The Qing Dynasty

Once the Manchu gained control of Beijing in 1644 they began a campaign to conquer the rest of the Ming territories, and by the end of the 17th century they gained control of south China and captured the island of Taiwan, putting it under Chinese control for the first time. By the late 18th century China reached its largest size in history and was also the largest country in the world. The transition from Ming to Qing dynasties was not nearly as difficult as the period that followed the Mongol invasion in the 13th century. The Manchu had been close to Chinese civilization for a long time and had already adapted many Chinese customs and attitudes by the time the dynasty began. Because many Ming officials were disillusioned with the weakness of the most recent emperors, some gave their support to the Manchu in taking over the government.

Political Organization

Even though the Qing rulers admired Chinese culture, they still encouraged a separation between Manchu and Chinese. Like the Mongols, Confucians were subjugated to the victors, and all highest political posts were filled by Manchu. However, they left the Confucian scholar-gentry in most positions of the bureaucracy, and the scholars continued to do the day to day work of the empire. Manchu rulers showed a desire to preserve their ethnic identity by forbidding intermarriage between Manchu and Chinese, and they forced Chinese men to shave the front of their heads and grow a queue—a Manchu-style patch of hair gathered long and uncut in the back—as a sign of submission to the dynasty. The civil service examinations continued to determine who entered the ranks of the scholar-gentry, and they became more competitive than ever, with tests given on the district, provincial, and metropolitan levels. Few could pass the metropolitans, and most students took the exams several times before they passed.

he was a talented military leader. Qianlong's reign brought so much prosperity that he cancelled tax collections on four occasions because the royal coffers were full and the government did not need money. By the late 18th century, China was a well-organized empire, with its influence firmly established in most parts of east Asia.

Economic and Social Characteristics

The prosperity of China under the Qing rulers was based on agriculture, maximized by intensive agricultural methods that produced high yields of food crops, especially rice, wheat, and millet. Food production was enhanced further by the arrival of American food crops across the Pacific Ocean by way of the Philippines. Maize, sweet potatoes, and peanuts could be raised on soils that had not been appropriate for previous crops, and the new food supplies helped to sustain a rapid increase in population. Eventually population growth began to outpace food production, but the imbalance was not evident before 1750. Population growth supported trade that needed a large labor force, and commerce was also boosted by the influx of American silver, which was traded for Chinese luxury goods. Chinese workers produced silk, porcelain, and tea for consumers all over Eurasia, so in contrast to the effect that they had on the Muslim Empires, the new silver supplies generally helped the Chinese economy.

Chinese society remained highly patriarchal, and the control that men had over women's lives probably increased during the late Ming and Qing dynasties, as it usually did when Confucian ideals were strong. The preference for male children was clear, since only boys were allowed to take the examinations, which in turn could boost a family's status if a son became a scholar-bureaucrat. Widows were encouraged to commit suicide after their husbands died, and foot binding became very popular during this time. Women could not divorce their husbands, but men could put their wives aside for disobedience or adultery.

The high status of scholar-bureaucrats grew even stronger during this era. They wore distinctive clothing, and commoners treated them with extreme deference. Their principal source of income came from government service, and they usually lived in urban areas, although most of them owned land that brought additional income. Below the gentry were peasants, artisans, and merchants, with merchants having the lowest status of the three groups. Artisans included craftsmen, physicians, tailors, and workers in manufacturing establishments, who all generally made more money than peasants. However, Confucian principles considered the honest work of peasants more worthy of respect than the profit-based trade of merchants, who were viewed as less worthy because they did not actually create any tangible products. However, many gentry families had ties to commerce, with at least some family members acting as merchants,
a practice that often created enough wealth to support talented sons while they studied for examinations. As in earlier days, the lower classes were often called “mean people,” which included slaves, indentured servants, and beggars.

CHANGE OVER TIME: CHINA – 8000 B.C.E.-1750

China’s long history is a challenge for anyone to understand, so it is important to recollect its story as it changed over time before 1750.

8000-600 B.C.E. – China’s earliest known dynasty emerged sometime before 1500 B.C.E. in the Yangzi and Huang He River Valleys of east Asia. Early developments include the veneration of family and departed ancestors, as well as an emphasis on the importance on writing and learning. The Shang Dynasty was overthrown by the Zhou Dynasty in the 12th century B.C.E., which instituted the belief in the mandate of heaven. (see pp. 55-62)

600 B.C.E.-600 C.E. – Confucianism, Daoism, and Legalism were philosophies that developed during the late Zhou Dynasty. During the 3rd century C.E., Shi Huangdi unified China as the short-lived Qin Dynasty under legalism, to be followed by the Han Dynasty, based on Confucianism, which lasted until the 3rd century C.E. Dynastic cycle patterns were well established by the end of the time period. (see pp. 98-105)

600-1450 – A long era of chaos ended in the 7th century with the short Sui Dynasty, followed by the much longer Tang Dynasty. Buddhist influences were strong, but during the dynasty’s later years, Confucians regained control, beginning neo-Confucianism. The Song Dynasty was founded in the 10th century based on neo-Confucianism. The Tang and Song were culturally rich, although military and political strength was greater during the Tang. The Song were defeated by the Mongols, who established the Yuan Dynasty, which was very much in touch with other areas of Eurasia. The Yuan were overthrown in the 14th century by the Ming Dynasty, which rebuilt Chinese institutions, including Confucianism and Han Chinese identity. The Ming had very mixed feelings about contacts with the outside world. (see pp. 196-206, 222-225)

1450-1750 – The Ming were at their strongest in the early part of this era, but they lost control of China to the Manchus, a semi-nomadic people from northeastern Asia in the mid-17th century, when the Qing Dynasty was established. The Manchus strengthened China through their large, efficient army and the competent, long rules of Kangxi and Qianlong. In 1750 China was the largest country in the world and still one of the strongest. (see pp. 328-337)

Cultural Influences

Beyond the strong neo-Confucian influences during Qing times, a rich cultural life emerged in philosophy, literature, and history, partly because the emperors supported printing and distribution of materials at their expense. The Ming emperor Yongle sponsored a huge project that compiled much Chinese knowledge into the Yongle Encyclopedia, but only three manuscript copies were made. In contrast, Kangxi’s Collection of Books was much more influential because he had it printed and widely distributed. In literature, popular novels circulated among the literate middle classes, with books written about the lives of both gentry and commoners. Most of the authors are unknown, and no one knows just how many novels were written, but two of the best known to survive are the Book of the Golden Lotus and The Dream of the Red Chamber.

Porcelain had long been a distinctive product of China, but it became a major art form during both the Ming and Qing eras. Wealthy Europeans sought to buy Chinese porcelain for their dinner tables, and Ming and Qing vases, decorative bowls, and painted scrolls and screens were in such great demand that their prices rose even as production increased. Many of these items did not go into international trade because a large number of prosperous Chinese filled their urban homes with the luxury goods. By the 1700s many educated Chinese read books and sent their children to schools and academies of higher learning. As always, beautiful calligraphy, painting, and poetry were more prized than math and science, and the members of the scholar-gentry class generally led highly refined, comfortable lives.