11.14: Rise of the Ming Dynasty

Learning Objective

- Describe the origins and rise of the Ming dynasty

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.

Terms

**White Lotus Society**

A Buddhist secret society associated with the Red Turban Rebellion.
Zhu Yuanzhang

A poor peasant who rose through the ranks of a rebel army and later founded the Ming dynasty.

Overview

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.

Sources

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