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The Ming Dynasty (1368-1644)

The Rise of Zhu Yuanzhang, the First Ming Emperor

Zhu Yuanzhang (r. 1368-1398)

The founder of the Ming dynasty, Zhu Yuanzhang, was born in 1328 into an impoverished family of landless agricultural workers in the present-day province of Anhui in southeast China. There was a story that around the time of his conception, his mother dreamt that a divine being put a glowing tablet into her palm. After she swallowed it, a fragrance remained in her mouth. When he was born, a red light filled the room. When neighbours saw the flaming red light at night, they came to help the family to put out the fire, but there was no fire. Such tales of supernatural occurrences surrounding men of humble origin who founded dynasties were not uncommon; their invention satisfied popular expectation.

When Zhu was sixteen, he lost his parents and brothers during a time of drought, pestilence, and famine. His distress was compounded by not having the money to afford a burial plot for them. Fortunately, a kind villager came to his aid, giving him a piece of land for the purpose. Left utterly alone, he became a novice at a local Buddhist temple, felicitously named the Temple of the Awakening Emperor. Soon after, he had to leave the temple because it was no longer able to support him. He became a mendicant, wandering about and experiencing fully the bitterness and hardship of such an insecure life at the bottom of society. Another story relates that when he was ill and alone on his travels, two mysterious purple-robed beings attended to all his needs and disappeared when he recovered. This story may have originated with Zhu himself, to support the claim of his heaven-ordained royal destiny, since the colour purple was associated with royalty in traditional China. In 1348, he returned to the temple, where he learned to read, remaining there for the next few years.

In 1352, when he was twenty-four, flames of rebellion against the Yuan were spreading like wildfire in southern China, engulfing the locality where Zhu Yuanzhang was living. The government troops sent to

suppress the uprisings burnt down his temple. The Yuan commander, too timid to fight the rebels, seized instead innocent civilians, presenting them as insurgents to claim the rewards. Although Zhu did not express resentment against Mongol rule on ethnic grounds, the authorities' actions destroyed his livelihood and jeopardized his personal safety. For the sake of staying alive, he joined the local band of Red Turbans, a rebel peasant movement seeking to overthrow the Yuan.

Among the Red Turbans, Zhu was in his element, 'like a fish who had found water'. He soon distinguished himself in bravery and resourcefulness. One of the leaders of the movement, Guo Zixing, noticed Zhu's exceptional ability, brought him into the inner leadership circle, and offered him the hand of his foster daughter in marriage. She would become the future Empress Ma, who would exercise a positive, moderating influence on Zhu, who turned out to be an autocratic emperor.

The success of the Red Turbans raised alarm at the Yuan court. In 1353, the Yuan prime minister Tuo Tuo assembled an enormous army, reportedly one million strong, its marching columns stretching for hundreds of miles, with flags flying and the sound of its drums reverberating into the wilderness. He led it himself, in a determined effort to crush the rebels. Just as he was making some progress, the Yuan emperor foolishly yielded to the intrigue of Tuo Tuo's enemies at court, and relieved him of his command. The Yuan forces were instantly thrown into great confusion, while the hitherto hard-pressed anti-government forces immediately took advantage of the situation to regroup, consolidate, and expand their territory.

Not all Chinese who joined the fray were on the side of the anti-government rebels. Several Chinese landlords responded to the court's call to raise vigilantes to defend themselves, and to fight the insurgents. They fought against the Red Turbans, who were deemed 'lawless bandits', threatening the traditional social order from which they benefited. Some who joined up were opportunists, who took advantage of the general disorder to carve out territories for themselves as local or regional 'strong men', without necessarily obeying the command of the court. Although there were still areas held by Mongol military aristocrats in pockets of southern China, they were gradually taken over by the Chinese warlords or militarists, whom the Chinese referred to as *qun xion*, meaning a group of heroes or strong men.

In due course Zhu Yuanzhang emerged as the leader of the movement that had been fighting the Yuan, under the Song banner. In 1356, he took the advice of some of the learned men who joined him, to seize Jiqing (modern-day Nanjing) from the Yuan. After renaming it as Yingtian, he used it as his base. Its superb natural defences, with the Zijin mountain on one side and the great river Yangtze on the other, caused it to be known as the 'city where the dragon nestled with the tiger'. Its location in a rich agricultural area would ensure the supply of grain for Zhu's large army. It was no accident that it had served as the capital for many earlier dynasties in south China. In addition to the material benefits, the symbolic importance of taking possession of a city with such historical resonance lifted Zhu's confidence in himself, as the Son of

Heaven chosen to save the people from the chaos and disorder of their world. By 1363, having captured many important cities around Yingtian, Zhu was poised to lead a new empire.

Zhu found himself in a world in turmoil, where the reigning dynasty, the Yuan, could no longer maintain civil order. In fourteenth-century China, people would conclude that the Yuan had lost its mandate to rule, and that a new dynasty would rise to replace it. This was how it seemed to Zhu when he joined the local rebel group. To gain prominence among the armed bands of insurgents depended largely on an individual's personal qualities such as charisma, intelligence, courage, ambition, good judgement, capacity for leadership and so on, rather than on his status or class origin in the society. Zhu was amply endowed with such qualities. He was an exceptional soldier and military leader, who inspired loyalty and respect in his followers through his personal courage, his brilliance at strategic planning, and his mastery of the correct tactics to use in each military engagement. Although he worked for over a decade under higher authorities in his movement, he realized, not long after he joined, the importance of having his own personal power base, while remaining attached to the movement as a front. He wisely chose Yingtian (Nanjing) as that base, where some of his military staff developed into outstanding commanders, and where he recruited distinguished Confucian literati as advisors.

While Zhu came from a poor segment of the society, he was not a social reformer or a revolutionary with a plan to establish an egalitarian society, largely in the interest of the Red-Turbaned peasant supporters. He abandoned early on the outlaw style of seizing the properties of the landlords in the areas he occupied and forcing the people there to supply him with grain for his needs. Looking to the future, he and his politically minded advisors saw themselves as being on the side of law and order, and they organized a regular regime of tax collection. They did not see landlords as their class enemies. Zhu and those who threw in their lot with him had a simple conservative vision: that of uniting China under a new dynasty in the Confucian-Legalist tradition, with Zhu himself as emperor and his supporters as the new ruling elite.

With such a vision in mind, but before he became the actual head of a united empire, Zhu adopted a political strategy that would eventually help him realize his ambition. He promoted an image of himself as a model Confucian ruler, who exemplified the virtues of benevolence, kindness, and loyalty. He maintained very strict discipline over his troops: after capturing a city, the soldiers were forbidden to kill or rob the inhabitants or abuse the women. When Zhu's forces were poised to take over the cities in eastern Zhejiang, he exhorted his generals to keep a tight rein over their soldiers, with the following remarks:

"To capture cities depends on being martial and brave; to pacify disorder relies on benevolence and kindness. Previously when we entered into Jiqing (Nanjing), we wronged no one. That was why we pacified it at a stroke. Whenever I heard that you captured a city without recklessly killing people, I could not contain myself with joy. The army behaves like a burning fire; unless it is controlled, it could burn

throughout the wilderness. A general should regard the absence of killing as being 'martial'. Not only would this benefit the country, [your] descendants would also benefit from the good karma."

Zhu kept taxation to a low rate on agriculture, commerce, and salt, exempted many distressed areas from taxation for limited periods, and provided some help to the very poor. These economic measures and his well-disciplined soldiers were popular with the people and helped to win them to his side. Several years before he enthroned himself, he was already taking up the role of the emperor in many ways. He gathered a group of well-educated and able civilian staff as advisors and officials, set up schools, re-introduced the examinations for the selection of officials, paid respect at Confucius' shrines, performed the rituals of ancestor worship, and carried out certain rites, such as the worship of heaven, that were normally the duty of an emperor. To finally realize his vision, more trials of strength on the battlefield were needed.

Zhu's campaign to unite China

During the 1360s, Zhu Yuanzhang began his military campaign to unite China by first eliminating his rivals in southern China one by one, and then marching north to put an end to the Yuan. One of his most powerful enemies was Chen Youliang, whose headquarters were located further along the Yangtze River above Zhu's base at Yingtian. In contrast to Zhu's high moral standing, Chen demonstrated disloyalty by killing the founder of his (Mongol) movement, whose position he had usurped. Many military commanders in this movement deserted Chen to join Zhu. Loyalty was a cardinal virtue in the Confucian code of ethics, and apparently morality still regulated behaviour, even when the political order had broken down. After his repeated attempts to annex Zhu's territory all failed, Chen decided on a naval showdown with Zhu on Lake Poyang, with an army of some 600,000 men and a flotilla of several hundred large three-storey high vessels, all painted red, and tied together into an imposing array stretching far into the distance. Though Zhu had smaller ships and fewer troops, his generals and soldiers were united in high spirits and with excellent morale. During the engagement, Zhu hit upon a winning strategy after witnessing the burning of twenty of Chen's vessels, when one of his generals shot fire cannons at them, When dusk fell after a day of intense combat, with the wind blowing strongly, Zhu called upon his bravest warriors to ram Chen's fleet with small boats packed with explosives and flammable materials. Soon the flames fed by the fierce wind engulfed many of Chen's warships, with fire and smoke rising to the sky, turning the water of Lake Poyang crimson from the reflection. Pandemonium broke out in Chen's camp with much shouting and screaming. Zhu's forces attacked, inflicting a decisive victory over Chen. Several hundred of Chen's boats were burnt, and many of his officers and fighting men were burnt to death, drowned, or killed. The battle of Lake Poyang made military history in term of its scale, use of fire, and the decisiveness of the defeat by an

underdog of a much more numerous and better equipped adversary. Chen never recovered from this blow and died in battle a few days later. The Great Han regime, created by Chen, came to an end after his son, who succeeded him, surrendered to Zhu early in1364.

Zhu's next target was Zhang Shichen, the warlord of a large area in eastern China that included the rich lower Yangtze delta. Zhang, lacking any interest in providing proper governance, presided over a corrupt and exploitative regime of a self-indulgent officers' corps. A few months before Zhu began his military offensive against Zhang in 1366, he published proclamations castigating Zhang as a criminal, whose military activities had done a great deal of harm to the people and urging Zhang's subordinates to 'abandon darkness and turn to light'. Whether it was the result of Zhu's excellent military strategy or his hard-hitting propaganda, his forces rapidly captured many of Zhang's big cities, and some of Zhang's important generals went over to Zhu's side. After ten months of resistance, Zhang's stronghold was finally breached, and his warlord career ended with his death in October 1367.

Soon after destroying his strongest adversaries in southern China late in 1367, Zhu decided that the time was ripe to use the overwhelming force at his command to unite China. The two lesser independent militarists in his vicinity were eliminated within three months of his despatching troops against them. Greater deliberation was required for the conquest of northern China, where the fiat of the Yuan court no longer had any effect on the commanders of large armies, who jealously guarded their own turf and fought continually against one another. Zhu had a thorough grasp of who controlled which parts of northern China, and their relationship with one another and with the court. Having, like a chess master, worked out a grand strategy, before the end of 1367 Zhu launched the long-awaited northern expedition, with a force of 250,000 troops commanded by his ablest generals. The military campaign was accompanied a proclamation stating that the aim of the expedition was 'to expel the barbarians, restore China, establish laws and regulations, and relieve the people in distress'. It gave an assurance that the 'troops would not commit the slightest offences, and the Mongols and the Muslim Central Asians would receive the same treatment as the Han Chinese'.

The conquest of northern China went smoothly, very much according to the plan: cities fell one after another, or surrendered to Zhu's forces, clearing the way to the Yuan capital, Dadu (Beijing). In July 1368, as the army from the south approached Dadu, the alarmed Yuan emperor, Shundi, fled north from the undefended capital and died in the Spring of 1369. Shundi's successor, Ayushiridara, retreated to Karakorum, where the Yuan remnants regrouped.

When Yuan Shundi evacuated from Dadu, Mongol rule of China effectively ended. Although there were still some independent military regimes of various sizes needing to be eradicated before unification could be considered completely achieved, Zhu nevertheless decided, near the beginning of 1368, that the time

was ripe for him to ascend the throne, which he did at Yingtian. Zhu named the dynasty he founded Ming, meaning bright, and called his reign period Hongwu, meaning Prodigiously Martial. He later changed the name of his capital, Yingtian, into Nanjing, meaning southern capital.

Characteristics of Zhu's rule

Although Zhu was dedicated to promoting various aspects of the Confucian tradition in governance, he did not rule as a passive Confucian emperor. He turned out to be a domineering ruler, who tried to supervise and control all aspects of government. During his reign of thirty-one years, from the first to the last year of Hongwu (1368-1398), he exemplified an extreme form of absolutist rule.

During the next two decades, the Hongwu emperor continued the drive for unification. His army speedily overthrew the warlord regime in Sichuan in 1371, and the control of Yunnan was seized from a Mongol prince in 1381. Between 1372 and 1388, several large-scale successful military campaigns against remnant Mongol forces in the northwest and northeast of China culminated in the demise of the Northern Yuan, and the splintering among the Mongols into separate tribal groups, who became less of a threat to the Ming.

While consolidation of the Ming empire was underway on the military front, Zhu also began to establish the political and administrative institutions of his dynasty with a view of making it a long-lasting one, first for the benefit of his own family, to maintain peace and order, and to ensure a sustainable way of life for the people of China, especially as regards their material well-being. As regards his family, he ennobled his twenty-three sons and his brother's grandson as hereditary princes and allowed each of them to have their own official staff and an army, varying in size from a few thousand to tens of thousands. They were positioned at strategic points of the empire to defend the realm. This system bore some resemblance to the Mongol military aristocracy, though the Mongol establishment was not restricted to the royals. When setting it up, Zhu rejected the warning of one of his officials, who had the temerity to point out that such empowerment of the princes might create trouble for the court in the future. Trouble indeed appeared soon after Zhu's death, but the institution survived in a somewhat attenuated form, as we shall see later. To make absolutely sure that the empire would remain with his family, he ruthlessly liquidated, on trumped up charges, a large number of his most senior and meritorious generals and advisors, whose support had enabled him to possess the empire. Probably for the sake of pre-empting possible vendettas, those who were related to these unfortunate officials to the ninth degree were also killed. Tens of thousands of people were killed in these fearsome purges.

Such cruelty formed a striking contrast with the Ming founder's frequently expressed pity for people suffering from famine, dislocation, wars, and other disasters, and for whom he repeatedly commanded his officials to offer food, or remission of taxes or land rent. At the beginning of the Ming, there were indeed

many distressed people. Decades of civil wars heaped devastation on a China that had already become impoverished through the exploitation and misrule of the Mongol Yuan dynasty. Countless numbers of people became refugees, some to avoid intolerably high taxation and burdensome labour services, others to escape the dangers of war. They would end up as *liu min*, a floating population of dislocated people without means of livelihood. Death and depopulation turned large areas of China into wilderness, particularly in many regions in the north. Dykes, canals, and irrigation works fell into a serious state of disrepair. In addition to bringing peace and order to an exhausted people, the Ming founder had to find ways to restore the economic health of the empire, if he was to properly fulfil his role as the new Son of Heaven, Furthermore, he had himself witnessed how people without a livelihood became lawless bandits or rebels. The Hongwu emperor strongly subscribed to the Confucian view that the economic foundation of the Chinese empire rested on agriculture, and that increasing agricultural production should hold the key to restoring the health of the economy, not to mention its obvious connection with the sustenance of the people. Another compelling reason for strengthening the agrarian economy by helping the farmers was the government's need for taxes. A government could only raise revenue from those who could produce goods and earn income.

From the beginning of his reign, the Hongwu emperor pursued, for nearly two decades, a vigorous program of rebuilding the agriculture of his empire through a series of measures. He advanced a policy urging the dislocated people to return to their native places to grow crops. The poor or landless of many areas were re-located to farm uncultivated agricultural land. Volunteers from many densely populated regions were called upon to resettle in depopulated areas in the north, or to reclaim wasteland. The government provided food, seeds, agricultural tools, and the remission of taxes or land rent for a limited number of years, to help the people transferred under these schemes to get started. The massive resettlement program, involving an estimated two to four million people, continued for a period under the reign of the Yongle emperor (r. 1403-1424) The amount of land reclaimed was impressive: in four years between 1370 and 1380, 8,947,298 hectares were brought under cultivation. The success of the policy was also reflected in the increased collection of grain tax. For example, the grain tax collected by the Yuan amounted to around 7 million hundredweight, while the Ming, in 1393, collected almost 20 million hundredweight.

In connection with the restoration of the agriculture, an enormous effort was put into water control work, such as the building or repairing of reservoirs and irrigation systems. The growing of certain kinds of trees, such as mulberry trees for the silkworms, was often regarded as a subsidiary agricultural activity, but the Hong Wu emperor made planting trees into a major project. He issued an order in 1392, requiring each colonizing farming family in Anhui province to plant mulberry, jujube, and persimmon trees, 200 of each on their land holdings. In 1394, farming households of the whole empire were obliged to plant 200 mulberry

trees and 200 jujube trees. Two years later, 84 million fruit trees were planted in today's Hunan and Hubei provinces. Some historians have estimated that about 1000 million trees were planted during the reign of the Hongwu emperor.

With peace and economic reconstruction under way, the Hongwu emperor set about organizing the empire's taxation in a systematic way. The Yuan household registration being unreliable, he started from scratch, in 1381, ordering the Ministry of Finance to compile 'Yellow Registers', which were records of the households of the people in their districts. The 'Yellow Registers' formed the basis of the labour service duty (corvee) which the people owed to the state. From early in his reign, measurements of the land owned by each of the households were made and graded according to the quality of the land, and the details were recorded, accompanied by drawings of the land units, which recalled the shape of fish scales. These volumes were called 'Fish-scale Registers', and they formed the basis for tax on land. These records were required to be updated every 10 years, but that requirement was not always met. The accuracy of the population records depended on how strictly the court command was executed, and the effectiveness and uprightness of the officials charged with the task. Because the Hongwu emperor was extremely strict, punishing severely those who did not carry out his orders assiduously, the population and land ownership figures were reckoned the most reliable by historians. The census figures were likely to have been understated, with tax evasion as one reason behind this situation. These records and future adjustments on them, though imperfect, formed the basis on which the bulk of the farming population of the empire was taxed.

In addition to registering the farmers and their lands for tax purposes, the Hongwu emperor also had separate registers made by the Ministry of Works for the households of various kinds of artisans. These people were required to offer the state free services as craftsmen at the capital, for periods of three months in every three years, or pay a tax instead. Those who produced items for the military were an exception. They would reside with the garrisoned troops and receive pay for their work. The registered craftsmen who were settled near the capital spent a third of their time working for the state, which compensated them with rice. Registering artisan households as hereditary occupational taxable units was a Yuan practice taken over by the Ming.

The soldiers represented another large hereditary occupational group, registered by the Ministry of Defence as such during the Ming. Since they were mostly stationed at the frontiers, the logistics of transporting large amounts of grain over long distances to supply them were enough of a problem without considering the cost of the grain. Letting soldiers grow their own food on military-agricultural colonies at the frontiers would solve that problem and save the state the cost of the food and the labour. (Earlier dynasties, such as the Qin and the Han, had already put such an idea into practice at various frontier regions.) Early in his reign, the Hongwu emperor enthusiastically adopted the use of military-agricultural colonies, especially in some frontier regions. He set up the framework and appointed officials to implement the policy on an

unprecedented scale. The pragmatic system that was enforced achieved the goal of enabling the military to become self-sufficient in food, without further efforts or costs to the state. This institution, being actively supported by his immediate successor and the Yongle emperor, continued to flourish for some decades, before it eventually started to decline from government malfunction.

By registering the households of the farmers with their land, the Hongwu emperor made sure that the state had a regular source of income from the largest occupational group of the empire. Applying a similar system to the artisans enabled the emperor and his personal staff at the capital and the military bases to have skilled workers to produce everything they needed. Keeping records of the soldiers that the state deployed, and enabling them to produce their own food supply, were positive steps towards strengthening the security of the empire. These administrative measures and the policy of restoring agricultural production, partly by repairing damaged water facilities, and also through a programme of population resettlement and wasteland reclamation, helped the economic recovery, advanced the healing process, and the return to life's normal rhythm in a country ravaged by decades of war.

As regards the organization of the government, the Ming founder began by taking over the Yuan system, which he then set out to reform. He could tap his scholar-officials' vast store of knowledge on law and government institutions of the past, and adopt what he saw as appropriate, or he could set up new structures according to the requirements of his time. As regards the central government, he adopted a practical administrative division of Six Ministries, three of which were concerned with the affairs of the farmers, the artisans, and the military. As for the others, the Ministry of Personnel enforced the regulations pertaining to the officials of the government; the Ministry of Justice took care of judicial matters; and the Ministry of Rites managed official ceremonials and worship services. The arms of the central government reached out to the regions through the local officials, who were the emperor's appointees. The work of local officials was periodically assessed by supervisory officials sent from the court. To assist him in overseeing the affairs of the whole empire, he continued, early in his reign, the Yuan institution of the Imperial Grand Secretariat, together with a Left and a Right Prime Minister.

As already mentioned, the Ming founder had assumed the role of a Confucian ruler, paying respect at the temples of Confucius and performing the rites of the worship of heaven and earth, even before he became emperor. After founding the Ming, he was serious about the periodic performance of these rites, including the worship of his own ancestors, to whom he granted posthumous titles of emperors reaching back five generations. He ordered schools to be built, which provided the lucky few qualified students important instruction on traditional Chinese culture. He re-vitalized the regular government-sponsored examinations for official selection. Having witnessed rampant official corruption and lawless behaviour during the end of the Yuan, the Hongwu emperor placed great emphasis on law, and its enforcement, as a corrective. The

Great Ming Code was compiled with reference to the Tang Code but was more comprehensive and more severe in its punishments.

It was the intention of the Ming founder that the institutions, laws, and precedents he had established would be binding on his successors. He often ended his edicts with the clause ‘let no changes be made’. He showed a strong desire for his empire to remain frozen through time, in the state in which he had ordained it. Even though that was not to be, his personal character and the actions and decisions he took during his thirty-year reign would have a vital impact on the future development of the Ming, for good or ill.

On the positive side, Zhu restored peace, order, and economic prosperity to the Chinese lands. In external relations, China under the Ming was once more acknowledged as a dominant power in East Asia. However, he fell far short of the Confucian ideal. A model Confucian ruler was someone who ruled passively by his virtuous example. He would not concern himself with the practical details of the politics or administration, which could be taken care of by his subordinates. His role was to embody goodness or benevolence, and thus inspire his ministers to govern in a virtuous manner. The Ming founder, though he acted kindly towards ordinary people in distress, exhibited a malevolent streak towards powerful government officials who, rightly or wrongly, incurred his jealousy or suspicion. The merciless killing of the high officials and their families and friends who had helped him win the empire has already been mentioned. Being an extremely energetic and hard-driven autocrat, he wanted to actively manage and control everything, even the future if he could.

In 1380, he did away with the Grand Secretariat, and abolished the post of prime minister in perpetuity. But he soon found that governing the empire directly by himself, both the central and the provincial governments, which entailed having to read an average of over 200 reports and twice that number of items to deal with every day, was too much even for a workaholic like him. He tried to remedy this situation by selecting a few scholars of the Imperial Academy to assist and advise him, leaving the power of decision entirely in his own hands. This absolutist tendency for bypassing the regular bureaucracy and concentrating the power entirely in the hands of the emperor continued, and became even more pronounced, under his successors. What had been an informal arrangement of enlisting the assistance of imperial academicians by the Hongwu emperor developed, under his successors, into the powerful ‘inner cabinet’ (*nei ge*, literally meaning inner pavilion) that met inside the palace as distinct from the outer court. The members of the inner cabinet of around five to ten individuals had far greater access to the emperor than the officials of the Six Ministries, let alone the more distant provincial officials. The head of this ‘inner cabinet’ assumed the role of the prime minister at times. This system, which strengthened the power of the Ming emperors at the expense of their own officials, was sure to emasculate the regular government administration, especially when foolish men occupied the throne.

Another institution set up by the Ming founder also turned out later to be harmful to the Ming polity. This was the Brocade-Uniformed Guards, intended as a security organization not just for protecting the emperor and his household, but even more for subjugating, intimidating, and controlling the officialdom in case of disloyalty or wrongdoing, real or suspected. This institution also served to add colour, pomp, and pageantry on ceremonial occasions. These armed guards formed the palace police, led by those whom the emperor trusted. They eavesdropped, spied upon, and gathered intelligence on officials. Being responsible directly to the emperor, they had the power to arrest, investigate, imprison, torture, and sentence those suspected of serious crimes, such as treason. When the control of this or its successor institution fell into the hands of tyrannical eunuchs during the reigns of several later irresponsible or feeble Ming emperors, Ming governance suffered great damage.

The Accession and Reign of the Yongle Emperor

Yongle (r. 1402-1424)

According to the rule of succession decreed by the Ming founder, the eldest son of the empress would automatically succeed to the throne. If the empress had no son, the first-born of the emperor with another consort would become the heir apparent. Should the heir apparent die before his father, the eldest son of his principal consort would succeed. Since the heir apparent of the Hongwu emperor predeceased his father, following the rule of succession his sixteen-year-old son, Zhu Yonwen, was in line to succeed. In 1398, the Hongwu emperor died, and Zhu Yonwen (r. 1398-1402) ascended the throne. The young emperor felt uneasy about the military power wielded by his princely uncles, amongst whom Zhu Di, the most senior and powerful Prince of Yan, inspired most fear. Following the advice of his officials, he pre-emptively degraded the Prince of Zhou, Zhu Di's brother born of the same mother, to the position of a commoner, sending him into exile. He then waited for the Prince of Yan to make a false move and incriminate himself. Soon several other princes were convicted of wrongdoing and stripped of their ranks; some were imprisoned, and others exiled. When the news reached Zhu Di at Yanjing (Beijing), he was alarmed and feigned madness while secretly plotted an uprising. Soon he had raised an army to fight the court's forces sent against him, with the justification of 'cleansing the treacherous officials at the emperor's side'. After four years of a bloody war of succession, in which thousands had perished, a stalemate was reached. In 1401, after a disaffected eunuch informed Zhu Di that Nanjing itself was not strongly defended, he promptly marched on the capital. When his troops reached the vicinity of Nanjing, some of his supporters opened one of the city gates to let him in. A fire started in the palace which killed the empress, but the young emperor disappeared without trace.

In due course, the princes and officials at Nanjing presented Zhu Di with official documents and the emperor's seal and offered him the royal coach to ride to the palace to be enthroned. In 1402, Zhu Di, the Ming founder's fourth and most grandly ambitious son, who was a gifted military commander and strategic thinker like his father, ascended the throne with Yongle (Forever Happy) as his reign period.

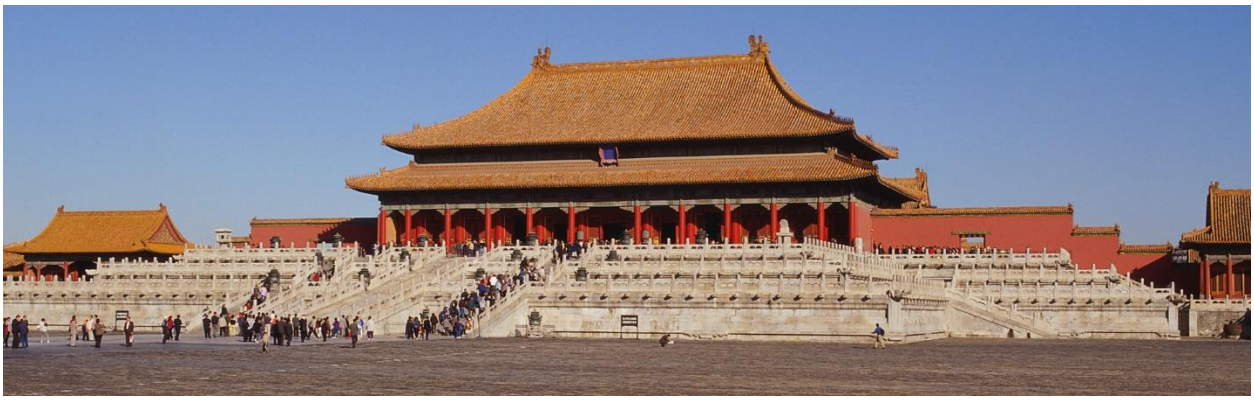
One of the first acts of the Yongle emperor (r. 1402-1424) was to punish the 'treacherous' officials, who had given his predecessor the advice on curbing the power of some of the royal princes including himself, as well as those who would not submit to him on account of their loyalty to the former emperor. Not only were the principals killed in extremely cruel forms of execution, their relatives, even remote ones, were not spared from death. He also promptly released his princely brothers from prison or exile and restored their titles and estates to them. While not depriving the princes of the imperial line their wealth and lofty status, he curtailed their military and political powers to such an extent that they would cease to be a future threat to the monarch.

Despite those four years of destructive war, the Yongle emperor presided over a prosperous and powerful country. At the beginning of the fifteenth century, the Ming was still reaping the benefit of the founder's policy of letting the people and the economy of China recover from years of wars, exploitation, and misgovernment. On the foundation of a flourishing economy and strong military force, the Yongle emperor was able to embark on several ambitious projects and campaigns during his reign of twenty-two years. Although these undertakings were enormously costly in terms of financial and human resources, their successful achievement brought him honour and glory, and the empire greater prestige and security.

Almost from the beginning of his reign, the Yongle emperor decided to transfer the capital to Beijing. He had to remain in Nanjing, which would later become the Southern capital, while the new palace at Beijing was being remodelled at the site of the old Yuan palace. Although nostalgia for the city that had been his base as the Prince of Yan might have contributed to his desire for the move, the more important considerations were likely political and security. Since the empire was most at risk from the aggressive nomadic tribes outside its northern frontiers, it made sense to shift its nerve centre further to the north, to manage this threat better. For several years after this decision was made, around 300,000 people, including merchants and rich families from well-developed prefectures in both north and south China, moved to Beijing, thereby increasing the economic and population weight of the capital. Along with this migration, large quantities of wood were shipped to Beijing from the south as building material. The reconstruction of the palace complex at Beijing, itself the size of a small city[1], took seventeen years. In 1408, when the rebuilding was still in process, emperor Yongle transferred himself and his government to Beijing, leaving

[1] Indeed, it is called the Forbidden City.

the heir apparent to preside in Nanjing. Finally in 1420, when the rebuilding was completed, Beijing was formally declared to be the capital of the Ming.

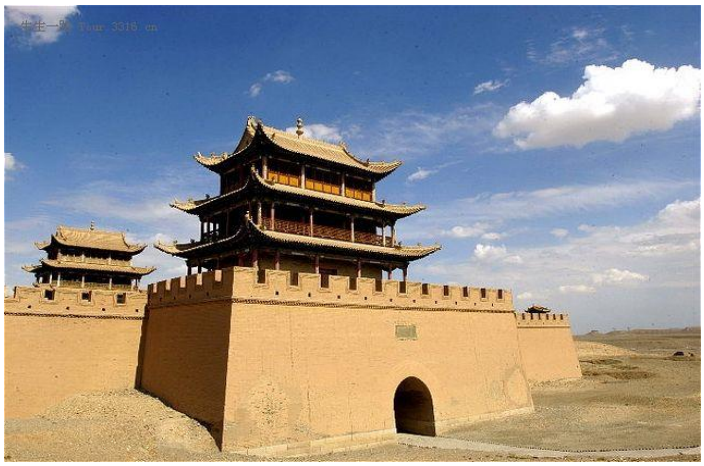


Part of the Forbidden City complex, in today's Beijing (*wendywutours*: retrieved on 26 November 2023 from https://www.wendywutours.co.uk/blog/china/photos-of-the-forbidden-city-on-show-at-the-palace-museum/)

Another great construction project under the Ming was the repair of the Great Wall, the massive defensive structure against the nomadic tribes. For a period of roughly four hundred years from the eleventh to the fourteenth century, while nomad dynasties ruled northern China and then the Yuan dynasty ruled all of China, the Great Wall fell into disrepair because it no longer served any purpose. But after driving the Mongols back to their homeland, the Ming empire of sedentary peoples was once more vulnerable to nomadic incursions from the north. In addition to keeping the nomads out by offensive military expeditions, the rulers of the Ming also decided on a defensive strategy of repairing the existing wall, making new extensions, and putting up inner walls in certain areas. The massive reconstruction work started with the Hongwu emperor, who built forts at strategic passes, which included the Jiayuguan fort that guarded the Silk Road at the western extremity of the Great Wall. The Yongle emperor sponsored the work on a long stretch of the wall in certain provinces north of Beijing. It took well over one hundred years and many reigns to complete the entire Ming Great Wall. It was roughly 17 to 35 feet high, 13 to 20 feet wide, and over 4000 miles long. It was made of pounded earth, faced with bricks or stones along certain sections, and dotted with watchtowers. Much of this imposing structure is still standing today.

Did it keep the nomads out? When the empire was strong, it probably protected the Chinese farmers at the border area from small raiding parties and kept larger invading armies at bay until rescue arrived. Near the end of the Ming, when it was severely weakened by peasant rebellions, it seems to have deterred the Manchus, until a disgruntled Chinese general let them in through the strategic pass at Shanhaiguan at the

north-east terminus of the wall. The Great Wall might have served as a supplementary security shield for a Chinese empire during its period of strength, but a weak and declining Chinese dynasty could not rely on the Great Wall alone to keep its land and people secure.



The western extremity of the Great Wall, at Jiayuguan (*playingintheworldgame*: retrieved on 26 November 2023 from https://playingintheworldgame.com/2013/06/08/the-brick-story/)

Presiding over a strong and prosperous empire, emperor Yongle was not content with merely keeping a defensive posture. He energetically pursued diplomatic, political, and military actions to confirm the position of the Ming as the pre-eminent power in East Asia – a stance most of the preceding dynasties, when they ruled a strong and united Chinese empire, tended to assume. Although the three million or so Mongols 'north of the desert' had not been able to unite to threaten China as they had done a century before, the more actively aggressive tribal groupings, such as the Oirats in the northwest and the Tatars in the northeast, at times posed significant military challenges to the Ming. Emperor Yongle rose to the challenge, leading 5 military expeditions personally, and won overwhelming victories against them.

What was to be done with the Mongols who surrendered after being defeated? It was not feasible to govern directly the territories where nomadic herders roamed by setting up Chinese-style prefectures and administering them as such. Genocide does not appear to have been an option. The Ming resorted to the age-old 'tribute system', which characterized the relationship between a dynasty ruling a united China and its weaker neighbours. Applying this diplomatic and political device, the Ming bestowed (*feng*) titles like 'Righteous-Sagacious' Prince, or 'Happy-Peaceful' King, on the Mongol chieftains. This act gave the titleholders symbolically or actually the authority to rule over the territory and peoples concerned. This suzerain-vassal relationship would be maintained by periodic tribute embassies by the vassals to the court of the suzerain. The visitors would offer gifts such as horses and other native products and receive

sumptuous gifts in return. Peace prevailed for a couple of decades until the tribes revived, and another aggressive Mongol khan rose to power.

The extension of the Ming empire

One of the Yongle emperor's major projects was to use tribute relationships to draw more and more overseas countries into the Ming fold. In fact, the institution had already been flourishing during the Hongwu era. For example, soon after emperor Hongwu ascended the throne, he sent an imperial edict to the King of Gaoli (Korea), a vassal of the previous (Yuan) dynasty, proclaiming the establishment of the Ming. The King of Gaoli responded by sending a delegation to congratulate the Ming emperor, with a request to be made officially the King of Gaoli. In 1370, Emperor Hongwu sent envoys, bearing a gold seal and appropriate documents, to invest him as the King of Gaoli. In 1371, tribute embassies arrived at the Ming court from many countries nearby that included present-day Japan, Thailand, Java, Vietnam, and Korea. When the Yongle emperor moved the Ming capital to Beijing, which was much closer to Korea than Nanjing, ties between the Ming and the Kingdom of Gaoli, which had by then changed its name to Chaoxian, became even closer, with annual tribute embassies and additional ones on special occasions. During the reign of Emperor Wanli (r. 1572-1620), Japan twice invaded Chaoxian, once in 1592 and again in 1597, but was repelled, largely due to military support from the Ming.

To the south lay the Kingdom of Annam with which a suzerain-vassal relationship was established between it and the Ming early in the reign of Hongwu. Soon after emperor Yongle came to the throne, a coup by Annam's prime minister, coupled with the new regime's expansionist drive into Ming territory, led Yongle to send troops to that country and eventually annex it. Subsequently, obstinate and prolonged local armed resistance rendered it very costly for the Ming to keep the territory as a Ming province. As a result, in 1426 the Xuande emperor (r. 1425-1435) decided to restore the earlier suzerain-vassal relationship, to which Annam was eager to return.

To the west lay U-Tsangang (Tibet), where Indian Buddhism took firm hold during the Chinese Middle Ages. It became a theocracy when the monks won the struggle for power between the secular and religious authorities. Unlike Korea and Vietnam, which were vassals, Tibet was incorporated into the Yuan empire. The Yuan acknowledged the power of the Tibetan Buddhist establishment by conferring a princely or kingly title on the head of the strongest Tibetan Lamaist sect. After founding the Ming, emperor Hongwu issued, in 1369, an imperial edict to the leaders of Tibet, requesting them to proceed to the Ming court, then at Nanjing, to be granted titles and offices by himself. Recognizing the fact that the dominant sect in Ming

times had lost its monopoly of power, the Ming bestowed florid titles of respect on the leaders of all three of the most prominent Tibetan Buddhist sects, capping the titles with the addition of 'Princes of Law' (*Fa Wang*), indicating their level of authority. Of the three, the 'Yellow Hat' sect, which gave rise to the Dalai Lama of today, developed close relationships with the leaders of the Tatar Mongols as well as the Ming court. From the time of Emperor Yongle, the Ming supported the 'Yellow Hat' strongly. In the course of a few generations, the Dalai Lama gained ascendancy over the other 'Princes of Law.' He became revered as the 'Living Buddha' and the sole theocratic ruler of this region under the Ming.

The Ming retained the power of official appointments and dismissal for ranks below the level of the 'Princes of Law'. Since these latter officials were already the local ruling elite, the act of appointment had the symbolic meaning that the Ming had authorized them to rule on its behalf. The Ming court also appointed roving officials (*liu guan*) to supervise the local administration but left religious matters entirely to the Tibetan Buddhist church. The Tibetan Princes of Law and other officials regularly paid homage to the Ming emperor, bearing tribute items and receiving lavish gifts in return. The Ming kept garrisons overseeing the security of this region and endeavoured to keep the postal relay stations on the routes between Tibet and the Ming capital in good order. Commercial exchanges of Tibetan horses for Chinese tea flourished at several cities in the west designated for such trade. The way Ming governed what is now called the Tibetan Autonomous Region (TAR) did indeed give this region a certain degree of self-rule and autonomy. However, the sovereignty of this region still resided with the Ming. Even when the power of the Ming declined, Tibet remained an integral part of the Ming empire.

During the first sixty years that covered of the reigns of the two outstanding emperors, Hongwu and Yongle, the Ming reached the apogee of power and territorial extent. During the war of unification, the Ming founder's territorial drive seems to have been directed towards recovering the full extent of the Yuan empire, a goal he largely achieved, apart from the Mongol homelands in the north. In strategic areas along the empire's long borders, emperor Hongwu organized garrisons or military-agriculture colonies. In border regions populated mostly by ethnic minorities, he pursued a policy of appointing as Ming officials the existing local powerholders, who were required to pay homage periodically to the emperor with tributes, and who were supervised and checked by roving Ming officials from the central government. The situation in Tibet illustrated this policy, apart from the fact that the powerholders in other regions were secular, while those in Tibet were monks. Emperor Yongle continued the military drive and the consolidation of the border regions, using the same political and administrative policy as emperor Hongwu, except for Vietnam, which he annexed for a limited period. The territory of the Ming reached its greatest extent during the reign of Yongle and remained so for about a decade afterwards.

Map showing the Ming Empire, c. 1450 (*TimeMaps*: retrieved on 26 November 2023 from https://playingintheworldgame.com/2013/06/08/the-brick-story/)

Admiral Zheng He's Voyages to the 'Western Oceans'

In addition to using the wealth and military prowess of the Ming to enlarge the territory of the empire, the Yongle emperor devoted enormous resources to an unprecedented maritime enterprise: sending Admiral Zheng He with a fleet of 'treasure ships' (*bao chuan*) and other vessels on a major voyage to the 'western oceans' (*xi yang*), meaning oceans to the west of the South China Sea. Soon after Yongle came to the throne in 1402, he initiated an ambitious ship-building programme which doubled the capacity of the already huge Longjiang dry-docks near Nanjing, for constructing large numbers of ocean-going wooden sailing ships known in the West as 'junks'. By 1405, a fleet of 317 such vessels, the largest in the world in terms of the total number and size of the individual ships, was assembled for a mission to establish or consolidate diplomatic and commercial relationships with overseas countries, and to explore the world. A eunuch called

Zheng He whose surname, like many Mongol converts to Islam, was originally Ma (being the first syllable of Mahomet), was chosen to command the fleet, with 27,800 crew members, and to represent the Ming emperor as his chief representative to these countries.

Zheng He was captured as a child by the Ming forces fighting the Mongols in Yunnan. After undergoing castration, he became a eunuch attached to the household of the Prince of Yen who gave him the Chinese surname Zheng. He grew into a man with an impressive presence, towering in physique as well as in personal attainments. He served the prince loyally and distinguished himself as a military commander fighting for the prince in the war over succession. For his meritorious services he was promoted to be the Grand Eunuch. He was commonly known as the San Bao (Three Treasures) Grand Eunuch. This referred to his merit as a Buddhist, the Three Treasures standing for the Buddha, doctrine, and meditation. Like many Chinese, who were able to combine elements from different religious beliefs and practices to construct their own personal spiritual world, Zheng He, though a devout Moslem, worshipped the Buddha, and Ma Zu, the Daoist goddess of the sea, as well as Tianfei, the Celestial Consort and patron saint of sailors. When the prince became the Yongle emperor, he set aside the Hongwu emperor's injunctions that forbade eunuchs to become literate and participate in government affairs; many were given important posts, and some were sent on ambassadorial missions to foreign lands.

Zheng He was an eminently suitable choice for the role of the commander-in-chief of the Chinese armada, and to represent the Ming emperor in foreign states on the routes of his voyages. He had demonstrated his capacity as a leader of men on the battlefield, and as one of the Yongle emperor's inner circle of aides; he had acquired first-hand knowledge of politics, state protocol, and civil and military administration. The Yongle emperor was willing to give this thoroughly trusted aide the power to act as his plenipotentiary. Zheng He's Islamic heritage, combined with his faith in Buddhism, rendered him a wise choice to build friendly relations with the states in the Middle East and Southeast Asia, where Islam, Buddhism or Hinduism were the dominant religions. With these excellent qualifications for the post, his lack of experience in seafaring was apparently excused.

While Zheng He was a newcomer to naval command and sea voyages, Ming China was the most advanced sea power in the world, possessing the most sophisticated maritime technology and knowledge of shipbuilding and seafaring. This development was the contribution of some of China's coastal ethnic groups, who sailed their well-designed and strongly-built wooden craft over great distances along the coasts or into the open seas, using the power of seasonal winds such as the monsoon, with the help of the mariner's compass, an early Chinese invention, and their knowledge of the positions of the heavenly bodies,

especially the Pole star, to direct their movements. Some of them seemed to have settled in many countries of Southeast Asia or further afield. Those who remained in China had accumulated knowledge and experience of shipbuilding, as well as ocean navigating, over many centuries. This heritage paved the way for Admiral Zheng He's successful voyages with his giant ships.

The Ming 'treasure ships', the largest and the most reliable ships of that age, were the culmination of these developments. Their name was derived from the enormous value and quantities of goods – 2,000 tons - they could carry in their capacious holds. Each of these vessels, made largely of teak, was approximately 440 feet long and 180 feet wide, with nine to twelve masts to which were attached huge sails of red silk, a material noted for its strength[2]. Around this time in Europe, Venice had the most powerful navy. The biggest Venetian galleys, about 150 feet long and 20 feet wide, were built for rowing by oarsmen in calm waters. They had a cargo carrying capacity of 50 tons at most. Christopher Columbus' eighty-five feet long Santa Maria, which reached America in 1492, was tiny by comparison.

A treasure ship of Zheng He, with an ordinary vessel for comparison (*Patch*: retrieved on 26 November from https://patch.com/massachusetts/stoneham/zheng-he-whos-he)

The large Chinese junks were ingeniously designed and constructed to give them the stability and robustness to survive severe storms at sea, such as typhoons. They could remain afloat even when partially damaged by a collision with an iceberg or punctured by hidden reefs, because they had watertight bulwark compartments – sixteen in the larger ships – that were built in sections, like the structure of a bamboo stalk,

[2] The author took the figures from *Ming Shi*, volume 9, p. 6212, which describes these ships as 44 *zhang* in length and 18 *zhang* in width. Since 1 *zhang* equals 10 *chi* (feet), the dimensions are as given above. They agree with those given by Gavin Menzies in his book *1421 The Year China Discovered the World* (Bantam Books, London, 2002). There is, however, some uncertainty surrounding the length of the Chinese *chi* used in building these ships.

within strong frames. One or two of these internal compartments might even be flooded on purpose for divers' use, or for trained otters, held on long cords, to herd shoals of fishes into nets for the ships' kitchens. They were equipped with reinforced bows to withstand the battering of the waves, and their 'balanced' rudders, centred at the sternposts, enhanced the vessels' stability and ease of steering. These flat-bottomed and wide-beamed vessels, with enclosed cabins on decks of four levels, were sufficiently commodious to accommodate over a thousand persons. Their sumptuously appointed grand staterooms and spacious apartments, with windows, balconies, and railings for looking out to sea, provided luxurious quarters for foreign dignitaries, who were regularly accommodated on these ships.

A fleet would be composed of many other types of vessels in addition to the 'treasure ships'. It would include somewhat smaller 'horse-ships' for transporting horses for the cavalry, and 'supply-ships' for carrying all kinds of necessary supplies, which included ammunitions for possible military actions, and materials for repair of the ships in case of damage, as well as medicine, food, and water for the health and wellbeing of such a large number of people on board. The variety of food carried by the ships provided a nutritious diet. It included rice (the brown kind also), soybeans, tea, a variety of dried, cured, and pickled meat, vegetables, and fruits, and also liquor and sauces produced by fermentation. There were even live pigs kept for meat. In addition to huge tanks holding the water for the ships' needs, the crew could use paraffin wax or seal blubber as fuel to make fresh water, by distilling seawater when the supply became really tight. Other ships included troop transport for the large body of soldiers on board. There were also small and nimble warships, 165 feet long with five masts, in addition to the even smaller patrol boats, 120 feet or 128 feet long, which were fitted with oars. The warships were organized into squadrons and equipped not merely with the conventional weapons of the time. They also had cannons of brass or iron, catapults and explosive firearms that were not commonplace in the armoury of many other nations, including the Europeans. The ships communicated and coordinated with each other through signalling with bells, gongs, drums, and lanterns. Such a well-equipped and provisioned fleet could navigate in the open oceans for more than three months, covering at least 4500 miles, without having to land for replenishment.

Successful command of such a fleet depended on Zheng He's leadership, but he needed the able assistance and support of others with a whole range of skills and experiences. Managing a large number of people on extended sea voyages, often lasting months or years, on missions serving various purposes, demanded a collaborative effort. Under him there were other eunuch admirals, military officers, and civil officials of different ranks, cartographers, skilled navigators, and artisans relating to ships' repair, in addition to medical officers, pharmacists, astrologers, geomancers, linguists, botanists, Buddhist and Daoist savants, and cooks, not to mention the soldiers and crew. For the diplomatic missions, the fleet took Ming envoys for various countries, linguists, historians, translators, and scribes. Foreign kings, princes, and ambassadors,

accompanied by their family members and staff, were brought to Beijing and returned to their homeland by the treasure ships, which were laden with foreign tributes, Chinese gifts, and goods for trade such as Chinese silks, ceramics, and lacquer ware, in exchange for tropical spices, south-sea pearls, precious stones, and other marketable products.

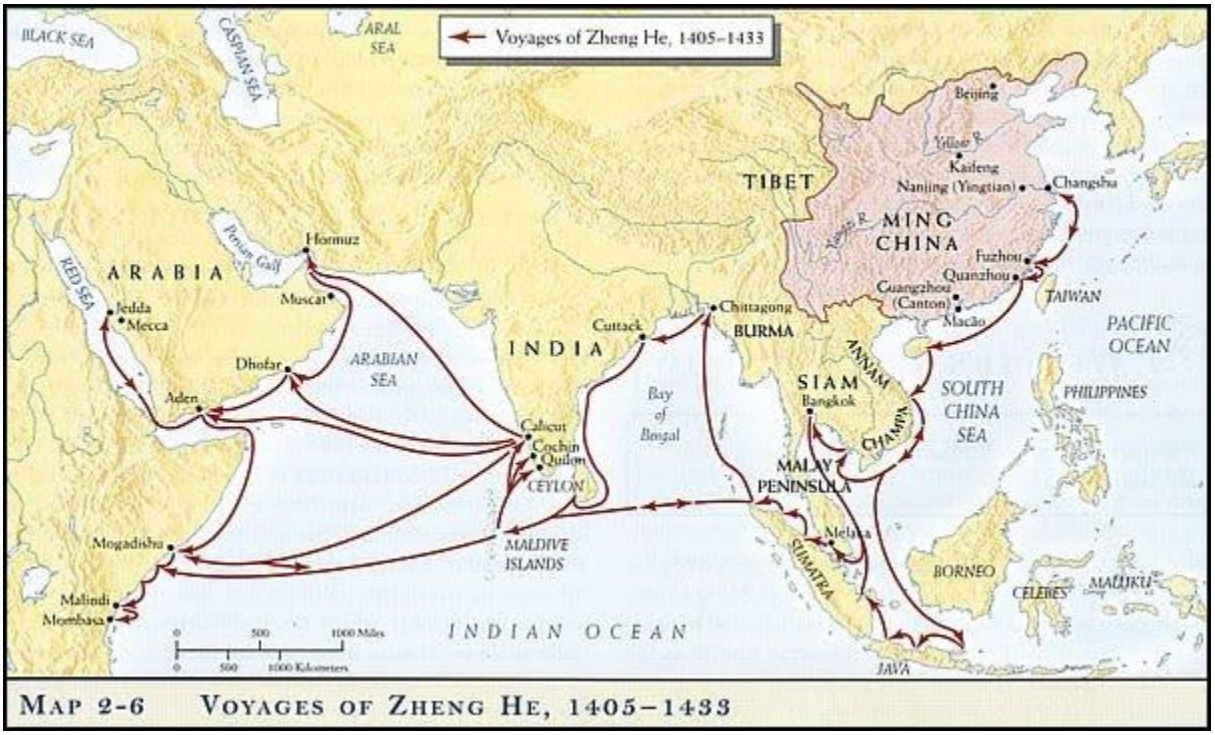
The diplomatic missions were apparently not the only reason for despatching Zheng He to the 'western oceans'. The Yongle emperor had a more personal motive: to track down his predecessor, the Jianwen emperor, whose disappearance triggered rumours and suspicions that he had escaped overseas. Trade was another reason, since the Yongle emperor seems to have been more open-minded to the advantages of commerce than the Ming founder, who had the traditional attitude of disdain for trade. Prestige was also an important consideration behind this project. Yongle wanted to show the world the overwhelming might of the Ming that, together with its high cultural attainments, justified its position as the suzerain, presiding over a world order of subordinate states. During the early decades of the fifteenth century, the Ming was at the height of its power and prosperity. With vast resources at his disposal, and given his love of glory as well as other motives, the Yongle emperor did not hesitate to send Zheng He and his fleet on many expeditions.

Before a fleet was ready to leave, the ships would be arranged in a formation with the treasure ships in the centre, surrounded by the smaller vessels, and flanked by squadrons of warships. Such a powerful armada was well able to take care of any groups of pirates or likely military challenges from the states to be visited overseas. A fleet so composed, with brightly painted ships 'resembling great houses', together bearing a forest of masts that were topped with pennants, must have been an awesome sight when they unfurled their great sails of red silk, and glided on the waves with the curved eyes of dragons or serpents gazing watchfully from their majestic prows.

Zheng He's first voyage started in 1405 and lasted for over two years until 1407, during which time he took his fleet to several countries that included Champa (at the east coast of south Vietnam), Java, Sumatra, Siam, Malacca, Ceylon, and Calicut (at the west coast of southern India). On his return trip, he brought back the envoys of many of the countries he had visited, with tributes to pay homage to the Ming emperor. During the reign of the Yongle emperor until shortly before his death, Zheng He was sent overseas six times with a fleet of similar size as the first, at intervals of two years or less after each trip, with each expedition lasting two years or more. During some of the journeys, Zheng He split the fleet up into smaller groups and let his subordinates command these to cover other routes. The Ming fleets controlled by Zheng He alone, together with those commanded by his staff, visited over thirty different countries or kingdoms.[3] Their

[3] The stone stele erected by Zheng He to commemorate his own voyages had 'over 3,000 kingdoms' written on it. Menzies (*op. cit*.) hazarded an explanation for the discrepancy and believed the figure of 3,000 was correct.

fleets landed at Hormuz in the Persian Gulf, and many cities along the coast of the Arabian Peninsula, including Muscat, Aden and Jeddah, from where Zheng He could easily reach Mecca for a pilgrimage, which he performed on one of his trips. Some of the fleets sailed across the Indian Ocean to the east coast of Africa, landing in places around Mogadishu (in Somalia) and Malindi (in Kenya) and covering over 6,000 kilometres on the round trip.



MAP 2-6 VOYAGES OF ZHENG HE, 1405–1433

Map showing the voyages of Zheng He (*Weebly*: retrieved on 26 November 2023 from https://patch.com/massachusetts/stoneham/zheng-he-whos-he)

Menzies (*op. cit.*) claimed that some of the fleets commanded by Zheng He's subordinates went much further: that one reached Australia and Antarctica, that another sailed to Australia and the Americas, that a third left a settlement in North America and attempted an expedition to the North Pole, while another rounded the Cape – a century before Magellan. Menzies was a retired British submarine commander. He pieced together these epic voyages commanded by the other admirals of the Ming fleet like a detective, starting with the discovery of an old map, reconstructing the fifteenth-century world of Ming China and elsewhere, and suggesting how these voyages could have taken place. Realizing that his startling claim would upset those schooled in the tradition of the European maritime exploration and discoveries

worldwide, he took great pains to collect evidence and authenticate his case. His fifteen years of diligent research, travelling to actual sites, visiting relevant scholars and experts all over the world, in addition to digging into manuscripts, maps, and various library sources, enabled him to put forward an impressive amount of evidence to support his narrative. Although the claim that ‘China discovered the world’ has been challenged, Zheng He’s seven remarkable voyages are generally accepted as historical.

Although Zheng He never found any trace of the Jianwen emperor, he splendidly achieved the aim of enhancing the prestige and demonstrating the power and wealth of the Ming. His journeys greatly stimulated the tribute embassies from abroad. During the quarter century when Zheng He’s treasure fleets roamed the seas, there was a steady stream of envoys and heads of state from the countries or regions where these fleets had visited, coming to the Ming court to participate willingly in the ritualized suzerain-vassal relationship. For example, in 1416 there were embassies from nineteen overseas countries. Even representatives of Mamaluke Egypt came to pay court. Kings from countries including Borneo and the Philippines boarded the treasure ships with their wives and large retinues, going to and fro between their kingdoms and China, some more than once; some even stayed sufficiently long that they died and were buried in China, with the appropriate ceremony. These people were normally honoured and lavishly entertained and provided for by their Ming hosts.

Why did the heads of foreign states and their representatives subscribe to this Chinese world order? The incentives most likely included tourism and material gain: the ships were comfortable, the Ming capitals were worth visiting, the royal banquets and entertainments were enticing, and the gifts of the Ming emperors were often more valuable than the tributes they offered. An added attraction was the opportunities for commerce. Furthermore, there was the comforting protection of the Ming’s military might. They probably realized that the submission to a Chinese emperor as suzerain was more form than substance: while the benefits were many, the yoke was light. The kowtows and other signs of subordination were an acceptable price to pay for all the benefits.

In retrospect, it is a striking fact that although the Ming had the military capacity and the naval prowess to conquer many of the states Zheng He visited, it did not do so. Zheng He’s instructions from the Yongle emperor were to ‘proceed to the end of the earth to collect tribute’ from the foreigners and ‘to attract all under heaven to be civilized in Confucian harmony’. The Ming had no intention of carving out colonies overseas by wars of conquest, as some of the European colonial powers began to do about a hundred years later in the Americas. It was not aiming to subjugate other states by force, to extract their wealth and exploit their people. The spirit of the tribute system of international relations as promoted by the Ming was peaceful and friendly; the Ming Admirals were enjoined ‘to treat distant people with kindness’. This soft power approach contrasts sharply with that of the Portuguese and Spanish empire-builders, who used their superior

military power to dominate Mexico and South America by force, leading to massive death tolls, the enslavement of the indigenous people, and the destruction of the native cultures. Although Zheng He's fleets included warships and carried tens of thousands of fighting men and plenty of weapons and armament, these were there to protect the people and valuables carried by the ships, to inspire awe, to impress the rulers of other countries, and to fight only if a situation arose that warranted the use of force. These fleets were not primarily a collection of warships, unlike the massive armadas assembled by Khubilai Khan to invade Japan.

To be sure, Zheng He did use force on several occasions. Some of these incidents were in connection with local chieftains behaving like pirates, or rebels against a regime which China recognized, attempting to rob his ships by force. After defeating them in battles, he took them back as captives to present them to the Yongle emperor. On another occasion, he used force to settle a local succession issue. The lack of colonial intention was further borne out by the fact that Zheng He did not leave sizeable garrison forces in the lands he visited. In many cases, the exchange of documents and gifts, and the bestowal of kingships by the Chinese emperor to rulers of these distant countries, was a form of recognition of the legitimacy of these rulers, as the heads of the independent and sovereign states concerned.

Besides the diplomatic successes and the increased prestige of the Ming, the disappearance of the Japanese pirates during the first half of the fifteenth century was another positive consequence of the Ming naval dominance, through the activities of Zheng He's fleets. The surveys of the coasts, and the charts of sea routes and ocean currents recorded by members of these fleets, increased the knowledge of geography, cartography, and ocean navigation of the whole early modern world, not just for the Chinese, but also for the European explorers. Research carried out by Menzies (*op. cit*.) brought to light evidence that the Portuguese explorers, Vasco da Gama (1460-1524) and Ferdinand Magellan (1480-1521), and even Christopher Columbus (1451-1506) and Captain James Cook (1728-1779, did not sail into the unknown, but were equipped with the knowledge of world maps and navigational charts based on the information painstakingly gathered by these Ming seafarers who preceded them.

Other benefits of Zheng He's voyages included contributions to advancements in scientific knowledge, cultural exchanges, and the welfare of humanity through the propagation of fauna and flora from one part of the world in another. Two examples in the area of food may be instanced: the spread to Asia of maize cultivated in America, and the introduction to the Americas of a distinctive type of Asiatic 'melanotic' chicken that had black flesh, skin, bones, and curly black feathers, and that was considered a more nourishing food in China than the more common types of chicken. Exotic animals like zebras and giraffes from Africa were brought back as gifts to the emperor. A giraffe was fancifully identified by the Yongle emperor as the mythical *qilin* - an animal like a cross between a deer and a unicorn. But apart from the

political advantage he gained by its being taken as a sign of heaven's approval of him, no lasting consequence came from importing such a creature. Other significant results of the voyages were the stimulation of trade, and the immigration of Chinese to Southeast Asia and India.

We may ask: was the Ming court pleased with the achievements of Zheng He and his fleets? The Yongle emperor was delighted that so many foreign heads of states and envoys came to honour him as their overlord, and many of their tributes, particularly the exotic, precious, or rare ones, must have had a more than purely symbolic appeal to him. He was also pleased with Zheng He's military triumphs abroad. As the sponsor and driving force behind Zheng He's maritime enterprise, he would not have sent Zheng He and his fleet repeatedly out to sea if he had not valued it.

The ending of the Ming fleet's expeditions

However, in 1424 the Yongle emperor died during Zheng He's sixth voyage. His son and successor, the Hongxi emperor (r. 1424-1425), disapproved of many of his father's costly projects, one of which was Zheng He's overseas missions with the enormous fleets. He listened to his Confucian advisors, who despised eunuchs and disparaged Zheng He's achievements. When Zheng He returned with his fleet at the end of his sixth voyage, instead of the triumphant receptions and rewards which he and his colleagues had formerly enjoyed, they were spurned and cold-shouldered by the new regime. The new emperor, who had no use for the treasure ships, ordered all the building and even the repair of them to be stopped. Zheng He was effectively retired from seafaring: in 1425, his was ordered to be stationed, with his troops, at Nanjing to guard the southern capital.

The Hongxi emperor died after a short reign of only two months, and was succeeded by his son, the Xuande emperor (r. 1425-1435). He continued to pursue his father's policy of retrenchment, but after several years on the throne, he noticed a decline in the tribute embassies from distant lands. In a bid to restore the Ming's sagging influence abroad, in 1431 he ordered the nearly sixty-year-old Zheng He to command a fleet of over 300 ships and 27,000 men and undertake one more major overseas voyage. Another, and a more narrowly targeted mission, was to persuade the King of Siam (Thailand) to cease hostile acts against the King of Malacca (in the present Malaysia), such as impeding the latter's passage to China. In connection with this, Zheng He brought an imperial edict from the Xuande emperor to the King of Siam stating:

'You, Oh king, should follow my orders and treat your neighbour well and instruct your officials not to invade and humiliate others without provocation. If you do this, we will regard you as one who respects Heaven and brings peace to people and makes friends with your neighbours. This is in accord with the benevolent principles I hold in my heart'.

This was Zheng He's seventh and last journey, for he died at sea in 1433 when the fleet was on its way home. This expedition was again a success, as it demonstrated once more the naval supremacy of the Ming and revitalized the tribute relationship and the official trade between the Ming and the coastal states, from the South China sea to the Arabian Peninsula and Africa. In addition to the large number of foreign envoys who came to Beijing on the fleet's return journey, visiting dignitaries from over a dozen countries sent tribute embassies to the Ming court during the years immediately following this voyage, the Malaccan king among them.

Two years after Zheng He's death, the Xuande emperor, who had sponsored Zheng He's last voyage, also passed away. It was the end of an era. The later generations of Ming emperors were no longer interested in the policy of pursuing prestige on the high seas. There were no more sightings of huge Ming fleets with cloud-like red sails in the Indian Ocean. Since the reopening of the repaired Grand Canal for grain transport from the south to north, Beijing in particular, the shipyards were producing more junks for river transport, while fewer and fewer ocean-going ships were being built. A regional rebellion in the southwest, and the resurgence of the Mongol threat in the north, led to the court to concentrate its resources for military campaigns against these foes, during the middle of the fifteenth century.

In 1477, a powerful eunuch named Wang Zhi, who headed a branch of the 'Brocade-Uniformed' palace police, made a last attempt to renew interest in a tribute voyage, and asked for Zheng He's logs. Tribute trade and palace procurement were a monopoly of the Ming eunuchs, which provided many opportunities for corruption and personal enrichment. Zheng He and his fellow eunuch admirals, who commanded the treasure fleets, were outstandingly upright and dutiful in their service to their emperors. They were unlike the later generations of manipulative eunuchs such as Wang Zhi, who deceived their emperors, amassed fortunes, and abused their power. A high official of the Ministry of War named Liu Daxia, after taking possession of Zheng He's documents, took it upon himself to hide and destroy them, and then reported to his superior that these records were 'lost'. In Liu's opinion 'the expeditions of San Bao to the West Ocean wasted tens of myriads of money and grain'. Referring to the shipwrecks and loss of lives, he said 'The people who met their deaths may be counted in myriads'. He considered the eyewitness accounts of foreign lands by Zheng He and his men to be 'deceitful exaggerations of bizarre things far removed from the testimony of people's eyes and ears'. Noting that the treasure ships brought back 'betel, bamboo staves, grape-wine, pomegranates, and ostrich eggs and such like odd things', he commented that 'these contributed nothing to the country'. As regards the 'wonderful and precious things' carried back by Zheng He, he asked 'What benefit was it to the state?' He condemned Zheng He's expeditions as 'an action of bad government

for which ministers should be severely reproved'. He believed that the 'old archives should be destroyed in order to suppress [a repetition of these things] at the root'. Liu's opinion, thus expressed, was likely to be representative of the views of the Confucian bureaucrats, who were hostile to the eunuchs and feared their unbridled power. Zheng He's unique archives fell victim to the long-standing feud between the literati and the eunuchs. Fortunately, books relating to these journeys had already been published and remained in the public domain, so not all accounts were lost. But the bulk of the valuable information contained in the painstakingly kept logs of Zheng He's voyages did not survive this purge.

The Decline and Withdrawal of the Ming

While the official tribute trade was left to find its own level, ordinary maritime commerce between merchants of China, Japan, and other countries flourished as never before. A certain amount of such trade, conducted through the ports authorized to trade with the merchants of the countries concerned, was legal, but there was a large and growing clandestine trade, and much flouting of the very restrictive Ming regulations on such commerce. The Ming government's response was to revive the ban on overseas trade and travel (*hai jin*) that the Ming founder had resorted to, as a measure against the collaboration of Chinese smuggler and Japanese pirates, who were ravaging the Chinese coasts. By 1500, the building of boats with more than two masts was strictly forbidden. In 1525, the central government ordered the coastal authorities to destroy all ocean-going vessels and to detain the merchants who sailed in them. In less than a century, the most powerful navy in the world had been destroyed by imperial decree.

These measures did little to stop the illegal trade because it was lucrative for all those involved - rich Chinese merchants, desperately poor peasants, and the Japanese pirates who were known pejoratively as *wokou*, meaning 'dwarf bandits'. A different approach, more in keeping with the burgeoning commercial activities of the time, would have been to liberalize coastal trade with more opened ports, and at the same time strengthen coastal defence against smugglers and pirates. This would have had the additional advantage of enabling the authorities to collect more trade tax. This was not the way favoured by the ideologically anti-commercial Confucian literati, who persuaded some of the emperors of the post-Yongle era to issue edicts prohibiting Ming subjects from engaging in foreign trade and overseas travel. The ban made outlaws of those who dared to contravene it.

Because the Ming had allowed its strong navy to wither away and had neglected to keep its once vigilant coastal defence system in good order, the latent Japanese pirates, who were ever ready to pounce, became rampant and bold. During the middle decades of the sixteenth century, they ravaged the whole of the Chinese coast like invading forces, with hundreds of boats and thousands of men, causing enormous damage to the Chinese coastal towns and villages. Sometimes they even set up bases on the Chinese coast. For example, 20,000 of them once based themselves near present day Shanghai, from where they robbed and pillaged nearby towns. These Japanese marauders were aided and abetted by local lords in Japan, as well as by Chinese smugglers and outlaws. There were frictions between the authorities of the two countries, when the Ming suspended Japanese trade at a port where such trade had been permitted, on suspicion of complicity between the Japanese authorities and the pirates. These factors, in addition to commercial growth, led to a phenomenal increase in piracy. During the ten years between 1555 and 1565, the Jiajing emperor (r. 1521-151566) enlisted a number of outstanding generals, who made a determined effort, with the help of crack troops and ample material support, to deal mortal blows to the pirates and remove their threat permanently from the Chinese coast. The price the Ming paid for this success was an empty treasury. During the reign of the Long Qing emperor (r. 1567-1572), the court must have recognized some of the negative aspects of its restrictive policy on trade, and it began to lift the ban, at least partially.

The Ming provides a classic illustration of the phenomenon of the dynastic cycle. The founder and his capable adult son, the Hongwu and the Yongle emperors, were heroic figures, who arrived at the pinnacle of power by overcoming great obstacles. They were outstanding in their personal capabilities and leadership qualities, with outsized ambitions, great force of personality, and strength of will. Presiding over a strong and prosperous country, they greatly extended the territory of their empire. Their era fit the description of the genesis and growth phase of a dynastic cycle. But this state of affairs was not to last.

The Yongle emperor' successors pursued a conservative policy of preserving what their forebears had won, to save costly expenditures and give the people respite from the burdensome demands of the state. However, even just to preserve the status quo, the Ming authorities had to have the political will, and maintain sufficient military strength to resist foreign aggression and to prevent secession by a subject state. As we have seen, the Xuande emperor was prepared to let Annam secede, rather than prolong costly military actions in that area.

There were also threats from the Mongols. In 1449 the Oirat chief Esen emerged after a series of tribal wars as the new Mongol strongman, and he invaded the Ming with a large army. The young Zhengtong emperor (r. 1435-1449 and 1457-1464) was encouraged by his favourite, a vainglorious eunuch named Wang Zheng,

to play the war game by himself leading a huge force, reportedly 500,000 strong, to fight the invaders. Esen outmanoeuvred the Ming forces and captured the Zhengtong emperor at Tumu, after inflicting a catastrophic defeat on the Ming. The battle of Tumu was significant because it changed Ming policy from offence to defence. The empress dowager Sun authorized the installation of a new emperor, the Jingtai emperor (r. 1449-1457), who empowered the new minister of war, Yu Qian, to strengthen the defence of the capital as Esen marched on Beijing, bringing with him the royal Ming captive. A series of military setbacks outside Beijing led Esen to retreat. He decided that his best interest lay in agreeing to return to the regime of tribute relationship with the Ming, provided that the Ming would again allow trade at certain designated market towns. He returned Zhengtong, by then a powerless deposed emperor, and peace was restored based on the trade agreement and through tribute embassies.

From the time of its defeat by the Mongols at the infamous battle at Tumu in 1449, the Ming gave up a large amount of territory in the north, retreating behind the inner Great Wall as a line of defence. By the mid-fifteenth century, a slow and gradual dynastic decline had already begun. Its lack of interest in maintaining a strong navy to ensure its position as a dominant maritime power provided further evidence of its waning vigour.

This was a turning point. There were major structural weaknesses in the political and fiscal system that needed to be addressed. Periodically, such efforts were made, but with limited success. One example was Zhang Juzheng's[4] Single Whip taxation reform of 1580 (to which we shall return). But without another strong leader at the top like the Yongle emperor, the Ming moderated its ambition, and withdrew into itself. The dynasty shrank into a passive defensive posture in its relationship with neighbouring and overseas countries and its territory contracted.

The Ming withdrawal was dramatically out of step with the European maritime expansion and exploration that would reach this part of the world a few decades later. This and other developments in Europe would usher in a new world of breath-taking changes, just when China had decided to turn inward and conserve its heritage. This choice was destined to leave China far behind the European powers, in the race to become wealthy and powerful modern nations. It also rendered China vulnerable, later in the Qing dynasty, to European imperial ambitions. In late Ming times, European development was still only a distant rumble, reaching the Chinese shores when the Portuguese established a foothold at Macau, and when the Jesuits arrived in China.

[4] Senior Grand Secretary in the late Ming.

The start of European incursions

Towards the end of the fifteenth century, the Portuguese sea captains Vasco da Gama (1460-1524) and Ferdinand Magellan (1480-1521), through the foundation laid by Prince Henry the Navigator (r. 1394-1460), led the European drive to find a direct sea route to tap the wealth of the lands far to the east, and to trade in their spices, silks, porcelain, and other desirable products, so as to avoid having to operate through Arab middle-men. Following their success in rounding the Cape of Good Hope in Africa and in circumnavigating the world, the Portuguese set up a colony in Goa (on the west coast of India), from where the coast of China was within easy reach. In 1515, the Portuguese landed at an island near Guangzhou, and from then on they sought permission from the Ming authorities to trade. They were not successful, because Portugal was not among the states with a tribute relationship with the Ming, and Ming subjects were still forbidden to trade privately with foreigners along most of China's coast, except at certain ports opened to merchants of specified countries. The Portuguese then resorted to force, occupying and attacking many cities along the coast. The Ming forces successfully repelled their attacks and ejected them from the occupied territories. Despite having eliminated their own navy, the Chinese during the sixteenth century were able to repulse European invaders, and thus save themselves from the fate of the indigenous peoples of South America. Notwithstanding these setbacks over several decades, the Portuguese never abandoned their goal of establishing a foothold in China. In 1553, they bribed a Ming official to let them land at Macau, with the pretext of having to dry out their ships after encountering severe storms at sea. In reality, their plan was to establish a permanent presence after landing, build residences, set up administrative offices, and encourage the immigration of Portuguese people. Around 10,000 individuals did come to settle at Macau. When the Wanli emperor (r. 1572-1620) ascended the throne, he imposed a customs duty on the Portuguese at Macau, collecting more than 20,000 taels of silver annually. Since the Ming government was desperately short of money, it tolerated the Portuguese *de facto* occupation of Macau, on account of its income from the customs duty.

The Spanish followed soon after the Portuguese, with Magellan claiming the Philippines for Spain in 1521. The small overseas Chinese communities there acted as an interface, facilitating trade between the Spanish and continental China. The Dutch also arrived with their armed fleet. They tried to dislodge the Portuguese from Macau, but without success. The Ming stoutly defended its coast without letting the Dutch gain any

foothold. The Dutch found a haven in southern Taiwan, where they defeated the Spanish, who had occupied the north of the island since 1626. In 1642, the Dutch took over the entire island, but only briefly.

The Catholic authorities in Rome strongly supported the overseas colonial expansion of the Catholic countries Portugal and Spain, since their thrusts helped to spread Catholicism to other parts of the world. Jesuit missionaries came to China on the heels of the Portuguese and used Macau as a beachhead to advance into China. The Jesuits were highly educated in the arts and sciences of a West which was on the eve of a scientific revolution. They acquired a high degree of proficiency in the Chinese language and became knowledgeable about Chinese culture, so that they could communicate with the educated Chinese at a sophisticated level on matters relating to both Chinese culture and Western science and technology; in this way they hoped to make them more receptive to the Christian gospel. After preaching for many years in southern China, an Italian Jesuit priest, Matteo Ricci (1552-1610), pioneered an approach that rendered Christian texts more understandable and acceptable to the educated Chinese. He linked Confucian 'ancient ethics' with Christian moral precepts, and accommodated Chinese ancestor worship as 'civil rites', while rejecting Buddhism and Neo-Confucianism. He began to make converts of scholar-officials, and he finally moved north to the capital. In 1601, the Wanli emperor gave him a stipend as a Western scholar and permitted him and his fellow Jesuit priests to stay and preach at Beijing. Other Jesuit missionaries adopted the same approach, and some also tried to reach the common people. By the end of the Ming dynasty in 1644, there were around 40,000 Catholic Christians in China.

The court officials valued the Jesuits' knowledge of science and technology. Some were employed by the court to work on chronology in the newly established Bureau of the Western Calendar to revise the calendar, and they, together with Chinese scholars, produced many books on astronomy and chronology. Others introduced western knowledge of physics, mathematics, mechanical engineering, and geography, as well as many arts subjects, to the educated Chinese through learned discourse, and by translating western texts. The Ming authorities even tapped the Jesuits' know-how on making 'western' cannons. It is noteworthy that the society that had invented gunpowder and firearms centuries earlier fell far behind in further development of these weapons until it was threatened by external foes. The next time the Chinese needed to import western technology on weaponry would be in the nineteenth century, when the Qing dynasty that succeeded the Ming was seriously threatened, by both internal rebellion and external aggression.

We may wonder why this early round of valuable transfer of western knowledge failed to make a lasting impact on the Chinese society. One reason was that the Jesuit mission in China was limited in scale, and its main objective was religious conversion rather than cultural transfusion. Perhaps the underlying reason for

China's imperviousness to foreign influence must be sought in its political structure, its economy, and its own deep-rooted cultural tradition.

There was transfer in the opposite direction too. The Jesuits brought back to Europe their knowledge of China, which inspired the appearance of 'Chinoiserie' as popular collectibles, found among ceramic products, furniture, and landscape design used in homes or for public display. The early European Enlightenment thinkers like Montesquieu and Voltaire, who were searching for a political model of ethical government founded on virtue without appeal to religion, saw Confucian China as the example they were looking for. This cross-cultural exchange between China and Europe appeared to have more impact on Europe, because of the receptive response of the great European philosophers to Confucianism, and the influence of their ideas on a Europe already in the throes of political change.

The Europeans were spreading by sea to distant shores, building colonial empires first in the Americas, and soon thereafter endeavouring to establish bases in East Asia and Southeast Asia. In contrast, Ming China, having destroyed its own navy, tried to steer clear of outside entanglements, and become self-contained within its own borders. Inside the empire, despite the weakening of the political superstructure, the society underneath showed plenty of vitality. The population nearly doubled from an estimated 70 million during the early decades of the Ming rule to around 130 million at the end of the dynasty. The Ming official population figures, collected for taxation purpose, were notoriously inaccurate, mainly because people tried to minimize the tax obligation, and also because the method of census-taking was not as rigorous as a modern census collection. Although there were more mouths to feed, there were also more hands to work. The economy expanded considerably in many directions: agricultural, commercial, and industrial. More labour-intensive farming, land reclamation, cultivation of new crops from the Americas such as sweet potato, peanut, maize, and tobacco, and improvements in agricultural machinery, technique, and irrigation, all contributed to significant increases in food and other farm products. The surplus of primary products and labour led to a boom in craft production, either as a cottage industry or in factories.

Economic and cultural developments

Trade, both internal and external, flourished. The commercial demand provided stimulus to industrial production. In the richer parts of southern China, factory production of various commodities for both the internal market and export thrived, as wealthy merchants and landlords used their capital accumulation as investments in both industry and commerce. Considerable advances were made in weaving, fabric dying, papermaking, metallurgy, and in the making of ceramics and lacquer wares, and cloisonné. Although there were domestic improvements in firearms, the European cannons made by the Jesuits were considered more

devastating. A fourteenth century Ming official was the first person to experiment with a rudimentary rocket-propelled flying machine. Silver imported from abroad and mined by the Chinese replaced the ever-depreciating paper money as the main currency of exchange and tax payment.

Some modern Chinese Marxist historians like to look at this type of economic development in the Ming as 'budding capitalism'. But in fact, there was no flowering of capitalism in Ming China. Among possible explanations, a modern economic historian, Mark Elvin, has suggested[5] that a 'high level equilibrium trap' kept the highly developed labour-intensive agricultural economy of China from being able to lift itself by its own bootstraps to achieve a capitalist market economy.

The dynamism of the Ming economy was reflected in its lively cultural scene. Popular literature, novels, and short stories flourished during the Ming, in response to the demands for culture and entertainment by the growing urban middle class. A similar phenomenon would occur in Europe much later. A booming printing industry and a brisk book trade helped to satisfy these tastes. Theatrical performances also grew in popularity. The traditional art forms such as painting, sculpture, music, and dance continued to find expressions among the gentry and the common people in diverse ways. The study of the Classics continued to attract those who wished to achieve higher social status or gain official posts, or for self-improvement. During the early decades of the Ming, the court favoured Song Neo-Confucianism. As time went on, prominent Ming thinkers did not feel bound by the Song interpretation of the Classical texts: their syncretistic brand of Neo-Confucianism was deeply influenced by Zen Buddhism and Daoism. They believed that moral knowledge or innate goodness (*liang zhi*) was inherent in the human mind, and they were concerned with recapturing this pristine state of the self before its corruption by egoistic thoughts and desires. They practised 'quietism' and stressed 'absolute spontaneity' and 'perfect accord between the mind and the world'.

Many works were published which presented practical knowledge on a wide range of subjects from medicine to dietetics, geology, the geography of China and foreign countries, encyclopaedias of agricultural techniques, and illustrated treaties on the technology of ceramics, iron, and steel. The Tiangong Kaiwu was one of the most comprehensive works on applied science and technology. The illustrated text covered mining with machinery, the building of boats and carts, the making of bricks, ceramic and metallic products, and many other industrial products. A remarkable book on botany and pharmacopoeia was Ben Cao Gang Mu. It was printed in 1596 with 'magnificent plates'. It had notes on over one thousand plants and one

[5] *The Pattern of the Chinese Past*, by Mark Elvin (Stanford University Press, Stanford CA, 1973).

thousand animals, with medicinal uses. It recorded a method of smallpox inoculation, similar in principle to that developed in the modern science of immunology.

The seeds of governmental decline

There were many reasons for the Ming's decline, including poor leadership at the top, systemic weaknesses, and financial crises. The Ming governance suffered from too much concentration of power in the hands of the emperor. If such an absolutist ruler delegated his power to the wrong people, or let his power be usurped by them, or if he were himself incompetent, the polity could be harmed. The extraordinary concentration of power originated with the founder who, after abolishing the prime ministers' office, tried to govern the entire country single-handedly with the help of a small number of scholars working from the inner courts or pavilions inside the palace. He terrorized the regular bureaucracy by setting up a fear-inspiring palace police, the Brocade-Uniformed Guards, to exercise surveillance over his officials and bend them to his will. It is ironic that his less capable heirs strengthened this absolutist tendency, though they lacked the founder's capacity for work, or his talent for making the day-to-day decisions on the business of running a vast empire.

The Ming dynasty was unusual in allowing eunuchs to participate in every area of government, civil and military, and the abuse of power by eunuchs was a special feature of Ming autocracy. The founding emperor, mindful of the lessons of eunuch abuse of power in history, prohibited eunuchs from handling official documents and meddling in politics. He decreed that the eunuchs should be treated as lowly servants, doing merely menial tasks, and be kept in their place through fear of law and discipline. The Yongle emperor, who seized the throne from his nephew with the eunuchs' help, overturned this ancestral injunction. From then on, those eunuchs who gained their emperors' trust and affection could become members of the ruling elite. Many held high official positions, acquiring great wealth and exercising enormous power or influence. Although there were a few towering figures among the Ming eunuchs, such as Zheng He, who served their emperors and their country admirably, many others were prodigiously corrupt and notorious for their abuse of power. While there were established institutions to assess, check, and supervise the work and the conduct of the regular officials, no such controls existed as regards the eunuchs. The emperor was the only one who could curb the eunuchs. If an official called an emperor's attention to eunuch misbehaviour or abuses, he might well put his own live at risk, should the emperor side with the eunuchs.

Not all the Ming emperors were endowed with the wisdom and good judgement to enable them to exercise their autocratic power justly and benevolently. Many of them were not even interested in managing the affairs of the state. They regularly failed to hold court audiences or respond to official communications.

Their negligence led to usurpation of power by unscrupulous people close to them from inside the palace, who were either members of the inner cabinet or eunuchs. These people tended to be corrupt and to misgovern the country. The Chenhua emperor (r. 1464-1487) was exploited by his eunuch Wang Zhi whom he had appointed him to head a section of the palace police. The Jiajing emperor devoted himself entirely to practising Daoism during the later years of his reign, from which he did not wish to be distracted by his duties as the head of the state. Power fell into the hands of Yan Gao who, for many years as the head of the inner cabinet, was notorious for corruption and acting unjustly towards officials outside his inner circle. The personal servants of the emperors knew the likes and dislikes and personal weaknesses of their masters, whom they could manipulate to gain power, wealth, or official posts for themselves and their henchmen.

The Zhengde emperor (r. 1505-1521) and his eunuch Liu Jin illustrate fully the lethal combination of an irresponsible emperor and a tyrannical eunuch. This ruler came to the throne as a teenager of fifteen. He was so fond of hunting, fishing, and all kinds of amusements and games that he had no time for the official business of government. This gave an opportunity to Liu Jin, the leader of a gang of eight eunuchs, known as the ‘eight tigers’, to take over the job of receiving all official documents - letters, reports, and petitions - from all parts of the empire, while keeping the young monarch intoxicated with entertainments. Liu Jin craftily presented these documents to the emperor just when he was most distracted. The emperor once waved him away irritably with the remark ‘this is what am I using you for, yet [you] come to disturb me’. From then on Liu Jin made the decisions for the emperor, and sometimes even changed laws at will. After Liu Jin and his gang were put in charge of the palace police, and the East and West Depots, officials who opposed or offended Liu Jin either lost their jobs or their lives. Extremely cruel punishments that could led to death were meted out, even to high officials, on trivial offences. He put his supporters, or those who bribed him heavily, in key government posts. Offering or solicitation of bribes became the order of the day. Those who did not satisfy him in every respect would be accused of crimes and suffer imprisonment, torture, and even death. With Liu Jin in charge, rampant corruption and a reign of terror prevailed. When Liu Jin discovered an anonymous letter accusing him of misdeeds on a street where the emperor had just visited, he ordered all court officials to kneel in front of the Feng Tian gate for questioning. and to listen to his day-long tirade. It was a scorching summer day, and some officials died from heat and thirst on that occasion. Finally, the crimes of Liu Jin were exposed, and he was arrested and convicted of treason. After his property was seized, hundreds of thousands of gold and silver ingots, four thousand jade belts, and many precious stones and other treasures were found in his house. All these ill-gotten gains were obtained during only a five-year tenure as the emperor’s surrogate.

The corruption and misrule served only to exacerbate the financial difficulties that the government began to experience, along with administrative decline, from the middle of the fifteenth century. The institution of self-sufficient agricultural-military colonies gradually disappeared. The land and population registry of the early Ming became less and less reliable. The land that belonged to small independent farming households, which provided the mainstay of the government's taxes, decreased alarmingly as time went on. The reason lay in the encroachment of peasant land by the wealthy merchants and landowners, a significant number of whom were royal relatives. The Ming founder had 23 sons; and his descendants that were recorded in the 'Jade Register' might have numbered about 300,000 by the end of the dynasty. They formed an unproductive 'super class' of powerful and privileged people, who tended to use their special connections or influence to take into their possession ordinary peoples' land. Land grabbing was also a common vice amongst greedy local elites and high officials, eunuchs included. This abuse impoverished the small farmers or turned them into landless labourers who might become rebels or bandits. It also removed a large amount of land from taxation, partly because the land that belonged to many special categories of privileged people was not registered for tax, and also because the mighty had ways and means of avoiding land registration and paying taxes. By 1529, the eighth year in the reign of the Jai Din emperor, the amount of land subject to tax had shrunk to less than half of that recorded at an earlier period. Even though the tax burden was increased on the remaining taxable land and farming households, the tax revenue was nevertheless drastically reduced. The government had trouble paying its officials, as well as supporting its military.

Feeble attempts at reform did not rectify the situation significantly until the early years of the Wanli emperor, who ascended the throne as a boy of ten. Still under the supervision of his mother and the dowager empress, he followed their advice to allow Zhang Juzheng to lead the inner cabinet, and to run the country. Zhang happened to be a capable and strong-willed leader of government. During the ten years, starting from 1573, when he wielded almost dictatorial power, he rendered the bureaucracy more effective through measures that promoted able officials, while weeding out the ineffective and corrupt ones. He greatly increased the amount of taxable land by having the empire's agricultural land measured district by district, without interference from powerful landowners. His 'Single Whip' reform unified the various categories of taxes, such as in labour or in kind, and commuted them all into silver currency, which was to be collected by the local officials directly. His tax reforms turned the government's financial deficit into a surplus, and reduced the tax burden on those who were least able to bear it. It appears that Ming decline could have been arrested, even at such a late date, if given effective leadership at the top. Because Zhang's reforms on taxation impinged on the interests of the rich and powerful, they did not last beyond his death in 1582, when the Wanli emperor dishonoured him posthumously.

After the Wanli emperor assumed control of the government himself, seizure of peasant land by the rich and powerful returned with a vengeance. He set a bad example by granting his imperial relatives unusually large estates, with land that had been seized from his helpless subjects. From the middle period of his reign at the beginning of the seventeenth century, the Ming state was in crisis, politically, economically, and financially. A loose-knit group of scholar-officials or ex-officials, who were deeply concerned about the critical situation the country had fallen into, started a political movement that stood for clean government. Because prominent members of this group met for political and philosophical discourses at the site of the old Song dynasty Donglin Academy in the city of Wuxi, they and others with similar views came to be known as the Donglin Party. They were so vehemently opposed to the corrupt and lawless behaviour of those in power that they were not afraid to criticize or attack high officials if their conduct did not come up to their standards of integrity or uprightness. Unfortunately, their political impact was limited by a system in which all power flowed from the monarch. They might have had some influence on public opinion, but unless the emperor gave them the authority to implement their ideas, they could only remain powerless bystanders. The Wanli emperor had no inclination to employ these people in key posts.

The Wanli emperor's actions served only to make a bad situation worse. To raise funds, he authorized a project to open up new mines by eunuch officials all over the empire, and to have the eunuchs collect taxes from these enterprises. From 1597 to 1605, although 3,000,000 taels of silver had been collected for the emperor, a large part of the profit went to the eunuch officials, their assistants, and the local bullies who became involved. The eunuch officials behaved arrogantly, with utter disregard of law, oppressing the local people in criminal ways, and exploiting them as free labourers in the name of the labour service tax. The mining enterprises, which gave rise to new opportunities for corruption and abuse of power by eunuchs, were deeply resented by the people in the localities concerned. Many rose in rebellions against the government.

Even with eunuch abuse of power, and the damages associated with it so much in evidence, the Tianqi emperor (r. 1620-1627) facilitated the rise of another lawless eunuch, Wei Zhongxian, who held dictatorial power for seven years. Wei was an illiterate gambler. He decided to neuter himself to improve his life's chances as a eunuch. He schemed his way into the heart of the emperor's wet-nurse, known as Madame Ke, of whom the emperor was particularly fond. Wei's close relationship with Ke helped him to become a favourite of the emperor also. Before long he was given the post of handling official documents for the emperor. This gave him the opportunity to write edicts, with the help of his more literate collaborators, in the emperor's name. Since his ambition knew no bounds, he murdered or sent into exile those who stood

in the path of his rise. He trained a personal force of ten thousand armed men in the confines of the palace, without the emperor sensing any personal threat. After being put in charge of the palace police, he tried to subdue all opposition by using the terror tactics of secret spies, imprisonment, and torture. He dismissed many of the officials, including members of the Donglin Party, who dared to impeach him. Some were imprisoned and tortured to death. He put his followers and collaborators in power, while mercilessly persecuting members of the Donglin Party, which stood for all those who opposed him. Officials who petitioned the emperor to condemn Wei's crimes were liable to get short shrift. The Tianqi emperor was so prone to listen to Wei and his supporters' stories and excuses that in the end the accusers became the accused. Wei's crimes were not exposed until the beginning of the reign of the Congzhen emperor (r. 1628-1644), who finally put an end to Wei Zhongxian's tyrannical regime.

The raging misrule during the Tianqi period did nothing but aggravate the late Ming crises. Peasant uprisings that had been sporadic throughout the Ming grew larger, more persistent, and more difficult to quell. It was as if the dynasty was losing its mandate to rule. As it had been towards the end of the Yuan, ambitious rebel leaders tried to use secret religious organizations as a cover to appeal to people suffering from economic distress, social injustice, or political oppression, to gather followers and then foment rebellion. The White Lotus Society had a long lineage as a vehicle for this purpose. It made its reappearance during the Wanli period in 1514, and in 1622, during the reign of the Tianqi emperor, its leaders, with nearly 200,000 adherents, decided to raise the flag of armed rebellion. Although this anti-government movement was suppressed, violent peasant unrest spread like wildfire, particularly in the Shaanxi province in northern China where, in 1627, a severe famine occurred. By the 1630s, small bands of rebels grew into armies of two or three hundred thousand, sweeping across the countryside and capturing towns and provincial cities.

The Ming authorities tried both to fight the rebels and to win them over by offering inducements, but two resilient rebel leaders, Zhang Xianzhong and Li Zicheng, each controlling an independent army of his own, survived all the government's effort at suppression and pacification. Despite some military setbacks, by the 1640s each had successfully occupied several provinces. In 1643, Zhang made himself the Great King of the West, and set up an orderly administration to rule from the city of Wuchang in central China. The following year, after Zhang had captured Chengdu in Sichuan and transferred his capital there, he made himself an emperor.

Also in 1643, Li, calling himself the Heaven Serving and Righteousness Promoting Great Generalissimo, set up a government at Xiangyang, with the help of disaffected members of the scholar-gentry. Li's literati

supporters also advised him to adopt policies which were calculated to win more peasant support for his regime, such as giving the land seized by landlords back to the peasants and getting rid of unreasonable and burdensome taxes. After capturing Luoyang, Li distributed the gold, silver, and grain from the store of an imperial prince to the people. These and other popular measures helped his movement to grow. In 1644 Li took Xi'an, which became the capital of his kingdom of Da Shun (Great Accord). Here he established an elaborate government administration, with laws and regulations.

When Li saw that the Ming was too weak to defend its realm, he marched with a large, well-disciplined force from Xi'an to Beijing early in 1644. All along the way, county after county surrendered without a fight, and he was able to capture Beijing within two months of the start of the march. After the fall of his capital, the Chongzhen emperor took his own life. At Beijing, Li sought to set up a central administration by recruiting lower ranking Ming officials to supplement his own. Higher officials, those above the Third Grade, were forced to contribute money to the new regime, because they were presumed to have become rich by corruption. At this point, the Ming seemed to have reached the end of its dynastic cycle. Evidently the time had come for the Ming to be replaced by a new dynasty, which was again to be founded by a rebel leader of underprivileged peasant origin, like the Hongwu emperor of the Ming. However, subsequent events showed that the mandate of heaven had passed Li Zicheng over, and his movement was soon to be swept away by a rising tide from the steppes.

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