

The Study on the Manchus' Mixed Economy towards the End of the Ming Dynasty and How This Mixed Economy Contributed to the Manchus' Successful Conquest of China

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Abstract: The conquest of China was not merely a historical coincidence but an incident resulting from all possible aspects and factors historians can or cannot think of. Through analysing the role played by the early Manchus' mixed economy, this paper has drawn some links between the Manchu protohistory and their rise to power. This insight emphasized the significance of viewing the Manchu conquest by considering the dynamic interplay between local and world history. However, it is still necessary and relevant to study the local history carefully and in isolation so that these intricate links and valuable details can be gleaned to fit into a larger picture of the all-encompassing global history.

Keywords: the Manchus' Mixed Economy, Ming Dynasty

1. Introduction

In 1636, the proclamation of the Qing Dynasty by the Manchu chief Hong Taiji marked the beginning of a unified empire and the last feudal dynasty in Chinese history. The rulers of the Qing dynasty—the Manchu elites—were more successful than the Mongols centuries ago, whose Yuan dynasty collapsed not long after its rise to power. Various aspects of the Manchus before and during their conquest have been constantly examined by scholars seeking to explain how this group outnumbered the Chinese by about three hundred and fifty to one, managed to conquer China and ruled them for nearly three centuries [1]. This problem was phrased as a 'minority-rule question' in Mark C. Elliott's book *The Manchu Way*.

Some tend to juxtapose or associate the Manchus and the Qing empire with the Mongols and the Yuan dynasty they established about 300 years before the Qing. This is generally because of the heterogeneous origins of two groups from the predominant Han population in China. Those Manchu conquerors who hailed near the Ming's northeastern frontier, debased as 'uncivilized barbarians' by the Hans, were not nomads [2]. The Manchus, or the Jurchens before Hong Taiji changed the name of his people, did not periodically travel from one point to another. Instead, they had adopted a more sedentary lifestyle and mode of production in the Ming dynasty, which proved essential to their conquest later [3]. The Manchus' way of living was hunting and fishing, supplemented with agriculture and trade [4]. This mixed economy was unique if compared with the agrarian society of the Hans and the pastoralism of nomads like the Mongols in Yuan and the Xiongnu during the Han [5].

This research paper intends to explain how the Manchus' success in conquering China lay in their unique economic mode, distinguishing them from the rest of the steppe warriors across Eurasian history. First, a brief history tracing the Manchu people's origin is mentioned, followed by an introduction to the three main Manchu tribes and their way of living. Agriculture, hunting and trade, as three elements in the Manchu economy in Manchuria, will then be analyzed to answer how they contributed to the Manchus' conquest. Finally, comparisons will also be made between the Manchus and the nomads (particularly the Mongols) regarding their economies.

2. Literature Review

The Manchus were known as the Jurchens in the Ming Dynasty. It was only in 1635 that the leader ruling the unified Jurchen tribes, Hong Taiji, changed the name from 'Jurchen' to 'Manchu'. The early ancestry of the Jurchens, like other ethnic groups habiting near the frontier of China, was highly controversial and still debated in today's academia. Recent studies trace the origin of the Jurchens to the Tungus. According to archaeological evidence, some scholars show that the Tungus moved to and resided in Manchuria since the third millennium B.C..

Over this long period, from the third millennium B.C. to the seventeenth century, the Jurchens in the Ming Dynasty formed from the interaction between a myriad of ethnic groups and tribes, which created difficulties in analyzing the Manchus' origins very accurately. However, the Manchus discussed in this paper are most related to the Jurchens who established the Jin dynasty (1115-1234) in Northern China [6]. Conquered by the Mongols, some Jurchens stayed in China, primarily Sinicized and integrated into Han society. Other Jurchens remained in northeastern Manchuria. These Jurchens inherited most of their identities, such as culture, tradition and religion, from the Jin Jurchens. A noteworthy aspect is their endless ways of living through herding, hunting and agriculture, as some of their predecessors did [7]. The adoption of such a mixed economy is mainly owing to the climate and topography of Manchuria, where the early Jurchens settled down.

Manchuria, where the Jurchens hailed and started their military conquest, provided ideal geographical and geopolitical conditions for developing their mixed economy. Manchuria formed a wide basin surrounded by mountains—Changbaishan near the border between Korea and Russia, the Xiaoxing'anling in the northeast, and the Daxing'anling in the west [8]. Generous rainfall ranging from 900mm to 500mm across the region supports natural vegetation, including coniferous and broadleaf forests and rain-fed agriculture on Manchuria alluvial plain [9]. In addition, those mountains in Manchuria covered with forests are habitats for a variety of animals, such as leopards, foxes and lynx, whose hides were essential commodities in the Ming dynasty. At the same time, ginseng and cones can be collected in pristine forests. Hunting and gathering as a subsistence lifestyle suit the Jurchens in Manchuria. Some natural resources were sold to the Chinese in exchange for textiles and other daily life necessities [10]. The west side of Manchuria plain borders the Mongolian steppe teemed with tall grass attractive to the pastoralists. Overall, the adoption of various types of ways of life and economy became possible in Manchuria thanks to its terrain and richness in its resources.

Before the rise of the remarkable Jurchen leader Nurhaci and his unification of the Jurchens into one people, there were three main groups—Jianzhou Jurchen, Haixi Jurchen and Yeren Jurchen, each with a different economy based on records from *Liaodong choreography* [11]. Jianzhou Jurchen and Haixi Jurchen practice agriculture or semi-agriculture, similar to Hans in China. Yeren Jurchen tapped on natural resources in forests and along the rivers near their settlements by hunting and fishing [12]. From 1583 to the early 1600s, the Jianzhou Jurchen leader Nurhaci managed to unify all the groups through a series of wars, establishing Later Jin. As an extraordinary politician and strategist, Nurhaci laid the foundation for the later Qing dynasty. From the societal and cultural perspective, the unification facilitated the formation of the Manchu identity. The mixed economy with a range of

modes of production was made more pronounced. A clearer picture of a harmonious Manchu society with a diversified and stable economic basis began to appear.

In contrast, the Mongol conquerors who founded their Yuan dynasty in China had a distinct economy and way of life from those of the Manchus. The Mongols were originally pastoralist nomads, characterized by their mobility. The absence of the idea of 'boundary' to some degree propelled the steppe Mongols to create a leviathan empire across Eurasian in the fourteenth century through limitless military campaigns. Undoubtedly, the nomadic lifestyle contributed to the Mongols' formidable military power on horseback [13]. Despite all these advantages, nomadic pastoralism constrains their agriculture and hinders the Mongols' ruling over the Hans. The Xiongnu nomads, who fought wars against the Han empire, also heavily relied on their pastoralist economy. These differences between the Manchus and the nomads will be further discussed concerning the Manchu way of life throughout the essay.

The following sections explore three constituent parts of the Manchu's mixed economy: agriculture, hunting and trade.

Agriculture was one component of the Jurchens' mixed economy, distinguishing them from those steppe nomads [14]. It significantly supported their growing population in the early seventeenth century and later sustained their war machine amid the Ming-Qing War.

Interestingly, scholars always centred on their military and administration when discussing the Manchu's victory over the Ming armies and the resurgent groups. However, it can be argued that military development used the agricultural economy as a basis. The early efforts by Nurhaci and Hong Taiji in Manchu's state building faced problems like fast population growth and shortage of farming land [15]. Population growth meant expanding their military power to launch wars or defend against others. Therefore, the issue of more mouths to be fed must be solved. This section explains the relationship between the Manchus' agricultural tradition and military expansion.

Military conquest accompanied the occupation of more farming lands, augmenting the Manchus' agricultural development. Remarkable agricultural developments in Manchuria were followed by the massive production of agricultural products, which supported the growing Jurchen population and later their military expansion.

Development in agriculture was emphasized by Nurhaci and his successor Hong Taiji, who used 'Manchu' to name the Jurchen. As recorded in *Liaodong Chorography*, 'No field was not plotted, and many lands on the mountains were also reclaimed' under Hong Taiji's reign [16]. After Nurhaci and his army defeated the Hada clans to unify the Jurchen clans and tribes in Manchuria, the people from the Jianzhou Jurchen group immediately put the acres of land into agricultural use. In 1606, the Ming lost its control over the Kuantianliubao area to the Manchus. Expectedly, 800 Li of land were reclaimed for agricultural production (Li is the length unit used in ancient China, one li is about half a kilometre) [17]. In 1616, Nurhaci sent about five hundred people to the Hans' region: Xunhe, Liujia, and Gushan, to exploit more lands to further boost the Manchus' agriculture.

Hence, these records before the conquest of China served as a testament to the Manchus' continuous focus on the agricultural economy. Nevertheless, a rapid expansion of agriculture could not be merely attributed to the occupation of lands by the Manchu army and their clairvoyant chieftain's leadership. Without a certain level of familiarity in agriculture, efficient use of farming lands would have been impossible. The Jurchens' agricultural knowledge could be well reflected in the vocabulary in the Manchu language back then. For instance, different plough parts had respective nouns in the Manchu language [18].

A positive cycle was set up, with the Manchus' agricultural element in their mixed economy as a foundation. To summarize, the military invasion aided in acquiring more farmlands and thus in developing agriculture more extensively. In turn, the agricultural practices of the Manchu people

supported their military campaign. The Manchu people's long-term agricultural economy directly or indirectly led to a successful conquest of entire China.

The Jurchen armies gathered booty from their military campaign and plundered from the villages near the frontier. From this aspect, the Jurchens were similar to other steppe nomads. Nonetheless, the Manchus used the lands to develop their agriculture. The Mongols focused more on expanding their empire, sometimes neglecting to make good use of the lands they had just conquered [19]. Secondly, as compared to the Xiongnu and the Mongols, it also seemed that the Manchus were better at developing their agriculture.

On the one hand, this is attributable to the bountiful natural resources in Manchuria. The black soil in Northeast China is rich in minerals, yielding more crops. This means that per unit of land, more people could be supported. On the other hand, as elaborated above, the Manchus were more accustomed to agricultural production from their mixed economy. In contrast, the Mongols did not share such a level of sophistication in sedentary agriculture due to their original way of living—nomadic pastoralism. Shortage of food and resources subjected to weather and mobility could only be compensated by the Mongols' successive ransacks [20].

Besides agriculture, hunting was also part of the Manchu mixed economy before they entered Beijing. With hunting came the development of necessary martial skills such as archery on horseback and the ability to navigate in complex terrains. The practice of hunting could be considered one of the factors contributing to the Manchus' military success in conquering the Hans.

The Jianzhou and Haixi Jurchen mainly adopted hunting and gathering. The Yeren Jurchen living in the northernmost part of Manchuria, from the western side of the Greater Khingan mountains to the Ussuri River, relied on fishing instead of hunting. They were less developed than Jianzhou and Haixi. 'Yeren', in the Chinese language, means 'wild', a word with obviously negative connotations. However, some from Yeren also picked up hunting or gathering, given the easy access to Manchuria's vast resources mentioned in the section above. The practice of hunting continued as military training exercises for the Eight Banner soldiers or imperial recreations in the Qing dynasty [21].

Manchu hunters knew how to fight on horseback. The Manchu cavalry were fierce and aggressive forces to be afraid of by their opponents. In addition to horsemanship, mounted archery was the martial training the Manchus acquired quickly from their hunting practices. The Manchus employed archery for their survival and warfare, with many being mounted archers. The Manchu archery was discussed by Peter Dekker in his *Rediscovering Manchu Archery* [22]. The composite bow used by the Manchus during their conquest was the same as those in their daily subsistence hunting. Their bows had massive ears and heavy limbs, enabling the archers to deliver impactful and even fatal shots. This bow design stemmed from the need to hunt large-sized animals in Manchuria, such as tigers, bears and leopards. It might appear inefficient compared to those lighter bows used by the Ming army [23]. However, on the contrary, the increased weight would prove less cumbersome to the Manchu warriors already adept at hunting with such bows. Expert at fighting on horseback, the Manchu archers equipped with the Manchu bows, characterized by their power and durability, could match, if not exceed, the soldiers using firearms from the Ming. As Peter Dekker cited from Jesuit Etienne Zie in the 19th century: 'The Manchus had long emphasized mounted archery...when they first established their state their archery was as follows: they used bows of eight li draw weight (approximately 106 pounds) ... whatever they hit, they pierced, and they could even transfix two men with some power to spare [24]. Thus, hunting as the early Manchus' way of life was crucial to their mastery of martial skills, serving as a significant factor for the Manchus' conquest.

Furthermore, the Manchus had developed a sense of solidarity and learnt how to collaborate through their daily hunting in the Manchuria forests. Working with other hunters in groups could be essential for fruitful hunts. To some degree, their daily hunting lives played a foundational role in the later development of the Eight Banner system. The Eight Banner was a military and administrative

way of organizing the Manchus, invented by their leader Nurhaci and later becoming part of the Manchu identity after the Ming-Qing War [25]. Military deployments based on the Eight-Banner system became easier, given that the Manchu hunters understood how to assist each other and fight in tandem. A poem by Chen Zhilin quoted by Mark Elliott captured the discipline and incredible strength of the unified Eight-Banner warriors:

The flags of the Eight Banners darken the frosty sky.

Ten thousand horses gallop, revelling in the adverse wind. Startled ranks of geese break high.

Thunder filling the sky arises from carved bows' releases.

3. Conclusion

In summary, hunting not only supported the Manchus in Manchuria mountains and forests, where they could hunt rabbits, foxes and deer for their meat and furs but also infused them with bravery and, more importantly, skills and an edge over the Hans.

The Jurchens under the rule of the Ming were subjected to the tribute system, like other alien ethnic groups, to pledge their loyalty to the court. The natural resources gathered from the forests, like the red fox and ginseng, would be bequeathed to the Emperor. The Ming court also highly demanded horses for the military and postal relay [26]. In the meantime, the Manchus utilized the excess goods gathered from forests for commercial purposes. Qing Shi Lu recorded: "Exchanged ginseng and mink fur for food, silk, or agricultural tools. At the same time, he (Nurhaci) sent people to purchase mink fur and pearls in Haixi, Hada, and Wula to be sold in Fushun [27]." Trade profits could be used to purchase more weapons to prepare for future wars. Material and wealth accumulation from their trade paved the way for the Manchus' state-building and military campaigns. Also, some of China's metallurgy technologies diffused into Manchuria as more merchants and civilians migrated there. The Manchus' metallurgy developed tremendously under Nurhaci, as evidenced in Qing Shi: '16 armourers, 15 smiths, who were all Jurchen.'

Economic exchanges had been significant to the Mongols in the fourteenth century to fulfil their basic needs, as their hunting and nomadic life provided limited food, not to mention some luxuries the Mongol elites coveted [28]. The commercial activities between Manchus and the Chinese or the Koreans were also driven by limited resources the Manchus could acquire solely from their hunting and agriculture in Manchuria. Similarly, these exchanges facilitated interactions between different ethnic groups. Cultural and technological exchanges were accompanied by natural resource exchanges, which proved even more significant to the Manchu state-building at the end of the Ming dynasty. The Ming was aware of the dangers involved in the iron and copper trade, fearing the rise of the Manchus [29]. However, despite the restrictions imposed by the Ming, the Manchu people could still obtain essential metals from unofficial channels, thanks to their trade network [30].

Hence, as part of the mixed economy, trade was of utmost importance to the Manchus' military development but also shaped the cultural interaction between the Hans and the Manchus.

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