The Ming Dynasty

The Ming dynasty's early emperors wanted to spread China's influence. By the late 1500s, however, China had limited its contact with the rest of the world.

The Ming Dynasty

How did Ming rulers bring peace and prosperity to China?

After Kublai Khan died in A.D. 1294, a series of weak emperors came to the throne. Mongol power in China began to decline, and problems increased for the Yuan dynasty. The government spent too many resources on foreign conquests. At the same time, many officials stole from the treasury and grew wealthy. Yuan rulers lost the respect of the people. As a result, many Chinese resented Mongol controls.

The Rise of the Ming

Unrest swept through China and finally ended Mongol rule. In A.D. 1368, a military officer named Zhu Yuanzhang (JOO YWAHN • JAHNG) became emperor. Zhu reunited the country and then set up his capital at Nanjing (NAN • JIHNG) in southern China. There, he founded the Ming, or "Brilliant," dynasty. The Ming dynasty would rule China for the next 300 years.

As emperor, Zhu took the name Hong Wu (HAHNG WOO), or the "Military Emperor." He brought peace and order, but he was also a harsh leader. Hong Wu trusted few people and punished officials that he suspected of treason, or disloyalty to the government. After Hong Wu died in A.D. 1398, his son became emperor and took the name of Yong Le (YUNG LEE).

Yong Le was determined to be a powerful ruler. In A.D. 1421, he moved the capital north to Beijing. There, he built the Imperial City, a large area of palaces and government buildings. The center of this area, known as the Forbidden City, was where the emperor and his family lived. Only top government officials were allowed to enter the Forbidden City.

The Forbidden City had beautiful gardens and palaces with thousands of rooms. China's emperor and court lived there in luxury for more than 500 years. The buildings of the Forbidden City still stand. You can visit them if you travel to China today.

How Did the Ming Change China?

Ming emperors needed government officials to carry out their decisions. To make sure that officials took their jobs seriously, the emperors brought back the civil service examinations. As during the Tang and Song dynasties, the tests were extremely difficult and required years of preparation.

One responsibility of officials was to carry out a census (SEHN • suhs), or a count of the number of people in China. The census helped officials identify the people who owed taxes.

The strong government of the early Ming emperors provided peace and security. As a result, the Chinese economy began to grow. Hong Wu rebuilt many canals and farms. He also ordered that new roads be paved and new forests planted. Agriculture thrived as farmers worked on the new lands and grew more crops.

Ming rulers also repaired and expanded the Grand Canal. This allowed merchants to ship rice and other products between southern and northern China. Chinese traders introduced new types of rice from Southeast Asia that grew faster. More food was available to the growing number of people living in cities.

The Ming also supported the silk industry. They encouraged farmers to start growing cotton and weaving cloth. For the first time, cotton became the cloth worn by most Chinese.

Arts and Literature

The arts flourished during the Ming dynasty. Newly wealthy merchants and artisans wanted entertainment and could afford to pay for printed books and trips to the theater. During the Ming period, Chinese writers produced novels, or long fictional stories. One of the most popular was The Romance of the Three Kingdoms. It described military rivalries at the end of the Han period. Many novels of the time were written in vernacular, or everyday language. Writers avoided formal language to tell their tales. Instead they tried to make their stories sound as if they had been told aloud by storytellers. Traditional Chinese dramas had been banned during the years of Mongol rule, but under the Ming they were restored to the stage. Actors in costumes performed stories of the day using words, music, dance, and symbolic gestures.

Explaning What was the purpose of the Imperial City?
Chinese Exploration

How did Chinese contact with the outside world change during the Ming dynasty?

Early Ming emperors wanted to know more about the world outside of China and to expand Chinese influence abroad. Ming emperors built a large fleet of ships to sail to other countries. The ships, known as junks, usually traveled along the coast of China. They could also sail on the open sea. Between A.D. 1405 and A.D. 1433, Ming emperors sent the Chinese fleet on seven overseas voyages. They wanted to trade with other kingdoms and demonstrate Chinese power. They also wanted to demand that weaker kingdoms pay tribute to China.

The leader of these journeys was a Chinese Muslim and court official named Zheng He (JUNG HUH). The voyages of Zheng He were quite impressive. On the first voyage, nearly 28,000 men sailed on 62 large ships and 250 smaller ships. The largest ship was over 440 feet (134 m) long. That was more than five times as long as the Santa Maria that Christopher Columbus sailed almost 90 years later.

The Travels of Zheng He

Zheng He took his first fleet to Southeast Asia. In later voyages, he reached the western coast of India and the city-states of East Africa. Zheng He wrote about his travels:

"We have traversed [traveled] more than 100,000 li [30,000 mi. or 50,000 km] of immense water spaces and have beheld in the ocean huge waves like mountains rising sky-high, . . . and we have set eyes on barbarian [foreign] regions far away, hidden in a blue transparency of light vapours, [fog] while our sails, loftily unfurled like clouds, day and night continued their course, rapid like that of a star, traversing [crossing] those savage waves."

— from tablet erected in Fujian, China, by Zheng He

At the different ports he visited, Zheng He traded Chinese goods, such as silk, paper, and porcelain. He returned with items unknown in China. For example, Zheng He brought giraffes and other animals from Africa, which fascinated Emperor Yong Le. Yong Le placed them in his imperial zoo in Beijing. Zheng He also brought back visitors from the outside world, including representatives from South and Southeast Asia. The voyages of Zheng He encouraged Chinese merchants to settle in Southeast Asia and India. In these places, they traded goods and spread Chinese culture.

Despite these benefits, Chinese officials complained that the ongoing trips cost too much. They also said that these voyages would introduce unwanted foreign ideas. Some officials also believed that being a merchant was an unworthy and selfish occupation. A Confucian teaching said that people should place loyalty to society ahead of their own desires.

After Zheng He died in A.D. 1433, Confucian officials convinced the emperor to end the voyages. The fleet's ships were taken apart, and the construction of seagoing vessels was stopped. As a result, China's trade with other countries sharply declined. Within 50 years, the Chinese shipbuilding technology became outdated.

Arrival of Europeans

Ming China was not able to cut off all contacts with the rest of the world. In A.D. 1514, ships from the European country of Portugal (POHR • chih • GUHL) arrived off the coast of southern China. It was the first direct contact between China and Europe since the journeys of Marco Polo.

The Portuguese wanted to trade with China and convert the Chinese to Christianity. At the time, the Ming government paid little attention to the arrival of the Portuguese. China was a powerful civilization and did not feel threatened by outsiders. To the Chinese, the Europeans were barbarians (bahr • BEHR • ee • uhnz), or uncivilized people.

At first, local officials refused to trade with the Portuguese. The Chinese hoped the foreigners would give up and go home. By A.D. 1600, however, the Portuguese had built a trading post at the port of Macao (muh • KAU) in southern China. Portuguese ships carried goods between China and Japan. Trade between Europe and China, however, remained limited.

Despite limited contact, European ideas did reach China. Christian missionaries made the voyage to China on European merchant ships. Many of these missionaries were Jesuits, a group of Roman Catholic priests. The Jesuits were highly educated and hoped to establish Christian schools in China. Their knowledge of science impressed Chinese officials. However, the Jesuits did not convince many Chinese to accept Christianity.

The Fall of the Ming

After a long period of growth, the Ming dynasty began to weaken. Dishonest officials took over the country. They placed heavy taxes on farmers. The farmers objected to the taxes and began to revolt.

As law and order collapsed, a people—the Manchus—from the north prepared to invade a weakened China. Like the
Chinese, the Manchus had been conquered by the Mongols. They had retreated to an area northeast of China’s Great Wall, known today as Manchuria. The Manchus defeated the Chinese armies and captured Beijing. In A.D. 1644, they set up a new dynasty called the Qing (CHEENG) dynasty.

**Analyzing** Why did Chinese officials oppose overseas voyages?

**LESSON 4 REVIEW**

**Review Vocabulary**

1. How would officials have taken a *census* of China’s population?

2. Why did the Chinese consider Europeans to be *barbarians*?

**Answer the Guiding Questions**

3. **Describing** Describe the Imperial City and the Forbidden City.

4. **Identifying** How did the Ming dynasty change China?

5. **Explaining** Why did China’s officials discourage the voyages of Zheng He?

6. **Summarizing** What effect did the arrival of the Jesuits have on the Chinese?

7. **ARGUMENT** Imagine that you are Zheng He, and government officials have threatened to stop supporting your voyages. Write a letter to persuade officials to let you continue traveling. Give at least three reasons why you should be allowed to continue.