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The Rise of the Ming Dynasty

The Ming dynasty was the last native imperial dynasty in Chinese history. The Ming dynasty rose up out of a peasant rebellion to create a grand new dynasty. The Ming are also the first to deal with Europeans arriving in ever increasing numbers; as a pre-modern period, many of the issues and contentions of the modern period will have their precursors in the Ming dynasty.

The story of the Ming dynasty begins in 1351 in a small Chinese province. A group of laborers uncover a statue with only one eye and an inscription: "Do not despise this one-eyed statue: it will be the herald of rebellion all throughout the empire." Soon, news of this discovery spreads all throughout China. Other disasters, such as floods and landslides occurred. These events plus the statue meant that the Mandate of Heaven had been withdrawn from the Mongol dynasty. Revolution was at hand.

In reality, the Yuan [the previous rulers] had begun to decline long before revolutions began to break out in the 1350's. In the 1350's, the pace of rebellion picked up. Several rebel leaders, almost all of whom came from the merchant or lower classes, seized cities and set themselves up as kings. Chu Yüan-chang would become the founder of the Ming dynasty.

1. What were a couple of "firsts" for the Ming dynasty?
2. How did the Chinese know it was time for a change in China?

Chu established the Ming ("Brilliant") dynasty in 1368 and called himself Ming Hong Wu; he ruled China from 1368 to 1398 and is considered one of the greatest emperors of China. The Hong Wu emperor set about remedying what he saw were the defects of the Mongol system.

First, he sought to consolidate rule into absolute rule by the Emperor. In order to consolidate his authority, he established complex rituals and he tightened the bureaucracy to allow for absolute control. Hong Wu allowed for no dissension or criticism of the Emperor from administrators or scholars. He adopted the Sui and Yuan practice of publicly beating incompetent or corrupt bureaucratic officials.

However, the single most important innovation that the Hong Wu emperor instituted in Chinese imperial government was the abolishment of the office of Chief Minister. By eliminating the position of Chief Minister, Hong Wu essentially took over the administration of China. All of these policies combined helped the Hong Wu emperor to consolidate all power. Unfortunately, this consolidation of power would eventually lead to the downfall of the Ming.

In order to better administer the state, the Hong Wu emperor ordered several surveys and censuses be taken of China and the data gathered in government registries. It was on this vast bookkeeping that the central government regulated taxation. In addition, however, he made all occupations hereditary in order to prevent social mobility. All members of Chinese society were grouped into three large hereditary classes: peasants, craftspeople, and soldiers.

The Hong Wu emperor also worked tirelessly on a code of laws for China, and to revive scholarship and philosophy that had fallen into bad days under the Mongols. He sponsored scholarship, but his most significant contribution to scholarship and Chinese administration was the re-adoption of the civil-service examination system. The reforms that the Hong Wu emperor instituted in the civil service examination made it a standard part of Chinese life and administration up until the early twentieth century. From 1364 to his death in 1397, the Hong Wu emperor rebuilt China to its past glories.

3. What are some ways the Hong Wu Emperor improved China after the fall of the Yuan Dynasty? (Name at least 4)

The Commercial Revolution of China

Under the Ming dynasty, China experienced one of the greatest economic expansions in its history. This expansion affected every area of Chinese economic life: agriculture, commerce, and maritime trade and exploration. It was under the Ming that the Chinese first began to trade and interact with Europeans on any significant scale.

The Chinese began in the 1400s to explore their surrounding areas. The Yung Le emperor wanted to expand trade with other countries and had a taste for imported and exotic goods. These expeditions sailed to East Asia, Southeast Asia, southern India, the Persian Gulf, and Africa. Trading from Africa to Southeast Asia, these expeditions made China the world's greatest commercial naval power in the world at the time, far superior to any European power. These expansions were led by Zheng He. Zheng was a Chinese admiral who led a series of voyages to these far off lands. As Zheng traveled he spread gifts of silk and silver to show the superiority of China and its people. The ships they sailed could hold up to 27,000 people, which made China the leader in sailing and exploration. This led to great prestige throughout the world; it was at this time that China first received embassies from major Islamic countries such as Europe. In 1435, however, the court scholars convinced the emperor that the decline of the dynasty would be signaled by a taste for exotic wares, so China greatly contracted its commercial and maritime expansion it had begun so auspiciously.

4. Why did the Chinese begin to explore? Who was Zheng He?

5. Why did the Chinese stop sailing?

The Chinese experienced a commercial revolution that included extensive trade with foreign countries, including direct trade with Europe. By the late sixteenth century, China was intimately a part of the growing global economy. The Chinese were trading actively with the Portuguese, the Dutch, and the Japanese, who traded silver for Chinese silks and porcelain. With their fleet, which rivaled that of any European power, the Ming shipped silks, cotton, and porcelain to areas and traded with the Spanish for silver, firearms, and American goods such as sugar, potatoes, and tobacco. The Chinese porcelains became all the rage in Europe in the seventeenth century. The Dutch, however, began importing tea, which became wildly popular all throughout Europe. All this trade had made China one of the leading manufacturing economies in the world. In exchange for raw goods such as silver the Chinese shipped out manufactured goods such as textiles and porcelain. By the mid-1500's, China was well on its way to becoming an urban, industrial, and mercantile economy.

6. How did China experience a commercial revolution?

Fall of the Ming Dynasty

There are numerous causes for the decline and fall of the Ming. The most immediate and direct cause of the fall of the Ming were the rebellions that racked the country in the seventeenth century because the imperial government exacted increasingly burdensome taxes on the common people. Another was the aggressive military expansion of the Manchu's. Others believe that the Ming dynasty declined because the virtue and the competence of the emperors gradually declined. All three of these factors coupled with large scale famines eventually led the aggressive Manchu's to conquer the Ming in 1644.

7. How did the Ming Dynasty fall?

The Qing Dynasty

The Qing Dynasty was the second time when the whole of China was ruled by foreigners, the Manchu. The first time was during the Yuan Dynasty when China was controlled by the Mongols. The Qing Dynasty lasted from 1644-1911 A.D. The reigns of the first three emperors of this dynasty were a time of peace and prosperity for China. In terms of government, the Qing Dynasty adopted the form of government used by the Ming, with only minor adjustments. For example the positions were all dual positions, one Manchu and one Chinese were in the same position, with the Manchu having more power. The form of military organization that the Qing used was one of the best in the world. They organized their troops under banners, each of which was a separate unit. These fighting men were personally attached to the emperor, in fact he owned them. They were incredibly loyal to the emperor.

The Qing were very successful as foreign rulers in China. They maintained their domination of the Chinese by preserving their own identity. They spent their summers in their homeland of Manchuria, which was closed to the Chinese. They banned intermarriage among the Chinese, continued to speak their own language and did not make their documents available to the Chinese. They retained military strength over the Chinese by separating the duties of the Chinese troops and of the Manchu troops.

8. What kind of government did the Qing have?

9. Describe their military.

10. How did the Qing rule China?

The Qing instituted changes in the dress of the Chinese. They required the Chinese men to shave their heads and wear queues. They also required them to wear Manchu clothes rather than the clothing style of the Ming Dynasty. The Qing did not require the Chinese women to change their dress, yet they did forbid them to bind their feet. This proved impossible to enforce and in 1668 A.D. the ruling was withdrawn. A custom the Qing did not attempt to change was the preference for agriculture over trade. The Qing favored an isolationist policy, which proved fatal. The lack of trade hurt China economically.

The period of peace that followed the ascension of the Qing Dynasty allowed for growth in all areas. Public works were repaired and maintained. Taxes were very light as compared to previous dynasties, and in famine struck areas, taxes were reduced even further. Commerce and international trade grew. This peace allowed for a revival of arts and learning. The areas of the novel, short story, drama, and poetry all flourished. Porcelain production continued to be important. Painting was also important, and for the first time European influences are seen. European missionaries were allowed into China and influenced Chinese ideas about science. However, Christianity was later outlawed when European ships with Christian sailors began looting the Chinese coast. Another reason for the outlawing of Christianity was disputes among the missionaries and a papal ecclesiastical policy that was contrary to Chinese policy.

During the reign of Qianglong, the borders of China were expanded to their greatest extent ever. His reign was the time of the greatest prosperity during the Qing Dynasty. However, there are also signs of internal problems. Popular uprisings occurred during this time, but they were all put down. The government, while they succeeded in suppressing the uprisings, did not succeed in alleviating the impoverishment that had led to these uprisings.

11. How did the Qing change Chinese culture?

12. How did the Qing dynasty improve China?

13. What achievements were made by the Qing dynasty?

The impact of the west was also felt for the first time in China. Great Britain especially was interested in trading with China for silk and tea. However, the British did not have anything that was easy to import to China until they began importing opium. This was devastating to China. Many became addicted to opium, and land that had previously been used for food began to be used to produce opium. Also, a large amount of Chinese money left the country in payment for the opium. Finally, in 1839 A.D. the opium trade was abolished. This set off a war with Great Britain that came to be known as the Opium Wars, and in 1842 A.D., China was forced to sign a treaty in which Great Britain received Hong Kong, and ports were opened to European trade.

Internal rebellions further weakened China. The T'ai P'ing rebellion is one of the most famous. Its leader believed in communal property, and the equality of men and women among other things. The problems caused by internal rebellion were further intensified by Japan's Westernization and goal of conquering the surrounding countries to provide both a buffer against attacks against Japan itself and to provide trading networks. Russia too began to come into contact with China and treaties were signed which defined the China/Russia border and allowed for types of trade.

While these struggles were occurring, the emperors became younger and younger, so that they had no control and power was in the hands of empresses and other advisors. The empress who held the most power was Tzu Hsi. She was uneducated and opposed to any type of reform or modernization that might have helped China economically and politically. Reformers who felt that China had to change were executed, despite the validity of their arguments that people whom they had previously regarded as inferior and barbarians were easily defeating China. Tzu Hsi had the former emperor executed, and the next day, she too died, albeit of natural causes. However, before her death she placed a two year old on the throne. This further weakened the government and strengthened the revolutionaries. His reign lasted from 1909-1911 A.D., at which point the revolutionaries won and the Republic of China arose.

14. How did the British impact China?

15. What were some incidents that weakened the Qing Dynasty?

16. How did the Qing finally fall?