

THE 17th CENTURY

A CONFUCIAN EMPEROR

The final stabilization of the Qing dynasty came with the Kangxi emperor whose reign was one of the longest and one of the best of the whole Chinese history: he was an active man with an inquisitive mind. Kangxi was one of the Three Emperors that took the Qing dynasty to its zenith: Kangxi, Yongzheng and Qianlong. Two of them reigned for more than 60 years and together they sat in the throne for 130 years, providing Chinese government a strong continuity.

In the cities the Manchu lived in restricted quarters, like the Tartar city in Beijing: that was also the case in Hangzhou, Canton and all Chinese cities.

They talked different, wrote different: the Manchu accommodation to China was never complete, and the Chinese elite resentment against the Manchu lingered for a long time.

It found expression for instance in two great painters, both members of the defeated Ming imperial family, Shitao and Bada Shanren. Shitao chose to paint in the traditional Chinese style, but added a sense of anguish to his works.

His human figures faced a complete void and had nowhere to go, while his mountains were on the verge of crumbling and menaced dangerously the solitary fisherman that looked at them overwhelmed.

Bada Shanren went further: his fish were on the brink of perishing for lack of water, opening their mouths in anguish.

And his birds were definitely cross and displayed a sulky attitude.

The sense of desolation is even more intense when he combines bird and fish in a unique painting.

Bada Shanren angry birds convey the depressing mood of the defeated Chinese.

Once the country was definitely pacified and all focus of southern and coastal resistance were subdued, Kangxi needed to convince the Confucian scholars that he had the Mandate of Heaven.

The literati were essential to run the Chinese state and he took a series of measures to convince them.

He presented himself as a dedicated calligrapher and an accomplished Chinese scholar, surrounded by books.

On the other hand, to please his Manchu banner men he also dressed in Manchu military attire and was genuinely fond of hunting.

Kangxi sided with the Confucian requisites of his Chinese literati. He sponsored the compilation of the standard dictionary of the Chinese language, the so-called Kangxi dictionary. When supplemented in further editions, it contained 49,000 Chinese characters and grouped them under the 214 radicals that are still in use today.

Examinations were on the run since the first years of the Qing state but not enough literati attended them.

Kangxi sensed the resistance and he badly needed the scholars' collaboration to staff the empire's bureaucracy.

To attract the literati, Kangxi conveyed a commission to write the official Ming History.

In China a new dynasty is always compelled to write the history of the previous dynasty, and the job of doing it provided a highly honorable position.

Many scholars took a step forward and were willing to participate even if this work entailed a death certificate for the Ming dynasty.

The process of writing, re-writing and revising it dragged from 1679 to 1739.

To foster a Confucian education of the whole realm Kangxi proclaimed the Sacred Edict.

Its Sixteen Maxims had to be read and carefully explained twice every month in all villages and city streets of China.

That followed a practice that Hongwu, the first emperor of the Ming dynasty, had already introduced.

Kangxi thoroughly understood the strong importance of Confucianism to reinforce social stability and to ensure the economic viability of the realm. The Maxims were meant (1) to reinforce family's hierarchical relations, (2) to lead a peaceful family life, (3) to enhance peace with your neighbors, (4) to ensure that every family was self-sufficient, (5) to promote frugality, (6) to value study, (7) to leave aside non-Chinese religions, (8) to know the law, (9) to be courteous, (10) to restrain your ambition, (11) to educate sons and brothers, (12) to refrain from false accusations, (13) to avoid concealing outlaws, (14) to pay your taxes, (15) to live in your household group and (16) to not indulge in violent quarrels. Kangxi's edict was a strict performance of classical Confucianism.

Four thousand years ago, according to traditional history, the legendary sage-emperor Shun had appointed a Minister of Education to instruct the people about the five basic relationships that are the core of moral and social order.

One has to keep in mind that the Chinese emperors were religious figures and they tended, as Mao Zedong also did, to promulgate catechisms and deliver Sunday sermons.