

BOOK REVIEW

Wang Wensheng, *White Lotus Rebels and South China Pirates: Crisis and Reform in the Qing Empire*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014.

This book studies the Qianlong-Jiaqing transition (1796–1810), a relatively neglected period in modern Chinese history. It probes some key factors that led to the rise of High Qing in the 18th century and its subsequent decline in the 19th century. It is widely known that the Qianlong emperor, in his last years, was responsible in weakening his powerful empire, but there have been arguments on the extent to which his successor's careful and conservative reforms helped restore order to imperial governance. The author, Wang Wensheng goes further than previous studies in identifying not only the White Lotus Rebellions of 1796–1804 but also the South China pirate attacks of 1802–1810 as relevant events in understanding the limits of Jiaqing's reforms. He points to the desultory but not insignificant attempts by some of the leaders of both groups to link their respective anti-regime causes. Using the two sets of events, the author suggests that the end of this period was neither the beginning of a dynastic decay nor the lull before the storm. The study shows that Emperor Jiaqing, subtly and cautiously, did reorganise the administrative machinery and regain credibility for the Qing regime. The emperor also recognised that changes in the external environment brought about by British and French interests along China's maritime frontiers required adjustments to traditional ideas of inter-state relations.

The author begins by examining the reasons Emperor Qianlong ended his aggressive long reign when he left at least one unsettled crisis for his successor to deal with. Unwilling to give up personal control over his empire's affairs, Qianlong entrusted Heshen, a young Manchu officer, whose ability to anticipate Qianlong's every wish gained the latter the most powerful position in the inner court. In time, Heshen abused his power to gather great personal wealth. Not only he became known as one of China's most corrupt officials, his period of dominance also badly corrupted the empire's highest officials. The author re-examines: why, after having Heshen condemned to death, Emperor Jiaqing did not do more to reform the key institutions that made such corruption the norm in large parts of the empire? The book draws attention to recent scholarly studies that have

asked questions about whether Jiaqing's caution was justified or whether his minimalist approach sowed the seeds of rapid decline after his reign.

The book is divided into two parts; two chapters on the view from the bottom and four others covering the view from the top.

In the bottom view, the author draws first on the research done on the unruly peoples—pressured by rapid growth of population in Central China—who moved up to the highland region bordering the three provinces of Shaanxi, Sichuan and Hubei. The region subsequently became an internal frontier filled largely with migrants from neighbouring provinces. However, despite the rapid rise of population, the government left it inadequately administered. Among the people who moved there were members of well-organised sects who espoused Bailian (White Lotus) millenarian doctrines—groups with a long history of dissent and rebellion. The author highlights that Qianlong adopted strong interventionist policies without having the military force putting these sects down. As an outcome, each local failure led the rebellions to spread and the defeats undermined the myth of invincibility that the emperor had tried hard to establish.

The author then turns to the rise of piratical activity along the coasts of Guangdong and Fujian soon after Jiaqing took over power. This was connected to the succession politics of neighbouring Annam (Vietnam) from the Tay Son regime (1771–1802) to the early years of the Nguyen dynasty (1802–1945). But there were also links with the White Lotus rebels in the north. Here again, Jiaqing emperor ordered military actions without adequate backup in manpower or funding. These failures further exposed the weakness of the empire's maritime defences at a time when British and French naval forces were seeking to advance in the South and East China Seas, looking for opportunities to break into the China market. Here the author brings a new perspective by examining these pirate activities together with the White Lotus uprisings and treating them as related challenges to the central government during the Qianlong-Jiaqing transition.

The author argues in these two chapters that a closer look at crisis-events such as the upland rebellions bordering key provinces within the empire and piratical activities along the empire's sea frontier can throw light on Qing governance and its capacity to reform under Qianlong's cautious successor.

The book then takes us to the view from the top. Chapter four examines the salient features of court politics in the declining years of Qianlong's reign, notably after he had ostensibly stepped down after fifty-nine years as emperor, out of respect to his grandfather, Emperor Kangxi who reigned for sixty years. Gradually losing his energy and focus, the ageing emperor relied more and more on Heshen, while his helpless son and

successor Jiaqing quietly looked on. Poor decisions and implementation by Heshen created a lot of trouble.

The next chapter analyses how this arrangement led to disastrous policies that aggravated living conditions in the troubled provinces, and the mistakes dragged the efforts of suppressing the White Lotus Rebellion much longer than necessary. The author closely scrutinises the debates between different groups in the inner and outer courts and describes the challenges in structuring an effective strategy to defeat the growing numbers of uprisings. It was clear that, apart from the inadequacies of the bureaucratic system, efforts to find trustworthy successors to the generation of great Bannerman commanders who had made Qianlong's reign so militarily successful for decades had been a failure.

Chapter six takes up the controversial issue of the reforms undertaken when Emperor Jiaqing took power into his own hands after Qianlong's death and Heshen's fall. He was already forty years old and had considerable experience in bureaucratic politics and the power play at court. He had able literati mandarins around him capable of advising on strong reform measures and implementations. But Jiaqing has been judged as having done little to uplift the dynasty from the dangers of dynastic decline. Was that because he was too timid or overly cautious when he could be bold and accord the dynasty a fresh start? Or were the institutions too rigid and the interests so entrenched that he could have done more than what he actually managed to? The author suggests that the questions may have missed the fact that his moderate reforms were deliberate and constructive, and that the reforms did contribute towards consolidating the power that enabled the dynasty to tackle even greater threats to its survival in the decades that followed.

In the last chapter, the author points to the fact that the dynasty had become increasingly aware that it was confronting a new set of inter-state relations, in the face of British and French ambitions in eastern Asia, as the wars in Europe were being fought in Asian oceans. Not only it had to deal with expectations of new kinds of international diplomacy, it also had to weigh the impact on traditional tributary relationships with its neighbours. What has only been highlighted by recent scholarship is that, the old hierarchical approaches were challenged by the Tay Son rebel regime in Vietnam at the end of the 18th century, and that the shifts in Sino-Vietnam relations had been effected by the new Nguyen dynastic house that crushed the Tay Son. Significantly, the Nguyen succeeded with help from the French, with forces acting outside tributary conventions. The author shows that the Qing court and its ministers were pragmatic and ready to embrace the new realities they encountered.

The book concludes by pointing to a distinctive feature of China's imperial system. Lacking the interplay of inter-state challenges that produced the considerable dynamism in European political and constitutional change, the Chinese empire needed major crises—both internal and external—to pressure its administration to reform and re-consolidate power. Each time this occurred, the rulers, the court and mandarinates had to make careful adjustments to re-balance state and societal relations in order to enable the regime to recover its authority. In this context, Jiaqing did a credible job with his cautious changes. Instead of judging the transition upon his father's death as steps towards further decline, these should be seen as timely moves that prepared the empire to deal with the far more dangerous threats afterwards. These threats included the two Opium wars of the 1840s and 1860s, and in particular, the series of major campaigns against the Taiping, the Nian and the several Moslem rebellions over a period of thirty years.

The author has skilfully argued for a re-assessment of the Qianlong-Jiaqing transition by reinterpreting the two events that dominated imperial affairs for over a decade: the White Lotus Rebellion and aggravated South Coast piracy. The juxtaposition of these events gives a fresh perspective on Jiaqing's contributions to dynastic recovery. Thus the book not only makes an important contribution to evaluating a turning-point in modern Chinese history but also points to fresh understanding of how a large centralised agrarian empire responded to threats to its stability and survival from both its inner frontiers and along its maritime borders.

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