

LESSON PLAN

# China's Long Nineteenth Century: Foreign Influence and the End of Dynastic China



**Subjects:** Social Studies

**Grade Level:** High School

**Duration:** Four 50-minute sessions

**Dynasty:** Qing (1644–1911)

**Object Type:** Photograph

**Themes:** Cultural Interactions; Power and Privilege;  
Daily Life and Folkways

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**The Empress Dowager Cixi with foreign envoys' wives in  
Leshoutang, Summer Palace, Beijing 1903–1905**

China

Qing dynasty, 1644–1911

Glass plate negative

9.5 x 7 in

Freer and Sackler Archives, FSA A.13 SC-GR-249

## Objective

Students will be able to explain the various reasons why the Qing dynasty was weakened during the nineteenth century, especially with regard to the outside influence of foreign powers.

## Essential Questions

- In what ways can foreign influence weaken the government of a country?
- How can the legitimacy of a ruler or ruling family be eroded?
- What are ways that cultures try to resist outside influence?

## Background Information

The Qing dynasty ruled China from 1644 to 1911. The Qing rulers were originally from Manchuria (northeast of modern China) and maintained many Manchu customs throughout their reign. The fall of the Qing in the early twentieth century marked the end of thousands of years of dynastic rule in China. There were many reasons for the fall of the Qing, including pressure from both inside and outside the country. This lesson will focus on four events that weakened China and led to the end of dynastic rule: the Opium Wars (1839–42, 1856–60), the Taiping Rebellion (1850–64), the First Sino-Japanese War (1894–95), and the Boxer Rebellion (1899–1901).

The last powerful ruler of Qing China was the Empress Dowager Cixi (1835–1908). While still a teenager, Cixi became a concubine of the Xianfeng Emperor and gave birth to a son. When the Xianfeng Emperor died, Cixi's young son became the Tongzhi Emperor and Cixi began her rule as regent. When her son died, she became a regent for her nephew, the Guangxu Emperor. She would control China for forty-seven years, ruling from 1861 until her death in 1908. Cixi was a formidable ruler, yet she refused to adopt new, western models of governance. Her refusal to modernize, combined with continuing pressure from foreign nations who wished to open China and take advantage of its vast resources and markets, would lead to the eventual downfall of dynastic rule. After Cixi's death, her grand-nephew, Puyi, became the twelfth and last Qing emperor. When he was forced to abdicate the throne in 1911, he was only six years old.

This lesson will begin with the photograph entitled “The Empress Dowager Cixi with foreign envoys' wives in Leshoutang, Summer Palace, Beijing (1903–1905)” (FSA A.13 SC-GR-249).

After the Boxer Rebellion, the Qing court began an unprecedented level of diplomatic engagement to improve relations with key foreign nations. This strategy included presenting photographic prints of Cixi as gifts for diplomats. This photograph is one such gift.

## Vocabulary

**Empress Dowager:** the title given to the widowed mother of an emperor in China, Japan, Korea, and Vietnam.

**Qing dynasty:** the last imperial dynasty of China, 1644–1911.

**regent:** a person who rules a country in circumstances of minority, absence, or disability of the monarch.

# Procedure

## Day 1

1. Project the photograph of “[Empress Dowager Cixi with foreign envoys' wives.](#)”
2. As they view the photograph, have students individually complete the Looking at Objects graphic organizer. After completing it on their own, pair or group students together and have them discuss their answers to the graphic organizer. They should add information and interpretations from other students onto their own organizer as needed.
3. Facilitate a whole class discussion about the photograph using the Discussion Questions. Discuss students' answers to the graphic organizer.

## Days 2 and 3

1. Separate students into groups of four. Assign each group one event from the nineteenth century that contributed to the downfall of dynastic China: the Opium Wars, the Taiping Rebellion, the First Sino-Japanese War, and the Boxer Rebellion. It is helpful if more than one group researches the same topic.
2. Have students research their assigned topic to find out dates, leaders, important events, causes, and impacts of the event. They should use their research to create a poster for a gallery walk. Instruct them to create a poster that will teach the rest of the class about the event, reminding them that other students will have no background so they must include enough detail to make it understandable to everyone. Use the handout at the end of this lesson to help you.

## Day 4

1. Display the group posters around the room. Give each student a note sheet to guide them as they view the projects.
2. Have students rotate around the room, taking notes on each project as they go using the graphic organizer entitled “China: The Long Nineteenth Century Note Sheet.”
3. After viewing the posters, conduct a class discussion to ensure that students have recorded the essential information on their note sheet.
4. As an exit ticket, have students answer the question, “Which event from the nineteenth century do you think was most responsible for ending dynastic rule in China? Why?”

# Discussion Questions

## Describe

- What do you see?
- What people or objects in the photograph attracted your attention?
- What do you notice about the arrangement of people and objects in the photograph?

## Analyze

- Why might the photograph have been staged this way?
- Who do you think the people in the photograph are?
- What is the context of this photograph?
- Why do you think there are only women in the photograph?

## Interpret

- What might the purpose of the photograph be?
- What message, if any, is the photographer trying to send?
- Why were these particular people chosen to be in the photograph?

## Inquire

- What was happening in China at the time this photograph was taken?
- How does the photograph fit into the context of unfolding events at the time?

# Extensions

## Visual Arts

- Create a modern take on this photograph by creating one of your own. In small groups, stage and take a photo that contains a similar powerful pose. Write a short description of your photo and what elements of power you chose to include in it and why.
- Compare and contrast this photograph of the Empress Dowager Cixi with the imperial portrait in the Sackler Gallery collection entitled "[The Empress Dowager, Tze Hsi, of China](#)" (S2011.16.1-2a-ap) or [other photographs of the Empress](#). Discuss with the class the ways in which the images are similar and different. How might the purpose of each image have led to these similarities and differences? What does each image tell us about Empress Dowager Cixi?

## English Language Arts

- Write a press release for the photograph. A press release starts with a headline and a strong opening sentence. The body should include information about who is in the photograph and why it was created; that is, what is the story behind the photograph and why does it matter?

## Social Studies

- Research a topic of your choice (from the four used here), and write a research paper describing the event and how it led to the end of dynastic rule in China.
- Explore the tradition of gift giving in China. Where does it come from? What are some of the common gift giving practices? Why might Cixi have given photographs such as this to visiting dignitaries?
- On a copy of the photograph, create thought bubbles above each person. What are they thinking as they pose for the picture? Be sure their thoughts relate to what you have learned about China during this time period.

# Resources

## Background Information:

Empresses of China's Forbidden City, 1644–1912. <https://asia.si.edu/exhibition/empresses-overview/>

POWER | PLAY: China's Empress Dowager. <https://asia.si.edu/exhibition/power-play-chinas-empress-dowager/>

China and the West: Imperialism, Opium, and Self-strengthening.  
[http://afe.easia.columbia.edu/main\\_pop/kpct/kp\\_imperialism.htm](http://afe.easia.columbia.edu/main_pop/kpct/kp_imperialism.htm)

The Qing Dynasty: Asia for Educators. [http://afe.easia.columbia.edu/tps/1750\\_cn.htm#qing](http://afe.easia.columbia.edu/tps/1750_cn.htm#qing)

View this image online <https://sova.si.edu/details/FSA.A.13#ref7>

View More Photographs of Empress Dowager Cixi: <https://sova.si.edu/record/FSA.A.13>

Learn more at <https://asia.si.edu/teachingchina>

## Resources for Student Research:

### The Taiping Rebellion

Excerpts from The Land System of the Heavenly Kingdom: "The Taiping Economic Program."  
[http://afe.easia.columbia.edu/ps/cup/taiping\\_economic\\_pgm.pdf](http://afe.easia.columbia.edu/ps/cup/taiping_economic_pgm.pdf)

The Taiping Rebellion: Causes and Effects. <https://www.britannica.com/event/Taiping-Rebellion>

### The Boxer Rebellion

Boxer Rebellion: Significance, Combatants, and Facts. <https://www.britannica.com/event/Boxer-Rebellion>

Eyewitness to History: A Prisoner of the Boxer Rebellion. <http://www.eyewitnesstohistory.com/boxer.htm>

### The Opium Wars

Khan Academy: The Opium Wars. <https://www.khanacademy.org/humanities/world-history/1600s-1800s/imperialism/v/opium-wars-world-history-khan-academy>

National Army Museum: The Opium Wars. <https://www.nam.ac.uk/explore/opium-war-1839-1842>

### The First Sino-Japanese War

The First Sino-Japanese War. <https://www.britannica.com/event/First-Sino-Japanese-War-1894-1895>

The Treaty of Shimonoseki, 1895. <https://china.usc.edu/treaty-shimonoseki-1895>





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