Ming-Qing Transition

In the mid-17th century, the Manchus, originating from today’s northeastern China, crossed the Great Wall and defeated the Ming and other competing forces. While resistance to the invaders lasted for decades, the Manchu-founded Qing dynasty eventually consolidated its rule over the entirety of China.

Kangxi was the second emperor of the Qing dynasty after the Manchus moved their capital to Beijing. He was born in 1654 and enthroned at age of seven. He ruled China for 61 years, making him the longest-reigning emperor in Chinese history.
Early Career

Before Kangxi was enthroned, the court was administered by four courtiers, Sonin, Suksaha, Ebilun, and Oboi. Kangxi ruled only in name. As a teenager, Kangxi eliminated these powerful courtiers and centralized power in his own hands. The arrest of Oboi took place in the audience chamber, where young wrestlers jumped upon the minister from their hiding place behind the throne, subduing him.

Political and Military Achievements

Kangxi was soon confronted by the challenge posed by three vassal kings in Southern China. The three kings, Wu Sangui of Yunnan, Shang Kexi of Guangdong, and Geng Jimao of Fujian, had previously assisted the Manchu army in their conquest of China. Since 1673, however, Kangxi had taken measures to deprive the three kings of their military capabilities, prompting Wu Sangui to rebel. This started the civil war known as the “Revolt of the Three Feudatories”. Kangxi’s military genius and political skills helped him to triumph over Wu. In 1681, the Qing army entered the capital city of Yunnan, ending the war against the rebels.
Thereafter Kangxi turned his attention to Taiwan. Taiwan was then ruled by the
Zheng family, loyalists of the fallen Ming dynasty who had taken Taiwan during
the Ming-Qing transition through their superior sea power. General Zheng
Chenggong refused to submit to the Manchus and monopolized the trade routes
over the China seas. In 1683, Kangxi took advantage of internal strife in the Zheng
family and sent troops across the Taiwan Straits, bringing the island under Qing
rule.

Throughout the seventeenth century, the Russians expanded through Siberia,
eventually reaching the Amur River valley, where they built the fortresses of
Albazin and Nerchinsk. In 1685, Kangxi sent an army to attack these fortresses,
leading to a protracted siege of Albazin. Eventually, in 1689, an agreement was
reached between Kangxi and Tsar Peter I “the Great” of Russia, known as the Treaty
of Nerchinsk. The treaty drew the Sino-Russian borderline along the Gorbitsu River
and the Stanovoy Range.
Soon the Khan of the Dzungar Oyrats, a Mongolian-speaking nomadic people that lived in western Outer Mongolia, launched a rebellion and conquered east Turkistan and attacked other Mongolian tribes, who fled to Inner Mongolia, seeking protection by the Qing court. Kangxi himself led an expedition into the Mongolian Gobi Desert, defeating the Dzungars and turning Outer Mongolia into an integral part of his empire.

**Sponsorship of Scholarship**

Kangxi was famous for his passion for learning. He actively engaged in discussions with leading scholars of his time on the topics of history, philosophy, and literature. He was a sponsor of Neo-Confucian learning, especially the philosophy of Zhu Xi. Under Kangxi’s reign, the traditional civil service examinations flourished as a means of recruiting talented Chinese into the administration. With his endorsement of the Hanlin Academy, the official history of the Ming dynasty was compiled, and many books and encyclopedias
were commissioned, including the Kangxi Zidian, a dictionary of Chinese characters listing over 42,000 characters. He also employed many Jesuit missionaries from Europe and maintained a strong interest in Western science and technologies.

Kangxi’s reign was marked by social stability, economic recovery, and cultural prosperity after the devastating warfare of the Ming-Qing transition. He initiated a period known to many Chinese as the “Prosperous Era of Kangxi and Qianlong” (the latter being Kangxi’s grandson) or the “High Qing”.