15.4: The Ming Dynasty

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

• Describe the origins and rise of the Ming dynasty

The Ming dynasty (January 23, 1368–April 25, 1644), officially the Great Ming, was an imperial dynasty of China founded by the peasant rebel leader Zhu Yuanzhang (known posthumously as Emperor Taizu). It succeeded the Yuan dynasty and preceded the short-lived Shun dynasty, which was in turn succeeded by the Qing dynasty. At its height, the Ming dynasty had a population of at least 160 million people, but some assert that the population could actually have been as large as 200 million.

Ming rule saw the construction of a vast navy and a standing army of one million troops. Although private maritime trade and official tribute missions from China had taken place in previous dynasties, the size of the tributary fleet under the Muslim eunuch admiral Zheng He in the 15th century surpassed all others in grandeur. There were enormous construction projects, including the restoration of the Grand Canal, the restoration of the Great Wall as it is seen today, and the establishment of the Forbidden City in Beijing during the first quarter of the 15th century. The Ming dynasty is, for many reasons, generally known as a period of stable, effective government. It is seen as the most secure and unchallenged ruling house that China had known up until that time. Its institutions were generally preserved by the following Qing dynasty. Civil service dominated government to an unprecedented degree at this time. During the Ming dynasty, the territory of China expanded (and in some cases also retracted) greatly. For a brief period during the dynasty, northern Vietnam was included in Ming territory. Other important developments included the moving of the capital from Nanjing to Beijing.

Founding of the Ming Dynasty

The Mongol-led Yuan dynasty (1279–1368) ruled before the establishment of the Ming dynasty. Alongside...
institutionalized ethnic discrimination against Han Chinese that stirred resentment and rebellion, other explanations for the Yuan’s demise included overtaxing areas hard-hit by crop failure, inflation, and massive flooding of the Yellow River caused by abandonment of irrigation projects. Consequently, agriculture and the economy were in shambles, and rebellion broke out among the hundreds of thousands of peasants called upon to work on repairing the dikes of the Yellow River.

A number of Han Chinese groups revolted, including the Red Turbans in 1351. Zhu Yuanzhang was a penniless peasant and Buddhist monk who joined the Red Turbans in 1352, but soon gained a reputation after marrying the foster daughter of a rebel commander.

Zhu was born into a desperately poor tenant farmer family in Zhongli Village in the Huai River plain, which is in present-day Fengyang, Anhui Province. When he was sixteen, the Huai River broke its banks and flooded the lands where his family lived. Subsequently, a plague killed his entire family, except one of his brothers. He buried them by wrapping them in white clothes. Destitute, Zhu accepted a suggestion to take up a pledge made by his late father and became a novice monk at the Huangjue Temple, a local Buddhist monastery. He did not remain there for long, as the monastery ran short of funds and he was forced to leave. For the next few years, Zhu led the life of a wandering beggar and personally experienced and saw the hardships of the common people. After about three years, he returned to the monastery and stayed there until he was around twenty-four years old. He learned to read and write during the time he spent with the Buddhist monks.

The monastery where Zhu lived was eventually destroyed by an army that was suppressing a local rebellion. In 1352, Zhu joined one of the many insurgent forces that had risen in rebellion against the Mongol-led Yuan dynasty. He rose rapidly through the ranks and became a commander. His rebel force later joined the Red Turbans, a millenarian sect related to the White Lotus Society, and one that followed cultural and religious traditions of Buddhism, Zoroastrianism, and other religions. Widely seen as a defender of Confucianism and neo-Confucianism among the predominantly Han Chinese population in China, Zhu emerged as a leader of the rebels that were struggling to overthrow the Yuan dynasty.

In 1356 Zhu’s rebel force captured the city of Nanjing, which he would later establish as the capital of the Ming dynasty. Zhu enlisted the aid of many able advisors, including the artillery specialists Jiao Yu and Liu Bowen.

Zhu cemented his power in the south by eliminating his arch rival, rebel leader Chen Youliang, in the Battle of Lake Poyang in 1363. This battle was—in terms of personnel—one of the largest naval battles in history. After the dynastic head of the Red Turbans suspiciously died in 1367 while a guest of Zhu, Zhu made his imperial ambitions known by sending an army toward the Yuan capital in 1368. The last Yuan emperor fled north into Mongolia and Zhu declared the founding of the Ming dynasty after razing the Yuan palaces in Dadu (present-day Beijing) to the ground.
Hongwu Emperor of the Ming dynasty: Zhu Yuanzhang, later Hongwu Emperor, was the founder and first emperor of China’s Ming dynasty. Born a poor peasant, he later rose through the ranks of a rebel army and eventually overthrew the Yuan leaders and established the Ming dynasty.

Instead of following the traditional way of naming a dynasty after the first ruler’s home district, Zhu Yuanzhang’s choice of “Ming,” or “Brilliant,” for his dynasty followed a Mongol precedent of choosing an uplifting title. Zhu Yuanzhang also took “Hongwu,” or “Vastly Martial,” as his reign title. Although the White Lotus had instigated his rise to power, the emperor later denied that he had ever been a member of the organization, and suppressed the religious movement after he became emperor.

Zhu Yuanzhang drew on both past institutions and new approaches in order to create jiaohua (civilization) as an organic Chinese governing process. This included building schools at all levels and increasing study of the classics as well as books on morality. There was also a distribution of Neo-Confucian ritual manuals and a new civil service examination system for recruitment into the bureaucracy.
Key Points

• The Ming dynasty was the ruling dynasty of China for 276 years (1368–1644) following the collapse of the Mongol-led Yuan dynasty.
• Explanations for the demise of the Yuan include institutionalized ethnic discrimination against Han Chinese that stirred resentment and rebellion, overtaxation of areas hard-hit by inflation, and massive flooding of the Yellow River caused by the abandonment of irrigation projects.
• These issues led to a popular revolt called the Red Turban Rebellion, led in part by a peasant named Zhu Yuanzhang.
• With the Yuan dynasty crumbling, competing rebel groups began fighting for control of the country and thus the right to establish a new dynasty, which Zhu did in 1368 after defeating his rivals in the largest naval battle in history and marching toward Beijing, the capital of the Yuan, causing Yuan leaders to flee.

Key Terms

• Zhu Yuanzhang: A poor peasant who rose through the ranks of a rebel army and later founded the Ming dynasty.
• White Lotus Society: A Buddhist secret society associated with the Red Turban Rebellion.

The Economy under the Ming Dynasty

The economy of the Ming dynasty was characterized by extreme inflation, the return to silver bullion, and the rise of large agricultural markets.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

Explain why the Ming dynasty supported the agricultural classes

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Key Points

• The economy of the Ming dynasty (1368–1644) of China was the largest in the world during that period, but suffered many inflations and contractions of currency.
• Because of hyperinflation of paper currency, the government returned to using silver as currency, which saw a major boom but later crashed, giving rise to widespread smuggling.
• Both because of his upbringing as a poor peasant and in order to recover from the rule of the Mongols and the wars that followed, the Hongwu Emperor enacted pro-agricultural policies.
• The Ming saw the rise of large commercial plantations, cash crops, and expanded markets.
• Hongwu Emperor initiated extensive land reform, including the distribution of land to peasants.

Key Terms

• bullion: Gold bars, silver bars, and other bars or ingots of precious metal used as currency.
• autarkic: The quality of being self-sufficient, especially in economic or political systems.
Overview

The economy of the Ming dynasty (1368–1644) of China was the largest in the world during that period. It is regarded as one of China’s three golden ages (the other two being the Han and Song periods). The period was marked by the increasing political influence of the merchants, the gradual weakening of imperial rule, and technological advances.

Currency during the Ming Dynasty

The early Ming dynasty attempted to use paper currency, with outflows of bullion limited by its ban on private foreign commerce. Like its forebears, paper currency experienced massive counterfeiting and hyperinflation. In 1425, Ming notes were trading at about 0.014% of their original value under the Hongwu Emperor. The notes remained in circulation as late as 1573, but their printing ceased in 1450. Minor coins were minted in base metals, but trade mostly occurred using silver ingots. As their purity and exact weight varied, they were treated as bullion and measured in tael. These privately made “sycee” first came into use in Guangdong, spreading to the lower Yangtze sometime before 1423, the year sycee became acceptable for payment of tax obligations.

In the mid-15th century, the paucity of circulating silver caused a monetary contraction and an extensive reversion to barter. The problem was met through smuggled, then legal, importation of Japanese silver, mostly through the Portuguese and Dutch, and Spanish silver from Potosí carried on the Manila galleons. Silver was required to pay provincial taxes in 1465, the salt tax in 1475, and corvée exemptions in 1485. By the late Ming, the amount of silver being used was extraordinary; at a time when English traders considered tens of thousands of pounds an exceptional fortune, the Zheng clan of merchants regularly engaged in transactions valued at millions of taels. However, a second silver contraction occurred in the mid-17th century when King Philip IV of Spain began enforcing laws limiting direct trade between Spanish South America and China at about the same time the new Tokugawa shogunate in Japan restricted most of its foreign exports, cutting off Dutch and Portuguese access to its silver. The dramatic spike in silver’s value in China made payment of taxes nearly impossible for most provinces. The government even resumed use of paper currency amid Li Zicheng’s rebellion.

Spring Morning in a Han Palace by Qiu Ying (1494–1552): Excessive luxury and decadence marked the late Ming
period, spurred by the enormous state bullion of incoming silver and by private transactions involving silver.

**Agriculture during the Ming Dynasty**

In order to recover from the rule of the Mongols and the wars that followed, the Hongwu Emperor enacted pro-agricultural policies. The state invested extensively in agricultural canals and reduced taxes on agriculture to 3.3% of the output, and later to 1.5%. Ming farmers also introduced many innovations such as water-powered plows, and new agricultural methods such as crop rotation. This led to a massive agricultural surplus that became the basis of a market economy.

The Ming saw the rise of commercial plantations that produced crops suitable to their regions. Tea, fruit, paint, and other goods were produced on a massive scale by these agricultural plantations. Regional patterns of production established during this period continued into the Qing dynasty. The Columbian exchange brought crops such as corn. Still, large numbers of peasants abandoned the land to become artisans. The population of the Ming boomed; estimates for the population of the Ming range from 160 to 200 million.

Agriculture during the Ming changed significantly. Firstly, gigantic areas devoted to cash crops sprung up, and there was demand for the crops in the new market economy. Secondly, agricultural tools and carts, some water powered, help to create a large agricultural surplus that formed the basis of the rural economy. Besides rice, other crops were grown on a large scale.

Although images of autarkic farmers who had no connection to the rest of China may have some merit for the earlier Han and Tang dynasties, this was certainly not the case for the Ming dynasty. During the Ming dynasty, the increase in population and the decrease in quality land made it necessary for farmers to make a living off cash crops. Markets for these crops appeared in the rural countryside, where goods were exchanged and bartered.

A second type of market that developed in China was the urban-rural type, in which rural goods were sold to urban dwellers. This was common when landlords decided to reside in the cities and use income from rural land holdings to facilitate exchange in those urban areas. Professional merchants used this type of market to buy rural goods in large quantities.

The third type of market was the “national market,” which was developed during the Song dynasty but particularly enhanced during the Ming. This market involved not only the exchanges described above, but also products produced directly for the market. Unlike earlier dynasties, many Ming peasants were no longer generating only products they needed; many of them produced goods for the market, which they then sold at a profit.

**Land Reform**

As the Hongwu Emperor came from a peasant family, he was aware of how peasants used to suffer under the oppression of the scholar-bureaucrats and the wealthy. Many of the latter, relying on their connections with government officials, encroached unscrupulously on peasants’ lands and bribed the officials to transfer the burden of taxation to the poor. To prevent such abuse, the Hongwu Emperor instituted two systems: Yellow Records and Fish Scale Records. These systems served both to secure the government’s income from land taxes and to affirm that peasants would not lose their lands.
However, the reforms did not eliminate the threat of the bureaucrats to peasants. Instead, the expansion of the bureaucrats and their growing prestige translated into more wealth and tax exemption for those in government service. The bureaucrats gained new privileges and some became illegal money-lenders and managers of gambling rings. Using their power, the bureaucrats expanded their estates at the expense of peasants’ land through outright purchase of those lands and foreclosure on their mortgages whenever they wanted the lands. The peasants often became either tenants or workers, or sought employment elsewhere.

Since the beginning of the Ming dynasty in 1357, great care was taken by the Hongwu Emperor to distribute land to peasants. One way was through forced migration to less dense areas; some people were tied to a pagoda tree in Hongdong and moved. Public works projects, such as the construction of irrigation systems and dikes, were undertaken in an attempt to help farmers. In addition, the Hongwu Emperor also reduced the demands for forced labour on the peasantry. In 1370, the Hongwu Emperor ordered that some lands in Hunan and Anhui should be given to young farmers who had reached adulthood. The order was intended to prevent landlords from seizing the land, as it also decreed that the titles to the lands were not transferable. During the middle part of his reign, the Hongwu Emperor passed an edict stating that those who brought fallow land under cultivation could keep it as their property without being taxed.

The Role of Foreign Trade

Trade during the Ming dynasty began slowly, with severe restrictions, especially toward Japan, but later expanded to markets around the world.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

Explain the significant role foreign trade played under Ming dynasty

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Key Points

- In the early Ming, after the devastation of the war that expelled the Mongols, the Hongwu Emperor imposed severe restrictions on trade, called the hajjin.
- The trade ban was completely counterproductive; by the 16th century, piracy and smuggling were widespread.
- After Hongwu Emperor’s death, most of his policies were reversed by his successors.
- After the Chinese banned direct trade with Japan, the Portuguese filled this commercial vacuum as intermediaries between China and Japan.
- Although the bulk of imports to China were silver, the Chinese also purchased New World crops from the Spanish Empire, many of which became staple crops.
- The thriving of trade and commerce was aided by the construction of canals, roads, and bridges by the Ming government.

Key Terms

- hajjin: A series of related isolationist Chinese policies restricting private maritime trade and coastal settlement during most of the Ming dynasty.
• **Matteo Ricci**: An Italian Jesuit priest and one of the founding figures of the Jesuit China missions. His 1602 map of the world in Chinese characters introduced the findings of European exploration to East Asia.

---

## Trade Restrictions

In the early Ming, after the devastation of the war that expelled the Mongols, the Hongwu Emperor imposed severe restrictions on trade (the “haijin” or “sea ban”). Believing that agriculture was the basis of the economy, Hongwu favored that industry over all else, including the merchant industry. Partly imposed to deal with Japanese piracy amid the mopping up of Yuan partisans, the sea ban was completely counterproductive; by the 16th century, piracy and smuggling were endemic and mostly consisted of Chinese who had been dispossessed by the policies. China’s foreign trade was limited to irregular and expensive tribute missions, and resistance to them among the Chinese bureaucracy led to the scrapping of Zheng He’s fleets. Piracy dropped to negligible levels only upon the ending of the policy in 1567.

After Hongwu Emperor’s death, most of his policies were reversed by his successors. By the late Ming, the state was losing power to the very merchants Hongwu had wanted to restrict.

---

![Japanese pirates](https://human.libretexts.org/Bookshelves/History/Book%3A_World_Civilizations_I/Chapter_15%3A_Chinese_Dynasties/15.4…
Updated: Sat, 07 Sep 2019 09:39:30 GMT
Powered by

---

## Trade Expands

After the Chinese banned direct trade with Japan, the Portuguese filled this commercial vacuum as intermediaries between China and Japan. The Portuguese bought Chinese silk and sold it to the Japanese in return for Japanese-
mined silver; since silver was more highly valued in China, the Portuguese could then use Japanese silver to buy even larger stocks of Chinese silk. However, by 1573—after the Spanish established a trading base in Manila—the Portuguese intermediary trade was trumped by the prime source of incoming silver to China from the Spanish Americas. Although it is unknown just how much silver flowed from the Philippines to China, it is known that the main port for the Mexican silver trade—Acapulco—shipped between 150,000 and 345,000 kg (4 to 9 million taels) of silver annually from 1597 to 1602.

Although the bulk of imports to China were silver, the Chinese also purchased New World crops from the Spanish Empire. This included sweet potatoes, maize, and peanuts, foods that could be cultivated in lands where traditional Chinese staple crops—wheat, millet, and rice—couldn’t grow, hence facilitating a rise in the population of China. In the Song dynasty (960–1279), rice had become the major staple crop of the poor; after sweet potatoes were introduced to China around 1560, they gradually became the traditional food of the lower classes. The Ming also imported many European firearms in order to ensure the modernness of their weapons.

The beginning of relations between the Spanish and Chinese were much warmer than when the Portuguese were first given a reception in China. In the Philippines, the Spanish defeated the fleet of the infamous Chinese pirate Limahong in 1575, an act greatly appreciated by the Ming admiral who had been sent to capture Limahong. In fact, the Chinese admiral invited the Spanish to board his vessel and travel back to China, beginning a trip that included two Spanish soldiers and two Christian friars eager to spread the faith. However, the friars returned to the Philippines after it became apparent that their preaching was unwelcome; Matteo Ricci would fare better in his trip of 1582. The Augustinian monk Juan Gonzáles de Mendoza wrote an influential work on China in 1585, remarking that the Ming dynasty was the best-governed kingdom he was aware of in the known world.

The thriving of trade and commerce was aided by the construction of canals, roads, and bridges by the Ming government. The Ming saw the rise of several merchant clans such as the Huai and Jin, who disposed of large amounts of wealth. The gentry and merchant classes started to fuse, and the merchants gained power at the expense of the state. Some merchants were reputed to have a treasure of 30 million taels.
Matteo Ricci map: Map of East Asia by the Italian Jesuit Matteo Ricci in 1602; Ricci (1552–1610) was the first European allowed into the Forbidden City. He taught the Chinese how to construct and play the spinet, translated Chinese texts into Latin and vice versa, and worked closely with his Chinese associate Xu Guangqi (1562–1633) on mathematical work.

Art under the Ming Dynasty

Literature, poetry, and painting flourished during the Ming dynasty, especially in the economically prosperous lower Yangtze valley.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

Describe some of the artwork characteristic of the Ming dynasty

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Key Points

- One major innovation during the Ming period was the vernacular novel, written in a form of Chinese readable to an audience much larger than the elite literati and incorporating themes outside the norms of Confucian court styles.
- Informal essays, travel writing, and private newspapers also thrived during the Ming period.
During the Ming, classical forms of painting continued, and new schools of painting flourished.

Well-known Ming artists could make a living simply by painting due to the high prices they charged for their artworks and the great demand by the highly cultured community to collect precious works of art.

The period was also renowned for ceramics and porcelains, which were sought around the world, and gave rise to many scammers and imitators.

**Key Terms**

- **vernacular**: The native language or native dialect of a specific population, especially as distinguished from a literary, national, or standard variety of the language.
- **calligraphy**: A visual art related to writing; the design and execution of lettering with a broad-tip brush, among other writing instruments.

**Literature and Poetry**

Short fiction had been popular in China as far back as the Tang dynasty (618–907), and the works of contemporaneous Ming authors such as Xu Guangqi, Xu Xiake, and Song Yingxing were often technical and encyclopedic, but the most striking literary development during the Ming period was the vernacular novel. While the gentry elite were educated enough to fully comprehend the language of classical Chinese, those with rudimentary educations—such as women in educated families, merchants, and shop clerks—became a large potential audience for literature and performing arts that employed vernacular Chinese. Literati scholars edited or developed major Chinese novels into mature form in this period, such as *Water Margin* and *Journey to the West*. *Jin Ping Mei*, published in 1610, though it incorporated earlier material, exemplifies the trend toward independent composition and concern with psychology. In the later years of the dynasty, Feng Menglong and Ling Mengchu innovated with vernacular short fiction. Theater scripts were equally imaginative. The most famous script, *The Peony Pavilion*, was written by Tang Xianzu (1550–1616), and had its first performance at the Pavilion of Prince Teng in 1598.

Informal essay and travel writing was another highlight of Ming literature. Xu Xiake (1587–1641), a travel literature author, published his *Travel Diaries* in 404,000 written characters, with information on everything from local geography to mineralogy. In contrast to Xu Xiake, who focused on technical aspects in his travel literature, the Chinese poet and official Yuan Hongdao (1568–1610) used travel literature to express his desires for individualism, as well as autonomy from and frustration with Confucian court politics. Yuan desired to free himself from the ethical compromises that were inseparable from the career of a scholar-official. This anti-official sentiment in Yuan’s travel literature and poetry was actually following in the tradition of the Song dynasty poet and official Su Shi (1037–1101). Yuan Hongdao and his two brothers, Yuan Zongdao (1560–1600) and Yuan Zhongdao (1570–1623), were the founders of the Gong’an School of letters. This highly individualistic school of poetry and prose was criticized by the Confucian establishment for its association with intense sensual lyricism, which was also apparent in Ming vernacular novels such as the *Jin Ping Mei*. Yet even the gentry and scholar-officials were affected by the new popular romantic literature, seeking courtesans as soulmates to reenact the heroic love stories that arranged marriages often could not provide or accommodate.

The first reference to the publishing of private newspapers in Beijing was in 1582; by 1638 the *Beijing Gazette* switched from using woodblock print to movable type printing. The new literary field of the moral guide to business ethics was developed during the late Ming period for the readership of the merchant class.
Painting

Famous painters included Ni Zan and Dong Qichang, as well as the Four Masters of the Ming dynasty, Shen Zhou, Tang Yin, Wen Zhengming, and Qiu Ying. They drew upon the techniques, styles, and complexity in painting achieved by their Song and Yuan predecessors, but added techniques and styles. Well-known Ming artists could make a living simply by painting due to the high prices they charged for their artworks and the great demand by the highly cultured community to collect precious works of art. The artist Qiu Ying was once paid 100 oz of silver to paint a long hand-scroll for the eightieth birthday celebration of the mother of a wealthy patron. Renowned artists often gathered an entourage of followers, some who were amateurs who painted while pursuing an official career, and others who were full-time painters.

The painting techniques that were invented and developed before the Ming period became classical during it. More colors were used in painting during the Ming dynasty; seal brown became much more widely used, and even over-used. Many new painting skills and techniques were innovated and developed; calligraphy was much more closely and perfectly combined with the art of painting. Chinese painting reached another climax in the mid- and late-Ming. Painting was derived in a broad scale, many new schools were born, and many outstanding masters emerged.

![Chen Hongshou painting from the Ming period](https://human.libretexts.org/Bookshelves/History/Book%3A_World_Civilizations_I/Chapter_15%3A_Chinese_Dynasties/15.4…)  
Chen Hongshou painting from the Ming period: Painting of flowers, a butterfly, and rock sculpture by Chen Hongshou (1598–1652); small leaf album paintings like this one first became popular in the Song dynasty.

Pottery

The period was also renowned for ceramics and porcelains. The major production centers for porcelain were the imperial kilns at Jingdezhen in Jiangxi province and Dehua in Fujian province. The Dehua porcelain factories catered to European tastes by creating Chinese export porcelain by the 16th century. Individual potters also became known, such
as He Chaozong, who became famous in the early 17th century for his style of white porcelain sculpture. The ceramic trade thrived in Asia; Chuimei Ho estimates that about 16% of late Ming era Chinese ceramic exports were sent to Europe, while the rest were destined for Japan and South East Asia.

Carved designs in lacquerware and designs glazed onto porcelain wares displayed intricate scenes similar in complexity to those in painting. These items could be found in the homes of the wealthy, alongside embroidered silks and wares in jade, ivory, and cloisonné. The houses of the rich were also furnished with rosewood furniture and feathery latticework. The writing materials in a scholar's private study, including elaborately carved brush holders made of stone or wood, were designed and arranged ritually to give an aesthetic appeal.

Connoisseurship in the late Ming period centered on these items of refined artistic taste, which provided work for art dealers and even underground scammers who themselves made imitations and false attributions. The Jesuit Matteo Ricci, while staying in Nanjing, wrote that Chinese scam artists were ingenious at making forgeries and thus huge profits. However, there were guides to help the wary new connoisseurs; Liu Tong (d. 1637) wrote a book printed in 1635 that told his readers how to spot fake and authentic pieces of art. He revealed that a Xuande-era (1426–1435) bronzework could be authenticated by judging its sheen; porcelain wares from the Yongle era (1402–1424) could be judged authentic by their thickness.

**Fall of the Ming Dynasty**

The fall of the Ming dynasty was caused by a combination of factors, including an economic disaster due to lack of silver, a series of natural disasters, peasant uprisings, and finally attacks by the Manchu people.

**LEARNING OBJECTIVES**
Explain why the Ming dynasty eventually fell from power

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Key Points

• During the last years of the Wanli Emperor’s reign and the reigns of his two successors, an economic crisis developed that was centered around a sudden widespread lack of the empire’s chief medium of exchange: silver.

• In this early half of the 17th century, famines became common in northern China, and the central government did little to relieve the populations, leading to widespread discontent among the people.

• The Manchu, formerly called the Jurchen people, rose to power under the leadership of a tribal leader named Nurhaci, who commissioned a document titled the Seven Grievances, essentially a declaration of war against the Ming.

• Peasant and soldier uprising under the leadership of Li Zicheng weakened the government and army of the Ming.

• The last Ming emperor, the Chongzhen Emperor, hanged himself on a tree in the imperial garden outside the Forbidden City.

• Li Zicheng, who had attempted to start a new Shun dynasty, was eventually defeated by the Manchu army, who founded the Qing dynasty.

Key Terms

• **Forbidden City**: The Chinese imperial palace from the Ming dynasty to the end of the Qing dynasty—the years 1420 to 1912—in Beijing.

• **Manchu**: A Chinese ethnic minority, formerly the Jurchen people, who founded the Qing dynasty.

• **Wanli Emperor**: The 13th emperor of the Ming dynasty of China; his reign of forty-eight years (1572–1620) was the longest of the Ming dynasty, and it witnessed the steady decline of the dynasty.

Economic Breakdown

During the last years of the Wanli Emperor’s reign and the reigns of his two successors, an economic crisis developed that was centered around a sudden widespread lack of the empire’s chief medium of exchange: silver. The Protestant powers of the Dutch Republic and the Kingdom of England were staging frequent raids and acts of piracy against the Catholic-based empires of Spain and Portugal in order to weaken their global economic power. Meanwhile, Philip IV of Spain (r. 1621–1665) began cracking down on illegal smuggling of silver from Mexico and Peru across the Pacific towards China, in favor of shipping American-mined silver directly from Spain to Manila. In 1639, the new Tokugawa regime of Japan shut down most of its foreign trade with European powers, causing a halt of yet another source of silver coming into China. However, while Japanese silver still came into China in limited amounts, the greatest stunt to the flow of silver came from the Americas.

These events occurring at roughly the same time caused a dramatic spike in the value of silver and made paying taxes nearly impossible for most provinces. People began hoarding precious silver, forcing the ratio of the value of copper to silver into a steep decline. In the 1630s, a string of one thousand copper coins was worth an ounce of silver; by 1640 it was reduced to the value of half an ounce; by 1643 it was worth roughly one-third of an ounce. For peasants this was an economic disaster, since they paid taxes in silver while conducting local trade and selling their crops with copper coins.
Natural Disasters

In this early half of the 17th century, famines became common in northern China because of unusual dry and cold weather that shortened the growing season; these were effects of a larger ecological event now known as the Little Ice Age. Famine, alongside tax increases, widespread military desertions, a declining relief system, natural disasters such as flooding, and the inability of the government to properly manage irrigation and flood-control projects, caused widespread loss of life and normal civility. The central government was starved of resources and could do very little to mitigate the effects of these calamities. Making matters worse, a widespread epidemic spread across China from Zhejiang to Henan, killing a large but unknown number of people. The famine and drought in the late 1620s and the 1630s contributed to the rebellions that broke out in Shaanxi led by rebel leaders such as Li Zicheng and Zhang Xianzhong.

The Qing Conquest of Ming: Rebellion, Invasion, Collapse

The Qing conquest of the Ming was a period of conflict between the Qing dynasty, established by the Manchu clan Aisin Gioro in Manchuria (contemporary Northeastern China), and the ruling Ming dynasty of China. The Manchu, formerly called the Jurchen people, had risen to power under the leadership of a tribal leader named Nurhaci. Leading up to the Qing conquest, in 1618 Nurhaci commissioned a document titled the Seven Grievances, which enumerated resentments against the Ming and bespoke rebellion against their domination. Many of the grievances dealt with conflicts against Yehe, which was a major Manchu clan, and Ming favoritism of Yehe. Nurhaci’s demand that the Ming pay tribute to him to redress the Seven Grievances was effectively a declaration of war, as the Ming were not willing to pay money to a former tributary. Shortly afterwards, Nurhaci began to force the Ming out of Liaoning in southern Manchuria.
Nurhaci of the Manchu: Nurhaci’s conquest of Ming China’s northeastern Liaoning province laid the groundwork for the conquest of the rest of China by his descendants, who founded the Qing dynasty in 1644.

At the same time, the Ming dynasty was fighting for its survival against fiscal turmoil and peasant rebellions. In 1640, masses of Chinese peasants who were starving, unable to pay their taxes, and no longer in fear of the frequently defeated Chinese army, began to form into huge bands of rebels. The Chinese military, caught between fruitless efforts to defeat the Manchu raiders from the north and huge peasant revolts in the provinces, essentially fell apart. On April 24, 1644, Beijing fell to a rebel army led by Li Zicheng, a former minor Ming official who became the leader of the peasant revolt and then proclaimed the Shun dynasty. The last Ming emperor, the Chongzhen Emperor, hanged himself on a tree in the imperial garden outside the Forbidden City. When Li Zicheng moved against him, the Ming general Wu Sangui shifted his alliance to the Manchus. Li Zicheng was defeated at the Battle of Shanhai Pass by the joint forces of Wu Sangui and the Manchu Prince Dorgon. On June 6, the Manchus and Wu entered the capital and proclaimed the young Shunzhi Emperor as Emperor of China.
The Kangxi Emperor ascended the throne in 1661, and in 1662 his regents launched the Great Clearance to defeat the resistance of Ming loyalists in South China. He fought off several rebellions, such as the Revolt of the Three Feudatories led by Wu Sangui in southern China starting in 1673, and then countered by launching a series of campaigns that expanded his empire. In 1662, Zheng Chenggong founded the Kingdom of Tungning in Taiwan, a pro-Ming dynasty state with a goal of reconquering China. However, the Kingdom of Tungning was defeated in the Battle of Penghu by Han Chinese admiral Shi Lang, who had also served under the Ming.

The fall of the Ming dynasty was caused by a combination of factors. Kenneth Swope argues that one key factor was deteriorating relations between Ming royalty and the Ming empire’s military leadership. Other factors include repeated military expeditions to the North, inflationary pressures caused by spending too much from the imperial treasury, natural disasters, and epidemics of disease. Contributing further to the chaos was the peasant rebellion in Beijing in 1644 and a series of weak emperors. Ming power would hold out in what is now southern China for years, but eventually would be overtaken by the Manchus.