

THE 17th CENTURY GLORY AND WAR

The Manchu tried hard to preserve the Chinese institutions and there was a high degree of continuity between Ming and Qing states: the legal code prevailed with little change, the territorial administration remained the same, and so did the six ministries.

There was only a major difference: dual staffing of Manchu and Chinese was used for high and important positions.

The Qing kept on with the agricultural expansion of the Ming.

Polders continued to expand alongside rivers and canals.

Mountains and previous infertile lands were colonized by the American crops.

Transport lines, especially the Grand Canal, were well kept and maintenance works were always in the run.

Once again, rivers and canals were crammed with traffic and bustling cities sprang everywhere.

Cash crops like cotton, tea and oil became much more extended and this favored regional specialization. It is with the Qing that tea became an international beverage.

By 1703 tea was already so popular in Europe as to become the theme of one of the famous Beauvais tapestries.

The commercial prosperity went hand in hand with the growth of efficient banking.

Qing merchants and bankers gathered fortunes and strengthened their position in great commercial leagues.

Those of Shanxi and Huizhou were the strongest.

The Shanxi trade routes had their center at Pingyao.

They met the need to supply the northern frontier troops, and they catered to the demands of Mongol and Manchu aristocracies.

The Huizhou trade routes were based in Anhui.

They covered the Yangzi basin and reached as far as Sichuan, Yunnan and Guangdong.

The great merchant houses followed the general layout of Han architecture, with a central courtyard and its living quarters around it.

Some of the merchants buildings still standing in Pingyao in the north or Huizhou in Anhui province are a remainder of it. Economic prosperity brought with it a demographic growth that followed the trend of the Ming: by 1750 the Chinese population had more than doubled reaching 170 million, that became 303 million in 1791 and 357 in 1811.

Chinese prosperity was so big that it could support this demographic boom: as had been the case with the Ming, taxes were extremely low and institutions like the ever-normal granaries limited the effects of natural disasters.

To consolidate the Manchu conquest of the south, Kangxi embarked in a series of Southern Tours that enhanced both the magnificence of the Qing, the recovery of the prosperous south and the emperor's cherishing of the people.

The Tours were great propaganda operations and the court convened Wang Hui, a foremost landscapist master, to paint them.

The many scrolls, each 25 meters long, followed the route of the Emperor's inspection tour from beginning to end.

The scrolls show the Emperor starting out his Southern Tour under its exclusive Yellow umbrella, followed by his retinue of Manchu banner men.

People of all classes kneel as he approaches, and altars in his honor are dressed in the doorways.

The scrolls show his journey through mythical mountains.

That followed the tradition of the imperial tours of the Qin and Han dynasty, 2000 years ago.

The emperor was supposed to offer a sacrifice at the foot of the mountain, and then climb all the stairs and go through all the shrines and temples that led to the sacred place that perched on the hill top.

Ritual sacrifices to sacred mountains were a Chinese tradition that the Manchu emperor was eager to honor.

The Tours always had to navigate and the imposing imperial fleet sailed the Grand Canal with the emperor and his yellow umbrella guiding it.

The Tour was also a way to inspect the management of the numerous hydraulic works of the empire. The Yellow river needed to be dredged regularly and its retaining walls underwent periodical repairs.

Thousands of people worked on it. At the emperor approach all of them fell to their knees.

All great Yangzi cities, Hangzhou, Suzhou, Yangzhou, underwent the periodical imperial visits.

At the arrival of the imperial boat, signaled by the yellow umbrella, the emperor disembarked protected by his banner men.

He then met the kneeling citizens and walked to the altar dressed in his honor.

People crammed the streets of the bustling city, while altars were dressed at every doorway.

Traffic was thriving.

Bridges were everywhere to connect the multiple waterways that crisscrossed the city, and well-tended polders covered the water margins.

The Kangxi Tours were extremely extensive and expensive enterprises and its echo reverberated even in Europe.

In the first decade of the 18th century, the voyages of the emperor became the theme of one famous Beauvais tapestry series.

Kangxi handled China's foreign affairs both as a Chinese and as a Manchu.

Mongols had been important for the Manchu state since the very start: in fact the continuous marriages made the Mongol elite part of the Manchu family.

Once in power in China, the Manchu divided and assimilated most of the Mongol eastern confederations, and they created a special organism, the Lifan Yuan, to deal with their northern frontier.

But the Western mongols, the Dzungars, resisted assimilation.

Its territory, Dzungaria, occupied a great part of Central Asia, that is northern Xinjiang, a great part of Kazakhstan, and part of Kirguizistan and West Mongolia. When Galdan became the head of the Dzungar confederation, Kangxi faced the major danger of his whole reign.

Galdan had the strong support of the Dalai Lama, and Kangxi also needed it to hold the Mongol tribes.

The Dzungar threat will linger for a century.

In 1696 Kangxi attacked Galdan with an army of 100.000 soldiers supported by a corps of 300.000 people in the rearguard.

Galdan was defeated, but the definitive conquest of Dzungaria and the incorporation of Xinjiang to the Chinese empire will only come in 1757 with the Central Asia campaigns of the Qianlong emperor.

With him China will attain its maximum extent: with the exception of Mongolia, those are the boundaries that it has today. By the mid-18th century Chinese influence covered all East Asia with the exception of Japan and a substantial part of Inner Asia. In terms of real territorial occupation, it was by and large the most populated, greatest and richest state on earth.