

THE 17th CENTURY

THE MANCHU

The third element of the crisis came from the northern tribes.

After the fall of the Yuan dynasty, Ming policy had consisted in dividing and controlling the Mongols that had retreated beyond the Great Wall.

To counterweight Mongol military potential the Ming promoted good relations with the Jurchen, that lived farther to the East, in what we now call Manchuria. At the same time they fostered the rivalries among the numerous Jurchen tribes to prevent them from grouping together and threaten the Ming.

The Jurchen, that later on will be called Manchu, had strong trading relations with the Ming.

They sold them huge quantities of furs, pelts and most of all of ginseng, that was highly valued by the Chinese as a strong energy provider and as an anti-aging remedy.

They received in exchange silk and iron implements, but that was not enough and silver flowed to Manchuria in huge quantities.

It has been suggested that 25% of the silver that came to China from America found its way to Manchuria: in fact, the Ming financed the formation of the Manchu state.

Furthermore, the Jurchen's had close relations with China, to whom they alleged obeisance and sent tributary missions.

That gave them a great familiarity with Chinese political culture: they were much more able than the Mongols to adapt to Chinese ways of life.

By the beginning of the 17th century, a Jurchen leader called Nurhaci united all the Jurchen tribes, and created a state monopoly for the ginseng trade. With the aim of centralizing power, he generalized the banner system, a civil-military structure that organized all Jurchen households and transferred loyalty to the tribe to loyalty to the new emerging state.

All adult males were subject to military service and all households came under four banners, yellow, red, blue and white that were further expanded to eight.

At the start, swords, arches and arrows were the basic equipment of the banner men.

In 1625, to signal his imperial design, Nurhaci built his new capital at Shenyang and modelled it following Beijing's layout.

Even being modest by the later standards of the Qing empire, its buildings followed closely the Chinese aesthetical cannon.

To keep his Mongol neighbours at bay Nurhaci arranged an impressive series of diplomatic marriages: three of his women were Mongols and 14 of his 17 daughters were married to Mongol princes.

By the time Nurhaci embarked on the conquest of China, the Mongols had already been incorporated to the Manchu state and were grouped in the 8 new Mongol banners.

Nurhaci was also a great warrior, and he launched one raid after another in **today's south Manchuria**.

Walled cities proved more difficult, because the Chinese had superior weapons and a good dominion of firearms while the Manchu used mainly crossbows and arrows.

Nurhaci died in 1626 while besieging a Chinese city, when his ladders to climb the city wall proved to be too short and his crossbows too inefficient to defeat the large European cannons that the Chinese were using.

Nurhaci built the Manchu state, but it was the new khan, Hong Taiji, who created the Qing dynasty.

Nurhaci died in front of Chinese-European cannons, but Hong Taiji learned quickly and with him the new state underwent a military revolution that fostered its centralization.

He promptly incorporated Chinese military experts and Chinese soldiers to his army: in less than 10 years the Manchu had closed their technological gap. The newly incorporated Chinese were grouped in the 8 Chinese banners and will prove essential for the conquest of China.

From the beginning the Manchu, heavily depended on Mongol and Chinese military and civil collaboration: their conquest of China will be a joint venture as will also be the subsequent government that ensued from it.

In 1636 Hong Taiji gave the Manchu state a new name, Da Qing, the Great Qing, and devised a new name for its subjects: from then on they were called Manchu. He also ordered that a new script be adapted to write the Mongolian related Manchu language.

The new script, adapted from the phonetic Mongolian script, added circles and dots to represent vowels. Hong Taiji died in 1643, a year before the fall of the Ming, and left his newborn empire in the hands of a 5 year boy, under the regency of his highly able own brother, Dorgon.

This was the crucial moment: China was devastated by bandit wars and peasant rebellions, the Manchu, well supported by their Mongol and Chinese squadrons, were pressing on the frontier, and the Ming court had reached its peak of ineptitude .

The only obstacle for the Manchu was the strong Ming army of Wu Sangui that guarded the stretch of the Great Wall close to Beijing.

Just at that moment the bandit armies of Li Zicheng took Beijing and Wu Sangui's family were taken prisoners.

In dire straits, Wu Sangui asked the Manchu help to drive the bandits out: they complied and the day after Dorgon enthroned his nephew as the first Qing emperor, Shunzi.

The summer of 1644 confronted the Chinese with awkward choices.

We now know that the Qing dynasty was on its way to conquer China, but that was far from crystal clear at that very moment, when newborn dynasties were popping up like mushrooms.

Li Zicheng and his righteous bandits proclaimed the new Shun dynasty in Beijing, where Li enjoyed his throne for less than a month.

He fled with his booty and died soon after.

The Manchu took Beijing but their newborn Qing dynasty faced the unprecedented paradox of holding only Beijing while aiming to conquer China.

Zhang Xianzhong and his bandits established the Daxi dynasty in Sichuan and controlled a great part of west China.

And south of the Yangzi river some Ming imperial princes haltingly tried to preserve the Ming heritage proclaiming the Southern Ming.

It was a weird situation and the Manchu took advantage of it.

It is from this turmoil that many missionary reports will emerge.