

THE 17th CENTURY

EUNUCHS AND BANDITS

Travellers and missionaries had unanimously praised the Ming empire's political and military stability.

Even so, by the mid 17th century the happy Ming were overturned.

Was their fall unavoidable, or at least clearly predictable?

In fact, the collapse came from the combination of three great problems, an imperial authority weak and arbitrary, interior rebellions and exterior threats.

Nothing of this was new: in its 250 years the dynasty had overcome similar crisis.

But this time the problems intermingled in an inextricable way.

The first element of the crisis came from the frail and erratic imperial authority.

The Royal court entered the 17th century with the do-nothing Wanli emperor, who spent most of his reign secluded in his inner quarters.

In the rather brief reign of his successor, from 1620 to 1627, palace factions went rife, and eunuchs attained unrestrained power.

That allowed one of them, Wei Zhongxian, to build up an extensive network of agents that held the most important positions in the capital and in the provinces.

Wei Zhongxian launched successive persecutions of the civil officials and suppressed with unrestrained ferocity the most influential association of scholars, the Donglin Academy, depriving the dynasty of hundreds of critical voices.

Military were also affected, specially because their positions depended not only on the results of their specific examinations, but also on the whim of the emperor who could always promote or demote them.

In the factionalist climate that prevailed at the court both victory and defeat could be falsified.

With the emperor's death in 1627, Wei Zhongxian's power declined, and after a few months the new emperor, Chongzhen, compelled him to commit suicide.

But the corruption network that he had created didn't disappear. Furthermore, the new emperor Chongzhen, who would be the last of the Ming dynasty, was not a commanding personality and his decisions were arbitrary and erratic and added confusion at all levels.

All the military commanders that brilliantly fought either the bandits or the Manchu fell victims of their own popularity and were finally put to death together with their families.

The last Ming emperor was incompetent, but so were most of the Chinese emperors, and this was certainly not enough to topple the dynasty.

The second element of the crisis were the peasant rebellions that spread throughout the empire mostly from the northwest. There the endemic local uprisings melted with the desperate bands of long unpaid army deserters roaming along the southern edges of the Great Wall. We also have to take into account the global climatic crisis of the 17th century that brought droughts, famines and wars everywhere.

By 1630 two great bandit bands had emerged, their leaders being Li Zicheng and Zhang Xianzhong.

Their bands laid waste to North China, and their policy of distributing to the poor some part of what they robbed to the rich, and of drastically executing any civil officials or landowners that came to their hands gained them considerable support: their armies were soon engrossed with hundreds of thousands of followers.

The plundering and burning of the Ming imperial tombs provided them with a terrific aura and imbued their movement with a strong political sense.

Zhang Xianzhong established his headquarters in the province of Sichuan where he put in place a civil administration that gained temporary credibility amongst the general population.

But when he was assailed by the Manchu armies he launched a campaign of terror to prevent desertions, that according to some accounts killed one million people out of a total provincial population of three millions.

The Manchu repression that followed was as ferocious, and the huge Sichuan remained devastated for decades.

Hundreds of thousands of migrants flowed to the nearby provinces.

The other bandits' leader, Li Zicheng, had a more engaging personality, that attracted many smaller rebel bands and increasing masses of poor peasants. On the other hand, quite a lot of lower-ranking Ming officials found Li Zicheng's career much like the one of the Ming founding emperor, Hongwu, who had also began as a peasant rebel.

Li Zicheng's original band was already an army when he captured Luoyang, a very important city on the Yellow river.

The city was thoroughly plundered and when some of the booty was conveniently distributed to the poor, crowds of people came in to join his army.

Following the Yellow river to the East he then laid siege to Kaifeng, where both he and the Ming armies cut the dykes of the Yellow river to crush the forces of the other: an enormous flood drowned 300.000 persons while Kaifeng was engulfed by the water and sank under the mud for almost a decade.

By 1642 Li Zicheng commanded an army of 400.000 and he conquered Xi'an, where he established the capital of his new dynasty.

Luoyang, Kaifeng, Xi'an, were all ancient Chinese capitals and that gave him an imperial aura.

In 1644 his troops took Beijing, that they thoroughly looted and burned, while the last Ming emperor climbed a small hill in the Forbidden city and hanged himself. As some of the sources put it, the dynasty that had been founded by a bandit was extinguished by another bandit. The Qing dynasty hated the very memory of those two bandit leaders and called them ignominious bandits.

But in contemporary China, they have **entered Mao's heroic pantheon, where they** stand as the forerunners of the great rebellions of 19th and 20th centuries, the Taiping rebellion and the communist revolution.