

# Ming Dynasty

## 1368-1644

### EAST ASIA: 1450-1750

Like the Muslim Empires, most of the civilizations of east Asia generally continued to think of Europe as a backward area of the world, and yet the global effects of European expansion were beginning to be felt by the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. Southeast Asia was probably most affected by the Europeans, since Portuguese and Dutch ships began to claim ports and control trade through this crucial linking area between the Indian Ocean and the South China Sea. Europeans took over the governments of two island regions of Southeast Asia – the Philippines and Indonesia – and established regimes that favored the interests of European merchants. In the Philippines, Manila became the center of Spanish commercial activity in Asia. The Dutch had a more tenuous hold on Indonesia, but from their hub in Batavia on the island of Java, they exercised control over much Southeast Asian trade. China, Japan, and Korea were much more resistant to European efforts to control trade.

Despite the fact that European traders and missionaries began to appear in China, the empire generally went about business as usual, and Japan actively tried to keep Europeans out of their lands. Nomadic invasions continued to preoccupy the Ming Dynasty, just as they had distracted previous dynasties, and European excursions to the New World were only of marginal interest to them. Although both China and Japan ventured into the seas around them and conducted a vigorous trade with one another, most of their concerns were land based and remained focused on their own internal affairs.



### 324 UNIT THREE The Late Ming Dynasty

The Ming Dynasty began with the overthrow of the Mongols in 1368, and it lasted for almost 300 years. During its early years the government was effective, population and food supply grew, and commercial activity continued, even though the Ming emperors were generally wary of outsiders. The experience with Mongol rule had emphasized the old Chinese tendency to protect their culture from outside influences, and so the Confucians regained much influence that they had lost during the Yuan Dynasty. Yet, China's precious goods, including silk and porcelain, were still highly prized in international trade, so the Ming did not turn their backs completely on the highly profitable commerce that had enriched them in the past.

#### Political Characteristics

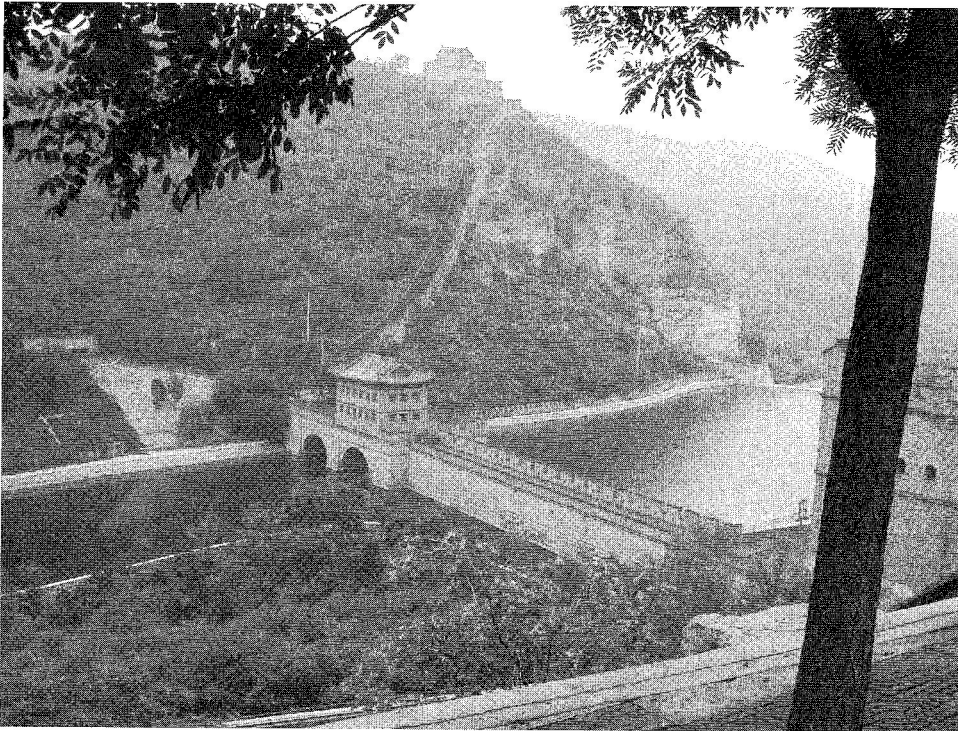
China's ancient concept of the all-powerful but not divine emperor continued with the Ming, and the real power of the emperor probably reached its height during their early years. A corps of palace eunuchs served as the emperor's eyes and ears, and they had almost exclusive direct access to the emperor. After the first Ming emperor's rule from Nanjing, the government returned to Beijing, where the emperor's **forbidden city** expanded to house more than 20,000 people to serve the emperor and his family. The examination system for the bureaucracy was revived, and essentially stayed in place until the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The exams were largely unchanged, requiring extensive knowledge of Confucian thought, and positions in the civil service bureaucracy were filled with those that did well on them. The Ming armies were vast in numbers, with good leadership and organization, although their firearms were not as advanced as those of the West.

#### Economic Progress and Technological Resistance

Arguably, commercial activity in China during the 16<sup>th</sup> century was stronger than in any other empire or kingdom in the world. A large percentage of people were engaged in trade and manufacture, despite the fact that merchants had a low status in Chinese society. When the Portuguese made their way to Chinese ports, they traded New World silver for Chinese luxury goods, but their behavior was so offensive that the Chinese government confined their activity to one port – Macao. Urban areas in China

grew rapidly under Ming control, inland cities as well as port cities, such as Macao, Guangzhou, Hangzhou, and Shanghai. Unlike their modern counterparts, people in these cities appear to have been decently housed and well fed.

Despite the economic prosperity based on both external and internal trade, the Ming Chinese were not known for their technological innovation, as the Song Chinese had been. Chinese science and technology led the world until at least the 1200s, but during the Ming era, many inventions from earlier Chinese times were adapted and improved by the Europeans. Examples include gunpowder and movable type printing. In their quest to preserve their identity, the Chinese took little notice of technological advances that would eventually prove to be their undoing. But for this era, the brilliance and prosperity of the Ming were not overshadowed by their lack of technological progress.



The Great Wall of China. This modern photograph shows the Great Wall as it was rebuilt during the Ming Empire. Extensive repairs fortified and expanded the wall that had first been constructed during the Qin era, 3rd century B.C.E.

### Trade and Cultural Contacts with Outsiders

The attitude toward the outside world was that the Middle Kingdom needed little from anyone else. The voyages of Zheng He were a notable exception to the overall Ming policy. The Ming period was a high point in cultural and commercial interactions between China and Japan, with the shoguns often embracing Chinese culture and buying decorative artifacts from China. Japanese and Chinese pirates, who often cooperated to raid coastal ports, plagued both countries, and were never eliminated. Trade contacts with westerners were limited to a few trading enterprises with the Dutch and Portuguese, but an important opening for Europeans was the Ming tolerance of Christian missionaries who shared with them some of the mysteries of western technology. Like Kubilai Khan's reaction to Marco Polo, the Ming found their European visitors interesting and amusing, but almost certainly a distraction to the real business of the court – keeping the ancient land-based empire safe and secure from much more traditional threats than the Europeans.

Christian missionaries had ventured into China much earlier, but the outbreak of the plague and the collapse of the Yuan Dynasty had caused Christianity to be almost eliminated in China by the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> century. The efforts to convert the Chinese to Roman Catholicism were revived in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, and the **Jesuits** – the order stimulated during the Catholic Reformation in Europe – led the way. The most famous of the Jesuit missionaries was **Matteo Ricci**, an ambitious Italian who hoped to convert Emperor Wanli to his faith. Ricci understood that the Chinese revered learning and refinement, and that they were repulsed by the crude European sailors that had landed on their shores. Ricci used his own erudition and curiosity about all things Chinese to impress the emperor, and to accomplish his underlying motive of establishing China as a Christian nation. Ricci was able to master reading and writing in Chinese, no small accomplishment considering the thousands of characters in the language. He also discovered that the emperor's court was curious about European science, technology, and practical mechanical inventions. The Jesuits knew math and astronomy, so they used their calculations to correct Chinese calendars that

had been slightly inaccurate and to prepare beautiful world maps with China placed strategically in the middle. To spark Chinese interest, the Jesuits intrigued them by displays of bronze cannons, cuckoo clocks, and most famously, a giant mechanical clock that chimed the hours.

The Jesuits brought these European innovations to the Chinese court as gifts, and then took advantage of the good will that they created by devising ways to convince the emperor of the similarities that they saw between Confucianism and Christianity. They held religious services in Chinese, and they allowed converts to continue to keep their shrines to their ancestors. Despite these clever, concerted efforts to promote Christianity, the number of converts was disappointing, so that by 1750 only about 200,000 Chinese (out of a population of 225 million) had adopted the faith. The Jesuit mission ended after the pope became alarmed by the comparisons between Confucianism and Christianity and ordered the priests to ban ancestral veneration and conduct services according to accepted European practice. The Chinese emperor responded by ordering a ban on Christian proselytizing. Although the priests did not cease their efforts, the mission was weakened, since it had neither papal nor imperial support. Although the Jesuits failed in their primary goal of creating a Christian China, they did open the country to European influence, primarily through their gadgets and technology. Their writings also stimulated an interest in China among Europeans, which resulted in both increasing demand for Chinese products in Europe and an admiration for Chinese values, decorum, and customs.



### **PERSPECTIVES: MATTEO RICCI ON CHINESE CULTURE**

Matteo Ricci, a Jesuit priest who lived in China between 1582 and 1610, faithfully kept a journal during those years with some keen observations of Chinese values and customs, as seen through the eyes of a Christian European. Some excerpts from his remarkable journal appear below.

“...the entire kingdom is administered by the Order of the Learned, commonly known as the Philosophers. The responsibility for orderly management of the entire realm is wholly and completely committed to their charge and care. The army, both officers and soldiers, hold them in high respect and show them the promptest obedience and deference, and not infrequently the military are disciplined by them as a schoolboy might be punished by his master... Philosophers far excel military leaders in the good will and the respect of the people and in opportunities of acquiring wealth...

The order and harmony that prevails among magistrates, both high and low, in the provinces and in the regal Curia is also worthy of admiration. Their attitude toward the King, in exact obedience and in external ceremony, is a cause of wonderment to a foreigner. The literati would never think of omitting gifts. In the courts and elsewhere, inferiors always bend the knee when speaking to a superior, and address him in the most dignified language...”

*Reference: China in the Sixteenth Century: The Journals of Matthew Ricci, 1583-1610.*, Matteo Ricci, trans. By Louis J. Gallagher, S.J. (New York: Random House, 1953), pp. 54-59.

## **The Decline of the Ming**

In many ways the decline of the Ming Dynasty followed the old model of dynastic cycles very closely. Large land-based empires always had problems defending their borders and maintaining control over their far-flung holdings. Again, central Asian nomadic groups that had long threatened China made successful forays across the Great Wall, despite the Ming's valiant attempts to make it impregnable. A series of weak emperors tolerated corruption among their imperial administrators, particularly the long-resented eunuchs, and court factions bickered for the emperor's favor. Peasant rebellions, a threat to most previous dynasties, multiplied as the central government lost its grip on local landlords. Just as had occurred during the 13<sup>th</sup> century, a group living north of the Great Wall was ready to seize China from emperors who had lost the mandate of heaven.

This time, instead of the Mongols, the Manchurians won the prize, after they realized that their overlord – the Chinese emperor – could no longer defend his lands. In a move that is reminiscent of the Zhou, who many centuries earlier had devised the mandate of heaven to justify their overthrow of the Shang Dynasty, the Manchurians named their new empire the **Qing** [pure] **Dynasty** as an indication that they were throwing the rogues out to restore the purity of Chinese culture and society. The biggest flaw in their presentation was the fact that they were not Han Chinese, but instead were “barbarians” from the north, a fact that nevertheless did not impede their ability to found and maintain a brilliant new era for China.

<b>Ming Dynasty – reading notes</b>		
	<u><i>Your Notes</i></u>	<u><b>Class Notes</b></u>
<b>Background</b>		
<b>Political Characteristics</b>		
<b>Economic Progress &amp; Technological Resistance</b>		
<b>Trade &amp; Cultural Contacts</b>		
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