Qing China – The Rise of the Manchus

The Ming Empire of the fifteenth century had created a vast maritime empire. The voyages of Zheng He had reached the coast of East Africa and clearly showed China’s power across the Indian Ocean. However, for reasons not clearly stated, the Ming Dynasty terminated all future voyages, ordered the mighty fleet to be broken down into pieces and closed the doors to China under a period of isolationism.

During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries a new dynasty would emerge that would expand the northern and western territories of China while continuing the nation to remain isolated. In 1644, the Qing Dynasty emerged and they would control China until 1912.

Ironically, the Qing were foreigners to China. They came from the northern region of Manchuria, a region beyond the Great Wall of China. To the mainland Chinese people they conquered violently, they became known as the Manchus.

The emergence and subsequent expansion of the Qing (Manchus) dynasty now brought a large number of non-Chinese people under their control.
The Qing seized power during the **General Crisis** of the seventeenth century, a time period that began during the **Little Ice Age** that had caused widespread famines and peasant rebellions. The subsequent change in the dynasty cycle was a violent period in Chinese history.

Rule under the Qing was harsh and they forced China to abide by their ethnic ways. Intermarriage between the Manchus and the Chinese was forbidden. They even mandated that the Chinese adopt the Manchu hairstyle.

![Politics of Men’s Hair in Chinese History](image)

Despite these strict regulations, the ruling elite of the Qing did master and adopt the Chinese language, Confucianist teachings and used Chinese bureaucratic techniques to rule their empire.

The Qing expanded China by taking control of Mongolia, Xinjiang, and Tibet, a campaign that took 88 years from 1680-1760. The reason for this expansion was not economic, it was largely for security reasons to protect the empire. The first threat were the Zunghar Khanate (Sometimes called Dzungar) from western Mongolia who the Manchus feared would start another Mongol invasion.

The second threat faced by the Manchus was the eastern expansion of the Russian Empire. Fortunately a compromise was made with the Russians with the signing of the **Treaty of Nerchinsk** (1689) which created a boundary line between Russia and China. The Qing expansion had now unified China.
The Qing used more powerful military technology to gain control as they had greater resources. They even ruled Mongolia separately under the Court of Colonial Affairs.

The Ming government used local rulers to keep administration costs down, (Mongol aristocrats, Muslim officials, and Buddhist leaders) but many soon became corrupt. They even imitated Chinese officials by wearing peacock feathers, decorating their hats with gold buttons, or adopting the Manchu hairstyle that was resented by the majority of the Chinese population as they were forced to wear their hair in the same way.
The Qing did not attempt to assimilate the people of Mongolia and Tibet into Chinese society. In fact, people of nobility, Buddhist monks and those associated with monasteries were exempt from paying taxes and performing mandated services of labor to the empire. In addition, the Qing did not encourage emigration of regular Chinese people to these regions, a continued effort to allowing them to keep their own culture. However the Qing did encourage the people of Mongolia to serve in their army as they were seen as a superior soldier over the regular Chinese soldier.

The image below is of Machang, a leading Qing warrior involved in the western expansion of the empire.

What evidence is there in the picture that the Qing army adopted some of the Mongol techniques?

The Qing Empire and the expansion of the Russian Empire completely transformed Central Asia. What was once an area of economic dominance, due to the Silk Roads, became isolated and backwards compared to the rest of the world. Land-based trading was now replaced by maritime trade. In addition, Mongolian nobles eventually lost their lands to Chinese merchants and the harsh Qing rule resulted in the nomadic herders of the steppes no longer being allowed to herd their animals freely. Many nomads were forced to leave their rural areas and move to the urban regions where they were reduced to becoming beggars on the streets.

The major significances of the Qing Empire were that they created the nation’s boundaries that are still similar in today’s society. With the Qing granting freedoms to Mongolia and Tibet, these ancient traditions have been challenged in recent decades, demanding autonomy or freedom from Modern China (such as the Free Tibet movement).

**Short essay question:**
How did the expansion of Russia and China transform Central Asia?
Compare the pattern of Qing expansion to that of Russia. What were the similarities and differences in how the two empires interacted with conquered people?