



Collapse and Restoration of Empire in China: From Ming to Qing

by James Carter and Richard Warren

James Carter and Richard Warren are professors of history at St. Joseph’s University. As a part of the dynastic cycle, Chinese ruling families would earn, then ultimately lose the Mandate of Heaven, which provided legitimacy to their reign. If an emperor was perceived to have lost this Mandate, the people of China would look to a new leader.

Secondary Source:

As far back as 1000 BCE, rulers in China had appealed to the “Mandate of Heaven” (tianming) to justify their rule. Like the European idea of divine right, this notion of legitimacy derived from a supernatural source but in China, the well-being of the people indicated the holder of the Mandate. If the people didn’t prosper, the Mandate could pass to another steward. This was not an idea like “the consent of the governed” constructed by Hobbes or other Social Contract theorists, but the suffering of the empire’s subjects could indicate a ruler who had lost the Mandate, a prelude to being swept away. A ruler didn’t need the people’s consent to rule, but he (and it was almost always he) did need to rule over them well. . . .

Under Ming rule, China prospered politically, economically, and culturally, expanding its borders in all directions and knitting society together with an intensive commercial network. The early Ming emperors oversaw a state based on Confucian **precepts** of loyalty, benevolence, and propriety. . . .

By the late 1500s, however, the Ming state was in decline. Corruption at court and an inadequate tax structure undermined effective governance. Even the wars between Spain and England played a role: New World silver had been flowing into the Chinese economy, but English and Dutch raiders disrupted the supply. As the silver supply dwindled, its value increased. The government required that taxes be paid in silver but did not mint it into coins. As a result, Chinese peasants conducted most of their daily business in copper coins and had to buy silver to pay their taxes (the Chinese word for bank, yinhang, means literally “silver shop”). As silver became more valuable,

continued on next page

Glossary:

precepts: principles

Collapse and Restoration of Empire in China: From Ming to Qing *continued*

more copper was needed to buy the same amount of silver, impoverishing the peasantry, dragging down the entire economy, and further reducing government revenues. Civil servants, including the military, were paid poorly and sometimes not at all. Public works projects, a traditional measure of a dynasty's effectiveness, were neglected. The Yellow River **levees** fell into disrepair; grain stored to ward off famine rotted. For a state with its legitimacy rooted in the well-being of its people, these were **potent** dangers. Several would-be rebels, including an unemployed post-station attendant named Li Zicheng (1606–1645), mobilized popular discontent against the Ming and initiated a rebellion in the 1630s.

Li and other rebellious peasants were not the only challenge facing the Ming. **The Manchus**—a confederation of tribes who were distinct linguistically and culturally from China's Han majority—had built their own empire starting in the 1500s to the northeast, in a region (Manchuria) that is a part of China today bounded by Russia and North Korea. Modeling their state largely on Chinese precedents, the Manchus expanded their territory until they were at the Ming's northern border. In many ways, in the early seventeenth century, the Manchu Empire appeared more stable and prosperous than China under the failing Ming. In the Spring of 1644 (the same era as the English Civil War, six thousand miles away), Manchu armies prepared to march on Beijing from the East, even as Li Zicheng's peasant army bore down on the capital from the West. The last Ming Emperor hanged himself upon hearing the news. With a rebel army occupying the capital and Manchu soldiers on the doorstep, the Mandate of Heaven seemed about to pass, but to whom?

The Ming's top general, Wu Sangui (1612–1678), remained in a position to play kingmaker between the two sides. The Manchu **regent** and Wu Sangui exchanged letters. Wu asked the Manchus' help to "destroy the roving bandits . . . and make manifest great righteousness in China." Manchu leaders argued for legitimacy using China's political logic: they would take up the Mandate of Heaven by restoring order to the Empire and

Glossary:

levees: a wall of earth built to prevent the overflow of a river

potent: powerful

The Manchus: the ethnic group that became the Qing Dynasty

regent: a person appointed to rule in a king or queen's absence

continued on next page

Collapse and Restoration of Empire in China: From Ming to Qing *continued*

its people.... The Manchu conquest of China became bitter and bloody, taking decades to complete. Some Ming princes attempted to maintain governments in exile, and many Chinese scholars remained loyal to the Ming dynasty, some choosing suicide or exile rather than aid the Qing. . . .

As they consolidated their rule, the Manchus, like other new governments, struggled to establish their legitimacy while they asserted their sovereignty.

Glossary: