CHAPTER 8

The Limits of Autocracy:

The Ming Dynasty 1368–1644

The Ming dynasty (1368–1644), founded by a poor peasant who joined the rebellions against Mongol rule, was an era of great changes in society, political dynamics, ethnic composition, foreign relations, and culture. The founder's armies managed to secure all of China proper and even to attract some Mongol nobles as allies and supporters. The early Ming emperors continued some of the institutions the Mongols had used, such as hereditary military households, but also returned to long-standing traditions of governance, such as careful census and registration of the population and land. Although the early emperors used terror to keep officials in line, competition to join officialdom quickly reached and exceeded Song levels. Literati culture was especially vibrant in the Lower Yangzi region, where urbanization reached high levels and the publishing industry grew rapidly. One reason for the prosperity of this region was a burgeoning of trade, including international maritime trade. Piracy became a major problem until the government relaxed its prohibitions on private trade. In the early seventeenth century, global cooling added to farmers' hardships and the government's problems.

KEY DATES

1368–1398	Reign of founder, Ming Taizu
1370	Ban on private sea voyages
1387	Census and land registration
1405–1424	Reign of Chengzu after he deposes his nephew
1405–1433	Zheng He's voyages
1420	Capital is moved from Nanjing to Beijing
1449	Emperor is captured by Western Mongols
1464–1466	Miao and Yao uprisings
1472–1528	Wang Yangming
1567	Ban on private foreign trade is ended
1577	Portugal establishes colony at Macau
1583–1610	Matteo Ricci in China
1592–1598	Ming armies fight Japan in Korea
1598	Tang Xianzu writes Peony Pavilion
1624–1627	Struggle between Donglin scholars and eunuch Wei Zhongxian
1630s	Widespread uprisings

Ming Taizu and his successors

Seldom has the course of Chinese history been as influenced by a single personality as it was by the founder of the Ming dynasty, Zhu Yuanzhang (1328–1398), better known by his imperial temple name, Taizu, and the name of his reign period, Hongwu. The first commoner to become emperor in 1,500 years, Taizu proved shrewd, hardworking, and ruthless. He knew poverty firsthand. His destitute parents frequently had to move to look for work or escape rent collectors; they even had to give away several of their children because they could not afford to rear them. When Zhu Yuanzhang was sixteen years old, a shift in the route of the Yellow River brought floods, famine, and disease to his region and took the lives of both his parents. Taizu, unable even to buy coffins in which to bury them, presented himself to a Buddhist monastery; but the monastery,

hard-pressed itself, soon sent out the novices to beg. After several years wandering across east-central China, Taizu returned to the monastery for three or four years until it was burned to the ground by the Yuan militia attempting to suppress local rebellions. In 1352, homeless again, Taizu joined one of the many rebel groups affiliated with the Red Turbans, a branch of the millenarian White Lotus Society whose teachings drew on the Maitreya cult of popular Buddhism, as well as Confucian and Daoist values and symbols. Taizu rose quickly in this rebel group, especially after he married the foster daughter of the commander. In 1355, on the latter's death, he assumed command of the troops and the following year captured the major city of Nanjing. In these early years he attracted to his service a small band of able soldiers of peasant origins as well as a few literati who served as advisors.

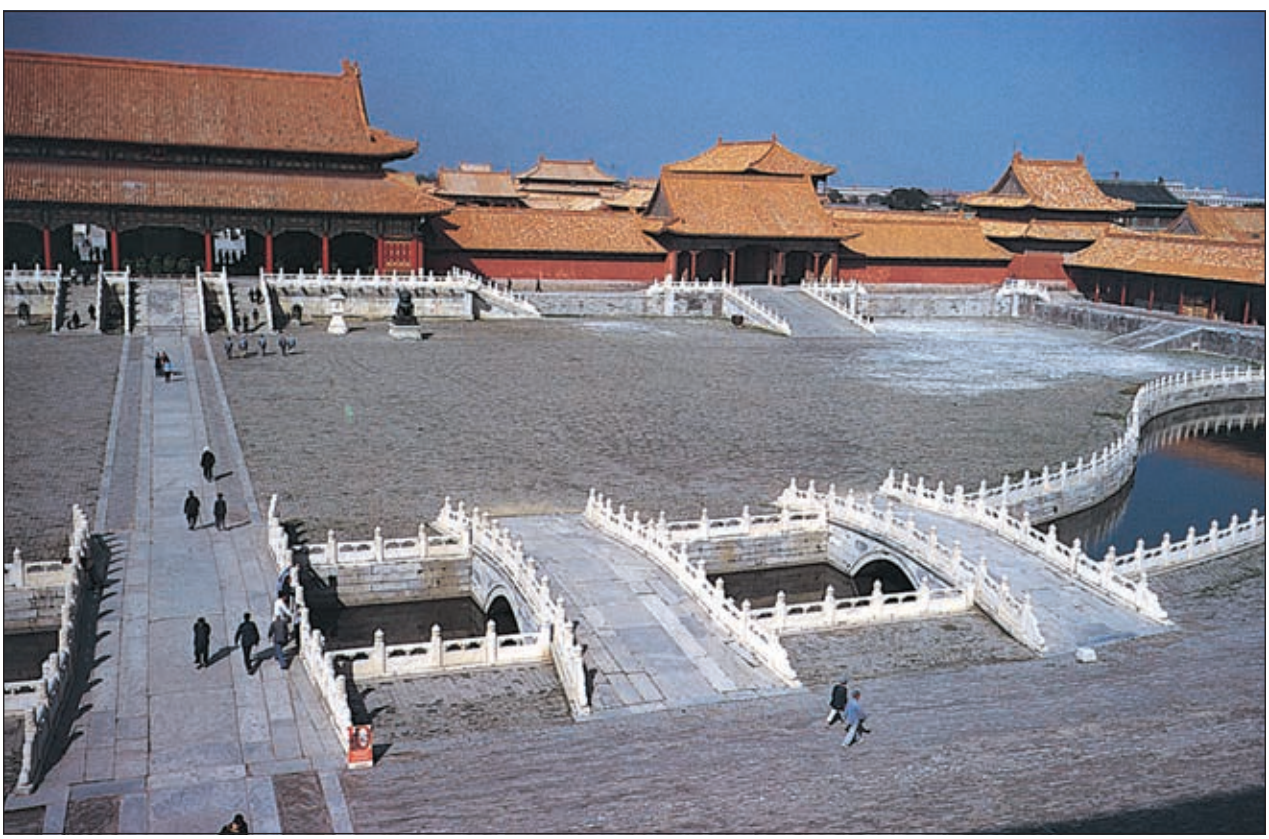
In this formal portrait, Ming Taizu is shown wearing a robe in imperial yellow decorated with images of dragons, seated in a wooden arm chair with a footrest.

Using Nanjing as a base for campaigns against other local strongmen, Taizu gradually became supreme in the southeast, even though he still nominally recognized the dynastic claims of the head of the Red Turbans. After the latter died in 1367 (somewhat suspiciously while Taizu's guest), Taizu made clear his own imperial intentions, sending his army north toward the Yuan capital at modern Beijing. The Mongol ruler was not captured and did not abdicate; rather he and his court fled, retreating into Mongolia. Subsequent Ming efforts to defeat the Mongols there were unsuccessful, so the Ming domain never extended into Inner Asia and dealing with Mongol forces was its major military challenge. In 1368, after gaining control of Beijing, Taizu razed the palaces and declared the establishment of the Ming dynasty. He retained Nanjing as his capital, making the Ming the first dynasty controlling north and south China to rule from a city south of the Yangzi River. Nanjing's population rapidly swelled from about 100,000 to perhaps 1 million. Taizu built huge walls around the city, nearly 30 miles (48 km) long, as well as palaces and other government buildings.

Influenced, it would seem, by Daoist notions of heavenly autocrats, Taizu made every effort to exalt the position of emperor. He projected himself as the lord of lords, the world's most powerful man. He saw his task as bringing into being a world where people obeyed their superiors and where those who did evil were promptly punished. In order to lighten the weight of government on the poor and expand state control of the population, he ordered a full-scale registration of both the population and cultivated land as the first step toward reallocating service and tax liabilities

more fairly. For the same reasons, he cut government expenses wherever he could. He railed against the deleterious impact of Mongol rule on Chinese cultural norms but also recognized the Yuan dynasty as legitimate and did not eliminate all traces of their form of government. He required his officials to kneel when addressing him and did not hesitate to have them beaten. Rather than return to the Song use of market forces to supply government needs, Taizu continued the Yuan use of hereditary obligations. He made the 2-million strong army largely hereditary, registering all soldiers' families as hereditary military families, to supply one soldier at all times. In the hope that their salaries also would not be a burden on the general population, more than 10 per cent of the arable land was set aside as military colony land, farmed by hereditary military colonists.

Taizu was committed to keeping the cost of government down to limit the burdens he put on the population. He retained the Yuan system of hereditary artisan households who would provide for the needs of the palace and government. The same principles were applied to local government as well; better-off village families were obliged to perform low-level judicial, police, and tax-collecting services without pay, an obligation that generally passed down within the family. This village service policy also appealed to Taizu because it allowed local communities to protect themselves from rapacious tax collectors: they themselves would be responsible for



The layout and design of the Ming palace complex in Beijing were largely retained by the subsequent Qing rulers. Visitors to Beijing today can wander through the orderly sequence of courtyards and halls where twenty-four emperors both lived and conducted the affairs of state.

assessing, collecting, and transporting taxes. Taizu also thought government intrusion could be cut back if people would observe traditional moral standards and social hierarchies. Toward this end, he issued hortatory admonitions for village heads to read aloud to their neighbours, urging them to behave with filial piety toward their parents, live in harmony with their neighbours, work contentedly at their occupations, and refrain from evil.

Taizu's sympathies did not extend to the commercial and scholarly elites. Inordinately high tax rates were imposed on the rich and cultured region around Suzhou in Jiangsu province, and thousands of wealthy families from the southeast were forced to settle elsewhere, especially in the new capital Nanjing. Taizu complained about the 120 *jinshi* chosen in the civil service examination of 1371, declaring, 'We sincerely searched for worthy men, but the empire responded by sending empty phrase-makers.' He ceased holding examinations for more than a decade. He also had the *Mencius* edited to remove eighty-five sections that referred favourably to curbing the authority of the ruler, apparently thinking they might embolden scholars to criticize his actions. Once, after the examinations were reinstated, Taizu had the chief examiner executed when it turned out that only candidates from the south had been selected as *jinshi*.

Perhaps overwhelmed by the magnitude of the problems he confronted, Taizu began to suspect that others were plotting against him or secretly ridiculing him. He turned his palace guard into a secret police force to spy on officials and ferret out political crimes. In 1380, he had his chief minister executed, and almost anyone remotely connected with him was soon arrested and executed as possible accomplices; after 14 years of investigation more than 30,000 had lost their lives. Two other major purges took another 70,000 or so lives. The return of native rule to China had not made political life less stressful.

These purges were not directed only at the mighty; Taizu waged repeated campaigns against the activities of the assorted underlings, runners, guards, and servants who did the bidding of officials and controlled ordinary people's access to them. As he reported in one of his proclamations, he felt driven to rid the world of evil people:

> In the morning I punish a few; by evening others commit the same crime. I punish these in the evening and by the next morning again there are violations. Although the corpses of the first have not been removed, already others follow in their path ... What a difficult situation this is! If I punish these persons, I am regarded as a tyrant. If I am lenient toward them, the law becomes ineffective, order deteriorates, and people deem me an incapable ruler.

Unable to put his trust in a prime minister, Taizu acted as his own chief executive, dealing directly with officials on matters large or small. Like the First Emperor of the Qin, Taizu went through huge piles of paperwork himself, exhausting himself in his determination to see to everything.

Taizu's successors obeyed in name his command that his laws and institutions were not to be altered, but they in fact enacted many changes in response to major social, economic, demographic, military, and intellectual developments. Nanjing, for instance, did not remain the capital for even a century. At his death in 1368, Taizu was succeeded by his legitimate heir (his deceased eldest son's fifteen-year-old son), but within three years this young emperor's uncle, Taizu's fourth son Chengzu (also called Yongle), usurped the throne. Chengzu was a forceful military man. His fief was in the northeast and he had led campaigns north to fight Mongols. In 1420, he moved the main capital to his power base at Beijing and demoted Nanjing to the rank of secondary capital. Thereafter Beijing was the residence of the court and seat of military power while Nanjing had supervision of fiscal matters and of supplying the poorer north with tax revenues collected in the wealthier south. Like earlier capitals, Beijing was arranged like a set of nested boxes: the main hall of the palace was the centre of the palace compound (called the Forbidden City), itself the centre of the government district (called the Imperial City), which in turn was the centre of Beijing, with movement in and out of these boxes limited to the gates that pierced the walls. By 1553, an Outer City had been added to the south, with its own walls and gates, bringing the overall size of Beijing to 4 by 4½ miles (6.5 by 7 km). To supply Beijing with grain, the Grand Canal was given a major overhaul, bringing it up over western Shandong through a chain of fifteen locks, a major feat of engineering completed in 1415. The 15,000 boats and 160,000 soldiers of the transport army – who pulled loaded barges with ropes where needed – thus became the lifeline of the capital.

Taizu's efforts to organize his government around unpaid service created many headaches for later Ming administrators. As in previous dynasties, a fully hereditary army proved difficult to maintain. Soldiers who were not paid deserted, and military land changed hands illegally. To protect the northern border mercenary armies had to be created. Local officials found that legal sources of revenue were so limited that they had no choice but to levy extra-legal ones to keep basic services going, leading to just the sort of abuses Taizu had wanted to prevent. Ordinary households, for their part, were often devastated by the burden of uncompensated responsibility for delivering taxes or maintaining local hostels for government travellers. Local, small-scale reforms were frequently introduced, and often copied elsewhere. One of these reforms eventually converted most obligations into a monetary tax.

Taizu's solution to the perennial problem of palace eunuchs also did not work as planned. Taizu had stipulated that eunuchs should not be allowed to learn to read or to interfere in politics. Within decades, however, palace eunuchs were not merely managing huge imperial workshops, but also playing major roles in military affairs and even such civil service matters as the appointment and promotion of officials. During the last century of the Ming, 70,000 eunuchs were in service throughout the country, 10,000 in the capital. They had their own bureaucracy, parallel to that of the civil service bureaucracy but not controlled by it. A school was set up to educate

them, and many became expert in bureaucratic procedures and documentary forms. Eunuchs staffed such palace offices as the Bureau of Ceremonial, whose chief was the manager of the palace quarters and the emperor's schedule, and when the emperor allowed it, a kind of chief of staff who could impose his will on the civil bureaucracy. Emperors uninterested in governance could let eunuchs handle most matters.

The Ming ruling house and its many princes – settled across the country in princely mansions – relished their role as military men and staged displays of martial prowess such as large-scale hunts or archery contests Frequently, they were also major patrons of Buddhism or Daoism. Over time, however, the cost of maintaining the imperial clan became ruinous. In the Wanli reign (1573–1619), there were 23,000 clansmen receiving stipends, and more than half the revenue of the provinces of Shanxi and Henan went to pay these allowances. The burden of the imperial clan was never fully solved.

Beyond the borders

The early Ming emperors had no desire to return to the multistate system of the Song; their goal was to reassert Chinese centrality in East Asia on the model of the Han or Tang dynasties. They also had to face reality. Ming armies had ended Mongol rule in predominately Chinese regions, but not eliminated Mongol power in the steppe. Some Mongol military forces were recruited to serve in the Ming army, others were sought as allies. But conflict also was recurrent.

Ming Taizu re-established the reception of envoys on the model of earlier dynasties. He forbade private foreign trade, wanting all exchange to occur through the framework of this diplomatic system posited on the moral centrality of the Chinese emperor who received diplomatic gifts and conferred largesse. The envoy system tended to work best for the conduct of relations with small or remote states, including those in Southeast Asia and along the Silk Route. The city-state of Hami participated as long as it remained Buddhist, but not after the sixteenth century when it adopted Islam and fell more under the orbit of Muslim powers to the west.

The region dominated by Mongol nobles was harder to confine within the Ming's preferred diplomatic framework. The northern border was porous, with Chinese settled in Mongol territory, Mongols (many of them soldiers in the Ming army) settled inside Ming territory, and Chinese garrison troops carrying on surreptitious trade and smuggling with the enemy. The Mongols in this period were not a stable, unified state. Khans of the northern, southern, or western Mongols – most claiming descent from Chinggis Khan – rose and fell, their authority contested from within and frequently in conflict with each other. In 1388, Taizu sent a huge army north into eastern Mongolia, where it won a victory and came back with thousands of captives. Chengzu, too, took fighting the Mongols as a priority and five times led expeditions in person, usually with Mongol nobles whose support he had secured. Then in 1449 a young Ming emperor foolishly led an army into Mongol territory, allowing himself to be captured and many of his courtiers slaughtered. A century later, the Ming was

Opposite
China's sea links to other nations became increasingly important in Ming times. Early in the dynasty, China was sending out seaborne missions to distant lands; late in the dynasty merchants and adventurers from distant lands were coming to China by sea. Thus in Ming times it was not enough to defend the northern borders against horseriding nomads; the government also had to worry about defending its southern coastal borders from pirates and smugglers.

no more successful in defending itself against the raids of the Mongol Altan Khan. In a single month in 1542, for instance, in Altan Khan captured or killed 200,000 people, seized a million head of cattle and horses, and reduced several thousand houses to ashes. Because of events like these, the Ming court of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries invested heavily in reconstruction of the Great Wall. Probably more important in reaching an accommodation was the decision reached in 1571, after much debate at court, to grant the Mongols favourable trading relations.

The Ming's diplomatic system implied paternalistic obligations for China to come to the aid of loyal vassal states, which the Ming government accepted, sometimes at considerable cost. In 1407, the Ming sent 215,000 troops to Vietnam to support the collapsing Tran dynasty. The situation rapidly deteriorated and the Ming attempted an outright annexation, giving up in 1424 in the face of widespread armed resistance. Near the end of the Ming dynasty, China similarly undertook two massive campaigns into Korea, perhaps Ming's most loyal allied state. Hideyoshi, who had recently unified Japan, attacked Joseon Korea when it refused to let his armies pass through the peninsula on their way to attack the Ming. In 1592, the Japanese army rapidly advanced as far as Pyongyang. The Ming put in place a huge logistical effort to move troops and cannons to lift the siege of Pyongyang and force a Japanese retreat. When negotiations failed, the Japanese launched a second invasion in 1597, but 150-ship-strong Korean and Ming naval forces turned the tide.

The southwestern frontier

It was not until Ming times that the mountainous, multi-ethnic southwestern provinces of Yunnan and Guizhou became fully incorporated into the Chinese realm. Han Chinese were happy to trade their own products for horses, metals, jade, elephant tusks, and lumber from the region, but tropical diseases and narrow valleys suited to their style of farming had limited Chinese immigration. The state of Nanzhao in Tang times and Dali in Song times had governed much of what is today Yunnan province. What is today's Guizhou province was at that time generally under the control of smaller polities, which were often at war with each other. Their rulers were generally willing to accept titles from Chinese states and exchange gifts with them in pursuit of their own ends.

The Mongols destroyed the kingdom of Dali in 1253 and incorporated it loosely into their empire, settling more than 50,000 soldiers and their families there, including many Muslims from the northwest. This pattern of settling furloughed soldiers was repeated by the Ming after its armies gained control of the region in 1381. By the end of the century some 250,000 military colonists had cleared at least 2 million *mu* (about 350,000 acres) in Yunnan and Guizhou. Subsequent settlements of military households during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries brought at least another half a million government-sponsored settlers, coming from as far away as Shanxi, Shandong, Jiangsu, and Fujian. These migrations had a major impact on the ethnic mix in the area, as Yunnan and Guizhou probably had only around 3 million people


Ming China's Contacts With the Outside World
MONGOLS
MANCHUS
GOBI
KHANATE OF ORDOS TUMET
Dunhuang
Liaodong
Yalu
SEA OF JAPAN
JAPAN
JOSEON
Beijing
Dengzhou
Yellow River
Grand Canal
Nagasaki
Lanzhou
Luoyang
Kaifeng
YELLOW SEA
Yangzhou
Xi'an
Nanjing
Xianyang
Hangzhou
EAST CHINA SEA
Chengdu
Yangzi River
Chenzhou
Fuzhou
TAIWAN
Yunnan
Guangzhou
PACIFIC OCEAN
BURMA
West River
Macao (Port.)
Salween
SOUTH CHINA SEA
ANNAM
Pegu
SIAM
Mekong
Vijaya
Ayutthaya
Angkor
MING EMPIRE
Hormuz
ARABIA
Guangzhou
Chittagong
Jedda
INDIA
Pegu
Vijaya
Aden
Calicut
Cochi
Mogadishu
Malacca
AFRICA
INDIAN OCEAN
Ming empire
Ming campaigns against the Mongols
Ming imperial capital
Ming wall
pirate raids
Portuguese trading contacts
Zheng He's voyages, 1405–33 (inset above)

at the beginning of the Ming, well over half of whom were non-Han. Colonists generally opened uncultivated lands near non-Han settlements, leading to friction but also to cultural borrowing and assimilation in both directions. Mining was also promoted because the region was one of the best sources for copper, silver, cinnabar, and gold.

In frontier areas like the southwest, the Ming government followed the same policies of dual administration as earlier dynasties. Places with extensive Chinese populations were ruled through prefectures and counties whose regular civil servants enforced nationwide law codes and tax regulations. In places where local headmen were clearly in control or the cost of central government administration too high, they ruled 'with a loose rein', obligating local leaders to maintain order, help the Ming if other nearby tribes caused trouble, and send envoys bearing gifts in return for titles and goods. The Ming central government played the role of distant overlord, not able to control much of what occurred, but not having to expend many resources either. The local chiefs, of course, were pursuing their own ends and found ways to use connections to the Ming government to their own advantage.

Violent conflict between settlers and the native population was not uncommon. In ways reminiscent of conflicts in the American West, provocations could come from either side: individual Chinese would exploit or reduce to near slavery local tribal people, and tribal people, where they had the military means, would rob, enslave, or otherwise terrorize Chinese settlers and merchants who ventured into their territory. The Ming state had conducted military operations in the southwest since the late fourteenth century, and conflict there intensified in the early 1440s. Full-scale war broke out from 1464 to 1466 when Miao and Yao tribes in Guangxi, Guangdong, Sichuan, Hunan, and Guizhou left their remote border areas to attack heavily populated cities. Concluding that the previous policies had been too conciliatory, the minister of war decided to pursue a military solution. Thirty thousand soldiers, including 1,000 Mongol horsemen, were assembled in Nanjing and marched from there into Guangxi, and another 160,000 troops were recruited locally and served under their own headmen. The main Yao stronghold, located in a deep gorge surrounded by jungle-covered mountains, was attacked, and the leader and 800 followers were captured and sent to Beijing to be beheaded. Armies were then dispatched to pacify the neighbouring territory.

Some Chinese officials argued against pursuing military supremacy over the non-Han groups, as it often led to deep-seated hatred of the Chinese. The philospher-official Wang Yangming, experienced in suppressing Miao rebellions in Guangxi, advocated joint administration by both local leaders and Chinese officials to allow gradual sinification. In the case of unsinified tribal people, he remarked, 'instituting direct civil administration by Han Chinese magistrates is like herding deer into the hall of a house and trying to tame them. In the end, they merely butt over your sacrificial altars, kick over your tables, and dash about in frantic fright.' On the other hand, leaving them to their own devices was likewise no solution since it

The Great Wall

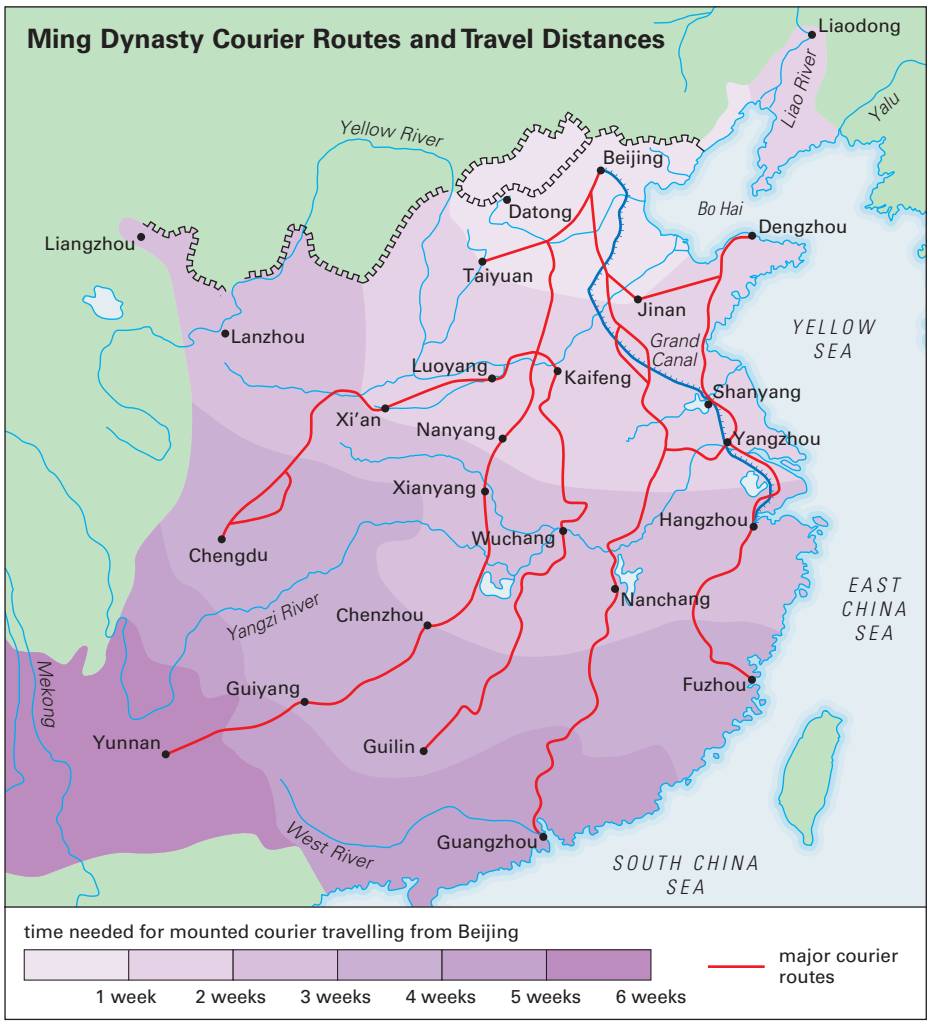
No relic of China's past is more imposing than the Great Wall. Faced with brick and stone and averaging 25 feet (7.5 m) high and wide, this wall extends from northeast of Beijing through several provinces to Jiayuguan in western Gansu. Built to keep out invaders, it is dotted with a series of large watch towers and garrison quarters. Beacon fires lit at these towers could quickly spread news of nomad attacks. Europeans who first saw the wall wrote home and greatly praised its immense size. The seventeenth-century observer Ferdinand Verbiest recorded that 'the seven wonders of the world put together are not comparable to this work; and all Fame hath published concerning it among the Europeans, comes far short of what I myself have seen.' Chinese in the twentieth century picked up on these ideas, making the Great Wall into a symbol of China's indomitable will.

Closer reading of history reveals that it was the Ming government's siege mentality that led to the wall we see today. Governments from pre-Han times on engaged in the construction of defensive walls. Most famous was the First Emperor of Qin whose costly wall-building was classed as one of his crimes against the Chinese people. But subsequent dynasties did not keep a solid wall in constant repair because walls, even massive ones, did not keep out raiders or invaders and other defence strategies were usually more cost-effective.

The Ming rebuilt the wall because it had found no other way to protect against the Mongols. The preferred policy during the first century of Ming rule was to control the Mongols through a combination of offensive attacks and controlled trade. This strategy was of limited success, and in 1449 the Mongols won a decisive battle at Tumu, capturing the Ming emperor Yingzong. The Ming chose to install a new emperor rather than bargain with the Mongols over ransom, but could not agree on how to deal with the Mongol threat. A deadlock between officials who rejected any contact with the Mongols and those who saw increased trade with them as the best solution prevented effective decision-making for decades, allowing the Mongols to grow stronger. No longer financially able to undertake offensive actions, the government resorted to reconstructing the Great Wall as a fallback measure.

The towers in this heavily fortified section of the Great Wall were intended as signalling stations, to allow rapid warning of the approach of such mobile opponents as the Mongols.

The Ministry of War used soldiers to man the courier system with its 1,706 stations. Officials travelling to assignments made use of it but at a more leisurely pace than couriers carrying urgent messages.



was like releasing deer into the wilderness without putting up fences to keep them from trampling on young crops.

Because the surviving historical record is overwhelmingly in Chinese and reflects the views of the state and literate settlers, it is difficult to reconstruct the experience of those already living in the southwest. Some assimilation certainly occurred, along with trade and the spread of technology, but certainly the region did not simply become 'Chinese': it remains one of the most ethnically diverse in today's China.

The economy

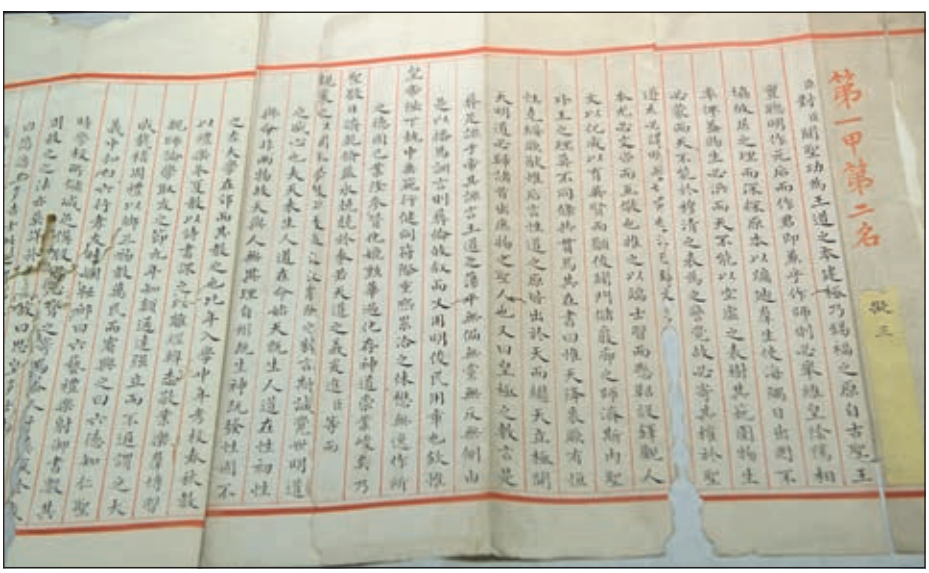
As was true for much of eastern Eurasia, the wars and epidemics of the final years of the Yuan had led to extensive depopulation and a shrunken overall economy. Early Ming policies brought stability but not much growth. Managing the monetary system proved a major challenge. The government failed to meet the need for coinage, to control counterfeiting of coins, or to enforce the use of its poorly backed paper

currency. In the end, paper money was abandoned and the government gave up minting coins because of shortages of copper. Uncoined silver came to circulate as the main form of money and gradually, after 1436, the government collected most taxes in silver.

The shift to silver aided a revival of the commercial economy after 1500. An influx of silver, first from Japan and later from the Americas via the Philippines, expanded the money supply. In the late sixteenth century, China was importing more than 50 tons of silver a year, which climbed to more than 100 tons in the early seventeenth century. Small market towns appeared all over the country. Regional specialization increased as communities took advantage of the availability of cheap water transport to take up cash-cropping. Fujian, for instance, grew sugar that was then shipped around the country. Population growth also became noticeable, doubling over the course of the dynasty, from between 60 and 80 million to between 150 and 200 million.

As in Song and Yuan times, the Jiangnan region led the way toward prosperity. Its farmers supported a vast silk industry. In the early seventeenth century, Suzhou alone had several thousand households who supported themselves by weaving silk and others specialized in dyeing. Not far away Songjiang became a centre of cotton manufacture, producing cloth sold throughout the empire. Cotton growing, ginning, spinning, and weaving were done in rural areas, dyeing in cities. The demand for raw cotton was so high that merchants shipped raw cotton grown in north China and Guangdong to be processed in Jiangnan. Most of the work was done by women working at home on a piece-rate basis.

Long-distance trade was aided by the expansion of networks of traders linked through kinship and native-place connections, the best known those from Huizhou in southern Anhui and Shanxi. One Huizhou lineage with establishments both in



Only a few examination papers from the Ming dynasty survive. The care the candidate put into writing clearly and neatly is evident in this rare example, which was good enough to be ranked second.

This photograph of the examination cells in Beijing was taken in the 1890s.

Hubei and Jiangnan would buy bulk materials such as cotton, timber, coal, and tung oil in Hubei and sell them in Jiangnan, then buy finished cotton textiles and salt to take back to Hubei to sell there.

Literati life

Reversing Yuan policies, the Ming government again made the civil service examination system the main route to office and thus a central feature of literati life. Boys in literati families were set to memorizing key texts early, often at the schools that were becoming more widely available. To prevent the most prosperous parts of the country, where education was most advanced, from monopolizing the civil service, and to guarantee representation to even the most backward regions, the Ming instituted provincial quotas. Just as significant, the Ming added a new lower tier to the degree system, the *shengyuan*, who qualified by repeatedly passing a local examination. This greatly expanded the numbers of degree-holders. By 1500, there were about 30,000 *shengyuan* at any given time, about one out of every 1,000 adult males.

The examinations questions themselves tested candidates on a wide variety of governance issues, ranging from the organization of local militias and financing military costs to infrastructure projects, disaster relief, and relations between the

throne and officialdom. Candidates were expected to demonstrate thorough mastery of the Four Books (*Analects*, *Mencius*, *Doctrine of the Mean*, and *Great Learning*) as interpreted by the Song scholar Zhu Xi. This emphasis on a single scholar's interpretations made study and grading more straightforward but served to separate preparation for the examinations from intellectual life to an even greater degree than in the Song period. Preparing for the examinations became divorced from literary trends as well, especially after 1487 when it was ruled that essays had to be written in a fixed, formal eight-part style dubbed the 'eight-legged' essay style, which emphasized reasoning by analogy and pairing statements.

The provincial and capital examinations were major events, with thousands of candidates arriving in the cities and spending a week taking tests divided into three two-day sessions. They spent their time in small cells where they could be watched to prevent cheating. Candles accidentally knocked over sometimes caused fires; rumours that the examiners had been blackmailed to reveal the questions could provoke riots. Once the final copies were collected, the examiners took about twenty days to grade them, and most candidates waited to learn the results before returning home.

Passing even the lowest level of examinations brought benefits. Degree holders could wear distinctive caps and sashes, were exempt from labour service, and were sometimes given stipends. At least as important, their titles gave them standing as

Hopeful candidates who had taken the civil service examinations crowd around the wall where the results are posted. Detail from a handscroll in ink and colour on silk attributed to Qiu Ying (active 1530–1552).

community leaders and entry into educated circles; if in reduced circumstances, they could probably use their titles to secure a job as a tutor in a wealthy family. The 10 per cent or fewer who were successful at the provincial level were entitled to greater privileges, including eligibility for appointment to lower-level government posts, even without passing the highest level in the capital. There would only have been 2,000 to 4,000 *jinshi* at any given time, on the order of one out of 10,000 adult males.

The key role of the civil service examination system in elite life did not make wealth irrelevant. Since office could be used to enhance family property and property could be passed from one generation to the next, families of officials did better than other families. As in Song times, when the class system was viewed from the county or prefectural level, a relatively small number of landholding families in a locality could well garner a disproportionately large share of the higher degrees generation after generation. In one county in Anhui, for instance, nineteen of the eighty-five *jinshi* awarded in Ming times came from just three family lines. Nor did wealth have to come from land alone. Merchants often had their sons receive literary educations, and families of merchants and scholars often intermarried.

The wealthy, moreover, had the resources to pursue a rather idyllic version of the literati life, combining the practice and connoisseurship of art and literature with study and occasional office holding. In 1570, the 'Four Great Families' of Suzhou invited the local literati to view their ancient bronzes and other antiquities. Such wealthy Suzhou families often lived in elegant walled compounds with extensive gardens. Quite unlike the rural and urban mansions of their European counterparts, these urban retreats provided no external visual interest. Only those invited within the high walls could discover the imaginary worlds created within small courtyards, reached after zigzagging along covered galleries, pierced in places by decorative windows offering glimpses of further worlds. The tiny gardens within these complexes might contain bamboo or plum trees as well as rocks that evoke mountains.

The elegance of the hardwood furniture crafted in Ming times was never surpassed. This 'official's' chair was constructed from slender, gently curved pieces of Huanghuali wood, a beautifully grained hardwood grown primarily in tropical Hainan Island, south of mainland Guangdong province. The apron and the splat are embellished with low-relief carving of dragon and cloud motifs. Fine hardwood furniture like this chair was fashioned without the use of metal nails, the pieces being held together through elaborately fitted joints.

In this milieu, scholar-artists blossomed. Great painters like Shen Zhou, Wen Zhengming, and Dong Qichang were literati thoroughly familiar with the classics, the works of the great poets, and the styles of former poets and calligraphers; and they tried to imbue with meaning the landscapes, gardens, trees, rocks, or other scenes they depicted. They attracted many students and followers, both amateurs who painted for self-expression while pursuing other careers, and men who decided to devote their full energies to painting. Making a living as a painter had become feasible because works of art by well-known painters commanded high prices. One wealthy man, planning the celebration of his mother's eightieth birthday, paid the prominent painter Qiu Ying 100 ounces of silver to paint a long handscroll for the occasion. Older paintings were also highly valued; one man acquired a landed estate in exchange for a set of four scrolls by Shen Zhou, a painter of the mid Ming.

For women, life in literati families was much like it had been in Song times, with a couple of important differences. Women whose husbands died while they were still

The well-to-do in the Jiangnan region often constructed elegant gardens with rocks, ponds, walkways, buildings, and trees. This garden in Suzhou, called the Humble Administrator's Garden, is especially large, covering 13 acres (5.2 ha).

young were more likely to stay with his parents, living as 'chaste' or faithful widows, a choice Ming Neo-Confucian moralists celebrated. Married women also had less control over property they brought into marriage, and probably as a consequence generally did not bring as rich dowries. This shift seems to reflect not only Confucian teachings but also Mongol marriage practices adopted into the Yuan legal code. A third change is that many more women in literati families not only wrote poetry but also had their writings published. They wrote poems in all the established poetic styles but sometimes developed more distinctively feminine voices. For instance, Gu Ruopu, whose husband died in 1619, wrote poems mourning her husband but also poems about her efforts on behalf of her sons and daughters, such as this one, titled 'Refurbishing a Boat for My Son Can to Use as a Study':

> I was always conscience-stricken before the zeal of those ancient mothers
> Until I found it, at a scenic spot beside a bridge where in other days
> It used to skirt the trees, following the chaste moon (not like
> Those craft that cruise the mist in search of frivolous ladies).
> You have long hoped to study in Yang Zhu's school, but now
> Passers-by will see the scholar Mi Fu's barge. Don't mistake if for a pleasure boat;
> I've fixed it up with old coverlets woven of blue silk.

Philosophical currents

During the first half of the Ming, Zhu Xi's synthesis of Confucianism was treated as orthodox by both the state and most scholars. In mid Ming, however, the talented, charismatic, and tireless Wang Yangming (Wang Shouren, 1472–1529) challenged Zhu Xi's understandings of metaphysics and the process of self-cultivation and inaugurated a period of wide-ranging intellectual debate.

Wang was an official of some distinction. He had earned a *jinshi* degree at the early age of eighteen and gone on to hold many posts. At one point he courageously submitted a memorial to the throne, protesting against the corrupt behaviour of a powerful eunuch. As a result, he was publicly flogged and banished to remote Guizhou. His most significant challenge to Zhu Xi's orthodoxy, namely his idea of intuitive moral knowledge, came to him suddenly during this period of exile.

What Wang objected to in Zhu Xi's teachings was his understanding of moral principles as something that could be understood and realized only through careful and rational investigation of events and things, a process which generally required devoting many years to the study of the classics and other books. Wang turned to ideas that had been current among some of Zhu Xi's contemporaries who thought truth could be found within oneself. To Wang Yangming's way of thinking, people could discover universal principles by clearing their minds of obstructions such as material desires and allowing their inborn knowledge of the good to surface. He also argued that moral action results spontaneously from the extension or realization of knowledge. True knowing, he held, is not abstract intellectualization but derives from experience; one does not understand filial piety if one does not practise it, any more than one understands pain without experiencing it. Knowing right from wrong leads to taking right action, as one is compelled to act upon what one truly knows.

Because he believed moral knowledge was innate in the mind, it followed for Wang Yangming that the potential for sagehood existed inside everyone and that the learned had no special claims to it. Self-cultivation, moreover, could be practised in the midst of everyday affairs. When an official told him that his official duties left him no time to study, Wang responded that there was no need to abandon his work because 'Real learning can be found in every aspect of record-keeping and legal cases. What is empty is study that is detached from things.' Wang wanted people to concentrate on the fundamental moral truths that even ordinary uneducated people could understand, once asserting that what was truly heterodox was not Buddhism or Daoism but ideas incomprehensible to average people.

Wang Yangming's ideas gained wide notice, and in the century after his death, Wang's followers took Confucian thought in many new directions and to a wider swathe of contemporary society. Some turned with interest to Buddhism and Daoism. Others questioned the traditional hierarchical arrangement of society, such as the elevation of the scholar-official above the commoner. One of Wang's most enthusiastic followers, Wang Gen, vigorously asserted that social standing did not limit

one's possibilities for moral perfection. He gave public lectures to crowds of ordinary people whom he taught to sing that happiness comes from the elimination of selfish desires. Another iconoclast, He Xinyin, proposed that merchants should rank higher than peasants on the social scale and criticized the family as a restrictive, selfish, and exclusive institution. What he exalted instead was friendship which he considered non-hierarchical and unselfish. Li Zhi, a generation later, undertook to rethink the philosophical basis of feelings, passions, and the self, a trend clearly tied to developments in literature. A fierce critic of hypocrisy, Li Zhi saw little if any value in conforming to conventional patterns of behaviour. He Xinyin and Li Zhi made many enemies and both died in prison, having been arrested on charges of spreading dangerous ideas.

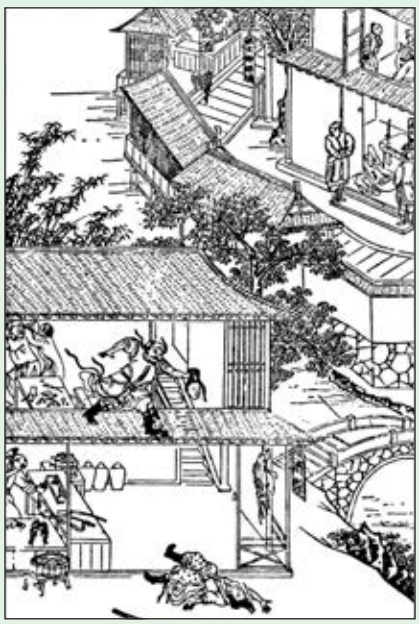
Popular culture and local society

The efforts literati took to perfect the cultivated life may reflect an attempt to buttress the boundaries between literati and popular culture, which were being gradually breached by urban culture, the explosion of the publishing industry, and the rise of vernacular literature. In the early seventeenth century, the Italian missionary Matteo Ricci commented on 'the exceedingly large numbers of books in circulation here and the ridiculously low prices at which they are sold'. The printer Mao Jin employed up to 20 craftsmen and published no less than 600 titles, using more than 100,000 wooden printing blocks. More books were being published for the lower end of the market. Profusely illustrated reference books for the home provided everything from multiplication tables and rules for performing funerals to what to specify in a contract for buying a water buffalo. Popular religious tracts included ledgers for calculating moral worth, in which people determined their fortunes by measuring good deeds against bad ones. For schoolchildren, there were primers introducing elementary vocabulary. For candidates for the examinations, there were inexpensive editions of the Confucian classics as well as collections of successful examination answers.

In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, more and more books were being published in the vernacular, using the grammar and vocabulary people used in everyday speech. Only those able to devote years to study could comfortably read books written in the terse and allusive literary language but women in educated families, merchants, shop clerks, and anyone else with at least a rudimentary education could read fiction. The enterprising writer and editor Feng Menglong, for instance, found an enthusiastic audience for collections of vernacular short stories, often humorous, populated by a cast of clerks and brigands, kings and monks, courtesans and ghosts.

The scripts of plays also found a ready market. Tang Xianzu's love stories and social satires were particularly popular. *The Peony Pavilion*, Tang's most popular play, tells the story of Du Liniang, the daughter of a high official who dreamed of a young scholar she had met. Consumed by her longing for him, she finally pined away. But

Many women were devoted to Guanyin, the Buddhist deity known to answer prayers for the birth of sons. By Ming times Guanyin was regularly depicted as a woman, as she is in this 10-inch-tall (26 cm) ivory image of her holding a child.



Left
Illustrations were used to attract readers to many sorts of books. The depiction of farmers celebrating a harvest (*top left*) enlivened the *Pictorial Reference Compendium*, a 1593 manual full of information on agriculture, medicine, cooking, and other practical affairs. The depiction of the technology of coal mining (*top right*) is from the 1637 *Explications of the Works of Nature* (*Tiangong kaiwu*). The scene of mayhem (*below left*) is from a late Ming edition of the popular novel about a gang of bandits/rebels, *Water Margin* (*Shuihu zhuan*). The illustrated vocabulary lesson (*below right*) comes from a sixteen-page primer, the *Newly Compiled Four Character Glossary* of 1436.

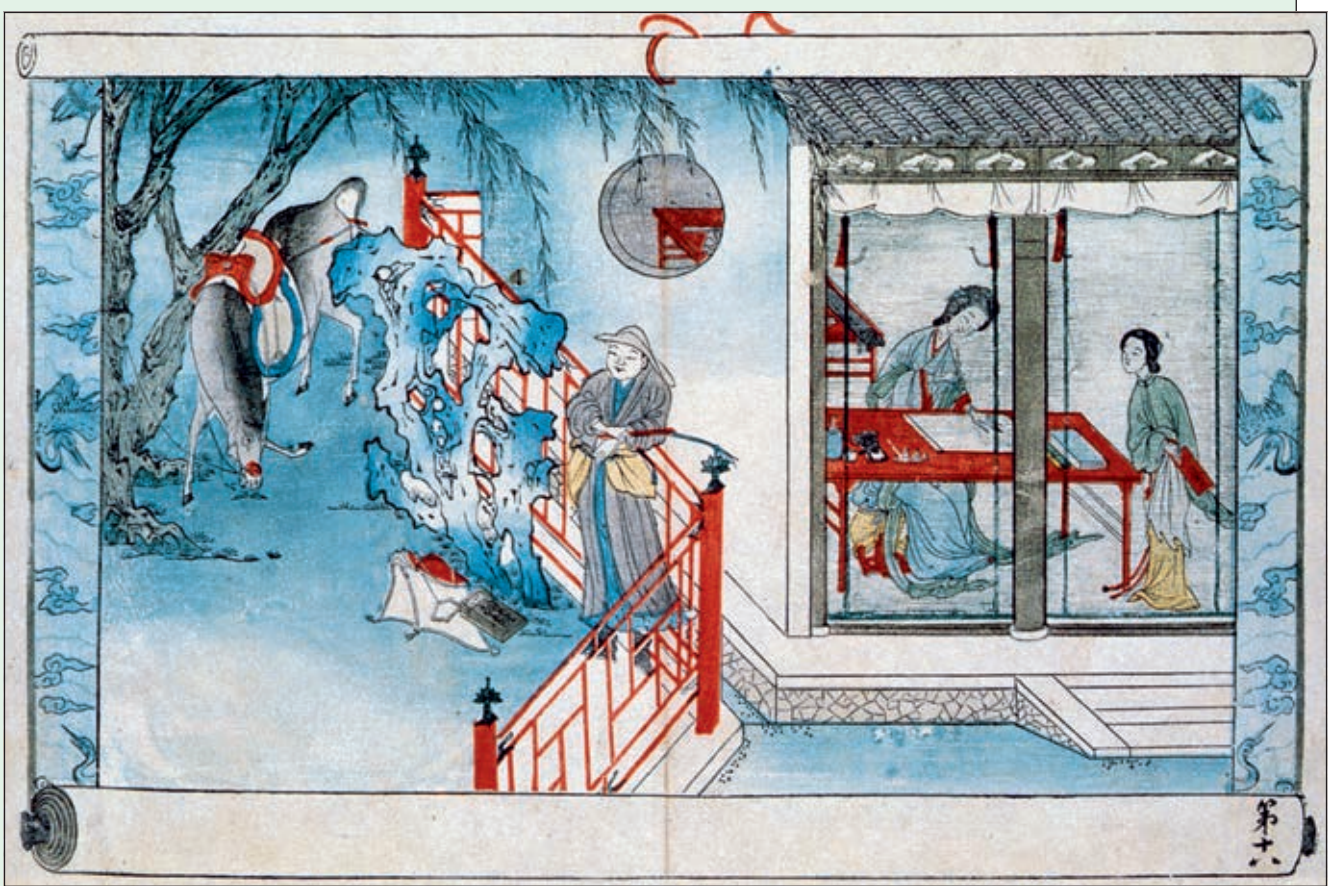
Opposite
The illustration from a 1640 edition of the *Romance of the Western Chamber* (*Xixiang ji*) shows Cui Yingying preparing a letter she will have her maid carry to the young scholar Zhang Gong in response to his efforts to win her affection.

before she died she buried a portrait of herself in the garden. The young scholar later visited her family again, discovered the painting, and fell in love with her. She appeared to him in a dream, renewing their dream-time love affair, and told him to open her coffin. There she lay alive, as beautiful as ever, his ardour having brought her back to life. After some tribulations, the play ends happily, with the scholar coming first in the examinations and her family welcoming him.

Book Illustration

The art of book illustration benefited from the rapid expansion of the publishing industry in Ming times. With nothing like copyright protection, no publisher could be sure another printer would not try to sell the same book.

To make their version attractive in this competitive market, publishers more and more frequently hired artists to draw illustrations to be carved on wooden blocks and printed along with the rest of the book. The artistry of these illustrations advanced rapidly as publishers devoted more space to illustrations. By the seventeenth century, publishers occasionally even issued books with multicoloured illustrations. Such colour printing was expensive because it required carving separate blocks for each colour and carefully positioning the blocks and sheets of paper during the separate printing of each colour.



Full-length novels also began to be written in Ming times. The plots of these early novels were heavily indebted to the story cycles developed by oral storytellers who had been performing in urban centres for centuries. Among the greatest Ming novels, all of uncertain authorship, are *The Water Margin* (*Shuihu zhuan*), the story of a band of outlaws set in the Song; *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms* (*Sanguo zhi yanyi*), the story of the martial exploits of the rivals for power at the end of the Han;

The Journey to the West (*Xiyuji*), the fantastic account of a Buddhist pilgrim to India in Tang times, accompanied by a monkey with magical powers; and *Plum in the Golden Vase* (*Jin Ping Mei*), an erotic tale of a lustful merchant, his wife and concubines.

The popularity of vernacular literature in late Ming times had a broad impact on cultural sensibilities. Educated men and women alike seem often to have idealized headstrong romantic attachments to people, things, or causes. Zhang Dai went so far as to claim, 'One cannot befriend a man who has no obsessions, for such a man lacks deep emotion.' Courtesan culture flourished in this environment and many poems written by late Ming courtesans have been preserved. Writers associated courtesans with high aspirations and disappointed hopes, seeing parallels between their own predicaments and those of talented but powerless women waiting for a lover able to appreciate them and to remove them from their demeaned circumstances.

Fiction and drama also offer glimpses of life in the countryside among ordinary people, perhaps especially *Water Margin*, with its village heads, rich and poor farmers, sons not willing to follow in their father's footsteps, and occasional crises. Other sources that help us imagine ordinary people's lives include genealogies, records of school or temple associations carved into stone, and historical accounts of banditry and violent local strongmen.

The Ming founder had a clear vision of how he wanted local society to operate. Local people, for their part, did their best to work around the system he imposed but also turned to state representatives when it was in their interest – for instance, when they wanted contracts enforced or crime suppressed. They could show their approval of officials who governed in ways they liked by establishing 'living' shrines to them, treating them like local gods. Local voluntary organizations, such as schools, descent groups, religious associations, and 'community compacts', were increasing in number and providing more and more opportunities for contact between villagers, members of the local elite, and representatives of the state. Although there continued to be enormous ecological, ethnic, and economic diversity across the extent of the Ming realm, the trend was toward greater connection. The distance between market towns was shrinking, tying villages more tightly into nationwide marketing systems.

As in earlier centuries, temples were key elements of local society throughout the country. Some had connections to larger Buddhist or Daoist networks of clergy, others were strictly local, focused on gods that might be recognized only in that community. Funding their temples and organizing their rituals and processions did not require the participation of state agents or Confucian educated local elites. Lower-level schools were probably not as ubiquitous as temples, but were also widespread, encouraged by the state but largely organized and funded at the local level. Being able to send their sons to schools appealed to farmers and tradesmen aware of the benefits of literacy and the remote possibilities of going further up the academic ladder.

In contrast to temples and schools, which were ubiquitous, lineages were much more common in some regions than in others. In Ming times, Confucian esteem for

kinship solidarity, the economics of land ownership, government imposition of hereditary responsibilities on specific households, and the political value of local allies all offered inducements for kinsmen to join forces. Periods of disorder often stimulated these activities, since strong descent groups could provide local defence. So did the presence of educated men, who often compiled genealogies or built halls for group ancestral rites. Merchants, too, found lineage estates a good way to protect property. Broadly speaking, lineages were more common in south China where centuries earlier migrants had often settled in places with enough uncultivated land for many descendants to remain in the vicinity, leading to many single-surname villages. In Fujian, substantial descent groups were quite evident by the twelfth century, and in the Ming, new ones were formed partly in response to the demands placed by the government on military households. In Huizhou in Anhui province, lineages were flourishing in the mid Ming, undoubtedly benefiting from the willingness of the many wealthy local merchant families to make donations to them. In Tongcheng, in the part of Anhui north of the Yangzi, lineages were being formed by the late Ming, but merchants played a less significant role than successful officials who used lineage property and lineage schools as part of their family survival strategies.Further south, in the Pearl River Delta, lineage trusts came to hold much of the arable land.

The best documented Ming lineages were ones with literati leadership. By the mid Ming, some of them were introducing elaborate systems to control and discipline members. In one area of Jiangxi province, for instance, lineages wrote up sets of rules that gave the lineage leaders considerable authority to settle disputes and enforce compliance with their decisions. The timing of this trend suggests that it was inspired by the concurrent renewal of interest in 'community compacts', a form of local association that had been promoted by scholars in the Song period for the purposes of moral renewal. Members had to agree to correct each other's faults and offer assistance in times of difficulty, with expulsion the sanction for anyone who failed to co-operate. In the mid Ming, Wang Yangming revived the term 'compact' to refer to the organizations he set up as parts of a rebel pacification programme. His followers made even broader use of it as a basis for public preaching to assembled villagers, whom they would urge, in folksy terms, to make a commitment to doing good.

Literati involvement in local communities accorded with intellectual trends as well. If, as Wang Yangming argued, everyone could potentially gain a less clouded understanding of right and wrong or even attain sagehood, it was worth making the effort to reach them. Fear of a fraying social fabric was also a motivation. In the mid sixteenth century, the grand secretary Xu Jie reported that landlords and tenants looked on each other as enemies, with the peasants refusing to pay their rents and landlords refusing to assist them when harvests failed. Lü Kun, a few decades later, observed that 'when tenants ask for help, the landlords ask for higher interest'. Some literati turned to charitable works as a way to alleviate social tension. At the end of the sixteenth century, for instance, one man set up a Society for Sharing Goodness,

whose members paid monthly dues into a fund used to support community projects like repair of roads and bridges or to provide assistance to families facing heavy expenses for weddings and funerals. The management of such charities was often turned over to local monks.

Overseas connections

Maritime trade had connected China to other parts of Asia for centuries, as numerous discoveries of shipwrecks attest. The Ming government tried to shape these connections to its advantage. The third emperor, Chengzu, wanting to enrol such trading partners in the Ming diplomatic system, had one of his most trusted servants, the Muslim eunuch Zheng He, lead huge expeditions toward this end beginning in 1405. The flotilla assembled for the first expedition carried 27,000 men on 62 large and 225 small ships, the largest of which was 440 feet (134 m) long. The first three voyages stopped at places as distant as India. The fourth went further, to Hormuz on the Persian Gulf, and the last three as far as the east coast of Africa. Unlike the European oceanic expeditions later in the fifteenth century, trade and exploration were not the primary motive behind these voyages; their purpose instead was to enrol far-flung states into the Ming diplomatic system. They were abandoned when court officials persuaded later emperors that they were not cost-effective.

A giraffe acquired in Africa during one of Zheng He's voyages of 1405 to 1433 aroused interest at court and lived on the palace grounds. The court painter Shen Du depicted it in this painting dated 1414. The inscription associates the animal with the unicorn (*jilin*), whose appearance was interpreted in ancient texts as a sign of heaven's favour.

Despite the naval strength displayed by Zheng He's expeditions, China's long coastline came, in Ming times, to cause almost as many defence problems as the northern frontier. The Ming founder prohibited Chinese merchants from going abroad, wanting all maritime trade to be channelled through the system of diplomatic missions. Within a century, official prohibitions against private foreign trade ran up against the emergence of an international East Asian maritime community intent on trade. The Ming diplomatic system had rules specifying the location and frequency of trade with each country. For instance, official relations with Japan were supposed to be conducted only through the port of Ningbo, those with the Philippines only through Fuzhou, and those with Indonesia only through Guangzhou. There were in addition limits on the frequency and size of diplomatic missions. For example, Japanese embassies were not to call more than once every ten years and to bring no more than 300 men on two ships. In fact, however, both open and clandestine trade took place all along the Chinese coast.

Pirates were a recurrent problem for residents of coastal areas. The 10 foot/3 m-long handscroll from which this detail was taken depicts a party of pirates landing in a coastal community. Other sections show their raids on local residences, the flight of refugees, and the arrival of Ming troops who fought the pirates on the water.

To many officials in the Ming government, the lawlessness of these seaborne traders was deeply troubling. After 1500, Europeans were a new element, especially Portuguese, Spanish, and Dutch, but there were Japanese and Chinese active in these illicit activities as well, with the Chinese probably the majority. Merchants often turned into smugglers, especially when official obstacles hindered their pursuit of profit. Boats laden with goods attracted pirates, and Japanese and Chinese pirates became a scourge along the coast in the mid sixteenth century, raiding at will anywhere along the coast from northern Shandong to western Guangdong. Europeans soon joined them. Ming anti-pirate efforts did not achieve much success until forceful military measures were accompanied by a relaxation of the maritime trade restrictions in 1567. Under the new policies, local authorities allowed Portugal to establish a trading base at Macao in 1577. Three years later, Spain seized Manila as a base from which to engage in the China trade and many Chinese moved there. Tensions between the Spanish and the Chinese communities in Manila turned bloody in 1639, and reportedly more than 20,000 Chinese were killed.

China's main exports were silk and porcelain. Silks included gauzes, crepes, velvets, taffetas, damasks, and brocades, both bolts of cloth and finished garments. In one case, a galleon to the Spanish territories in the New World carried more than 50,000 pairs of silk stockings. In return, China imported mostly silver from Peruvian and Mexican mines, transported via Manila.

Besides stimulating the Chinese economy, the expanding maritime trade brought with it new goods and new ideas. New World plants entered China, including sweet

In 1602, the Wanli emperor asked Matteo Ricci to work with Chinese collaborators to prepare a map of the world. The resulting map, 12 feet (3.5 m) wide, showed the Americas, until then unknown in China. It was printed and copies were soon made, including this one made in Japan in 1604.

potatoes, maize, tomatoes, and peanuts, foods which facilitated population growth because they could be grown in land previously left uncultivated, such as hilly or sandy soil. European ideas, including scientific ones, began to filter in through Catholic missionaries. The first missionary to have much of an impact on China was the Italian Jesuit Matteo Ricci, who arrived in Macao in 1583. He belonged to the new Society of Jesus, or Jesuits, founded in 1540 to convert the heathen and help counter the spread of Protestantism that was sweeping Europe. Ricci, of the opinion that European missionaries would do best by presenting themselves as men of education rather than as monks, concentrated his initial efforts on acquiring a remarkable command of written and spoken Chinese. Late Ming intellectual openness proved favourable to his efforts and his broad learning enabled him to win many influential friends in Beijing, where he lived from 1601 to his death in 1610. Ricci and other well-educated Jesuits were accepted in late Ming court circles as foreign literati, regarded as impressive especially for their knowledge of astronomy, calendar-making, mathematics, hydraulics, geography, and ballistics. With the help of some highly placed converts, they translated key books on these subjects into Chinese, using secular learning to attract literati interest. Ricci had maps of the world drawn that showed regions of the world most Chinese had not imagined. He downplayed features of Christianity that had less appeal to Chinese, such as the intolerance of other gods announced in the Ten Commandments.

By the end of the Ming, there were Jesuit, Dominican, or Franciscan missions in most of the coastal provinces and even some inland areas. Although quite a few late Ming intellectuals showed an interest in Western learning, others were entirely hostile to Christianity, disturbed especially by the missionaries' efforts to convert

common people, filling their heads, they thought, with wild, impossible ideas. Even relatively open-minded Chinese found some ideas hard to swallow, such as the dogma that the universe came into being because of the actions of a creator or that individuals should follow only one religion. Christian social teachings also aroused resistance; many scholars could not accept the requirement that they get rid of their concubines in order to convert to Christianity, viewing such an action as callous to the woman and their children by her.

European weapons found much readier acceptance. Although China had the best gunpowder weapons until the early Ming, its military hardware had since fallen behind the Europeans, whose constant wars had resulted in progressive innovation. When the Portuguese arrived in the early sixteenth century with the matchlock arquebus, it was quickly copied by pirates operating in the South China Sea and soon by the Ming government as well, which manufactured them by the thousands and used them against the pirates. The military leader and theorist Qi Jiguang wrote in 1560 of the power and accuracy of these guns and how to deploy troops trained in their use. Because these guns took time to load, the men would be organized in volleys, the first row shooting, then going to the rear to reload while the second row shot, and so on. Qi also experimented with European-style cannons that would be carried onto the battlefield on carts. These modern weapons were used by both sides in the campaigns against the Japanese in Korea in the 1590s, marking a major shift in the conduct of war.

Political, environmental, and fiscal crises

Confucianism in the Ming is usually discussed in terms of the ideas of philosophers like Wang Yangming and his followers. This story is generally told as one of increasing openness to ideas of non-Confucian origin, to people of non-literati background, and to people with eccentric tastes or unconventional preferences.

There was another historically important strain of Ming Confucianism, which was, however, much more political and judgmental. Throughout the Ming many officials, imbued with Confucian notions of loyalty to the throne and the responsibility of officials to speak out on matters of principle, courageously protested against bad officials and harmful policies. In 1376, when Taizu asked for criticism of his rule, Ye Boju submitted a memorial that criticized the harsh punishment of officials for minor lapses, noting that many literati considered themselves fortunate not to be summoned to serve. Taizu was so incensed he had Ye brought to the capital in chains where he died of starvation in prison. A few decades later, some officials were willing to protest against Chengzu's usurpation of the throne. Among those who suffered the consequences was the leading scholar Fang Xiaoru, executed along with hundreds of relatives, students, neighbours, and friends. In 1519, when Emperor Wuzong announced plans to tour the southern provinces, officials submitted a flood of negative memorials and more than a hundred officials staged a protest by kneeling in front of the palace. Outraged, the emperor ordered that as punishment they kneel

there for five days, after which he also had them flogged. Eleven eventually died of the beatings. Only a few years later, in 1524, hundreds of officials again gathered at the palace gate, this time to protest against the new emperor's refusal to treat the previous emperor as his adoptive father and his plan to reserve the title 'father' for his deceased natural father. Unable to bend them to his interpretation of Confucian family ritual, the emperor had 134 imprisoned; 16 died of the floggings they received.

The last great protest movement of the Ming was as much a factional struggle between different power-holders as an expression of conviction. It had an institutional base in the Donglin Academy, near Wuxi in Jiangsu province, and in the censorate, an organ of the government whose officials had the right and responsibility to speak out against malfeasance and abuse of power. After the Academy was rebuilt in 1604, it became a centre for frustrated ex-officials to discuss the evils besetting the empire. They called for a revival of orthodox Confucian ethics, rejecting the more inclusive views of Wang Yangming and Li Zhi. Gu Xiancheng, for instance, claimed that the idea of following naturally the dictates of innate moral knowledge was used by unscrupulous literati as a justification for the greedy pursuit of personal gain. These teachers' zeal inspired younger activist officials in the censorate, who labelled themselves men of integrity, the 'good sort', the 'pure current', and called their opponents 'small men', 'deviant officials', and 'cliques'. Officials from both sides impeached each other, accusations and counter-accusations crossing so frequently it is no wonder that emperors wearied of the mutual denunciations of their officials.

The most dramatic phase of the struggle occurred when the censor Yang Lian submitted a long memorial accusing the eunuch Wei Zhongxian of twenty-four 'great crimes'. The central thrust of Yang's argument was that the young emperor, only eighteen years old, had ceded his rightful prerogatives to the cruel and power-hungry eunuch. Even though the emperor flatly denied the charge, other censors sent up a flood of memorials supporting Yang Lian, defying the court's warning against such action. Eventually Yang and five others were arrested in highly public ways, crowds gathering along the way to see them carted off to Beijing. All were eventually tortured to death. Other rounds of arrests, tortures, deaths, and protests soon followed.

In protests of these sorts, Confucian officials diagnosed the problems of the dynasty in moral terms: they faced an epic clash for the soul and survival of the dynasty. The Confucian tradition celebrated these acts of political protest as heroic – the morally committed individual taking a stand against the abuse of power. They can also be seen as an effort on the part of officials to curb the power of the throne. Judging by results rather than motives, the penchant of Ming officials for risking their lives to assert the purity of their cause and the moral turpitude of their opponents may have made it more difficult to find political solutions to the problems of the Ming government.

The collapse of the Ming was hastened by environmental disaster. The early seventeenth century saw the start of the Little Ice Age across Eurasia. In China, a drop

in average temperatures led to lakes freezing over which had never frozen before in recorded history and a shortening of the growing season, reducing harvests. The resulting hardship was compounded by the Ming government's failure to come to the aid of the indigent. Despite the expansion in the Chinese economy during the course of the sixteenth century, the government became progressively less solvent because its expenses rose but its revenue did not, since its tax quotas were fixed in the early years of the dynasty and were not adjusted as the economy expanded. The cost of maintaining the imperial clan was unsustainable. Military campaigns were also a huge drain; the war in Korea against the Japanese, for instance, had cost the treasury 26 million ounces of silver. The government tried imposing emergency tax levies when disasters struck, but by then the situation was getting out of control.

The harvest failure and famine of 1627 to 1628 became devastating in northern Shaanxi, and soon army deserters, laid-off soldiers, and desperate farmers were forming gangs and ravaging the countryside. In 1632, they moved east into Shanxi and Hebei and south into Henan and Anhui. The government armies proved unable

In 1557, because a fire destroyed many palace buildings, the high official Wang Chongguang was sent to remote Guizhou to supervise the cutting of huge old trees needed for the reconstruction. Travelling so far was necessary because deforestation had depleted the supply of large trees elsewhere. Wang was rewarded for his success in this mission and commemorated it in this woodblock printed picture.

to destroy these gangs, which kept gaining new adherents. By 1636, two main leaders had emerged, Li Zicheng, a former shepherd and postal-relay-station worker who was paramount in the north, and Zhang Xianzhong, a former soldier who became paramount in the area between the Yellow and Yangzi rivers. Neither Li nor Zhang gained control of the lower Yangzi, but conditions there were not much better. Tax increases in 1639, followed by floods, drought, locusts, and epidemics took such a toll that hordes of beggars became a common sight. Tenants rose up against landlords, and urban workers rioted. A folk song of the period accused the Lord of Heaven of failing to perform his duties:

> Old Skymaster,
> You're getting on, your ears are deaf, your eyes are gone.
> Can't see people, can't hear words.
> Glory for those who kill and burn;
> For those who fast and read the scriptures,
> Starvation.
> Fall down, old master sky, how can you be so high?
> How can you be so high? Come down to earth.

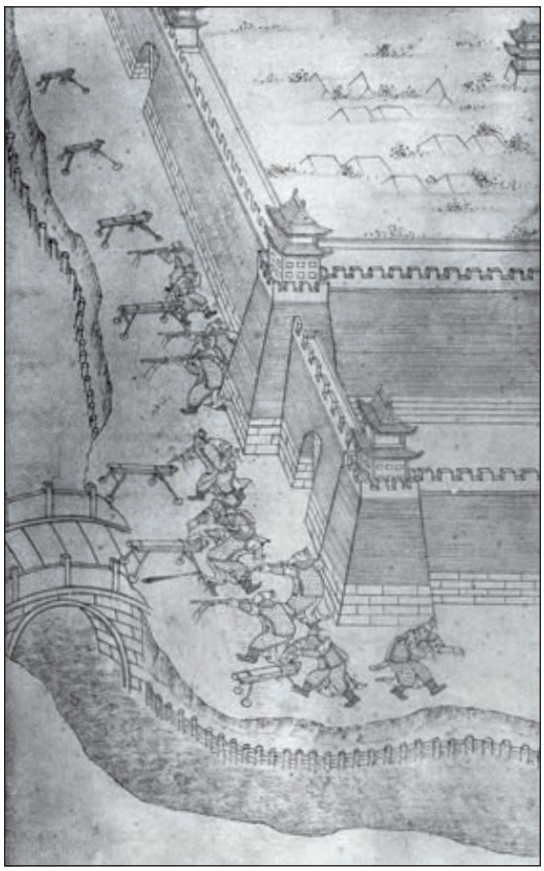
With rebellion spreading and the Ming government facing bankruptcy, the death toll mounted steadily. In 1642, a group of rebels cut the dykes of the Yellow River, destroying the city of Kaifeng and killing several hundred thousand people in the flood and subsequent famine. Epidemics, especially of smallpox, also contributed to a demographic disaster of huge proportions – China's population dropped by several tens of millions during these decades. As the social fabric unravelled, Li Zicheng took hold of Hubei, Henan, and Shaanxi; in 1644 he moved through Shanxi and Hebei into Beijing, where the last Ming emperor, in despair, took his own life. Meanwhile Zhang had moved into Sichuan, where he caused great loss of life in his attacks on Chongqing and Chengdu. Both Li and Zhang announced the establishment of dynasties, setting up governments complete with civil service examinations and coinage, but neither inspired much confidence that orderly life would be soon restored. Looting and violence of all sorts remained pervasive. In the end, it took an army from beyond the Great Wall to restore order.

When the focus is on the state, the Ming period is generally judged rather harshly. Since it was the only extended period of native rule over all of China proper from the fall of the Northern Song in 1126 to the fall of the Qing in 1911, historians wish they could find more to celebrate. Tensions inherent in the Chinese bureaucratic monarchy between arbitrary power and orderly rules, between absolute monarchs and their advisors and surrogates, recurrently reached the point where the government was immobilized.

Looked at from the perspective of global history, the Ming period has often been considered the era when China fell behind. By contrast to the Song period, when

China was the most advanced society in the world, in Ming times other parts of Eurasia, most notably Europe, seemed to be catching up or forging ahead. Precisely when Western maritime nations were sending ships into Asia, the Ming government was withdrawing from the sea. Just when Europeans were learning to put to good use Chinese technological advances like printing, gunpowder, and the compass, China was letting its scientific and technological leadership slip. Recent research has modified this view, showing that Chinese military commanders were quick to adopt military technology such as European cannons, and ordinary Chinese had not withdrawn from the sea, but were in fact taking up residence in many Southeast Asian countries.

When we turn our focus to culture and society, the Ming, especially its second half, seems to have been a time of remarkable innovation and prosperity. For over two centuries the Ming government maintained a high level of peace among a huge population spread across a sub-continent, using inexpensive forms of motivation like the examination system and imperial exhortations to keep the cost of government low. The magnitude of this accomplishment does not seem insignificant when it is measured against the lawlessness that resulted when it collapsed. The arbitrary actions of the emperors undoubtedly demeaned the status of high officials and jeopardized their welfare, but was probably less detrimental to the lives of ordinary villagers and townspeople who were left to run many of their affairs on their own. The population grew steadily. Increased commercialization, a growing publishing industry, and increased elite involvement in local community life were all strengthening ties among this population, giving them a stronger sense of common history and identity. The southwestern region of modern Yunnan and Guizhou was absorbed into the Chinese sphere to a degree never true before – something the Ming government would have taken as an accomplishment even if not all the population already there would have agreed. The inability of the government to control everything was not entirely bad, after all. Indeed, when compared to the other empires of Eurasia, the Ming government's success in managing problems of scale is truly impressive.



In the battle between Ming forces and the Manchus, both sides quickly adopted the guns and cannons of the Portuguese.

The Kilns at Jingdezhen

Of the material artefacts surviving from the Ming dynasty, none is appreciated more than the fine porcelains produced in the town of Jingdezhen in northern Jiangxi province. During the Ming dynasty these kilns produced enough porcelain to supply not only the whole country but much of the rest of the world as well.

Porcelain is distinguished from other types of ceramics by its whiteness, smoothness, and translucence. Producing porcelain requires special clays and high temperature firing (1280–1400°C/2336–2552°F). The clays were found in particularly pure form near Jingdezhen, which was also favoured with access to forest-covered mountains for fuel and rivers for inexpensive transport.

Imperial patronage led to a rapid increase in the production of high-quality porcelain at Jingdezhen. The palace placed orders for specific wares – in 1551 for 8,400 small pieces and 2,300 large ones; in 1577, the peak year, for 96,500 small pieces, 56,600 large ones, and 21,600 items for use in sacrificial ceremonies. Many of these pieces were destined for use in the palace, others for gifts, including gifts to vassal states in return for their diplomatic gifts. Imperial quality controls were exacting; archaeologists have discovered huge piles of shards of imperial porcelain that was deliberately broken because it did not meet standards of colour, form, or design, but could not be put on the open market because of their imperial markings.

In the early Ming, much of the labour required for these imperial orders was supplied on an unpaid basis by hereditary artisan households who owed no other taxes. Later, labour at imperial kilns and workshops was paid. When large orders came in, however, much of the work would be subcontracted out to the numerous private workshops and kilns. By late Ming, there were more than 200 private kilns and thousands of small pottery workshops.

Mass-production techniques were employed at both private and imperial workshops. In other words, potters did not see an object through from the mixing of the clay to the firing and packing; rather there were separate workshops involved in each process, with workers speedily and repetitively performing a single task on a large number of objects. A French missionary, visiting the kilns in the early eighteenth

century, reported watching a cup pass through more than a dozen hands, one worker giving it an initial shaping on a wheel in a matter of seconds, another setting it on a base, another pressing it into a mould to make sure its size was uniform, another polishing it with a chisel, and so on. Altogether, he reported, as many as seventy people could be involved in the production of a single item.

Besides high-skilled workers, there were thousands of low-skilled workers employed during the busy summer season, who came into town from nearby counties. In 1601, 10,000 workers rioted to protest the eunuch director's demands for increased production; in 1604, rioters demanded higher wages from the merchants who controlled much of the business.

Jingdezhen produced porcelain in many shapes and designs but became noted for its pieces decorated in blue underglaze and polychrome enamels. These highly decorative pieces were in immense demand outside China, in Japan, Southeast Asia, West Asia, and eventually Europe. Europeans sought dinner services, especially after 1604 when two Portuguese ships were captured by the Dutch and their cargoes of 200,000-odd pieces of Chinese porcelain were put up for sale, attracting bidders from all over Europe, including agents for Henri IV of France, James I of England, and the Grand Duke of Tuscany. Over the next two centuries exports to Europe were huge. By the eighteenth century, European traders often commissioned specific designs, sending samples to China for potters to copy.

Left
In Europe, Chinese porcelain was used for both table service and decoration. Depicted here is the ceiling of the 'porcelain room' in the Santos Palace in Lisbon, which in the late seventeenth century was covered with 260 Chinese plates and bowls dating from 1500 onward, the time the kings of Portugal had begun collecting Chinese porcelain.

Above
The decoration of the fine porcelains produced at Jingdezhen shows extraordinary inventiveness in pattern and motif. These pieces, ranging from the fourteenth to the seventeenth centuries in date, include pictures of dragons, birds, fish, and children at play.