The Ming Dynasty (1368-1644)

The expulsion of the Mongols from China in 1368 ushered in a new period of peace and prosperity for China under the Ming ("brilliant") Dynasty. The early Ming emperors revived Chinese power and wealth through their foreign, governmental, and economic policies. In the realm of foreign policy, several strong emperors aggressively extended Chinese power to the old borders of the Han Empire. Not surprisingly, the Ming Dynasty was especially concerned with the threat of the northern nomads who had so recently humiliated China. Therefore, they put forth a tremendous effort to subdue the nomads (with very limited success) and partially restored the Great Wall. The fortifications around the first capital, Nanjing, were 60 feet high and extended in a perimeter 20 miles long, the most massive urban fortifications in the world. In 1421, the Ming moved the capital to Beijing, only 40 miles from the northern frontier in order to keep a better eye on nomadic movements. Not only did this endanger the capital, since it was so close to the nomads, it also removed the government from contact with and understanding of the more economically vibrant South. As it was, the nomads posed no real serious threat to China during most of the Ming Dynasty's rule.

Beijing itself became a magnificent city with 40-foot high walls around a perimeter of 14 miles. Central to the capital was the emperor's palace complex, known as the Forbidden City. Unlike Western architecture, which reaches ever skyward away from earth, as seen in Gothic cathedrals and skyscrapers, Chinese architecture aims for a more balanced and harmonious effect in the true Taoist spirit. The Forbidden City especially shows this, being spread out on a broad horizontal plane under the overarching dome of the blue sky, which counterbalances the effect of the high roofs of many of the government buildings and palaces. The overall effect is one of horizontal stability, emphasizing the permanence of the regime of the Son of Heaven (Chinese emperor).

The Ming reversed the unpopular policies of the Mongols and reinstated the system of civil service exams for selecting officials, thus restoring the Mandarins to prominence in Chinese society. They also retained the other features of government used by previous dynasties, such as the Six Ministries and the Censorate. The Censorate was largely concerned with preventing corruption and abuses by sending traveling censors to the provinces to hear complaints and investigate the conduct of local magistrates. Unfortunately, many censors were young officials being asked to report against senior officials who could seriously damage their careers later on. Since the censors had little protection against such reprisals, they often shrank from doing their jobs properly. However, the overall effect of Ming policies was to provide fair and efficient, though strict, government.

Ming economic policies similarly provided for China's prosperity during this period. Dikes and canals were repaired, while extensive land reclamation program was instituted, since some regions of China were totally depopulated from earlier Mongol depredations and neglect. The government offered tax exemptions lasting several years to any peasants who moved into the ruined areas, a policy which effectively revived much of China. Another policy was to encourage extensive reforestation, probably for shipbuilding purposes, although palm, mulberry, and lacquer trees were also planted for other economic purposes.

As a result of the Ming Dynasty's policies, China was again a strong and prosperous empire, making it the dominant political and cultural power in East Asia. China's cultural vibrancy can be seen in several aspects of the Ming era. For one thing, architecture flourished, as the Chinese constructed arched bridges and tall pagodas with graceful curved roofs. As stated above, the setting of these buildings in broad horizontal planes provided a more balanced effect than the lofty spires of cathedrals one found in Europe at that time.

Chinese science and technology at this time was largely bound up with newcomers from the West. The expulsion of the Mongols in 1368 effectively cut China off from the West for nearly two centuries. In fact, Columbus was still looking for the Mongols in 1492, since Europe had not received word of their fall over a century after its occurrence. However, in the 1500's, the Portuguese and then the Spanish arrived in China by sea. Most of China's contact with the West at this time was through the Jesuits who skillfully presented Christianity in Confucian terms in order to gain entrance into China and win converts to their faith. Ironically, the Jesuit leader, Matteo Ricci, won court favor by presenting the emperor with a wind-up clock, which, of course, was ultimately derived from the Chinese water clock. (He kept in their good graces by keeping the key, so he would be summoned to court each week to rewind the clock.) Over time, the Jesuits provided the Chinese with a good idea of the state of Western science and technology, especially in the areas of mathematics, cartography, astronomy, and artillery. Europe learned a great deal from China as well, such as the idea for its first suspension bridge, built in Austria in 1741, over 1000 years after the first such bridge had been built in China.
Extensive maritime expeditions into Southeast Asia, the Indian Ocean, and as far as East Africa and Arabia, were another feature of the early Ming period. Between 1405 and 1433, no less than seven major expeditions were launched under the command of the admiral, Zheng He (1371-c.1434). Some of Zheng He's expeditions comprised over 25,000 men sailing in ships that were 400 feet long, many times larger than anything Europe, just then embarking on its age of exploration, could put into the water. The purpose of these expeditions is not entirely clear, probably being more to display Chinese power and influence than cultivate trade, although profitable trade was certainly carried on, especially in fine porcelain, which we today still call china. Then, in 1433, the expeditions suddenly ended, once again for vague reasons. One idea is that the mandarins, resentful of the profits made by the middle class merchants running these expeditions, pressured the emperor to end them. Whatever the reasons, it is tantalizing to think of what might have happened if these expeditions had continued, possibly with China discovering a route to Europe. As it was, Europe was left to find those routes and eventually dominate the globe.

The end of these expeditions had other far-reaching results for China, since they deprived the government of vital trade revenues. This, combined with two other factors, led to the decline and fall of the Ming Dynasty. First of all, the later Ming emperors lost interest in government, retreating to the comfort and pleasures of the Forbidden City and allowing abuses and corruption to multiply in the provinces. At the same time, the practice of making military offices hereditary led to the gradual deterioration of the army. Together, these factors weakened China and encouraged a growing number of peasant rebellions, attacks by nomads in the North, and raids from pirates in Japanese and Chinese ports. In 1644, another northern people, the Manzhou from Manchuria, replaced the Ming Dynasty and founded a foreign, and China's last, dynasty.

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The Qing Dynasty (1644-1911)

The Qing Dynasty founded by the Manzhou, although of nomadic origin, had absorbed much of Chinese culture and did everything it could to portray itself as a legitimately Chinese dynasty. As a result, the emperors revived the civil service exams and other governmental institutions, restored the mandarins to the levels of prestige they had enjoyed before Mongol rule, and maintained interest in classical scholarship. (However, the Manzhou also outlawed the crippling practice of binding Chinese women's feet and forced the Chinese peasants to shave their heads except for wearing Manchurian-style pigtails.) Militarily, the Manzhou extended China's borders to their greatest extent ever, encompassing Manchuria, Mongolia, Siankiang, Tibet, Korea, Burma, Taiwan, and Vietnam.

All this time, contact with the West continued. However, in the long run, it caused problems for China in two very different ways. For one thing, several new crops, such as corn, sweet potatoes, and better strains of rice, were imported, thus making China's agriculture much more productive. In the short run this was good. But, in the long run, these new crops and improved transport of food along China's canals and waterways, both of which allowed specialized cash crops suited to local soils, triggered a population explosion that pushed China's population to nearly 400,000,000 by 1800. At the same time, China's agriculture was expanding into Manchuria, which held the upland and drainage areas of some of China's rivers. Extensive farming here caused soil erosion and deforestation that triggered disastrous flooding downstream. These floods plus overpopulation put severe strains on China's ability to feed so many people and seriously weakened it.

The second problem had to do with religion. As we have seen, the Jesuits were allowed to preach Christianity in China, because they presented their religion in Confucian terms and were tolerant of Confucian practices. All that changed when Franciscan and Dominican priests arrived and started behaving in a much less tolerant manner than the Jesuits, condemning, among other things, the venerated Chinese custom of ancestor worship. Also, unlike the Jesuits, who concentrated on the educated ruling classes, the Franciscans and Dominicans preached more to the masses, which made Chinese authorities suspicious and resulted in a crackdown on Christianity in China (although the Jesuits still maintained some status at court) and a curtailment of trade with the West in the 1700's.

Unfortunately for China, Europe's power and interest in Chinese goods, especially tea, were growing beyond China's ability to hold these western "barbarians" back from its gates. The result would be a century of humiliation at the hands of the West and a revolution that would at once transform China and maintain its unique culture and integrity as a nation.