CHINA'S LAST EMPIRE
THE GREAT QING
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INTRODUCTION

THE GREAT Qing empire was by far the largest political entity ever to center itself on the piece of earth known today as China. It more than doubled the geographic expanse of the Ming empire, which it displaced in 1644, and more than tripled the Ming’s population, reaching in its last years a size of more than half a billion persons. Included within the Qing empire were not only those people who saw themselves as “Chinese” but also people who had never previously been incorporated into a Chinese dynastic state, including Tibetans, Uighur Muslims, certain groups of Mongols, Burmese and Tais along the southwestern frontier, indigenous populations of Taiwan and other newly colonized areas both on the frontiers and in interior highlands, and also the people who occupied the Qing throne itself and would come to be known as “Manchus.” This enormous territory, or at least the vast bulk of it, and this huge and continuously growing population, with all its attendant tensions, would be bequeathed to its successor states, the Republic of China and the People’s Republic of China. For the Qing was many things, but one of those things was the closing chapter of the two-thousand-year history of imperial China.

To govern this unprecedentedly expansive empire for nearly three hundred years, the Qing in its heyday worked out systems of administration and communication more efficient and effective than any of its predecessors. And to feed this unprecedentedly large population, it achieved a level of material productivity (indeed, prosperity) far beyond that of any earlier Chinese dynasty, as well as institutions of economic management probably more ambitious and effective than any seen previously any-
where in the world. While scholars of Chinese art and literature may reasonably argue that the Qing’s aesthetic output was not quite the equal of, say, Tang poetry, Song painting, or Ming porcelain, its vibrant cosmopolitan culture did make great contributions in all of these areas, and it also pioneered in new venues of artistic expression such as the novel and the theater, to say nothing of print journalism. And while it is a mistake to see China at any point in its imperial history as hermatically isolated from other parts of the world, there is no question that it was under the Qing empire that relations and mutual influences between the eastern and western ends of the great Eurasian landmass became qualitatively more intense, and also more conflictive, than they ever had been in the past. The implications of this are still being worked out today.

Historians understand the Great Qing empire much differently now than we did forty or fifty years ago. Indeed, it might be fair to say that in the 1950s and 1960s there really was no such thing as “Qing history” in most of the world. Of course, Chinese historians had long organized China’s past in terms of successive ruling houses, which rose and fell according to the Confucian model of the “dynastic cycle,” and the Qing could be seen as simply the last such ruling house. Accordingly, as had each new dynasty in the past, the fledgling government of the Chinese Republic after 1912 commissioned an official history of its predecessor, the Draft History of the Qing (Qingshi gao), eventually published in 1927 under the editorship of the former imperial official Zhao Erxun. Five years later, the intrepid private scholar Xiao Yishan published his own General History of the Qing Dynasty (Qingdai tongshi), which came to serve in essence as the standard scholarly statement on the subject.

By the second half of the twentieth century, however, Confucian historiography was no longer in favor, at least in the West. Instead, the effective father of modern Chinese history in the United States, John King Fairbank of Harvard University—who with incredible personal energy wrote textbooks, trained teachers for other universities, and oversaw a pioneering monograph publication series on modern East Asia—held firmly to a view that divided the history of China’s past half millennium around 1842. All that fell before remained part of “traditional China,” whereas “modern China” began with the Western “shock” of the Opium War and the Treaty of Nanjing. The Qing was thus bifurcated, and different groups of scholars worked on the two separate parts. Fairbank never explicitly said (as others did) that late imperial history before the 1842 watershed was essentially “stagnant” and that genuine develop-
great individual figures of the past but on social, economic, and cultural "structures" (as opposed to mere "conjunctures") that emerged and receded only very slowly over the "longue durée." The somewhat belated impact of this school on the field of Chinese history was facilitated by American China scholars' gradual assimilation of the magnificent corpus of socioeconomic history that had been produced by Japanese China scholars since the Second World War, and then by the opening to outside researchers of the huge troves of Qing imperial archives (in Taiwan in the 1970s and in Beijing in the early 1980s), which enabled scholars to attempt the kind of bold, long-term history espoused by Annales.

The consequences of this social history turn were three. First, historians began to be newly critical of the instrumental view of China's recent past inherent in the "China's response to the West" model and to concentrate instead on changes in the country's own domestic history, seen now as anything but stagnant. This new trend was summarized, approvingly, by one of Fairbank's own chief disciples, Paul Cohen, with the phrase "discovering history in China." The impact of the West on the Qing empire was increasingly marginalized in this revisionist narrative of Qing history—a necessary corrective, perhaps, but one that would invite subsequent correctives of its own. Eventually, historians would move to "bring the West back in" to the new Qing history, once we had come to understand it better on its own terms.

A second consequence of the social history turn, abetted by the economic "miracles" of the East Asian Four Little Dragons (Hong Kong, Singapore, Taiwan, South Korea) and then of post-Mao China itself, was a gradual discarding of the failure narrative of Qing history. Research questions such as "Why was there no capitalism or industrialization in nineteenth-century China?" (often asked in unfavorable comparison to Meiji Japan) were now seen as based on misguided or even false assumptions. Comparative social scientists as well as American specialists in Chinese history began to argue that as late as the mid-eighteenth century the Qing empire may have had a more prosperous economy and a higher general standard of living than most of Western Europe.

A third and most telling consequence came in the area of periodization. No sooner did the view of the Qing era as a coherent whole begin to trump the "traditional"/"modern" divide than dynastic markers themselves began to seem like mere surface ripples in the structural evolution of China's past. As Frederic Wakeman Jr. observed in 1975:

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Gradually, social historians began to realize that the entire period from the 1550s to the 1930s constituted a coherent whole. Instead of seeing the [Qing] as a replication of the past, or 1644 and 1911 as critical terminals, scholars detected processes which stretched across the last four centuries of Chinese history into the Republican period. The urbanization of the of the lower [Yangzi] region, the commutation of labor services into money payments, the development of certain kinds of regional trade, the growth of mass literacy and increase in the size of the gentry, the commercialization of local managerial activities—all these phenomena of the late Ming set in motion administrative and political changes that continued to develop over the course of the [Qing] and in some ways culminated in the social history of the early twentieth century.13

But what to call this new era that transcended the Ming-Qing divide? The weaker, less encumbered term that gained great popularity was "late imperial." This phrase implied that not merely the Qing but also all or part of the preceding Ming was a single coherent historical era. The stronger formulation, one which I endorsed, was the term "early modern." But this category, too, had several obvious liabilities. For one thing, it seemed to imply some necessary transition to a full-fledged modernity, perhaps a modernity that looked a lot like Westernization, with its industrialization and representative government; and this was a notion that revisionist historians sought most deeply to challenge. More generally, "early modernity" was a concept deliberately appropriated from the historiography of Europe, and its use seemed to force onto China a set of Western-inspired expectations that risked obscuring the particular realities of the Chinese past itself. The verdict on this issue is still out.

The second basic reconceptualization of Qing history is now often referred to as the Inner Asian turn. This was an outgrowth of a cultural history revolution that followed on the heels of the social history revolution. With its emphasis on "representations" over inherent "facts," cultural history urged the de-essentialization of such categories as gender and race, seeing them as culturally negotiated and historically contingent rather than biologically given. Although new attention to changing gender roles has been one of the most fruitful and exciting developments in Chinese historiography during the past several decades, the related
that imperial history was but a long prologue to the emergence of a modern Han Chinese nation-state—and more generally in the underlying notion of the nation-state as the necessary end of history. Han-nationalist historiography was criticized as imposing a model of progress derived from the serendipitous experience of Western Europe on a quite different set of cultures, which—but for the actions of a core of self-interested twentieth-century nationalist elites—might have taken an altogether very different course.30

The third sea change in Qing historiography, which might be called the Eurasian turn, grew largely out of the second but also drew upon the longstanding subdisciplines of world history and ecological history, both of which in the past had only fitfully paid attention to developments on the Chinese subcontinent.21 Where these fields first importantly intersected with the Qing was in studies by Chinese historians of the so-called general crisis of the seventeenth century and how this may have precipitated the Ming-Qing dynastic transition. In arguing for the impact of this crisis on late imperial China, a number of scholars stressed transnational economic factors, especially dramatic fluctuations in international bullion flows, but also the global climatic shifts sometimes called the Little Ice Age.22

Ultimately, however, it was the comparative study of early modern empires that led to a new vision of Eurasian unity. The older binary history of European challenge and Asian response gave way to a new historical emphasis on different components of a holistic Eurasian landmass that followed local variant courses along a comparable developmental trajectory.23 Rather than being an isolated exception, the Qing was now reconceived as effectively similar to the Ottoman, Moghul, Romanov, and perhaps even Napoleonic land-based empires in patterns of administrative centralization (aided by new communication technologies), deliberate multinational inclusion, and aggressive land settlement. Together, these new Eurasian powers worked from various directions to enclose and squeeze out older (often nomadic) cultures.24

This Eurasian revision carried significant implications for periodization as well. If the Inner Asian turn posed a problem for the hard-fought triumph of a China-centered Qing history, the Eurasian turn potentially challenged the revisionist conception of a “late imperial China” as including the Ming along with the Qing, and of an “early modern China” as starting sometime in the Ming’s last century. In what might be seen as a manifesto for the Eurasian turn, Evelyn Rawski—revising in 2004 her
1996 position that the Qing was qualitatively different from previous Chinese dynasties—argued emphatically that such an unprecedentedly centralized empire was so deeply a specific function of Manchu rule that it was an impossibility under the ethnically Han rulers of the Ming. In other words, early modernity in China did indeed begin with the dynastic transition of 1644, and not before.\textsuperscript{33} Perhaps the dynastic periodizers of the old Confucian tradition were not so far wrong after all.

The Great Qing empire discussed in this book, then, is a constantly moving target. What it was, and to what extent it constituted something incomparably distinctive in the longer run of Chinese history or in the vast expanse of Eurasian space, remain open questions. That is precisely why the study of this place and period, at our own moment in history, is so rewarding.

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In 1688 Tong Guogang, an officer of the Chinese Plain Blue Banner, petitioned the Kangxi emperor to change his officially registered ethnicity from “Chinese-martial” (Hanjun) to “Manchu.” His great-uncle Tong Bunian had been born in Liaodong around 1580 but moved to Wuchang in central China. As a Wuchang native, he passed the metropolitan examination in 1616, served the Ming as a county magistrate, and later headed up the dynasty’s military defenses in the northeast. After a disastrous defeat, Tong Bunian was accused of treason and died in prison in 1625, fervently proclaiming his loyalty to the Ming. His son Guoqi grew up in Wuchang and there composed a genealogy defending his father’s Chinese patriotism by demonstrating descent from no fewer than ten generations of heroic Ming soldiers. But when Guoqi was taken captive during the Qing conquest of the Yangzi region in 1645, he and his family were impressed into the Chinese Plain Blue Banner.

As it turned out, other Tong men of Liaodong ancestry—men whom Guoqi had candidly included in his genealogy—had been just as heroic in the cause of the conquering Qing armies as Tong Bunian had been in defense of the Ming. Indeed, one of these would become the maternal grandfather of the Kangxi emperor, making Tong Guogang himself Kangxi’s uncle! The emperor thus granted Guogang’s petition for reclassification as a Manchu, noting, however, that it would be administratively awkward to similarly reclassify too many of his distant kin. From that day forward, Tong Guogang and certain of his relatives became Manchus while others remained Chinese. In this time and place, ethnic identities were far from genetically predetermined but were flexible, ambiguous, and negotiable.\textsuperscript{1}
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with not a few of these people fully or partly of Han Chinese ancestry. The group that succeeded the Ming on the Dragon Throne was not a Manchu race but was instead an organization of persons deliberately created for the purpose of conquest. The leaders of this “Qing conquest organization” felt it useful to assign their members national identities such as Mongol, Chinese-martial, and even Manchu, but this assignment was based on political convenience rather than any preexisting biological fact. As seen in the case of the Tong family described above, this initial assignment might easily be rescinded or changed as situations demanded.

Whereas the older view saw an originally distinguishable Manchu people that was assimilated or otherwise effaced over time, the new Qing narrative saw the Manchus as actually having come into existence over the course of the dynasty. The strenuous activities of the Qianlong emperor and others were not so much defending a national culture threatened with extinction as working to create such a culture by providing it with an origin myth, a national language and literature, and a set of defined cultural traits. And in this project they were surprisingly successful. Ironically, if Manchus did not really exist before 1644, they certainly did in 1911, according to this scenario. In keeping with this view, the story of Manchukuo was pretty much as presented in Bertolucci’s great film The Last Emperor. Puyi, in the movie, was roused out of his postimperial career as a Shanghai lounge lizard to answer what he sincerely felt to be the call of his Manchu people to head their national state in the northeast. What was hypocritical about Japan’s Manchukuo project was not some pretense that a genuine Manchu people existed on which to base it (for such a group did exist at this time) but rather the pretense that these Manchus would have real self-determination.

This new narrative is itself subject to overstatement. A second generation of Manchu-centered scholarship argues for the reality of ethnic or racial difference, at least in the eyes of contemporaries, from the dynasty’s very outset. A study of Manchu garrisons throughout Qing China, for example, has detected a significant degree of ethnic tension between their inhabitants and the surrounding Han populations. Still, in one form or other most historians today prefer the new narrative to the older one, and that set of assumptions underlies our story here.

Organizing the Conquest

Whether the Qing conquerors were an ethnically distinct frontier people or a deliberately constructed multiethnic conquest organization, their
achievement was truly remarkable. How could such a motley assemblage possibly overcome the mighty Ming war machine, arguably the most formidable fighting force in the world at that time?

The rise of the Qing as a military and political force in the area that became known as Manchuria, and is today northeast China, was the work of three successive tribal chieftains of the clan known as Aisin Gioro. "Aisin" means "gold" and is written in Chinese with the character Jin—which was the dynastic name of the Jurchen-speaking people who ruled north China from 1115 to 1260 and from whom the Aisin Gioro claimed descent. The three chieftains were Nurhaci (d. 1626), Hong Taiji (d. 1643), and Dorgon (d. 1659). The efforts of these three men to deliberately prepare their subjects for the conquest of the Ming included centralization, and (to a debated degree) sinicization—the appropriation of Han Chinese organizational techniques and cultural traits.

For most of the Ming era, "Manchus" did not exist. Population groups in northeast China were widely diverse, and while several of them shared linguistic and no doubt genetic similarities, no overarching identity united the peoples of this large and ecologically variable region. Unlike the Jurchen of the past and the Mongols to their west, the Aisin Gioro and their immediate neighbors were not nomadic herdsmen. The economy of their Liao River valley home had over the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries developed into a mixture of agriculture and hunting, with a significant amount of intercultural trade, especially in furs and the highly prized medicinal root ginseng. Under Nurhaci, the Aisin Gioro gradually accumulated a monopoly on franchises to import ginseng to the Ming, where demand for the stimulant was growing rapidly just as indigenous sources became exhausted. Although, like all of the Ming's other trading partners, the Aisin Gioro took in exchange some silk and other fine Chinese manufactures, ginseng tipped the balance of trade greatly in Nurhaci's favor. In the early seventeenth century the Ming may have re-exported to the Aisin Gioro as much as 25 percent of the silver it took in from Europe and the New World. This profit from trade, applied to the acquisition of weaponry (including firearms) and the hiring of skilled military officers, very largely financed the conquest.

Governance along the northeast borders was primarily in the hands of hereditary tribal chiefs. As had most imperial regimes before them, the Ming practiced a policy of divide and rule toward these mobile and frequently martial peoples, investing each tribal chief with a vassalage and sporadically attempting to stir up rivalries among them. Nurhaci was one such chieftain enjoying a vassal relationship with the court. Around the turn of the seventeenth century, urged on by the Ming, he declared a vendetta against a neighboring tribe, which he accused of murdering his father. In pursuit of this cause, he forged a series of alliances with other population groups through marital unions, coercion, and conquest. The result was the creation of a significant confederation.

Events such as these had happened several times previously under the Ming and were not in themselves alarming. If a confederation was to become a serious threat to the dynasty, it needed some sort of permanent institutionalization. This was precisely what Nurhaci attempted to provide. The first step was to create a written language for his growing population, which he accomplished by commissioning a team of local scholars in 1599 to adapt the Mongol script to the Jurchen speech: with that stroke, the language later known as Manchu was born. A more decisive step was his creation of the system of "banners" in the years before 1615. There were initially four, and subsequently eight, such banners—solid white, white bordered with yellow, solid blue, and so on. Each banner signified a fighting unit, but it also represented a unit of residence and economic production and included not merely fighting men but also their dependents. As the system was gradually worked out, each banner came to be identified with a discrete national grouping—Manchu, Mongol, Chinese-martial—though assignment of national identities and consignment to ethnic groups was a matter of expediency and ongoing readjustment. Like the Mamluk armies of the medieval Middle East, members of the eight banners were all legally slaves. Inasmuch as hierarchical relationships within and among the banners were governed by a military command structure that was simultaneously a system of administration and property ownership, this resembled a feudal system. It was not quite feudal, however, in that the system of proprietorship that underlay it was not land but rather slaves. In 1616 Nurhaci proclaimed his regime the Latter Jin.

The banner soldier was a formidable fighting man (Fig. 1). Cavalry wore the uniform color of their banner and were protected by metal helmets with red tassels and cane shields. Each man was responsible for the maintenance of three horses. Soldiers carried distinctive swords and sometimes flails but were most accomplished in the use of the bow; their quiver housed thirty or more arrows. Manchu bows were short (four feet) but very powerful, requiring years of strength-training to master. The distinctive mode of firing arrows from horseback at full gallop—
holding the bow and the reins simultaneously in the left hand while
drawing the bow with the right—was so original to banner warcraft that
it had its own verb (niyamniyamb) in the Manchu language. Infantry
included some archers as well, but they were more often musketeers
or artillerymen. Use of muskets was something of a practiced specialty
among Han Chinese bannermen. They had also learned from the Portu-
guese how to cast cannon, and they developed the strength to haul them
into the field, earning the nickname uien cooha (heavy troops).³

It fell to the second Latter Jin leader, Hong Taiji, to superimpose on
this tribal or feudal arrangement a bureaucratic structure on the Ming
model. Hong Taiji was no longer to be the first among equals within a
caste of feudal princes. He was now also, and uniquely, the emperor (Son
of Heaven) within a state structure, and the banner headmen were in part
his state officials. This move was significant for at least two reasons: it
provided a superior form of political organization suitable for the con-
quest of the vast lands to the south; and it also provided an unmistakable
challenge to the Ming emperor, who now saw to his northeast not a col-
lection of servient vassals but instead a polity that claimed to be, for
the moment at least, a separate but equal state.

Now, for sinicization. Our previous understanding was that the Man-
chus, like all other aspiring barbarian conquerors of China, adopted Chi-
nese ways of governance and legitimization of their rule, becoming in effect
civilized Chinese. We know now that nothing so complete ever hap-
pened. The Qing rulers wore many hats and governed their diverse con-
stituencies (Jurchen, Mongol, Tibetan, Chinese) in differing ways simul-
taneously. If the Qing ruler was the Son of Heaven for his Chinese
subjects, he was also the Khan of Khans for the Mongols, the Chak-
ravartin (Wheel-Turning King) for the Tibetans, and so on. The Qing
would be a diverse, multinational, and presumably universal empire, very
different from the Chinese dynasties it succeeded.⁴

That said, the conquest organization in the northeast, starting with
Nurhaci himself, proved very enthusiastic and adept at adopting Chinese
ways in the project of exerting domination over their would-be Chinese
subjects. They energetically recruited Chinese elites disaffected from the
Ming or simply hungry for personal power to serve as civil bureaucrats
and military leaders of their fledgling state. The military men brought
with them European-style artillery and other novel techniques of warfare
that the Ming had learned from the Jesuits. They assiduously studied
the Chinese language and launched translation projects for the Chinese
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plunder, brutality, and little else. The horrified Wu Sangui deserted his post in the northeast and returned to the capital to dispatch Li, who fled to Xi’an, then moved throughout central China until the summer of 1645, when he apparently was killed by militiamen of a village that his few surviving followers had raided for food. The military and administrative establishment of the Qing followed Wu Sangui into Beijing, where Fulin, at the age of six, was installed on the Dragon Throne on October 30, 1644, with the reign title Shunzhi, Vanquisher of the Shun.

Alien Rule.

China had experienced a long history of periodic rule by peoples who were not identified, by themselves or by the conquered, as Chinese. No one really liked it, of course, but it could be justified ideologically in several ways. The Son of Heaven was, after all, the intermediary between the active first principle of the universe, Heaven, and all human beings, not simply the Chinese, and so logically Heaven might select any of its constituents to receive its mandate to rule. And the criterion for receiving that mandate was not bloodline but rather the personal virtue of the candidate—with “virtue” defined fairly precisely in Confucian cultural terms.

That said, China long had an indigenously-generated sense of essential, perhaps even biological, difference among peoples, and the Qing conquest was one moment when such domestic racial thought came to the fore. No one was more emphatic in this than the Hunanese philosopher and erstwhile resistance leader Wang Fuzhi (1619–1692). After discussing how beasts with webbed feet and with cloven hooves necessarily separate themselves from each other, Wang wrote:

The Chinese in their bone structure, sense organs, gregariousness and exclusiveness, are no different from the barbarians, and yet they must be distinguished absolutely from the barbarians. Why is this so? Because if man does not mark himself off from things, then the principle of Heaven is violated. If the Chinese do not mark themselves off from the barbarians, then the principle of earth is violated. And since Heaven and earth regulate mankind by marking men off from each other, if men do not mark themselves off and preserve an absolute distinction between societies, then the principle of man is
violated... Even the ants have leaders who rule their ant-hills, and if other insects come to attack their nests, the leader gathers the ants together and leads them against their enemies to destroy them and prevent further intrusion. Thus he who would lead the ants must know the way to protect his group. 10

Unsurprisingly, Wang's writings were proscribed throughout much of the Qing era but reemerged to great popularity in the late nineteenth century, beginning with their republication in 1867 by the (presumably loyalist) anti-Taiping hero Zeng Guofan.11

In practice, the Qing takeover of much of north China was surprisingly easy and bloodless. In one county of Shandong, local elite-led militia, dismayed at the rapacious incompetence of the late Ming administration, eagerly handed their locality over to the arriving officials of Li Zicheng's Shun dynasty and then, just as readily, kicked out Li's officials and delivered it again to the Qing once the Shun proved even less able than the Ming.12 But this early success may have been deceptive; it would take a full forty years after the conquest of Beijing for the Qing regime to establish itself with full security throughout the breadth of the former Ming domains, and for much of this period the new dynasty's eventual triumph was by no means determined.

Emboldened by their early success, and even before most of central China had been occupied, the new regime ordered all its male subjects to adopt the queue, a hairstyle traditional to the northeast in which the forehead was shaved and remaining hair was wound into a long braid. In early 1645 the Dorgon regency issued an imperial edict to the Board of Rites:

Within and without, we are one family. The Emperor is like the father, and the people are like his sons. The father and sons are of the same body; how can they be different from one another? If they are not as one then it will be as if they had two hearts and would they then not be like the people of different countries? ... All residents of the capital and its vicinity will fulfill the order to shave their heads within ten days of this proclamation. For Zhili and other provinces compliance must take place within ten days of receipt of the order from the Board of Rites. Those who follow this order belong to our country; those who hesitate will be considered treasonous bandits and will be heavily penalized. Anyone who attempts to evade this or-

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der or who uses cunning language to argue against it will not be lightly dealt with.13

The court may have underestimated the degree of rage this queue-wearing demand would generate among Han men, who not only saw their traditional hairstyle as reflective of their cultural identity (a point the Qing understood) but also viewed shaving their foreheads as a form of self-mutilation and a breech of filial obligation owed to the parents who had bequeathed them their bodies. Throughout the central China highlands, local elites who had already accepted with deference the arrival of Qing county administrations responded to the demand with renewed revolt. They retreated to their mountain fortresses and held out, often to the last man, for another five or six years.14

In the lower Yangzi region the outcome was bloodier still. Ming general Shi Kefa had ordered that the splendid city of Yangzhou be defended to the death, and in May 1645 when it fell to Qing forces much of the population was deliberately killed and survivors raped and murdered by unruly Chinese soldiers in Qing employ. Despite this ominous example, and in direct response to the head-shaving decree, local elites in the Yangzi delta opted to rebel against their newly established conquerors. In retaliation, furious Qing generals ordered the massacre of over 200,000 people in the county seat of Jiading and an even larger number in Jiangyin.15

Cultural memories of these atrocities, especially the one at Yangzhou for which an eyewitness account (Wang Xiuchu's A Record of Ten Days at Yangzhou) circulated underground for centuries, would haunt the Qing ever after. One sample from Wang's long catalogue of atrocities told of a forced march of survivors, while the city lay in smoldering ruins:

Some women came up, and two among them called out to me... They were partially naked, and they stood in mud so deep that it reached their calves. One was embracing a girl, whom a soldier lashed and threw into the mud before driving her away. One soldier hoisted a sword and led the way, another leveled his spear and drove us from behind, and a third moved back and forth in the middle to make sure no one got away. Several dozen people were herded together like cattle or goats. Any who lagged behind were flogged or killed outright. The women were bound together at their necks with
a heavy rope—strung one to another like pearls. Stumbling with each step, they were covered with mud. Babies lay everywhere on the ground. The organs of those trampled like turf under horses' hooves or people's feet were smeared in the dirt, and the crying of those still alive filled the whole outdoors. Every gutter or pond that we passed was stacked with corpses, pillowing each other's arms and legs. Their blood had flowed into the water, and the combination of green and red was producing a spectrum of colors. The canals, too, had been filled to level with dead bodies.16

Grafted on to “scientific” (that is, social Darwinist) notions of racial difference imported from the West in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and in company with the rediscovered writings of nativist writers such as Wang Fuzhi, such graphic accounts fed the mill of anti-Manchurism and Han nationalism that contributed mightily to the dynasty’s overthrow in 1911.

For its part, the Qing regime remained undecided on just how much it was willing to play the game of Confucian rule. The old Jurchen Council of Princes—under the leadership of Dorgon, Jinggalang (who would succeed the regent following his death in 1650), and Ebai (who would serve as regent for the young Kangxi emperor from 1661 to 1669)—retained considerable authority. Literati opinion was largely disregarded, and the Chinese were treated effectively as a conquered people.17 But with Kangxi’s arrest of Ebai (who died in prison almost immediately) and assumption of personal rule, the tone of Qing policy moved in a dramatically different direction.

Dynastic Consolidation

It took the Qing conquerors nearly forty years from the time they captured Beijing and announced the founding of the dynasty to fully eliminate their competitors, and for much of this time it was by no means a certainty that the Qing would ultimately prevail. The first of these competitors was the rump regime of the defeated dynasty itself, called the Southern Ming. The Ming practice of enfeoffing imperial princes in various localities throughout the empire had left a variety of candidates for succession on the death of the Chongzheng emperor in 1644, but it also virtually ensured that conflict would ensue over just who should be the focus of loyalist efforts.

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In June 1644 the Prince of Fu at Nanjing was reluctantly persuaded to declare himself the Hongguang emperor, but his reign lasted just one year before he was captured and killed by Qing forces. Thereafter one prince after another—usually several at once—claimed the mantle, running around the country seeking shelter and patronage from various paramilitary resistance forces or masters of mountain fortresses. The most lasting of these, the Prince of Yongning, was proclaimed the Yongli emperor in 1646 and then flitted around Guangdong, Guanxi, southern Hunan, and Yunnan for a dozen years before eventually fleeing to Burma. He was apprehended there by Wu Sangui and executed in May 1662, extinguishing the Ming once and for all.

A far more serious threat to the Qing was the rebellion of Wu Sangui himself. As the Ming general who had joined the Qing and led their forces into North China, he had been granted a fiefdom in Yunnan. Similar fiefs had been granted two other Ming turncoats—Shang Kexi in Guangdong and Geng Qima in Fujian. By the early 1670s the Kangxi emperor had grown impatient with the autonomy of these “Three Feudatories” and put increasing pressure on the princes to resign and allow full integration of the south into the Qing bureaucratic administration. Wu Sangui responded on December 28, 1673, by declaring a rebellion, under the slogan “Overthrow the Qing and restore the Ming.” He ordered his subjects to cut their queues and his troops to wear white garments and caps in mourning for the late dynasty.

At the same time, Wu also proclaimed his own new Zhou dynasty. He quickly advanced into western Hunan and then in early 1674 took the provincial capital, Changsha, the northern Hunan prefecture of Yuezhou, and Jingzhou in western Hubei. He was poised for an advance into the Yangzi valley, when the Kangxi emperor led his own troops south into Jiangxi to divide Wu from the other two feudatories and to find some route into Hunan to recapture Yuezhou, Wu’s northernmost stronghold. The emperor achieved this in 1679, after five years of bitter fighting. But his victory turned the tide of what had seemed a life-and-death dynastic struggle, and within two years the rebellion had collapsed.18

The third challenger to the Qing was both the most persistent and by far the most interesting. It was a vast, integrated, armed, and eventually bureaucratized maritime empire built up and controlled by three successive generations of the Zheng family of traders from coastal Fujian.19 Large armadas of Chinese armed smugglers had dominated the trade in
East Asian waters since the late fifteenth century, exchanging the prized silk, porcelain, and other manufactures of China for silver from Japan and the New World. The Ming ban on maritime trade only increased the power of these groups, while the Tokugawa expulsion of the Portuguese and its restriction of Dutch trade to the small island of Deshima in the 1630s dramatically reduced competition from these other maritime powers. In 1624 Zheng Zhilong assumed control of one such fleet of armed smugglers, and by 1630, at the age of twenty-six, he had unified them all under his single command.

Zheng engaged diplomatically with the Portuguese (who offered him the latest Western military technology in exchange for Chinese manufactures), the Dutch in Taiwan (for whom he had once worked as a translator and with whom he signed a treaty of mutual protection), the Japanese (who gave him the daughter of a high-ranking daimyō in marriage), and eventually the Ming (who, beleaguered by internal rebellion and Qing incursions in the northeast, in 1628 appointed Zheng an admiral of the fleet). His new very powerful empire was headquartered at Xiamen (Amoy) on the Fujian coast, where he made himself a popular hero by routinely seizing government granaries in years of dearth and distributing their contents to the coastal population. When the Qing captured Beijing in 1644, Ming loyalists saw Zheng as their champion, but in 1646 he withdrew his forces from Fujian and allowed the Qing to capture the local Ming pretender, the so-called Longwu emperor. His betrayal was met with another betrayal, however, when rather than honoring Zheng for his assistance the Qing instead took him prisoner and carted him off to Beijing. He was held there as hostage against his successors for some fifteen years, and in 1661 when he was no longer deemed useful he was executed.

Zheng Zhilong's son, Zheng Chenggong, assumed control of his father's Xiamen-based maritime empire in 1646 and immediately set out to bureaucratize its organization, dividing it into eastern and western fleets and five inland and five overseas companies, each divided into branches, and all overseen by several central ministries reporting to himself. Through agents at his inland base in Hangzhou, he purchased the best Jiangnan manufactures and became the undisputed master, both commercially and militarily, of the East China seas. But having in his youth been granted by the Longwu emperor the title Lord of the Imperial Surname, Chenggong took his Ming loyalism more seriously than his father had. In 1658 he launched a major attack on Jiangnan, announcing his attempt to reclaim it for the Yongli emperor (who was on the run in Yunnan). With a force of well over 100,000 men, he captured several coastal cities, then sailed up the Yangzi and took Zhenjiang.

On September 9, 1659, Zheng Chenggong attacked Nanjing but was turned back with heavy casualties. Throughout the following year the Qing, now fully determined to eliminate this nagging threat, besieged Zheng's Xiamen base. It withstood the siege, but Zheng nevertheless decided to withdraw from the mainland. For several decades his regime's relations with the Dutch had been souring, and so on April 30, 1661, he appeared with some 900 ships before Castle Zeelandia at Anping on the Taiwan coast. Landing without incident, he fought to dislodge the Dutch and on February 1, 1662, secured their negotiated withdrawal from Taiwan to Batavia. For this, he has been much honored as a Chinese nationalist hero.

Later that same year, however, Zheng Chenggong seemed to fall into a depression (prompted in part by reports of the execution of his father, with whom he had remained in communication during his long captivity) and committed suicide. After a succession struggle, his son Zheng Jing assumed command of the still prosperous maritime state. Familiar institutions of Chinese civil government—tax offices, Confucian academies, poorhouses, and widow homes—were set up in the regime's new Taiwan home. It survived for another two decades. Draconian moves by the Qing court to destroy its economic base by forcibly removing populations along the southeast coast proved more disastrous to the Qing than to the Zheng, who easily found other avenues of trade. Chinese naval attacks on Taiwan met with mixed success. Repeated Qing overtures for a negotiated surrender, in exchange for semiautonomous status for Taiwan, were met by procrastination. But finally, fatally weakened in 1674 by an ill-considered participation in Wu Sangui's Three Feudatories rebellion, beset by a worsening subsistence crisis, and damaged by another round of fratricidal fights over succession, the Zheng regime succumbed to a massive assault ordered by the Kangxi emperor in 1683. The Qing were now, at last, undisputed masters of all of China proper.

Forging an Accommodation

A key factor in the successful establishment of any dynasty in imperial China was the forging of an alliance between the local gentry and the central bureaucracy. The literati class had historically remained fairly
taining a hierarchical distinction between above and below was the bedrock of civilization itself, but at the same time it was a necessary check on the natural tendency to concentrate political power and economic resources at either pole. The persistent threat was monopolization at the top, but there existed also the less obvious danger of petty despotism below, in the hands of clerks or local strongmen.\textsuperscript{41}

In Gu's ideal world, wealth would circulate freely at all levels, and political authority would be delegated by the throne to competent, locally responsive county administrators. Attempts at micromanagement via excessive regulation or scrutiny by the throne only undermined the authority of local officials and empowered petty clerks, who—in collusion with “evil gentry”—manipulated these regulations in their own interest. Gu's proposal to enfeoff certain public-minded local elites as county magistrates seemed to be designed to rest in local gentry rather than to cede power to them, and to achieve a true, anti-despotic “rule of many.”

Having refused appointment as a Qing official because of his pledge to his dying mother and his loyalty to the departed Ming dynasty under which his forebears had served, Gu never submitted his plan to the throne. It is unlikely he ever thought it stood a chance of implementation. But his creative circulated widely, along with his other voluminous scholarly publications, and its bold outlines inspired political reformers throughout the remainder of the imperial era. It is both ironic and significant that scholars in the last Qing decades and well into the Republican era, influenced by Western ideas of representative government and popular sovereignty and looking for an indigenous Chinese tradition on which to graft them, found that tradition in the “feudal” proposals of Gu Yanwu.\textsuperscript{42}

The Shunzhi emperor died suddenly of smallpox on February 5, 1661, at the age of twenty-three. Fulin had formally exercised personal rule for eight years but had never been a very forceful monarch. At his death, a power struggle ensued at court, featuring the suspiciously quick cremation of the emperor’s remains, the alleged forging of his will, and the execution of his favorite eunuch. Shunzhi’s seven-year-old third son, Aisin Gioro Xuanxue, was placed on the throne as the Kangxi emperor, chosen on the somewhat flimsy grounds that he had already survived an infantile bout with the disease that killed his father. With the Qing consolidation still very far from complete, the prospects for the new dynasty’s survival did not look promising.

And yet it survived, shortly to enter a period celebrated in Chinese-language historical writing as the “prosperous age” (shengshi) and in the West as the High Qing.\textsuperscript{43} No small reason for this success was the Qing’s astonishing good fortune to have on the throne over the “long eighteenth century”\textsuperscript{44} three remarkably capable, hard-working, and (not least) long-lived men—two of whom ruled for sixty years each—reigning under the titles Kangxi, Yongzheng, and Qianlong.

Kangxi (r. 1662–1722) is widely acknowledged as one of the greatest emperors in Chinese history (Fig. 4). In 1669 at the age of sixteen he moved decisively against the Regents who had put him on the throne, arresting chief regent Ebai for a detailed list of crimes and throwing him in prison, where he shortly died. A passionate devotee of the Manchu-style hunt, Kangxi was an extremely successful military commander, personally leading the suppression of the Three Feudatories rebellion and Qing
incursions into Inner Asia, as well as a brilliant and innovative civil administrator. He had a broadly curious and complex mind and was eager to sit through long lectures and debates by advocates of differing schools of thought, including Jesuit missionaries from the West. He held public demonstrations of scientific and mathematical principles and was fond of showing off the degree to which he grasped their significance or remembered their details. Through his patronage of Jesuit scholars, he absorbed Western pharmacology and anatomical study. He sponsored grand collections of Tang poetry and other massive literary anthologies, as well as guiding the compilation of a standard dictionary of the Chinese language.

Added to all this, Kangxi was a man of extraordinary sensibilities—sensitive to the concerns of his subjects, to the joys and pains of raising his sixty or so children (who, it seems, regularly disappointed him), and to his own emotions. On the consideration to be shown to the old and dying, he wrote:

It's really unbearable not to look after the old when they grow ill; as well as money for their support, and doctors, we should send their old friends to talk with them, no matter whether the sick person is an old and loyal official, or one of my brother's slaves, or the Jesuit Delzé bloated with dropsy north of the Wall, or an old princess in her palace. Like my aunt, the Barin Princess Shu-hui, daughter of [Hong Taiji]; I visited her regularly as she was dying in [Beijing], and gave her all she needed; and she did die with a smile on her face... We can cheer old people up with presents, too. Every year Princess Shu-hui used to send cakes of fat, and dried mutton, to my grandmother and me, and we would send her sable, black fox, and satin. I would always try to make my presents something needed, or something that I knew would bring pleasure, for if you just give an object at random it might just as easily be given back—then all you have is an exchange of items, something with no real feeling behind it... The affections and filial piety are a matter of spontaneity and naturalness, not of fixed rules and formal visits.

Probably Kangxi's most celebrated and far-reaching policy decision came toward the end of his long reign. In 1713 the emperor announced his belief that the economic production of the empire had been fully restored to what it had been at the height of the Ming and that the cadas-
entral survey his ministers had been working on for some time was now completed. The fiscal base for his regime was thus permanently and comfortably secure. Although new lands might continue to be brought under cultivation to meet the needs of his growing population, and these might be taxed accordingly, there would be no need ever in the future to raise the basic tax rate on agricultural land—even though, with new technologies, crop selection, and commercialization the productivity of that land might well increase.

With this declaration, Kangxi committed his successors to governing with a declining share of the realm’s bounty, despite facing an inflationary economy, an ever more complex society, and a dramatic range of new challenges. They would find means of augmenting the government’s take from agriculture through the imposition of various surtaxes, and they would discover other sectors of the economy to tax. But filial piety dictated that they would never violate Kangxi’s pledge to keep the basic land tax as it was in 1713. By the nineteenth century the Qing central administration would find itself permanently impoverished.

Aisin Gioro Yinzen, the Yongzheng emperor (r. 1723–35), was quite a different man from his father (Fig. 5). Of the fifteen elder sons of Kangxi who might have claimed the throne, Yinzen, the fourth, was not the obvious favorite. He ruthlessly eliminated any of his brothers who opposed his succession and endured rumors that he was a usurper throughout his reign. Nearly forty-five years old at the time he ascended the throne, Yinzen already had a well-formed idea of problems in his father’s later reign that needed correction and, though his own reign lasted a mere thirteen years, he used that time to leave an indelible mark on the Qing empire’s—and China’s—subsequent history. He was by all accounts a blunt man, with little of his father’s bravado, showmanship, or refined intellectual and aesthetic tastes. Yongzheng surrounded himself with similarly plain-talking officials drawn from lower rungs of the Manchu peerage, and Chinese from obscure, often frontier, backgrounds. He routinely invited their criticisms of his own initiatives, in a collegial, pragmatic spirit of getting things done.

The basic tenor of Yongzheng’s reign was said to be “strict” or “severe” (yanshi). But he was not aggressive or brutal—he was by no means adventurous in his military policies, and he could be remarkably lenient in his treatment of criminal offenders. The term referred instead to a hardheaded drive to rationalize bureaucratic administration and centralize imperial control, no matter the cost or the opposition. His initiative

Fig. 5  The Yongzheng emperor, formal portrait. Courtesy of the Palace Museum, Beijing.
to make counties more self-supporting by allowing them to collect a mortgage fee was emblematic of this concern. So too were his efforts to bureaucratize the Eight Banners, to eliminate certain gentry tax breaks, and to fold the head tax into the land tax for simplification. He sought to establish orphanages, poorhouses, and elementary schools in every county of his empire. Briefly and ineffectively, he also campaigned to make a uniform vernacular Chinese (what we sometimes call Mandarin) the standard spoken language throughout his realm.8

As part of a crackdown on sectarian deviance, Yongzheng ordered the expulsion of Christian missionaries from all parts of the empire outside of Beijing. He was the prime mover in the ambitious scheme to centrally control local grain reserves through the ever-normal granary system, and he was also behind visionary programs to bring as much land as possible under productive cultivation and to emancipate servile tenants and agricultural laborers and other debased status groups. In short, Yongzheng was an early-modern state-maker of the first order.9

Upon his death in 1735 the Yongzheng emperor was succeeded by his son Aisin Gioro Hongli, who as the Qianlong emperor came to embody what the wider world understood as “China.” Hongli was twenty-five years old at the time of his succession—neither a young boy like his grandfather nor a middle-aged adult like his father.10 Mindful of his own baggage of illegitimacy, Yongzheng had selected his heir apparent in early adolescence and had carefully tutored him in the craft of imperial rule. But as his father had done two decades earlier, the young Hongli monitored with some concern the shortcomings of his predecessor, and after he ascended the throne he formulated his own strategy for correcting these policy excesses and mistakes. One of his first acts was to recall his childhood tutor, the venerable Chinese minister Zhu Shi, to assist him during the transition. In the last years of Yongzheng’s reign, Zhu had served as a sounding board for literati grumblings about the emperor’s “strict” policy initiatives. Empowered now to advise the newly enthroned Qianlong emperor, he offered counsel to the new ruler on how to address these criticisms.

Announcing that the hallmark of his reign would be liberal magnanimity, in contrast with his father’s severity, Qianlong reversed many policies of the Yongzheng era during his first fifteen or so years on the throne. He backed off from his predecessor’s frenetic drive for reclamation of new farmland and in 1748 scaled back the holdings of state granaries at the local level. Restating the belief that the wealth of the empire was fixed

and that mobilization of this wealth in the hands of the state ran counter to the preferred strategy of “storing wealth among the people,” he portrayed his father’s two major fiscal initiatives—imposing the mortgage fee and folding the head tax into the land tax—as unseemly greed counter to the dictates of benevolent governance. He quietly let these practices atrophy by not raising surtaxes commensurate with inflation. Qianlong engaged in a series of piecemeal tax reductions throughout the first part of his reign—cutting back on local grain assessments, extractions for military-agricultural colonies, real estate transfer and title registration fees, and numerous other local levies—until the spiraling cost of his own military adventures made this no longer feasible.

In 1745, to celebrate the ten-year anniversary of his accession, Qianlong declared a general remission of the land tax amounting to some twenty-eight million taels of silver. In effect, he ended his father’s unfinished experiment to create a financially capable, significantly interventionist state apparatus.11 Whether or not this policy reversal was wise in the context of its own time, its legacy would haunt the Qing in the late nineteenth century when it was suddenly thrust into competition with predatory nation-states from both Europe and East Asia.

Far more sympathetic to the interests of the Chinese literati than his father had been, Qianlong seemed to view these men as partners in rule rather than as brakes on centralized authority. He restored a number of the gentry’s tax privileges and exemptions from criminal punishments that Yongzheng had abolished. His preferred ministers were far more likely to be highly polished aesthetes than the rough-and-ready can-do technocrats favored by Yongzheng. During Qianlong’s reign the examination curriculum gradually shifted to place greater emphasis on mastery of prose and poetic style and on philological erudition. At the lower end of the literary scale, Qianlong abandoned the drive for mass education, especially in frontier areas, on the belief that endowing untrustworthy minority groups with the advantages of literacy was politically unwise and financially wasteful.12 Lying behind all such decisions was Qianlong’s distaste for his father’s crusade to reduce social stratification and cultural differentiation within the empire and create a relatively homogeneous population of subjects to an absolutist throne. Qianlong was quite content to wear many hats as he ruled over a universal empire comprised of multiple distinct corporate groups defined by status and ethnicity.13

Nothing epitomized the differences between the two emperors’s conceptions of the Qing domain more neatly than the Zeng Jing case of 1728.14
Zeng was an obscure schoolteacher who interpreted severe flooding in his native Hunan as a sign of Heaven’s displeasure with Yongzheng’s rule and a mandate for dynastic change. When he tried to enlist the aid of the Shaanxi-Sichuan viceroy—a descendent of the martyred Southern Song general Yue Fei, heroic defender of Chinese culture and independence from alien conquerors—his treasonous plot was betrayed. Zeng’s antipathy to Yongzheng was based in part on claims of the emperor’s usurpation of the throne and in part on rumors of his debauched personal conduct. But mostly it reflected an essentialist tradition that viewed the Han Chinese as biologically superior to alien “races.” Domination by inferiors such as the Manchus must be resisted to the death. Zeng explicitly cited the seventeenth-century Zhejiang scholar Lü Liulian as the source of these ideas, but they were even more apparent in the manuscript writings of Zeng’s fellow provincial Wang Fuzhi. This underground vein of Hunanese nativism would come into the open more forcefully in the Qing’s final century.

Yongzheng’s response to the discovery of Zeng’s plot was remarkable. He had the bones of Lü Liulian exhumed and pulverized but, as a gesture of imperial grace, he allowed the repentant Zeng himself to return home, where he became something of a local hero. The emperor then compiled and widely promulgated his own record of the case, in which he argued at length against the theories that had prompted Zeng’s crimes. In his Record of Great Righteousness Dispelling Superstition (Dayi jueni lu), Yongzheng explained that “Manchu” was really only a native-place designation—like northern, southern, western, and so on—not a racial marker. Indeed, he came quite close to arguing that ethnic distinctions in general had no reality at all.

But for Yongzheng’s successor, with his corporatist concept of rule, this attitude was totally unacceptable. In January 1736, as one of the first acts of his reign, Qianlong had Zeng Jing rearrested and executed by “lingering death” and then launched a search-and-destroy mission against all copies of his father’s heretical tract. Implicitly agreeing with Wang Fuzhi on the essential reality of races, Qianlong placed high value on his Manchu heritage and made strenuous efforts to preserve its language, horsemanship, archery, and hunt, to clarify ethnic lines within the banners, to trace the geographical and genealogical origins of his people, and to commission the writing of a national epic, the Ode to Mukden. Qianlong’s grand mission to invent the Manchus as a national group decisively ended Yongzheng’s project of cultural homogenization.15

Even as he backed away from Yongzheng’s policies, however, Qianlong by no means prescribed himself as reversing his father’s intent. To do so would be unfilial, and Qianlong was ostentatiously observant of ritual propriety. Instead, he presented himself as retrenching in ways that his father himself would certainly have endorsed had he lived longer. Qianlong was, in fact, an unrivaled master of display, the ever-visible “exemplary center” of the empire, the famously hard-working, stabilizing force of the High Qing. His various military adventures—of variable significance for shoring up or expanding the boundaries of empire—were neatly rounded off and packaged for posterity by the emperor himself as his Ten Great Campaigns. He was fond of having himself drawn or painted in different costumes—as a Buddhist bodhisattva to appeal to his Lamaist constituents, for example, or on horseback in European-style military armor by the Jesuit court painter Giuseppe Castiglione (Fig. 6).

At his summer retreat just outside the Great Wall in the city of Chengde, Qianlong constructed a grand theme park representing the public architecture of the vast Qing domain—a mini-Potala to exemplify Tibet, a southern Chinese temple in the Jiangnan style, and other buildings. Whereas his prosaic father had eschewed the practice of making ceremonial visits throughout his realm, Qianlong delighted in his “southern tours,” and no expense was spared in making everything look just right. Large sections of the wealthy commercial city of Yangzhou were entirely rebuilt prior to one of his visits in order to make them conform to the emperor’s imaginings of what the city must be like. He also sponsored elaborate jubilees on ten-year anniversaries of his reign. Probably Qianlong’s single grandest act of showmanship, though, came with his retirement in 1795. After sixty years on the throne, he ended his rule one day short of the length of his grandfather Kangxi’s reign, in the ultimate display of filial respect.

Imperial Expansion

Chinese nationalist historiography, at least since the May Fourth era of the late 1910s, has portrayed Qing China essentially as a victim of intensifying imperialist aggression on the part of Western nations and eventually Japan. There is of course good reason to accept this portrayal, as far as it goes. But what it tends to gloss over is the extent to which the Qing itself played the imperialist game, and did so very well—at least until the end of the eighteenth century. In the West, historians no longer depict
Qing China as a victim or an anomaly but as of one of several early modern empires that arose on the Eurasian continent in roughly the same era, including the Mughal, the Muscovy-Romanov, the Ottoman, and the British empires. We are now struck less by the differences than by the common features of their imperial ambitions: a new capacity for administrative centralization across vast distances, a deliberate multi-ethnicity and transcendence of national borders, and, not least, an aggressive spatial expansionism.39

In its first century and a half on the throne, the Qing more than doubled the spatial expanse of the Ming empire and bequeathed to its twentieth-century successors most of the boundaries claimed today as China. For the many Qing soldiers, statesmen, and ideologists involved in this expansion, a "civilizing mission" not all that different from the European experience was associated with conquest. Such particular products of China's own history as the patrilineal-patrilocal family system, patrilineal inheritance, incest taboos, marriage and funerary practice, sedentary agriculture, proprietorship of agrarian land by registered and tax-paying households, and literacy in the Chinese language were vigorously implanted in frontier or colonial areas as the norms of civilized human society. Like their subjects, Qing rulers also tapped into these ideas when they were useful for the dynasty's own purposes. But for the most part the expansionist agenda of the Qing was quite different: it drew upon Inner Asian notions of historical mission, on the perceived needs for different peoples for imperial security, and at times on the personal bravado of individual monarchs.

The Zunghar Mongols, a semi-nomadic people of the steppes of central Eurasia, fiercely resisted incorporation into the Qing empire and the divide-and-rule fragmentation that was a staple of Qing frontier policy, as it had been for the Ming. Instead, under the enterprising khan Batur Hongtaiji (d. 1653) and his son Galdan (d. 1697), the Zunghars busied themselves with a project of alliance formation and state building analogous to that undertaken by that other Hong Taiji who had played such a pivotal role in the formation of the Qing itself.30 By around 1660 they had created a formidable inland empire bordered by Muscovy-Russia to their north and west and the Qing to their south and east. But as early as 1689 the Treaty of Nerchinsk between Muscovy-Russia and the Qing stabilized for the time being the eastern (Manchurian) sector of their joint frontier. Over the next century, this triad of empires would be gradually reduced to a pair, as the two agrarian empires on the Zunghars' flanks...
progressively extended and hardened their borders to squeeze out their pastoralist neighbor.

The very year after concluding the Nerchinsk accord, the Kangxi emperor declared his own personal campaign to eliminate the khan Galdan. He marched into the steppe and engaged the Zunghars at the great battle of Ulan Butong, where Kangxi’s chief general and uncle, Tong Guogang, met his end. Despite a Qing declaration of victory, the campaign and its successors dragged on for decades. In 1697 Kangxi’s war of attrition on Galdan’s allies and food supplies finally brought about the khan’s death, under uncertain circumstances. His remains were presented to the triumphant Qing emperor, who had them pulverized and scattered to the winds. But under a succession of khans the Zunghars continued to hold out, and the war slogged on.

When Kangxi himself died in 1722, Yongzheng traded in his father’s personal vendetta for various initiatives to pacify the Mongols through negotiated truces and offers of trade. But another round of open revolt in the late 1750s prompted the professedly magnanimous Qianlong emperor to launch a genocidal campaign against the Zunghar survivors, who numbered more than half a million. It was successful, and the depopulated steppes were quickly resettled with millions of Qing subjects.

Piggybacking on his success against the Zunghar Mongols, in 1757–1759 Qianlong invaded the territories around the Tarim Basin to the south and west of Zungharia, an area populated by Turkic, Uighur, and other Muslim peoples. The campaigns in the field proved much easier than the task of selling the adventure to high-level Han literati at home, who saw no need to conquer this huge pastureland, whose peoples had not traditionally threatened the Chinese homeland. The trusted grand councilor Liu Tongxun, the long-serving northwest governor Chen Hongmou, and other officials one by one cautioned against the project, and in 1760 a seemingly orchestrated chorus of answers on the metropolitan examination subtly condemned the campaigns as a vain and wasteful display of imperial arrogance. Qianlong brushed these criticisms aside and in 1768 announced the formal annexation of the region under the name Xinjiang (New Dominion). With this one gesture, he expanded the empire into a vast territory that China still claims today, and bequeathed to his heirs a morass of lingering ethnic-nationalist tensions.

Though he ignored the advice of his councilors not to invade, Qianlong solicitously tried to blunt their criticisms by making the New Dominion pay for the cost of its conquest. He never succeeded, and the maintenance of the territory remained a financial burden throughout the dynasty. The system of theoretically self-supporting military-agricultural colonies implanted throughout Xinjiang never remotely provided for their own maintenance, necessitating continuing grain imports from the interior. The mining of newly discovered silver deposits, the establishment of horse farms, the settlement of semi-conscripted farmers with state-supplied seed and tools (along with liberal start-up tax holidays), and the selective opening of the area’s trade routes to Han merchants all helped but were never enough to offset the territory’s spiraling military and administrative costs. The most successful use made of Xinjiang was as a penal colony. An estimated 10 percent of the empire’s governors and generals who served from 1758 to 1820 spent time there in punitive banishment, as did a considerably larger number of local officials and many thousands of common convicts.

In 1768 when a community of such exiles rebelled against mistreatment by a drunken commander and were massacred in response, the New Dominion revealed itself as a troublesome locus of violence. Jihads by indigenous and immigrant Muslim populations against their Manchu and Han overlords recurred with gathering intensity. Attempts to administer the area indirectly and on the cheap through indigenous chieftains of uncertain loyalties enjoyed mixed success at best. And frontier conflicts with the expanding Russian empire never went away, despite periodic rounds of negotiation to settle imperial borders. By the third quarter of the nineteenth century, when massive internal rebellion and predatory invasion from overseas rendered the Qing dynasty unable to respond effectively, defense of the New Dominion reached a point of crisis.

With encouragement from the British in India, a Muslim militarist named Ya’qub Beg (1820–1877) entered Xinjiang in 1865 and carved out an expanding autonomous state. In 1871 the Russians, supposedly to protect their own borders from Ya’qub Beg’s incursions but more importantly to counter the British, moved in and occupied northeast Xinjiang. The Qing was slow to respond, in large part because its most effective military leader in the region, the anti-Taiping hero Zuo Zongtang, was busy suppressing a separate Muslim uprising in the adjacent provinces of Shaanxi and Gansu. Zuo completed this task in 1873, and four years later—as British mediation proceeded too slowly to rescue their client—he moved into Xinjiang and extinguished Ya’qub Beg’s regime. The territory was almost entirely recovered for the Qing empire (a small chunk of Ili remained in Russian hands), and in 1884 the New Dominion was de-
clared a province, administered bureaucratically like any other. The crisis was resolved—for the moment. But the costs of colonization continued to rise, and the Muslim separatist movement never went away.

Another Qing imperial legacy that continued to haunt China into the twenty-first century was Tibet.23 The Ming neither claimed nor sought to intervene directly in that vast territory, preferring simply to exercise the traditional Chinese divide-and-rule policy toward the various sects and tribal communities there. The preconquest Qing likewise initially had little interest in Tibet, until its relations with its Mongol allies and rivals raised its awareness of Tibet’s religious significance. Accordingly, in 1639 Hong Taiji invited the Dalai Lama to visit the imperial court. He declined but sent a reply identifying Hong Taiji as a bodhisattva and Manjusri (Great Lord). The Lama eventually visited Beijing after the conquest, in 1652, where he received various high honors from the Shunzhi emperor. Qing historical records identified these ceremonial exchanges as Tibetan acceptance of Qing suzerainty, but that does not seem to have been the Tibetan understanding. The fifth Dalai Lama had proudly forged the first effectively unified Tibetan state at around the same time that the Qing invaders were dispatching the Ming, and Qing influence in domestic Tibetan affairs remained negligible throughout most of the eighteenth century.

That situation changed toward the century’s end when Tibet was thrown into domestic turmoil by feuding aristocratic lineages. The usurper, Samyge Gyamtso (1653–1705), allied himself with the Qing’s enemies, the Zunghar Mongols, prompting the Kangxi emperor to collude in his assassination. When Zunghars invaded politically-divided Tibet in 1717, Kangxi responded in kind, occupying Lhasa in 1720. Upon his succession, the Yongzheng emperor sought to pull the Qing forces out, but further eruptions of domestic unrest in Tibet convinced him to send in more troops in 1728. Later waves of Qing invasion followed in 1750 and in 1791. Gradually the empire took over local administration in Tibet under the control of a caretaker official known as an amban. At the same time, in its self-proclaimed role as protector of the Buddhist world and in accord with the maxim taken from the Book of Rites to control diverse populations by using their own cultural characteristics, the Qing did little to sinicize or otherwise alter Tibetan local society.

In Taiwan, following the Kangxi emperor’s suppression of the Zheng regime in 1683, the Qing sought to have the claimed territory pay for the costs of its own administration, principally through the land tax.

Kangxi’s eighteenth-century successors were aware of course, from the experiences of Zheng Chenggong and the Dutch before him, that for security reasons they needed a stronger colonial presence than the Ming had established there. But through most of the century the court’s cost-benefit calculus dictated that the expense of keeping peace between Han settlers and indigenous Taiwanese tribes, and among the settlers themselves, would not repay the benefits of systematic land development on the island. Consequently, despite the advocacy of radical expansionists such as the highly prolific local official Lan Dingyuan, the court consistently legislated against Han migration across the straits. In 1684, right after the suppression, the Kangxi emperor announced a quarantine policy, and for the first decades of Qing rule the Chinese population of the island was lower than it had been under the Zheng regime. Though the Kangxi quarantine was relaxed somewhat under Yongzheng, the mid-Qing court never conducted the state-sponsored settlement drives in Taiwan that it did in both Zhungeharia and Xinjiang.

As it turned out, it did not have to. Population growth in land-starved southern Fujian province prompted pioneering emigration to Taiwan in defiance of the central government’s fiat. Even more dramatically, grain shortages in areas along the coast where local populations were increasingly engaged in maritime trade and other nonagrarian livelihoods created a strong demand for the rice that commercial farmers of northern and central Taiwan’s coastal plains could produce in abundance. The commercial possibility of lucrative sugar exports attracted further settlers. Despite intermittent maritime bans, governors of coastal provinces, mindful of provisioning concerns, managed to have the cross-strait trade exempted, though in theory it was regulated by permit. Consequently, Han Chinese colonization of the Taiwan frontier proceeded apace.

One government response, undertaken in the wake of a local uprising in 1722, was to draw a boundary line between the area allowable to Chinese settlement and the area legally reserved for the indigenous “savages.” This line was expansively redrawn several times in the eighteenth century. It was only in 1875, after Danshui and Anping had been opened to foreign traders as treaty ports and Qing possession of Taiwan as a whole was challenged by Meiji Japan, that the court moved to an aggressive “open the mountains and pacify the savages” policy throughout the island.

The eighteenth-century court’s fears of costly security bills proved well founded. In the absence of a dense bureaucratic and military presence,
the elite that emerged in mid-Qing Taiwan was largely comprised of wealthy strongmen who combined planting with command of their own paramilitary forces. Over time these men and their heirs became gentrified, seeking and winning civil service degrees and adopting more refined lifestyles. Moreover, skilled Qing local administrators in Taiwan, as elsewhere throughout the empire, adroitly co-opted selected strongmen to suppress others who from time to time rose in defiance of the throne. But the growing complexity of Taiwan's society eventually frustrated the Qing design to govern the island on the cheap.

In 1786 Lin Shuangwen rose up and seized several county seats. The Qianlong emperor responded with a massive force of a hundred thousand troops, led by the seasoned general Fukang'an, and the rebellion was crushed within two years. In retrospect, the Jiaqing emperor identified this "great campaign" orchestrated by his father as marking a turning point in the empire's string of glorious expansionist victories: it was the first campaign, Jiaqing noted, in which regular troops needed to be augmented with "local braves." The failure to develop a plan to demobilize these forces when they were no longer needed would haunt the dynasty during the White Lotus rebellion of the subsequent decade, and indeed until the dynasty's collapse.25

In the southwest, in the provinces of Yunnan and Guizhou, and in adjacent portions of Sichuan, Hunan, and Guangxi, the Qing faced a similar dilemma with regard to the multitude of indigenous peoples. While increasingly recognizing the diversity of these linguistic and cultural groups—and studying them with ever greater ethnographic precision—Qing observers simultaneously tended to reduce them to a homogenized cultural construction, called the "Miao," a savage "other" in contrast with their civilized selves.26 Policy toward the Miao in the eighteenth century included both quarantine and enforced acculturation, sometimes alternating but also expressed simultaneously by different officials. In one center of non-Han population in mountainous western Hunan, for example, a "Miao pale" (Miaojiang) was sometimes cordoned off to limit or prohibit Han migration, and yet at other times the same area was under active commercial-agricultural development.

Settlement of criminal cases involving the Miao similarly varied between separate judgments under a special set of statutes reflecting indigenous customary law—a forerunner to the extra-territorial judicial privileges later granted to Europeans along the coast—and prosecution and punishment of Miao criminals as ordinary Qing subjects. Acculturation of the west Hunan population to Qing norms gradually occurred over the eighteenth century, largely through intensified commercial relations, but acculturation was hardly assimilation or still less sinicization. At century's end, when resistance broke into the open, prompted by the predations of Qing military forces, self-consciously non-Han peoples of the five-prefecture region united as one in the Great Miao rebellion of 1795.27

Han Chinese had been present in Yunnan and Guizhou for millennia, and the area had been generally claimed as part of the Chinese empire since the earliest dynasties. But Han immigration into these regions in the Ming, and even more so in the first century of the Qing, was unprecedented, prompted by land hunger, trade opportunities, and—especially after the 1720s—a rush to mine the region's rich deposits of copper and other monetary metals. As the home base of Wu Sangui, moreover, the southwest had been disrupted by the Three Feudatories rebellion of the 1670s and 1680s, and during the reconstruction period the government intensified its effort to integrate the area administratively in order to reduce any future threat.28 But Qing authorities seem never to have sought a wholesale dispossession or displacement of indigenous populations. As conflicts arose with increasing frequency and ferocity, they were seldom simply two-sided disputes. Aggrieved parties resorted to arms to defend highly complex and specific local interests, and not necessarily along strict ethnic lines.

As in Taiwan, the early Qing sought to administer this area without great expense, through a selective entrenchment of native chieftains as its agents. But with the gradual introduction of Han-style patrilineal inheritance practices, new disputes arose over succession to chieftainships. When the Qing announced in 1705 that it would only recognize as chieftains individuals educated in Chinese-language schools, these disputes regularly erupted into factional warfare. The Qing's decision in the 1720s to enforce a transition from native chieftainships to direct bureaucratic administration was in large part a response to the political anarchy already under way in the region.

Bureaucratic administration had been tried in the sixteenth century by the Ming but with little real effect. The initiative was revived under Wu Sangui in the 1660s and 1670s, but the outcome was a multiplication of native chieftaincies rather than their elimination. As the largest domains were broken up into prefectures, effective administration was simply passed down one level, to jurisdictions below the prefecture.
In contrast with the northwest, where Yongzheng was notably less bellicose than either his predecessor or successor, in the southwest he was by far the most aggressive colonizer. His Yunnan-Guizhou governor-general Ortai launched vigorous land reforms, including reclamation, private ownership, and household registration for tax purposes. Local resistance to each of these policies required an ever-growing military presence in the region. When Chinese literati in the heartland predictably complained about the cost, Yongzheng defended his incorporationist policies in 1728 as follows: “I take this action only because the unfortunate people living in these frontier areas are my innocent children. I hope to free them of such hardship and make their lives safe and happy. Under no circumstances am I expanding the size of my empire simply because of some misguided notion that there are people and land in these areas that I can use.”

But the violence escalated, culminating in the near genocidal Guzhuo rebellion of 1735-1736 in which by the Qing’s own accounts nearly 18,000 local people were massacred and some 1,224 villages torched. This bloody catharsis, which coincided with the succession of the Qianlong emperor (whose ambitions lay elsewhere), effectively brought to an end the first phase of expanding Qing hegemony in the southwest.

The sinicization process was yet more problematic in the Sino-Burmese borderland encompassing western Yunnan and the upper valleys of the Mekong and Irrawaddy rivers. A significant Chinese presence there dated only from the arrival of Wu Sangui and his Green Standard armies in 1659, but it grew rapidly. Wu and his Qing superiors attempted to impose an administrative structure built on enfeoffed native chieftains, but indigenous local aristocrats—a complex cultural mélange of Tai and other language groups—more often managed to accept and balance appointments from several adjoining polities, of which the Qing was but one. Similarly, cultural elements were selectively adopted from several regional metropoles. In the prosperous border towns, for example, Confucian schools sprang up adjacent to older Theravada Buddhist temples.

This region of fluid identities, bloodlines, and political loyalties was also a great commercial crossroads, with Chinese manufactures traded alongside indigenous products such as smoked hams, rhino horns, and specialty woods, as well as cotton and tea from newly carved-out plantations. Chinese merchants, with their tight networks organized by lineage, guild, and native place, seized the dominant role in this commerce, which ran in several directions throughout China and Southeast Asia, according to demand. The Qing authorities alternately encouraged this trade and imposed embargoes, depending on their fluctuating security concerns. One major ban came in the 1760s during the Qing’s Burmese campaigns. Though Qianlong lauded this as yet another victory in his string of Ten Great Campaigns, in fact it was something of a debacle, as thousands of Manchu and Chinese troops succumbed to tropical diseases, with very little payoff. In the wake of the campaign and the lifting of the embargo, trade grew at an even more rapid pace.

Elimination of petty principalities and the consolidation of the Burmese and Siamese monarchies in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries led to a more multipolar political, cultural, and economic scene in the borderlands. But as elsewhere, the hardening of boundaries between early modern states gradually closed off the ambiguous frontier zones of the past, and growing cultural tensions would eventually culminate in the Panthay rebellion of the mid-nineteenth century.

High Qing Culture

Compared with the intellectual license and aesthetic experimentation of the late Ming, the early Qing represented in many ways a return to discipline and control. In the area of Confucian scholarship, for example, the radical freethinking of the late Ming Taizhou school was soundly repudiated by the Kangxi court, which revived the Neo-Confucian learning (lixue) of the Song dynasty, with its emphasis on social hierarchy and ritual conformity. The culmination of this was the court’s publication of The Complete Works of Master Zhu Xi (Zhuzi quanshu) and Essential Ideas of Nature and Principle (Xingli jingyi) in 1714 and 1715, compiled by the establishment intellectual Li Guangdi. Yet this recycling of Neo-Confucian scholarship was in itself a way innovative. It dramatically downplayed the speculative cosmological elements and the search for personal sageshiof the Song tradition and emphasized instead the Neo-Confucianists’ creative quest for practical solutions to social, economic, and administrative problems, what would later come to be promoted as substantive learning (shixue) or statecraft (jingshi).

By the time of the Yongzheng and Qianlong reigns, the rising prosperity of a broad urban class had revived and expanded the middle-brow culture that had emerged in the late Ming. The tastes of these merchants and artisans bridged the gap between the fairly rigid, homogeneous philosophical, literary, and artistic traditions of the elite and the vi-
repositories of revealed truth and reinterpreting their prescribed social and moral orders.

The culminating intellectual project of the High Qing was the decade-long compilation of the *Imperial Library in Four Treasuries* (*Siku quanshu*), inaugurated by the Qianlong emperor in an edict of February 1772. All published books and unpublished manuscripts in the empire were submitted to an imperial commission at Beijing, which altogether reviewed over ten thousand works. About 34,500 of these were copied into a standardized set of 36,000 volumes, copies of which were housed in the Imperial Palace at Beijing, the Summer Palace, and other palaces at Chengde and Mukden (Shenyang). Later copies were installed at Yangzhou, Zhenjiang, and Hangzhou. An annotated catalogue of these works was presented to the throne in February 1781. Actual control of the editing project was effectively captured by the circle surrounding the philologist and Hanlin academician Zhu Yun (1729–1781). Though native to Hangzhou, Zhu’s family had resided in Beijing for three generations. His intellectual rise thus reflected the nature of Beijing itself as an alternative cultural center to Jiangnan. Zhu and his circle imposed their own Han Learning agenda on the empire’s intellectual world, challenging Sung Neo-Confucian readings of classical texts at every opportunity. Thus, the legacy of the Imperial Library project was to intensify factionalism among the literati, which contributed in turn to the deterioration of bureaucratic morale in the final decades of the eighteenth century.

Warning Signs

The High Qing is assumed by most scholars to have ended with the formal abdication in 1795 of the Qianlong emperor in favor of his son, Jiaqing. A range of critical dysfunctions that appeared, more or less dramatically, around the turn of the century collectively justify this periodization. But in the area of bureaucratic initiative and morale, troubling signs appeared well before this date.

In 1774 an uprising led by Wang Lun, an itinerant preacher of a millenarian Buddhist sect, broke out along the Grand Canal in western Shandong province. Seemingly motivated not by economic distress but by genuine religious conviction, the rebels managed to capture several county seats and eventually threatened the major canal port of Linqing. A truly alarmed Qianlong court was able to send sufficient troops to put down the rebellion handily, but the fact that the it had managed to get off the ground at all, still less to capture county seats, was a shocking indication of the regime’s weakening social control.

Some seven years later, a widely publicized scandal erupted in the management of what might be considered the masterpiece of Qing statecraft, the ever-normal granaries system. These county-level repositories had shown remarkable success during the preceding half-century in controlling regional food shortages and achieving price stability over the annual agrarian cycle and across the territorial breadth of the empire. One of the principal means of stocking granaries was by selling civil service degrees for contributions in either grain or silver. But over the course of the 1770s, a racket headed by Gansu’s provincial treasurer, Wang Ganwang, had pocketed huge amounts of silver collected for the purpose of purchasing grain and had then falsely reported famine relief distributions to account for the grain’s nonexistence. By 1781 when the throne was accidentally tipped off about the scheme, Wang had been promoted to Zhejiang governor, and his personal assets were found to exceed a million taels of silver. As the eighteenth century drew to a close, the ever-normal granary system—the crowning achievement of Qing bureaucratic governance—was becoming decidedly abnormal, as the “prosperous age” drew to a close.