1996 position that the Qing was qualitatively different from previous Chinese dynasties—argued emphatically that such an unprecedentedly centralized empire was so deeply a specific function of Manchu rule that it was an impossibility under the ethnically Han rulers of the Ming. In other words, early modernity in China did indeed begin with the dynastic transition of 1644, and not before. Perhaps the dynastic periodizers of the old Confucian tradition were not so far wrong after all.

The Great Qing empire discussed in this book, then, is a constantly moving target. What it was, and to what extent it constituted something incomparably distinctive in the longer run of Chinese history or in the vast expanse of Eurasian space, remain open questions. That is precisely why the study of this place and period, at our own moment in history, is so rewarding.

In 1688 Tong Guogang, an officer of the Chinese Plain Blue Banner, petitioned the Kangxi emperor to change his officially registered ethnicity from “Chinese-martial” (Hanjun) to “Manchu.” His great-uncle Tong Bunian had been born in Liaodong around 1580 but moved to Wuchang in central China. As a Wuchang native, he passed the metropolitan examination in 1616, served the Ming as a county magistrate, and later headed up the dynasty’s military defenses in the northeast. After a disastrous defeat, Tong Bunian was accused of treason and died in prison in 1625, fervently proclaiming his loyalty to the Ming. His son Guoqi grew up in Wuchang and there composed a genealogy defending his father’s Chinese patriotism by demonstrating descent from no fewer than ten generations of heroic Ming soldiers. But when Guoqi was taken captive during the Qing conquest of the Yangzi region in 1645, he and his family were impressed into the Chinese Plain Blue Banner.

As it turned out, other Tong men of Liaodong ancestry—men whom Guoqi had candidly included in his genealogy—had been just as heroic in the cause of the conquering Qing armies as Tong Bunian had been in defense of the Ming. Indeed, one of these would become the maternal grandfather of the Kangxi emperor, making Tong Guogang himself Kangxi’s uncle! The emperor thus granted Guoqiang’s petition for reclassification as a Manchu, noting, however, that it would be administratively awkward to similarly reclassify too many of his distant kin. From that day forward, Tong Guoqiang and certain of his relatives became Manchus while others remained Chinese. In this time and place, ethnic identities were far from genetically predetermined but were flexible, ambiguous, and negotiable.
Stories like this one have been central to a new kind of historical understanding of just who were the rulers of the dynasty that took over the throne of China in 1644. Not long ago, the accepted wisdom on the Manchus grew, on the other hand, out of an essentialist assumption that races were, after all, races—each, like the Manchus, biologically or genetically determined once and for all time. But this essentialist view was also based on a teleological Han nationalist historiography that saw a Han Chinese nation-state in the twentieth century as the inevitable outcome of China’s two-thousand-year-old imperial history. According to this logic, all lasting imperial dynasties, including those of alien rule, were roughly analogous; alien “races” like the Mongols and Manchus might conquer the domain of the Han people, but if they were to hold onto that possession they would have to rule it as Chinese, and in effect become Chinese themselves.

According to this scenario of Qing rule, a Manchu race or people existed prior to the conquest of the Ming, though they were in all important ways “barbarians,” culturally inferior to the Han. Once the conquest was accomplished, the Manchus, after some internal debate, opted to rule China as Confucian Chinese Sons of Heaven, a decision that inevitably led to the cultural “assimilation” and presumably also the biological eradication of the Manchu race. Some Manchu rulers such as the Qianlong emperor (r. 1736-1795) noted with alarm that their countrymen were losing their distinctiveness and fought a rear-guard action to maintain “the Manchu way,” but they were doomed to failure. When the Qing dynasty was itself replaced by the Chinese Republic in 1911, there were few real Manchus left, and these simply melted into the general Chinese population. One convenient implication of this narrative is that there was no longer any Manchu people.

The 1980s, however, historians of the Qing began to rewrite this narrative, almost to stand it completely on its head. Through the influence of cultural studies, we came to distrust essentialized notions of biological categories such as race and to see racial classifications instead as the products of specific historical situations and sociopolitical processes of negotiation. Thus, according to this new view, in the seventeenth century there really was no such thing as Manchus. Instead, there were various groups of peoples along the northeast frontiers of the Ming empire, drawn from a wide variety of genealogical stocks and cultural traditions.

CONQUEST

with not a few of these people fully or partly of Han Chinese ancestry. The group that succeeded the Ming on the Dragon Throne was not a Manchu race but was instead an organization of persons deliberately created for the purpose of conquest. The leaders of this “Qing conquest organization” felt it useful to assign their members national identities such as Mongol, Chinese-martial, and even Manchu, but this assignment was based on political convenience rather than any preexisting biological fact. As seen in the case of the Tong family described above, this initial assignment might easily be rescinded or changed as situations demanded.

Whereas the older view saw an originally distinguishable Manchu people that was assimilated or otherwise effaced over time, the new Qing narrative saw the Manchus as actually having come into existence over the course of the dynasty. The strenuous activities of the Qianlong emperor and others were not so much defending a national culture threatened with extinction as working to create such a culture by providing it with an origin myth, a national language and literature, and a set of defined cultural traits. And in this project they were surprisingly successful. Ironically, if Manchus did not really exist before 1644, they certainly did in 1911, according to this scenario. In keeping with this view, the story of Manchukuo was pretty much as presented in Bertolucci’s great film The Last Emperor. Pu Yi, in the movie, was roused out of his postimperial career as a Shanghai lounge lizard to answer what he sincerely felt to be the call of his Manchu people to head their national state in the northeast. What was hypocritical about Japan’s Manchukuo project was not some pretense that a genuine Manchu people existed on which to base it (for such a group did exist at this time) but rather the pretense that these Manchus would have real self-determination.

This new narrative is itself subject to overstatement. A second generation of Manchu-centered scholarship argues for the reality of ethnic or racial difference, at least in the eyes of contemporaries, from the dynasty’s very outset. A study of Manchu garrisons throughout Qing China, for example, has detected a significant degree of ethnic tension between their inhabitants and the surrounding Han populations. Still, in one form or other, most historians today prefer the new narrative to the older one, and that set of assumptions underlies our story here.

Organizing the Conquest

Whether the Qing conquerors were an ethnically distinct frontier people or a deliberately constructed multiethnic conquest organization, their
achievement was truly remarkable. How could such a motley assemblage possibly overcome the mighty Ming war machine, arguably the most formidable fighting force in the world at that time? The rise of the Qing as a military and political force in the area that became known as Manchuria, and is today northeast China, was the work of three successive tribal chieftains of the clan known as Aisin Gioro. "Aisin" means "gold" and is written in Chinese with the character jin—"Asin"—was the dynastic name of the Jurchen-speaking people who ruled north China from 1115 to 1234 and from whom the Aisin Gioro claimed descent. The three chieftains were Nurhaci (d. 1626), Hong Taiji (d. 1643), and Dorgon (d. 1650). The efforts of these three men to deliberately prepare their subjects for the conquest of the Ming included confederating various tribes and groups, centralizing power, and (to a debated degree) Sinicizing—the adoption of Han Chinese organizational techniques and cultural traits.

Proposition of the Chinese confederation as not just a military but also a cultural and political unit, the Nurhaci industrialized and expanded the territory and economy of their confederation, becoming the dominant power in the region. This was achieved through a series of military campaigns and alliances with other tribes, resulting in the eventual incorporation of the Ming into the Qing Empire.

such chieftain enjoying a vassal relationship with the court. Around the turn of the seventeenth century, urged on by the Ming, he declared a vendetta against a neighboring tribe, which he accused of murdering his father. In pursuit of this cause, he forged a series of alliances with other population groups through marital unions, coercion, and conquest. The result was the creation of a significant confederation.

Events such as these had happened several times previously under the Ming and were not in themselves alarming. If a confederation was to become a serious threat to the dynasty, it needed some sort of permanent institutionalization. This was precisely what Nurhaci attempted to provide. The first step was to create a written language for his growing population, which he accomplished by commissioning a team of local scholars in 1599 to adapt the Mongol script to the Jurchen speech: with that stroke, the language later known as Manchu was born. A more decisive step was his creation of the system of "banners" in the years before 1615. There were initially four, and subsequently eight, such banners—solid white, white bordered with yellow, solid blue, and so on. Each banner signified a fighting unit, but it also represented a unit of residence and economic production and included not merely fighting men but also their dependents. As the system was gradually worked out, each banner came to be identified with a discrete national grouping—Manchu, Mongol, Chinese-martial—though assignment of national identities and conscription to ethnic groups was a matter of expedience and ongoing readjustment. Like the Mamluk armies of the medieval Middle East, members of the eight banners were all legally slaves. Inasmuch as hierarchical relationships within and among the banners were governed by a military command structure that was simultaneously a system of administration and property ownership, this resembled a feudal system. It was not quite feudal, however, in that the system of proprietorship that underlay it was not land but rather slaves. In 1616 Nurhaci proclaimed his regime the Later Jin.
holding the bow and the reins simultaneously in the left hand while
drawing the bow with the right—was so original to banner warcraft that
it had its own verb (niyamniyumbi) in the Manchu language. Infantry
included some archers as well, but they were more often musketeers
or artillersmen. Use of muskets was something of a practiced specialty
among Han Chinese bannermen. They had also learned from the Portu-
guese how to cast cannon, and they developed the strength to haul them
into the field, earning the nickname wpen cooha (heavy troops).7

It fell to the second Later Jin leader, Hong Taiji, to superimpose on
this tribal or feudal arrangement a bureaucratic structure on the Ming
model. Hong Taiji was no longer to be the first among equals within a
caste of feudal princes. He was now also, and uniquely, the emperor (Son
of Heaven) within a state structure, and the banner headmen were in part
his state officials. This move was significant for at least two reasons: it
provided a superior form of political organization suitable for the con-
quest of the vast lands to the south; and it also provided an unmistakable
challenge to the Ming emperor, who now saw to his northeast not a col-
lection of subservient vassals but instead a polity that claimed to be, for
the moment at least, a separate but equal state.

Now, for sinicization. Our previous understanding was that the Man-
chus, like all other aspiring barbarian conquerors of China, adopted Chi-
nese ways of governance and legitimation of their rule, becoming in effect
civilized Chinese. We know now that nothing so complete ever hap-
pened. The Qing rulers wore many hats and governed their diverse con-
stituencies (Jurchen, Mongol, Tibetan, Chinese) in differing ways simul-
taneously. If the Qing ruler was the Son of Heaven for his Chinese
subjects, he was also the Khan of Khans for the Mongols, the Chak-
rawar (Wheel-Turning King) for the Tibetans, and so on. The Qing
would be a diverse, multinational, and presumably universal empire, very
different from the Chinese dynasties it succeeded.3

That said, the conquest organization in the northeast, starting with
Nurhaci himself, proved very enthusiastic and adept at adopting Chinese
ways in the project of exerting domination over their would-be Chinese
subjects. They energetically recruited Chinese elites disaffected from the
Ming or simply hungry for personal power to serve as civil bureaucrats
and military leaders of their fledgling state. The military men brought
with them European-style artillery and other novel techniques of warfare
that the Ming had learned from the Jesuits. They assiduously studied
the Chinese language and launched translation projects for the Chinese
CONQUEST

plunder, brutality, and little else. The horrified Wu Sangui deserted his post in the northeast and returned to the capital to dispatch Li, who fled to Xi'an, then moved throughout central China until the summer of 1645, when he apparently was killed by militiamen of a village that his few surviving followers had raided for food. The military and administrative establishment of the Qing followed Wu Sangui into Beijing, where Fulin, at the age of six, was installed on the Dragon Throne on October 30, 1644, with the reign title Shunzhi, Vanquisher of the Shun.

Alien Rule

China had experienced a long history of periodic rule by peoples who were not identified, by themselves or by the conquered, as Chinese. No one really liked it, of course, but it could be justified ideologically in several ways. The Son of Heaven was, after all, the intermediary between the active first principle of the universe, Heaven, and all human beings, not simply the Chinese, and so logically Heaven might select any of its constituents to receive his mandate to rule. And the criterion for receiving that mandate was not bloodline but rather the personal virtue of the candidate—with “virtue” defined fairly precisely in Confucian cultural terms.

That said, China long had an indigenously-generated sense of essential, perhaps even biological, difference among peoples, and the Qing conquest was one moment when such domestic racial thought came to the fore. No one was more emphatic in this than the Hunanese philosopher and erstwhile resistance leader Wang Fuzhi (1619–1692). After discussing how beasts with webbed feet and with cloven hooves necessarily separate themselves from each other, Wang wrote:

The Chinese in their bone structure, sense organs, gregariousness and exclusiveness, are different from the barbarians, and yet they must be distinguished absolutely from the barbarians. Why is this so? Because if man does not mark himself off from things, then the principle of Heaven is violated. If the Chinese do not mark themselves off from the barbarians, then the principle of earth is violated. And since Heaven and earth regulate mankind by marking men off from each other, if men do not mark themselves off and preserve an absolute distinction between societies, then the principle of man is
violated... Even the ants have leaders who rule their ant-hills, and if other insects come to attack their nests, the leader gathers the ants together and leads them against their enemies to destroy them and prevent further intrusion. Thus he who would lead the ants must know the way to protect his group.  

Unsurprisingly, Wang's writings were proscribed throughout much of the Qing era but reemerged to great popularity in the late nineteenth century, beginning with their republication in 1867 by the (presumably loyalist) anti-Taiping hero Zeng Guofan.  

In practice, the Qing takeover of much of north China was surprisingly easy and bloodless. In one county of Shandong, local elite-led militia, dismayed at the rapacious incompetence of the late Ming administration, eagerly handed their locale over to the arriving officials of Li Zicheng's Shun dynasty and then, just as readily, kicked out Li's officials and delivered it again to the Qing once the Shun proved even less able than the Ming. But this early success may have been deceptive; it would take a full forty years after the conquest of Beijing for the Qing regime to establish itself with full security throughout the breadth of the former Ming domains, and for much of this period the new dynasty's eventual triumph was by no means determined. 

Emboldened by their early success, and even before most of central China had been occupied, the new regime ordered all its male subjects to adopt the queue, a hairstyle traditional to the northeast in which the forehead was shaved and remaining hair was wound into a long braid. In early 1645 the Dorgon regency issued an imperial edict to the Board of Rites:

Within and without, we are one family. The Emperor is like the father, and the people are like his sons. The father and sons are of the same body; how can they be different from one another? If they are not as one then it will be as if they had two hearts and would they then not be like the people of different countries?... All residents of the capital and its vicinity will fulfill the order to shave their heads within ten days of this proclamation. For Zhili and other provinces compliance must take place within ten days of receipt of the order from the Board of Rites. Those who follow this order belong to our country; those who hesitate will be considered treasonous bandits and will be heavily penalized. Anyone who attempts to evade this or-

The court may have underestimated the degree of rage this queue-wearing demand would generate among Han men, who not only saw their traditional hairstyle as reflective of their cultural identity (a point the Qing understood) but also viewed shaving their foreheads as a form of self-mutilation and a breach of filial obligation owed to the parents who had bequeathed them their bodies. Throughout the central China highlands, local elites who had already accepted with deference the arrival of Qing county administrations responded to the demand with renewed revolt. They retreated to their mountain fortresses and held out, often to the last man, for another five or six years.  

In the lower Yangzi region the outcome was bloodier still. Ming general Shi Ke had ordered that the splendid city of Yangzhou be defended to the death, and in May 1645 when it fell to Qing forces much of the population was deliberately killed and survivors raped and murdered by unruly Chinese soldiers in Qing employ. Despite this ominous example, and in direct response to the head-shaving decree, local elites in the Yangzi delta opted to rebel against their newly established conquerors. In retaliation, furious Qing generals ordered the massacre of over 200,000 people in the county seat of Jiading and an even larger number in Jiangyin.  

Cultural memories of these atrocities, especially the one at Yangzhou for which an eyewitness account (Wang Xiuchu's A Record of Ten Days at Yangzhou) circulated underground for centuries, would haunt the Qing ever after. One sample from Wang's long catalogue of atrocities told of a forced march of survivors, while the city lay in smoldering ruins:

Some women came up, and two among them called out to me... They were partially naked, and they stood in mud so deep that it reached their calves. One was embracing a girl, whom a soldier lashed and threw into the mud before driving her away. One soldier boasted a sword and led the way, another leveled his spear and drove us from behind, and a third moved back and forth in the middle to make sure no one got away. Several dozen people were herded together like cattle or goats. Any who lagged behind were flogged or killed outright. The women were bound together at their necks with...
a heavy rope—strung one to another like pearls. Stumbling with each step, they were covered with mud. Babies lay everywhere on the ground. The organs of those trampled like turf under horses' hooves or people's feet were smeared in the dirt, and the crying of those still alive filled the whole outdoors. Every gutter or pond that we passed was stacked with corpses, pillowing each other's arms and legs. Their blood had flowed into the water, and the combination of green and red was producing a spectrum of colors. The canals, too, had been filled to level with dead bodies.16

Grafted on to “scientific” (that is, social Darwinist) notions of racial difference imported from the West in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and in company with the rediscovered writings of nativist writers such as Wang Fuzhi, such graphic accounts fed the mill of anti-Manchuism and Han nationalism that contributed mightily to the dynasty's overthrow in 1911.

For its part, the Qing regime remained undecided on just how much it was willing to play the game of Confucian rule. The old Jurchen Council of Princes—under the leadership of Dorgon, Jirgalang (who would succeed the regent following his death in 1650), and Ebai (who would serve as regent for the young Kangxi emperor from 1661 to 1665)—retained considerable authority. Literati opinion was largely disregarded, and the Chinese were treated effectively as a conquered people.17 But with Kangxi's arrest of Ebai (who died in prison almost immediately) and assumption of personal rule, the tone of Qing policy moved in a dramatically different direction.

Dynastic Consolidation

It took the Qing conquerors nearly forty years from the time they captured Beijing and announced the founding of the dynasty to fully eliminate their competitors, and for much of this time it was by no means certain that the Qing would ultimately prevail. The first of these competitors was the rump regime of the defeated dynasty itself, called the Southern Ming. The Ming practice of enfeoffing imperial princes in various localities throughout the empire had left a variety of candidates for succession on the death of the Chongzhen emperor in 1644, but it also virtually ensured that conflict would ensue over just who should be the focus of loyalist efforts.

CONQUEST

In June 1644 the Prince of Fu at Nanjing was reluctantly persuaded to declare himself the Hongguang emperor, but his reign lasted just one year before he was captured and killed by Qing forces. Thereafter one prince after another—usually several at once—claimed the mantle, running around the country seeking shelter and patronage from various paramilitary resistance forces or masters of mountain fortresses. The most lasting of these, the Prince of Yongning, was proclaimed the Yongl emperor in 1646 and then flitted around Guangdong, Guangxi, southern Hunan, and Yunnan for a dozen years before eventually fleeing to Burma. He was apprehended there by Wu Sangui and executed in May 1662, extinguishing the Ming once and for all.

A far more serious threat to the Qing was the rebellion of Wu Sangui himself. As the Ming general who had joined the Qing and led their forces into North China, he had been granted a fiefdom in Yunnan. Similar fiefs had been granted two other Ming turncoats—Shang Kexi in Guangdong and Geng Qimao in Fujian. By the early 1670s the Kangxi emperor had grown impatient with the autonomy of these “Three Feudatories” and put increasing pressure on the princes to resign and allow full integration of the south into the Qing bureaucratic administration. Wu Sangui responded on December 28, 1671, by declaring a rebellion, under the slogan “Overthrow the Qing and restore the Ming.” He ordered his subjects to cut their queues and his troops to wear white garments and caps in mourning for the late dynasty.

At the same time, Wu also proclaimed his own new Zhou dynasty. He quickly advanced into western Hunan and then in early 1674 took the provincial capital, Changsha, the northern Hunan prefecture of Yuezhou, and Jingzhou in western Hubei. He was poised for an advance into the Yangzi valley, when the Kangxi emperor led his own troops south into Jiangxi to divide Wu from the other two feudal princes and to find some route into Hunan to recapture Yuezhou, Wu's northernmost stronghold. The emperor achieved this in 1679, after five years of bitter fighting. But his victory turned the tide of what had seemed a life-and-death dynastic struggle, and within two years the rebellion had collapsed.18

The third challenger to the Qing was both the most persistent and by far the most interesting. It was a vast, integrated, armed, and eventually bureaucratised maritime empire built up and controlled by three successive generations of the Zheng family of traders from coastal Fujian.19 Large armadas of Chinese armed smugglers had dominated the trade in
East Asian waters since the late fifteenth century, exchanging the prized silk, porcelain, and other manufactures of China for silver from Japan and the New World. The Ming ban on maritime trade only increased the power of these groups, while the Tokugawa expulsion of the Portuguese and its restriction of Dutch trade to the small island of Deshima in the 1630s dramatically reduced competition from these other maritime powers. In 1624 Zheng Zhilong assumed control of one such fleet of armed smugglers, and by 1630, at the age of twenty-six, he had unified them all under his single command.

Zheng engaged diplomatically with the Portuguese (who offered him the latest Western military technology in exchange for Chinese manufactures), the Dutch in Taiwan (for whom he had once worked as a translator and with whom he signed a treaty of mutual protection), the Japanese (who gave him the daughter of a high-ranking daimyo in marriage), and eventually the Ming (who, beleaguered by internal rebellion and Qing incursions in the northeast, in 1628 appointed Zheng an admiral of the fleet). His now very powerful empire was headquartered at Xiamen (Amoy) on the Fujian coast, where he made himself a popular hero by routinely seizing government granaries in years of dearth and distributing their contents to the coastal population. When the Qing captured Beijing in 1644, Ming loyalists saw Zheng as their champion, but in 1646 he withdrew his forces from Fujian and allowed the Qing to capture the local Ming pretender, the so-called Longwu emperor. His betrayal was met with another betrayal, however, when rather than honoring Zheng for his assistance the Qing instead took him prisoner and executed him off to Beijing. He was held there as hostage against his successors for some fifteen years, and in 1661 when he was no longer deemed useful he was executed.

Zheng Zhilong's son, Zheng Chenggong, assumed control of his father's Xiamen-based maritime empire in 1646 and immediately set out to bureaucratize its organization, dividing it into eastern and western fleets and five inland and five overseas companies, each divided into branches, and all overseen by several central ministries reporting to himself. Through agents at his inland base in Hangzhou, he purchased the best Jiangnan manufactures and became the undisputed master, both commercially and militarily, of the East China seas. But having in his youth been granted by the Longwu emperor the title Lord of the Imperial Surname, Chenggong took his Ming loyalty more seriously than his father had. In 1658 he launched a major attack on Jiangnan, announcing his attempt to reclaim it for the Yongli emperor (who was on the run in Yunnan). With a force of well over 100,000 men, he captured several coastal cities, then sailed up the Yangzi and took Zhenjiang.

On September 9, 1649, Zheng Chenggong attacked Nanjing but was turned back with heavy casualties. Throughout the following year the Qing, now fully determined to eliminate this nagging threat, besieged Zheng's Xiamen base. It withstood the siege, but Zheng nevertheless decided to withdraw from the mainland. For several decades his regime's relations with the Dutch had been souring, and so on April 30, 1661, he appeared with some 900 ships before Castle Zeelandia at Anping on the Taiwan coast. Landing without incident, he fought to dislodge the Dutch and on February 1, 1662, secured their negotiated withdrawal from Taiwan to Batavia. For this, he has been much honored as a Chinese nationalist hero.

Later that same year, however, Zheng Chenggong seemed to fall into a depression (prompted in part by reports of the execution of his father, with whom he had remained in communication during his long captivity) and committed suicide. After a succession struggle, his son Zheng Jing assumed command of the still prosperous maritime state. Familiar institutions of Chinese civil government—tax offices, Confucian academies, poorhouses, and widow homes—were set up in the regime's new Taiwan home. It survived for another two decades. Draconian moves by the Qing court to destroy its economic base by forcibly removing populations along the southeast coast proved more disastrous to the Qing than to the Zheng, who easily found other avenues of trade. Chinese naval attacks on Taiwan met with mixed success. Repeated Qing overtures for a negotiated surrender, in exchange for semi-autonomous status for Taiwan, were met by procrastination. But finally, fatally weakened in 1674 by an ill-conceived participation in Wu Sangui's Three Feudatories rebellion, beset by a worsening subsistence crisis, and damaged by another round of fraternal fights over succession, the Zheng regime succumbed to a massive assault ordered by the Kangxi emperor in 1683. The Qing were now, at last, undisputed masters of all of China proper.

Forging an Accommodation

A key factor in the successful establishment of any dynasty in imperial China was the forging of an alliance between the local gentry and the central bureaucracy. The literati class had historically remained fairly
stable during dynastic transitions. Some individuals and families lost their lives in loyalist resistance, while others succeeded at promoting themselves under the new regime, but in aggregate they remained entrenched in support of their local interests. The gentry of the late imperial era were not in a position to assume the throne themselves—they were not an armed warrior caste like their Japanese counterparts, the samurai. Consequently, new dynasties were formed either by rebellious commoners such as the Ming founder or by alien conquerors such as the Qing. But no matter who took the reins of imperial rule, the gentry were absolutely necessary to the consolidation of a new dynasty in a number of ways.

Besides serving as a recruitment pool for imperial officials, they were the controllers of display in their localities—through teaching, delivering public lectures, performing sacrifices and other public rituals—and were therefore the critical voice in establishing the new regime’s legitimacy. More practically, they stabilized local society through their philanthropic activities and other local leadership projects, and through a range of legal and quasi-legal channels they were critical to the regime’s fiscal collection system. It was absolutely essential for an aspiring dynasty to secure an effective alliance with this group, and the Qing worked diligently at this over the course of its first several decades on the throne.

In the cultural sphere it immediately began to reestablish the examination system, providing upward mobility opportunities and securing tacit endorsement of its legitimacy on the part of all who consented to sit for the test. In 1679 it held a grand special examination offering civil service degrees well in excess of established quotas and intended specifically to capture the allegiance of scholars who may still have harbored loyalist sentiments toward the Ming. In 1648 it ceremoniously reestablished the postgraduate Hanlin Academy, that historically troublesome home of political criticism that the Ming in its last days had allowed to lapse. By the early 1680s it launched a massive compilation project, the Milushu, for preserving the history of its predecessor, with the goal among other things of channeling the energies of literati who had special knowledge of, and nostalgia for, the now safely extinguished former dynasty.

The Qing was helped immeasurably in this project of cultural cooperation by its adept selection of officials. For example, in Yangzhou—the once-graced lower Yangzi city that had seen brutal devastation during the conquest—local literati in the late seventeenth century were seeking to reestablish their cultural hegemony by a busy process of poetry composition and publication, construction of pavilions, bridges, and other sites of

CONQUEST

real or invented historical significance, and collective meetings to drink, recite, admire the scenery, and generally yet one another’s claims to cultural superiority. Much of this process was orchestrated by the young Shandong native Wang Shizhen (1643–1711), who was dispatched by the Qing to serve as a judge in the area and whose own literary gifts, personal charisma, and support for the project of elite reconstruction in no small way sold the idea of Qing rule in this pivotal locality. In the short term, at least, the massacre of 1645 was nearly effaced from local memory. 20

The Qing moved to forge ties with the landed elite in more material ways, most strikingly by what it chose not to do. The Ming, which had come to power on a “land to the tiller” platform, had moved quickly to seize many large private landholdings and redistribute plots to household-scale cultivators. The Qing did no such thing. Although it carved out imperial, banner, and official estates in the environs of Beijing and elsewhere in north China, it did this primarily in areas that had been decimated by the Li Zicheng rebellion. Elsewhere, it announced its intent to respect existing ownership rights and help landowners displaced by the rebellions reclaim their property.

The Qing also helped elites regain control over their labor force. In Guangshan and Shangcheng counties of Henan’s southern highlands, for example, bondservant labor in agriculture was the norm. The dynastic transition had been marked, here as elsewhere, by waves of rebellion among this unfree workforce. In 1658, on a rumor that the new Qing court had declared universal emancipation, the bondservants rose up one final time, but the recently arrived Qing prefect moved quickly to demonstrate that the rumor was untrue, throwing his military forces behind local militias to brutally suppress the challenge to landlord rule. This key event cemented the identity of interests between landlords and the state in a troublesome part of the empire where Ming loyalist and local resistance movements died hard.

The most severe test of the throne-gentry alliance occurred, unsurprisingly, in the area of tax collection and especially, as one might expect, among the enormously wealthy anti-Qing families of the Yangzi delta. Though this was probably the most productive agrarian land in all of China, it was also disproportionately taxed. The Ming founder had instituted what amounted to confiscatory tax rates there in the fourteenth century in order to support his new imperial capital at Nanjing, and predictably these assessments had remained on the books even when his successor moved the principal capital to Beijing. The response of local land-
holders and officials over the centuries had been to work out what both parties agreed to be a reasonable tax yield, collect just this amount year after year, and declare the excess uncollectible due to natural calamities of one sort or another. As a result of this arrangement, by early Qing times there were enormous accumulated tax arrears on record for this region, arrears that no local authority had any intention of ever collecting.

Under the Ehai regency in 1661, however, the court suddenly announced its intention to clear these arrears. Deeply suspicious of the Jiangnan gentry’s politics and hoping to break the back of their autonomous economic power, it announced a schedule of required repayment, posted officials to the area charged with prosecuting the tax clearance, and, when local landholders proved unable or unwilling to meet these demands, threw large numbers of influential gentry in local jails. Nationally, the irate response of the elite was overwhelming, and the court quickly recognized its mistake. It released the hostages, worked out financial agreements to save face on both sides, and scapegoated and cashiered (and in some cases even imprisoned) the very officials it had charged with clearing the taxes in arrears. The throne-gentry alliance in Jiangnan had, after a rocky start, ultimately survived the conquest.

GOVERNANCE

While the Great Qing was an empire encompassing many disparate peoples, it was also a dynasty (guo) in the Chinese imperial tradition, and its ruling house confronted many of the same problems faced by its predecessors. The Chinese empire, the legacy of the First Emperor Qin Shihuang in the third century B.C., had demonstrated throughout its long history that it could be conquered but not permanently fragmented. Some self-righting mechanism seemed to dictate that periods of breakdown would be followed by longer eras of reintegration. The empire had been able to sustain its enormous size in the area known as “China proper” or “Inner China” for over two millennia. No other political unit of comparable scale—not the Roman or Holy Roman empires in the West, nor the Mamluk or Ottoman empires in the Islamic world, nor the Mongol empire in central Asia—had survived nearly so long. Why?

Usually an empire expands up to the point where the costs of maintaining military superiority over its neighbors along increasingly extensive borders, combined with the costs of internal administration and maintenance of stability, become unsustainably great.1 The economy buckles under the mounting pressure as the imperial government tries to enlarge its share of the realm’s economic product, and the society fractures as collection mechanisms for meeting the state’s growing fiscal demands exacerbate inequality (as it is usually easier to collect proportionately more from the poor than from the rich). The resulting tension and animosity in turn make the costs of maintaining internal stability all the greater. In most cases, the empire breaks down under the strain into smaller, more