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Question 2

**Dorgon (r. 1643 - 51) put it: "The Chongzhen emperor was all right. It's just that his military officers were of bogus merit and trumped up their victories, while his civil officials were greedy and broke the law. That's why he lost the empire." How accurate was Dorgon's assessment of the decline and fall of the Ming?**

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Dorgon points out three short-term causes of the fall of the Ming: the personality of the Chongzhen Emperor, the incompetency of the military, and the corruption of the civil service. While all three points are valid, there were other reasons that caused the Ming’s rule to deteriorate towards the end of the sixteenth century, such as natural disasters, the increased factionalism at court, and eventually the growing power of border tribes. I shall examine how Dorgon came to this conclusion, while assessing other reasons for the fall of the Ming.

First, I shall examine the personality of Ming’s last emperor. Chongzhen was described as being a “mercurial, paranoid micro-manager” (Swope, 2014, pg. 210) who did not allow his military commanders flexibility in orders. In addition, he made numerous political errors such as giving orders for a reduction in the government postal system, and when there was a famine, Chongzhen refused to accept “restoring the government post” (Chan, *The glory and fall of the Ming dynasty*, 1982, pg. 338), displaying obstinancy in the face of his official’s reproach. Chongzhen repeatedly demonstrated failure to trust the bureaucracy and lent his authority to the eunuchs which the nobility despised. (Swope, *The military collapse of China's Ming Dynasty*, 2014, pg. 211) This paranoia had alienated him from his court (Swope, 2014, pg. 212). Ming observers such as contemporary historian Huang Zongxi felt that he was insufficient as an emperor. (Brook, *The Troubled Empire,* 2010, pg. 241) So why did Dorgon praise him as being “all right”? Chongzhen did the Manchus the courtesy of committing suicide before the Manchus removed him. (Brook, 2010, pg. 240). By dying, Chongzhen had created a means for the Manchus to install themselves as the new dynasty while retaining clean hands.

Secondly, to say that the military officers were “of bogus merit and trumped up their victories” would be an offense to the many talented military officials that defected to the Qing, and the loyal ones who died in office. However, the military was frequently underfunded (Swope, 2014, pg. 211) with “none of the funds” reaching the army from the capital (Wakeman, *China and the Seventeenth-Century Crisis,* pg. 31). Soldiering was of a lower social standing, leading to low morale. In addition, the court failed to make adequate use of its military, with no coordination between civil officials and military officials, and mutual dislike between the two (Swope, 2014, pg. 210). “Ill-equipped” civil officials were placed in charge of military campaigns and the Ming possessed few with both civil and military talents (Swope, 2014, pg. 210). Unlike its European peers, the Ming maintained a standing army, 600 000 at the northern border alone (Robinson, *Why military institutions matter for Ming history,* pg. 319), with fifty-three to ninety-seven percent of the treasury’s silver being spent on the military (Robinson, pg. 310) Maintaining an army led to the Ming beggaring itself at a time where such silver was badly needed by the government, while the lack of funds drove military officers to “pursue individual and family interests” (Robinson, pg. 323) by accepting bribes and committing fraud, smuggling and illicit trade. (Robinson, pg. 326) Such myriad abuse of the Ming military system was common and contributed to the fall in prestige of the military. Dorgon was aware that the same officers “exaggerated the size of the enemy forces to excuse their failure” and “show their bravery” when they scored a victory against the Manchus. (Chan, Pg. 343) These military officers held no true loyalty, and could be persuaded to join either side. They were also keen in claiming credit, as they were “interested only in the problems of that region” and “rested satisfied without any thought of pursuing them” (Chan, pg. 344), exhibiting the naked self-interest that led to Dorgon’s conclusion.

In contrast, the Manchus were successful in consolidating their gains after each victory. Once Nurhaci sent his demands, the Manchus embarked on “a series of dazzling victories in one battle after another” with the Ming only offering token resistance. (Brook, 2010, pg. 247) The Manchus were unified under Nurhaci, with his son Hong Taiji exerting full control over the larger region of Manchuria and Dorgon spearheading the campaign after Hong’s death. As the mastermind of the Manchu conquest, Dorgon discerned Ming military weakness and was able to attack the disorganized rabble with impunity.

The Ming civilian government was extremely corrupt. Many officials engaged in taking bribes and kickbacks, resulting in “their delivery officials routinely factor[ing] in amounts that would be skimmed off along the way”. (Swope, 2014, pg. 211) This happened at all rungs of society, with local magnates bribing officials to hide land and property that would have been taxed for state revenue. Without a tax base, the central government had no revenue to carry out institution reform, be it in the military or in court. With no revenue, “Officials salaries were fixed at artificially low levels” (Swope, 2014, pg. 212) and thus officials resorted to corruption to meet their living expenses and “provide a more comfortable living standard for their family”. (Miller, *State versus Gentry,* pg. 93) With corruption being endemic to the Ming political system, the emperor failed to adequately care for the welfare of his people with the lack of funds.

Corruption was aided by the rise in factionalism. Swope attributes the increased power of the eunuchs to this need to “circumvent the cumbersome Ming bureaucracy where in it could take weeks or months to appoint and deploy an official or issue an order.” (Swope, 2014, pg. 211) The emperor had needed the eunuchs to act as counterpoint to the local nobility he employed as officials, but eventually lost control to the eunuchs as well. Due to the monopoly of power by eunuchs at various times, officials “lost confidence in the certainty of any imperial action” (Wakeman, pg. 32) and questioned the emperor’s decisions in the form of memorials. Influenced by Wang Yangming’s thought which demanded “forthright, direct and spontaneous action” on the “completion of knowledge” (Chan Wing-sit, *Dynamic Idealism in Wang Yang-ming,* 1963, pg. 656), they felt as part of their innate goodness, it was their onus to remove the ‘corruption’ they saw in court, creating further indecision. Positions were left unfilled, funding was left to dry up, there was greater instability in all areas outside of the capital, resulting in the growth of rebels which eventually overran the Ming court. This lack of stability and instructions would have been obvious to Dorgon, who bore witness to the disorganized campaigns of the Ming due to political infighting at court.

After touching upon the short-term reasons for Ming’s fall, I shall now elaborate more on long-term factors which reduced Ming’s chances of survival. During the sixteenth century, China was a silver sink. (Swope, 2014, pg. 210) When “silver from Mexico and Japan entered the Ming empire in great quantity”, inflation increased as silver’s buying power decreased. (Flynn, *Born with a ‘Silver Spoon’, the Origins of world trade in 1571,* 1995, pg. 203). Despite the hyperinflation, the Ming was unable to recognize the downsides of moving away from paper currency, and were subject to global pressures, with the thirst for silver to pay taxes corresponding with the increased supply. All was well when silver continued to be imported into China. However, silver levels fluctuated, especially after Spain stopped the imports and Tokugawa placed banned the shipment of silver. This shortfall led to a restricted supply but increased demand. Farmers now had to pay the same level in taxes but had to exchange a higher amount of grain. This contributed to the famine as farmers turned to banditry rather than pay increasing taxes. This increased the instability in the coastal provinces and pushed Ming towards its decline.

The Ming dynasty was subject to natural disasters as well. In the course of the seventeenth century, the Ming went through the Little Ice Ages with colder global temperatures. While “late Ming period witnessed the fewest natural disasters of an era in the Ming as both a total percentage of incidents and in terms of the number of incidents per year.” (Swope, 2014, pg. 214) Chongzhen’s reign was marked by drought (Swope, p. 214) and physical conditions were exacerbated by deforestation, population growth and migration. Droughts were followed by epidemics and locusts (Brook, pg. 251), with the survivors pushed to rebel, creating further loss of life as they destabilized the empire. In addition, there existed a belief that “weather and the response of supernatural powers to human actions” were linked (Elvin, *Who was Responsible for the Weather,* 1998, pg. 214), creating the impression that the Ming had lost the Mandate of Heaven. Nurhaci used this as the tenet for justifying that he was the Son of Heaven, and attributed his success as he claimed that “Those who act in a morally good fashion succeed; those who do not, fail” (Elvin, pg. 218) Weather had played both a physical and metaphysical influence in the loss of confidence in the Ming.

While Chongzhen was unlucky in his reign, his predecessors had contributed to the weakening of imperial power. Wanli, his grandfather had “repeatedly diverted government funds for palace building, confused the privy and public purses, and allowed his purveyors to deduct regularly a 20 percent kickback on all costs” (Wakeman, p. 31), showing himself to be capricious, prone to favoritism, and encouraged the breakdown of civilian law. In contrast, Wanli took greater interest in military affairs and displayed good leadership in the Three Campaigns, allowing “proper coordination of the efforts of civil, military and censorial officials and the throne” (Swope, *Culture, Courtiers, and Competition,*  2008, p. 108) and provided his military generals an ample leash as opposed to Chongzhen’s frequent dismissals and replacement of border officers. However, Wanli was unable to exhibit the same qualities in civilian court, and “allowed his government to sink into a cesspit of intrigue” as he withdrew from managing the empire. He “stymied court processes by dismissing his court for extended periods of time, leading to growth in factionalism as well as undermining government operations.” (Zhao, *A Decade of Considerable Significance*, 2002, pg. 119) Wanli had passively protested the factionalism that prevented centralization of power in his hand, but this ‘strike’ had led to deteriorating relations with his officials, with important decisions delayed or made uncertain. His successor died within a month in office, while Tianqi was “mentally limited” (Swope, 2014, pg. 209-210) and with negligible imperial intervention, important decisions could not be made, and crucially little attention was made for provinces outside the capital.

The straw that broke the backbone of the Ming were the peasant rebellions; a culmination of the above short- and long-term factors. Shaanxi was a “dry cold region” with mediocre soil and “many of the leaders of the rebels came from there” (Chan, pg. 335) It was near the border, and the leaders “had formerly belonged to the forces then guarding the borders of the empire” (Chan, pg. 339), thus they knew the standard procedure and operating practices of their enemy, the government army. The rebels grew from disparate groups to unified forces that displayed guerilla tactics that evaded the army, bringing down cities by force and by propaganda, while frequently obtaining weapons (Chan, pg. 345) from the retreating army. The rebels resupplied themselves by looting, and “accumulated weapons of all kinds and a great number of horses.” (Chan, pg. 344) In the end, they matched the government army in force, in equipment, and overpowered the defenses of the cities that led to Peking thus directly contributing to the Ming’s fall.

In conclusion, the decline of the Ming was a result of various factors both short- and long-term. Military weakness and government corruption were contributing factors that built up from Wanli’s reign, which signaled a long decay in imperial power. Had strong leaders supported by a unified government been in place at the time of the Manchu incursions, it is likely that the Ming would not have imploded from within.

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