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COLLAPSE

ONE COLD night in the winter of 1657–1658, fourteen years after the Ming dynasty had been overthrown, Huang Zongxi (1610–1695) was awoken by a noise on his bookshelf. He lit a candle on his bedside table and peered at the bookshelf in time to see a rat scurry down from the shelf. He carried the light over to inspect what the rat had been chewing, and the guttering flame showed him that the rodent had selected a stack of *Capital Gazettes* from the Hongguang era (1644–1645). The capital gazette was the official newssheet that every court printed and distributed to its higher officials with information about events, policies, and appointments. The copies on Huang's bookshelf had been printed in Nanjing, where Hongguang for a time held his court. Hongguang was Zhu Yousong (1607–1646), formerly the Prince of Fu and cousin of the Chongzhen emperor, who committed suicide in 1644 to avoid being captured by rebels. The remnants of the Ming court fled south to Nanjing, where the prince was enthroned as the Hongguang emperor. The armies serving the invading Manchus descended on Nanjing and chased Hongguang out a year later. The Hongguang edition of the *Capital Gazette* was suspended.

Huang Zongxi had somehow managed to preserve his copies through the unsettled years that followed. He recalled the winter's night on which he saved them from the rat, because that was the moment when he decided that he could no longer put off compiling a record of the short reign. "I was saving them to use as documentation for writing the history of that period," Huang writes, "but in the years since that time I saw many troubles and was often ill." Now the danger was of losing

the living memory of that first difficult year after the fall of the Ming. "What you can pick up now about the old times dwindles by the day," he worries. His own unsettled circumstances made matters worse. "I have moved three times in ten years, and many of the books I gathered have gone missing." If the book were not written soon, it never could be, for more time would pass and the memory of the reign would fade. "Who," he asks himself, "will take up this duty after I die?"[1]

Taking the Blame

By 1658, Huang Zongxi had established himself as the most important historian and constitutional theorist of his generation. It had been fourteen years since Chongzhen's suicide, followed by the Manchu takeover of Beijing. Many Ming officials bowed to circumstances and made the transition to a new master, but many did not, choosing instead to live out the rest of their lives as loyalists to the dynasty that had honored them with office before 1644. This was certainly the expectation in Huang's social and intellectual circle. Thirty-four at the time the Ming fell, he decided that the only way to remain loyal to the memory of the Ming was to decline to serve a second dynasty—just as a widow was not supposed to marry a second husband, though most widows did remarry and many officials did sign on with a second dynasty. Huang, however, withstood the pressure from conquerors and colleagues to offer his allegiance, and spent the rest of his life writing and teaching, leaving an intellectual and documentary legacy greater than anything he might have achieved through bureaucratic service.

Hongguang had not been a popular choice for emperor, as Huang notes in the *Veritable Record of the Hongguang Era* that he did end up writing. Shi Kefa (1601–1645), the tough-minded minister of war who struggled to rally the remnants of the Ming against the Manchu invaders and would die in the spectacular massacre of the city of Yangzhou in 1645, declared the Prince of Fu disqualified from emperorship on seven grounds: he was corrupt, licentious, alcoholic, unfilial, vicious to subordinates, unstudious, and meddlesome.[2] Shi's frank assessment was not enough to annul the prince's candidacy: the minister of war made the error of assuming that the head of an imperial autocracy had to be a person of merit. It was proximity to the founder's direct line of descent that mattered, not who might actually be personally qualified to hold the top position. What really troubled most courtiers about the Prince of Fu was

not his character; it was his parentage. His father was Zhu Changxun (1586–1641), the prince at the center of the "foundation of the state" controversy whom Wanli had wanted to designate as the heir apparent to please the boy's mother, Lady Zheng. Lady Zheng was thus the Prince of Fu's grandmother. To officials who had held out against Wanli's choice during that constitutional struggle, it almost felt as though the old emperor was getting his revenge from beyond the grave.

The revenge was short-lived. The Hongguang emperor was betrayed to the Manchus after one brief year on the throne in Nanjing and died shortly later in confinement. Three other cousins were pushed forward to lead fugitive Ming regimes in the distant south. One of them even appealed to the Pope to send an army of deliverance to China, though the letter reached the Vatican long after the fate of the Ming was sealed. None of the resistance groups was able to withstand the onslaught of the armies the Manchus commanded—consisting in fact of surrendered Ming troops for the most part.

The new Qing regime was willing to show Chongzhen the posthumous respect he deserved as a legitimate emperor who, like a chaste widow, had chosen suicide over dishonor. His Manchu "successor," the Shunzhi emperor (r. 1644–1661), had a stele placed in front of Chongzhen's tomb that praised him for "having sacrificed his life on behalf of the nation" while those around him "lost their virtue and let their country perish."[3] The history of his reign was thus written in a way that blamed his advisors—the very men who disdained to switch sides and serve the conquerors. Dorgon (1612–1650), the commander of the Qing forces and uncle of the child-emperor of the new dynasty, summarized the politically correct version of events: "The Chongzhen emperor was all right. The trouble was that his military officers were of bogus merit and trumped up their victories, while his civil officials were greedy and broke the law. That is why he lost the empire." His suicide had been convenient in allowing them to claim the mandate of Heaven without having to exterminate the previous mandate-holders, so they built him a tomb alongside the tombs of his imperial ancestors, gave him all the posthumous honors due to an emperor, and declared his dynasty at an end.

Officially there would be no honors for his upstart cousin, and certainly no Veritable Record. If someone were to compile such a book, he would have to do it out of sight of the new regime. Indeed, the discovery that someone was compiling such a record could be construed as a challenge to Qing legitimacy, effectively an act of treason. This may have

been a morally feeble reason to keep putting the job off, but it was nonetheless compelling. The failure to do so only further compounded the sense of humiliation and self-worthlessness that loyalists felt about their part in the dynasty's downfall. Suspecting that there had to have been something their generation could have done to keep the Ming afloat, they looked through their closets for signs of failure—and found any number of them: practical, attitudinal, intellectual, ethical. One Shanghai writer who was only a child when the Ming fell even attributed the collapse of the dynasty to a shift away from classical literary style. The dynasty was set on the road to disaster as early as the Wanli era, he declared. "Once literary style had become greatly corrupted, the fate of the nation followed in its wake."[4]

This explanation for the fall of the Ming makes for fine histrionics but poor history. Huang Zongxi was a good historian as well as a good loyalist, alert enough not to assume that the responsibility for the disaster was inescapably embedded in the habits and inclinations of this class. His view, contradicting Dorgon, was that the dynasty fell because a mediocre emperor had failed to take action against the eunuchs and incompetent bureaucrats who surrounded him. "When the emperor does not conform to the Way," Huang coldly observes a few lines later in the rat-in-the-night preface, "what can the riff-raff do but count the days toward their own destruction?" Nonetheless, Huang did not regard the failures at the Chongzhen court as the main story. These were no more than the circumstances of the fall. Beneath the mismanagement and moral slide lay the fundamental weaknesses of autocratic rule. Autocracy neglected the bond that should exist between ruler and people such that when disaster struck, neither could trust the other to find a way forward. That, in Huang's view, is what lay at the root of the Ming collapse.

This was not the sort of analysis through which most intellectuals were prepared to understand dynastic decline as they experienced it. More simply, they looked about them, dazed by the onslaught that arrived more swiftly than had the Mongols in an earlier time and trembling to think of what was to come. The poet Wang Wei (ca. 1600–ca. 1647) expressed the despair of her generation in these eight lines of parting she wrote for her husband as he left to join the resistance against the Manchus:

> Mist rises from the desolate grass;
> The moon descends into the cold stream.

The soul goes home as the autumn ends;
Sadness comes in the dim night.
When will this disquiet end?
Will my inner heart grow cold?
You point your oars to the edge of the sky;
Seeing you off, I feel hesitant and uncertain.[5]

Wang Wei pointed no fingers, simply described the conditions in which her family and class found themselves at the end of the dynasty. Such testimony has influenced modern historians, who have fashioned their accounts of the Ming around the tragedy of decline.[6] But it is worth asking whether the Ming was in decline before it fell. One can argue that it was, and we shall rehearse some of these arguments. Yet it is useful to distinguish the outcome from the conditions that produced it. Whether the Ming was in decline or not, it is difficult to imagine how matters could have turned out differently, given the circumstances. Some of the blame could go to the officials around the Chongzhen emperor for failing to take measures that might have stemmed the military and fiscal tide that turned against the regime. While our attention in this chapter will be on those who advised, schemed, and fought their way through the final decades of the dynasty, the conditions under which they acted shaped the courses of action they could follow. Indeed, the greatest puzzle might well be to figure out how the Ming remained standing for as long as it did.

The Wanli Sloughs

To tell this story, we need to go back to the reign of the Wanli emperor, enthroned in 1572 and dead in 1620. Contrary to the standard narrative of decline, the failings of the emperor may not be the place to start. There is evidence that the Wanli emperor was indecisive and politically inept, but we have reached the point when it is time to pull back from the little dramas at court and see the bigger picture. In the case of the Wanli era, the bigger picture involves two major downturns in the environment.

The first Wanli Slough of 1586–1588 was an environmental collapse on a scale that stunned the regime and established a new benchmark for social disaster. The regime was able to weather the catastrophe thanks to the reforms that Chief Grand Secretary Zhang Juzheng had imposed on the administration of the empire's finances at the start of the 1580s. By tracking unpaid taxes and blocking the promotion or transfer of magis-

trates who failed to clear back taxes in their counties, Zhang got the financial system operating as close to its peak of efficiency as the system allowed and left the Imperial Treasury well stocked with silver when he died in 1582.[7] These reserves helped the Wanli court weather the storm when disaster struck in 1587 and ride it out the following year. The shock of the slough remained a strong memory. When a large famine began to build in Henan province six years later, court and bureaucracy mounted a rapid response that relieved the shortfall before local distress could mushroom into a regional crisis.[8]

Two decades passed before the second Wanli Slough arrived in 1615. The two years preceding the slough were years of flood in north China; in the second of those years the weather turned cold. What initiated the slough was a confusing patchwork of severe drought in some places and severe flood in others. Petitions for relief started pouring into the central government from everywhere in the autumn of 1615. On November 25, two grand secretaries forwarded a summary of these reports to the Wanli emperor. "Although the situation differs in each place, all tell of localities gripped by disaster, the people in flight, brigands roaming at will, and the corpses of the famished littering the roads, and not one report does not plead to receive the favor of your imperial grace." The emperor agreed to forward their summary to the Ministry of Revenue, which came back with a recommendation that massive relief be undertaken.

Shandong was hit by the famine worse than any other province. A report that reached the court in February estimated that over 900,000 people were on the brink of starvation, that local relief supplies had run out, and that civil order had completely collapsed. In March 1616, a lower degree-holder in Shandong province submitted an *Illustrated Handbook of the Great Starvation of the People of Shandong* to the court. The court diary noted that each picture was captioned with a poem of lament. A couplet in one of these poems became the tagline for the entire disaster.[9]

> Mothers eat their children's corpses,
> Wives strip off their dead husbands' flesh.

The famine moved from north China to the Yangzi valley later that year, reached down to Guangdong the next, and gripped the northwest and southwest the year after that. The worst may have been over by 1618, yet drought and locusts continued to harry the realm through the last two years of the reign. To this litany of disasters may be added mas-

sive sandstorms in 1618 and 1619—offshoots of the deforestation of the northwest. The one that blew in over Beijing at dusk on April 5, 1618, was so powerful that, according to the *History of the Ming*, "it rained soil. The air was thick, as though with fog or mist, and the soil kept raining into the night." A year less a day later, "from noon until night, sandy dust filled the sky, coloring it a reddish-yellow."[10]

Wanli died in 1620, just at the moment when the long run of cold, dry years came to an end. The crown prince, the legitimate one, was enthroned as the Taichang emperor. Within a month, even before his father had been properly buried, Taichang was dead. Yet another constitutional crisis threw the court into chaos. The succession was simple enough, but the son who was put on the throne as the Tianqi emperor was immature and untutored. During the next seven years (1621–1627), the realm fell into the grip of his chief eunuch, Wei Zhongxian (1568–1627). The political climate was evil, but weather was remarkably normal. The last two years of the Tianqi era were wetter than usual, but without serious flooding. Nature's only major aberrations were earthquakes, which rattled every year of the reign.

The chaotic reign of the Tianqi emperor ended with his early death in 1627, to the great relief of almost everyone at court. His failure to produce a son could have thrown the regime into yet another constitutional crisis, but he had a sixteen-year-old brother to succeed him, a young man whose enthronement as the Chongzhen emperor led many to hope that here at last was an autocrat with whom they could work. But conditions would worsen, and Chongzhen had little chance to reverse the fate of being the last emperor.

The Northern Border

The people of the Ming were not alone in facing the famines of the Wanli era. The drought that gripped north China in those years also parched Liaodong, the region northeast of the Great Wall subsequently known as Manchuria. It was there that the Jurchen leader Nurhaci (1559–1626) was gradually building an ever broader alliance of Jurchen and Mongol tribes into a confederacy that in 1636 would take the new ethnic name of Manchu. Nurhaci was still submitting tribute to the Ming as late as 1615, but he was doing so as a cover for his own territorial ambitions. The drought and cold may have been what convinced him to stop sending tribute. Rather than withdraw as a more timid leader might

have done, he escalated his competition with the Ming for Liaodong. He needed the grain that was grown there and was prepared to fight the Ming for it. The turning point came in May 1618, when Nurhaci launched a surprise attack in eastern Liaodong that led to the death of the commander-in-chief of the Ming forces and gave the Jurchens control of the region.

The Ming launched a major campaign against Nurhaci the following spring, but it was beset with difficulties. It was underfunded, because the Wanli emperor refused to disburse imperial household funds at the level required. It was also bogged down by snow, an effect of the colder weather. Barely a month after it had started at the battle of Sarhu on April 14, 1619, the campaign collapsed. That fiasco was followed by what the great fiscal historian Ray Huang has characterized as "a series of dazzling victories in one battle after another" for Nurhaci's forces. It was the beginning of the eventual loss to the Ming of all its territories beyond the Great Wall, though that loss would take another two decades to run out. That dry summer, three months before his death, Wanli explained to a grand secretary that the cause of the defeat was discord between civilian and military officials in Liaodong. Ray Huang, on the other hand, placed the blame squarely on the emperor. Wanli's refusal to release silver from the Imperial Treasury obliged the Ministry of Revenue to impose a temporary surtax on the land tax to pay for the Liaodong campaign. Not only would that surtax not be rescinded; it would be increased, as the next quarter-century of military misadventures and environmental disasters heaped impossible demands on imperial finances.[11] The military disaster at Sarhu meant that the military threat would continue to escalate, and that whatever the Ming had spent on defense, it would now have to spend more.[12]

The military problem seemed easier to fix than the more complicated and intractable problem of finances, and more than one official stepped forward with proposals. One of them was Xu Guangqi, the Christian disciple of Matteo Ricci. Xu in 1619 began his determined campaign to argue that the most effective way to enhance the Ming's military capacity was to borrow the best European knowledge.[13] His program included not just ballistic technology but the science of Euclidean geometry, which would help gunners improve their sighting. Xu had earlier helped Ricci translate the first six books of Euclid's *Elements* into Chinese, which was published in 1608. He also advocated bringing Portuguese soldiers up from Macao to train Chinese gunners in the newest methods. When a

Portuguese gunner in 1622 scored a direct hit on the Dutch gunpowder store during a failed Dutch attack on Macao, word got out that it was the calculations of the Italian Jesuit Giacomo Rho that had been responsible for the hit, and this was all the proof Xu needed. He obtained permission for seven gunners plus an interpreter (actually the Jesuit missionary to Japan, João Rodrígues) and an entourage of sixteen men to travel up to Beijing that year.

The question of whether to rely on foreign technology—and perhaps the even more pressing worry that foreign soldiers in Beijing would gain knowledge they could later put to military use against the Ming—provoked a controversy at court that threatened to destabilize the entire project. When a cannon exploded during a demonstration the following year, killing the Portuguese gunner and wounding three Chinese assistants, the project was canceled and the gunners were sent back to Macao. The experiment was repeated six years later when Xu was able to gain permission to bring a second team of gunners, with Rodrígues along again as interpreter, to Beijing. Opponents at court succeeded in blocking the delegation when they got to Nanjing, but the Chongzhen emperor eventually issued the edict permitting them to proceed to the capital. Indeed, they should do so with haste, as Jurchen raiding parties were roaming around the capital region.

The edict reached them on February 14, 1630, and they set off. Sixty-five kilometers short of Beijing, outside the city of Zhuozhou, the gunners encountered one of these Jurchen raiding parties. The Portuguese contingent retreated inside the city gates, mounted eight of their cannon on the wall, and fired when the Jurchens rode into range. The show of artillery had its effect, and the raiders departed. It was enough to win over some of those at court who still doubted the wisdom of bringing foreigners inside the realm.[14] It also emboldened Xu to ask the emperor to send Rodrígues back to Macao for more gunners and more cannon, and to permit Giacomo Rho, the Italian mathematician who defeated the Dutch in 1622, to enter the capital and take up a post at the Astronomical Bureau.

Xu's project to engage foreigners, a politically delicate maneuver, was badly shaken when twelve of the Portuguese soldiers were killed in a military revolt in Shandong in 1632 and Xu's chief military disciple was executed for failing to suppress the revolt. The debacle let loose a firestorm of factional politics that had nothing to do with the military situation the regime faced and everything to do with one clique trying to destroy the

other.[15] Xu's initiative on its own was not enough to shift the military balance in Liaodong. He was absolutely correct in realizing that firearms would be decisive in future battles, but without an emperor able to direct the defense of the realm, a grand secretary who enjoyed the confidence of his peers, or a military commander immune from impeachment for reversals in the campaign, technical knowledge would not change the tide of events.

The garrison command at Guangning fell to the Jurchens in 1622. Ming forces had to withdraw inside Shanhai Guan, the Gate of the Mountains and Seas, the eastern terminus of the Great Wall where it meets the sea. But colder, drier weather led to food shortages in Liaodong, obliging the Jurchens to pull back and rebuild. This retreat gave the Ming dynasty a chance to catch its breath and to cast about for ways to fund its border defense. An increase on current levies seemed untenable. As a capital official reported to the Tianqi emperor in the summer of 1623, "The costs of military supplies and courier deployment in Liaodong have escalated so greatly that the material strength of the entire realm goes into supporting this one small corner of it." Consequently, "the common people year after year have to scrape the marrow out of their bones and sell their children and wives to meet the harsh exactions."[16] The Chongzhen emperor attempted to address the problem by tightening the tax system and reducing abuses among the privileged. He also tried to ensure the flow of revenue to the center by blocking the careers of field administrators who did not deliver their quotas, though this order only had the effect of increasing the bribes that field administrators paid to the clerks in the Ministry of Revenue to hide their shortfalls.[17]

The Ming forces were able to take advantage of the Jurchen fall-back to recapture some of Liaodong. A swashbuckler named Mao Wenlong even succeeded in humiliating the Jurchens by invading their sacred homeland in the Ever White Mountains in 1624 (incidentally a habitat for Siberian tigers). Nurhaci's death in 1626 further stalled Jurchen expansion, and the Jurchens turned to other means, including diplomacy. They sent a letter to Mao, hoping to persuade him to switch sides. The letter begins by pointing out that disasters have always portended the fall of a state. The Ming, whom the letter refers to insultingly as the "southern dynasty," was experiencing its full share. "As the southern dynasty approaches its end, the number of deaths is endless and even the imperial emissaries die, so how can one general save the situation?" Then follows

the invitation to switch sides. "The healthy animal finds a tree and climbs it; the wise minister finds a ruler and serves him." The letter concludes by observing that "the southern dynasty has lived to the end of its natural life; its time and course are exhausted. This is not even worth regretting."[18]

Mao did not reply, probably because he figured he was on the winning side. The following February, however, the Jurchens launched an offensive against Korea, forcing Mao to pull back. He may have ceded territory, but his new position at the mouth of the Yalu River placed him in control of the profitable maritime trade between Liaodong and Shandong, giving him the means to assert implicit autonomy as a semi-warlord. The Jurchens quietly reopened back channels to see whether he could be induced to come over to them. Mao was sufficiently well supported by rents from the maritime trade that he could afford to play each side against the other, and he did so until 1629, when his superior officer Yuan Chonghuan (1584–1630), suspicious of Mao's intentions, used the pretext of carrying out an official inspection to enter his camp and order one of his officers to behead him on the spot. "The murder of Mao Wenlong," the historian Frederic Wakeman has noted, "threw the frontier into turmoil, ultimately releasing many of the general's freebooters to plunder on their own."[19]

Yuan's dramatic act may have prevented Mao from switching sides, but the turmoil distracted him from detecting the swift offensive that Nurhaci's son Hong Taiji was preparing. That November he went around Yuan's defensive position and dispatched contingents of mounted archers onto the North China Plain. One contingent rode right to the walls of Beijing. Another attacked the city of Zhuozhou further south, where as we have noted Xu Guangqi's Portuguese gunners fired on them. The Jurchen raiding parties were not prepared to back up their invasion and withdrew beyond the Great Wall, but the court needed someone to blame. What better scapegoat than the man who murdered Mao? Yuan Chonghuan was recalled to Beijing and subjected to the humiliating punishment of beheading and dismemberment the following January. His crime was the traitorous act of failing to stop the Jurchens from reaching Beijing. It was a crime for which many other officers would pay with their lives in the coming years.[20]

Hong Taiji was able to launch his offensive on the strength of having devoted the three years after his father's death to reconsolidating the Jurchen forces under his leadership. Although he withdrew his forces at the end of that winter, he had demonstrated that the Ming military pres-

ence in Liaodong was ineffective. Gradually he exerted full control over the larger region of Manchuria. In 1636, he felt confident enough to found a dynasty, the Qing, and have himself declared emperor. The symbolism of the new dynastic name implied that the Qing, a water image meaning clear or pure, would submerge the Ming, a fire image of sun and moon together. Whether Hong Taiji believed that his dynasty would become more than the sort of regional regime the Jurchens had commanded in north China four centuries earlier we do not know, but the dynastic founding was at least a challenge to the Ming. Hong Taiji died in 1643 before he could carry out his conquest. The succession passed to his young son, and the campaign to his brother Dorgon.

The Chongzhen Slough

We move now from the actors on the Chongzhen stage to the stage itself, the environment. No emperor of the Yuan or Ming faced climatic conditions as abnormal and severe as Chongzhen had the misfortune of doing. In the first years of the reign, the difficulties were mostly confined to the northwest, especially the province of Shaanxi. Drought and famine were so severe that a censor reported at the end of 1628 that the entire province was a disaster zone. Temperatures plummeted the following year, as a cold spell set in that lasted into the 1640s. It was felt not only by the people of the Ming. During the 1630s, Russians experienced severe cold for at least one of the three months of December, January, and February. In the 1640s, however, severe cold was reported for every month of winter, making this the coldest decade in Russian history since the twelfth century.[21] Lying between China and Russia, Manchuria suffered the same fierce cold. The Jurchens may have been drawn south by the wealth of the Ming, but they were also pushed south by the cold.

The first serious famines began in 1632, the fifth year of the Chongzhen era. The court that year was inundated with memorial after memorial reporting on extraordinary conditions all over the country and the extreme social dislocation that went with it. "Banditry everywhere, and every day worse than the day before," exclaimed an official sent to inspect the northwest. "Communication between north and south has been almost completely cut off," reported an official assigned to deal with the disaster along the middle section of the Grand Canal. "The poor flee and become brigands while the rich slip off undetected," declared a second in the same region. "Merchants are not moving goods, and all the roads are blocked."[22]

After 1632, the disaster only deepened. Locusts began to appear on a massive scale in the eighth year, 1635. Then finally the dry weather turned to full-scale drought in the tenth year, 1637. For seven years running, the Ming suffered droughts on an unprecedented scale. During the great drought that devastated western Shandong in the summer of 1640, the famished stripped the bark off trees to have something to eat, then turned to rotting corpses.[23] In the commercial city of Linqing in northwestern Shandong, the desperate resorted to cannibalism.[24] Famine spread its pall southward over the Yangzi delta the next summer. A telegraphic entry in the Shanghai county gazetteer describes the scale of the disaster:

> Massive drought.
> Locusts.
> The price of millet soared.
> The corpses of the starved lay in the streets.
> Grain reached three-tenths to four-tenths of an ounce of silver per peck.[25]

The drought continued for another two years. Desperate to turn the tide, the Chongzhen emperor on June 24, 1643, issued an edict commanding all his subjects, from the highest official to the lowest day laborer, to purge the evil thoughts lurking in his heart so that Heaven might be persuaded to end the punishment of drought and bring back the rain.[26]

Epidemics followed in the wake of drought and famine. Much of it was due to smallpox. Chinese were already managing the disease by practicing variolation, a simple form of inoculation, but the Jurchens/Manchus were not. They had a particular dread of this disease and were so anxious to avoid coming into contact with infected people that, at several key moments in their military incursions through the 1630s, they fell back from an area in which contagion had been reported. Fear of smallpox was partly what ended Hong Taiji's foray onto the North China Plain in 1629–1630.[27] The epidemic that scourged the region around the Gate of the Mountains and Seas in 1635 was probably smallpox. Smallpox broke out in Shandong in 1639 on a scale sufficient to convince the Manchus to cancel that winter's raid into north China.

Epidemics struck other regions of the country as well. The northwest was particularly hard hit. The first massive epidemic in that region devastated Shanxi province in 1633. Three years later it spread through

Shaanxi and southern Mongolia. In 1640, all Shaanxi was infected. After it was over, provincial officials estimated that 80 to 90 percent of the population died.[28] Though the percentage surely exaggerates the actual toll, it does indicate the severity of the episode, at least in some parts of the province. Whether the disease was plague is much debated. A strange explosion in the rat population in 1634 in the far northwest—the *History of the Ming* reports that a hundred thousand rats surged across the Ningxia countryside eating everything in sight—has encouraged some historians to connect the rats to the outbreak.[29] Whether the two events were connected, and whether the rats were carrying plague-infected fleas, are still anyone's guess.

A severe epidemic struck the Yangzi valley in 1639, and again an exodus of rats in the mid-Yangzi region the same year has raised the specter of plague. The sickness returned with even greater virulence two years later, not just in the Yangzi valley but throughout the eastern half of the realm. For one Shandong county that year it was reported that well over half the residents of the county died of the sickness. To the entry reporting the epidemic, the compiler of the local gazetteer has added this desperate note: "Among all the strange occurrences of disaster and rebellion, there had never before been anything worse than this."[30] In another Shandong county south of the Yellow River, where the epidemic completely exterminated some villages, an estimated 70 percent of the people died; the same percentage was recorded as well further up the Yellow River valley in Henan.[31] Locusts at the end of the summer then cleared the land of every edible plant, leaving absolutely nothing to eat.

The epidemic seems to have paused briefly in 1642, then resumed annually, devastating communities all the way from Jiangnan in the south to the border in the north.[32] It was understood at the time that Beijing was the epicenter of these waves of sickness, and that the Grand Canal, once the great avenue of national prosperity, was now the highway for the infected to spread the disease from the north. The effect of the epidemic on top of famine was deadly. "The great majority of the people have died" is a phrase much repeated in local records of these last years. "Of every ten homes, nine are empty" is another. As 1644 dawned, every county in northern Shanxi was infected.[33]

This was the Chongzhen Slough, the most prolonged series of disasters since the Taiding Slough in the 1320s. Crops withered, food supplies dwindled, and the commercial economy shut down, driving the price of grain to unprecedented levels. People had nothing with which to pay

their taxes. A hardship for them, it was worse for the government, which found itself without the means to pay the soldiers who defended the border or the courier soldiers who kept the machinery of state moving. As early as 1623, the minister of war informed the emperor that the courier system was completely exhausted. Stringent new rules about who had the right to use the system needed to be applied if state communications were not to break down altogether.[34] But this was not sufficient to ease the burden, and so the ministry took the radical step in 1629 of closing some courier stations to save the cost of staffing them. Realistically, no amount of tightening was going to meet the unrelenting costs of waging war in Manchuria. The state saw no alternative to levying heavier and heavier taxes to keep pace with the soaring military costs. Black humor punned on the word Chongzhen/*chongzheng* ("double levy") and called it the Double Taxation era.[35] When 1644 arrived, 80 percent of counties had stopped forwarding any taxes at all. The central treasury was empty.

Rebellion

The financial meltdown hit hardest the northern areas that depended on central allocations to keep operating. At the beginning of the Chongzhen era, they were the first to suffer famine. Belt-tightening left soldiers and couriers without pay or rations. Many simply abandoned their posts, fleeing to peripheral regions where they could survive between day laboring and banditry without being tracked down. When drought struck one of these peripheral regions, Shaanxi province, in the spring of 1628, some of these men mutinied. This was the beginning of a tide of rebellion that would wash back and forth over the realm for the next seventeen years.[36]

With every mutiny and every successful raid on a government granary or a county yamen, the men who turned their back on the Ming and took survival into their own hands gained the confidence to go on to more ambitious conquests. Two rebel leaders came to command large followings and eventually declare their own short-lived dynasties, Li Zicheng (1605–1645) and Zhang Xianzhong (1605–1647). Li and Zhang were both from small communities in the impoverished north of drought-prone Shaanxi. Li got a job at a postal station in 1627 but lost it when the station was closed two years later. He worked as a tax collector for a time, flirted with soldiering, then drifted into banditry. Zhang's early years have spawned more dramatic stories. His pock-marked face may signify that he suffered smallpox as a child and survived. While a teen-

ager, he was disowned by his family and thrown out of his community, according to one story, after killing a classmate. The story may be apocryphal, but the part about going to school seems to have been true, for two Jesuit missionaries who met Zhang near the end of his inglorious career discovered he was literate. As the safest place for a violent young man was in the army, Zhang became a soldier. He was accused, possibly unjustly, of plotting to mutiny against his commanding officer. Another officer intervened and saved him from execution, so the story goes, but he was booted out of the service. Having no skills other than fighting, in the summer of 1630 he turned to the only other career open to a man of his talents, banditry.

Li and Zhang were among the many marginal young men who formed and re-formed bandit gangs over the next few years across north China. Gradually these gangs linked into loose armies and, as they did, sought territorial bases from which to draw revenue and defend themselves against the armies the Ming sent to suppress them. In the end, none of the aspiring peasant warlords was successful in establishing a permanent regime. Even those who set up civil administrations remained in the end peripatetic, sometimes moving as new opportunities arose, sometimes picking up and fleeing as the forces sent to quell them moved in. By the mid-1630s, these northern armies probed down through Henan and Anhui into the Yangzi valley. Both Li Zicheng and Zhang Xianzhong suffered major defeats in 1638 at the hands of Ming armies. Were it not for the many burdens the state faced at this juncture, neither should have been able to revive their war machines.

But they did. Within two years, Li and Zhang had rebuilt their mobile regimes to a level that allowed both to harbor dynastic ambitions. Neither, however, was able to assert unchallenged control over any particular territory. Both moved around the interior of north China, from Henan to Shaanxi and down to Huguang, depending on the movement of Ming armies. As 1644 dawned, Zhang was down in Huguang after a failed attempt to take Nanjing and was preparing to move west into the inland fortress of Sichuan. Li, however, had just captured the ancient capital city of Xi'an. There he inaugurated the Shun (Submission) dynasty—though whether the submission was of Li to Heaven or of Heaven to Li was a matter of opinion—then late that winter launched a full-scale invasion of Shanxi province. While there, he looked even farther east, toward an undefended Beijing, and decided to make a bold and unexpected dash on the capital.[37]

The Chongzhen emperor issued a general mobilization order to all military commands on April 5, but the response was too weak to defend the capital city. Beijing fell to Li's forces on April 24. The emperor and his family retreated to the inner recesses of the Forbidden City. Seeing no way out, Chongzhen slew his daughter and retreated to Coal Hill behind the Forbidden City, where he hanged himself from a tree. The news of his death shocked the realm. The lunar date—the nineteenth day of the third month—burned itself into public memory. Chongzhen's suicide could not be safely mourned under the next dynasty. It had to be sublimated into some other commemoration, and was. Within a few years, there sprang up throughout Jiangnan a cult that worshipped the sun as it rose every year on this day.[38]

The news of Li Zicheng's attack on Beijing reached the Gate of the Mountains and Seas, where the commander of the Ming border forces, Wu Sangui (1612–1678), was holding back the Manchus. Wu decided on a desperate course. He approached Dorgon, the Manchu commander on the other side of the gate, with a proposal. The two generals would suspend hostilities, and for great honors and a mammoth reward, Dorgon would join him in a massive counterattack to drive the rebels from the capital. For Wu, this was a provisional arrangement to meet an unexpected crisis; for Dorgon, it was the nail that sealed the Ming coffin. Facing the prospect of fighting a joint force far greater than his own, Li installed himself as emperor on June 3 at the last possible moment, then beat a hasty retreat the following day. The day after that, the Manchus entered the Forbidden City and declared the inauguration of the Qing dynasty. Li Zicheng died a year later on the run.

Meanwhile, Zhang Xianzhong retreated into Sichuan, where he founded the Great Kingdom of the West, a notorious regime that operated a reign of terror for two years in order to support itself. Zhang's sole concession to humanity, as later reports would have it, was to permit the two Jesuit missionaries he found in Sichuan when he arrived to baptize as many people as they liked before he executed them en masse. In November 1646, he was forced by the Manchus to abandon the province and flee north. Manchu soldiers caught up with him and killed him on January 2, 1647.

The fall of the Ming dynasty is many histories: the history of the expansion of the Manchu empire on the northeast border, the history of the most massive rebellions to wash over China since the fourteenth century, the history of the disintegration of the Ming state, and the history of a

major climate episode. Different in the stories they tell, they overlap and together constitute the same history. Could the rebel armies of Li Zicheng have taken control of the Yellow River valley in 1641 had an epidemic not wiped out 70 percent of the population earlier that year, leaving the region undefended, for example?[39] To decide which destroyed the dynasty—fiscal insolvency? rebellions? Manchu military might? the weather?—would exclude more truths than it would illuminate. At this particular conjuncture in China's past, their combination was what brought down the house of the Ming. Perhaps the greater puzzle than deciding which event destroyed the dynasty is asking how the Ming managed to survive as long as it did.

Living through the End

The people of the Ming came out the other side of the Chongzhen Slough to find themselves the subjects of a new dynasty. The routes to the world beyond 1644 were many, some easier than others. The vast majority accepted their fate, submitted to Manchu authority, and, if they were men, displayed their personal submission to the new dynasty by adopting the nomad hairstyle of shaving the front of the head and growing a queue at the back. It was a humiliation, but when Dorgon in 1645 declared it to be the price of keeping one's head, few resisted. Some did, however, keeping alive for several years the hope that the Ming dynasty might be restored.

As the Zhu family had nothing to gain by submitting to the Manchus, except perhaps their lives, some of the princes lent their persons to the resistance. The crown prince fled Beijing late in 1643 but was captured by rebels. When the dynasty tried to find a cousin to succeed Chongzhen and continue the line, only two were deemed suitable and available. In-fighting among court factions determined that the Prince of Fu would become the Hongguang emperor. He lasted on the throne for a year, but his armies could not hold back the Manchus, and they captured him outside Nanjing. The succession was passed up to a great-uncle in a distant collateral line (the Longwu emperor, r. 1645–1646), who also lasted only a year, then slid sideways to his brother (the Shaowu emperor, r. 1646), and then back down to a cousin of the Prince of Fu (the Yongli emperor, r. 1646–1662). These were the emperors of the tail to the Ming dynasty known as the Southern Ming.[40]

The last pretender, Yongli, was forced to flee into Burma in 1659 to escape the armies of none other than Wu Sangui, the general who invited

the Manchus through the Gate of the Mountains and Seas in 1644. Wu was still in their service, though he would rebel in 1673 when the second Qing emperor decided to shut down the large fiefs that had been given to the Chinese military leaders who had put his father on the throne. Even in Burma, Yongli was apprehended. He and his teenage son were taken under armed guard back to Beijing, but on the way, in May 1662, it was decided that they be executed for fear that their presence back in the country would inflame anti-Qing resistance. After that, no other Zhu male dared look for a throne.

During the first year after the fall of Beijing, there was hope that military resistance might turn the tide against the Manchus. There was no effective coordination of these efforts, however, so that one city after another fell to the forces of the new Qing dynasty as they pressed southward to the Yangzi and beyond. The momentum of this invasion, unlike the Mongol invasion four centuries earlier, became unstoppable. The Manchus announced that cities surrendering without a fight would be leniently treated, and those resisting would have their citizens massacred. Many local leaders, seeing no way out, chose to capitulate peacefully. A few did not, and the Manchus were as good as their word. The first spectacular slaughter took place in the city of Yangzhou at the south end of the Grand Canal just above its junction with the Yangzi River. The second was across the river in the city of Jiading. Nanjing submitted without a fight, which allowed Qing forces to continue up the Yangzi River and then south through Jiangxi province. The last major resistance the Qing met in this region was at the provincial capital of Nanchang, which came under siege in the summer of 1645. Food supplies dwindled, and so soldiers inside the city were sent out on charges against the Manchus, but every time they were ineffective in breaking the siege. The men organizing the defense then turned to an itinerant monk calling himself Mahaprajna, who claimed he could defeat the Manchus by sending a dozen boys out onto the battlefield carrying long sticks of incense and reciting the *Prajnaparamita Sutra*. As the Manchus were devils rather than humans, the force of the boys' purity would dispel them, he claimed. The tactic was tried, alas, and the boys were slain below the city walls. When the provincial capital finally fell in February 1646, hundreds of thousands were butchered in reprisal for resisting the Great Qing.[41]

As the invasion advanced, the resistance had to withdraw further south and then southwest to evade annihilation by the Manchus. Their struggles have left a wealth of stories of heroic bravery and tragic defeat, all of

them ending invariably in execution or suicide.[42] The crisis point in many of these stories comes when the demand is made to cut one's hair in the Qing fashion. A resistance fighter who retreated to the coastal islands of the Zhoushan Archipelago south of Shanghai wrote this poem before committing suicide in October 1644:

> Keeping one's hair divides Huns from Chinese;
> Supporting the Ming makes death and life one.
> Being the last loyal subject is my only achievement;
> Righteousness is all, this body nothing.[43]

Seven years later, Zhoushan served as the base of a second wave of resistance, but that attempt also went down in defeat. One of the men involved in this resistance drew the same ethnic line in the sand over the issue of hair. The Qing commander who captured him offered to spare him if he would cut his hair and submit to the Qing. "If I could have cut my hair earlier," he retorted, "why would I have waited until today?" For offending the ruling dynasty, the commander ordered his soldiers to cut off the man's arms and legs and leave him to die.[44]

A quieter mode of resistance against the order to adopt the Manchu hair style was to shave all one's hair off, effectively taking the tonsure of a Buddhist monk. This act was accepted as a sign of undertaking a religious life, and many chose this course of passive resistance. Most were what we might call political monks and did not take religious vows. The new regime could not begin to round up every monk and determine whether he was a man of faith or a man of resistance. Extracting the political monks from the real monks would have caused enormous trouble and further unrest, so the Manchus wisely decided to let them be and leave this one option for refusal open. Some men followed this course well after the Ming was gone. Shitao Daoji (1642–1708) was a member of the imperial Zhu family. He was barely two years old when the dynasty fell, but spent his formative years fleeing the Manchus in southwest China. He ended up becoming a political monk, but also a painter, arguably the most creative artist of the early Qing.[45]

Most people did nothing of this sort, of course. They had lives to get on with and obligations to meet. By 1646, after the collapse of two legitimate Southern Ming courts and many other illegitimate bids, most regarded the continuing defense of the Ming as a futile cause. Madam Huang Yuanjie, who is counted among the great poets of the mid-

seventeenth century, composed a poem on Qingming Festival, a festival in the lunar calendar that fell that year on April 4. Qingming was the day when families gathered at their ancestors' graves to tidy them and to eat a meal of cold food to remember the hardships the dead had suffered. By 1646, everyone on the Yangzi delta, and in many other places in the country, had relatives and friends to recall who had died in the fall of the Ming. Huang had lost contact with her impoverished husband in the turmoil of the Manchu occupation of the delta the year before, never to find him again. Remembering him that Qingming day, she also chastised those too eager to forget:

> Leaning against a pillar, I am besieged with worries about the nation;
> Others, as always, go to the pleasure houses.
> My thoughts persist like unending drizzle;
> Tears fall like fluttering petals without end.
> Since we parted, a new year has already arrived;
> We still observe the custom of not lighting the fire.
> Thinking of my family I stare off into the white clouds,
> My small heart overwhelmed by grief.[46]

The same turmoil in 1645 claimed the husband of her bosom friend and sometime patron Shang Jinglan (1604–ca. 1680), an eminent poet in her own right. Shang's husband, Qi Biaojia (1602–1647), is the better known of the couple. Qi had been a prominent statecraft activist and local philanthropist dedicated to improving the age in which he found himself, and had died when the armies of the Qing overran his home county. Shang's poem of remembrance for her husband casts the two of them as loyalists in different modes, the one giving his life to honor his dynasty, the other preserving hers to raise their children.

> Your name will be known forever:
> I have chosen to cling to life.
> Officials who maintain their loyalty are called great,
> Parents who cherish their children, merely human.
> You were a righteous official in life;
> Your epitaph carries your name beyond death.
> Though the living and the dead walk on different roads,
> With my chastity and your integrity, we walk hand in hand.[47]

Such acts of sacrifice were remembered against a background of foreign conquest that could not really be resisted by anything but remorse. China had been through this before. Like the people of the Song, the people of the Ming saw themselves caught in an unbridgeable ethnic gap with their conquerors. The Manchus too were invaders from the steppe, yet they did not choose to rule Mongol-style. The Yuan had accentuated ethnic distinctions to impose order; the Qing preferred the fiction of multinational unity. The reality was a foreign aristocracy whose qualification for rule was brute conquest. The Ming idea of a Chinese China thus remained an ideal that excluded steppe customs. It was too firmly settled in Ming minds for them to regard the Manchus as anything other than interlopers from beyond the pale of civilization.

That too would change. Once it was clear that the Manchus were not about to reorganize the realm in any significant way, the social order that had prevailed under the Ming simply resumed. The people of the Ming became, almost seamlessly once the fire of resistance burned out, the people of the Qing. When a republic emerged from the ruins of the empire in 1912, the Ming was fondly recalled as the last "Chinese" dynasty, but what "China" had become no longer fit within the borders that the Qing empire had created. The revolutionaries who founded the Republic were uninterested in going back to Ming borders. They claimed sovereignty over all the territory that the Manchus had unified, from Taiwan to Tibet. But then they were only doing what Khubilai Khan and Zhu Yuanzhang had claimed in their turn to have done: unifying the realm. The Yuan and the Ming were not forgotten after all.