Week 24: Hearts and Minds

Historical Overview

The turmoil of the conquest ushered in a period of soul searching both for the conquering Manchus and their Han Chinese subjects. On both sides, questions of culture and ethnic identity loomed large. The Manchus worked hard to establish their own Confucian credentials in order to win both popular and elite support while simultaneously seeking to hold on to their native ways even as they governed a population that greatly outnumbered them. Many Han Chinese, for their part, found it difficult to accept rule by what they perceived as a group of northern barbarians while others took advantage of a political fresh start to revive traditional Chinese institutions of governance.

During the years that the populations of northern and central China were coming to terms with this new political reality, the Manchus were consolidating their rule in the southern part of the country where the Ming court had fled in the 1640s. It would be another 40 years before the Qing gained full control, and the dynasty only truly hit its stride during the reign of the Kangxi Emperor which lasted from 1662 until 1722. Under Kangxi, Taiwan was incorporated for the first time into Chinese territory. And Qing expansion into inner Asia began with successful military campaigns against the Dzungar in northern Mongolia.

Section 1: Conquest and Consolidation

I ended the previous lecture with the invasion of China proper by Qing forces in the spring of 1644. This was the beginning of an extended period of consolidation and upheaval that lasted about 40 years. The battle for Beijing was the first crucial episode in this consolidation. Li Zicheng entered the capital on April 24, 1644. This day saw the suicide of the Ming emperor and his concubines, and the flight of the remnant of the Ming court to the south where they hoped to regroup and return eventually.

Li Zicheng did not hold on to Beijing for long. His efforts to ally with the Ming general Wu Sangui, who was guarding the Shanhaiguan Pass, failed. Instead, Wu made a deal with the Manchus. He invited the Manchu regent, a man named Dorgon, to join him in chasing out Li Zicheng from Beijing and to help reestablish the Ming dynasty. The Manchus and Dorgon's advisers agreed to join forces, but they had a different plan. They would suppress the rebellion and establish their own dynasty within China proper.

So the Qing armies invaded with Wu's army in front, taking the worst of the fighting. Qing troops, led by Manchu cavalrymen, swept in later in the afternoon, their attack camouflaged by a dust storm. Together, they drove Li's armies from the field in a decisive victory. This victory caused a series of dramatic events. First, Li Zicheng, who had fled the battlefield for Beijing, returned there and had himself enthroned. That was on the third of June. The next day, on June 4, he set fire to the palace buildings and took what men he had left with him to escape to the west. And the day after that, on June 5, Qing troops entered Beijing themselves.

The people in the city were doubtless surprised when the "righteous army", liberating the city turned out to be led by Manchus, not by Chinese soldiers. Dorgon's statement on the steps of one of the palaces that had not been burned down was as follows.

"The empire is not an individual's private empire, whosoever possesses virtue holds it. The army and people are not an individual's private army and people, whosoever possesses virtue commands them."

Now, the Qing conquest was actually by no means a sure thing. The Qing and allied forces were outnumbered something like four to one in the field, and it took another year of fighting before they finally caught up with Li Zicheng and killed him. By early 1645, The Qing armies had crossed the Yellow River, and in early 1645, they had crossed into Jiangnan.

Most localities submitted, although some cities, like Yangzhou, did not. The fall of Yangzhou was followed by the loss of Nanjing and Hangzhou by the end of the year. But the incorporation of South China took another five years and relied upon different forms of persuasion, everything from violent coercion to ideological co-optation and outright collaboration.

Meantime, the last refugees from the Ming court had escaped to Burma and set up what was called the Southern Ming Dynasty, which lasted there until 1661 when the last pretender to the Ming throne was captured and executed by none other than Wu Sangui. But even then, the job of consolidation was not finished, as another group of Qing loyalists led by a man named Zheng Chenggong, also called Koxinga, had entrenched themselves, first of all, along the southeast coast, and then on the island of Taiwan. They had gotten to Taiwan having first expelled the Dutch in 1662, who had earlier settled and colonized there.

Now the Zheng regime was supported by a thriving maritime trade network that ran from Japan to Southeast Asia. It had a lot of money. And it took a massive coastal blockade and the assembling of an entire navy before the Qing was finally able to defeat the Zhengs and take control of Taiwan in 1683, integrating it, for the first time, into Chinese territory.

Section 2: Resistance and Withdraw

The fall of the Ming and the rise of the Manchus tore a whole world apart. No one expected this. No one could have imagined China's once again falling into the hands of a small bunch of outsiders in such a sudden and violent way. That is to say, the Qing conquest, was a major shock to Chinese perceptions of the world, and precipitated a major intellectual readjustment, and forced many hard choices on people, to support the Qing, to resist, or to remain agnostic.

For most people, this was a pretty easy choice. If someone is holding a sword to your neck, or your wife's neck, or your child's neck, you surrender. But for some people, the choice was not so obvious and the price of surrender was not one that they were willing to pay.

Strange as it may seem, one of the things that proved too much for some people was the order given by the Manchus that people, that are adult males, needed to cut their hair in a special way. The imposition of the queue was one of the most obvious signs of the Qing conquest and it was written directly on Chinese bodies physically.

Beginning first in 1644, Qing rulers decreed that adult males in the Han population would be required to cut their hair in Manchu fashion. What this meant was that they had to shave the front half of their skull clean and to grow their hair long in the back and gather it into a single tight braid called a queue. By forcing them to do this, the Manchus were able to tell at a glance who had submitted to their rule and who had not. And it made it very difficult for anyone to change sides.

There was tremendous resistance to the queue, however, on the part of the Chinese. To cut the hair was to violate a cardinal principle of filiality, according to which one was required to show respect for one's body as a gift from one's parents. Not to mention that to wear one's hair in Manchu fashion, rather than in Chinese style, in a carefully gathered bun, or ji, on the top of the head, was to adopt an objectionable and barbarian custom,

However, the price of resistance, which was decapitation, was great. Hence, the saying arose, "Lose your hair and keep your head, or keep your hair and lose your head." Most people, not surprisingly, chose to lose their hair, but not all. This queue, or the pigtail as it was sometimes called, became the standard hairstyle for all Han men throughout the late imperial period and is the source of a derogatory nickname for the Chinese that was invented for them by Westerners in the 19th century.

What about those who did not go along with the Qing though? Those who were unwilling to sacrifice everything for the Ming, and yet also unwilling to serve the Qing were many. What choices did these dissidents have? Well, they could commit suicide, or they could retire from the world of affairs. But this raises another question. If they retired from participation in daily affairs and retreated to a monastery, or something like that, and they stayed out of trouble, how do we know that they were loyalists in the first place?

Well, we know because some took to expressing their feelings about the new world they lived in through poetry, and drama, and art. Particularly in art, where we have depictions of lone trees, desolate scenes, uprooted, isolated travelers, abstract images, all symbolic of the artist's withdrawal from the world. One of the most famous of these is Bada Shanren, who was well known for his depictions of fish and birds. The fish, in particular, often depicted with no background at all, literally fish out of water. The word "fish" doubling as a homonym for a word meaning leftover or remnant. Bada's paintings poignantly capture the predicament of those people that the change of dynasty had left behind.

Section 3: The Problems of Legitimacy

For Manchus, too, their success in 1644 posed major challenges, of which the suppression of rebellion, and chasing down Ming heirs was the easy part. The saying goes, the kingdom can be won on horseback, but cannot be ruled from horseback.

In order to make it as a dynasty, the Qing rulers required the support of the educated, property stratum of society. This was crucial for Qing control. They had to win over the literati, and the gentry. Without them, there would be no one to staff the bureaucracy. There would be no one to help maintain local control. There would be no way to collect taxes. To get those people on your side, they had to be persuaded of your legitimate right to rule. And in many ways, this was the biggest challenge that the Manchus faced. In the end, they did need it, by and large. But their Barbarian origins always remain an issue, right down to the very end of the dynasty.

Now, the Manchus had lived long enough under the sway of the Ming Empire, that the rules of Chinese politics were fairly familiar to them. They knew that the key to getting literati support involved convincing people that they had won heaven's mandate, they had "tian ming". Not only did they need to quell the seemingly endless rebellions that marked the later years of the Ming, and bring peace to people, but they also needed to assume the traditions of Chinese imperial orthodoxy, and present themselves as champions of Confucian virtue.

The early Qing emperors, the Kangxi emperor, the Yongzheng emperor, and the Qianlong emperor-- and particularly, the Kangxi emperor-- understood the importance of striking a Confucian pose. All of them seemed to have internalized the virtues that were expected of them as rulers of China.

One of the best examples of Kangxi's understanding of this was the proclamation of the so-called Sacred Edict in 1670, immediately after he assumed power, himself. These were 16 maxims read twice a month to villagers by the gentry. Their aim was to nourish traditional Confucian values, such as filial piety, brotherly love, thriftiness, propriety, the maintenance of customs. And they called upon people to accept their station in life, so that the minds of all may be stabilized. This was rather like an ideological education, or even a Sunday sermon.

Another good example of the acceptance of Confucian values was the Qing sponsorship of a major scholarly project, the writing of The History of the Ming Dynasty. The composition of the dynastic history was always the responsibility of each succeeding dynasty. By taking this up, the Qing showed their respect for Confucian norms, and for Chinese precedent. But to get people to take part in the history project was not so easy. A special exam was held to recruit literary talent from across the country to join that editorial team, the team that would write the history of the fallen dynasty. Some scholars refused, but jobs were scarce, and many agreed to take the exam despite some misgivings. In the end, some 50 renowned scholars-- including many who had been officials under the Ming-- agreed to work for the Qing court, and to write that history.

This convinced them of the Manchu commitment to traditional values. And their own historical existence was authenticated in a way that no other act of recognition could have accomplished, by giving all of them-- Ming loyalists, and Qing servitors a common stake in perpetuating a Confucian regime as Fred Wakeman wrote in his Great Enterprise.

The same commitment to upholding the values and ideals of traditional Chinese culture also lay behind the composition of the Complete Library of the Four Treasuries-- called the siku quanshu-- which was put together under the order of the Qianlong emperor, about a century later than Kangxi. In this sense, although the Qing conquest shook up society-- without any question-- and Qing rule represented domination by a people whom most urban Chinese, at least, regarded as inferior to them, it did not result in a transformation of social values, but in a confirmation of those values. And so, we see here a high degree of continuity in terms of social, and intellectual trends between the Ming and Qing states.

Section 4: The Limits of Success

Despite the imposition of the queue and the success of such policies as the Sacred Edict and the Ming History project, the Manchu claim to power and legitimacy was by no means unchallenged as many Han Chinese continue to hold onto feelings of ethnic prejudice or conflicted loyalties. These are worth talking about for just a moment. The Qing claim to the Mandate of Heaven raised tensions on a couple of different levels-- one cultural and one political.

On the cultural level, the tension was between competing ideas of what China was and what Chineseness was. Both views in these competing ideas were based in the classics. One view was of China as a place reserved for people who were already culturally and ethnically Chinese.

The classic quotation that these people like to quote ran something like this. This is from the Mencius. "I have heard of men using the doctrines of our great land to change barbarians, but I have never yet heard of any being changed by barbarians." According to this view, non-Chinese could never properly rule over China. Hierarchy and propriety demanded that they be subservient to the Middle Kingdom.

The other view put a different spin on this quotation. If barbarians could be changed by Chinese doctrines, they could become like the Chinese, therefore there was no inherent reason that they could not hold the Mandate of Heaven. According to this second and competing view, China was an infinitely expandable empire without real borders.

China belonged to any who followed the Chinese way and who pursued the cause of virtue. And being virtuous meant being Confucianized, regardless of one's origins. And obviously the Manchus much preferred this view of things.

On the political level, the picture was a little bit simpler. The basic tension was over loyalty to the ruler. Older ideas of loyalty, pre-Song ideas of loyalty, was that loyalty was called forth by the virtuous ruler and was strong in direct proportion to the ruler's virtue. The more virtuous a ruler, the more one should be loyal to him.

The new Confucians changed this around a bit. They like to think of the tie to the ruler as that to one's father. That was not mediated by moral conditions but was absolute.

Both of these views were also supported by classic texts. And we see both of these views coming out among those living in the time after the Qing conquest. For some who had served the Ming emperor, the idea of switching to serve the Qing ruler was unthinkable. For them, loyalty was absolute, and it would always be to the Ming emperor.

But others reasoned that the last Ming emperor was not a true emperor. He had failed to demonstrate true virtue. The proof of that lay in the fact that he had lost the realm. And so for them, pledging allegiance to the new Qing ruler, who appeared to be, in fact, more virtuous, was not such a problem.

Of course, such people lay themselves open to the charge of being opportunists or worse. Now, there were no right or wrong answers in this debate, but it was a wrenching debate that lasted for more than a generation. The result was a profound ambivalence that runs right through the entire early Qing period, through the first century at least, hinging on questions to resist or not to resist, to serve or not to serve.

It was this ambivalence that underlay the heroic resistance at the town of Jiading, where 20,000 people were killed during the conquest, or at Jiangyin, where there was an 80-day siege and perhaps as many as 100,000 people were killed. These acts of resistance were all led by local gentry. The worst of these was at Yangzhou, where the resistance was led by the last Ming minister of war, Shi Kefa, the last upright men in the Ming, a man of unquestionable loyalty to the Ming emperor. Many, many thousands died there.

Responses to this ambivalence varied. Brothers turned against brothers, fathers turned against sons. Most people went along with Manchu rule, and the Qing conquest brought some places welcome stability. But ambivalence can be seen everywhere. Han women taken as concubines to Manchu princes, for instance, would wear Manchu clothes at home but were allowed to visit their daughters or their sons and wore Chinese clothing then. This kind of ambivalence is the sort of thing that we see so much of in these transitional decades following the conquest of the Ming dynasty by the Manchus.

Section 5: Reclusion, Rebellion and Restoration

If the Qing were willing to tolerate various sorts of subtle protests, like the paintings of Bada Shanren or the plays like The Peach Blossom Fan, they were not willing to tolerate outright challenges. And the greatest test for the Qing came in the 1670s. And it came from the man who had done more than anyone else to enable the Manchus to rise to power in the first place, namely Wu Sangui.

Wu Sangui led the most dangerous challenge to Qing rule, in what we know as the Rebellion of the Three Feudatories, or the San-Fan, which lasted from 1673 until 1681, and which almost-- almost-- undid the Qing. At one point they had conquered half the country themselves, the entire southern half of the country. It would be two centuries before a similarly serious uprising once again arose to threaten Qing control. That was the Taiping Rebellion. The defeat of Wu Sangui and the suppression of the San-Fan Rebellion meant the end of the last major threat posed by the Han Chinese to the stability of the Qing empire, and really marked a kind of coming of age of the Qing.

Now, I've already talked about the consolidation of the Qing. The fact is that large parts of the country were not actually conquered by Manchu armies. Central rule was extended into the far south by relying on Chinese-- not Manchu-- forces. These were divided into three separate groups called feudatories. Wu Sangui in Yunnan and Guizhou, Shang Kexi in Guangdong, and Geng Jingzhong in Fujian Province.

Each of these was run like an independent fief. Together they received about 10 million taels of silver annually. That's about one third of the total tax revenue that was funneled to them. They were able to appoint their own bureaucracy, which was staffed mostly by their own relatives and followers.

They had their own large armies which were bigger than those of the Qing. Wu's was especially large. And to make sure he didn't get too out-of-line, his eldest son was kept a hostage in Beijing.

Now this was clearly not a stable configuration, and as the time passed, it became clear that something was going to have to be done. In 1673, Shang Kexi asked to step down, but he wanted his son to take his place. The other two also offered their resignations, which the court, after some hesitation, accepted, much to their surprise. At this point, Wu Sangui announced that he was in rebellion. The forces of the three feudatories joined together, and they announced a proclamation that they were founding their own dynasty and they were bringing back all of the old Ming customs, including hairstyles.

This rebellion, as I say, began in 1673. It resulted in the nearly complete loss of southwest China from Qing control. And it would not have been surprising, in fact, if the Manchus had returned north at this point and just given up on the whole thing. Indeed, part of the terms set forward by Wu Sangui was that the Manchus leave.

Now the Qing did not do this. They sent their own army-- a combined Manchu Chinese army-- against the three feudatories, which, at first, were very unsuccessful. But the tide began to turn in 1676, first with the surrender of Geng, and then, the next year, the surrender of Shang. Wu Sangui himself died in 1678, and he was succeeded by his son, who held up for another three or four years, in Kunming. And they were at last defeated by the Qing in April of 1681.

That was the end of the last major threat posed by the Chinese to the stability of the empire. It's important because it marks what some historians have noted is the transition from Ming loyalism to Qing loyalism. Many Chinese officials decided not to line up with Wu Sangui and his allies, even though they were all Han Chinese, but allied instead with the Manchus, with the Qing. So it's only at this point-- some 40 years after the conquest of Beijing-- that Qing rule began to take on the look of permanence and Kangxi's Sacred Edict began to acquire the ring of authenticity.