

**EAST ASIA:  
THE MING DYNASTY IN CHINA  
AND THE RESTRUCTURING OF JAPAN**

## **MING CHINA**

Chinese history is characterized by a succession of dynasties, the first of which was established centuries before a comparable level of political organization was achieved in Europe. The Ming dynasty was the last truly Chinese dynasty. Though its successor, the Ch'ing dynasty (1644-1911), adopted many of the forms of Ming rule and much of Chinese culture, it was a conquest dynasty from the Manchu tribes of the north.

Perhaps this is one of the reasons why the period of the Ming dynasty is considered one of the "golden ages" of China. But there are other reasons as well. It was a time of general peace, prosperity and growth. It was also a time when literature and the arts continued to display impressive vitality.

The Ming and Ch'ing dynasties are often considered together because of the similarities in their approaches to statecraft and because many of the Ming cultural, economic and social trends continued into the Ch'ing period. The years of the two dynasties, from the middle fourteenth century to the early twentieth century, might be thought of as "late traditional" or "late dynastic" China. Here we will discuss only the Ming dynasty and save discussion of the Ch'ing for a time when East and West are being inexorably drawn closer together – and closer to conflict.

### **Recovery and Growth**

**Demographic Changes.** The population of China was vast by any standard, but it suffered severely during the century of Mongol rule that preceded the establishment of the Ming dynasty. Northern China endured the Mongol invasions. Added to this was the impact of disease (including the bubonic plague, which was as devastating in China as it was in Europe) and occasional natural disasters. The population, estimated at perhaps 150 million or more on the eve of the Mongol invasions, had been reduced to perhaps 60 million by the time of the Ming dynasty restored native Chinese rule.

During the nearly three centuries of Ming rule, China experienced steady population growth. Estimates range from 100 percent (from 60 million to 125 million) to 300 percent or more (as high as 200 million) by the end of the dynasty in the seventeenth century. This was accompanied by an increase in food production that both fostered and resulted from the growth in population. The Ming government, particularly concerned about the recovery of the ravaged north, encouraged migration to depopulated areas. In addition, the government sponsored water projects (dikes and irrigation) and land reclamation to stimulate agricultural growth. Better strains of rice and new kinds of crops, including corn introduced from the Americas late in the period also aided production.

### **Economic Activity**

China's economy continued to be centered on farming, the occupation of the vast majority of the population. The Confucian ideology (discussed later) that characterized by statecraft and social relation had always emphasized the importance of agriculture, placing peasants, at least theoretically, in a position of respect, if not wealth and power.

**Commerce and Industry.** But commerce and industry also grew during the Ming dynasty, along with the increase in population. Cash crops such as silk and cotton allowed many farmers, particularly in the Yangtze River valley, to augment their income or to obtain goods from other parts of China. From large cities to smaller market towns, commercial exchanges steadily increased. In the last century of Ming rule, silver further stimulated economic activity. Much of it was mined in China's southwestern provinces, while much was imported from Japan and the Spanish colonies in exchange for Chinese silk and other goods. Ironworks, porcelain factories, and large scale silk spinning enterprises attest both to the advanced nature of the Chinese economy and to a high level of organization.

### **Ming Government**

The basic outline of Chinese administration had been set centuries earlier, in the bureaucratic organization of the Han dynasty (206BC – AD220). The Ming rulers consciously emulated the centralized government of the T'ang dynasty (616-906), but carried centralization to an even higher degree. Furthermore, the extensive bureaucracy of the Ming dynasty helped the government survive during periods of rule by weak emperors. It also eased the transition to a new, foreign dynasty when the Ming fell in the seventeenth century.

**Imperial Despotism.** The pattern for Ming politics was set by the dynasty's founder, the emperor known as T'ai-tsu. As capable as he was autocratic, T'ai-tsu attempted to concentrate as much power into his own hands as possible.

**The "Mandate of Heaven."** The theory behind Chinese emperorship allowed for T'ai-tsu to do this. Confucian ideology argued that, ideally at least, the emperor was the epitome of virtue and moral rectitude. He was the "son of heaven," the father of the national family, the guarantor of peace and stability. He and his dynasty ruled the country by the virtue of the "Mandate of Heaven," the centuries-old idea that Heaven sanctions the rule of the regime in power as long as the country is governed wisely and humanely. The Mandate of Heaven implied no personal god passing judgment on the emperor or his subjects. Heaven was impersonal and nonanthromorphic, but it could have powerful impact on individual lives. The emperor's loss of the mandate could be manifested in dramatic ways; floods, famine and widespread popular discontent could all be taken as Heaven's displeasure.

**Exercising Power.** The emperor could be simply a figurehead, taken advantage of by ambitious bureaucrats and advisers. But depending on his personality and political will, he could also be a very real and powerful political actor. Though T'ai-tsu set a pattern of despotic, centralized rule, his successors were not always able or inclined to exercise such personal control. Into the fifteenth century, Chinese emperors continued to take interest in government, ruling directly with the aid of trusted counselors. From about 1500 on, however, the Ming dynasty suffered from an absence of vigorous imperial leadership, though China continued to make produce remarkable cultural achievements. During the later days of the Ming, emperors often could not be bothered with the business of government, frequently preferring to indulge themselves in some of the more immediate pleasures attendant to the position. Some of them found the hedonistic pleasures of the palace irresistible. The early seventeenth-century emperor Hsi-tsung even became an accomplished carpenter, though his abilities at statecraft did not match his expertise at making furniture.

**Overthrow of the Ming.** With the decline of competent imperial leadership, the Chinese government was plagued by maladministration and competing factions. The influence of eunuchs – who owed their position to the personal favor of the emperor and were despised by the official Confucian bureaucracy – increased, accompanied by palace intrigue and corruption. Attention to the problems of the provinces waned, resulting in widespread discontent. This was fertile grounds for the rise of rebel bands, whose numbers swelled during the last days of the Ming dynasty. It was the most powerful of these, led by Li Tzu-ch'eng, that captured Peking in 1644. With the suicide of the Ming emperor, the dynasty came to an end.

## **CHINESE BUREAUCRACY**

**Administrative Structure.** The emperor, at the apex of the state, had a vast army of officials under him. In addition to his personal advisors and the top administrative councils, the affairs of the nation were handled by six boards, or ministries: Personnel, Public Works, Finance, Punishment, Rites and War. At the next level were provincial governors and district magistrates. The district magistrate was the lowest level official appointed directly from the central government. He was the crucial link between the imperial bureaucracy and the affairs of local society. Charged with the important responsibilities of keeping the peace and collecting tax revenues, this official could only perform well in his duties if he could gain the trust, or at least the cooperation, of the local aristocracy.

**The Examination System.** The Chinese bureaucracy also included military officials, but the most interesting aspect of Chinese government was the civil service. Chinese theories of government by no means allowed for popular participation, but the method of recruitment into the Chinese civil service did allow for occasional injections of new blood.

Government posts were given to men who had passed a grueling series of examinations based on classical Confucian literature. The theory behind this system was based on two premises. First, the Confucian classics contained the principles of good government and personal morality. Second, people could improve themselves through education. Combining these two premises led to the conclusion that a thorough education on the Confucian classics would produce literate men of virtue. And who would not want to be ruled by such people?

**The Examination.** In theory, the examination was open to almost any man, but in practice it was very difficult for anyone but members of the leisured upper class to afford the time and tutors to adequately prepare. Most examination candidates did not make it past the first of the three exams. Passing the examination required thorough knowledge both of the classics and of the most important commentaries on

those books. It was expected that a candidate would not just be familiar in a general sense with the content of the books, but that he would have them memorized. And if that were not enough, the candidate was also graded on his to conform to certain set literature styles. The difficulty of this test is indicative of the attraction a career in government and men, young and old, studied for years to prepare for the examination – some of them taking the test over and over again in the hope of passing. Many who failed to reach the highest levels of the examination became local teachers. Others unable to deal with the dashing of their cherished hopes, suffered breakdowns or even committed suicide.

**Strengths and Weaknesses.** The examination system had its advantages and disadvantages. The institution of the system, centuries before the Ming dynasty, was a conscious attempt to create a meritocracy – rule by those who had demonstrated their ability, rather than those who happened to be born into the right families or who gained favor with the ruler by whatever means. At its best, the system produced a class of dedicated, highly educated officials. But it did not reward creativity, emphasizing instead orthodoxy and the maintenance of tradition. There were limited reforms in the procedure in the nineteenth century, but it was not eliminated until the first decade of the twentieth century.

## MING SOCIETY

It has been already been mentioned the growth in commerce that changed the Chinese economy during the Ming period. Naturally, Chinese merchants benefited from this growth, as they were the ones who transported goods from one place to another and made them available for sale. In contrast with most of Europe, however, in China it was difficult to translate commercial success into political power or social prestige.

**Peasants.** Peasants were the most numerous group in China, and the elite scholar-official recognized that the prosperity of the empire depended on peasant labor. Confucian statecraft required that the government be solicitous of the peasants' welfare, even while the peasants were expected to work hard and yield taxes to the government.

**Artisans and Merchants.** Ranking just below the peasants were artisans who, while they did not produce the staple crops on which everyone depended, nevertheless made objects of utility and value. Merchants, who were becoming increasingly important in the Chinese economy, were accorded very little social prestige. They were relegated to the bottom position in the official social hierarchy. Commercial activity was looked down on by the Confucian-educated rulers of China, who felt that a superior person did not engage in the base activity of making money. So even as merchants enriched themselves, they remained socially and politically inhibited.

**The Farming Family.** The basic unit of Chinese society, the farming family, was organized along patriarchal lines. Every family member was needed for work, especially at planting and harvest times. A large family could have mixed blessings. It meant more mouths to feed, but it also meant more hands available for work and could be seen as a sign of prosperity. The rhythms of agricultural life were far different from the politics of the capital or the commotion of the growing trading centers – and more resistant to change.

## CONFUCIAN SOCIETY

**Confucian Principles.** Though it is often thought of primarily as a religion, Confucianism was originally a set of principles attributed to Confucius, the sage and would-be statesmen of the sixth and fifth centuries BC. These principles were designed to create a well-ordered society at a time when “China” was a collection of small states frequently at war with one another. Confucian principles emphasized virtue, benevolence, morality, and respect for hierarchy in government, society and the family. By the time of the Ming dynasty, these principles were deeply ingrained in Chinese culture.

**Social Order.** Like the family, the entire social order was based on a hierarchy of gender and age, with men dominant and seniority respected. This was consistent with Confucian ideology, which encouraged each person to know his or her place in the family and society and to act in accordance with that position. This reached as high as the emperor himself, who was expected to be benevolent and concerned, and as low as the humblest peasant, who was expected to be obedient and hard working.

**Filial Piety.** The supreme virtue in Confucianism was filial piety. Parents – and especially the father – were to be accorded undying respect and obedience. This ideology fit well with the demands of the centralized Chinese state, as the emperor was depicted as figurative father of the entire country. Just as the children in a family should honor and obey their father in exchange for his nourishing and protecting

them, so all the subjects of the emperor should honor and obey him in exchange for his benevolence and wise rule.

## MING CULTURE

The Ming period is known for its accomplishments in scholarship, literature and the visual arts. Building on work done by frustrated and officially suppressed scholars during the years of Mongol rule, Chinese writers also contributed to the development of drama as both a theatrical and literary form. The peace that prevailed during the Ming period provided an atmosphere conducive to all these expressions.

**Scholarship.** One of the most important Ming thinkers was Wang Yang-ming. This philosopher and official had the same objective as all other Confucians: the discovery of historical, metaphysical and moral truth. But Wang wrestled with the problem of how to incorporate the knowledge of truth into every day life. Because everyone is born with the ability to live a morally good life, Wang argued, the responsibility of the individual is to overcome obstacles to such a life that come from living in the real world. Not satisfied with much of the philosophical speculation of his day, Wang tended to de-emphasize “book learning” as an end in itself in favor of practical application. His influence continued long after his death and spread to Korea and Japan as well.

**Literature.** Though playwriting was important, the novel is perhaps the cultural achievement most often identified with the Ming period. Chinese writers produced a number of very important literary works, some of which not only rank high within Chinese tradition, but deserve to be considered world classics as well.

**Visual Arts.** Painting and calligraphy had long been highly prized in China. Scholars, in fact, were expected not only to be familiar with a large body of literature and be able to compose essays that could stand as works of literature, but also write with a good hand. This was considered a mark of character. In the sixteenth century, both painting and calligraphy flourished in Soochow, just south of Nanking on the Grand Canal linking the Yangtze River valley with northern China.

Another important visual art – both as an art form and as a trading item – was porcelain. Beautiful blue and white vases, plates, and other objects – known in the West as “china” – became valued possessions in Asia and Europe.

## MING FOREIGN POLICY

Early Ming emperors pursued a vigorous foreign policy, further extending the limits of the empire. The Ming dynasty arose with the expulsion of the Mongols, who had ruled China as the Yuan dynasty for nearly a century, but the Mongols continued to be a threat from the north throughout the sixteenth century.

**The Tribute System.** The Chinese preferred to play off one foreign threat against another or to manage foreign affairs through the “tribute system.” Under this arrangement, emissaries from foreign rulers would accept the nominal “superiority” of the Chinese emperor, in exchange for trading privileges, gifts, and the emperor’s vestiture of authority for the king of the visiting ambassador. Given the costs of war, this could be a sensible foreign policy move for states wishing to deal with China. It also had the effect within China of confirming the official view of the emperor as the ruler of a civilization that was the epitome of cultural advancement. Therefore, the Chinese were not as interested in learning and engaging in discourse with their visitors as many of the visitors were in learning about China.

The first European inroads into China were made by Portuguese traders, who arrived in Canton in 1515. By mid-century the Portuguese had established themselves at Macao. Other Europeans soon joined in, notably Spain and the Netherlands, purchasing such luxury goods as silk, spices and porcelain. The balance of trade was decidedly in China’s favor. Europeans had very little that interested the Chinese.

**Impact on the West.** While Western influence on China during the Ming dynasty was minimal, Chinese influence on the West was more substantial. The impact of the Chinese porcelain industry has already been mentioned. This was part of a craze for things Chinese, and it would not be unusual to see aristocratic European homes decorated with Chinese art. The lavishly decorated “Chinese Room” of the Potsdam Palace in Dresden is one of the most famous examples of *chinoiserie* – the fascination with things Chinese. In addition, European enlightenment philosophers were fascinated with the reports they received on China, which seemed to point to an idyllic society of peaceful splendor and enlightened government.

## THE TRANSFORMATION OF JAPAN

Throughout the later fifteenth century and the sixteenth century, the island nation of Japan underwent decades of convulsions, disorder and disunity. When European traders and missionaries arrived

during this period, they saw a country that must have looked strikingly familiar to feudal Europe. Local rulers paid nominal allegiance to the emperor, but within their domains, they were virtually autonomous. Warfare was endemic, as regional commanders sought to enlarge their lands and armies by conquest. By 1600, however, Japan had been reunified and a new political order had begun to take shape. This new order was accompanied by a renewed emphasis on a clearly defined social order. It also had economic implications, as Japan closed its doors to most outside trade and other foreign contacts and developed an internally oriented commercial economy. The merchant class became wealthy and, denied access to political participation, turned much of their wealth to artistic and hedonistic pursuits.

### **WARRING STATES AND REUNIFICATION (1467-1600)**

In 1467 a dispute over succession to the office of *shogun* (the military strongman who ruled the country in the name of the emperor) led to a major struggle. Known as the Onin War (1467-1477), this struggle was the beginning of a century of competition and war over land and political influence.

### **DISENTEGRATION**

Fighting spread from Kyoto, the emperor's capital, to the provinces. As it did so, Japan disintegrated, into a collection of principalities of varying size, each ruled by a local lord assisted by his army. The warriors who made up these armies were known as *samurai*. The samurai became the group most readily associated with the "warring states" period; an entire body of literature and mythology centers on the romanticized exploits of brave, loyal warriors.

The Japanese term *gekokuji* \* (those below overthrow above) has been used to describe this period of warfare. The chaos implied by the term probably gives fair indication of the precariousness of power and the fragility of the periods of peace that occasionally interrupted the fighting. Eventually, however, a group of 200 or so military lords emerged, known as *daimyo*, who were able to more effectively control their domains and their samurai armies. As the domains became more centrally organized, they appeared more and more like independent states.

**Castle Towns.** One more important development during this period that had far-reaching implications for later Japanese history was the establishment of "castle towns" in the late sixteenth century. Dominated by an imposing citadel, these towns initially served two purposes: they gave the daimyo a strong defensible location from which to rule his domain, and they allowed him to gather his warriors in one place for better control.

In the long term, the castle towns were less important as strategic military locations than they were for several other reasons. With the warriors removed from the land to the castles, rural life became regulated by the peasants themselves, rather than by samurai overlords. The samurai lived on stipends paid to them by their lords, rather than on the income from land grants as had previously been the case. With a large number of samurai now settled in one place, a thriving merchant class came into being to serve their needs. Over the course of the Tokugawa period, this merchant class became very wealthy, leading to a social transformation that eventually had political consequences as well. The castle towns also accelerated urbanization in Japan, as more and more of the political, economic and cultural life in any domain was concentrated in its castle town. Many of Japan's major modern cities began as castle towns.

### **RESTORING STABILITY**

Most of these developments took decades (or even centuries) to reach their full extent. More immediately, however, for the "warring states" of Japan, the emergence of castle towns symbolized a shift in momentum away from disorder toward order and reunification. They at least helped promote local stability and paved the way for the establishment of a stable political order, which took shape in the early seventeenth century.

**Oda Nobunaga.** It fell to three warlords in the late sixteenth century to finally end the century of war and decentralization. Oda Nobunaga started the process. Nobunaga was a skillful tactician, and even used firearms – recently introduced to the Japanese by the Portuguese – to good effect in the wars that accompanied Japanese unification. In 1568, Nobunaga entered Kyoto with his army. Controlling Kyoto was vital for any warlord with aspirations of ruling the entire country, since Kyoto was the seat of the emperor and the all-important symbolic center of the Japanese state and race.

Nobunaga was determined to eliminate challenges to his power, regardless of where he saw them. He could be ruthless in pursuit of his aims. As he saw it, restoring order in Japan included eliminating the political and economic influence of the large Buddhist monasteries outside Kyoto. As part of his

campaign, in 1571 Nobunaga destroyed the great Buddhist establishment at Mt. Hiei, both a center of Japanese Buddhism and a haven for “warrior-monks” who were virtually a law unto themselves.

**Toyotomi Hideyoshi.** Nobunaga was assassinated by one of his vassals in 1582. Toyotomi Hideyoshi, a foot soldier who had risen to become one of Nobunaga’s leading generals, avenged his master’s death and then resumed efforts to reunify the country. Through a combination of military conquest and political conciliation, Hideyoshi completed the task of unification by 1590. Ambitious enough to want the title of shogun, Hideyoshi had to settle for lesser titles because of his low birth, but he was clearly the supreme military power in Japan.

In the process of reunifying the country, Hideyoshi realized that the warfare of the preceding century had created an armed peasantry. This situation, he concluded, would be detrimental to any effort to create a stable political order. He therefore ordered that all peasants turn in their swords, and other weapons. The resulting “sword hunt” brought in countless swords, spears and other items. It appears to have been quite successful in creating a society in which the majority of the population were disarmed, ruled over by a small warrior elite who now had an absolute monopoly on the use of force.

Hideyoshi also conducted new land surveys to assess the productivity of agricultural land and the size of individual parcels. This became the basis for a new land tax that allowed for more systematic tax collection and greater predictability in tax revenues.

Ironically, considering his own humble birth, Hideyoshi also took steps to freeze Japanese social structure. The “sword hunt” was part of this process, as it created a distinction between warriors and everyone else. But there was also a rigid distinction created between farmers and townspeople. Members of one social class rarely married into another class. Furthermore, each class was given different legal privileges and protection.

**Invasion of Korea.** Having unified the country, Hideyoshi turned his to the mainland. Apparently hoping to add Korea and China to his conquests, he invaded Korea in 1592 and 1597. The invasions devastated much of Korea, though before Hideyoshi’s troops could reach China, the Ming government had sent troops to assist the Koreans, driving the Japanese back. The cost of the military involvement in Korea, in fact, is often cited as one of the reasons for the decline of the Ming dynasty in China. But the real hero for the Koreans was Admiral Yi Sun-sin, commander of a fleet of ships that operated in the island dotted waters off the southern coast of Korea. Admiral Yi is credited with developing the world’s first iron-clad ships, the so-called “turtle boats.” Despite the Japanese troops’ success on land, the Korean ships wreaked havoc with the Japanese navy. The Koreans turned back the Japanese invasion, but not before sustaining serious economic damage and loss of cultural treasures. Admiral Yi, who sustained a mortal wound while leading his fleet against Japan, has been enshrined as perhaps the greatest hero in Korean history.

**Establishment of Tokugawa Rule.** Hideyoshi died in 1598, leaving only a child as his heir. The leading daimyo, who had paid at least lip service to Hideyoshi’s succession wishes while he was alive, soon fell to fighting among themselves. A coalition of eastern daimyo, led by Tokugawa Ieyasu, emerged victorious in 1600 at the Battle of Sekigahara. Unlike Hideyoshi, Ieyasu was able to claim the title of shogun in 1603 by manipulation of his genealogy to show descent from the right medieval warrior family. Ieyasu established his family as the new hereditary rulers of Japan for the next 250 years. In addition, he took steps to create a stable political and social structure. The two and a half centuries of Tokugawa rule were a period of peace and prosperity.

**Contact with Europe.** Japan was already trading regularly with China and Korea. The arrival of Western traders widened the scope of Japan’s commercial contacts. The Portuguese were not the only Europeans interested in trading in Japan. They were soon followed by Spanish, Dutch and English ships. Most trade with Westerners was conducted in the port city of Nagasaki. During the Tokugawa period, Nagasaki was the only city open to European trade, and the only to the Dutch, whose traders were confined to the small island of Deshima, just off Nagasaki. Suspicious of Westerners, the Japanese government sought to strictly control foreign trade, both before and after the establishment of Tokugawa rule.

## JAPANESE CULTURE

Despite the upheavals that characterized the century prior to Tokugawa rule, Japanese culture continued to display a high level of sophistication.

Historians of culture refer to the transition period between the “warring states” and reunification as the “Momoyama period,” from the location of Hideyoshi’s castle outside of Kyoto. Indeed, magnificent castles are one of the most lasting cultural legacies of this time. But the castles are not important only for

their architecture. By decorating their castles with paintings, sculptures, screens and other art objects, castle lords fostered a variety of arts.

**Visual arts.** The visual arts found a new subject for study with the arrival of Europeans in the sixteenth century. *Namban* (“Southern Barbarian”) paintings showed the huge ships in which Westerners traveled to Japan. Japanese artists also depicted the Westerners themselves, emphasizing features, which seemed particularly strange. A “typical” European in one of these paintings might be tall and awkward, with a long nose and red hair.

**The Tea Ceremony.** Japanese warriors were particularly attracted to the tea ceremony. In fact, there was no greater devotee than Hideyoshi himself. The actual drinking of tea was only one aspect of this highly stylized ritual, which was perfected during the Momoyama period. It had connections with Zen Buddhism, which emphasized austerity and contemplation rather than extensive iconography and textual study. The popularity of the tea ceremony also provided an impetus for the pottery industry, as finely crafted tea implements, many of them imported from Korea or showing Korean influence, became valued for both artistic and practical reasons.