Chapter 9

Change or no change in the late empire? From the Ming to the high Qing (1368 - ca 1850)

Key ideas:
This chapter outlines major events and transformations of the late imperial period. The narrative is provided by political history, with glances at economic, social and cultural transformation considered where possible. Bearing in mind that this period is often typified as the archetype of pre-industrial China and contrasted to modern change, it also pursues generalizing characterizations that have been raised by the Western glance: Was the late empire a period of stagnation? How despotic was the state during the Ming and Qing periods?

Introduction

The late imperial period is usually understood to cover the Ming and Qing dynasties. Sometimes, it is implicitly or explicitly restricted to the period from 1500 to the end of dynastic China, congruent to the “early modern period.”

Stagnation and Oriental despotism

The history of these four-and-a-half centuries appears bland or fascinating, depending on perspective. Typically, it is given short shift in general histories, for by the time the account reaches this period, everything of interest appears to have been said already. Historians who focus on the Ming or Qing, by contrast, will never tire of emphasizing that their subject is the best and only way to get to know pre-modern China, a precondition to understanding modern China, and the most intriguing example of an advanced pre-industrial society.

For a long time, it seemed that nothing really happened throughout the period. Certainly, by the end of the period, there were at least four times as many Chinese than at its outset, yet this was understood as merely quantitative growth without real change. It appeared to be the result of vast reproduction and intensification of patterns that had been in place by the Song period or even earlier, resulting in a vast, impoverished humanity living under a system of centralist despotism.

The power of European perspectives

These were the images of stagnation and oriental despotism produced by European contemporaries of the Qing period. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, their manner of history writing was forcefully and knowledgeably confirmed by Japanese scholars, at a time when these were involved in the enterprise of re-defining history as a modern discipline in the context of nation-building in Asia. Japanese and European interpretations subsequently shaped Chinese modernizers’ image of their own past. To the present, they exert a powerful influence on our imagination of “traditional” China. In this chapter, therefore, we will need to read Ming and Qing history with past and present European perspectives in mind.
At the same time, the late imperial period is known better than any preceding epoch and has been studied in great detail. The multitude of focused research offers at once a great wealth of perspectives and insights and can be so overwhelming as to prevent us from seeing the wood for the trees. In the following, we have to try to keep our investigations broadly oriented, with only brief excursions into concrete detail.

**9.1 The Ming dynasty**

The Ming (1368-1644) and Qing (1644-1911) were long-lived dynasties that tend to appear both the epitome of Chineseness and of stifling dreariness. The Ming were cherished as the reconstitution of Chinese empire in its true form - mostly in retrospect, for Ming political life was marred by extreme viciousness. The Qing, although a conquest dynasty, came to be regarded as the last and most representative stage of "traditional" China - to the point that Chinese still wear the queue - a Manchu hairstyle - in Western popular imagination. In the following, we will see what can be found behind clichés of poverty-stricken peasant masses oppressed by a bookish elite immersed in Neo-Confucian scholasticism and moralizing.

The reconstruction of a Chinese empire

We have noted in the last chapter that the Yuan dynasty collapsed in the mid-14th century, and that Zhu Yuanzhang 朱元璋 (1328-1398)

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was the rebel leader who eventually ended several decades of civil war. Having gained control over the rich Jiangnan area, he proclaimed a new dynasty, the Ming. In the same year, his army captured Beijing and drove the last Yuan ruler out into the Mongolian steppe.

Zhu Yuanzhang became the forceful and despotic emperor Hongwu emperor, who ruled from 1368 to 1398. The experience of protracted chaos, the economic and intellectual leadership of Jiangnan, and his personality contributed to shaping the new dynasty. As the Qing, for reasons to be discussed below, was eager to preserve the Ming system, the early Ming was structurally formative for the late empire.

Zhu grew up as a peasant boy in rural northern Anhui. When he was 16, he lost his family in one of the terrible epidemics. He spent his later teens struggling to survive as a mendicant monk, and in his early twenties joined the Red Turban (hongjin 红巾) rebels. He soon became a rebel leader, and as he grew in stature and power, he distanced himself from the sectarian rebel background. Moving into Jiangnan, he quickly associated himself with educated counsellors, intent on learning the art of governing. By the time he proclaimed his new dynasty and set up his capital at Nanjing 南京, he already presided over fledgeling government structures.

Agrarian stability

As Ming authority expanded over China proper, it succeeded in providing what the ravaged country needed most: stability. This great achievement consolidated Ming authority for a long time to come. The Hongwu era was a period of reconstruction.
The Hongwu emperor had a clear grasp of rural needs from his own bitter experience. Once emperor, he was bent on reviving settled village life. Timothy Brook outlines the early Ming and the Hongwu emperor’s ideals:

The emperor’s vision of an agrarian order was the Daoist model of a little elite of virtuous elders supervising self-sufficient villages and forwarding modest taxes to a minimalist state. Cultivators were tied to their villages, artisans bound to state service, merchants charged with moving only such necessities as were lacking, and soldiers posted at the frontier. Administration would be placed in the hands of a small educated class on whom the people themselves would keep vigilant watch.

Hongwu’s goal was to immobilize the realm. People were to stay put and could move only with permission of the state. The emperor imagined 20 里 (12 kilometers) to be the farthest distance anyone should go (exactly the distance that a thirteenth-century English legal treatise used to define “neighbouring,” as this was the maximum distance a short-hauler could be expected to cover to get to market and back in a single day). Hongwu wrote into law an outer limit of 100 里 (58 kilometers); one needed a route certificate to go any farther, and to do so without one cost a person a flogging of eighty strokes. Undocumented travel abroad entailed execution upon return. The Ming Code, the compendium of core laws of the dynasty, sought to block social as well as physical mobility. The son of an artisan was an artisan, a soldier’s son a soldier, and the penalties for switching occupations were just as severe as those for jumping physical boundaries.243

To this rigid system of control we should add the 里甲 registration and taxation system. This system organized ten households into a unit called 甲 and ten 甲 into a 里. A 里 was to be headed by a 里长, an elder, recognized person, who would be responsible for collecting taxes and organizing corvée service to the state.244

Was Ming China in fact immobilized? To which degree could such tight supervision actually have been implemented? Only tentative answers are possible to this important question. For the late 14th century and the core region, the general answer would be yes. The 1381 census is thought to be relatively accurate at just under 60 mio.245 The 里甲 system has been shown to have been in operation for the core region around Nanjing.246

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243 Brook, Confusions of Pleasure, p. 19.
246 Brook, Confusions, pp. 19-27.
Confirming both the orientation towards agriculture and the efficiency of the early Ming state, regional studies by Li Bozhong and von Glahn have shown for the Jiangnan area that early Ming policies were certainly conducive to agricultural development, but not to trade and urban development. While population growth picked up and both agricultural techniques and those for the construction of irrigation, draining and protecting the land against the sea developed significantly, towns, cities and trade in the same area experienced a downturn, only recovering gradually over the 15th century.247 Clearly, the Hongwu emperor’s experience and vision as well as the venerated agrarian ideals bore more resemblance to the early Tang than to the Song. The Northern orientation is unmistakeable. Jiangnan was perceived as a rich and exploitable as well as an intractable and over-indulgent area. Although the image would persist, the area's economic importance did not take long to re-establish itself.248

Although the early Ming systems formally remained in place, they were gradually hollowed out by population growth, economic development and general mobility. Despite steep population growth, all later censuses continued to hover around 60 mio. Lijia structures continued to be in place in many regions, but the numbers of households comprised under them varied greatly: the structure still

248 A striking example of assertion and development despite sustained discrimination on political grounds is the case of the city of Suzhou  苏州. Out of favour as the seat of Zhu Yuanzhang’s most prominent rival in the rebel period, the prefecture was burdened with an inordinately high tax quota. This pressure notwithstanding, however, the city rose to become China’s leading centre of trade and pre-industrial industry. See Marmé (1993), “Heaven on Earth: The Rise of Suzhou, 1127-1550.”
served as a means of organization but no longer constituted a tight system of control.

**Central despotism**

In the political centre, the Hongwu emperor set the stage for fundamental tensions and vicious violence. Zhu had the poor man’s distrust of elites. He never trusted his scholar-officials but insisted on control. He centralized power in his own hands. With the Song office of chief secretary (equivalent to the prime minister) abolished, all matters of importance now had to pass before the emperor. This created an immense workload for the emperor and his successors, while leaving the regular government decapitated. Furthermore, the Hongwu emperor expanded the Yuan practice of beating officials at court, a humiliating and often life threatening punishment that publicly reminded scholar-officials that they were but servants of the dynasty. He also set up a secret service to spy on his officials and unleashed massive purges when he came across real or imagined insubordination. In these purges, not only the officials implied were summarily executed, but their whole lineages, students and anyone linked to them in any way was ferreted out and killed. Up to 40 000 people, mostly from the Jiangnan elite, may have died in the purges after 1380.249

**Eunuch power**

The emperor’s obsession with control over his officials gave increasing weight to irregular structures that developed from offices belonging to the inner court. Originally, the inner court had no political function but served the needs of the imperial family. It was located in the inner palace where no adult male except for the emperor himself was allowed, and staffed by eunuchs. When added functions and institutions expanded the inner court to control the regular bureaucracy, it continued to be mostly eunuchs who served in these irregular offices, such as the secret police and parallel supervisory structures to the regular bureaucracy.250 By the late Ming, the irregular structures had developed into a parallel administration larger than the regular bureaucracy.

**Tensions between emperors and scholar-officials**

Beyond the despot’s distrust of his servants, the conflict between the emperor and his inner court on the one hand and the scholar-officials of the outer court on the other resulted from long-standing tensions that were sharpened by the reliance on Neo-Confucian ideology by the late imperial state. Much simplified, we could say that dynastic emperors relied on scholarly Confucian concepts, such as the mandate of heaven, for legitimation and on scholar-officials for a civilian bureaucracy to run their empire, therefore implementing an

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250 The Hongwu emperor ensured that his dynasty would continue in the direction he had set by explicit orders to later ages in many edicts and in his testament. He promulgated, for example, that any suggestion of restoring Central Secretariat constituted a capital offence.
examination system with solidly Neo-Confucian examination topics. The scholar-officials, meanwhile, conceived of themselves as guardians of Confucian learning and educators of “all under heaven,” including the emperor! Thus, the emperor held the power, but the officials had access to higher authority.

This relationship in which mutual reliance and confirmation were coupled with deep tensions and a subtle power struggle was a late imperial constellation. When the examination system had become the only regular career path in the regular government by the late 15th century, it became an institutionalized system.

By his reliance on “the eunuchs” (i.e. those eunuchs who achieved positions of power and other men in the irregular offices), the emperor attempted to hold scholar-official power in check by pitting his personal followers against bureaucrats who served the institution of imperial rule rather than the emperor in person. The frontline may have had its use at times for deflecting direct criticism from the emperor and thus allowing for changes without the loss of face for both sides. In any event, holding high office remained a highly dangerous profession, for both regular officials and eunuchs. In the course of the dynasty, for 30% of high-ranking scholar-officials their careers ended in humiliation or disaster.251

The slim state

While politics at the centre of power were volatile, stifling and fraught with danger, however, despotism was not a pervasive phenomenon throughout society. The state apparatus was small and focussed on the centre; local magistrates were bound up in it, yet to them, as well, the state remained far away and maintained little real power on the local level. Altogether, the regular official positions in the Ming and Qing did not exceed 25,000. The shortage of personnel and of funds meant that, on the local level, magistrates were able to act only with the support of the local elites and population. The measures they implemented usually had to be consensual and often deviated considerably from those ordered from the centre.252

The Yongle usurpation

With the succession to the Hongwu emperor, another disturbing aspect of the late dynasties becomes apparent. The Hongwu emperor had prescribed strict primogeniture in order to forestall succession conflict.253 When he died in 1398, his grandson and heir

252 As discussed below, investigations carried out in the Yongzheng era (1723–1735) revealed conventional practices going back to the Ming period for the handling of local and regional of government funds that diverged widely from central orders.
253 This means that succession would fall to the eldest son of the empress and to his line. Younger sons were excluded unless the oldest son had died without heir, while sons of concubines could not be considered irrespective of seniority. The succession to the Hongwu emperor was well arranged but not entirely free from problems. Empress Ma had remained childless and the emperor’s four sons were in fact sons of various concubines formally adopted by her.
apparent (his oldest son's oldest son) mounted the throne as the Jianwen 建文 emperor.

Within a year, however, his eldest uncle, Zhu Di 朱棣 (1360-1424), the Prince of Yan 燕 based in Beijing, had risen in open rebellion, and after three years of civil war he established himself as the Yongle 永乐 emperor (reigned 1402-1424). When he launched his march on Nanjing, Zhu Di claimed to do so in order to protect the young emperor from power-hungry officials. But when he occupied the capital, he made sure that the Jianwen emperor, his empress and his young son all burnt to death. When none of the leading officials of Jianwen’s court could be convinced or coerced into giving public support to the usurper, he unleashed a great purge against the leading scholar-officials who had shaped the policies of the Jianwen emperor’s court, with their all relatives and followers.

Although he won out militarily and silenced literati criticism by terror, the Yongle emperor never felt quite assured of his position. He outdid all previous emperors in the great symbolic imperial roles: He had the greatest collection of written works compiled, the Yongle dadian 永乐大典, completed in 1408.254 He led major campaigns into Mongol territories in the Northwest and had a huge fleet sent out to gain the recognition of the outside world as far as ships would sail, the famous seven expeditions led by Zheng He 郑和 (1371-1433) from 1405 to 1433.255 He had the capital moved to from Nanjing to the former Yuan capital, now commonly called Beijing and moved his court in 1421 to the greatly rebuilt site, despite a famine in northern China.

The Yongle emperor succeeded both in becoming a powerful active ruler and in installing his line on the Ming throne. Beyond direct effects of three years of civil war in northern China and up to 20,000 scholar-officials and their families killed, the succession had lasting repercussions on the very meaning of dynasty and state. In asserting his claim to the throne purely because he claimed family leadership, he had treated the empire as if it were a family estate.

254 The collection was to remain unsurpassed. It comprised 22,877 juan volumes and occupied 40 cubic metres. When finished, it was so voluminous, that printing turned out not feasible. It was stored in two handwritten copies in the imperial library. One copy disappeared before the end of the Ming, the other was destroyed when Western forces burnt the Yuanmin Yuan palace in 1860.
255 Between 1403 and 1433 seven great expeditions of fleets consisting of some 300 ships specially built for the purpose were undertaken under the command of the eunuch Zheng He. The flagship was the enormous "treasure ship" (baochuan 宝船), huge, twelve-masted vessels of perhaps several hundred metres in length. The expeditions interfered in the political scene in Java, but usually restricted their activities to representation. Following existing merchant routes, they reached all important places along the trade route that connected Southeast Asia to the Gulf of Aden. According to a recent, much publicized reconstruction, one of these expeditions actually rounded the Cape of Good Hope and discovered America. The work is, however, regarded as flimsy by most academics. See Menzies (2003), 1421: The Year the Chinese Discovered the World.
A 17th century woodblock print that is thought to represent Zheng He's treasure ships:

A changed understanding of dynasty

The event may not appear unusual to us from our European perspective, given that medieval and early modern rulers naturally treated their realms as possessions, dividing and bequeathing them at will. In China however, rulership was separate from mundane occupations, such as landownership.

Since archaic times, the ruler and his dynastic succession had been indispensable to the Chinese state as the link of humanity and cosmos and as the source of all authority. This allowed the Chinese emperor to exalt himself as the highest authority for “all under heaven,” while it also defined his task as a service to humanity, not to his own ends. From the imperial age onwards, if not before, therefore, Chinese rulers inherited a task and a status outside all ordinary human rank, but had never owned their empires.

Had the Zhu clan been an ordinary lineage, a conflict between a young lineage head and his father’s younger brothers would have been completely within the ordinary. Carried out as a quarrel over imperial rule, however, it was unforgivable. How could it happen? We may speculate that the members of the young dynasty still had not completed their mental change from being an ordinary family to being the imperial house, that their ideas of rulership had been shaped by the Mongols who, after all, had treated their occupied territories rather much like private possessions, or that the Hongwu reign had given rulers such despotic powers that even the loftiest conventions could no longer restrain them.

The rites controversy

Whatever the case, the Yongle accession created a deeply unsettling precedent. A century later, another crisis occurred when the
Zhengde emperor 正德 (r. 1506-1522) died without heir. The chosen successor, a cousin of the Zhengde emperor and future Jiajing emperor 嘉靖 (1522-1567), accepted the throne but refused to become the adopted son of his cousin and the adopted grandson of the surviving dowager empress. Instead, he insisted on retroactively elevating his natural parents to the level of emperor and empress. The new emperor prevailed over the desperate opposition of his scholar-officials.

To us, the whole affair may appear as a hair-splitting dispute over a mere formality. To those involved in it, it was a matter of supreme importance well worth the numerous lives lost to the cause. At the core of the dispute again lay the question whether the dynasty was to serve the state or the state the dynasty.

Over the last century of the Ming and throughout the Qing dynasty, the issue was not raised again. Nevertheless, it remains an intriguing aspect that throws a stark light on Ming conflict between emperors and officials, dynasty and state. Considered against this background, the continued importance and development of Neo-Confucianism becomes more understandable; for thinkers such as Wang Yangming 王阳明 (1472-1529) developed a moral universe in which the focus was on the individual and the community, while the ruler at the centre had become merely a ritual point of reference. We will return to elite culture and philosophical developments below. For the moment, let us return to the transformative measures of the early Ming.

The northern capital

Nanjing had been the original Ming capital, initially by default, for Zhu Yuanzhang was able to take over a rebel court here, and later because the location was well chosen for the Hongwu-emperor's minimalist state. But, lacking the prestige of Chang'an, Luoyang, or even Kaifeng, Nanjing as the main capital remained a somewhat unsure choice. When the Yongle emperor decided to move the capital to Beijing, he may have initially based his choice on strategic reasons, for this had been the seat of his principedom Yan and his power-base. When he decreed the former Yuan capital to become the first capital, however, he made sure to greatly enhance the symbolic value of the shift. The new capital was grandly rebuilt and filled by forcibly resettled urbanites from Jiangnan.

The separation of the political from the economic centre

The restitution of the Yuan capital was a geopolitical statement: The Ming dynasty proclaimed it northward orientation; its capital was to be a bulwark against the steppe. At the same time, it meant the continuation of Yuan structures with a political centre far removed from the leading economic core of the empire. Former Yan, in the

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256 Initially, Kaifeng and the prefectural city of the Hongwu emperor's home district served as alternative capitals. Later, the Hongwu emperor sent the crown prince on a mission to investigate the possibilities of moving the capital back to Luoyang and Chang'an.
northernmost corner of the North China Plain, had never been more than a peripheral centre. Unlike the Han and Tang capitals Chang'an and Luoyang, which had been situated in agriculturally and industrially productive regions, Beijing remained mostly a centre of consumption (and redistribution) that had to be provided for by the rest of the empire. In addition, while the transport routes for the maintenance of Chang'an and Luoyang had run from East to West and had been able to use natural or adapted waterways (albeit upstream), the transport route to Beijing ran from south to north, against the natural morphology.

The Grand Canal became the lifeline of the late imperial capital, linking the metropolitan area to the main plains, to Jiangnan and to the rice producing areas along the Yangzi and its tributaries. The canal system from the Huaihe - which since 1324 was also the lower course of the Huanghe - northwards to Tongzhou, the terminal point of the canal 30 km from Beijing, was a Yuan construction. During the Yuan period, however, the problem of water supply of the section along the western edge of the Shandong massif remained unsolved and shipping too cumbersome to be kept up. The Grand Canal became fully navigable only after its rebuilding in the early 15th century.

The so-called tribute grain transports

The supply system for the capital, often referred to as the "tribute grain transports" along the Grand Canal was a massive state-directed enterprise. Maintaining the waterway involved stabilizing the course of the lower Huanghe, then taking a southern course and "usurping"
A system of dikes that had to be continually repaired and raised higher with the sedimentation of the river's bed kept the great river in its southern course until 1853, when the river finally shifted northwards again. The problem of the water supply for the highest section of the canal was solved by diverting small streams that used to flow westwards out from the Shandong Massif into artificial lakes that served as water reserves for the canal during the dry season and as buffers for the retention of excess water in the rainy season. In addition, 37 sluices were installed to maintain the water levels in the canal sections. Both for canal maintenance and for the tribute transports, troops were employed. These camps staffed by hereditary soldiers, while military in structure, became specialized on dike maintenance or grain transport.

The Kangnido map of 1402, drawn in Korea using Chinese materials, gives an impression of the relatively precise, but clearly “North-heavy” knowledge of Asian geography in China and Korea:


The choice of the northern capital had three far-ranging consequences for the political economy of late imperial China.

1. With regard to taxation, it meant that the state had to maintain taxes in kind, even when commercialization and monetarization of

257 Since the early Yuan period and until 1492 the lower Huanghe was divided into two courses, with the main, quite instable southern arm roughly following the destroyed Bian 汴 canal, and the lesser northern arm reaching the sea north of the Shandong peninsula.

258 Bao Yanbang estimates that 1.8 mio troops were employed in the grain transports during the Ming period. Official figures give the number of 48 000 soldiers used in canal maintenance. Those employed in the regulation of the Huanghe were much higher. See Bao Yanbang (1996), Mingdai caoyun yanjiu, p. 3.
the economy made taxes levied in money (silver) the more desirable alternative both for the local administration and for the taxpayers. For the regions that the state drew on as grain suppliers, mainly eastern Jiangnan (southeastern Jiangsu and northern Zhejiang), but also Shandong, Hebei and Henan, Jiangxi, Hubei, and Hunan, "tribute grain" continued to be shipped out every autumn on a fleet of some 7000 standardized grain barges.

(2) The minimal state of the Hongwu emperor could not be preserved. Even without increasing the state revenue as it was received at the capital granaries, the taxes (in kind, money and corvée) collected from the taxpayers had to be raised considerably to cover the transport cost.\(^{259}\) While taxation remained nominally at the same level, rates in fact increased massively, basically adding the transport cost in the form of surcharges and so-called wastage grain. Although attempts were made in the late Ming and in the Qing period at rationalizing the taxation system, at a more even distribution of the tax burden, and at improved transport efficiency, the basic structure remained in place to the end of the dynastic age.

(3) Once the decision for inland transport and for the Grand Canal as the "throat" (houlong 喉咙) of the political centre had been taken, it created vast structures, interests (of transport officers and canal cities) and liabilities (great numbers of transport soldiers and other professional transporters who were well organized and depended on the transports for their livelihood). As a result of this massive commitment, the possibility of sea transport was excluded.

This change is particularly interesting when we consider the fact that, during the Yuan period, the cost and delays of the inland transport route had led the government to adopt sea transport from the mouth of the Yangzi to Tianjin 天津 (today some 30 km off the coast but then still located on the sea), and sea transport had also been used by the Ming to transport provisioning for the reconquest of Southern Manchuria in the late 14th century. In the debate that preceded the reconstruction of the canal, the argument of greater reliability of inland transport prevailed. The danger of losing whole shipments to storms, pirates or foreign aggression outweighed considerations of greater speed and lower costs of sea transport.\(^{260}\) The decision in favour of the canal transport system preceded the last of Zheng He’s great expeditions by two decades. Even if the

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\(^{259}\) For the rise in taxation under the Yongle emperor, see Ray Huang, "The Ming Fiscal Administration," pp. 108f.

\(^{260}\) At the height of Yuan transports around 1330, some 1800 seagoing ships were recruited for the state grain transports. They undertook two trips per year, transporting ca. 280 000 ton per year. See Hoshi (1969), The Ming Tribute Grain System, pp. 3f., and Guo Songyi/Zhang Zexian (1997), Zhongguo hangyunshi, p. 210. In the debate, a calculation was submitted that attempted to show that transport by inland waterways was also cheaper than sea transport. This calculation left out transportation duration, however. Canal barges made one delivery per year, while Yuan period sea transports had been undertaken twice a year, while also leaving the ships available for other uses during the rest of the year.
expedition ever had the potential of developing into more than a show of prestige, this possibility was precluded with decision in favour of canal transport.

The Song-Yuan-Ming transition

A recent collection of important papers, entitled The Song-Yuan-Ming transition, redefines and bridges the gap in understanding the middle and the later empire. The title suggests both break and continuity. In our brief survey of history, we cannot explore this complex topic, but we still need to invest a few thoughts on the question how deep the break was that ended the middle empire, and which traditions the Ming dynasty inherited.

Continuities and discontinuities

As successor of the Yuan, the late empire necessarily took over much of the Mongol empire. The Yuan bequeathed the provincial subdivision of the empire, which – with some further subdivisions – has remained in place to the present, as well as the physical and institutional structures of government, and the courier system for state communications. These were the outer props of a state, which the Ming sought to fill with reconstructed Chineseness. The Hongwu emperor laboured to restore Chineseness to all aspects of life, even sending out orders with samples to guide his people to proper dress and outfit, in order to eliminate Mongol elements from material culture.

As our exploration of the early Ming state has shown, however, that the early Ming were a stark contrast to the Song. The ideal pursued was one of self-sufficient, sedentary peasant life, not of a commercial, urbanized and mobile society, while government structures were despotic and the climate at court inimical rather than competitive but professional.

After a century of Mongol rule, distance in time to the Song period was too great to revive Song structures. Besides, it was not desired, for this was the dynasty blamed with succumbing to the Jurchen and the Mongols. Furthermore, it would appear that the Ming anti-Mongol stance itself led to a continuity of the empire's general layout: The Mongol orientation towards the steppe was replaced by a Chinese obsession with the Northern Frontier; the northern capital and its supply system as well as the string of military colonies along the northern frontier, shaped a political economy in which the South provided for the political and military centre and supported the frontier colonies. Most importantly, the obsession with power and control that dominated the central government made for totalitarian structures that were mitigated only by the commitment to a minimalist state.

The later Ming

By the middle of the 15th century, structural changes had transformed Ming society and economy, while in domestic and foreign policy expansion gave way to retrenchment. After a misguided campaign of 1449 against the reunited Oirat Mongols that ended in the capture of the Zhengtong emperor 正統 (reigned 1436-1450, again as Tianshun emperor 天順 1457-1465), often referred to by his temple name Yingzong 英宗), the policy towards the Northern Frontier changed from aggressive intervention to retrenchment. The obsession with the northern frontier, however, remained unchanged. For the rest of the dynasty, the Ming state invested massive funds and personnel in its effort to contain the Mongol threat by tightly restricting all interaction, including trade, and by preventing all potentially militarily relevant knowledge from circulating outside the empire, even at the cost of destroying it.

The Great Wall

The Great Wall near Beijing in a photo of 1907: http://www.unp.me/f44/china-before-the-rule-of-mao-zedong-149328/

In this period, the Great Wall, in the shape that we know today, was built. This wall, no longer a construction of tamped earth but faced with stone and bricks, was a line of defence. Unlike the Qin and Sui walls which had demarcated the inner frontier, the Ming wall indeed largely marked the empire’s borders.

The sea ban

As the empire attempted to reduce contacts with the steppe to the inevitable minimum, policies towards maritime trade became similarly hostile. While the Yuan had imposed increasingly restrictive supervision on overseas trade in order to siphon off its surplus, Ming bans on trading with foreign lands were ideological. Eventually, the
The anti-maritime stance at the political centre reached such a pitch that a war minister had the recordings and maps of Zheng He's expeditions burnt.

Only incoming tribute envoys and tightly limited numbers of licensed overseas trade were permitted. Much more went on illegally. The state's attitude seems to have been rooted in the opinion that merchants and pirates were of the same kind, that maritime expeditions were so dangerous that they attracted only the most reckless rabble, and that their flourishing was detrimental to the stability of the whole region involved.262 It was, however, the restrictive licensing and outlawing of most trade that did much to create piracy, smuggling, and violence. In the second half of the 16th century, the anti-maritime stance reached its climax with the order to destroy all merchant ships with two or more masts.263

The Japanese pirates264

As it was impossible to control the long and broken coastline of southeastern China, however, the result was that shifting patterns of large scale illegal trade formed. The situation became more complex when the Dutch and the Portuguese entered the scene, aggressive monopolists armed with devastatingly efficient cannons.

The policy to make most trade illegal is though to have been the main cause for the so-called Japanese pirates (wokou 倭寇). These in fact were mostly Chinese merchants who were no longer permitted to legally carry on their trade with Japan. Illegalized seafarers entered upon a kind of race of arms against both their own government and against their competitors, especially the Portuguese in the spice and silver trade. Organized "pirates" controlling up to several hundred ships became a threat which local governments were unable to resist. Coastal communities, threatened both by pirates and by government reprisals, became closed, self-reliant and violent.

In the late Ming, the anti-seafaring policies were gradually relaxed, as ideological rigor gave way to fiscal need. Customs and licenses were rediscovered as a lucrative source of revenue. As usually cash-starved officials imagined profits of overseas merchants to be fantastically high and set staggering license and customs fees, however, most merchants preferred to continue operating in a partly legalized grey zone.

The social and economic transformation

At the same time, social change dissolved hereditary occupations, while trade flourished and unminted silver became the non-official

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262 The still most thorough analysis of the Ming sea bans is Wiethoff (1963), Die Seeverbotspolitik und der private Überseehandel von 1368-1567. For a more recent view, see Brook (1998), "Communications."


high value currency. Agrarian self-sufficiency was superseded by a vibrant, commercialized economy.

The great early Ming efforts in improving communication and transport infrastructure, especially the Grand Canal and the restoring of the courier roads, enhanced the development of trade. Great merchants and brokers with state licenses, lesser merchants and entrepreneurs operating in grey or illegal zones or in trades not supervised by the state, transporters and peddlers increasingly became the motor of economic development. The renewed monetarization of the economy was stimulated by overseas trade, that enabled merchants to import large amounts of silver, first from Japan and later on from the New World.

*The state and the commercialized economy*

The role of the state became restricted to normative guidance and the control of certain fields. Tax quotas burdened certain regions, in particular Jiangnan, and affected directions of regional development, while strategic interest privileged others, especially the capital area and the Northern Frontier. By maintaining monopolies and restrictions in such fields as the production and distribution of salt as well as on mining, by tolls and customs, the state gained revenue through licenses, directed certain economic activities and illegalized others. Opinions differ widely as to whether the state interference in the economy was hindering development, whether it was overall conducive, or irrelevant.

*Population growth, calamities and resource shortages*

In any event, the economy continued to grow at a sufficient rate to allow continued, though gradually slowing, population growth. By the late 16th century, the Ming population is estimated to have approached 200 mio. 265

The social elite in general as well as the gentry elite of successful candidates in the state examinations gradually broadened. At the other end of the social ladder, the numbers of landless vagrants, with bandits and pirates forming endemic counter-cultures, also increased. In the course of the 16th century, instances of severe famine caused by droughts, floods, or locusts, and increasingly followed by great epidemics, increased. It seems clear that, by the late 16th century, Ming China had produced an economic system in which growing numbers of people lived with a shrinking per capita energy consumption. 266

*The Ming-Qing cataclysm*

The end of the Ming is often presented as an inevitable downturn of an enfeebled dynasty that set in with the Wanli 万历 era (1573-1620) and ended six decades later with the Manchu takeover. Crises of the late 17th century were a great wave of epidemics that engulfed

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266 Slvin (1973), Pattern, Part Three; Brook, Confusions, Summer.
all densely inhabited regions except for the Far South in 1588/89, and the Hideyoshi invasions of Korea (1592-1597), during which the Ming supported the Choseon defence with massive armies and at great expense.267

**The Hideyoshi invasions of Korea**

In East Asian international politics, the Hideyoshi invasions constitute a point of reference. They initiated deep distrust between the three countries that was resolved until the late 19th century by the adoption of Ming policies of minimal interaction on the part of Choseon Korea and Tokugawa Japan. This phase of East Asian policy is usually known as that of seclusion or of "closed doors".

**The Late Ming**

The effect of the Hideyoshi invasions on the Ming empire was severe, for the military support depleted the already badly strained state coffres. It is now thought, however, that it was not the final blow to an already tottering empire. In any event, the Ming lasted for another thirty years, under a central government presided by no more than mediocre rulers, but still as an obviously functioning state. When the first Jesuits reached China in the early 1700s and recorded back their experience of many years of knowledgeable observation, the picture they provided was of a well ordered, reasonably prosperous society.

**The end of the Ming**

The end came swiftly and cataclysmically in the 1630s. Devastating epidemics rushed along the main lines of communication, hitting the most densely inhabited regions of the empire. At the same time, a terrible drought devastated the Northwest. Former soldiers of frontier garrisons and desperate men from Shanxi and Shaanxi formed large rebel armies. Meanwhile, the Manchu had begun to build their independent state in Manchuria, and started expanding southward.

The dynasty fell in 1644 when the capital was first taken by one of the rebel armies, led by Li Zicheng 李自成 (1606-1645) and the emperor, realizing that the city could not be held, hanged himself.

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267 Five years of war and devastation came to an end when Toyotomi Hideyoshi 豊臣秀吉 (1536 – 1598) died. He was an extraordinary military leader who completed the unification of Japan after a century of civil war. The extreme contrast of Toyotomi Hideyoshi's image in Japan, Korea and China well illustrates the weight of historical figures in present-day East Asia. While he is honoured as the second unifier of Japan, a great statesman and military leader in Japan, memory in Korea centres on the "mound of ears," thousands of cut-off ears and noses the Japanese invaders took back to Kyoto, and Chinese depictions also concentrate on the devastations brought about by the invasion of Korea. After Hideyoshi's death, Tokugawa Ieyasu 徳川家康 displaced his son and became the first Tokugawa shogun. Foreign and domestic policies were turned around from warlike expansion to autarchy and domestic development.

Hideyoshi's successor, Tokugawa Ieyasu 徳川家康 (1543 – 1616) completed the pacification of Japan under the leading shogun's rule. Following the Ming precedent, Choseon Korea and Tokugawa Japan also pursued a policy of external and internal pacification by reducing inter-state contacts to a minimum and discouraging the use (and further development) of military technology except for a few government workshops.
Meanwhile, a general named Wu Sangui 吳三桂 (1612-1678), recalled from fighting the rebels and dispatched to defend China proper against the approaching Manchu army at Shanhaiguan 山海关, found himself caught between the Manchu and the rebel forces. He decided to strike an alliance with the invaders to be able to suppress the rebels. Thus, the Manchu forces entered China proper.

### 9.2 The Qing dynasty

The extension of the Ming empire: [http://www.artsmia.org/art-of-asia/history/ching-dynasty-map.cfm](http://www.artsmia.org/art-of-asia/history/ching-dynasty-map.cfm)

Who were these new northern invaders? The Manchu (Chinese: Manzhou 滿洲), a people from northeastern Manchuria, were considered descendants of the Jurchen. They had organized peoples under their rule in banners and officially renamed themselves Manchu in the 1630s. Having learned the arts of statecraft and social organization from Choseon Korea and Ming China, they had begun their new process of state formation in the early 17th century. Reminiscent of the rise of the Jin 金, once their state formation got under way, military strength due to the availability of horses and advanced horsemanship made the Manchu a redoubtable military force despite their small numbers. In 1616, Nurhaci (Chinese Nu'erhachi 努爾哈赤, 1559-1626), the unifier of the Jurchen,

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269 Ethnic categorization is, of course, constructed. In the case of the Manchu, the new name apparently served as a means of integrating a larger segment of peoples living in Manchuria into the new identity; in fact including Chinese and Koreans, while excluding “ethnic” Jurchens who lived further west and had taken on Mongol nomadic lifestyles (these were then classified as Mongols in the banner system).
proclaimed his own dynasty, reviving the name Jin. He forced the Choseon king to accept his dynasty as an equal by military force and began to encroach upon Ming territories in southern Manchuria.

In 1636, Nurhaci’s son Hong Taiji (Chinese: Huang Taiji 皇太极 or Hong Taiji 洪太极, 1592-1643) changed the dynastic name to Qing. Gaining the allegiance of the Eastern Mongols and imposing Qing status, now as the superior state, upon Choseon Korea by another invasion, he consolidated an independent Manchurian empire. When he died in 1643, an unstable regency was set up for one of his younger sons, the future Shunzhi emperor. Dorgon (Chinese: Duo'ergun 多尔衮, 1612-1650) emerged as the most powerful of the regents. It was under his leadership that the Qing conquest of the Ming empire was carried out.

The Qing conquests

The Manchu were not conquerors of China. They entered China proper by coincidence rather than by design. Once in Beijing, they acted quickly and resolutely to mount the throne. China was conquered for them by able Chinese turncoats, such as the statesman Hong Chengchou 洪承畴 (1593-1665) and the general Wu Sangui mentioned above.\(^\text{270}\)

The conquest wars took over three decades. Wars had to be fought against the remaining rebel forces of Li Zicheng in the Northwest, and those of Zhang Xianzhong 张献忠 (1606-1646) who had marauded Sichuan for many years,\(^\text{271}\) against tenacious, though never well organized loyalist resistance that centred in the Southeast and Southwest. Only the Northern plains and Shandong, the regions that had submitted promptly, escaped devastation.

The years until the subjugation of the last Ming loyalists are a sad sequence of often ineffectual warfare and terrible destruction. The massacre of Yangzhou 扬州 in 1645, the great city on the mouth of the Grand Canal into the Yangzi, became emblematic for the terror of the Manchu conquest. The city had been chosen as the point of resistance by a hastily formed “Southern Ming” government based in Nanjing. When the equally hastily assembled loyalist army could not

\(^{270}\) Hong Chengchou and Wu Sangui were the last two capable Ming generals by the early 1640s. When the Manchu pressure on Liaoning became a danger to the capital, they were recalled from their campaigns against the Northwestern rebels to defend the capital. Hong Chengchou was captured and changed sides. He became the leading strategist and statesman of the early Qing. Wu Sangui was the general who let the Manchu enter China proper. After retaking Beijing from the rebels, he contributed much to the conquest of the south and became the most powerful of the so-called Three Feudatories, three Han-Chinese princes who held great territories in the Far South and the Southwest.

\(^{271}\) Zhang Xianzhong is the epitome of a rebel leader who rose to oppose an unbearable situation only to cause unbelievable suffering himself. In 1640, leading an army of 100,000 men from the Northwest, Zhang invaded Sichuan and captured Chengdu. According to Qing records, he had all residents of Chengdu butchered. Over a decade, his rebels ravaged the province of Sichuan, killing millions of people. On a big stone, later called Zhang Xianzhong’s stone, he had the following words engraved: “The Heaven gave everything to nourish men. Men has nothing to thank Heaven for. Kill kill kill kill kill kill.”
hold the walled city against the Manchu troops, it abandoned the city and fled across the Yangzi. As "punishment," the most of the remaining civilian population, some 800 000 people, were butchered in a ten days bloodbath. Similar massacres happened in other cities.

The queue

Shortly afterwards, an order of symbolic subordination rekindled resistance: Dorgon decreed that all male subjects were to shave the front half of their heads and wear their remaining hair in a long plait. This was the Manchu hairstyle, and the adoption of new hair and dress codes following the integration of new peoples in the shifting world of the Northeast was a common phenomenon. In China, however, the decree forced every single man to make his visible choice between cultural loyalty to the Ming and submission to a barbarian order. The issue was not made easier by Chinese tradition to leave one's hair uncut throughout life, as preserving every part of the body one had been given by one's parents was filial duty. Many cities of Jiangnan rose against the conquerors, for many men the choice became one between suicide and being killed by loyalists. In the issue of hairstyle, the Manchu prevailed. Once adopted, the queue became normal. Further orders for women to unbind their feet and adopt Manchu dress, however, had little effect and were soon abandoned.

The Three Feudatories

Three Chinese military leaders finally subjugated the South. They were rewarded with extensive military frontier territories (the san fan 三藩, commonly translated as "feudatories"). When the Qing government moved to curb the power of Han-Chinese leaders, however, the three feudatories rose in rebellion. Wu Sangui, the old turncoat general who now held Yunnan, went so far as to become the protector of the last Ming pretender. It took the Qing forces from 1673 to 1678 to suppress the rebellion.

The Manchu dynasty was confirmed in its distrust of Chinese military men and began to systematically cut the privileges of the Han banners. Originally, Hong Taiji had set up Han and Mongol banners as parallel integrative socio-military structures of Manchuria. While the Han bannermen were the most numerous, however, they were disadvantaged in land distribution and career opportunities once the Manchus entered China proper. Gradually, their numbers dwindled, while meritorious Han bannermen were reclassified as Manchus. By the end of the dynasty, Han bannermen were but a small subgroup in Manchu banner camps.

Zheng Chenggong

When the South was returned to the Qing fold, the young Kangxi emperor moved to strike at the last threat in the south: the maritime

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272 Cheng K'o-Ch'eng (1990). "Cheng Ch'eng-kung's maritime expansion and early Ch'ing coastal prohibition."
empire of Zheng Chenggong 郑成功 (1624-1662, often referred to as Koxinga in older Western sources, a Dutch transliteration of his title guoxing ye 国姓爷). 273

Zheng Chenggong was the scion of the richest maritime merchant family of the late Ming. He controlled a fleet of thousands of ships, ten-thousands of men, and a fortune estimated at 4 mio tael. We may regard him as a product of the anti-maritime Ming policy, as merchants responded to the dangers of the sea and their home coast with ever-increasing organization and armament. Unlike his father, Zheng Chenggong refused to submit to the Qing, but built up his control along the coasts of Fujian and Guangdong. In 1659/60, his fleet sailed up the Yangzi and was beaten back with considerable difficulty near Nanjing. The attack threatened to interrupt the empire's lifeline, the Grand Canal. After the suppression of loyalist resistance in the Southeast, Zheng drove the Dutch from Taiwan and centered his activities there.

Qing maritime ban and Taiwan

In the wars against Zheng's maritime empire, the Qing government not only banned all seafaring on the Fujian and northern Guangdong coast, but ordered the complete coastal strip cleared of human habitation. As the population along this mountainous coast is concentrated on the narrow coastal strip and dependent on fishery (and trade), this draconian measure was highly destructive. 274 In 1683, when the Qing dynasty was firmly established, Zheng Chenggong's grandson submitted. Taiwan was incorporated into the empire as a prefecture of Fujian province. Subsequently, Han colonization of the island began in earnest. Formerly considered a wild and inhospitable abode of pirates and ferocious savages, Taiwan became important as an exporter of rice and sulphur (a main ingredient of gunpowder). It also remained a source of anxiety for the authorities, however, as clashes with aboriginals, piracy and smuggling would not abate.

The transmission of the mandate

Already before entering China proper the Manchu leaders, well aware of the military weakness of both Choseon Korea and Ming China as well as of their own small numbers, had shifted from the pursuit of spoils and captive populations to ruling. They entered China and

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273 Zheng Chenggong, the son of a some-time merchant-some-time-pirate and a Japanese mother. His father started off as a pirate, then helped the Ming authorities with the suppression of piracy (possibly his competitors), at times he traded with the Portuguese in Macao, at other times he captured their ships off Taiwan. When the Ming fell, family fortunes took a peculiar turn. Zheng Chenggong's Japanese mother, then living at Quanzhou, committed suicide out of loyalty to the Ming, while his father submitted to the Qing. The son, hearing of his mother's fate, opted for resistance (causing his father's execution in 1661). Piracy in the late Ming was a major enterprise, for pirate fleets had to be strong enough to assert themselves against Portuguese and other competitors as well as the Ming navy and authorities.

274 For a case study of the destruction in a Fujian prefecture during the Ming-Qing wars, see Vermeer (1990), "The decline of Hsing-hua prefecture in the Early Ch'ing."
found themselves in Beijing at a most inopportune moment, with the
dynastic founder Hong Taiji dead and an unstable regency of three
leaders ruling for a six year-old boy, the later Shunzhi emperor 顺治
(1638-1661 reigned directly 1650-1661).

It is safe to assume that Chinese advisors, such as Hong Chengchou
shaped the ascension to power of the Qing. The taking of Beijing
was explained in terms of Chinese political morality as an act of
righteous revenge on Li Zicheng and his rebels for causing the death
of the last Ming emperor. Throughout the conquest, the argument
upon which the legitimacy of the new dynasty was built, was that the
last Ming emperor was dead (the three “southern Ming” emperors
relatively distant members of the Ming royal house) and that the
Qing Shunzhi emperor inherited the mandate of heaven as the ruler
who avenged his predecessor and restored peace (by routing the
rebels).

This source of legitimation together with the narrow basis of Manchu
power meant that the Qing dynasty presented itself as a faithful heir
to the Ming and in fact preserved Ming structures and ideology.
Manchu changes were confined to the capital area, where most
banners were settled and Manchu took over the northern city, to
restructuring the military system and to introducing a new office for
relations with northern and western peoples, the Lifan yuan 理藩院,
and to the outward mark of Manchu domination, the queue.

The high Qing

An 18th century version of Zheng Zeduan’s 11th century painting Qingming shanghetu, showing an imaginary
urban river landscape updated to the artist’s contemporary world:
http://www.npm.gov.tw/exh96/orientation/ch_b41_1.html(清明上河圖)

In 1644, the Manchu Qing may have appeared as no more than the
least bad of several bleak choices to those who threw their lot in with
them, by comparison to the hopeless Ming court and the
undisciplined rebels. Until at least the late 1650s, the eventual
outcome of the cataclysm remained unclear. From the late 17th
century onwards, however, the aspect of the new dynasty changed
dramatically. Three powerful and capable emperors reigned for
almost one-and-a-half centuries, bringing back stability and prosperity. The reign eras Kangxi 康熙 (1662-1722), Yongzheng 雍正 (1723-1735), and Qianlong 乾隆 (1735-1796) were the period of Qing glory. Population development most clearly indicates unprecedented economic growth. At the close of the Ming-Qing wars in 1678, the total population is estimated at 160 mio, the war period having allowed for no recovery since the disasters of the late 1620s and 1630s. A century later, in 1776, it exceeded 300 mio people.275

Kangxi, Yongzheng and Qianlong

It is a strange irony of history that it were three Manchu emperors, descendants of the very barbarians the first Ming emperor sought to keep out of China in perpetuity, who came closest to fulfilling the role of the active and conscientious autocrat that he had bequeathed upon his dynasty and that the Qing had inherited.

The Kangxi emperor: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kangxi_Emperor
The Qianlong emperor in the years of his ascension to the throne, portrait by Giuseppe Castiglione: http://www.chinapage.org/painting/qianlong.html

For the consolidation of Manchu rule and the recovery of Chinese society it probably was fortunate that the conquest generation of Manchu leaders died young.276 The Shunzhi emperor who ruled for ten years before he suddenly died aged only 23, already set the direction towards the restoration of Chinese scholar-official institutions and methods of administration. When the Kangxi emperor wrested power from his regent in 1669 aged only 14, he made a point of showing himself an earnest student of classical

275 Cao Shuji, Zhongguo renkoushi, pp. 691-701, 706.
276 Dorgon, died in 1650, aged 38. Almost all members of the Manchu ruling house of his generation predeceased him or died in the power struggles immediately following his death.
Chinese learning, successfully gaining the support of the scholar elite. The reigns and lives of the three emperors Kangxi, Yongzheng and Qianlong were not untroubled, yet by and large they reigned with dedication and authority. Moreover, they enjoyed relative longevity, so that the long reigns particularly of Kangxi and Qianlong in themselves helped to create stable conditions.277

**Economic growth**

Within the empire, peace and reconstruction, the introduction of New World crops such as maize, sweet potatoes, peanuts and tobacco, together with an active agrarian policy, renewed and even more pronounced regional specialization and industrial-scale production all contributed to an economic expansion that supported a population far in excess of the Song/Jin and the high Ming. Maize and potatoes were especially important as they allowed the cultivation of formerly marginal upland areas.

Demographic recovery restored the busy commercial economy of the later Ming, which relied on high population density in the core areas that facilitated exchange and a mixture of agrarian and proto-industrial production. When the core areas filled up, migration to depopulated and frontier areas intensified. Sichuan was resettled and became an important grain export region; the upland regions of southern and southwestern China, formerly sparsely inhabited minority regions, became the colonial frontier. With the consolidation of rule in the western regions, Han-Chinese settlement expanded here, too. Much of the terraced rice fields on the steep slopes of Guangxi and the complex irrigation systems along the northwestern Huanghe loop were undertaken in the Qing period.

Market and trade networks supported and enabled regional specialization and interdependence. Both in volume and in value, grain was the most important commodity in long distance trade, illustrating the reliance of the economic system on private trade.

**External security**

In external relations, the Qing empire achieved what the Ming had laboured unsuccessfully to enforce: By the middle of the 18th century, all steppe and highland regions to the north and west had been brought into the Qing zone of influence. The regions under a loose form of imperial administration included what are now Tibet, Qinghai, Xinjiang, Inner and Outer Mongolia, and Manchuria up to the Amur. Allegiances and formal acknowledgement bound Mongols, Tibetans and Uighurs in a system of alliances, exchange and some measure of interference, directed by a special office of frontier relation, the Lifan yuan. At the same time, treaties with Tsarist Russia and Choseon Korea demarcated precise borders and regulated international relations in the framework of tributary

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277 The Kangxi emperor died aged 68, the Yongzheng emperor at age 57, the Qianlong emperor reached his 88th year.
relations under the administration of the Ministry of Rites (the Libu 礼部).

The slim activist state

While we have emphasized the continuity of government institutions and economic patterns from the Ming to the Qing, limited but significant reorganization of government tasks and finances were undertaken. Striving to present himself as the benevolent heir of his predecessor dynasty, the Kangxi emperor decreed a permanent freezing of the labour service tax on the levels of 1711. Furthermore, the Qing state retained the administrative size of the Ming. This meant that the number of some 25 000 official positions was not increased. As a result, magistrates continued to administer districts of the same geographic size but with greatly increased populations. By the 18th century, a magistrate in the most populous areas might have up to 1 mio people under his jurisdiction. Clearly, the Qing state was extraordinarily slim.

Having said this, however, it also is important to note that the Qing state took a considerably more activist stance in matters that concerned social and economic stability. Efforts in food security and in the minting of copper cash are good examples of such sustained efforts. The system of granaries for famine relief and gruel kitchens in cities and towns for poverty relief during the lean months of winter and spring was expanded.278 In order to overcome the chronic shortage of copper coins (as before actually a copper-zink-lead-alloy), minting was massively stepped up from the Kangxi through the Qianlong reign. The need to open up new copper resources in the 18th century led to the state directed expansion of mining in Yunnan as well as the improvement of navigation on the upper Yangzi and several tributaries. In addition to producing the low denomination currency for a quickly expanding market economy, it thus contributed significantly to the settlement and development of the Southwest.279

The Yongzheng financial reforms280

Furthermore, government finances and tasks were reorganized under the Yongzheng emperor. The most important reform was the incorporation of the labour-service tax (already commuted to a tax payable in money) into the land tax. This meant that taxation was completely shifted to land taxation rather than the taxation per person. The result was a significant simplification of taxation and a more even distribution of the tax burden, as the poorest landless households were no longer taxable.

In addition, finances of local government were reformed. In an attempt to weed out corruption, it turned out that local officials’

funds were so inadequate that they had to employ various means of illegal taxation to be able to fulfill their tasks at all. According to the Ming statutes, in fact, funds for the local administration covered no more than a small stipend for the officials themselves and quite insufficient budgets earmarked for wages of yamen runners, ceremonial expenses, stipends of students at government schools, and welfare contributions for orphans, widows and the poor. For building projects, road maintenance, irrigation projects and all other works of local development and maintenance, officials had to convince the local elite to make donations, raise illegal taxes, or divert tax revenues, or use a combination of these measures. In fact, as the central government realized in the early 18th century, such practices were so well established that they had become fully regularized on the local and provincial levels, while being concealed in reports to the central government.

Faced with this situation, fiscal reforms were undertaken that reorganized the revenue sharing between local and central government. Funding of local government tasks was improved and became more flexible. Nevertheless, the problems both of insufficient funding and of corruption persisted.

**Fragility and the 19th century crises**

Despite, or, rather, as a result of the impressive economic growth and population increase over more than a century, high Qing society lived under mounting strains. Core problems of a highly condensed economic system were great numbers of people in marginal existences, immediately threatened by poverty if any of their resources should fail, advanced interdependence of regions that also meant considerable fragility should markets and transport networks be disrupted, and mounting ecological pressures that drove up prices for many basic materials, reduced margins and eliminated alternative incomes and survival strategies in times of disaster.

**Density and land shortage**

In the core regions, a self-sufficient peasantry was an ideal of the past. Pressure on available land had rendered many plots too small to maintain a family's livelihood. Rural families, while carrying on some agriculture, were dependent on additional income from (female) textile work, sometimes as proto-industrial market-oriented labour, such as the spinning of cotton with both raw materials and finished products bought and sold on nearby markets, or from (male) migrant labour in transport and other forms of unskilled or semi-skilled labour. In other words, populations not only of towns and cities but of whole areas were dependent on market networks.

**Ecological pressures**

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At the same time, high population density and the cultivation of marginal land led to mounting ecological pressure. Deforestation had been a long-standing problem in northern China. Wood for buildings and machines was an expensive commodity transported over long distances. Brushwood and stalks served for cooking and heating, yet these, too, became increasingly scarce and expensive. In the eighteenth century, problems of deforestation increased also in the South. In mountainous areas, the clearing of slopes – often for the cultivation of maize and sweet potatoes – caused erosion with often severe consequences for irrigation systems and the quality of soils in the valleys.

**Energy efficiency and specialization**

Chinese society responded to these mounting pressures with considerable ingenuity to increase energy-efficiency and create livelihoods. Thus, in the core zone of the Guangzhou area, villages shifted to the relatively barren hills, leaving all lowland to cultivation. In Eastern Jiangnan, the largest area with extremely high population density, all organic material was used as fertilizer, down to the “wiping of a barber's razor.”²⁸² Trades became highly specialized and self-organized in guilds. Thus, makers of funeral paper artifacts might be subdivided into several specialized trades, and porters in a single city might be organized in several guilds, each with its own zone of operation.

In the meantime, the government was not oblivious to the problems. In fact, the Qianlong emperor was deeply concerned about the most visible pressures, growing poverty and increasing numbers of “floating people” (liumin 流民), landless poor who had taken to wandering. Restrictions on movement were reduced, but a solution could not be found. We would now say that a solution was not possible within the agrarian regime.

**The competitive society**

The two most striking and lasting social strategies were extreme competitiveness at all levels of society and social self-organization. It was the pressure to gain and maintain a livelihood (shengyi 生意) that made late imperial society highly competitive. Throughout society, there was a great insistence on work from a very young age. In order to protect their trade, artisan’s guilds set high thresholds for entry. Chinese apprentices had to pay for being taken in and were heavily exploited. Families, even better-off ones, could only afford to raise a certain number of children. Births were spaced at three to four years; when more children – especially daughters – were born to a family that already had two or more children who had survived early childhood, these were often drowned instantly.

²⁸² Forbes (1848), *Five Years in China*, p. 80. Forbes points out that this thorough recycling of all refuse had the side-effect of preventing water pollution even in urban areas.
Anxiety did not lessen for those who had become wealthy. The proverbial saying that a fortune will not outlast three generations was borne out for many families which became successful officials, entrepreneurs or merchants. The Jia clan in the famous novel Dream of the Red Chamber (Hongloumeng 红楼梦) illustrates that even a privileged banner household was not exempt from these pressures. Social obligations and demands to exceed exerted great pressures on the offspring of the wealthy soon unmade fortunes.

The self-organization of society

Self-organization, of the type we have already encountered in the late Tang and especially in the Song period, increased and expanded. In the late imperial period, the majority of welfare institutions, such as gruel kitchens, orphanages, widow houses and hospitals, were run by local elites. Local elites funded and organized road, bridge and dike maintenance, the construction of irrigation and drainage systems. In some cases, irrigation systems on which several thousand people depended were communally run. Sometimes, the public engagement of a single individual could rival major state projects. Thus, through four decades, a rich merchant by the name of Li Benzhong 李本忠 (1759-1841) invested 170,000 taels of silver over almost four decades to make the passage through the Three Gorges of the Yangzi safer for navigation, by having dangerous rocks hewn away during low water and building a new tracking gallery.283

In all this, the state retained some overall control, through licensing guilds the recognition of merit and the sometimes real, sometimes figurative leadership in communal projects. Nevertheless, it is clear that the elite had taken over much of the running of society.

The 19th century downturn

In the early 19th century, tensions erupted into the first major rebellions. Regional in scope, the state was able to suppress them. Nevertheless, crisis deepened. Natural calamities of a very cold century, large-scale rebellions, and the northward shift of the Huanghe caused overwhelming inner threats, opium and imperialist naval power added external pressure. Despite all odds, the Qing state lasted through the century, and even experienced some restoration, both politically and economically, from the 1860s to the first decade of the 20th century. The dynasty fell in 1911, mainly because the rising coastal elite had withdrawn its support.

The question as to when the flourishing of the 18th century gave way to the 19th century downturn, when living standards started to decline and to undermine social and political stability remains hotly debated. The onset is dated between the mid-18th and the mid-19th centuries. Some authors insist that the gap between living standards in the most advanced regions of China and Europe did not open until the turn of the 18th to the 19th century, others argue that China had

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fallen back by the 16th century.\(^{284}\) The intensity of the debate highlights the many uncertainties in the study of late imperial economy and society.

It seems in order to be careful both with overly rosy notions of the high Ming and Qing and with too bleak pictures of 19th century disaster. Very generally speaking, the 19th century cannot have been disastrous throughout, as overall population growth continued. By 1800, the Qing population is estimated at some 300 mio, by the end of the dynasty at 400 mio. During the first three decades of the 19th century, despite regional rebellion and weaker emperors, the overall picture is not one of a faltering empire.\(^{285}\) After the great rebellions of the middle of the century, the restoration period of the late Qing is thought to have brought sufficient, if precarious stability to allow for demographic and economic recovery.

As to late imperial China before the 19th century crises, it is useful to keep in mind that climatic conditions of China meant that natural disaster struck much more frequent and with much greater severity than we are used to consider from our European experience. Throughout the late imperial period until the 1870s, with a climate that was both colder and drier than China’s modern climate, droughts, floods, and locust plagues were more frequent than any

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\(^{284}\) For the confrontation of interpretations kindled over Pomeranz’ book *The Great Divergence*, see the *Journal of Asian Studies* 2002, pp. 501-661, with papers by Philip C.C. Huang, Kenneth Pomeranz; James Lee, Cameron Campbell and Wang Feng; and Robert Brenner and Christopher Isett.

time before.\textsuperscript{286} Furthermore, high population density and high mobility made inhabitants of the core regions especially exposed to disaster, for epidemics were all but unavoidable when people were already weakened from hunger. According to a rough estimate, every grown person in late imperial China knew severe famine from his or her own experience.

\textit{Low life expectancy}

Demographic research has shown a gradual but marked fall in life expectancy from the 16\textsuperscript{th} century onwards, with lowest life expectancies in the most developed regions and apparently better life quality in sparsely inhabited and economically less active regions, such as Hunan or the North.\textsuperscript{287} This disconcerting finding would suggest, that life expectancy fell as and where economic flourishing set in. This finding seems to contradict all expectations.\textsuperscript{288} Yet, although demographic data are based on difficult and debated reconstruction, the general trend towards an alarmingly high mortality it too firmly established to be in doubt. Why was late imperial China such an unhealthy environment to live in?

\textit{Disease}

Generally, pre-industrial urban and mobile life was unhealthy, because urban and mobile people were especially exposed to contagious disease. In the core regions of late imperial China, such conditions were probably present even in nominally rural areas. Furthermore, rural life was often disease-ridden. The most frightening example is schistosomiasis (also known as bilharzia), parasitic disease caused by worms in rice paddies, rivers and lakes. By the mid 20\textsuperscript{th} century, up to 80\% of water systems throughout the South were found to be infested, causing the rural population severely exposed to a seriously debilitating and often lethal disease.\textsuperscript{289}

\textit{Vulnerability}\textsuperscript{290}

As falling standards of living and to the vulnerability to natural and man-made disaster, Mark Elvin has offered the most convincing tentative explanations. In \textit{The Pattern of the Chinese Past} he argues that shortages of resources, including arable land, wood, fuel, metal, and money caused a gradual but inescapable decline of real wages and living standards that in turn constricted economic development because purchasing power was reduced and concentrated to the

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{286} Liu Zhaomin (1992), \textit{Zhongguo lidai shang qihou zhi bianqian}, pp. 135-174.
\item \textsuperscript{288} We may add that it also contradicts European descriptions from the period. European visitors to China, from the early missionaries to late 19\textsuperscript{th} century travellers generally comment positively on nutritional state of the Chinese and on the diet of the ordinary Chinese compared to their European counterparts, when they become specific.
\item \textsuperscript{289} Elvin, \textit{Pattern}, pp. 185f. For medical information, see http://ehs.sph.berkeley.edu/china/e/disease.htm
\item \textsuperscript{290} Elvin, \textit{Pattern}, Part Three and \textit{Elephants}, part 1 and 2.
\end{itemize}
necessities of life. In The Retreat of the Elephants he adds the aspect of environmental degradation to the picture.

**Environmental buffers**

He shows that the pattern of highly intensive cultivation and advanced regional specialization became critically exposed to crisis. The fact that the system had grown to cover whole regions had not only generated substantial ecological pressures, but had eliminated the “environmental buffer” that formerly could offer some protection to rural populations. Bluntly and simplified, people could no longer fall back on whichever meagre means for survival might be found in forests and wild lands, for these were no longer within reach. Copious catalogues of edible wild plants, intended as guides in the case of crop failure, became useless in the developed regions, for uncultivated margins had all but disappeared.

**Conclusion**

This chapter provided an overview of historical transformations of late imperial China prior to the modern transformation. Before we continue with the late Qing and the onset of modernity, the next chapter offers an introduction to Western perspectives on China that took shape over the period investigated here and still influence our understanding of China’s past and present.
Further reading:

For a feel of the Hongwu emperor’s efforts and intentions.

For an eyewitness’ diary of the “Ten days of Yangzhou” during the Manchu conquest.

For a picture of society and economy in the Middle Ming period

For an overview of Qing society.

For a careful, concrete and still highly influential interpretation of late imperial economic history.

For a highly readable account of the Kanxi-emperor’s reign, personality and an analysis of Qing policy making.

For the seriously interested, the following works provide detailed studies on various topics:

