



China Under Ming and Qing Rule

By Trevor Getz

The Ming and Qing dynasties ruled China from 1368 to 1912. China was the wealthiest empire in the world, then wasn't as power shifted in the 1640s, then was again.



Competing periodization

Chinese historians are very familiar with the date range of 1368 to 1910, marking the period when China was ruled by the Ming, then Qing dynasty. They also recognize 1640 as an important date, since that's when Ming rule ended and Manchu soldiers from the north took over, beginning the Qing era.

This course, meanwhile, focuses on the three centuries from 1450 to 1750 as a significant period. This is the era when Western European empires began their rise to unprecedented dominance. But that narrative doesn't really fit China which was an empire before 1450, and an empire after 1750. So that's a problem with the periodization (the way time is divided) of the course. Still, we're going to try to use that difference to our advantage, by using China's history in this period to raise questions about the narrative that the course is telling you.

China's turn inland

What might a history of this era told from a Chinese perspective look like? Well, after 1433, the Ming emperors turned China's resources inland. During the previous century, China had increasingly become a maritime power, extending their reach across the Indian Ocean with Zheng He's massive treasure fleets. Chinese merchants sailed around the ocean with the full backing of their mighty empire. But in 1433, the emperor ended these expeditions, decommissioning or burning most of his fleets. Some historians used to describe this as "China's turn inward," but that's been revised to "China's turn inland" by many of today's scholars. The first label implies retreat, the second suggests resourcefulness. It acknowledges that China's movement of resources inland made real sense from their perspective.

Why did the turn inland make sense? Maintaining a huge navy was expensive and, from the Ming point of view, totally unnecessary. Their greatest threats and opportunities were on their inland frontiers, not in the ocean. China produced everything it needed at home. If foreign merchants wanted access to China's vast wealth and consumer goods, they were welcome to come to China.

This land-based mindset mostly prevailed through the rest of the Ming and later the Qing dynasty. During the 1750s, the Qianlong emperor launched a series of military campaigns that expanded China's territory to its greatest extent. So 1450 to 1750 was not a period of withdrawal, decline, or European domination. It was a period of inland expansion that provided new wealth, power, and territory to an already formidable empire.

Rethinking periodization can help us avoid some misconceptions about China. Chinese society is sometimes characterized as a rigid and even unchanging society, shaped by philosophies that rejected change and instead demanded obedience and duty—namely Confucianism and legalism. That characterization is inaccurate. China often followed a different path from societies in other parts of Afro-Eurasia, but that's because dynastic leaders were responding to unique forces for change, many of them coming from Chinese peasants, as we will see.



A map of the Ming dynasty in 1415, superimposed on the modern borders of China and its neighbors. CC BY 3.0.

The Ming dynasty

Let's explore some of those sources by going back to the beginning of the Ming dynasty in 1368.

When the Black Death swept through Mongol-ruled China in the 1340s, it arrived on top of many other problems. By the fourteenth century, the Chinese middle class resented the Mongols for excluding them from positions of power. Then there were the Chinese peasants, who felt oppressed by high taxes. Plague, plus social unrest, led to a rebel movement known as the Red Turban army. Led by a brilliant peasant named Zhu Yuanzhang, this army drove the Mongols out of most of China by 1368, when Zhu declared himself the first emperor of the Ming dynasty. He took the title of the Hongwu Emperor (ruled 1368–1398). The dynasty would last almost 300 years.

The Ming Emperors had a lot to occupy their attention. The Hongwu Emperor knew from personal experience—having lived as an oppressed peasant under Mongol rule—the power of peasants, especially when hungry. To ensure stability and access to affordable food, he focused on building China's infrastructure. His successors, especially the Yongle Emperor (ruled 1402–1424), prioritized agricultural expansion and improvement.

But the Ming Emperors also had another problem to deal with. They might have defeated and expelled the Mongols, but other pastoralist peoples from Central Asia were still a constant threat. The Yongle Emperor led five massive raids into Central Asia to ensure the peoples of that region would not be able to threaten China again.

While agricultural stability and invasion from Central Asia were constant concerns of the Ming Emperors, the Yongle Emperor also found time to promote long-distance maritime trade. Some sources suggest his navy had 3,500 ships, the largest of which were over 400 feet long. By contrast, the Spanish armada—the largest fleet assembled in Europe in this period—consisted of only 130 ships, none longer than 140 feet. The Yongle Emperor commissioned an admiral, Zheng He, to lead a trading fleet deep into the Indian Ocean, travelling as far as the East African coast.



An illustration from a 1637 Chinese book, showing a new seeding machine. Agriculture was vitally important to the Ming dynasty rulers, who had a vast population to feed. New farming technology was often quickly adopted and spread. Public domain.

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A map of the 7th, and largest, expedition of Zheng He. By Vmenkov, CC BY 1.0.

State sponsorship of long-distance trade didn't last long. By the 1430s, the two big problems of agriculture and the threat of invasion from central Asia got worse. The population of China doubled under Ming rule, but that meant the government needed to spend most of its time worrying about feeding all of these people. Successors of the Yongle Emperor built a huge bureaucracy, perhaps 200,000 people, to help run and protect the empire. External trade continued, but mostly with neighbors in Southeast and Central Asia.

Because of these policies, the Ming state was probably the most prosperous country on Earth in this period, and culture flourished. After 1450, some of the world's greatest literature came from China, including *Journey to the West*, a fantastic account of the Buddhist monk Xuanzang's journey to India that inspired the modern anime classic *Dragon Ball-Z*.

Unfortunately for the Ming Emperors, even as cultural achievements flourished, economic and political problems began to threaten their dynasty. While the early Ming Emperors had avoided overtaxing peasants, things changed over the next couple centuries. By the early 1620s a heavy tax burden fell on peasants. Meanwhile, infighting among China's many bureaucrats divided them into factions. When one political faction took control, they would sometimes imprison their rivals.

Also, protecting the empire from invasions was always expensive. The communities of Central Asia remained an ongoing threat, then the Japanese emerged as a brand *new* threat. From the 1590s onward, the Chinese spent a lot of money helping the Korean government stave off attacks from Japan. (On any map showing Asia, you'll notice how the Korean peninsula points toward Japan like an inviting pier, making it the easiest path to China.)

This difficult situation got a lot worse when a series of famines struck in 1628, and the Ming government couldn't afford food for its peasants. As their agricultural base broke down, a military dynasty from Central Asia known as the Manchus brought an army into China, supposedly to help the Ming government. Instead, they took power themselves as the Qing dynasty.

Qing: The Manchu dynasty

Like the Mongol Yuan dynasty before 1344, the Manchus were technically invaders from outside of China. However, in the chaos surrounding the decline of the Ming dynasty many Chinese welcomed them. In return, the early Qing rulers were careful to not alienate the Chinese peasantry as they slowly extended their grasp over the country.

It helped that the Qing had a very able emperor early on. The Kangxi Emperor (ruled 1661–1722) first ended resistance to his rule and then decreased the size of his army to keep costs low. This allowed him to freeze taxes so that they would not increase, a very popular measure. His court also managed to balance a sense of tradition with innovation. On the one hand, the Kangxi Emperor ordered scholars to compile the first real dictionary of Chinese characters and sponsored a revival of poetry and culture based on Chinese history. On the other hand, he was very interested in technology from any region, including a fascination with European clocks. As a result of all this work, China returned to prosperity, with peasants enjoying a higher standard of living than almost any other society of the time.

The Kangxi Emperor was succeeded by his son, the Yongzheng Emperor (ruled 1722–1735), and then his grandson, the Qianlong Emperor (ruled 1735–1796). Though China was the center of their realm, they ruled an increasingly multi-ethnic state that included many people in Central Asia, a number of whom were Muslim. They tried to keep this state together by giving prosperity and demanding obedience. They promoted Confucian ideals while also sponsoring Muslim, Buddhist, and other religious practices.

Overall, anyone looking at China in 1750 would see a state that was peaceful and relatively prosperous, and larger than it had ever been before. As late as 1791, the Qianlong Emperor offered the British trade envoy Lord Macartney this simple explanation: “Our Celestial Empire possesses all things in prolific abundance and lacks no product within its borders. There is therefore no need to import the manufactures of outside barbarians in exchange for our own produce.”



The Kangxi Emperor, one of the longest-ruling and most successful emperors in Chinese history. Public domain.

Sources

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An illustration from a 1637 Chinese book, showing a new seeding machine. Agriculture was vitally important to the Ming dynasty rulers, who had a vast population to feed. New farming technology was often quickly adopted and spread. Public domain. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Seeding_machine_-_technology_from_the_time_of_the_Ming_dynasty.jpg

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