

## FROM THE MEDIEVAL TO MODERN AGE: THE MING AND QING DYNASTIES

The Ming Dynasty (明朝) was the imperial ruling dynasty of China, from 1368 to 1644, following the collapse of the Mongolian Yuan Dynasty. The Ming was the last dynasty in China ruled by ethnic Hans. Although the Ming capital of Beijing fell in 1644 to a rebellion led by Li Zicheng, regimes loyal to the Ming throne (collectively called the Southern Ming) survived until 1662.

Ming rule saw the construction of a vast navy and a standing army of one million troops. Although private maritime trade and official tribute missions from China had taken place in previous dynasties, the tributary fleet led by the Muslim eunuch admiral Zheng He in the 15th century far surpassed all others in size. In addition, the Ming established enormous construction projects, including the restoration of the Grand Canal and the Great Wall, and the establishment of the Forbidden City in Beijing during the first quarter of the 15th century. Estimates for the late-Ming population vary from 160 to 200 million, roughly one quarter of the world's population.

By the 16th century the Ming economy was stimulated by trade with the Portuguese, the Spanish and the Dutch. With the discovery of the Americas, China became involved in a new global trade of goods, plants, animals, and food crops known as the Columbian Exchange. Trade with European nations and the Japanese brought in massive amounts of silver into the country, which then replaced copper and paper notes as the common medium of exchange in China. During the last decades of the Ming Dynasty, the flow of silver into China was greatly diminished, thereby undermining state revenues and indeed the entire Ming economy. This damage to the economy was compounded by the effects on agriculture of natural ice ages and calamities, crop failure, and sudden epidemics. The ensuing breakdown of authority and people's livelihoods allowed rebel leaders such as Li Zicheng to challenge Ming authority, paving the way for the rise of the Qing Dynasty.

### REVOLT AGAINST THE YUAN

The decline of the Mongol-led Yuan dynasty in the 14th century allowed for the foundation of the Ming Dynasty. Alongside ethnic discrimination against Han Chinese that stirred local resentment and rebellion, other explanations for the Yuan's demise included overtaxing areas hard-hit by inflation, and massive flooding of the Yellow River. Consequently, agriculture and the economy were in shambles, whilst rebellion and banditry broke out among the hundreds of thousands of peasants called upon to work on repairing the dykes of the Yellow River.

Indeed, a rich cultural diversity developed during the Yuan Dynasty, as the political unity of China and much of central Asia promoted trade between East and West. The Mongols' extensive West Asian and European contacts produced a fair amount of cultural exchange. That is to say, the other cultures and peoples in the Mongol World Empire permanently influenced China and vice-versa. Buddhism had a great influence in the government, and Tibetan-rite Tantric Buddhism also took permanent root in Chinese Buddhism. The Muslims of the Yuan Dynasty introduced Middle Eastern cartography, astronomy, medicine, clothing, and diet in East Asia. Middle Eastern crops such as carrots, turnips, new varieties of lemons, eggplants, and melons, high-quality granulated sugar, and cotton were all either introduced or successfully popularized by the Yuan Mongols. On the other hand, certain Chinese innovations and products - such as the printing press, gunpowder, porcelain, playing cards and medical literature were exported to Europe and Western Asia.

### RELATIONS WITH TIBET

Scholarship outside China generally regards Tibet as having been independent during the Ming Dynasty, whereas historians in China today take an opposing point of view. The Mingshi, the official history of the Ming Dynasty, states that the Ming established commanders overseeing Tibetan administration while also renewing titles of ex-Yuan Dynasty officials from Tibet and conferring new imperial titles on leaders of Tibet's Buddhist leaders. However, Turrell V. Wylie states that censorship in the Mingshi in favor of bolstering the Ming emperor's prestige and reputation at all costs obscures the nuanced history of Sino-Tibetan relations during the Ming era.

Modern scholars still debate on whether or not the Ming Dynasty really had sovereignty over Tibet at all, as some believe it was a relationship of loose suzerainty which was largely cut off when the Jiajing Emperor persecuted Buddhism in favour of Daoism at court. Helmut Hoffman states that the Ming upheld the facade of rule over Tibet through periodic tribute missions received at the Ming court and by granting nominal titles to ruling lamas, but did not actually interfere in Tibetan governance. Wang Jiawei and Nyima Gyaincain disagree, stating that Ming China had sovereignty over Tibetans who did not inherit Ming titles, but were forced to travel to Beijing to renew them. Melvyn C. Goldstein writes that the Ming had no real administrative authority over Tibet since the various imperial titles were given to Tibetan leaders already in power under Mongol administration. Thus according to him, the Ming emperors merely recognized an existing political reality.

#### TREASURE FLEETS

Beginning in 1405, the Yongle Emperor entrusted his favored eunuch commander Zheng He as the admiral for a gigantic new fleet of ships designated for international tributary missions. The Chinese had sent diplomatic missions over land and sea since the Han Dynasty, and had been engaged in private overseas trade leading all the way to East Africa for centuries, but no government-sponsored tributary mission of this grandeur and size had ever been assembled before. To service seven different tributary missions abroad, the Nanjing shipyards constructed two thousand vessels from 1403 to 1419, which included the large "treasure ships" which measured up to 134m (440 ft) in length and 54m (180 ft) in width. However, these claims have been called into question by some researchers who put the actual length of the ships to values as short as 59 m (roughly 200 feet). The first voyage from 1405 to 1407 contained 317 vessels with a staff of 70 eunuchs, 180 medical personnel, 5 astrologers, and 300 military officers commanding a total estimated force of 26,000 men.

These enormous tributary missions were discontinued after the death of Zheng He, yet his death was only one of many culminating factors which brought the missions to an end. Emperor Yongle had conquered Vietnam in 1407, but Ming troops were pushed out in 1428 with significant costs to the Ming treasury; in 1431 Vietnam was recognized as an independent tribute state. There was also the threat and revival of Mongol power on the northern steppe which drew court attention away from other matters; to face this threat, a massive amount of funds were used to rebuild and upkeep the Great Wall after 1474. Yongle's moving of the capital from Nanjing to Beijing was largely in response to the need of keeping a closer eye on the Mongol threat in the north. Court officials also associated the lavish expense of the fleets with eunuch power at court, and so halted funding for these ventures as a means to curtail further eunuch influence.

#### CONTACT WITH EUROPE AND AMERICA

Although Jorge Alvares was the first to land on Lintin island in the Pearl River Delta in May of 1513, it was Rafael Perestrello, a cousin of Christopher Columbus, who became the first European explorer to land on the coast of mainland China and trade in Guangzhou in 1516, commanding a Portuguese vessel with a crew from a Malaysian junk that had sailed from Malacca. The Portuguese sent a large subsequent expedition in 1517 to enter port at Guangzhou and open formal trade relations with Chinese authorities. In 1557, the Portuguese managed to convince the Ming court to agree on a legal port treaty that would establish Macau as an official Portuguese trade colony on the coasts of the South China Sea. After the Chinese had banned direct trade by Chinese merchants with Japan, the Portuguese filled this commercial vacuum as intermediaries between China and Japan. The Portuguese bought Chinese silk and sold it to the Japanese in return for Japanese silver; since silver was more highly valued in China, the Portuguese could then use Japanese silver to buy even larger stocks of Chinese silk. However, by 1573, after the Spanish established a trading base in Manila, the Portuguese intermediary trade was trumped by the prime source of incoming silver to China from the Spanish Americas. Although the bulk of imports to China were silver, the Chinese also purchased crops from the Americas via the Spanish Empire. This included sweet potatoes, maize and peanuts, foods that could be cultivated in lands where traditional Chinese staple crops such as millet and rice could not grow. This agricultural bonus facilitated a rise in the population of China. After sweet potatoes were introduced to China around 1560, it gradually became the traditional food of the lower classes.

#### BREAKDOWN AND DISASTER

In this early half of the 17th century, famines became common in northern China because of unusual dry and cold weather that shortened the growing season; these were effects of a larger global ecological event now known as the Little Ice Age. Crop failures and natural disasters such as flooding and earthquakes, as well as the inability of the government to properly manage irrigation projects caused widespread loss of life. The central government was starved of resources and could do very little to mitigate the effects of these calamities. Making matters worse, a great plague spread across China from Zhejiang to Henan, killing a massive number of people.

In 1640, masses of Chinese peasants who were starving, unable to pay their taxes, and no longer in fear of the frequently defeated Chinese army, began to form into huge bands of rebels. The Chinese military, caught between fruitless efforts to defeat the Manchu raiders from the north and huge peasant revolts in the provinces, essentially fell apart. Unpaid and unfed, the army was defeated by Li Zicheng, and thus deserted the capital without much of a fight. On May 26, 1644 Beijing fell to Li's rebel army as his forces were allowed into the city when the gates were treacherously opened from within. It said that the last Ming Emperor hanged himself on a tree in the imperial gardens outside the Forbidden City.

#### THE EARLY QING DYNASTY

The Qing Dynasty, known originally as the Later Jin Dynasty, was the last ruling dynasty of China, ruling from 1644 to 1912. It was preceded by the Ming Dynasty and followed by the Republic of China. The dynasty was founded not by the Han, who form the majority of the Chinese population, but the Manchus, who are today an ethnic minority of China. The Manchus are descended from Jurchens, a people who lived around the region now comprising the Chinese provinces of Jilin and Heilongjiang. What was to become the Manchu state was founded by Nurhaci, the chieftain of a minor Jurchen tribe in Jianzhou, in the early 17th century.

Originally a vassal of the Ming emperors, Nurhaci in 1582 embarked on an inter-tribal campaign to unify the Jurchen tribes. In 1618, Nurhaci announced the Seven Grievances, a list of complaints against the Ming Dynasty, and openly renounced the sovereignty of Ming overlordship in order to complete the unification of those Jurchen tribes still allied with the Ming emperor. After a series of successful battles he relocated his capital from Hetu Ala to successively captured Ming cities in the province of Liaodong, first Liaoyang and later to Shenyang. By 1644, the Qing asserted control over most of China proper, while complete pacification of China was accomplished around 1683 under the Kangxi Emperor.

Nurhaci was succeeded by his eight year old son Hung Taiji in 1626. On the civil front, Hung Taiji, on the advice of surrendered Ming officials, set up a rudimentary bureaucratic system based on the Ming model of government. Hung Taiji's bureaucracy was staffed with an unprecedented number of Han Chinese, many of them newly surrendered Ming officials. However, the Jurchens' continued dominance in government was ensured by an ethnic quota for top bureaucratic appointments. Hung Taiji's reign also saw a fundamental change of policy towards his Han Chinese subjects. Whereas under Nurhaci all captured Han Chinese were seen and treated as chattel or a threat to Manchu stability, Hung Taiji in contrast incorporated them into the Jurchen "nation" as full if not first-class citizens, who were also obligated to provide military service. By 1648, less than one-sixth of the Qing army was comprised of Manchu ancestry. This change of policy not only increased Hung Taiji's power base and reduced his military dependence on his Manchu subjects, but it also greatly encouraged other Han Chinese subjects of the Ming Dynasty to surrender and accept Jurchen rule when they were defeated militarily.

One of the defining events of Hung Taiji's reign was the official adoption of the name "Manchu" for all Jurchen people in November 1635. Furthermore, when the imperial seal of the Yuan emperors was said to be presented to Hung Taiji by Ejei, the last Great Khan of the Mongols, Hung Taiji renamed the state from "Jin" to "Qing" and elevated his position from khan to emperor, suggesting vast imperial ambitions. Some historians believe that the name "Qing" was chosen in reaction to that of the Ming, which consists of the Chinese characters for sun and moon, which are associated with the fire element. The character Qing is composed of the water radical and the character for blue-green, which are both associated with the water element. Others have suggested that the name change went a long way to rehabilitate the Chinese state in the eyes of the Ming-era Han Chinese, who had regarded the former Jurchen Jin Dynasty as foreign invaders.

#### THE LATE QING DYNASTY

A common view of 19th-century China is that it was an era in which Qing control weakened and prosperity diminished. Indeed, China suffered massive social strife, economic stagnation and explosive population growth which placed an increasing strain on the food supply. Historians offer various explanations for these events, but the basic idea is that Qing power was, over the course of the century, faced with internal problems and natural disasters which were simply too much for the antiquated Chinese government, bureaucracy, and economy to deal with.

The Taiping Rebellion in the mid-19th century was the first major instance of anti-Manchu sentiment amid widespread social unrest and worsening famine, threatening the stability of the Qing dynasty, which significantly weakened the power of the Qing Dynasty. In 1851 Hong Xiuquan and others launched an uprising in Guizhou Province, established the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom (Taiping Tianguo) with himself as king, claiming he often had visions of God and was the brother of Christ. Slavery, concubinage, arranged marriage, opium smoking, footbinding, judicial torture, and the worship of idols

were all banned under the Taiping. However, success and subsequent authority and power led to internal feuds, defections and corruption. In addition, British and French troops, equipped with modern weapons, came to the assistance of the Qing imperial army, successfully crushing the Taiping 1864. The rebellion not only posed the most serious threat towards Qing rulers; it was also "the costliest (in terms of human life) civil war in history and second bloodiest war of any kind, being only exceeded in casualties by WW II. Between 20 and 30 million people died during its fourteen-year course from 1850 to 1864. After the outbreak of this rebellion, there were also revolts by the Muslim and the Miao minorities of China against the Qing Dynasty, most notably in the Dungan Revolt of 1862–1877 in the northwest and the Panthay Rebellion of 1856–1873 in Yunnan province.

19th-century China struggled with the concept of international and state to state relations. Prior to the 19th-century, the Chinese empire was generally the hegemonic power in East Asia. Under its imperial theory, the Chinese emperor had the rights to rule tianxia, or the whole world 'under the heavens'. Thus China had always either ruled territories directly, or its various neighbours fell under its tributary system. However, the 18th century saw the European empires gradually expand across the world, as European states developed stronger economies built on maritime trade. European colonies had been established in India and Indonesia whilst the Russian Empire annexed the areas north of China. In 1793, Great Britain attempted to forge an alliance with China, sending the McCartney Embassy to Hong Kong with gifts for the Emperor, including examples of the latest European technologies and art. In 1793 however, the Qianlong Emperor stated to the British Ambassador Lord McCartney that China had no use for European manufactured products or trade with Europeans in general. When the Qing regime tried to ban the Opium Trade in 1838, Great Britain declared war on China.

The Opium Wars revealed the outdated state of the Chinese military. The Qing navy, composed entirely of wooden sailing junks, was severely outclassed by the modern tactics and firepower of the British Royal Navy. British soldiers, using modern rifles and artillery, easily outgunned Qing forces in ground battles. The Qing surrender in 1842 marked a decisive, humiliating blow to China. The subsequent Treaty of Nanjing demanded reparation payments, allowed unrestricted European access to Chinese ports, and ceded the island of Hong Kong to Great Britain. It revealed many inadequacies in the Qing government and provoked even more widespread rebellion against the already hugely unpopular regime.

## THE FALL OF IMPERIAL CHINA

By the early 20th century, mass civil disorder had begun and continuously grown. To overcome such problems, Empress Dowager Cixi issued an imperial edict in 1901 calling for reform proposals from the governors-general. The edict paved the way for the most far-reaching reforms in terms of their social consequences, including the creation of a national education system and the abolition of the imperial exams in 1905. However, Cixi and the Guangxu Emperor both died in 1908, leaving a relatively powerless and unstable central authority. Puyi, the eldest son of Zaifeng, was appointed successor at age two, leaving Zaifeng with the regency. This was followed by the dismissal of the very influential general Yuan Shikai from his former positions of power. By this time, many influential leaders in South China, foremost amongst them Sun Yat-sen, had begun to call for a complete change to the state system.

Thus the Wuchang Uprising succeeded on October 10, 1911, which led to the creation of a new central government, the Republic of China, in Nanjing with Sun Yat-sen as its provisional head. Many provinces began separating from Qing control. Seeing a desperate situation unfold, the Qing government brought an unwilling Yuan Shikai back to military power, taking control of his Beiyang Army, with the initial goal

of crushing the revolutionaries. After taking the position of Prime Minister and creating his own cabinet, Yuan went as far as to ask for the removal of Zaifeng from the regency.

With Zaifeng gone, Yuan Shikai and his Beiyang commanders effectively dominated Qing politics. He reasoned that going to war would be unreasonable and costly, especially when noting that the Qing Government had a goal for constitutional monarchy. Similarly, Sun Yat-sen's government wanted a Republican constitutional reform, both aiming for the benefit of China's economy and populace. With permission from Empress Dowager Longyu, Yuan began negotiating with Sun Yat-sen, who decided that his goal had been achieved in forming a republic, and that therefore he could allow Yuan to step into the position of President of the Republic. In 1912, after rounds of negotiations, Longyu issued the Imperial Edict bringing about the abdication of the child emperor Puyi. The collapse of the Qing dynasty in 1912 brought an end to over 2,000 years of imperial China and began an extended period of instability of warlord factionalism. The unorganized political and economic systems combined with a widespread criticism of Chinese culture led to questioning and doubt about the future.

Editor:

Walter Koh

(McGill University)