

# Dynastic Decline, Heshen, and the Ideology of the Xianyu Reforms\*

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## ABSTRACT

This article examines the 1799-1805 Xianyu Reforms, a period of governmental reform in the wake of Emperor Jiaqing's purge of the powerful minister Heshen. Previous accounts of this event stress its Confucian form and inability to avert nineteenth-century challenges of dynastic decline. This paper, however, focuses on ideology and how new change offered not an obstacle, but an opportunity. In securing power and advancing reform, the Jiaqing court manipulated a caricatured image of Minister Heshen—and, more broadly, moral/administrative breakdown—in order to define decline and galvanize public sentiment. Creation of a polemic, classics-based vision of Heshen (decline) vs. Jiaqing (revival), reflective of a clash of cosmic forces, legitimated the attack on the minister while offering an alternative to a larger bureaucratic purge. Posing new reforms as the mirror opposite of the “Heshen Regency,” in turn, molded the shape and the focus of new reform, orienting it pragmatically toward select values and broader political incorporation of polity. The Xianyu Reforms, that is, were not shackled by tradition; they used tradition creatively.

**Key Words:** Qing Dynasty, Emperor Jiaqing (嘉慶), Heshen (和坤), Heshen Regency, Xianyu (Jiaqing) Reforms (咸與維新), dynastic decline, imperial ideology

China's early nineteenth century was a period of political transition and literati concern. Nearly simultaneous Miao, White Lotus, and pirate rebellions had erupted in the late eighteenth century, the culmination of decades of rising discontent and declining administrative efficiency. In the protracted and un-

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expectedly bitter pacifications that ensued many educated Chinese perceived something more. Twentieth century hindsight suggests that these troubles augured the beginning of the end of the Qing dynasty. Contemporaries also confronted this fear.<sup>1</sup>

This essay examines one of the most critical and poorly understood episodes of the early century turmoil, the 1799-1805 Xianyu Reforms (*Xianyu weixin* 咸與維新, also called the “Jiaqing Reforms” and “Jiaqing Restoration”). Emperor Qianlong’s 乾隆皇帝 death in 1799 sparked dramatic changes in the Chinese imperial government. His son, Emperor Jiaqing 嘉慶皇帝 (r.1796-1820), heretofore politically marginalized, seized control of government and eliminated his greatest court rival, the powerful first minister Heshen 和珅 (1750-1799). This “minimalist purge” provided a prelude to cautious fiscal, military, and moral reform framed in explicit reaction to Heshen’s rule of government.<sup>2</sup>

Existing studies of the Xianyu Reforms focus most on upon the Heshen purge and new pacification policy. Their consensus is that the tradition-bound Jiaqing court let slip a critical chance for radical change, thereby giving the rub to anxious literati’s darkest fears. Such interpretations, however, pay little attention to the *ideological* dimensions of the reforms—how the new regime treated contemporary circumstances not as an obstacle, but as an opportunity. The Jiaqing court did not suppress murmurs of doom; rather, it promoted them. Recasting recent history (particularly Heshen’s rule) in a polemic framework of dynastic decline and revival laid a classics-based cultural foundation that mobilized literati discontent, encouraged popular support, and opened alternatives to a destructive bureaucratic purge. This effort, in turn, shaped the specific Confucian form of the reforms, orienting them toward pragmatic ends of social order, fiscal viability, and national solidarity.

1. Concerning the rebellions of the early nineteenth century see, Guan Wenfa, *Jiaqing di*, pp. 373-494; and Dai Yi, ed., *Jianming Qingshi*, V.2., pp.382-477. Concerning contemporary literati fear of dynastic decline, see David Nivison, “Ho-shen and His Accusers: Ideology and Political Behavior in the Eighteenth Century”; and Mark Elvin, *Changing Stories in the Chinese World*, p.21.
2. For related writing on the Xianyu Reforms, see *Da Qing Renzong rei (Jiaqing) huangdi shilu* (hereafter: DQRRHS); *Qing Renzong yushi wenchu ji* (hereafter: QRYWJ); Nivison, “Ho-shen”; Harold Kahn, *Monarchy in the Emperor’s Eyes: Image and Reality in the Ch’ien-lung Reign*, pp.248-59; Susan Mann Jones and Philip Kuhn, “Dynastic Decline and the Roots of Rebellion,” pp.116-19; James Polachek, *The Inner Opium War*, pp.35-37; Beatrice S. Bartlett, *Monarchs and Ministers: The Grand Council in Mid-Ch’ing China, 1723-1820*; Guan Wenfa, *Jiaqing di*; Zhang Yufen, “Lun Jiaqing chunian de Xianyu Weixin” and “Jiaqing chaozheng shuping”; and Zhu Chengru, “Lun Jiaqing qingzheng hou zhongyang quanli de chongzu.”

## Signs of Decline

By the end of the eighteenth century there were classic signs of dynastic decline. Population growth, with its rivers of unruly migrants to imperial borderlands, had swelled to over 300 million. Expansion of cultivated acreage, labor-intensive farming, and New World crops aided growth for a time, but rents rose, social violence was pervasive, and some literati feared an imminent exhaustion of resources. As observer Hong Liangji 洪亮吉 (1746-1809) put it: "Heaven and Earth's way of making adjustments is flood, drought, and plagues." With uncontrolled population movement and natural disaster came further eruption of border revolt: most alarmingly, the 1795-1797 Miao rebellion in south China and the 1796-1804 White Lotus rebellion in central China. The frustrated Qing pacification that ensued revealed fundamental flaws in the dynasty's military structure, the cost of which nearly bankrupted the imperial treasury.<sup>3</sup>

Yet there was, contemporaries believed, an even more profound problem. As explicated in Confucian classics such as the *Mencius*, the integrity of the ideal social order was ultimately reliant upon society's leaders. The imputed power of rulers was deemed great as leaders strengthened not just organization that fed and housed, but also the very moral fiber of the recipients of their care. Qing thinkers, wary of the speculative excesses of the late Ming, were little inclined to proclaim the metaphysical implications of these ideas. Still they strained beneath the skin of even the most pragmatic administrative discussion. Good men create a good world: this is their innate power. In equal measure, bad men squander their Heavenly-bequeathed potential, bringing disaster in proportion to their ill-used authority.

Scholar Hong Liangqi is perhaps most famous for rearticulating this view, centering it anew in late eighteenth century literati discourse. "The deterioration of the county government is a hundred times worse than ten or twenty years ago," Hong lamented in 1798.<sup>4</sup> Where once people had lauded the integrity of

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3. Concerning contemporary problems, see Susan Naquin and Evelyn S. Rawski, *Chinese Society in the Eighteenth Century*, esp. pp.218-21. Concerning Hong Liangji's views, see the translation in Theodore de Bary and Richard Lufrano, *Sources of Chinese Tradition: From 1600 Through the Twentieth Century*, V.2, pp.176-78.

4. *Huangchao jingshi wenbian* (hereafter: HJW) 89:7b; De Bary and Lufrano, *Sources*, pp.178-79. Specifically, Hong was referring to wrongful taxation, false reporting, and arbitrary appropriation of state funds.

officials, now they merely grasped for wealth.<sup>5</sup> Nor was this only a problem of local leaders. In a famous (and nearly fatal) 1799 letter intended for the emperor, Hong pointed out similar failings with even more important imperial rulers. “Governors and governor generals of provinces act only to meet an immediate crisis. None of them are concerned about the role of the official as an exemplar; they simply concentrate on holding on to their own offices.”<sup>6</sup> Moral deterioration in government, he suggested, now extended to the very top tiers.

A shift had occurred and the result was not just the impassive “flood, drought, and plague” of a disturbed cosmos adjusting itself. There was a threat yet more personal and frightening. Speaking of the White Lotus revolt, Hong Liangji noted that “the county officials were not able to prevent the spread of heterodoxy by exerting good influences on the people, and when sectarianism spread, the officials would . . . make demands on the people and threaten their lives, until the people joined the rebels.”<sup>7</sup> Poor leadership—failing to “urge on Heaven in its work,” as Emperor Kangxi had once exhorted—had transmogrified regional revolt into a crisis of civilization. It suggested that the Qing state had become its own worst enemy: an agent of a pestilential degeneration.

Hong’s ideas are more notably for boldness than originality. Fellow men of letters harbored similar views, if more discreetly. Yan Ruyi 嚴如煜 (1759–1826), a Hunan native long troubled by the eroding moral climate of the late eighteenth century discussed the idea of decline from a historical perspective. Echoing thinkers reaching back to the Song dynasty, Yan drew upon the *Yijing* 易經 (Book of changes) to explain history as the circulation of positive (*yang* 陽) and negative (*yin* 陰) forces: powers ever grappling in a zero-sum struggle for dominance. Hence, when peace and culture waned, chaos and barbarism inevitably waxed. Yan Ruyi saw this pattern in the deterioration of the provincial borders of western Hunan, southern Shaanxi, and coastal Guangdong. In all three instances, nostalgic early Qing days of cultivated fields, classical study, and harmonious relations were eroded by strife, greed, and poor management, culminating in pervasive moral confusion and the Jiaqing wars. As he reckoned, these new conflicts signified a further (if still correctable) stage in a very alarming

5. De Bary and Lufrano, *Sources*, pp.176–77.

6. Susan Mann Jones, “Hung Liang-chi (1746–1809): the Perception and Articulation of Political Problems in Late Eighteenth Century China,” p.166. For the full translation of this letter, see pp.161–76. For an excerpted translation see de Bary and Lufrano, *Sources*, pp.172–74.

7. De Bary and Lufrano, *Sources*, p.178.

process of decline.<sup>8</sup>

The strongest early nineteenth century support for a classical vision of historical degeneration, however, came from Emperor Jiaqing himself. Enraged by the Hong Liangji's protest, Jiaqing nonetheless affirmed the cultural logic on which Hong's criticism was founded: "Officials had forced subjects to revolt" (*guan bi min fan* 官逼民反).<sup>9</sup> Here, it is not so remarkable that an emperor of China should chastise his subordinates in government. Far more striking is that, in blaming improper leaders, Emperor Jiaqing openly sanctioned the views of impertinent activists and even rebel generals! The concession says much about the new ruler, even as it set a precedent for the official depiction of the White Lotus revolt and late eighteenth-century field administration. We see, if not the man revealed, then at least his public concern and desired reaffirmation of orthodox ideals.<sup>10</sup>

### Heshen and Dynastic Decline: Pre-Reforms Views

There is little doubt that this classical rhetoric of moral failure, extending from disgruntled provincial thinkers to disgruntled new monarch, had a political purpose. The opinions inferred—and, after 1799, stated clearly—that the empire's degeneration traced most clearly to the alleged evil of one man: Minister Heshen.

Heshen was one of late eighteenth-century China's most powerful leaders. Starting from humble beginnings as an imperial guardsman in 1776, this notable enjoyed a meteoric rise under the patronage of Emperor Qianlong. A trusted subordinate, Heshen was granted appointments in the Grand Council, Board of Revenue, Grand Secretariat, and Board of Civil Office, often simultaneously holding several top ranking posts in these offices. This authority, later combined with further influence in the Board of Civil Office and Board of Punishments, lent the minister a stature and power second only to emperors Qianlong

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8. For Yan Ruyi's *Yijing*-based views on borderland history, see *Sanshengbian fangbei lan* 12: 44a; and Daniel McMahon, "Restoring the Garden: Yan Ruyi and the Civilizing of China's Internal Frontiers, 1795-1805," pp.68-80, 170-77, 290-93.

9. *Kanjing jiaofei shupian*, pp.1-4; Polechek, *Inner Opium War*, pp.36-37. Concerning Jiaqing's criticism of official corruption, with implications for dynasty decline, see DQRHS, *juan* 38 and QRYWJ, *juan* 5.

10. Zhang Yufen, "Jiaqing chaozheng," p.210.