



# China in World History

Paul S. Ropp

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The Manchus' professional military forces were organized under eight different colored flags or banners (four solid colors and four with borders). There were eight Manchu banner divisions, eight Chinese banners, and eight Mongol banners, all expert riders and archers and all under Manchu leadership. They quickly took Beijing, restored order, and proclaimed that the Mandate of Heaven had passed to the Qing dynasty.

Where the Chinese people surrendered, they were assured that Chinese life and culture would continue on in peace and prosperity. If they resisted they would be killed, as was demonstrated vividly when the southern city of Yangzhou refused to surrender. Manchu forces took



*This Manchu bannerman, part of the Imperial Bodyguard, tests his bow from a crouching position. Manchu troops were all skilled archers who carried a powerful bow and a quiver full of arrows and were able to shoot accurately while riding a horse at full speed. Only the best and most reliable soldiers were made part of the elite Imperial Bodyguard. Courtesy of Sotheby's, New York*

the city and for ten days were given free rein to rape, loot, and kill the entire population at random. Some Chinese officials chose to resist to the death and to kill their families to prevent their violation by the invading forces. But many other Chinese, including Wu Sangui, opted to cooperate closely and fully with the Manchu invaders. They saw that the Ming cause was hopeless and that the disciplined rule of the Manchus offered their best chance for a peaceful future. The peasant rebellions and rent riots of the late Ming proved in the end much more terrifying to the Chinese landlord-scholar elite than the prospect of being ruled by the Manchus.

The one serious Manchu intervention in Chinese life was that all Chinese males had to adopt the Manchu hairstyle: to shave the front half of the head and grow the remaining hair into one long braid at the back, the queue. Hairstyle can be a powerful symbol, and Chinese men had always been proud of their long hair tied in a topknot (something like Japanese sumo wrestlers today). Forcing the queue on Chinese males probably increased the resistance rate among the Chinese, but it also worked as a visible and omnipresent symbol of Chinese submission to Manchu power.

Despite the effectiveness of the Manchu forces and their Chinese collaborators, it took a full generation to put the dynasty on a firm footing. At age fifteen, the Kangxi Emperor took control of the government in 1669 by arresting his regent, the powerful Prince Oboi, believing that he was plotting against him. Just four years later, as the emperor turned nineteen, three former Ming generals, including Wu Sangui who had been awarded large independent fiefdoms in south China, had risen in revolt against the dynasty. The Kangxi Emperor led the successful suppression of these forces by 1681, and two years later Qing forces took the island of Taiwan, wiping away the last remnants of Ming loyalist resistance to Manchu rule.

Often compared with his contemporary Peter the Great of Russia, the Kangxi Emperor was one of the most effective rulers China ever had. He was to hold the throne for sixty years until his death in 1722, the longest reign in Chinese history to that point. In 1712, he froze the tax assessment (based on the number of able-bodied males in each area) so that taxes would not increase in the future even as the population increased. He extended the empire northward and established the borders with Korea and Russia that remain in place (with some disputed areas) today. He also led successful campaigns against the Mongols in Central Asia, and his troops occupied Tibet, extending the dynasty's borders westward far beyond anything imagined by the Han or Tang.



*An itinerant barber in Beijing, photographed in 1865, tends a customer with the Manchu hairstyle (head shaved in front and the queue, a long single braid, in back) that was forced on all Chinese males in 1644 as a universal symbol of Chinese submission to Manchu rule. Itinerant barbers carried all their equipment on a shoulder pole; on one side were a bowl, razors, and brushes in a chest that doubled as a seat for the customer, and on the other side were a water container, bowl, and charcoal burner. Adoc-photos / Art Resource, NY*

What made Kangxi a great emperor were not just his military conquests but his ability to recruit able and dedicated Chinese officials to the service of his dynasty. He was a diligent, hardworking emperor and a good judge of character who valued and rewarded honest answers from his officials. This in turn inspired their loyalty and devotion to him. Kangxi honored Ming loyalists who refused to serve the Qing as long as they did not engage in forceful resistance. He held special examinations to recruit eminent Chinese scholars to work on the official history of the Ming dynasty, an effective way to enlist proud Chinese in the service of Manchu rule. He opened the examination system to Chinese from the south, where resistance to Manchu rule had been widespread. He also patronized Chinese art, philosophy, and poetry by recruiting

scholars and officials to compile a massive encyclopedia, several kinds of Chinese dictionaries, authoritative editions of important works in philosophy, and the complete poems of the Tang dynasty.

The Kangxi Emperor was interested in Western learning, which Jesuit missionaries brought to China starting in the sixteenth century. Several Jesuits working in the late Ming court explained Western theories of astronomy, calendar calculations, mathematics, geography, and military technology. The Jesuits saw Chinese ancestor worship as mere civil ceremonies of respect, not idolatrous pagan rites. Thus, they allowed their Chinese converts to maintain their social obligations under Chinese beliefs and customs. In the early eighteenth century, a papal envoy to the Qing court declared that ancestral worship could not be performed by Chinese Christians. This intolerance, plus the national jealousies and competition among Western Christian missionaries, led Kangxi to place more restrictions on missionary activities, thus ending the Jesuit dream of converting a Chinese emperor.

In 1722, the Kangxi Emperor died and was succeeded by another powerful and competent ruler, the Yongzheng Emperor. Some people accused the Yongzheng Emperor of poisoning his father and seizing power. Whether true or not, he was a much more guarded and suspicious man than his father. He took several steps to reduce the power of Chinese officials and to make the government more responsive to the emperor's will. He expanded a secret memorial system (begun by his father) whereby high officials could send him confidential messages quickly by an empire-wide, pony express-type system. He also instituted a thorough tax reform to try to eliminate tax evasion among the wealthy and privileged classes.

The Yongzheng Emperor died in 1736 and was succeeded by the Qianlong Emperor, who, like his grandfather, Kangxi, also reigned for sixty years. He tried in many other ways to emulate his grandfather. He made a number of southern tours of the empire as the Kangxi Emperor had done. He intensified Qing involvement in Tibet and sent more troops there in the late eighteenth century to help defend the Tibetans against attacks from the Gurkhas of Nepal. He also extended Qing control further west into the Mongol regions of Chinese Turkestan (today's Xinjiang Autonomous Region). The boundaries of China today are based largely on the Qing borders as established in the Qianlong reign.

The Qianlong Emperor also imitated his grandfather as a patron of Chinese culture, including the arts, philosophy, and poetry. He became the most avid art collector and sponsored the greatest library building effort in the entire history of China.<sup>6</sup> *The Complete Works of the*

*Four Treasuries* was to include a copy of every significant work ever published in Chinese. Part of the emperor's concern was to collect all known works in order to suppress anything that was judged harmful to the dynasty or to public morals. Therefore, some military works, all works with anti-Manchu content, and works judged to be heretical as pornographic or as anti-Confucian were to be burned. Anyone who harbored subversive writings faced the death penalty, but if they turned in such works they were not punished.

The three great emperors of the Qing—Kangxi, Yongzheng, and Qianlong—saw themselves as sage-kings in ways that extended the Chinese model of emperorship beyond the Chinese-speaking world. They presided over a multiethnic empire, uniting the Manchus with the Chinese, the Mongols, the Uighurs, the Tibetans, and many minority tribes in south and southwest China. They were very conscientious, deeply versed in the traditions of Confucianism and Buddhism themselves, and not about to tolerate criticisms of their rule.

The Manchu emperors and their Chinese officials saw the eighteenth century as one of China's greatest eras of peace and prosperity. Culturally and politically it was a conservative time, partly enforced by strong-willed emperors and partly embraced by Chinese scholar-officials who came to reject the late-Ming trends of individualism and creativity in philosophy and art as somehow responsible for the Ming collapse and the Manchu conquest. The school of Wang Yangming fell into general disfavor in the early Qing, but there were also creative developments in art and philosophy, even if they were not as exuberant as in the late Ming. Some painters and writers found subtle ways to express their unhappiness with Manchu rule or with Chinese society.

Two of China's greatest novels were written in the middle of the eighteenth century. Wu Jingzi, a failed examination candidate, wrote a brilliant satirical novel, *Unofficial History of the Scholars*, poking fun at ignorant and arrogant scholars who cared only about examination success, wealth, and status. Cao Xueqin, whose Chinese grandfather had been a close personal bondservant of the Kangxi Emperor, wrote *The Dream of the Red Chamber* (also known as *The Story of the Stone*), which is universally acknowledged as China's greatest novel. Set in a framework of Buddhist reincarnation and proclaiming the illusory nature of material life, *The Dream of the Red Chamber* is a compelling psychological portrait of a very large and powerful family gradually falling into poverty and disgrace.

These two novels seem prophetic, in that the Qianlong reign was glorious on the surface but showed by its end the unmistakable signs

of dynastic decline. Government institutions and revenues did not keep pace with the rapid population growth of the eighteenth century. In his last twenty years, the Qianlong Emperor became overly fond of one of his imperial Manchu bodyguards, Heshen, who used his privileged position to embezzle millions of ounces of silver for his own private fortune. This coupled with the continuous military campaigns of Qianlong's later years left the state near bankruptcy by the end of his reign.

When Qianlong died in 1799, officials were finally free to speak out against Heshen. Qianlong's son, the Jiaqing Emperor, had Heshen imprisoned, charged with corruption, and forced to hang himself. When his fortune was assessed, it equaled in value about half of all the state revenues for the past twenty years. Heshen was one symptom of dynastic decline in the Qianlong Emperor's later years. An even more ominous symptom was a serious peasant rebellion, lasting a decade and ranging over five provinces, under the same White Lotus banner that had sealed the fate of the Ming dynasty. The rebellion was suppressed by 1804, but the difficulty Qing forces faced in putting it down showed how much the Manchu banner garrisons scattered around the empire had declined in fighting effectiveness during the century of relative peace.