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Recentering the Ming–Qing Transition: beyond the “Seventeenth Century Crisis,” “The Great Divergence,” and “New Qing History”

Zhao Yifeng 趙軼峰

Professor, Institute for the Study of Asian Civilizations, Northeast Normal University, Changchun, Jilin, China
yazhouwmyjy2005@nenu.edu.cn

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Abstract

The Ming–Qing transition – the final dynastic change in Imperial China – followed the cyclical patterns of rise and fall that had characterized previous dynastic shifts throughout Chinese history. However, its occurrence in the mid-seventeenth century positions it within a broader context of significant transformations in Europe and the Americas. This transition’s most profound impact lay in the culmination of the long-term centralizing processes within Chinese civilization. In its aftermath, the imperial system continued, for a time, to grow stronger, while the economy experienced sustained prosperity driven by both agriculture and commerce. When viewed holistically, this period in Chinese history, while interconnected with European developments, followed a distinct trajectory. Recent scholarship, influenced by the framework of world history, has deepened our understanding of the Ming–Qing transition’s role in broader global changes. However, this approach has sometimes led to an overemphasis on international factors, potentially diminishing the transition’s significance as a particular phase in China’s long-term historical progression. Analyses that predominantly focus on ethnic Manchu–Han dynamics often fail to capture the full historical context. A more nuanced understanding emerges when we examine this period through the lens of the long-term centering process within Chinese civilization. Differences between Chinese and European civilizations extend far beyond comparisons of productive forces. Therefore, discourse around concepts like “convergence” or “divergence” can be misleading without clearly defined comparative frameworks and metrics.

Keywords

Ming–Qing transition – dynastic change – seventeenth-century crisis – “the great divergence” – “New Qing History”

In its most literal sense, the Ming–Qing transition describes the change from one dynasty to another. Discussions of the transition at this level have typically centered on questions around the underlying causes of this transition – Why did the Ming (1368–1644) collapse? How did the northern Manchus succeed in seizing control of central China? What were the consequences of this seismic shift in power? For those living in the direct aftermath of dynastic change, these questions were firmly situated within the confines of a China-centric worldview that, while occasionally touching on ethnic relations and cultural clashes, primarily viewed the transition through the lens of state politics and as a domestic issue. This changed with the advent of new approaches to historiography in early twentieth-century China, which expanded the scope of historical analysis by incorporating universal historical patterns and principles, engaging in comparative studies of other nations, and integrating cross-disciplinary insights. These methodological innovations allowed for a broadened perspective of the Ming–Qing transition that transcends the traditional political focus. From the 1980s onwards, academic study on these questions has increasingly gravitated towards themes of modernization and modernity, enriching the study of Ming–Qing history with methodologies derived from economics, sociology, and anthropology. This has led to a deeper integration of Chinese scholarship and international research, establishing the Ming–Qing transition as a significant topic in global historical discourse. Yet, despite the recent emergence of new methodologies, the academic community has yet to reach a consensus on the core issues of the Ming–Qing transition. Longstanding debates remain unsettled while differences among competing innovative interpretations have continued to grow. The concept of a Ming–Qing imperial agrarian-commercial society – a concept that I have proposed as an alternative to the traditional concept of a Ming–Qing feudal society – offers a crucial framework for interpreting the fundamental trends in social structure and historical progress during the Ming and Qing (1616–1911) dynasties. The Ming–Qing transition, as a key juncture in this period, is an unavoidable theme when examining the imperial agrarian-commercial society of the Ming and Qing dynasties.

1 Dynastic Change and Its Underlying Causes

The Ming–Qing transition represents, at its most superficial level, the replacement of one dynasty by another. Dynastic succession has been a recurring, albeit irregular, phenomenon throughout Chinese history, with no dynasty from the Qin (221–207 BCE) through to the Qing maintaining uninterrupted rule for more than 300 years. Viewing dynastic succession as a cyclical historical pattern, the Ming dynasty, which lasted from 1368 to 1644, had approached the typical upper limit of dynastic longevity, making its eventual end a foreseeable outcome. This is not to say there were no factors that could have prolonged the Ming dynasty's reign, but rather that many causes of its downfall were similar to those that caused the fall of previous dynasties.

To understand the factors leading to the fall of a dynasty and their manifestation in the Ming, it is essential to consider the typical causes of dynastic decline. When a dynasty does not collapse quickly, but instead enjoys a prolonged period of prosperity, its ultimate downfall is invariably due to failures in governance. Recurrent causes of such failures include severe corruption and internal conflicts among the ruling class, the intensification of social conflicts leading to civil unrest and rebellion, and invasions by powerful enemies, be they border forces or foreign powers. These circumstances, which have repeatedly led to dynastic change throughout the imperial era, would also play a role in the decline of the Ming. From such a perspective, therefore, the Ming–Qing transition represents a typical example of dynastic change within the broader historical trajectory of Chinese civilization, rather than a unique occurrence in its own right.

Yet beyond these traditional structural factors, the Ming–Qing transition was also significantly shaped by the unique socio-economic context of the seventeenth century. This period was marked by the opening of new maritime routes and the rapid expansion of European trade and colonization, leading to the creation of an unprecedented global trade network linking Asia, Europe, and the Americas. Such global integration led to a substantial influx of foreign silver into China, accelerating the transition to a silver-based monetary system and the monetization of government finances and tax revenues. As a result, China moved from a primarily agrarian economic structure towards one in which agriculture and commerce played equal roles. However, the state's administrative systems struggled to keep pace with the burgeoning commodity economy, resulting in severe fiscal challenges, border defense crises, and social instability during the Wanli 萬曆 period (1573–1620).¹ By the Tianqi

1 For a more detailed analysis of the causes and conditions of the late-Ming financial crisis, see Zhao Yifeng 趙軼峰, "Shilun Mingmo caizheng weiji de lishi genyuan ji qi shidai tezheng"

天啟 period (1621–1628), widespread rebellion among the broader populace had rendered the Ming dynasty's collapse only a matter of time.

In analyzing the dynamics of dynastic succession, the fall of the Ming is inherently linked to the rise of the Qing. The emergence of a powerful northern regime, as exemplified by the Manchu-led Qing, is a recurrent phenomenon in Chinese history. Precedents can be found in the Liao (907–1125), Jin (1115–1234), and Yuan (1206–1368) dynasties, which all capitalized on the internal disarray and decline of imperial dynasties occupying central China to seize power through expansive military campaigns. While the Qing ascension was facilitated by the employment of more refined strategies, they were effectively taking advantage of the chaos that marked the final years of the Ming – chaos at a similar level to the turmoil that had marked the collapse previous dynasties. The success of the Qing was therefore grounded in a combination of both strategic opportunism and historical precedent. Importantly, the rise of the Qing was not predicated on the Manchus representing a newer or more modern societal model than the Ming, nor did they possess broader international connections at the time of their conquest.

2 The Socio-economic Implications of the Ming–Qing Transition

The transition of power between dynasties inevitably brings about significant institutional and policy changes that deeply impact social conditions. As China's final imperial transition, the passage from Ming to Qing brought about monumental shifts that profoundly influenced the course of Chinese history far beyond ordinary policy and institutional changes.

After the fall of the Ming, the philosopher Gu Yanwu 顧炎武 (1613–1682) differentiated between the fall of a kingdom and the fall of *tianxia* 天下 (the world). He observed:

There is loss of the kingdom and there is loss of [the moral basis] of the world. How may these two things be distinguished? It is said that a change in the family name of the emperor and in the period of reign constitutes loss of the kingdom. But when *ren* 仁 (loving-kindness, benevolence, humanity) and *yi* 義 (right action, righteousness, duty) are entirely obstructed, it comes to a point where beasts are led to devour

試論明末財政危機的歷史根源及其時代特徵, *Zhongguoshi yanjiu* 中國史研究, no. 4 (1986): 55–68; Zhao Yifeng 趙軼峰, *Mingdai de bianqian* 明代的變遷 (Shanghai: Shanghai sanlian shudian, 2008), 232–77.

men and men to devour one another. It is this that is referred to as the loss of the moral basis of the world.²

Similar sentiments were also expressed by many of Gu Yanwu's intellectual contemporaries, such as Wang Fuzhi 王夫之 (1619–1692) and Huang Zongxi 黄宗羲 (1610–1695), who viewed the transition to a Manchu-led Qing dynasty as a regression from civilization to barbarism. For the general populace living through this period, the Ming–Qing transition represented a prolonged catastrophe. However, while the academic community is well-versed in the political upheavals of this era, there remains a significant gap in the scholarly exploration of the impact that this transition had on the livelihoods of the populace at large.

From a longitudinal perspective on Chinese history, this tumultuous period can be seen as advancing the centering process of civilization in a Chinese context, facilitating a convergence of diverse regional identities within the broader framework of what is today understood as Chinese civilization. This civilization originated in the inland regions of Asia, with its early formation and development centered in the fertile Central Plains – the area surrounding the lower and middle reaches of the Yellow River. Over time, the development of this civilization led to increased interactions between this core region and the peoples and cultures occupying its surrounding peripheries. These evolving relationships, between an expanding Central Plains and various neighboring regions, have played a pivotal role in shaping the broader narrative of Chinese history. Of particular significance were the interactions between the agricultural societies of the Central Plains and the nomadic or semi-nomadic cultures to its north. These interactions, which began in the pre-Qin era, intensified with political unification under the Qin and Han (206 BCE–220 CE) dynasties, manifesting in warfare, marital alliances, annexation, and migration. From this perspective, the rise of the Qing in the northeastern regions represented the final phase of the centering process of Chinese civilization. For the Manchus, descendants of the northeastern Jurchen people, who had always maintained significant economic and cultural connections with the Central Plains, the rise to power and subsequent expansion of the Qing dynasty inevitably led them into greater integration with the core regions of Chinese civilization.

The unification of China under the Qing dynasty therefore marked a significant historical turning point – the dissolution of the longstanding political

2 Gu Yanwu, *Record of Daily Knowledge and Collected Poems and Essays*, trans. and ed. Ian Johnston (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017), 103.

divisions between the Central Plains and the northeastern territories. The era also witnessed the Qing dynasty's strategic efforts to forge alliances with various Mongolian tribes, effectively bridging the political divide between the agrarian Central Plains and the nomadic cultures of the northwestern grasslands. As a consequence, during an age characterized by burgeoning global interaction and accelerating modernity, Chinese civilization achieved a new level of integration. For the first time, groups of peoples from vastly distinct cultures and socio-economic structures – agrarian, nomadic and semi-nomadic – were unified under a single political framework. This integration contrasted sharply with historical developments in Europe between the fifteenth and eighteenth centuries, where such comprehensive political and cultural integration did not occur.

For the Qing government, the demands of governing such a vast and ethnically diverse area within the confines of a unified state required the consolidation of centralized state power. To manage the potential for social disorder inherent in diverse multiethnic polities, the Qing adopted conservative policies aimed at maintaining order and continuity across social, cultural, and political arenas, with only rare and cautious engagement in political measures aimed at modernization in these spheres. And yet when it came to economic management, the Qing were much less conservative. Emerging from the social disorder that marked the Ming–Qing transition, the Qing administration not only continued but accelerated the market-oriented trends initiated in the late Ming period. They championed urban growth and trade expansion, actively regulated the monetary system, and energized commodity markets to an unprecedented level in Chinese history. Thus, throughout the two centuries following the fall of the Ming, China presented a unique historical tableau – a traditional imperial governance system intricately intertwined with burgeoning commodity markets in which both the state and the economy mutually reinforced and extended each other's reach.

By the eighteenth century, the political consolidation resulting from the Ming–Qing transition had led to the flourishing of an imperial agrarian-commercial society. This was driven by a thorough restructuring of governance frameworks, with the Qing effectively merging Manchu political and social institutions with the imperial system traditionally adopted in central China, thereby expanding the administrative reach of the central government. At the same time, it also involved absorbing lessons from Ming dynasty policy challenges, particularly in mitigating the financial and social instability exacerbated by ongoing military standoffs and costly operations along the Great Wall. On the socio-economic front, the Qing revised taxation and monetary

policies and initiated significant cultural projects under the auspices of the imperial court. These measures paved the way for a period of substantial prosperity and societal stability that extended from the mid-reign of the Kangxi 康熙 Emperor (r. 1661–1722), to the latter years of Qianlong 乾隆 Emperor (r. 1735–1796), an age often referred to as the High Qing Era.

The Ming–Qing transition, marked by a change in the ruling classes, brought about a series of institutional, policy, and cultural changes. At an institutional level, one of the most significant changes was the emergence of a ruling structure which, while dominated by Manchu nobility, formed a coalition with Mongol nobles and Han Chinese scholars. This shift was accompanied by a transition from a governance structure primarily influenced by Confucian ideology to one founded on more hybrid and pluralistic principles.

At an international level, while the Qing presided over a time of rapid global change and increased engagement between Europe and China, its relationship with these global shifts was multifaceted and complex. Traditional academic narratives have often described the Qing's isolationist policies as a "closed-door" approach, which is somewhat of an exaggeration. In reality, Qing rulers, at quite an early stage, allowed European missionaries to take up court positions. Furthermore, the Qing administration had far more experience managing territorial sovereignty issues and a clearer awareness of the threat the Europeans presented than its Ming predecessors. What it lacked, however, was a comprehensive understanding of the global changes underfoot at the time. Nor was it able to effectively develop a direct strategic response to increasing European growth and influence within China. When considering the Ming–Qing transition within the broader context of the centering process of Chinese civilization, it becomes apparent that the transformation in China was related to but not entirely synchronized with global historical movements dominated by Western Europe at the time. Furthermore, the vast expanse of China exhibited significant regional variations, underscoring that the dynamics within the empire were not uniform but diverse and multifaceted.

3 The Ming–Qing Transition and the "General Crisis of the Seventeenth Century"

One of the major trends in historical research to gain traction since the mid-twentieth century has been the tendency to examine historical change through the lens of global interactions and world history. This trend saw the rise of discourse surrounding a "general crisis of the seventeenth century" emerge as a serious topic of contention within European history studies in the

1960s.³ Initially focused on social and economic crises in the mid-seventeenth century Europe, the conceptualization of the “crisis” expanded in the 1970s to encompass not only Europe but also the broader Eurasian continent, extending its temporal focus to cover the entire seventeenth century. By the early twenty-first century, Chinese academics incorporating this framework into their own analyses, making the theory of a “general crisis” a crucial element in understanding the Ming–Qing transition. Despite its prominence, substantial debate persists within the academic community regarding the extent of global interconnectedness during this period and the specific impact these global dynamics had on the events of the Ming–Qing transition.

One of the earliest discussions linking the “general crisis of the seventeenth century” with the Chinese historical context was Samuel Adshead’s 1973 article, “The Seventeenth-Century General Crisis in China.” In this article, Adshead connected the turmoil in seventeenth-century China with events in Europe, suggesting that the collapse of Seville as the center of a worldwide monetary system precipitated revolutions in distant Asia, leading to seemingly unrelated events such as the fall of the Ming dynasty in China, civil war in Vietnam, the rise of the Oirat Mongols in Inner Asia, and turmoil within the Ottoman Empire.⁴ Adshead’s analysis of the economic decline and political turbulence of the late Ming period was grounded in the research of other contemporary scholars rather than his own direct examination of primary sources. Without clear data and timelines to demonstrate how monetary contraction in Seville directly impacted China, any association drawn between these global economic shifts and internal political struggles in China or the downfall of the Ming dynasty risks significant misinterpretation.

A position similar to Adshead’s was also presented by William Atwell in his 1982 article “International Bullion Flows and the Chinese Economy *Circa* 1530–1650.” This study argued that variations in the inflow of international silver into China significantly undermined the economic and political

3 This movement is generally seen to have started with Eric Hobsbawm’s 1954 publication of “The General Crisis of the European Economy in the 17th Century” in the journal *Past and Present*. By the early 1960s, it was already common practice within European academia to refer to the social disorder in Europe during the 1640s to 1650s as the “general crisis of the seventeenth century.” See Eric Hobsbawm, “The General Crisis of the European Economy in the 17th Century,” *Past and Present* 5 (1954): 33–53; and Michael Roberts, “Queen Christina and the General Crisis of the Seventeenth Century,” *Past and Present* 22 (1962): 36.

4 Samuel Adshead, “The Seventeenth Century General Crisis in China,” *Asian Profile* 1, no. 2 (1973): 271–80.

stability of the Ming dynasty in its final decades.⁵ Atwell revisited this topic in 2005 with his article “Another Look at Silver Imports into China, ca. 1635–1644” responding to critiques of his earlier thesis regarding the relationship between silver imports and the mid-seventeenth century crisis in China.⁶ In this later piece, Atwell emphasized that there was indeed a marked decrease in silver imports in the years immediately preceding the fall of the Ming dynasty. It is important to note that Atwell’s arguments, while influential, were not grounded in a comprehensive analysis of primary sources from Chinese or other archives. Instead, his methodology involved selectively drawing upon a vast body of modern scholarship to support his claims. As a result, despite the title of his 2005 article suggesting a reevaluation of silver import data for the period in question, Atwell did not actually present new quantitative data regarding the volume of silver inflows into China during this crucial historical juncture.

Interestingly, in his 2005 response, Atwell did not fully address the criticisms levied at him by Richard von Glahn in 1996. Von Glahn’s work, “Myth and Reality of China’s Seventeenth-Century Monetary Crisis,” challenged the prevailing notion that a rapid decline in silver imports had led to the fall of the Ming dynasty. Arguing against the use of Ming government increases in silver revenue as a proxy for domestic demand of silver, von Glahn noted that in reality, “effective demand for silver came from the private economy, not the public fisc.”⁷ Von Glahn’s research led him to estimate that “the volume of silver exported to China in the last century of the Ming can be crudely estimated at around 7,325 tons,” and that data on silver imports into China during the last years of the Ming did not show any significant decline.⁸ He concluded that, “overall, the Chinese economy did not experience any sudden diminution of silver imports during the last years of Ming rule.”⁹ Von Glahn also highlighted a crucial oversight in claims that suggested reduced silver inflows in seventeenth-century China led to crisis. These arguments, he contended, failed to consider the significance of the total money supply, since the impact of new silver inflows would necessarily depend on the existing stock of silver in circulation. Estimations of late Ming silver imports remain a key point of

5 William Atwell, “International Bullion Flows and the Chinese Economy *Circa* 1530–1650,” *Past and Present* 95 (1982): 68–90.

6 William Atwell, “Another Look at Silver Imports into China, ca. 1635–1644,” *Journal of World History* 16, no. 4 (2005): 467–89.

7 Richard von Glahn, “Myth and Reality of China’s Seventeenth-Century Monetary Crisis,” *The Journal of Economic History* 56, no. 2 (1996): 432.

8 *Ibid.*, 439.

9 *Ibid.*, 439–40.

contention in this debate, with a lack of sufficient reliable statistical data continuing to prevent definitive statements on the issue. However, as von Glahn has noted, it is important to consider the total silver stock when assessing silver demand, rather than simply drawing direct causal links from a reduction in silver imports.

Frederic Wakeman Jr. offered a nuanced perspective on the crisis in his 1985 article “China and the Seventeenth-Century Crisis.” As with many of his predecessors, Wakeman acknowledged the role of global factors in the Ming dynasty, noting that “the seventeenth-century crisis in China occurred within an East Asian world-economy affected by general global phenomena related to climate and disease, and furthermore connected by indirect economic conjuncture to the Atlantic *Weltwirtschaft* then emerging.”¹⁰ Yet while Wakeman generally supported the notion that China was indeed part of a global seventeenth-century crisis, he refrained from drawing direct causal links between the Ming–Qing transition in China and specific monetary or economic conditions in Europe.

A more explicit rejection of the European silver trade’s impact on the Ming dynasty can be found in Jack Goldstone’s “East and West in the Seventeenth Century: Political Crises in Stuart England, Ottoman Turkey, and Ming China,” published in 1988. For Goldstone, the parallel, similar, and interrelated crises of the seventeenth century experienced by England, the Ottoman Empire, and Ming China were “aspects of an integrated, multifaceted process” that primarily stemmed from political, social, or religious divisions, rather than purely economic factors.¹¹ Notably, Goldstone explicitly rejected Atwell’s assertion that a decrease in silver imports led to the late Ming crisis. Instead, he argued that fluctuations in silver imports were negligible relative to the overall size of the Chinese economy and therefore could not have been the primary driver of the dynasty’s collapse. Nevertheless, aspects of Goldstone’s assertions on parallel, similar, and interconnected crises in seventeenth-century England, the Ottoman Empire, and Ming China were somewhat speculative. His study relied heavily on secondary sources, introducing the risk of inaccuracies and misunderstandings. For instance, Goldstone’s use of data from Ray Huang’s work on Ming fiscal policy illustrates the potential pitfalls of relying on secondary sources without careful verification. Goldstone cites Huang as stating that

10 Frederic Wakeman Jr., “China and the Seventeenth-Century Crisis,” *Late Imperial China* 7, no. 1 (1986): 22.

11 Jack Goldstone, “East and West in the Seventeenth Century: Political Crises in Stuart England, Ottoman Turkey, and Ming China,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 30, no. 1 (1988): 131.

“a superintendent of the salt tax in the 1560s could make a personal income of nearly forty thousand ounces of silver a year.”¹² However, Huang’s original text actually refers to an informal source from the early seventeenth century that mentions a figure of 30,000 taels.¹³ Goldstone’s alteration of both the date and the amount, without explanation, raises questions about the accuracy of his data. Furthermore, Huang’s “informal source” was Zhou Xuanwei’s 周玄暉 (b. 1558) *Jinglin xuji* 涇林續記, a single-volume work known for its fantastical and anecdotal content and generally classified as a collection of strange tales rather than a reliable historical document. This chain of citation – from a dubious primary source, through Huang’s uncritical use, to Goldstone’s further alteration – illustrates a compounding of errors in historical analysis. It is also worth noting that the specific case mentioned in *Jinglin xuji* refers only to salt distribution supervisors in Guangzhou and is not indicative of other regions.¹⁴ In Goldstone’s retelling, however, it could easily be misinterpreted as suggesting that salt distribution supervisors across China could earn 40,000 taels of silver annually.

In the years following Goldstone’s work, a more nuanced and cautious approach to the relationship between the Ming–Qing transition and European crises has begun to emerge in the literature. Niels Steensgaard, in a 1990 article analyzing the debate surrounding the “general crisis of the seventeenth century,” reached the conclusion that “the solution to the puzzle of the seventeenth-century crisis as a Eurasian phenomenon may be, that it did *not* affect Asia, but represented a new departure in the Western part of the continent.”¹⁵ In 2008, Michael Marmé observed that “acutely aware that distances were vast and transport and communication slow, and that the flow of goods, men, and messages was limited, those who have sought to understand the timing of the fall of the Ming as something more than coincidence have focused their energies on identifying a common trigger for shared crisis. Hence the attention to bullion flows, climate change, and population pressure.”¹⁶ Noting that focus on the crisis had shifted from seeking the origins of modernity

12 Ibid., 115.

13 Ray Huang, *Taxation and Governmental Finance in Sixteenth-Century Ming China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1974), 215.

14 Zhou Xuanwei 周玄暉, *Jinglin xuji* 涇林續記, vol. 8 of *Hanfenlou miji* 涵芬樓秘笈, ed. Sun Yuxiu 孫毓修, Tsinghua University Library Collection, 48.

15 Niels Steensgaard, “The Seventeenth-Century Crisis and the Unity of Eurasian History,” *Modern Asian Studies* 24, no. 4 (1990): 697.

16 Michael Marmé, “Locating Linkages or Painting Bull’s-Eyes around Bullet Holes? An East Asian Perspective on the Seventeenth-Century Crisis,” *The American Historical Review* 113, no. 4 (2008): 1084.

to examining the effects of climate change, a shift closely in accord with contemporary concerns, Marmé suggested that such alignment “forces us to ask whether we are not simply projecting our concerns onto the past.”¹⁷ These cautionary perspectives suggest that previous debates about a “general crisis of the seventeenth century” may have overstated the connections between events in different regions of Eurasia, inappropriately describing them as part of a single process. Indeed, even within Europe, significant regional variations existed. Italian economic historian Carlo Cipolla noted in his introduction to *The Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* volume in *The Fontana Economic History of Europe* that:

It is fashionable today among economic and social historians to speak of the sixteenth century as the golden age in the economic and social history of Europe and to paint the seventeenth century in somber tones, muttering darkly about “the crises of the seventeenth century.” At the bottom of every simplification there is always a grain of truth but every simplification should be taken with a grain of salt.¹⁸

Similar issues of oversimplification have arisen in discussions of sixteenth and seventeenth century Chinese and Asian history, many of which have been noted in Andre Gunder Frank’s influential 1998 work *ReOrient: Global Economy in the Asian Age*. Critically evaluating major studies on the “general crisis of the seventeenth century,” Frank argued that while there were indeed local crises in various parts of Eurasia, including China, related to climate and the influx of silver from international trade, there was no general, long-term “seventeenth-century crisis,” and certainly no “seventeenth-century crisis” in Asia. He pointed out that Europe’s economic influence had not yet reached a level where it could lead to a global economic downturn and asserted that Seville was certainly “not the center of any worldwide system.”¹⁹

As early as 1978, American historians Geoffrey Parker and Lesley Smith had compiled and published a selection of earlier essays on the European “seventeenth-century crisis” into a volume titled *The General Crisis of the Seventeenth Century*. This collection was subsequently republished in 1997 and 2005, with the latter edition expanding its scope to include four additional

17 Ibid., 1083.

18 Carlo Cipolla, ed., *The Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*, vol. 2 of *The Fontana Economic History of Europe* (Sussex: Havester Press, 1976), 12.

19 Andre Gunder Frank, *ReOrient: Global Economy in the Asian Age* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 248.

articles focusing on Asia.²⁰ While Parker's role as editor and his authorship of the new preface in the 2005 edition suggests his support for the notion that this seventeenth-century crisis was a global phenomenon that encompassed Asia as well as Europe, his own viewpoint on the issue is more fully articulated in his 2013 monograph, *Global Crisis: War, Climate Change and Catastrophe in the Seventeenth Century*. Although the book does contain some exaggerated claims and potentially contentious points, its overall treatment of the subject is balanced. Notably, Parker does not present climate change as the sole cause of the crisis, nor does he overly emphasize the role of decreased silver imports to China.²¹

Initially conceived within a European framework, the concept of the "general crisis of the seventeenth century" has gradually expanded to encompass a global outlook. This expansion represents a shift from a Eurocentric view of history that aimed to compare the historical development trajectories of Europe and China to a reevaluation of historical interconnectedness across major world regions during this period. Within this broader debate, discussions pertaining to the Ming–Qing transition in China have highlighted the significant roles of climate change, natural disasters, and international trade – particularly the influx of silver – in shaping the events of the period. While these elements have undoubtedly played crucial roles in the complex process of dynastic change, many of these discussions have failed to fully consider the continuities between the Ming–Qing transition and earlier historical periods. This includes both macro-structural continuities and the continuous progression of socio-economic and political processes. Furthermore, there has been insufficient attention to the regional variations within Chinese society during this time. Given these limitations, discussions surrounding the "general crisis," while providing valuable insights, should not be viewed as offering a comprehensive or fully nuanced understanding of the Ming–Qing transition.

4 "The Great Divergence," "New Qing History," and the Ming–Qing Transition

Another common conceptual framework frequently employed in Western academic discussions of the "general crisis of the seventeenth century," is that of the "great divergence" – a term used prominently by the Californian School

20 Geoffrey Parker and Lesley Smith, eds., *The General Crisis of the Seventeenth Century*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2005).

21 Geoffrey Parker, *Global Crisis: War, Climate Change and Catastrophe in the Seventeenth Century* (London: Yale University Press, 2013).

of economic history to describe the economic and developmental split that had emerged between Western Europe and parts of Asia, particularly China, by the nineteenth century. This concept also gained traction within the Chinese intellectual community following the translation of Kenneth Pomeranz's seminal work *The Great Divergence: China, Europe, and the Making of the Modern World Economy*. In this book, Pomeranz's comparative analysis of economic growth between the Jiangnan region and Yorkshire led him to conclude that China and Europe were at comparable levels of economic development in the seventeenth century. Pomeranz argued that the "great divergence" only emerged in the late eighteenth century when Europe began to pull ahead due to the exploitation of resources in the New World.²² Analysis of the great divergence continued in the decade after the publication of Pomeranz's work with the publication of *Before and Beyond Divergence: The Politics of Economic Change in China and Europe* by R. Bin Wong – another prominent member of the California School – and Jean-Laurent Rosenthal. This work, which also gained traction in China following its translation in 2018, revised some of Pomeranz's core methodologies and expanded his analytical framework. Broadening the units of comparison and incorporating cultural differences into their analysis, Wong and Rosenthal placed greater emphasis on the role of state politics, polity size, and institutions in shaping economic history.²³ They asserted that fundamental differences in political structures and dynamics were already in place long before the economic divergence of the eighteenth century, stating that "the politics of economic change in China and in Europe were quite different and, as early as AD 1000, enter into self-reinforcing patterns. The thirteenth [century] reunification of China by Khubilai Khan completed the process of divergence."²⁴ However, Wong and Rosenthal's new methodology is not without its challenges. Their assertion of a divergence beginning in 1000 CE raises a critical question: if China and Europe had not "diverged" before this point, did

22 Kenneth Pomeranz, *The Great Divergence: China, Europe, and the Making of the Modern World Economy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 264–97; Peng Mulan 彭慕蘭 [Kenneth Pomeranz], *Da fenliu: Ouzhou, Zhongguo ji xiandai shijie jingji de fazhan* 大分流：歐洲、中國及現代世界經濟的發展, trans. Shi Jianyun 史建雲 (Nanjing: Jiangsu renmin chubanshe, 2003).

23 Jean-Laurent Rosenthal and R. Bin Wong, *Before and Beyond Divergence: The Politics of Economic Change in China and Europe* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2011); Wang Guobin 王國斌 and Luosen Ta'er 羅森塔爾 [Jean-Laurent Rosenthal], *Da fenliu zhiwai: Zhongguo he Ouzhou jingji bianqian de zhengzhi* 大分流之外：中國和歐洲經濟變遷的政治, trans. Zhou Lin 周琳 (Nanjing: Jiangsu renmin chubanshe, 2018).

24 *Ibid.*, 10. The Californian School's "great divergence" has been questioned, with one example being Roman Studer's study through a comparison between India and Europe. See Roman Studer, *Great Divergence Reconsidered: Europe, India, and the Rise to Global Economic Power* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

this imply that they had previously been on a “convergent” path? If not, then the concept of “divergence” might merely reflect perceived similarities derived from a particular analytical perspective.

Another significant international discussion pertaining to the Ming–Qing transition has emerged from the work of a group of American scholars often associated with the “New Qing History” school. This scholarly movement was first formally set into motion with Evelyn Rawski’s 1996 critique of Ping-Ti Ho’s argument that the Qing dynasty’s long-term success was the result of a policy of systematic sinicization. Writing approximately three decades earlier, Ho’s thesis had emphasized that the Qing’s achievements were, in many ways, attributable to their adoption and adaptation of Chinese institutions and culture after their conquest of the Ming dynasty, the result of a clear process of sinicization.²⁵ In contrast, Rawski approached the question with a focus on Inner Asia, arguing that the fundamental reason for the Qing’s ability to maintain rule for over two centuries and achieve numerous successes was the Manchu ruling elite’s preservation of their distinct Manchu characteristics. According to Rawski, these unique attributes enabled the Qing to function effectively as an Inner Asian empire, governing vast territories and diverse ethnic groups.²⁶ Importantly, this view challenges the simplistic equating of the Qing empire with “China.” Ho and Rawski’s competing ideas have sparked many wide-ranging debates, the details of which are too complex to elaborate fully here. Instead, in the following, I will focus attention on the issues around continuity and discontinuity between the Ming and Qing dynasties.

Where historians like Ping-Ti Ho have tended to emphasize the continuities between the Ming and Qing dynasties, proponents of the “New Qing History” school have instead focused on discontinuities and ruptures. However, both sides of this debate have arguably overlooked a crucial factor: the long-standing process of centralization within a Chinese context that involves regional convergence towards a Chinese civilizational sphere. Throughout Chinese history, each new dynasty, regardless of its ethnic origins, has sought to establish its legitimacy by compiling official histories of its predecessors. This practice is exemplified by the Yuan dynasty’s compilation of the official histories of the Song (960–1279), Liao, and Jin dynasties; the Ming dynasty’s compilation of the *Yuanshi* 元史; and the Qing dynasty’s compilation of the *Mingshi* 明史. In this historiographical tradition, all these regimes were viewed as orthodox and legitimate Chinese dynasties, irrespective of whether their core ruling groups

25 Ping-Ti Ho, “In Defense of Sinicization: A Rebuttal of Evelyn Rawski’s ‘Reenvisioning the Qing,’” *The Journal of Asian Studies* 57, no. 1 (1998), 123–55.

26 Evelyn Rawski, “Reenvisioning the Qing: The Significance of the Qing Period in Chinese History,” *The Journal of Asian Studies* 55, no. 4 (1996): 829–50.

were ethnically Han or non-Han. This perspective challenges the simplistic dichotomy of Han versus non-Han as the ultimate criterion for defining “China” and “Chinese.” Viewed through this lens, the discontinuities introduced by the Qing conquest, while significant, did not represent a fundamental break from the broader centering trajectory of convergence towards a culturally and politically cohesive Chinese civilization. Rather, the Qing dynasty’s incorporation of both the Central Plains and its own Manchu homeland can be seen as a continuation and expansion of the long-term process of integration between core and peripheral regions within the Chinese civilizational sphere.

The centering process of civilization is a complex phenomenon that encompasses both peaceful interactions and violent conflicts. The transition from the Ming to the Qing dynasty represents a particularly significant period in this process, marked by intense debates over the concepts of *hua* 華 (Chinese; civilized center) and *yi* 夷 (non-Chinese; uncivilized periphery) and how the Manchu-led Qing were situated within these concepts. These debates around the changing order of *hua* and *yi* took place not only in China, but also in Korea and Japan during this period. However, as the Qing solidified their rule, they implemented policies that blurred the lines between *hua* and *yi*. The Manchu Qing discontinued the practice of confiscating Han Chinese-held land, protected Ming imperial tombs, promoted Confucian learning, continued the civil service examination system, undertook massive compilations of historical and cultural texts, developed water conservancy projects, fostered economic growth, and conducted foreign affairs in a manner consistent with Chinese traditions. While the distinction between *hua* and *yi* within a Manchu Qing context never completely disappeared, it became increasingly ambiguous. This meant that the degree of cultural integration within the Chinese civilizational sphere significantly increased during the Qing era. Therefore, the debate over whether the Qing period should be characterized as a process of Han Chinese sinicization or the assertion of “Manchu-ness” may be somewhat misplaced. When placed within the broader context of the long-term historical centering process of Chinese civilization, a more comprehensive understanding emerges.

5 Conclusion

The Ming–Qing transition marked the last dynastic change of China’s imperial era. This transition largely followed the patterns of dynastic rise and fall that had characterized Chinese history for millennia. However, its occurrence – over a century after China’s increasing involvement in global trade networks – imbued it with significant connections to concurrent major transformations

in other parts of the world, particularly in Europe and the Americas. Recent scholarship, influenced by the framework of world history, has deepened our understanding of the Ming–Qing transition's role in the broader context of global historical changes. However, this approach, while valuable, has sometimes led to an overemphasis on the transition's international qualities and unique features. Such interpretations risk diminishing the transition's significance as an important moment in China's long-term historical progression and may misrepresent its meaning for world history. Moreover, focusing solely on inter-ethnic relations during this period may also miss the broader implications of this transition. Instead, viewing the Ming–Qing transition through the lens of the long-term centering process of civilization within the Chinese cultural sphere allows for a more comprehensive analysis. The Ming–Qing transition should not be viewed as a turning point leading to a “great divergence” between China and the West. The “divergence” thesis represents a partial and temporally constrained interpretation, derived from analyzing idealized and disaggregated components of societal communities through specific analytical lenses. In fact, the post-seventeenth century period witnessed a reinforcement of China's imperial system and a sustained economic prosperity driven in equal measures by both agriculture and commerce. A central theme of this era in Chinese history was the intensifying consolidation of Chinese civilization as a cohesive cultural community. While these developments were still connected to the changes occurring in Europe during the same period, they followed a distinct trajectory. In this context, while it is important to be mindful of the global connections in world history during the seventeenth century, one must be cautious not to exaggerate these connections to a degree that contradicts regional historical evidence.

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