THE MILITARY COLLAPSE OF CHINA'S MING DYNASTY, 1618–44

Kenneth M. Swope

ROUTLEDGE

The Military Collapse of China's Ming Dynasty, 1618–44

This book examines the military collapse of China's Ming Dynasty to a combination of foreign and domestic foes. The Ming's defeat was a highly surprising development, not least because as recently as in the 1590s the Ming had managed to defeat a Japanese force considered to be perhaps the most formidable of its day when the latter attempted to subjugate Korea en route to a planned invasion of China. In contrast to conventional explanations for the Ming's collapse, which focus upon political and socio-economic factors, this book shows how the military collapse of the Ming state was intimately connected to the deterioration of the personal relationship between the Ming throne and the military establishment that had served as the cornerstone of the Ming military renaissance of the previous decades. Moreover, it examines the broader process of the militarization of late Ming society as a whole to arrive at an understanding of how a state with such tremendous military resources and potential could be defeated by numerically and technologically inferior foes. It concludes with a consideration of the fall of the Ming in light of contemporary conflicts and regime changes around the globe, drawing attention to climatological factors and developments outside state control. Utilizing recently released archival materials, this book adds a much needed piece to the puzzle of the collapse of the Ming Dynasty in China.

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Asian states and empires
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The importance of Asia will continue to grow in the twenty-first century, but remarkably little is available in English on the history of the polities that constitute this critical area. Most current work on Asia is hindered by the extremely limited state of knowledge of the Asian past in general, and the history of Asian states and empires in particular. ***Asian States and Empires*** is a book series that will provide detailed accounts of the history of states and empires across Asia from earliest times until the present. It aims to explain and describe the formation, maintenance and collapse of Asian states and empires, and the means by which this was accomplished, making available the history of more than half the world's population at a level of detail comparable to the history of Western polities. In so doing, it will demonstrate that Asian peoples and civilizations had their own histories apart from the West, and provide the basis for understanding contemporary Asia in terms of its actual histories, rather than broad generalizations informed by Western categories of knowledge.

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Please note that the interpretations and conclusions expressed herein are entirely my own and do not necessarily reflect those of any of the granting institutions listed above. If I have unwittingly forgotten anyone, you have my apologies and my thanks!

Kenneth M. Swope
Hattiesburg, Mississippi

Ming Dynasty reign titles and dates

Temple name	*Reign title*	*Dates*
Taizu	Hongwu	1368–1398
Huizong	Jianwen	1399–1402
Chengzu	Yongle	1403–1424
Renzong	Hongxi	1425
Xuanzong	Xuande	1426–1435
Yingzong	Zhengtong	1436–1449
Daizong	Jingtai	1450–1456
Yingzong	Tianshun	1457–1464
Xianzong	Chenghua	1465–1487
Xiaozong	Hongzhi	1488–1505
Wuzong	Zhengde	1506–1521
Shizong	Jiajing	1522–1566
Muzong	Longqing	1567–1572
Shenzong	Wanli	1573–1620
Guangzong	Taichang	1620
Xizong	Tianqi	1621–1627
Sizong	Chongzhen	1628–1644
Anzong	Hongguang	1645
Shaozong	Longwu	1646
	Yongli	1647–1661

Latter Jin/Early Qing Dynasty reign titles and dates

Temple name	*Reign title*	*Dates*
Taizu	Tianming	1616–1626
Taizong	Tiancong	1627–1636
Taizong	Chongde	1636–1643
Shizu	Shunzhi	1644–1661
Shengzu	Kangxi	1662–1722

Chinese weights and measures

Chinese unit	*US equivalent*	*Metric equivalent*
1 *fen*	0.141 inches	0.358 centimeters
1 *cun*	1.41 inches	3.581 centimeters
1 *chi (linear)*	14.1 inches	35.814 centimeters
1 *chi* (itinerary)	12.1 inches	30.734 centimeters
1 *zhang*	141 inches	3.581 meters
1 *bu*	60.5 inches	1.536 meters
1 *li*	1821.15 feet	0.555 kilometers
1 *mu*	0.16 acres	0.064 hectares
1 *qing*	16.16 acres	6.539 hectares
1 *liang* (tael)	1.327 ounces	37.62 grams
1 *qian* (cash)	0.1327 ounces	3.762 grams
1*jin* (catty)	1.33 pounds	603.277 grams
1 *dan* (picul)	133.33 pounds	60.477 kilograms
1 *shi* (stone)	160 pounds	72.574 kilograms
1 *sheng*	1.87 pints	1.031 liters
1*dou*	2.34 gallons	10.31 liters

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Stylistic conventions

All Chinese personal and place names are rendered in the *pinyin* system of romanization without tone marks. For the sake of consistency, this includes works published in Taiwan as well as their authors' names. The only exceptions to this rule are books published in English by Chinese authors who use variant forms of romanization. Japanese names and terms are rendered in the standard Hepburn system. For Korean names and terms I use the modified McCune-Reischauer system without hyphens between syllables for personal and place names. For Mongolian and Jurchen/Manchu names and places, I use the system employed in *The Cambridge History of China* volumes. For places well known in the English-speaking world, such as Tokyo and Pyongyang, long vowel indicators are omitted. For translation of Chinese official titles into English, I follow Charles Hucker, *A Dictionary of Official Titles in Imperial China*. For converting lunar dates into their Western equivalents, I follow *A Sino-Western Calendar for Two Thousand Years, 1–2000 A.D.*, by Bi Zhongsan and Oyang Yi. Specific dates are generally rendered into their Western equivalents, but when a reference is made to a month, say the 4th month, this refers to the lunar month.

With respect to citing specific works, in general I cite them by the modern page numbers if possible. Otherwise, citations are given by *juan* (chapter) and fascicle number within the *juan*. Because the works in question were usually printed on woodblocks, each page had two sides, hence the first side or face of page 12 of *juan* 15 of a work would be rendered 15, p. 12a. In the case of compiled materials such as Liu Qinghua's *Ming shilu Chaoxian ziliao jilu*, the original *juan* and page numbers for the works in question are generally included with the excerpt in question.

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Introduction

The present book is the product of some two decades of interest in the Ming–Qing transition. It started with my senior independent study thesis completed at the College of Wooster (OH) under the guidance of David Gedalecia (my first teacher of Chinese history), Madonna Hettinger, and John Hondros. At the time, however, my Chinese was woefully insufficient for primary source research so I was obliged to produce a synthetic work that left me hungry to do more. Therefore, when I had the chance to write a Master's thesis at the University of Michigan, I again turned to the Ming–Qing transition, producing a composite study of five major figures from the era. My subsequent doctoral dissertation focused on slightly earlier events, the so-called Three Great Campaigns of the Wanli Emperor (1592–8). In the dissertation and my subsequent monograph, *A Dragon's Head and a Serpent's Tail*, I challenged standard representations of Ming military impotence by examining the important role played by the much-maligned Emperor Wanli (r. 1573–1620), who I argue was a forceful and dynamic leader, particularly in the realm of military affairs.[1] In the process I counter the prevailing interpretation that the Ming military establishment was a lost cause by the turn of the seventeenth century and that the dynasty's collapse in 1644 was already a foregone conclusion. While both the dissertation and the book have been generally well received, a persistent question at conferences and presentations since the book's publication has been "If the Ming was still so militarily viable as of 1600, then what happened in the coming decades?" This work is my answer to that question and therefore serves as somewhat of a sequel to my last monograph.

In fact, readers of the previous book will find some of the same historical figures herein. Several of the military commanders who served so ably on behalf of the Ming in the 1590s were still in the field twenty years later, most notably Liu Ting, better known to his contemporaries as Big Sword Liu. The civil commander Yang Hao, no stranger to controversy from his own days in Korea in 1597–8, would be appointed by the aging and sickly Wanli Emperor as the Supreme Commander of the Ming expedition to crush the Jurchen warlord Nurhaci in the spring of 1619. None other than this same Nurhaci had in fact offered to send troops to Korea on behalf of the Ming to battle the Japanese, though his request was denied. Kwanghae, King of Chosôn Korea from 1609,

had been the crown prince who rallied the populace against the Japanese invaders in the 1590s. And of course Wanli himself was still on the throne, though two decades of bitter factional infighting and controversy had taken their toll on the once vigorous (albeit petulant) monarch.

One of the central conclusions of my research on Wanli was that the role of the emperor remained integral to military success within the Ming system, even as the hereditary military order created by the Ming founder in the fourteenth century declined precipitously. Indeed, with the increasing factionalization of the civil bureaucracy, emperors such as Wanli often turned to military officials to exert their will and devised ad hoc, extra-bureaucratic means of dealing with military emergencies.[2] This made the relationship between the throne and military officials even more important. While some emperors were content to let their civilian bureaucrats run the military show, others, such as Wanli, took a more active interest in military affairs and patronized certain military families and officials to counter-balance the overwhelming power of civil officials in Ming government. But because of the nature of the Ming system, which placed tremendous power in the hands of the monarch and demanded much of its rulers, it could be exceedingly difficult for emperors to effectively exercise this power. Most lacked the interest or acumen to do so. At other times, the empire suffered from a relative dearth of competent, experienced field commanders. Wanli benefited from the happy circumstance of having a fairly tight-knit group of talented commanders who worked well with one another and with at least some of their civilian counterparts.

Recent research by Kai Filipiak has suggested that the late sixteenth century in general witnessed the emergence of more militarily competent civil officials whose skill sets meshed well with their military counterparts.[3] In Filipiak's assessment such a state of affairs had five main consequences germane to the present study. First, there was a general increase in military efficiency as experienced bureaucrats working in tandem with competent field commanders were able to plan and supply campaigns in disparate corners of the vast Ming empire. With the promulgation of numerous texts about military affairs, many of which were drawn from the direct experiences of civil officials, military formations were reorganized, often becoming smaller and more flexible, and advances were made in military training, tactical analysis, and technological improvements. Next, the successful collaboration between civil and military officials in the late sixteenth century resulted in the emergence of recognized experts in certain kinds of warfare, who would then be deployed to trouble spots throughout the empire. In contravention of previous Ming practices these men often brought a core of elite retainers with them. The retainers could both train others in their commander's tactics and serve as elite shock troops.

Third, the extensive interaction between civil and military leaders increased the overall prestige and cultural cachet of both sides, particularly the latter. In contrast to their rough-and-ready popular image, many late Ming military commanders were also competent poets, painters, collectors of artwork and patrons of artists. For example, the late Ming artist Xu Wei (1521–93) was

patronized by the famous Ming general Li Rusong, son of Li Chengliang (adoptive father of Nurhaci), and incidentally a veteran of the Ming war in Korea. By cultivating Confucian virtues these military figures facilitated their acceptance by the broader strata of elites and lubricated social relations for more effective cooperation in military matters. On the flip side, in part because of increasing military emergencies but also in response to general social trends, civil literati became more interested in the martial arts and in military affairs in general. Many civil officials apparently practiced martial arts for health or other reasons. Military strategy study societies proliferated. Some literati even wore swords in public so as to effect a more "dashing" appearance.[4] Along with the widespread use of civil officials in military capacities one can trace a general militarization of late Ming culture and society.

Nonetheless, despite these general trends, late Ming politics were still heavily factionalized and often dysfunctional. Even a cursory examination of the primary source record yields abundant evidence of the pervasive sniping and petty backstabbing that was part and parcel of the Ming political landscape. And with such a huge expanse of territory and so many potential military threats, the empire demanded a strong leader aided by a reasonably limited number of forceful competent officials with the monarch's full backing. Too many competing interest groups would simply cancel each other out, especially in the absence of a good supreme commander. In other words, a despotic political system functioned best only under the strong hand of a despot. While Wanli did not quite fit the bill as well as some of his illustrious ancestors, he was smart enough to back the right military commanders and make his will felt in the military arena. And earlier in his reign at least, he had the good fortune to have the support of several very competent civil officials who worked well with their military counterparts. Wanli's successors would not be so lucky.

Thus one of the main conclusions of the present study is that imperial leadership after Wanli failed in maintaining the appropriate balance between civil and military officials and in identifying and patronizing the proper commanders to deal with the empire's mounting military crises. As will be obvious to readers of the following pages, the late Ming, while perhaps not as blessed as the empire of Wanli's heyday, still could boast of a fair number of skilled, experienced military commanders. And not all the civil officials indulged in the endless skullduggery for which the era is infamous, though sadly, most ended up embroiled in it to varying degrees. But, as the famous Chinese saying goes, "If the cart in front is overturned, how can those behind it hope to stay the course?" In this time of mounting military and environmental disasters, strong leadership was essential and those fated with running the empire could not provide it, despite their best intentions, as will be seen. Simply put, they were commanders-in-chief and they made bad decisions given the information and resources at their disposal. Before offering a preview of what is to come, however, it is worth situating the present study within the broader scope of Chinese and world history and noting how this book fits within the existing English-language historiography of the Ming–Qing dynastic transition.

The Ming–Qing transition was "an agonized process that involved just about everything that took place in China during the seventeenth century," that "significantly affected subsequent Chinese views of their culture, society, and polity" in the words of the eminent historian Lynn Struve.[5] Moreover, because of a number of factors, including its relatively recent vintage within the grand scope of Chinese history, the explosion of printing, rising literacy rates, the presence of foreign observers such as the Portuguese and Jesuit missionaries, and the racial backdrop to the conflict, the Ming–Qing transition is by far the best documented such event in traditional Chinese history. Historians benefit from having voluminous sources produced by all the major participants in multiple languages. This has made the Ming–Qing transition a cultural phenomenon quite unlike similar transitions earlier in Chinese history. There are a number of reasons for this.

The first concerns the nature of the Jurchen/Manchu conquerors themselves and ideas of Han Chinese nationalism that emerged in the late nineteenth century. For centuries the Ming has been remembered as the last native Chinese dynasty and even though recent historians of the subsequent Qing period have done a wonderful job in delineating the many innovations of the Manchu rulers, it remains the case that Ming institutions and practices most often served as the models for the Qing. When ordinary people in China think of "imperial" culture, it is most often the Ming that they are thinking of. This makes perfect sense given that such iconic structures as the Forbidden City, the Temple of Heaven, and the Great Wall all date from the Ming and are therefore considered Ming (Chinese) rather than Manchu symbols, though the latter occupied the palace in Beijing and initially modeled their own capital in Shenyang (which one can still visit) after the Ming royal palace. Furthermore, good history begins with good stories. For Chinese the Ming–Qing transition is filled with high drama, heroes and villains, traitors and martyrs. It has captivated audiences for centuries starting with novels and folk tales in the seventeenth century down to modern-day television dramas, documentaries, popular histories, comics, and video games.

In the broader sense the fall of the Ming dynasty corresponds to the fall of several other great states in the seventeenth century. Over the past three decades scholars around the world have devoted increasing attention to climate change and natural disasters as important factors in shaping world history. Scholars such as William Atwell, Jack Goldstone, and, more recently, Geoffrey Parker have noted the multifarious effects of the so-called "Little Ice Age" and the "Seventeenth-Century Crisis."[6] What these studies have shown is that there were indeed many factors that were simply beyond the logistical capacities of early modern states to handle. But people of the time viewed the world in very different, culturally specific terms. Rather than point to "inconvenient truths" and global warming these people spoke of dynastic cycles, evil portents, and the wrath of God. But modern scientific research and access to a multiplicity of primary source chronicles from around the world have enabled historians to better understand these processes and approach regime changes in new ways. The present work both acknowledges the efforts of these modern historians and seeks to convey the sense that contemporaries in China had of these disasters as they

emerged in their midst. Understanding how people in China experienced the fall of the Ming can be useful for comparative historians looking at other invasions and dynastic transitions.

Military historians can also benefit from a study of the collapse of the Ming dynasty as the era in question falls right in the middle of the period identified by some scholars as the time of the so-called "Military Revolution" in Europe. While scholars such as Peter Lorge, Kenneth Chase, and more recently Tonio Andrade have engaged in that debate as it pertains to Asia, an analysis of technology and tactics utilized by the combatants in these conflicts compared to those used by their counterparts elsewhere in the early modern world can provide a sense of balance and trajectory.[7] As will be seen herein, Ming officials, the Manchus, and the peasant rebel foes of the Ming were all ready adopters of superior firearms technology when they could get it. They also recognized the value of drill and training. Military experts and technicians were recruited, bribed, and richly rewarded. In several cases defectors played key roles in aiding the cause of one side or another, though this writer is loathe to blame "Han traitors" for the ultimate defeat of the Ming as some Han nationalists were wont to do in the past. Given the number and depth of the surviving primary source materials, deeper understanding of the military collapse of the Ming can provide guidance for historians working in other contexts.

As noted above, there is an ever-expanding and voluminous secondary literature on the fall of the Ming dynasty in Chinese. There are also a fair number of excellent secondary studies in English. Nonetheless there were a number of compelling reasons that prompted me to write this book. First and foremost is the simple fact that none of the previous studies has approached the fall of the Ming dynasty from a military perspective. While this is perhaps understandable given the anti-military bias of traditional Chinese historians (and many modern Western historians), it remains puzzling that histories of decades of constant warfare and strife have managed not to foreground the military dimensions of the Ming collapse but have rather concentrated primarily on political, institutional, and cultural factors. I certainly do not wish to divorce the military narrative from these other aspects of the Ming's collapse (and certainly the reader will find all herein), but it seems that an examination focusing primarily on the military reasons for the fall of the Ming and how they impacted other areas is long overdue. The sheer number of surviving primary documents dealing with military matters alone suggests that this is the proper course. By my estimation 80 percent of the extant Ming archival documents from the period under consideration here (*c.*1618–44) deal with the military situation, perhaps more. Thus, whatever else was on people's minds at the time, military exigencies were never far away. Previous studies have often downplayed this simple fact.

Another thing that makes this study unique is the perspective I take, which is that of the Ming court. This might be surprising to historians of other regions, but most studies of the fall of the Ming have not taken the court-centered approach, but have rather focused on specific regions, individuals, or, in the case of Frederic Wakeman Jr's magisterial *The Great Enterprise*, the perspective of the Qing

invaders.[8] The author does a remarkable job of showing what the Qing did right, but devotes far too little attention to what the Ming did wrong. After all, at the start of their conflict, the Ming had huge advantages in manpower, resources, and military technology. Yet they failed repeatedly. Additionally, perhaps because of the earlier work of James Parsons in tracing the course of the great peasant rebellions of the late Ming, Wakeman glosses over them and seems to dismiss their significance in the dynasty's fall.[9] Yet many Chinese scholars, most notably Li Guangtao, argue that the peasant rebellions were more important in the minds of many Ming officials and militarily more significant because of their proximity to the economic and commercial heartland of the empire.[10] My own findings suggest that the importance ascribed to the Manchus and peasant rebels respectively varied by official, but on the whole it seems that the peasant rebels were deemed a more serious military threat by Emperor Chongzhen (1628–44) because of their overt challenge to his domestic legitimacy and their ready ability to disappear into the countryside and hide among the people. This was even as most realized that man for man the Manchus were more formidable on the battlefield. But it was widely believed that they could be appeased, bought off, or contained outside the Great Wall.

To her credit Lynn Struve adopts a court-centered approach in her seminal work, *The Southern Ming*, but she begins her account in 1644, after the fall of Beijing.[11] In fact, the major reason I decided to end this study with the fall of Beijing is because of the fine work done by these historians on the subsequent course of the Ming resistance and Qing consolidation of power. Yet no one has seriously studied the reasons behind the strategies and tactics employed by the Ming against its foreign and domestic foes from 1618 to 1644. Given the nature of the Ming political system and the importance of a strong supreme commander in the form of the emperor, I think it is integral to examine the military collapse of the Ming from the perspective of the court because they had the broadest perspective on the empire and its problems. Regional officials were most concerned with their jurisdictions. While central officials certainly had their own personal interests, biases, and animosities, they still had a better general grasp of the big picture and were empowered to act on that. So throughout this book I attempt to convey what they knew and how they acted upon that information and to show the pros and cons of various stratagems and positions and how they related to the bigger strategic picture.

At the same time I will readily admit that there are problems with taking the court-centered approach. First, short shrift is given to trouble spots on the far reaches of the empire, particularly in the southwest and southeast. Even though there were major aboriginal minority uprisings and outbreaks of piracy respectively in these regions, they are often given cursory attention in the major annalistic chronicles, official court records, and the like. In other eras such disturbances would have warranted more attention to be sure, but it was a matter of priorities. An aboriginal uprising in Guizhou, no matter how large, did not directly threaten the government's legitimacy in Beijing. A Jurchen raid on the capital did. In my defense on this count, my major concern here was to trace the reasons for the

collapse of the Ming government in Beijing. Other studies of the Qing conquest devote far more attention to activities in the south. Additionally, I will direct my attentions to the southwest in my next study, which will examine Zhang Xianzhong's bloody reign in Sichuan and its aftermath.

The next problem with adopting the perspective of the court concerns the objectives and strategies of its major rivals. I have endeavored to consider the perspectives of all the major players, but my first and foremost aim has been to discern what went wrong from the perspective of the court. Others have done an admirable job of identifying the many strengths of the Manchus, but have too easily dismissed the strengths of the Ming or ignored the fact that, despite its many problems, the Ming state managed to hold out for decades against a dizzying array of military and environmental challenges. The fact that the Qing retained so many Ming practices and institutions testifies to their continued viability. So I firmly believe it is just as important to trace why the Ming collapsed militarily as it is to determine how the peasant rebels and Qing succeeded. So more attention is devoted to their efforts and failings than to issues of Jurchen state-building and peasant rebel mobilization of the masses, though the latter topics are of course covered as they pertain to the issues at hand.

Finally, the last major contribution I hope to make concerns introducing Western readers to an array of heretofore obscure and only recently published primary sources. Historians of the Ming and Qing are particularly blessed in that various universities, departments, and publishing houses in China are still churning out collections of documents. Some of these are digitized, but being old-fashioned (and soon just plain old) I prefer the fine facsimile and typeset modern editions of Ming documents that continue to appear. One example is the wonderful collection of Ming documents from the Number One Archives in Beijing. Recently published by Guangxi Normal University, this collection encompasses 102 volumes at an average of around 500 pages of facsimile documents. The vast majority of these documents date from the period under consideration here and pertain to military affairs. Chronological biographies and the collected works of late Ming scholar-officials also continue to appear, often in easy-to-read modern typeset editions. A good example of such a work is the two-volume modern edition of the collected works of Minister Yang Sichang, previously only available in a handful of manuscript copies in East Asia. I have also attempted to draw upon a fair amount of the recent secondary literature in Chinese, most notably the excellent works of scholars such as Fan Shuzhi and Yan Chongnian. The latter has become so popular in China that he has hosted a CCTV series on Ming history. Since so much of this work has appeared in the past twenty years, it is my hope that the inclusion of these sources can help to update the pioneering work undertaken by the other scholars referenced in this introduction.

Concerning the organization of the present book, I have opted for a basic narrative approach. This is due both to my natural predilections as a military historian and to the simple fact that the story is just so damn good. Therefore I decided to jump back and forth between theaters of war within chronologically delimited chapters rather than split the chapters between topics or foes. To obviate potential

confusion I have included subheadings throughout the chapters. The advantage of such an approach in my opinion is that the reader gets a better sense of how the Ming emperors and their advisers must have felt as events unfolded around them. There often seemed little time to breathe with tigers at the front door, wolves at the back, and snakes in the closet. We will now turn to a brief preview of the rest of the book, which is filled with spoilers. Those interested in jumping right into the story should skip to Chapter 1 now. Researchers interested in specialized aspects of the fall of the Ming or in particular topics may want to continue reading.

The first chapter sets the context for the war between the Ming and the Jurchen leader Nurhaci and traces the first few years of their struggle. In it the place of the Jurchens within the Ming East Asian world order is discussed as are Nurhaci's efforts at state-building and Ming efforts to stymie him. The chapter also includes discussions of the Ming campaign to wipe out Nurhaci in the spring of 1619 and its aftermath, which saw the rapid expansion of Jurchen power in the northeast. Chapter 2 looks at the changing fortunes of the two belligerents as the Ming scrambled to stabilize the northeast while being hamstrung by a mentally deficient emperor and a deeply factionalized court. At the same time they found themselves confronted with military challenges in other parts of the empire including a sectarian rebellion in Shandong, a massive aboriginal revolt in the southwest and a resurgence of piracy along the southeast coast. Despite these problems the Ming not only stabilized the northeast front, but managed to score their biggest victory of the entire war against the Jurchens under the famous commander Yuan Chonghuan, who remains one of China's national heroes.

In the wake of the Ming victory at Ningyuan and with the ascension of a new emperor just over a year later, they decided to take the offensive against the Jurchens and their new khan, Hung Taiji, son of Nurhaci. Chapter 3 chronicles the reasons the Ming decided to pursue the so-called "forward strategy" and how it ultimately backfired owing to more questionable command decisions on the part of both Yuan Chonghuan and, more seriously, the emperor himself. This chapter also covers another seminal event in the history of the late Ming: the rise of the peasant rebellions in the drought-ravaged northwest. The next chapter begins with a discussion of renewed Jurchen offensives in Liaodong after the execution of Yuan Chonghuan and continues through the outbreak, suppression, and aftermath of the infamous Wuqiao Mutiny, which resulted in the defection of several key commanders and their men to the Jurchen side at a critical juncture in their war with the Ming. It also offers a brief look at Hung Taiji's state-building efforts. It then looks at the ebb and flow of Ming efforts against the peasant rebels in northwest China and traces the rise of the most prominent peasant rebel leaders. The chapter ends with the Ming capture of the Ming rebel leader Gao Yingxiang and preparations for their most ambitious campaign to date against the peasant rebels.

Drawing extensively from Yang's own collected works, Chapter 5 chronicles the tenure of the controversial Yang Sichang as Minister of War. Yang was the architect of the ill-conceived "Ten-Sided Net" and favored rapprochement with

the Manchus, two mistakes that have severely tarnished his historical reputation. Yet, as argued in this chapter, he was able to gain the favor of the mercurial Chongzhen emperor in part because, unlike many of his counterparts, he at least had plans and recommendations. Poor judge of character and leader that he was, Chongzhen backed the only horse who at least seemed willing to run the race, no matter his chances for victory. This chapter also discusses the worsening situation in Liaodong and the reasons for the failure of peace talks between the Ming and the newly created Qing.

Chapter 6 covers the rapid expansion of the peasant rebellions across central and northern China after the death of Yang Sichang and the climactic battle of Song-Jin in Liaodong that marked the real turning point in the Ming–Qing conflict. From late 1642 onwards the Ming were on their heels in the northeast and even as certain capable commanders were attempting to stabilize the theater in the northwest to buy time for new strategies to be devised, the emperor was bowing to pressure from hawks to launch another offensive against the peasant rebel leader Li Zicheng, now deemed the most serious military threat in the eyes of the court. This chapter also looks at the efforts by Li and his rival Zhang Xianzhong to build support for their nascent regimes.

Chapter 7 covers the final ignominious four months of Ming rule over all of China. Portents mounted and harebrained schemes proliferated as the once proud dynasty crumbled in the face of foes that were far from invincible. To the end Chongzhen's shortcomings as a leader, strategist and evaluator of talent plagued his efforts to stem the tide and save his state and his family. In the long run his suicide on Longevity Hill behind the Forbidden City probably did more for saving his reputation than any other act of his troubled reign. The somewhat anticlimactic battle between the forces of Li Zicheng and the Manchus (aided by the Ming turncoat Wu Sangui) at Shanhaiguan ends the chapter and the narrative proper. The conclusion offers suggestions for further research and situates the fall of the Ming within the broader scope of world history.

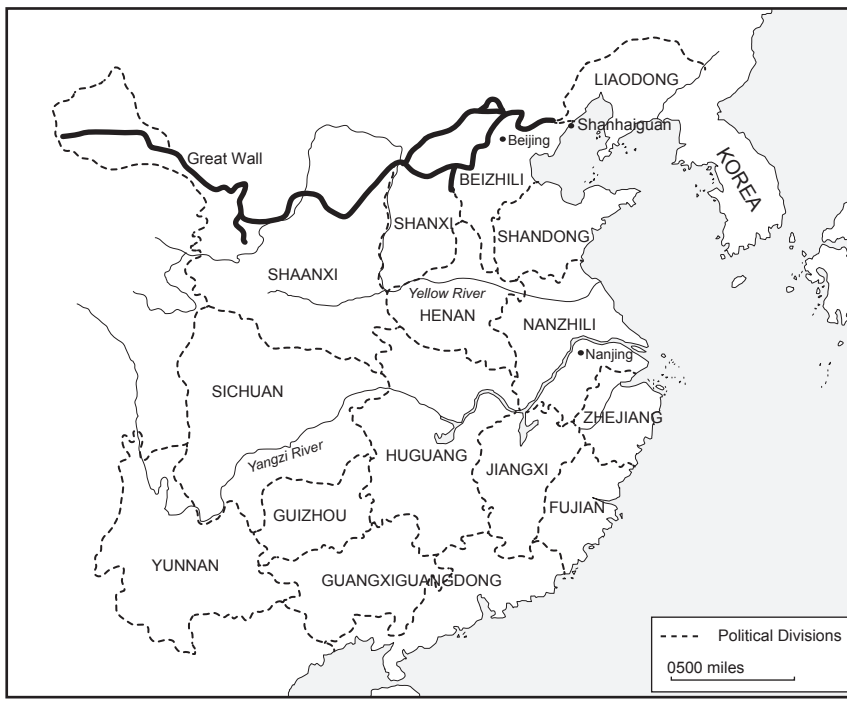

Figure 1.1 Map of Ming dynasty political divisions

1 A gauntlet is cast down: The rise of the Latter Jin, 1618–21

The storm begins

In the fourth lunar month of 1618, the water in the moat around the city of Beijing, capital of the largest, wealthiest empire on the planet, turned blood red from the Xuanwu to the Zhengyang gates, the latter located just south of the main entrance to the emperor's residence, known to Westerners as the Forbidden City.[1] To residents of the capital this was reportedly terrifying, yet another portent of the gloom that was engulfing the dynasty.[2] After all, despite a series of impressive military triumphs in the 1590s, the government had degenerated into faction-ridden gridlock in the ensuing decades.[3] The Emperor Wanli (r. 1573–1620) had engaged in a running series of disputes with his officials over everything from the naming of his heir to annual merit evaluations for officials, to official appointments, to his controversial practice of employing eunuch tax collectors to essentially shake down the wealthy tax dodgers in a practice euphemistically called "opening mines" (*kuang shui*).[4] And just three years before a mysterious intruder had been apprehended in the Forbidden City where he was ostensibly seeking to kill the heir apparent. The intruder was executed amid controversy in this so-called "Case of the Attack with a Club."[5] In the ensuing years the emperor had become even more reclusive as pressures and challenges mounted on multiple fronts. Nonetheless the Ming state retained its preeminence in East Asia, at least for the time being.

As it turned out, the flashpoint for the conflict that would ultimately destroy the Ming was a frontier town in the northeast. The town was called Fushun and it was one of the 18 key fortresses established by the august founder of the Ming, Zhu Yuanzhong, who reigned as Emperor Hongwu (r. 1368–98) in the region the Chinese called Liaodong.[6] Fushun was targeted by an upstart frontier khan from a tribe known as the Jianzhou Jurchens named Nurhaci (1559–1626), an erstwhile vassal of the Ming who had challenged Ming authority in the region two years before by virtue of his proclamation of the state of the Latter Jin (Golden kingdom) in reference to a dynasty controlled by his Jurchen forebears in the past (1126–1234).[7] But until this point Nurhaci had remained at least outwardly loyal to his nominal Ming tributary overlords. His attack on Fushun, however, was the culmination of years of effort and planning. Among other things Nurhaci had

established military farms (*tuntian*) to raise supplies, allocated cattle among his men, and detailed some two hundred men to cut down trees for the fashioning of siege equipment.[8]

Moreover, in addition to constituting his first overt military challenge to Ming authority in Northeast Asia, Nurhaci's attack on Fushun was connected to his strategy of assimilating rival Jurchen tribes such as the Haixi. Indeed, the attack was prompted in part by necessity because, according to contemporary Korean records, heavy rains had ruined harvests and Nurhaci's people were starving.[9] Nurhaci now had an estimated 60,000 men under arms in addition to the civilians under his purview and he could ill-afford further delays that might undermine his efforts at expanding his authority. In terms of its strategic locale, Fushun offered a good springboard because it was more isolated and less well-protected than other Ming fortress towns in the region. It was defended by a military official named Li Yongfang, ostensibly a mid-ranking mobile corps commander (*youji jiangjun*) but in practice a commandant (*shoubei*) with only about 1,200 men under his command. Nurhaci decided to lead 20,000 men against Fushun. Additionally, not trusting anything to chance, Nurhaci, who had regularly traded at Fushun as a Ming vassal in the past, had already conducted discussions with the Ming commander about holding a horse trading market, a relatively common arrangement.

Nurhaci asked Li to hold the market in the middle of the fourth month of 1618. Nurhaci's plan was to send fifty men to the city disguised as horse traders. Then he would creep outside the city with another 5,000 men and wait for a prearranged cannon signal. He hoped to save as many men as possible in this initial gambit. Siege ladders and great shields were manufactured for the impending assault. In the meantime Nurhaci curried favor with local Mongol and other Jurchen chiefs to keep them neutral and secure his flank. Ming strength in the region was nominally 90,000, but in fact numbers were much lower, their quality was poor, and their pay and rations were months in arrears.[10]

Announcing his Seven Grievances against the Ming to Heaven, Nurhaci departed his capital of Hetu Ala on the 13th day of the 4th month of 1618 (May 7).[11] He also issued orders to his men not to rape, pillage, or harm commoners.[12] He divided his army into two columns, leading the right wing himself, which would attack Fushun proper. The Jin forces were hampered by heavy rains and forced to slog through the mud all night but they still managed to reach the city gates by the morning of the 15th when the fifth columnists opened the gates for them, ostensibly simply for the purpose of trading horses. As soon as the gates opened, the troops hidden in the forest around the city assailed the walls with their scaling ladders. Li Yongfang vacillated over what to do as several of his subordinates gave their lives in a hasty defense. Eventually Li and his lieutenant, Zhao Yipeng, decided to surrender. In a letter to Li Nurhaci noted, "I know you are a man of many talents and have had many experiences and my state is in search of talent, as we are lacking in capable officials and are looking to employ capable generals." He added "What purpose will your death serve? But if you surrender, you and all your soldiers will be

safe."[13] When he got the letter Li Yongfang said he would surrender at the south gate but he kept his troops on alert. He then opened the gate as the Jin attacked the Ming loyalist troops. When he met Nurhaci he allegedly agreed to surrender only if the people were spared. Nurhaci honored his promise, though many were taken as captives to Hetu Ala.[14]

Some 590 Ming soldiers were killed or captured in the attack. Those who did not surrender were slaughtered. Jurchen losses were small.[15] For his efforts in facilitating the Jin capture of the city Li Yongfang received the position of commander in the Jin army and a granddaughter of Nurhaci as his concubine.[16] Li would be the first prominent Ming commander to openly join the Jin side and his deal would set a precedent for many later defectors.[17] In addition to their military advice and expertise, many scholars attribute Chinese defectors such as Li great importance in transmitting Chinese values, ways of life, and institutions to the Jin royal family, without which they may not have succeeded in establishing their empire.[18] As one scholar notes, "the chief importance of the Chinese in the Manchu state was that they furthered bureaucracy and bureaucratic development and diminished the feudal element in Manchu society."[19]

Two nearby forts quickly fell as well and Nurhaci detailed some 4,000 men to hold Fushun temporarily while he waited for the Ming counter-attack. He did not have to wait long. Within three days the Ming grand coordinator heard of the fall of Fushun and dispatched commander Zhang Chengyin to recapture the city. The Ming led 10,000 troops in five columns against the city, arriving on the 21st. They set up three camps, dug trenches, and arrayed their firearms around Fushun. Their initial assault inflicted heavy casualties but the Jin forces under Nurhaci's sons Hung Taiji (1592–1643) and Daisan (1583–1648) cut through the Ming units and routed them. It was estimated that barely 20 percent of the relief force survived the fierce Jin assault.[20] The victorious Jin army returned to Hetu Ala on the 26th day of the 4th month and rested for just over a month before setting forth in search of more conquests.

In response Wanli made General Li Rubo (d. 1619) the Commander of Liaodong and Yang Hao (d. 1629) the Military Affairs Commissioner (*jinglue*).[21] These were understandable, if somewhat controversial, appointments. Both men were acknowledged favorites of the Wanli emperor but had been scandalized as the result of a botched siege against the Japanese in Korea some twenty years before. The political fallout had ended the career of Yang Hao (despite Korean protests) and Li Rubo had assumed a much lower profile as a regional commander in Liaodong.[22] Complicating matters further was the fact that the Li clan had very close ties to Nurhaci. In fact Rubo's father, the famous Ming general Li Chengliang (1526–1618), had served as a surrogate father and mentor to the Jin khan in his younger days.[23] The Ministry of War then released 200,000 taels of silver for raising armies and ordered two more famous military commanders, Du Song (d. 1619) and Liu Ting (1554–1619), to hasten to the frontier at once.[24] The Court of the Imperial Stud supplied 60,000 more taels for the purchase of war horses. The Ming hoped to amass a force of 130,000 for a full counter-attack. They also looked into building ships for military and transportation purposes.[25]

But due to shortages in the capital the Ming court had to requisition mounts, weapons, and supplies from auxiliary bureaus in Nanjing, the secondary capital.[26]

Acting Minister of War Bi Sancai also told the emperor that salaries for the Liaodong garrisons were already three months in arrears so they would have be creative with financing.[27] The Ministry of War had barely one-fifth of what they needed now and could get only 47,000 more taels in short order. So Bi hoped that Wanli could dip into the imperial privy purse for funds. Wanli countered by saying that the coffers were empty and that the Ministries of Revenue and War needed to find the funds.[28] Meanwhile, more bad omens appeared around the capital, portending invasion.[29] By this time Nurhaci's grievances and demands had reached Beijing and the Ming were making more serious preparations to curtail Jin actions.

Nurhaci then decided to go after the fortress of Qinghecheng, now reinforced with 6,400 troops from its original strength of several hundred. Yang Hao had advised the commander of the fortress Zou Chuxian to lay an ambush for the Jin in the mountain pass nearby to better take advantage of superior Ming firepower, but he ignored this advice. When the enemy did approach, Zou refused to let his men sally forth, opting for a passive defense strategy. Nurhaci arrived on the 21st day of the 7th month and commenced the attack the next day. The defenders fired cannon and hurled logs and boulders at the enemy but Nurhaci refused to retreat, despite sustaining heavy casualties. His men were finally able to breach the wall in the northwest corner before the Ming could reload their heavy cannon. A bloody street fight ensued but Zou and his commanders were defeated and died in the fighting. Qinghe fell and most of those within were slaughtered.[30] Fingers were pointed back in Beijing.

The Jin then fanned out and took eleven more isolated towns in short order though the Ming commander He Shixian killed 154 in one battle and drove them back north. Li Rubo then killed 76 outside Shenyang and reinforced that strategically important city against another assault.[31] Yang Hao killed a Ming officer who had fled Fushun earlier in the year, to set an example for the men.[32] Liu Ting arrived at Shanhaiguan, the pass which marked the border between China proper and Liaodong and began training operations with units from distant Sichuan province, though he feared he lacked the numbers needed. He also stressed that the troops needed more time to train. Most ominously for the subsequent course of the Ming dynasty, the Ministry of Revenue initiated its first tax hike, a mere three-hundredths of a tael per *mu*, to help fund training and supply costs for the troops in Liaodong.[33] The court also put a price of 10,000 taels on Nurhaci's head.[34]

In the centuries since these events took place, much has been made of the apparent unreadiness of the Ming in the face of the challenge posed by Nurhaci. Wanli and his officials have come under heavy criticism for supposedly failing to anticipate Nurhaci's actions and for failing to check his state-building efforts sooner. But in fact, as the following brief survey will demonstrate, the Ming had taken note of Nurhaci's actions and had engaged in multiple efforts, both military and diplomatic, to contain him. Moreover, this was in accordance with standard