

THE 17th CENTURY

THE MING-QING TRANSITION

The northern cities, weary of the Ming corrupt misgovernment and of the bandits' raids, offered no significant resistance to the Manchu.

It was a walkover and this enhanced the Manchu's confidence and pushed them to a serious blunder.

The new dynasty ordered all its male subjects to shave their heads leaving only a patch in the back to be braided into a queue.

They also had to change their dress style to conform to Manchu style, leaving aside their large tunics with broad sleeves and adopting the tight clothes of the Manchu. Probably that allowed the Manchu to distinguish at a glance the new absorbed subjects from the potentially dissident Chinese, making very difficult for anyone to change side.

But this Hair and Dress Regulation infuriated the Chinese, both elites and plain people.

It amounted to conform to the despised steppe's way of living and it offended the Chinese sense of cultural superiority.

The Manchu responded with the death penalty for those who didn't comply.

The choice between losing their hair or losing their head stiffened Chinese resistance for decades.

In time, the Chinese will become used to their queues but 250 years later the Chinese rebellion that toppled the Qing dynasty will begin with the public cutting of the queues.

Women styles were treated with much more leniency, as is very obvious in the many images that we have of the harem ladies, where they always appear dressed in Chinese style.

But Manchu women didn't bind their feet and that provided an immediate and irreversible identification of Chinese women.

With the north more or less pacified, the Manchu headed to the south.

But so did the Ming loyalists.

The emperor had hanged himself, but tens of thousands of Ming imperial princes were scattered throughout China, each of them living in a provincial palace with his women, his eunuchs and his retinue.

The bandits killed quite a lot of them, out of hate, and so did the Manchu, out of fear. By the end of summer most of them went into hiding, but a handful of those princes fled to the south and one after the other – or many of them at the same time -stepped forward and claimed the empire.

No figure of preeminent authority emerged to lead the Southern Ming.

But their very existence encouraged the resistance of some of the populous and rich cities of the Yangzi river basin and they became targets of a furious Manchu attack. Yangzhou, a prosperous city that controlled the traffic on the Grand Canal, was subject to a Ten Days Massacre that left hundreds of thousands of victims.

One of the survivors wrote a narrative of these terrible days.

His vivid picture of blood, rapes, fires and deaths survived as a most forbidden text until the end of the dynasty.

At least three others equally bloodthirsty massacres occurred in the lower Yangzi.

One of the problems of the Southern Ming was that they badly needed financial support and that made them dependent on the local warlords.

The most important of them was Zheng Zhilong, a half pirate and half trader based in the port of Xiamen in Fujian.

His extensive fleet controlled a far-flung maritime commercial empire that reached from Japan to South-East Asia.

His son Zheng Chenggong, called Koxinga in Western sources, sided decidedly with the defeated Southern Ming.

Leading a force of more than 100,000 men, Koxinga launched several attacks on Chinese coastal towns, plundered many of the prosperous Yangzi cities and even considered invading Manila.

When the Manchu attacked his Xiamen base, he retreated his troops to Taiwan.

Up to then, Taiwan had been inhabited by aborigines.

In the 1630s the Spanish had erected a Fort in Taiwan northern shores but they were ousted by the Dutch in 1642.

The Dutch had established themselves in a well-protected bay in the south.

Zeelandia was much bigger and consistent that the Spanish Fort of Santo Domingo, and a consistent colony of Chinese had already mushroomed in its outskirts while both Dutch and Fujian ships anchored at its shores. Koxinga landed at Taiwan with a huge fleet carrying an army of more than a hundred thousand men and expelled the Dutch from Taiwan.

This was the first battle between China and the West, and the Dutch surrendered to a Koxinga who had left aside his pirate garb and dressed like a king.

The Southern Ming didn't last long, and the south slipped into a widespread turmoil.

To consolidate the conquest of the South, the Qing appointed three great Chinese military commanders as lords of the southern **provinces**. **It didn't take** long for them to reign as almost absolute monarchs in their fiefs.

The final rebellion of the Three Feudatories was on the brink of splitting China in two.

To quell the rebellion of the border zone principedoms and to prevent Koxinga's fleet to support it, the Qing took the extraordinary measure of removing all the southern coastal populations a hundred kilometres to the interior.

The south was not pacified until 1683, when the Kangxi emperor ordered a final massive assault to Koxinga's family headquarters in Taiwan.

That ended the long period of the Ming Qing transition.

Taiwan was incorporated for the first time to the Chinese empire as a prefecture of the Fujian province.

China entered finally into a long period of peace, but the slogan "Overthrow the Qing and restore the Ming" will survive in the secret societies and will reappear again and again to haunt the dynasty down to the end of the Qing.