

would prove unequal to the task of sustaining a great imperial state and the Islamic culture that it represented.

THE LONG SIXTEENTH CENTURY IN EAST ASIA

The long sixteenth century was also a period of exceptional dynamism in East Asia – the vast region occupied by China, Japan, Korea and the Inner Asian steppe. The early phase of Ming rule in China between 1368 (when the dynasty began) and the 1430s had seen the forceful reassertion of a distinctively Chinese political and cultural tradition after the long interlude of alien rule under the Mongol Yuan. The early Ming emperors reinvigorated the bureaucratic state and the examination system on which it rested. They swept away the chief ministers of the previous regime and created a personal absolutism. They proclaimed devotion to Confucian orthodoxy, and fostered the collection and publication of Confucian texts. In 1420 Peking was re-established as the imperial capital, once the completion of the Grand Canal assured regular supplies from the great grain-basket of the Yangtze valley.⁹⁶ In all these ways the Ming were the real founders of the system of government that lasted in China until the revolution of 1911. Their reaffirmation of Confucian cultural supremacy lasted almost as long.

Ming rule represented a vehement reaction against what was seen by its original supporters as the corruption, oppression and over-taxation of the Mongol Yuan.⁹⁷ In deference to Confucian beliefs, the Ming emperors embraced an agrarian ideology in which land was true wealth, and wealth was anchored in social obligations both upward and downward. Social order and cultural cohesion, the vital conditions of imperial stability, were locked into the system of agrarian production on whose food payments and land taxes dynastic authority depended. Fear of the disorders that had helped pull down the Yuan, and a watchful concern for agrarian calm, made the Ming reluctant to tax heavily, despite the huge burden of frontier defence. By the sixteenth century they had come to preside over an understaffed, underpaid and inadequate bureaucracy.⁹⁸ An

over-narrow tax base, and the refusal to allow government agencies to engage in trade, produced a fiscal crisis. By the late sixteenth century the attempt to provide for defence by an army that paid for itself from its own agrarian estates had also broken down completely.⁹⁹ By that time, too, the level of rural disorder – relatively low during much of the Ming era – had begun rising sharply.

Ming diplomacy was intended to secure the external conditions for internal stability. From that point of view, the famous voyages dispatched by the emperor Yung-lo around the Indian Ocean under the admiral Cheng-ho were an aberration, prompted perhaps by fear of attack by Tamerlane and his successors. Yung-lo, the ‘second founder’, who reigned from 1403 to 1424, was an exceptionally determined and aggressive monarch. His naval imperialism, the protracted effort to incorporate Vietnam into his empire, and his military drive against the Inner Asian nomads may all have been part of an abortive strategy to assert China’s primacy throughout East Asia.¹⁰⁰ But the strain was too great. His successors adopted a drastic alternative. The adventure in sea power was quickly abandoned. Private overseas travel and trade were forbidden. And to secure North China against invasion from the steppe, or unwelcome contact with its nomads, they preferred to rely not on military expeditions but on the Great Wall. Built to extend and reinforce earlier frontier defences, the Great Wall was largely constructed after 1470 and brought to completion in the following centuries. It was still being built when the Ming dynasty fell in 1644.¹⁰¹

Later Ming rulers thus chose to uphold China’s place in East Asia by stressing its cultural unity and rejecting foreign commercial relations. That meant a deliberate withdrawal from Inner Asian politics, in which the Yuan had exerted a definite influence. It required a determined attempt to force both maritime and Inner Asian trade into the rigid framework of official tribute. By the early sixteenth century this had become unsustainable. Steppe-nomad

demand for China's cloth and grain outstripped the supply through official channels of trade. Frontier warfare intensified.¹⁰² For China's nomad neighbours, raiding and freebooting yielded the goods that the Chinese refused, or were forbidden, to trade. Along the sea coasts, the same restrictive policy bred a huge upsurge in smuggling and piracy, as China felt the early effects of Europe's commercial intrusion and, much more important, of the political and economic transformation of Japan.

Since the late twelfth century, Japan had been ruled through a compromise by which legitimate authority was vested in the emperor but actual power was in the hands of the shogun, formally acknowledged as viceroy or regent by the imperial court. The shogun or 'generalissimo' was – or tried to be – a hereditary military dictator, and usually rose from the ranks of the emperor's generals. However, the real basis of a shogun's strength was his coalition of allies among the feudal lords and their *bushi* or samurai, the warrior class. But under the Ashikaga shoguns this 'system' broke down in a 'feudal anarchy' of warring fiefdoms that lasted from the 1460s until the mid sixteenth century. At about the same time, fifteenth-century Japan experienced a phase of marked commercial expansion. New crops were grown and new commodities exported, including copper, sulphur and swords. Ming controls over trade meant that Japan's principal market was mainly accessible through a network of smugglers and pirates. But the collapse of the shoguns, who had also frowned on unofficial trade, and the rise of the *daimyo*, the local 'domain' lords, many of them with a direct interest in trade, encouraged an explosion of Japanese maritime enterprise. By the 1550s, Japanese traders, freebooters and *wako* pirates were ranging as far afield as Thailand, Burma and India. Japan's silver production made it an 'Asian Mexico', and a key trading partner for the Portuguese and Spanish who had entered the Pacific.¹⁰³ In 1567 the Ming emperor abandoned the struggle against illegal trade and threw open China's ports – although not to Japan.¹⁰⁴ Canton was opened to foreign merchants in 1578. Japan allowed in the Portuguese merchants, who settled at Nagasaki in 1571.

These moves in East Asia coincided with a remarkable phase of Christian missionary enterprise. Its headquarters was at Goa, the seat of Portugal's Estado da India. Portugal's claim to a European monopoly in the exploration and trade of Asia had been sanctioned by the Pope as part of the task of taking the faith to the heathen. Goa was the gateway through which dozens of missionaries made their way into Asia. St Francis Xavier, co-founder of the Jesuits, made his way ashore in 1542, barefoot and in rags. He died ten years later on the coast of South China. His body was brought back for burial in Goa, to be displayed once a year, miraculously preserved from physical decay. Its religious prestige was so great that the Pope insisted that at least one arm should be sent back to Rome. Other Jesuits went to the Mughal court and one, Roberto di Nobili, spent years in South India in the vain attempt to reconcile Hinduism and Catholicism to the satisfaction of the Brahmins. But perhaps the most remarkable of the Jesuit priests was Matteo Ricci. He went to China in the 1580s and, after years of patient diplomacy, was granted permission to go to Peking in 1601. Once there, his learning, shrewdly adapted to the style and bearing of a Confucian scholar, gave him an entrée to court. Ricci was able to draw the first map in China to depict the Americas. His skill in cartography, medicine and astronomy became the hallmark of the Jesuit mission, and its main source of prestige. Ricci's real objective – to persuade the Confucian intellectuals that their concept of heaven was really the same as his idea of God – proved much more elusive. But long after his death the mission remained the most reliable source of European knowledge about Chinese affairs, until European merchants arrived in numbers in South China after c.1750.

For the Ming, however, neither commercial concessions nor their attempt to appease frontier nomad hostility brought more than temporary respite. In Japan, the years after 1570 saw a dramatic struggle for reunification as first Nobunaga and then Hideyoshi imposed a ruthless personal supremacy over the warring *daimyo* – helped by the new gunpowder technology of muskets and guns. Hideyoshi was determined to win control over Japan's trade route

with China, along the Korean coast. Frustrated by Ming delays, he formulated an astonishing plan to conquer first Korea and then China itself. In 1592 he invaded Korea with an enormous army of 200,000 men. When the Chinese intervened, he bartered for a measure of power in Korea and for freedom to trade with China. When China refused, he staged a second invasion in 1597, but it was quickly aborted when he died unexpectedly. Hideyoshi's ambition outran his military power. The Ming could not just be shouldered aside. But the real casualty of the Korean wars was Ming finance – and the Ming system.

The Ming had seen off the Japanese threat, but they still faced continuous pressure from the Mongol nomads along the Great Wall. Their most dangerous enemy was building up the frontier empire that overwhelmed them completely after 1620. During the 1590s, Nurhaci, a nomad generalissimo in the mould of Genghis Khan, had assembled a Manchurian polity that combined tribal elements from the forest and steppe with settled agrarian communities in the frontier district north-east of Peking. As Ming power dwindled amid fiscal crisis and growing internal disorder, Nurhaci strengthened his grip over frontier Mongols and Chinese, for whom his control was more real than that of their nominal suzerain. In 1601 he acquired a standing army using the 'banner' system, in which stress on Manchu ethnic identity was combined with division into military 'companies' as the key social and administrative units. In 1615 he sent his last tribute mission to Peking. Three years later he issued a manifesto denouncing the Ming and declaring his intention to overthrow the dynasty. By 1636, as much by winning over powerful Chinese as by military conquest, Nurhaci's successors realized this ambition – although their dynastic accession as the Manchu or Ch'ing (the Pinyin version is 'Qing') was delayed until the fall of Peking and is conventionally dated to 1644.

What was the significance of this change in the 'mandate of heaven', and of Japan's reunification after 1590? Together they cut short the experiment in 'openness' that was tried out in East Asia after 1550. In the later sixteenth century, the combination of

Japanese commercial and maritime expansion, the opening of China and the trickle of European trade had stimulated the movement of people, goods and ideas.¹⁰⁵ Chinese and Japanese moved into South East Asia; Europeans arrived in Japan and China. In China, new overseas markets for porcelain and silk encouraged urban growth. The inflow of Japanese and American silver in payment monetized the economy and its revenue system – an important gain in a country without precious metals.¹⁰⁶ Japan, with its large population of maybe 12 million (three times that of contemporary Britain), its maritime sector and its reserve of bullion, may have been the vital agent in this opening-up. It was in the trading ports of south-western Japan that Christianity established a foothold when the Jesuits arrived after 1580. They skilfully exploited Christianity's appeal as a social adhesive in the age of disorder.¹⁰⁷ But Hideyoshi's supremacy, followed by the systematic repression of *daimyo* autonomy by Ieyasu (1524 – 1616), the first Tokugawa shogun, spelled the gradual end of Japan's 'Christian century' and the brief era of openness in overseas trade. Christianity was blamed for *daimyo* resistance, in Kyushu especially (where there was a major rebellion in 1638 – 9). Many Christians were killed, and Christianity was banned altogether in 1640. Ieyasu had tried to control foreign trade. His successors preferred to exclude Europeans completely. The Spanish were expelled in 1624. The English traders had already left. The Portuguese were confined to the island of Deshima in Nagasaki harbour, and then forced to leave in 1639. Japanese were forbidden to travel abroad after 1635. Chinese merchants and artisans continued to come: Nagasaki had its 'Chinatown'. China's cultural influence remained extremely strong. But against the rest of the world the seclusion policy (*sakoku*) was all but complete.

It ran in parallel with the systematic reassertion of Confucian ideology by the new Tokugawa regime, now based in Edo (modern Tokyo). Tokugawa rule maintained the outward forms of feudalism in the *daimyo* domains, but modified the substance. Feudal lordship was weakened by the grant of village autonomy and by transforming the samurai from a local warrior class into something

more like a salaried service gentry paid (in rice) to administer the domains. To help legitimize this new dispensation, the early Tokugawa sponsored Confucian ideologues and educators. They preached the Confucian message of a four-class hierarchy (officials, peasants, artisans and merchants), and the need to pursue social and natural harmony in a well-ordered society.¹⁰⁸ In Ch'ing China it was a similar story. Dynastic change meant not the end of Confucianism, but its deliberate entrenchment as the official ideology of the new Manchu regime. Manchu rulers were less instinctively hostile than their Ming predecessors to foreign commercial contact. But they were deeply mistrustful of its political meaning in the coastal region south of the Yangtze, which was geographically remote, hard to control, and the refuge of Ming loyalists who were only slowly defeated.¹⁰⁹ But the most significant achievement of the Manchu dynasty was to reverse the ultimately disastrous introversion of Ming frontier policy. Manchu adeptness in steppe diplomacy helped to turn Inner Mongolia into a buffer zone, and to drive China's imperial power deep into Inner Asia. The northern inland threat to China's stability was efficiently neutralized. With a once-disruptive Japan now safely withdrawn into neo-Confucian seclusion, and Confucianism firmly in command in Korea and Vietnam, the Manchu accession heralded a remarkable restoration of the East Asian world order. European influence, based in faraway Java, was confined to its keyholes. Early Dutch interest in direct trade and diplomacy succumbed to the mood of mutual indifference: by 1690 the Dutch East India Company had stopped sending ships to China.¹¹⁰ Meanwhile, imperial China reached the apogee of its power.

COMPARING EUROPE

Comparing Europe with other parts of Eurasia in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries requires (for European readers) a certain mental adjustment. Our knowledge of Europe is so much more detailed that it is easy to see it as a cultural and political anthill that contrasts