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The Significance of the Ch'ing Period in Chinese History

PING-TI HO

ALTHOUGH the Ch'ing period is generally regarded as one of the better studied and understood periods of Chinese history, the existing fund of our knowledge is actually far from adequate. A systematic discussion of the significance of the entire period from 1644 to 1912 would require a large number of articles, monographs, and fresh syntheses. Since the purpose of this paper is merely to stimulate further discussion and research, I hope to be excused for making a few highly tentative generalizations.

The general significance of the Ch'ing period is that chronologically it falls between what is traditional and what is modern. However much the new China changes in the future, the Ch'ing period, the last phase of China's *ancien régime*, has left important legacies. The Ch'ing period will continue to serve as a datum plane from which to study either the earlier periods or to analyze the heritage of present-day China. To understand more fully both earlier and contemporary China, therefore, the Ch'ing period is crucial.

The Ch'ing period is significant for a number of more specific reasons. First, geographically China could never have reached its present dimensions without the laborious, painstaking, and skillful work of empire building carried out by Manchu rulers between 1600 and 1800. Since much of present-day China's impact on the outside world is due to its size and the location of its frontiers, the contribution of the Ch'ing period to the formation of modern China as a geographic and ethnic entity is of the greatest significance. Simple statistics will tell part of the story. The area known as China proper, which throughout much of the imperial age represented the limits of effective Chinese jurisdiction, amounts roughly to 1,532,800 square miles, which is about one-half the area of the United States. By late Ch'ing, when the Manchu empire had shrunk considerably from its fullest extent (reached by the end of the eighteenth century), China still embraced an area of approximately 4,278,000 square miles, which is 606,000 square miles larger than the area of the People's Republic of China.

It is true that at the peak of the Han and T'ang dynasties the Chinese empire reached as far west as parts of present-day Russian Turkestan, and that the Mongol empire is the largest in the annals of man. But the westward expansion of Han and T'ang was ephemeral at best, and the Mongol world empire was too loosely organized to leave any permanent imprint. In contrast, the Manchus alone were able to work out long-range policies of control and to design complex administrative and military apparatus by which to make the largest consolidated empire in Chinese history endure.

With the exception of the Mongol Yuan empire and such earlier non-Chinese em-

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pires as the To-ba Wei, the best that any Chinese dynasty could hope for was to make the Great Wall an effective front line of defense against the northern nomads. Thanks to their geographic propinquity to the Mongols and especially to their far-sightedness, the early Manchu rulers had worked out, even before 1644, a basic long-range policy towards the Mongols of Inner Mongolia, which was continued and amplified down to the very end of the dynasty. The policy consisted of perennial inter-marriage between the imperial clan and Mongol princedoms; periodic conferring of noble ranks on various strata of the Mongol ruling class; the endorsement by the imperial government of Lamaism as the religion for the Mongols; the setting-up of administrative machinery from *aimaks* (principalities), *chigolgangs*, (leagues), down to *hoshigo* (banners), which not only suited Mongol customs but also allowed the Manchus to follow a policy of divide and rule. All these, and much else, were supervised from Peking by *Li-fan-yüan*, or the Court of Colonial Affairs. In addition, a significant number of Mongols were incorporated into the Eight Banner system and into the central and provincial administration. Although early Ch'ing statutes prohibited the Chinese from entering the domains reserved for Mongol nomads, the imperial government from the late seventeenth century onwards connived at Chinese migrations to Inner Mongolia, especially in times of famine. Chinese immigration also received the tacit blessing of Mongol nobles who found their new role as *rentiers* profitable. Wherever sizable Chinese agricultural colonies were established, the imperial government set up regular local administrations, that is, counties and prefectures. Since by late Ch'ing times Chinese migrations to the northern steppe had become large-scale, Inner Mongolia had become increasingly sinicized. The integration with the rest of China of the Inner Mongolian steppe, which prior to the advent of the Manchus had always been outside the pale of Chinese civilization, was exclusively a Ch'ing contribution. Similar Chinese migrations to Manchuria, especially from the middle of the nineteenth century onwards, have made Manchuria thoroughly Chinese, despite the onslaughts of Czarist Russia and Japan.

The need in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries to defend Khalkha (Outer Mongolia) from the warlike Dzungars of Northern Chinese Turkestan led the Manchus to a long series of wars which resulted in the establishment of Chinese suzerainty over Outer Mongolia and Tibet and the conquest of Kokonor and Chinese Turkestan. The effectiveness of Manchu control of these far-flung regions varied inversely in proportion to the magnitude of such difficulties as distance, terrain, transportation of men and supplies and financial resources. That the complex Ch'ing system of control of these outlying areas was by and large ingenious and viable may be evidenced by the well-known facts; namely, that Chinese Turkestan and Kokonor were made into new provinces of Sinkiang and Chinghai respectively in 1884 and 1928, that the imperial resident and garrisons in Lhasa were not withdrawn until after the fall of the dynasty in 1912, and that Outer Mongolia did not legally secede from China until January, 1946.

After 1842, the Ch'ing empire was compelled to learn the harsh realities of modern power politics. Step by step, Russia, Britain, France, and Japan reduced the question of the legal status of China's outlying regions and dependent states to an almost purely academic one. Every party had learned from *Realpolitik* that the true status of any of China's peripheral areas depended on China's ability to exert effective control. It is this rude historical lesson that prompted the People's Republic of

China to seize the earliest possible opportunities to rush its army into Sinkiang and Tibet.

Before summing up the Ch'ing territorial bequest, it should be pointed out that the extension of China's internal frontiers in Ch'ing times, if less spectacular than empire-building, is historically equally important. Although the history of the extension of China's internal frontiers is almost as old as Chinese history itself, it was from the Yung-cheng period (1723-1735) onwards that a more energetic policy of sinicization was directed against the various non-Han ethnic groups who constituted the majority in the hilly enclaves of Hunan, the highlands of Western Hupei, and a number of mountainous districts of Yunnan, Kweichow, Szechwan, and Kwangsi. The core of this policy was to replace the native tribal system with ordinary Chinese local administration. Between 1723 and 1912 this policy was applied also to parts of Kansu, Kokonor, Chinese Turkestan, and eastern Tibet, which was made into Sikang province between 1928 and 1949. It is worth mentioning that even the last few years of the Manchu dynasty witnessed a recrudescence of this policy in Sikang. Without the extension and consolidation of the southwestern internal frontiers, it is doubtful that the southwest could have served so well as China's last territorial base of operation against Japan during the critical years from 1937 to 1945. Externally, as well as internally, therefore, the Ch'ing period is of greatest importance to the formation of modern China as a geographic entity.

A second important inheritance that modern China has received from the Ch'ing is her large population. Prior to the Ch'ing the peak officially registered population of China was 60,000,000, although there is reason to believe that during certain earlier periods, such as latter halves of Sung and Ming, the population may well have exceeded 100,000,000. The basic fact remains, however, that a preindustrial population could not as a rule grow at a sustained high rate unless the combined economic and institutional factors were unusually favorable. As has been discussed in my *Studies on the Population of China, 1368-1935*,¹ such a combination of favorable economic and institutional factors did exist in the century from the dawn of domestic peace and prosperity in 1683 to the late Ch'ien-lung era when China's population had shot up to 300,000,000. Even an increasingly unfavorable population-land ratio and deteriorating economic conditions could not prevent the population from reaching 430,000,000 by 1850 through sheer momentum. While modern China had unquestionably been plagued by overpopulation and mass poverty, her present estimated population of 700,000,000, when ruthlessly regimented by the most Spartan state in history, cannot fail to make its impact felt. To understand the historical roots of this impact of numbers, the Ch'ing period is again crucial.

Thirdly, the Ch'ing is without doubt the most successful dynasty of conquest in Chinese history, and the key to its success was the adoption by early Manchu rulers of a policy of systematic sinicization. The Ch'ing period thus provides an excellent case study for the complex processes of acculturation which in turn helps to sharpen our perception of the inherent strength of traditional Chinese institutions and culture. Space does not allow a systematic explanation of the reasons why early Manchu

¹ Cambridge, Mass., 1959.

rulers had to adopt such a policy. Suffice it to say here that for a conquering ethnic group so vastly outnumbered by the Chinese, the most effective long-range policy was to sponsor the very institutional and cultural system which the Chinese nation, especially the key social class of scholars and officials, regarded as orthodox. The systematic sinicization of the Hsiao-wen emperor of Northern Wei late in the fifth century and the conversion to Catholicism of Henry IV of France in 1598 were dictated by similar political necessities.

Systematic sinicization of the Manchu imperial clan, nobility, and officials may be evidenced by the following facts: the adoption from the beginning of the dynasty of the Ming government system *in toto*, which, with a few Manchu innovations, was improved and rationalized; the ardent endorsement by the K'ang-hsi emperor and his successors of the conservative and passive aspects of social and political relationships in later Sung Neo-Confucianism as official orthodoxy; the unprecedented homage that the Ch'ing emperors paid to Confucius (two kneelings and six prostrations in Peking and three kneelings and nine prostrations in Confucius' birthplace, Ch'ü-fu); the designing and maintaining of the strictest education for imperial princes in Chinese history based largely on orthodox Confucianism; the utilization of Confucian orthodoxy as a justification for abolishing the various layers of feudal relationships within the indigenous Manchu Eight Banner system; the large-scale printing and dissemination under imperial auspices of ancient classics and Neo-Confucian writings of the Ch'eng-Chu school and literary reference tools and anthologies which culminated in the compilation of the *Ssu-k'ü ch'üan'shu*; and the increasing addiction to Chinese literature, calligraphy, painting, and entertainments.

It is true that such unusually able rulers as K'ang-hsi, Yung-cheng, and Ch'ien-lung did not fail to realize the importance of preserving certain Manchu traits and customs. But so effective was the crucible of Chinese culture that by the latter half of the eighteenth century the imperially exhorted Manchu nativism had boiled down to little more than a legal obligation on the part of imperial princes and Manchu examination candidates to practice horsemanship and archery and to study the Manchu language, although Manchu Shamanism seems to have survived till the end of the dynasty. There is definite evidence that even for imperial princes, Manchu had become a dead language by the beginning of the nineteenth century at the latest. Furthermore, there is ample evidence that interethnic marriage went on throughout the Ch'ing period, especially during the long reign of K'ang-hsi and toward the end of the dynasty. The fact that Manchu Bannermen suffered progressive impoverishment as a result of their prolonged mingling with the Chinese in both urban and rural areas is too well known to need any elaboration.

In fact, so sinicized were the Manchus that much of what we regard as the orthodox Confucian state and society is exemplified not by earlier Chinese dynasties, but the Ch'ing period. We need mention only that in its formative stage the Sung Confucian state is known for its remarkable diversity of thought and policy and for its absence of officially endorsed orthodoxy. In spite of the Ming founder's choice of the Ch'eng-Chu school as orthodoxy, none of his successors showed any real concern for ideology. Even as gifted a Ming ruler as Hsüan-tsung (1425-1435) sent an official and his family to prison upon the latter's remonstrance that certain erudite officials should be appointed to help the emperor to study the Sung scholar Chen Te-hsiu's *Ta-hsüeh yen-i* (Systematic Exposition of the Book of Great Learning). In contrast,

from K'ang-hsi's majority to the end of Ch'ing the officials selected to serve as imperial tutors and as special lecturers on Confucian classics for the emperor in spring and autumn were all scholars of the Ch'eng-Chu school. For good or for evil, it was under the alien Manchu rule that China became a strictly conformist "orthodox" Confucian state. In no earlier period of Chinese history do we find a deeper permeation and wider acceptance of the norms, mores, and values which modern students regard as Confucian.

Despite its inevitable cost, the Manchu policy of systematic sinicization and Confucianization served dynastic interests extremely well. The Manchus ruled China for a period of 268 years, as compared to a mere 89 years of Mongol rule of all China. For all their shortcomings and repressive measures, the eras of K'ang-hsi, Yung-cheng and early Ch'ien-lung constituted one of the rare periods in Chinese history in which the majority of the nation enjoyed peace, prosperity, and contentment. When the supreme test came in 1851 with the outbreak of the Taiping rebellion, the majority of the Chinese nation, especially the key social class of scholars and officials, fought loyally for their Manchu masters because the so-called alien dynasty had been, in fact, more Confucian than previous Chinese dynasties.

Fourthly, despite the collapse of the old order by the end of the dynasty, the Ch'ing period on the whole must be regarded as one in which traditional political, economic, and social institutions attained greater maturity and the economy and society achieved a greater degree of interregional integration.

As to political institutions, the Ch'ing definitely benefited from the prolonged trial and error of such earlier periods as Sung and Ming. A comparison of the administrative law of various dynasties since the T'ang reveals that in matters such as jurisdictions of and the interrelations between various offices, the classification and transmission of documents, the procedures by which decisions were made and subsequently executed, and a wide range of regulations on appointment, discipline, etc., the Ch'ing system appears to have been more meticulous, regularized, and rational.

It is true that few if any social and economic institutions originated in Ch'ing times. As is well known, merchant and craft guilds can be traced back at least to the T'ang, the modern type of patrilineal clan to 1050, private academies and the system of community chests for examination candidates also to the Sung. Likewise, various nongovernment benevolent institutions ranging from orphanages and community cemeteries for the poor to fire-squads and life-saving boats had all originated in earlier periods. Whereas during earlier formative periods they may have been sporadic, inadequately supported, or of limited geographic distribution, by the Ch'ing period they reached fuller development and became more common.

An excellent example by which to illustrate the maturing of economic and social institutions and to indicate greater interregional economic and social integration is the multiplication in Ch'ing times of various types of voluntary associations based on common geographic origin, generally called *hui-kuan* (*Landsmannschaften*). As far as can be ascertained from extant records, the *hui-kuan* made its debut in Peking in the early fourteen twenties in the form of an exclusive club for *Landsmann* of Wuhu, Anhwei, who served as officials of the central government. From 1560 on, some regional merchant groups began to establish their *hui-kuan* in the nation's capital. By the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, *hui-kuan* established by merchants

and craftsmen of various geographic origins began to appear in major cities and a few prosperous towns of the lower Yangtze. During Ch'ing times, however, the city of Soochow, southern Kiangsu, boasted as many as 41 *hui-kuan* and many more guilds established by various *Landsmann* groups who came from virtually every part of China. In late Ch'ing there were nearly 400 *hui-kuan* in Peking alone which represented all the provinces and scores of prosperous prefectures and counties and which served mainly as hostleries for *Landsmann* candidates for the metropolitan examinations. From my recent book, *Chung-kuo hui-kuan shih-lun (An Historical Survey of Landsmannschaften in China)*,² it is shown that by late Ch'ing times, *hui-kuan*, whether open to all social statuses or only to members of *Landsmann* guilds, existed in all provincial capitals, major and minor coastal and inland ports, certain sub-county towns, and many obscure inland counties noted neither for their trade nor crafts. The highest density is found in Szechwan, where practically every county had at least a few *hui-kuan* established by immigrants from afar and some counties had as many as 40 or 50.

In Szechwan and elsewhere in major cities where detailed local history or new inscriptional data are available, we learn that various *Landsmann* groups tended to merge into what in modern terms may be called chambers of commerce, and to take part in matters concerning the welfare of the entire local community. Constant contacts between various *Landsmann* groups and natives often resulted in intermarriage and brought about social assimilation. Contrary to the impressions of various Western and Japanese scholars that the prevalence of *hui-kuan* in Ch'ing times reflected an unusually strong local particularism in China and hence has retarded the modernization of Chinese economy and society, the existence of thousands of *hui-kuan* in all parts of China and the coexistence of various *Landsmann* groups in the same major and minor cities could not but have facilitated interregional economic and social integration—a process which went on apace even during the late Ch'ing and early Republican period of political disintegration.

Fifthly, in material culture and the arts, the Ch'ing period may be regarded as one of leisurely fulfillment and enrichment. One basic reason for the remarkable advancement in material culture which in turn stimulated broader cultural growth was the rare century of prosperity and benevolent despotism following the dawning of *Pax Sinica* in 1683. The field of Ch'ing material culture is obviously too vast to enable us to make any tentative generalization. For the present purpose, we can only surmise from better-quality local histories that the division of labor in trades and crafts became increasingly minute and that the range, variety and volume of articles for mass and elite consumption became even greater. While the merchant princes of the lower Yangtze set new standards of conspicuous consumption, a rising standard of living was nevertheless enjoyed by substantial segments of the population.

This century of peace and prosperity witnessed, among many things, an unprecedented demand for and supply of books and the rise of great bibliophiles and art connoisseurs. Led by the imperial court which since K'ang-hsi's majority had begun to compile, edit, and print books and to collect art on a grand scale, the merchant princes of the lower Yangtze and many officials and well-to-do scholars followed

² Taipei, 1966.

suit. While the vogue of cultivating scholarly and artistic avocations by the elite was a national phenomenon, the lower Yangtze area remained throughout this century the center of Chinese cultural activities. It was largely the wealth, leisure, great libraries and art collections, and the over-all sophistication of the lower Yangtze area that provided opportunities for the rise of research scholarship as an end in itself; for the flowering of the wonderful school of expressionistic painters led by Shih-t'ao and the Yang-Chou masters, who, along with the hermit Pa-ta-shan-jen, inspired such modern giants as Chao Chih-ch'ien (1829-1884), Jen I, better known as Jen Po-nien (1840-1895), Wu Ch'ang-shih (1844-1927), and Ch'i Po-shih (1862-1957); for the maturing of various schools of opera, including the one which was later somewhat erroneously called Peking opera.

After the decline of lower Yangtze merchant princes by about 1800, cultural activities became geographically more evenly spread and reached a wider public. In terms of the range of cultural activities and of their degree of permeation, there is little reason to agree with the erstwhile influential view that the Ch'ing period was one of cultural and artistic stagnation.

Lastly, an attempt shall be made to point out certain basic factors which appear to me of primary significance in accounting for the decline and fall of the maturest empire in Chinese history. To begin with, thanks to the existence of unusually favorable economic and institutional factors during the century of *Pax Sinica*, by the late eighteenth century the population explosion had reached unprecedented proportions and created a set of new economic problems with which China's existing fund of technological knowledge failed to cope. Second, for all its outward grandeur, the era of Ch'ien-lung was one of widening discrepancy between law and practice and of creeping peculation, which, judging from the three installments of confidential Grand Council archives published in *Wen-hsien ts'ung-pien*,³ may have become nation-wide and semi-institutionalized, at least between 1776 and 1799. It was the widespread peculation from the Ch'ien-lung era onwards that transformed the benevolent despotism of K'ang-hsi and Yung-cheng into a malevolent despotism that had so much to do with the outbreak of the White Lotus and subsequent rebellions. Third, the exigency of the Taiping wars forced the post-1850 Ch'ing government to resort to the sale of office on a scale seldom paralleled in Chinese history—a factor which was regarded by many a post-Taiping statesman and official as the taproot of all administrative evils. Fourth, during and after the Taiping rebellion there was a tendency toward increasing political decentralization caused by the growth of the powers of the provincial authorities and by the increasing inability of the provincial authorities to exert effective control over the local officials. Fifth, for the first time in her long history, China was brought into the maelstrom of modern world politics by the West, whose culture was in many ways her equal and in some crucial ways her superior. While prior to the Opium War the working of some of these factors had contributed to the weakening of the Manchu empire, it was the convergence and interplay of all these factors after 1840 that eventually brought about the downfall of the Ch'ing dynasty and the disintegration of traditional Chinese institutions and Confucian culture.

³ Peiping, 1935 (No. 25-26, April and May) and 1937 (No. 6, June).