The Ming Empire in China (1368–1600)

The Ming Dynasty was founded by a man who lived through the disorder of the late Yuan and knew poverty firsthand. His efforts to impose order on Chinese society sometimes took draconian forms, but his thirty-year reign brought China peace and stability. Although he and some of his successors treated officials cruelly, in time competition to join officialdom surpassed Song levels. Literati culture was especially vibrant in the economically well-developed Jiangnan region, south of the lower Yangzi River. As population increased, both rural and urban areas took on distinctive traits. Rural areas differed greatly by region, with powerful lineages, tenancy, and absentee landlords much more common in some areas than others. The merchant-centered culture of cities found expression in vernacular fiction and drama, published in increasing quantity and accessible even to those with rudimentary educations.

Since the Ming Dynasty was succeeded by a non-Chinese conquest dynasty (the Qing Dynasty of the Manchus, 1644–1911), the Ming was the last of the native dynasties. Historians have therefore often turned to it for a baseline against which modern change has been judged. How did China compare to western Europe in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries? Had China already begun to fall behind western Europe in technology, standard of living, or pace of change? At the local level, were communities becoming more integrated into the realm as standardizing policies and economic linkages spread? Or were they becoming more diverse as the economy developed in different directions in different places? A related set of questions concerns the government and the educated elite. How effective and how adaptable was the government? Why did educated men continue to seek office when the government so often
treated them poorly? What was the impact on the educated class of the changes in the examination system and the explosion of printing?

THE FOUNDING OF THE MING DYNASTY

The founder of the Ming Dynasty, Zhu Yuanzhang (1328–1398), started life at the bottom of society. His parents often moved to look for work or evade rent collectors. His home region in Anhui province was hit by drought and then plague in the 1340s, and when he was only sixteen years old, his father, oldest brother, and brother’s wife all died, leaving two penniless boys with three bodies to bury. A neighbor let them bury them in his field, but they had no way to provide coffins or anything to eat. With no relatives to turn to, Zhu Yuanzhang asked a monastery to take him on as a novice. The monastery was short of funds itself, as its tenants could not pay their rent, and in less than two months, Zhu was sent out to beg for food. For the next three to four years, he traveled widely through central China. Not until he returned to the monastery did he learn to read.

A few years later, in 1351, a millenarian sect known as the Red Turbans rose in rebellion. The Red Turbans were affiliated with the White Lotus Society, whose teachings drew on Manichean ideas of the incompatibility of the forces of good and evil and the cult of the Maitreya Buddha, who would in the future bring his paradise to earth to relieve human suffering. The Red Turbans met with considerable success, even defeating Mongol cavalry. In the course of fighting the rebels, the Yuan government troops burned down Zhu Yuanzhang’s temple. Zhu, then twenty-four, joined the rebels. The leaders of the Red Turbans were men of modest origins, and Zhu Yuanzhang rose quickly among them. One of the commanders let Zhu marry his daughter. Within a couple of years, Zhu had between twenty thousand and thirty thousand men fighting under him.

At this time there were strongmen all over China—some rebels, some loyal to the Yuan, but all trying to maintain control of a local base. Zhu quickly attracted some literati advisers who thought he had a chance to be the final victor and hoped to help shape his government. They encouraged him to gradually distance himself from the Red Turbans, whose millenarian beliefs did not appeal to the educated elite. In 1356 Zhu took Nanjing, made it his base, and tried to win over the local population by disciplining his soldiers.

Many of Zhu’s followers developed into brilliant generals, and gradually they defeated one rival after another. In 1368 his armies took the Yuan capital (which the Yuan emperor and his closest followers had vacated just days before). Then forty years old, Zhu Yuanzhang declared himself emperor of the Ming Dynasty. The word ming, meaning bright, resonated with the Manichean strain in Red Turban ideology. His first reign period he called Hongwu (“abundantly martial”), and since he did not change the name of his reign period for the rest of his thirty-year reign, he is often referred to as the Hongwu emperor. It became the custom from this point on for emperors not to change their reign period names. Zhu Yuanzhang’s posthumous temple name (the name used in the sacrifices to him after his death) is Taizu, so he is also called Ming Taizu.

Ming Taizu

In the milieu in which Taizu grew up, the deities in Daoist temples labeled “emperors,” such as the Yellow Emperor and the Emperor of the Eastern Peak, provided a folk image of imperial rule. Taizu seems to have taken these divine autocrats as his model and did everything he could to elevate the position of emperor to their level. He required his officials to kneel when addressing him, and he did not hesitate to have them beaten in open court. He issued instructions to be read aloud to villagers, telling them to be filial to their parents, live in harmony with
their neighbors, work contentedly at their occupations, and refrain from evil.

Taizu wanted a world in which everyone obeyed their superiors and those who committed evil acts were promptly punished. In order to lighten the weight of government exactions on the poor, he ordered a full-scale registration of cultivated land and population so that labor service and tax obligations could be assessed more fairly. Taizu called for the drafting of a new law code and took it through five revisions. He had legal experts compare every statute in it to the Tang code in his presence, but he made the final decisions.

Some Yuan practices Taizu retained. One was the strengthening of the provinces as the administrative layer between the central government and the prefectures. The creation of provinces should not be viewed as a decentralization of power, but a way for the central government to increase its supervision of the prefectures and counties. Another Yuan practice that Taizu retained was use of hereditary service obligations for artisan households that had to supply the palace or government as their tax obligation. The army too made use of hereditary households. Centuries earlier, during the Northern and Southern Dynasties, armies composed of men with inherited obligations to serve had been common. Among the non-Chinese in the north, the status was an honorable one, but in the south, the status became despised. In the Tang, the divisional militia, with its hereditary obligations, had worked well for a half-century, but then it was supplanted by recruited professional armies, a practice the Song retained. The Mongols, however, made military service a hereditary obligation as they did so much else, and the Ming took over this practice.

Under Taizu, the Ming army reached 1 million soldiers, drawn from the armies that had fought for control of China as well as some conscripts and some convicts. Once their families had been classed as military households, the family was responsible for supplying one soldier in succession, replacing ones who were injured, died, or deserted. Garrisons were concentrated along the northern border and near the capital, each garrison allocated a tract of land that the soldiers took turns cultivating to supply their own food, a system that had been repeatedly tried since the Han Dynasty. Although in theory this system should have supplied the Ming with a large but inexpensive army, the reality was less satisfactory. Just as in earlier dynasties, garrisons were rarely self-sufficient, men compelled to become soldiers did not necessarily make good fighting men, and desertion was difficult to prevent.

Many of the soldiers in the Ming army were Mongols in Mongol units. Although anti-Mongol sentiment was strong among the rebels, Taizu recognized that the Yuan Dynasty had had the Mandate of Heaven and told Mongols that they would be welcome in his dynasty: “Those Mongols and Inner Asians who live on our land also are our children, and those among them who possess talent and ability also shall be selected and appointed to office by us.”1 Taizu did not try to conquer the Mongols, and Ming China did not extend into modern Inner Mongolia. Where it did expand was to the southwest. In the 1380s Ming took control of modern Yunnan and created the new province of Guizhou east of it.

Taizu had twenty-six sons, several in their teens by the time he became emperor, and he took measures to see that they and their descendants would not interfere in the government. The princes were sent out of the capital to fiefs, and Taizu issued rules that they and their descendants were not to take examinations, serve in office, or follow any sort of career other than specified military assignments. They were to live outside the capital, supported by government stipends.

Taizu had deeply ambivalent feelings about men of education and sometimes brutally humiliated them in open court. His behavior was so erratic that most likely he suffered from some

---

form of mental illness. In 1376 Taizu had thousands of officials killed because they were found to have taken a shortcut in their handling of paperwork related to the grain tax. In 1380 Taizu concluded that his chancellor, Hu Weiyong, was plotting to assassinate him. Anyone remotely connected to him was executed, the investigations taking nearly a decade, with as many as fifteen thousand people losing their lives. From 1380 on, Taizu acted as his own chancellor, dealing directly with the heads of departments and ministries.

As Taizu became more literate, he realized that scholars could criticize him in covert ways, using phrases that had double meanings or that sounded like words for "bandit," "monk," or the like. Even poems in private circulation could be used as evidence of subversive intent. When literary men began to avoid official life, Taizu made it illegal to turn down appointments or resign from office. He began falling into rages only his wife, Empress Ma, could stop. After her death in 1382, no one could calm him.

Chengzu

Taizu lived a long life, to seventy-one sui, outliving his eldest son, who had been his heir apparent. He made that son's eldest son the next heir, and this grandson succeeded to the throne at the age of twenty-one. (He is known as Huidi, or the Jianwen emperor.) Almost immediately, however, the eldest of Taizu's surviving sons by the empress, a man known then as the Prince of Yan, launched a military campaign to take the throne himself. After a three year civil war, he prevailed. He is known as Chengzu, or the Yongle emperor (r. 1403–1425).

Chengzu was a military man, like his father, and he was married to the daughter of a leading general, who encouraged his military interests. He directed the civil war himself and often led troops into battle, leading to victories over the Mongols. In 1406 he authorized a major expedition into Vietnam, which had been independent for over four centuries. Although the campaign was a success, the region was held only two decades. Also like his father, Chengzu was willing to use terror to keep government officials in line. Quite a few officials serving Huidi resisted his usurpation. When the leading Confucian scholar, Fang Xiaoru, refused to draft the proclamation of his accession, Chengzu not only had him executed by dismemberment, but had his relatives and associates to the tenth degree executed as well, including all those who had been passed when he conducted the civil service examinations. Tens of thousands were killed.

Yet Chengzu also had impressive accomplishments. He put two thousand scholars to work making a 50-million word (22,938-chapter) compendium of knowledge, drawn from seven thousand books (the Yongle Encyclopedias). To assist those studying for the civil service examinations, he had a selection of texts from the Cheng-Zhu school of Confucianism compiled. He expanded and regularized the court diplomatic system.

Early in his reign, Chengzu decided to move the capital from Nanjing to Beijing, which had been his own base as a prince, as well as the capital during Yuan times. Construction employed hundreds of thousands of workers and lasted from 1407 to 1420. Although little of the original city walls and gates survives today, the palace complex remains, its layout and architecture still reflecting the fifteenth-century design. The city was a planned city, like Chang'an in Sui-Tang times, built near the site of the Yuan capital, but starting afresh. Like Chang'an, it was built on a north-south axis and consisted of boxes within boxes. The main outer walls were forty feet high and nearly fifteen miles around, pierced by nine gates. Inside it was the Imperial City, with government offices, and within that the Forbidden City, the palace itself, with close to ten thousand rooms. The main audience halls were arranged along the central axis, with vast courtyards between them where attending officials would stand or kneel. The design, as intended, awes all who enter.

The areas surrounding Beijing were not nearly as agriculturally productive as those around
Nanjing. To supply Beijing with grain, the Grand Canal was extensively renovated, broadening and deepening it and supplying it with more locks and dams. The fifteen thousand boats and one hundred sixty thousand soldiers of the transport army, who pulled loaded barges from the tow paths along the canal, became the lifeline of the capital.

Weaknesses of the Imperial Institution

Ming Taizu had decreed that succession should go to the eldest son of the empress, or the latter's eldest son if he predeceased his father, the system generally, but not inflexibly, followed by earlier dynasties. In Ming times, the flaws in this system became apparent as one mediocre, obtuse, or erratic emperor followed another. Yinzong (r. 1436–1450), who came to the throne at age eight, liked to play soldier; with the encouragement of his favorite eunuch, he led an army against the Mongols when he was twenty-one years old, leading to the destruction of his fifty-thousand-man army and his own capture. The Mongols found him so useless that they returned him the next year, after his brother had been enthroned. Xianzong (r. 1465–1488), after coming to the throne at age sixteen, let himself be manipulated by a palace lady almost twenty years his senior; she had his children born to other women systematically killed. Wuzong (r. 1505–1521) willfully defied established practices and spent much of his time drunk. Shizong (r. 1522–1567) refused to treat his predecessor as his adoptive father. Subject to fits of rage, he was so cruel to his palace ladies that a group of them tried to murder him in 1542. In 1565 the brave official Hai Rui submitted a memorial saying the emperor had failed as a man, a father, and a ruler and had been a disaster for the country. Shenzong, the Wanli emperor (r. 1573–1620), was intelligent but refused to hold court for years at a time and allowed memorials to pile up unopened and vacancies to go unfilled.

Because Ming Taizu had abolished the position of chancellor, the emperor had to turn to members of the inner court to help him. At first, relatively junior men in the Hanlin Academy served as secretaries, a practice that became regularized as a kind of cabinet of grand secretaries. Although they were given concurrent titles as vice ministers to enhance their standing, their lack of actual administrative experience hampered their dealings with the outer court. Added to this, they had to work with the eunuchs to manage the flow of paperwork, and some of the stigma attached to eunuchs spilled over to them.

Eunuchs became as serious a problem in Ming times as they had in late Han and late Tang. From the time of Ming Taizu on, eunuchs were employed in the palace, their numbers gradually growing. As in earlier dynasties, emperors often preferred the always compliant eunuchs to high-minded, moralizing civil service officials. A eunuch bureaucracy developed, headed by the director of ceremonial, who was responsible for seeing that the emperor was attended at all times, that security was maintained, and that documents were properly handled. When the emperor allowed it, the director of ceremonial became a kind of chief of staff who could impose his will on the civil service. In 1420 Chengzu set up the Eastern Depot, headed by a eunuch, which acted as a secret service and investigated cases of suspected corruption and sedition. During the late fifteenth century, the eunuch bureaucracy grew as large as the civil service, each with roughly twelve thousand positions. After 1500, the eunuch bureaucracy grew much more rapidly and by the mid-sixteenth century, seventy thousand eunuchs were in service throughout the country, with ten thousand in the capital. Eunuch control over vital government processes, such as appointments, was especially a problem during the long reign of the derelict Shenzong (1573–1620).

Confucian writers generally vilified eunuchs, as though they were by nature evil, and rarely showed sympathy for their unfortunate circumstances. Eunuchs were essentially slaves. Many were acquired by dubious means as children, often from non-Chinese areas in the south, and
once they were castrated, they had no option but to serve the imperial family. Zheng He, for instance, was taken from Yunnan as a boy of ten by a Ming general assigned the task of securing boys to be castrated. Society considered eunuchs the basest of servants and heaped scorn on them.

What was a conscientious official to do, given the flaws in the Ming government? Officials serving in local posts could do their best to make the government work, even when they knew that needed reforms would not be made. Some, discouraged, left office after a few years. If they had enough property to live on, they could enjoy the status of retired official and concentrate on matters more within their control, such as writing local histories or collecting works of calligraphy.

Although the educated public complained about the performance of emperors, no one proposed or even imagined alternatives to imperial rule. High officials were forced to find ways to work around uncooperative emperors but were not able to put in place institutions that would limit the damage an emperor could do. They came to prefer weak emperors who let them take care of the government, knowing that strong emperors often acted erratically. Probably one of the reasons so many Ming emperors resisted their officials' efforts to manage them was that the officials were indeed trying to keep emperors engaged in tasks where they could do relatively little harm.

Many officials did in fact risk their careers, and sometimes their lives, trying to admonish emperors. The tradition of protesting against evil officials, harmful policies, and wrong-headed imperial decisions was strong throughout the Ming, though it rarely led to the results the protesters sought. In 1376 when Taizu asked for criticism, Ye Boju submitted a memorial objecting to harsh punishment of officials for minor lapses. In it he noted that many officials considered themselves fortunate to be out of office. Taizu, incensed, had Ye brought to the capital in chains and let him starve to death in prison. A few decades later, many of Huidi’s top officials protested Chengzu’s usurpation, with dire consequences to themselves and their families. In 1519 when Emperor Wuzong announced plans to make a tour to the southern provinces, he was flooded with memorials objecting to his decision. Over a hundred officials staged a protest by kneeling in front of the palace. Wuzong was outraged and ordered the officials to remain kneeling for three days, after which he had them flogged; eleven died. A few years later, in 1524, during the crisis over Shizong’s refusal to treat the previous emperor as his adopted father, hundreds of officials again gathered at the palace gate. The emperor had 134 of them imprisoned, and 16 died of the floggings they received. The Confucian tradition celebrated these acts of political protest as heroic. Rarely, however, did they succeed in moving an emperor to change his mind; more often they exacerbated factional tensions within the government.

DIPLOMACY AND DEFENSE

The Ming government faced both new and old challenges along its borders. Until 1600 and the rise of the Manchus, the Ming looked on the Mongols as their primary military threat. The coast at this time was presenting new challenges. Ming China was being drawn more deeply into maritime trading networks, which brought both piracy and new sources of wealth.

Early in the Ming, the government expanded and regularized the court diplomatic system, trying to make it conform to the idealized view of how it had functioned in the Han and Tang dynasties, when China had dominated East Asia, rather than in Song times, when a multi-state system had operated and Song had paid tribute to its northern neighbors. To the Ming court, the arrival of envoys from dozens of countries, bringing their strange or valuable goods with them, served to confirm China’s moral centrality. As in earlier dynasties, countries that sent missions had their own agendas and were as eager to benefit from the trade that the missions made possible as to stay on China’s
good side. Vietnam, for instance, regularly sent missions to the Ming court after it expelled the Ming invaders.

Zheng He’s Voyages

It was in order to invite more countries to send missions that Emperor Chengzu authorized an extraordinary series of voyages to the Indian Ocean under the command of the Muslim eunuch Zheng He (1371–1433). Zheng He’s father had made the Hajj to Mecca, and the voyages followed old Arab trade routes. The first of the seven voyages was made by a fleet of 317 ships, of which 62 were huge “treasure ships,” 440 feet long. Each expedition involved from twenty thousand to thirty-two thousand men. Their itineraries included stops in Vietnam, Malaysia, islands of Indonesia, Sri Lanka, India, and, in the later voyages, Hormuz on the coast of Persia and east Africa (see Map 14.1). At each stop, Zheng He would go ashore to visit rulers, transmit messages of China’s peaceful intentions, and bestow lavish gifts. Rulers were invited to come to China or send envoys, many of whom were accommodated on the return voyages. Chengzu was delighted in the exotic things the fleet brought back, such as giraffes and lions from Africa, fine cotton cloth from India, and gems and spices from Southeast Asia. These expeditions were not voyages of discovery; they followed established routes and pursued diplomatic, not commercial, goals.

Why were these voyages abandoned? Officials complained of their cost and modest return. As a consequence, after 1474, all of the remaining ships with three or more masts were broken up and used for lumber. Not long after that, the more modest expeditions of Vasco de Gama and Christopher Columbus changed the course of world history.

The Mongols and the Great Wall

The early Ming emperors held Mongol fighting men in awe and saw in them the potential for another great military machine of the sort Chinggis had put together. Both Taizu and Chengzu were determined to avoid the fate of the Song Dynasty, which had to pay off its powerful northern neighbors. Both emperors personally led armies into Mongolia. Chengzu, in fact, died on his fifth campaign in 1424, at age sixty-four.

As it turned out, the Mongols in Ming times never formed the sort of federation that could have seriously threatened China. After the last Yuan emperor retreated to Mongolia, he did not find it easy to keep the Mongols united under his leadership, since his loss of China discredited him. Ensuing Mongol civil wars weakened Mongolia and led to division. Through much of the Ming, the 3 million or so Mongols were loosely divided into six groups, located in today’s Inner Mongolia, Manchuria, Mongolia, or north of those areas. Under Taizu and Chengzu, the Ming sent large and well-provisioned armies into Mongol territory, with as many as two hundred fifty thousand troops. Such campaigns were extremely expensive and did not accomplish much, given the Mongols’ mobility. Later in the dynasty, the Ming was less inclined to send armies into Mongolia and concentrated on defending its borders against attack.

Although in Ming times, the Mongols were never united in a pan-Mongol federation, groups of Mongols could and did raid, and twice they threatened the dynasty: in 1449, when Esen, the khan of the Western Mongols, captured the emperor, and in 1550, when Beijing was surrounded by the forces of Altan Khan, khan of the Mongols in Inner Mongolia. The Ming was very reluctant to grant any privileges to Mongol leaders, such as trading posts along the borders, and wanted the different groups of Mongols to trade only through the envoy system. Repeatedly Mongol envoys said friction could be reduced if regularized trade could be introduced, but until 1570, when an agreement was reached with Altan Khan, the Ming court refused.

Two important developments shaped later Ming-Mongol relations: the building of the Great Wall and the Mongols’ forging of close ties
with Tibetan Buddhism. Work on the wall began by the mid-fifteenth century, when administrators of the western sections of the border began connecting principal garrison points and had some successes in trapping contingents of Mongol cavalry. Extending the wall was later seen as a solution to the deadlock between officials who argued that the Mongols could be managed by allowing more trade and those who insisted that no concessions be made to them.

Much of the Ming Great Wall survives today. It is about 1,500 miles long, from northeast of Beijing into Gansu province. In the eastern 500 miles, the walls average about 35 feet high and 20 feet across, with towers every half-mile for lookout. The wall itself is faced with brick much of the way, giving it an imposing appearance that greatly impressed the first westerners who saw it.

Although there was considerable trade between Tibet and China through Sichuan and
Yunnan, Ming China did not have close diplomatic ties to Tibet, then largely ruled by the major monasteries. When Tibetan monasteries needed military assistance, they called for help from competing Mongol leaders, and many struggles were decided by Mongol military intervention. Tsong-kha-pa (1357–1419) founded the Yellow Hat or Gelug-pa sect, whose heads later became known as the Dalai Lamas. In 1577 the third Dalai Lama accepted the invitation of Altan Khan to visit Mongolia, and the khan declared Tibetan Buddhism to be the official religion of all the Mongols. The Dalai Lama gave the khan the title “King of Religion” and the khan swore that the Mongols would renounce blood sacrifice. When the third Dalai Lama’s reincarnation was found to be the great-grandson of Altan Khan, the ties between Tibet and Mongol, not surprisingly, became even stronger.

Trade and Piracy Along China’s Coasts

The Ming court’s obsession with defending against the Mongols was not because its other borders posed no problems. The court wanted trade subordinated to diplomacy and stipulated that envoys from the Philippines were supposed to enter only through the port of Fuzhou, those from Japan only through Ningbo, those from Indonesia only through Guangzhou, and so on. Moreover, the size and frequency of missions was restricted; Japanese embassies, for instance, were not to call more than once in ten years or bring more than two ships with three hundred men. In the sixteenth century, this formal system proved unable to contain the emergence of an international East Asian maritime trading community composed of Japanese, Portuguese, Spanish, Dutch, and Chinese merchants and adventurers. Because the profits to be had from maritime trade were high, both open and clandestine trade took place all along the coast.

Boats leaving China carried silk and porcelains; those entering it brought silver from Peruvian and Mexican mines, transported via Manila, to pay for the Chinese goods. Boats laden with goods attracted pirates. Pirates grew so strong that they took to raiding the coast from Shandong to Guangzhou. Instead of trying to suppress the pirates by expanding its navy, the Ming government forced people to move away from the coast, hoping to starve out the pirates. Anti-pirate efforts did not have much success until maritime trade restrictions were eased in the late sixteenth century. Under the new policies, Portugal was permitted to set up a trading base at Macao in 1557, a base it held until 1999.

Besides stimulating the Ming economy, the expansion of maritime trade brought New World crops to China. Sweet potatoes, maize, peanuts, tomatoes, chili peppers, tobacco, and other crops were quickly introduced into China. Sweet potatoes and maize in particular facilitated population growth because they could be grown on land that had not been cultivated because it was too sandy or too steep. Spanish and Portuguese ships also began to bring missionaries, with radically different sets of ideas about the nature of the world (see Connections: Europe Enters the Scene).

SOCIAL AND CULTURAL TRENDS

From the founding of the Ming until about 1500, China recovered from the wars and dislocations of the Yuan period, and attempts were made to stabilize society. By the sixteenth century, however, Chinese society and culture were breaking free of many of the restraints that the early Ming government had tried to impose on them, and social and cultural change sped up.

The Educated Class and the Examination Life

Despite the harsh and arbitrary ways in which Ming emperors treated their civil servants, educated men were as eager to enter the bureaucracy as in earlier ages. As discussed in Chapter 12, civil service examinations played only a very small part in the recruitment of officials during the Yuan period. In Ming times, the examinations