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Preface to a New Discussion on the Ming-Qing Transition

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When the Qing dynasty (1616–1911) officially replaced the Ming dynasty (1368–1644) in 1644, it was much more than just another turn in the succession of imperial dynasties. It marked a major shift in the geopolitics of East Asia, even seen by some scholars as an integral part of what has been labeled the General Crisis of the Seventeenth Century. Since the rulers of the Qing dynasty were not Han, there has always been an extra dimension to debate on this dynastic succession. In recent years, discussions over the nature of the Qing dynasty, its unique place in China's history, and its place in Asian history, have come to the forefront again.

At the center of this debate is the following question: should we see the Ming-Qing transition primarily as Qing politics and culture inheriting Ming traditions, or does the Qing represent a significant break from Ming traditions? Traditional historiography in China advocates ideas such as “dynastic cycles” and “sinicization,” and Western scholars came up with a periodization known as “Late Imperial China,” which combines Ming and Qing into one historical category. All of them believe in a direct line of succession that took place in the Central Plains of China between the Ming and the Qing. On the opposite side of the debate are the scholars who put forth the idea of “dynasties of conquest” and the Western scholars of the New Qing History School who posited the idea of an “Inner Asianness.” They emphasize the uniqueness of the Qing polity. In recent years the debates have continued, and we now have a clear view of the main arguments from each camp. Some scholars have even sought to find a compromise between the two positions. In this special issue, we present four articles representing mainland Chinese opinions on this important debate.

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In the article “Recentering the Ming–Qing Transition,” Zhao Yifeng 趙軼峰 takes as his starting point the theory of the General Crisis of the Seventeenth Century. He believes this theory overestimates macrofactors transpiring in Asia at the time such as climate change, environmental crises, and the international silver trade, while ignoring the central importance of China’s internal historical trends, which accurately define most of its dynastic successions. In short, the “world” significance of the Ming–Qing transition has been greatly overstated. In all the important ways, the Qing dynasty carried on the Chinese institutions and identity from the Ming, and although certain cultural breaks did occur, none of them was so great it ran contrary to the overarching trends of Chinese civilization. Like all the founding rulers before them, the Qing rulers carried forward traditional Chinese culture in the traditionally circumscribed geographical area.

In “From Migration Legends to Regional Identity,” Zhao Shiyu 趙世瑜 starts with a discussion of a geographical understanding of “China proper,” which leads to a discussion on China’s national identity and issues of cultural unification. Zhao researches the legends of ethnic tribes from several different areas of China, citing stories of great migrations that occurred in the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries. He uses these tales to demonstrate how a new national consciousness emerged during the Ming and Qing dynasties.

In “An Examination of the Ming Empire’s Inner Asianness,” Zhong Han 鍾煥 offers an acute rebuttal of the theory of Qing dynasty’s unique inner Asianness. He first recounts the traditional arguments in favor of Qing uniqueness, such as the multifaceted role of the Qing emperor, the common use of multilingual composition in official documents, and liberal religious policies. He then proceeds to demonstrate that all of these characteristics of Qing rule were also present in the Ming, thus showing Qing rule to be more of a succession of Ming traits than a rupture. He concludes that the Yuan–Ming–Qing period of Chinese history should be seen as one primarily characterized by cultural continuity.

In the final article, “Revisiting the ‘Inner Asianness’ of the Qing Dynasty from the Perspective of Multilingual Composition,” Qiang Guangmei 強光美 deals exclusively with the phenomenon of multilingual composition. Like Zhong Han, she points out that the Han-ruled court of the Ming dynasty issued decrees and other documents in a multilingual format in its effort to administer over a multilingual populace, especially peoples in the border regions. This policy was adopted and carried on by the Qing. Furthermore, rather than being used to promote multiculturalism, this policy was used, in particular by the Qing, with the goal of unifying the entire regime by promulgating Confucian thought. This was a common policy of the Ming and Qing, and it

sets them apart from the ethnic minority rule of the preceding Liao (907–1125), Jin (1115–1234), and Yuan (1206–1368) dynasties.

These articles represent the frontier of Ming and Qing historical studies in China. They utilize multilingual materials from Asia as well as current theories from the West. Our hope is to show how mainland research fits into the larger context of international sinological dialogue, and how this research might push such dialogue forward.