



On the Trail of the Yellow Tiger: War, Trauma, and Social Dislocation in Southwest China during the Ming-Qing Transition by Kenneth M. Swope.

Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 2018. Pp. xx, 429. ISBN 978-0-8032-4995-0.

Review by Xing Hang, Brandeis University (xinghang@brandeis.edu).

Sinologist and military historian Kenneth Swope (Univ. of Southern Mississippi) has written a vivid and harrowing account of seventeenth-century China caught in the traumatic and protracted transition from the Ming Dynasty (1368–1644) to the Manchu-dominated Qing Dynasty (1644–1912). There is a considerable body of scholarship on this subject, but most of it takes a top-down view, focusing on efforts of state or quasi-state actors to consolidate control of the country, including the maritime Zheng commercial enterprise (1628–83) in the southeast. Swope, by contrast, emphasizes the role of commoners in the remote southwestern borderlands of the empire, with special attention to the rise and fall of Zhang Xianzhong, one of the two main rebel leaders who touched off the events resulting in the downfall of the Ming. He also examines Zhang's legacy for the dynastic transition and beyond.

Swope highlights the dichotomy between traditional, Confucian-inspired historians who portray Zhang as a killing machine who left behind rivers of blood and mountains of corpses and present-day scholars in the People's Republic of China who see him as a class hero struggling against the decadent, feudal Ming elite. Swope takes a more nuanced view, casting Zhang as a rebel who had to negotiate broader circumstances beyond his (or any individual's) control, notwithstanding his personal force of will. Even his emergence in northwestern China during the 1620s was the result of both natural disasters and an acute shortage of government funds, which were mostly being diverted to contain the Manchu threat northeast of Beijing.

The author shows that Zhang began his career as a kind of social bandit seeking to cancel the gross class inequalities prevalent at the time. While state coffers shrank, greedy and corrupt officials and imperial relatives like the Prince of Shu amassed huge fortunes and lived in lavish palaces. By confiscating and redistributing their properties, Zhang won over a sizable following and the firm allegiance of many scholars. He managed to carve out a territorial base in southwestern China's Sichuan Province, known as "Heaven's Storehouse" for its bountiful natural endowments. In October 1644, several months after the Ming Dynasty fell to his rival, the rebel peasant leader Li Zicheng, Zhang proclaimed himself the ruler of the Great Western Kingdom and instituted the trappings of a bureaucracy and revenue system. But the rebel leader's violent and psychopathic tendencies worsened over time. Zhang began severely punishing officials and commoners alike for the slightest perceived infractions or just the sheer joy of it.

Swope details Zhang's ghastly atrocities, including rape, torture, mass executions, and dismemberment and maiming of his victims. Famines and epidemics further ravaged the land, causing the price of food and other necessities to skyrocket. By the time Manchu prince Haoge hunted down and killed Zhang in 1647, Sichuan Province had undergone drastic depopulation: empty cities, abandoned houses, and rotting corpses littered the landscape.

In the environs of the capital [of Sichuan, Chengdu], it was said that only one or two out of every thousand survived. One could travel hundreds of *li* [1 *li* = ca. 600 meters] without seeing cooking

fires or any signs of human inhabitation. Some of the few people still left alive were missing hands or other body parts as a result of Zhang's policies, grim reminders of his bloody rule. Trees and weeds overran the cities, and tigers routinely prowled their desolate lanes and alleys. (141)

Among the survivors who remained in the province, many of them hid and lived like animals for decades in the dense forests and mountains. Swope recounts the story of "two wild people whose fingernails were so sharp that they could take down deer with them.... [Others'] bodies became covered with fur as they reverted to a more natural state" (141-42). To survive, common people consumed wild grasses and animal remains, or even resorted to cannibalism. Swope consistently evokes the human costs of political chaos and warfare.

Although contemporary writers who lived through the dynastic transition tended to exclusively blame Zhang Xianzhong for the killing sprees, Swope correctly notes that the death and suffering continued for decades *after his demise*. A prolonged conflict between his remnant followers, the Southern Ming, and the Manchus throughout the 1650s exacerbated the plight of the common people in southwestern China. Both parties to the struggle, suffering acute shortages of revenues and supplies, engaged in plunder, killing, looting, burning, and rape. These atrocities spread from Sichuan to neighboring Guizhou and Yunnan provinces. Behind the scramble for resources lay an empire-wide depression marked by the same extended deflation that had contributed to the initial collapse of the Ming in Beijing in 1644. Swope could have made his narrative even more compelling by more closely linking his empirical observations to the broader economic situation in China and elsewhere in the world, including the impact of declining silver imports from Japan and the Americas.

In the second half of the book, Swope discusses Zhang's posthumous influence on events during the Ming-Qing transition. Two of his "adopted sons," Sun Kewang and Li Dingguo, carried their dead leader's military power to greater levels of sophistication by learning from his mistakes. Ironically, they joined forces with the Southern Ming troops and upheld the pretender Yongli. Swope correctly labels this a military alliance rather than a submission, since Sun and Li maintained their chains of command and bases in Guizhou and Yunnan. Whether driven by opportunism, desperation, or a desire to restore Han Chinese rule and expel the barbarian Manchus, these bandit leaders, whose rebellion initially destabilized the Ming, eventually became the final, most successful guardians of the tottering dynasty. Indeed, until the mid-1650s, they played an instrumental role in stabilizing the Yongli court. Sun Kewang was an excellent administrator and established a rational revenue collection system in Yunnan. In a series of brilliant campaigns, Li Dingguo, a master at strategy, inflicted heavy defeats upon Qing forces, killing several top commanders and princes, and making significant territorial gains. The Yongli emperor provided the symbolism and legitimacy around which the entire movement cohered.

However, as Swope argues, the regional militarization and warlordism that had enabled the rise of Zhang Xianzhong and Li Zicheng continued to hamper effective cooperation between Sun Kewang and Li Dingguo. Their independent bases of power reflected their distinct personalities. Chinese historians typically criticize Sun for striving to undermine Li's initiatives at every turn, triggering open internecine warfare in 1656. Swope, on the other hand, also blames Li Dingguo for not seeking Sun's administrative expertise and for stealing his top commanders. Meanwhile, Yongli proved too weak-willed to mediate and provide leadership when it was most needed. By 1657, the cooperation had fallen apart. Sun surrendered to the Manchus and Yongli and his entourage fled to Myanmar two years later. Li Dingguo made foolhardy and costly attempts to bring the ruler back to Yunnan. In 1661, Qing forces under Wu Sangui captured Yongli and executed him in the provincial capital of Kunming. Around the same time, Li Dingguo died a bitter and lonely

man on the China-Myanmar border, ending the major Ming loyalist resistance against the Manchus on the Chinese mainland.

Despite their ultimate failure, Zhang Xianzhong and the Southern Ming organized the southwestern frontier population into a cohesive unit for taxation and military mobilization purposes. Wu Sangui built on this foundation to forge his own autonomous enterprise, which culminated in his failed insurrection against the Qing in 1674. Li Dingguo worked closely with the southwest tribal groups, like the Lolo and Miao contingents, and adopted their practice of using war elephants. In fact, when Qing forces entered Yunnan, the most unwavering demonstrations of loyalty to the Ming came from the semi-autonomous *tusi* chieftains. The Kuidong 13, or the Yao-Huang bandits, for instance, continued their resistance against the Manchus from their mountain stockades on the Sichuan-Huguang border until their final elimination in 1664, well after the deaths of Yongli and Li Dingguo. The difficulties of subjugating the *tusi* prompted the Qing to enact the policy of *gaitu guiliu* (conversion of autonomous units into regular administrative divisions) during the eighteenth century. Unfortunately, Swope provides only tantalizing hints of these profound legacies for the Qing, despite their relevance to his key arguments.

Kenneth Swope's book offers a masterful analysis of the strategies and tactics of the main players in a brutal, multilayered conflict, including peasant rebels, the Southern Ming, and the Manchu Qing. He could have reinforced his arguments by elaborating on the broader trends that swept China during the Ming-Qing transition. But this is a minor critique. *On the Trail of the Yellow Tiger* is a lucid, often thrilling treatment of its subject; it will appeal to both scholarly and general audiences.