CHAPTER FOURTEEN

The Ming Empire in China (1368–1644)

The Ming Dynasty was founded by a man who lived through the disorder of the late Yuan and knew poverty firsthand. His efforts to impose order on Chinese society sometimes took draconian forms, but his thirty-year reign brought China peace and stability. Although he and some of his successors treated officials cruelly, in time competition to join officialdom surpassed Song levels. Literati culture was especially vibrant in the economically well-developed Jiangnan region, south of the lower Yangzi River. As population increased, both rural and urban areas took on distinctive traits. Rural areas differed greatly by region, with powerful lineages, tenantry, and absentee landlords much more common in some areas than in others. The merchant-centered culture of cities found expression in vernacular fiction and drama, published in increasing quantity and accessible even to those with rudimentary educations.

Because the Ming Dynasty was succeeded by a non-Chinese conquest dynasty (the Qing [ching] Dynasty of the Manchus, 1644–1911), the Ming was the last of the native dynasties. Historians have therefore often turned to it for a baseline against which modern change has been judged. How did China compare to Western Europe in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries? Had China already begun to fall behind Western Europe in technology, standard of living, or pace of change? At the local level, were communities becoming more integrated into the realm as standardizing policies and economic linkages spread? Or were they becoming more diverse as the economy developed in different directions in different places? A related set of questions concerns the government and the educated elite. How effective and how adaptable was the government? Why did educated men continue to seek office when the government so often treated them poorly? What was the impact on the educated class of the changes in the examination system and the explosion of printing?

THE FOUNDING OF THE MING DYNASTY

The founder of the Ming Dynasty, Zhu Yuanzhang (joo ywan-jahng) (1328–1398), started life at the bottom of society. His parents often moved to look for work or evade rent collectors. His home region in Anhui (ahn-hway) province was hit by drought and then plague in the 1340s, and when he was only sixteen years old, his father, oldest brother, and brother's wife all died, leaving two penniless boys with three bodies to bury. A neighbor let them bury them in his field, but they had no way to provide coffins or anything to eat. With no relatives to turn to, Zhu Yuanzhang asked a monastery to take him on as a novice. The monastery was short of funds itself because its tenants could not pay their rent, and in less than two months, Zhu was sent out to beg for food. For the next three to four years, he traveled widely through central China. Not until he returned to the monastery did he learn to read.

A few years later, in 1351, a millenarian sect known as the Red Turbans rose in rebellion. The Red Turbans were affiliated with the White Lotus Society, whose teachings drew on two distinct traditions. One was Manichaeism and its idea of the incompatibility of the forces of good and evil. The other was the cult of the Maitreya Buddha, who would in the future bring his paradise to earth to relieve human suffering. The Red Turbans met with considerable success, even defeating Mongol cavalry. In the course of fighting the rebels, the Yuan government troops burned down Zhu Yuanzhang's temple. Zhu, then twenty-four, joined the rebels. The leaders of the Red Turbans were men of modest origins, and Zhu Yuanzhang rose quickly among them. One of the commanders let Zhu marry his daughter. Within a couple of years, Zhu had between twenty thousand and thirty thousand men fighting under him.

At this time there were strongmen all over China—some rebels, some loyal to the Yuan, but all trying to maintain control of a local base. Zhu quickly attracted literati advisers who thought he had a chance to be the final victor and hoped to help shape his government. They encouraged him to gradually distance himself from the Red Turbans, whose millenarian beliefs did not appeal to the educated elite. In 1356, Zhu took Nanjing, made it his base, and tried to win over the local population by disciplining his soldiers.

Many of Zhu's followers developed into brilliant generals, and gradually they defeated one rival after another. In 1368 his armies took the Yuan capital (which the Yuan emperor and his closest followers had vacated just days before). Then forty years old, Zhu Yuanzhang declared himself emperor of the Ming Dynasty. The word *ming*, meaning "bright," resonated with the Manichaean strain in Red Turban ideology. His first reign period he called Hongwu (hung-woo, "abundantly martial"), and because he did not introduce a new reign period for the rest of his thirty-year reign, he is often referred to as the Hongwu emperor. It became the custom from this point on for emperors not to change their reign period names. Zhu Yuanzhang's posthumous temple name (the name used in the sacrifices to him after his death) is Taizu (ty-dzoo), so he is also called Ming Taizu.

Ming Taizu, the Hongwu Emperor

In the milieu in which Taizu grew up, the deities in Daoist temples labeled "emperors," such as the Yellow Emperor and the Emperor of the Eastern Peak, provided a folk image of imperial rule. The Hongwu emperor seems to have taken these divine autocrats as his model and did everything he could to elevate the position of emperor to their level. He required his officials to kneel when addressing him, and he did not hesitate to have them beaten in open court. He issued instructions to be read aloud to villagers, telling them to be filial to their parents, live in harmony with their neighbors, work contentedly at their occupations, and refrain from evil.

Taizu wanted a world in which people obeyed their superiors and bad deeds were promptly punished. In order to lighten the weight of government exactions on the poor, he ordered a full-scale registration of cultivated land and population so that labor service and tax obligations could be assessed more fairly. Taizu called for the drafting of a new law code and took it through five revisions. He had legal experts compare every statute in it to the Tang code in his presence, but he made the final decisions.

Some Yuan practices Taizu retained. One was the strengthening of the provinces as the administrative layer between the central government and the prefectures. The creation of provinces should not be viewed as a decentralization of power, but instead as a way for the central government to increase its supervision of the prefectures and counties. Another Yuan practice that the Hongwu emperor retained was use of hereditary service obligations for artisan households that had to supply the palace or government

as their tax obligation. The army too made use of hereditary households. Centuries earlier, during the Northern and Southern Dynasties, armies composed of men with inherited obligations to serve had been common. Among the non-Chinese in the north, the status was an honorable one, but in the south, the status became despised. In the Tang, the divisional militia, with its hereditary obligations, had worked well for a half-century, but then it was supplanted by recruited professional armies, a practice the Song retained. The Mongols, however, made military service a hereditary obligation as they did so much else, and the Ming took over this practice.

Under the Hongwu emperor, the Ming army reached 1 million soldiers, drawn from the armies that had fought for control of China as well as some conscripts and some convicts. Once a family had been classed as a military household, it was responsible for supplying one soldier in succession, replacing soldiers who were injured, who died, or who deserted. Garrisons were concentrated along the northern border and near the capital; each garrison allocated a tract of land that the soldiers took turns cultivating to supply their own food, a system that had been repeatedly tried since the Han Dynasty. Although in theory this system should have supplied the Ming with a large but inexpensive army, the reality was less satisfactory. Just as in earlier dynasties, garrisons were rarely self-sufficient, men compelled to become soldiers did not necessarily make good fighting men, and desertion was difficult to prevent.

Many of the soldiers in the Ming army were Mongols in Mongol units. Although anti-Mongol sentiment was strong among the rebels, Taizu recognized that the Yuan Dynasty had had the Mandate of Heaven and told Mongols that they would be welcome in his dynasty: "Those Mongols and Inner Asians who live on our land also are our children, and those among them who possess talent and ability also shall be selected and appointed to office by us."* Taizu did not try to conquer the Mongols, and Ming China did not extend into modern Inner Mongolia or Central Asia. Where it did expand was to the southwest. In the 1380s, Ming took control of modern Yunnan and created the new province of Guizhou east of it.

Taizu had twenty-six sons, several in their teens by the time he became emperor, and he took measures to see that they and their descendants would not interfere in the government. The princes were sent out of the capital to fiefs, and Taizu issued rules that they and their descendants were not to take examinations, serve in office, or follow any sort of career other than specified military assignments. They were to live outside the capital, supported by government stipends.

Taizu had deeply ambivalent feelings about men of education and sometimes brutally humiliated them in open court. His behavior was so erratic that most likely he suffered from some form of mental illness. In 1376, Taizu had thousands of officials killed because they were found to have taken a shortcut in their handling of paperwork related to the grain tax. In 1380, Taizu concluded that his chancellor, Hu Weiyong (hoo way-yung), was plotting to assassinate him. Anyone remotely connected to Hu was executed, the investigations taking nearly a decade, with as many as fifteen thousand people losing their lives. From 1380 on, the Hongwu emperor acted as his own chancellor, dealing directly with the heads of departments and ministries.

As Taizu became more literate, he realized that scholars could criticize him in covert ways, using phrases that had double meanings or that sounded like words for "bandit," "monk," or the like. Even poems in private circulation could be used as evidence of subversive intent. When literary men began to avoid official life, Taizu made it illegal to turn down appointments or resign from office. He began falling into rages that only his wife, Empress Ma, could stop. After her death in 1382, no one could calm him.

Chengzu, the Yongle Emperor

Taizu lived a long life, to seventy-one *sui*, outliving his eldest son, who had been his heir apparent. He made that son's eldest son the next heir, and this grandson, known as Huidi (hway-dee), succeeded to the throne at the age of twenty-one. Almost immediately, however, the eldest of Taizu's surviving sons by the empress, a man known then as the Prince of Yan, launched a military campaign to take the throne himself. After a three-year civil war, he prevailed. He is known as Chengzu (chuhng-dzoo), or the Yongle (yung-luh) emperor (r. 1403–1425).

Chengzu was a military man like his father, and he was married to the daughter of a leading general, who encouraged his military interests. He directed the civil war himself and often led troops into battle,

*Cited in F. W. Mote, *Imperial China, 900–1800* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999), p. 560.

leading to victories over the Mongols. In 1406 he authorized a major expedition into Vietnam, which had been independent for more than four centuries. Although the campaign was a success, the region was held for only two decades. Also like his father, Chengzu was willing to use terror to keep government officials in line. Quite a few officials serving Huidi resisted his usurpation. When the leading Confucian scholar, Fang Xiaoru (fahng shyow-roo), refused to draft the proclamation of his accession, Chengzu not only had him executed by dismemberment but had his relatives and associates to the tenth degree executed as well, including all those who had been passed when he conducted the civil service examinations. Tens of thousands were killed.

Yet the Yongle emperor also had impressive accomplishments. He put two thousand scholars to work making a fifty-million-word (22,938-chapter) compendium of knowledge drawn from seven thousand books (the *Yongle Encyclopedia*). To assist those studying for the civil service examinations, he had a selection of texts from the Cheng-Zhu school of Confucianism compiled. He expanded and regularized the court diplomatic system.

Early in his reign, Chengzu decided to move the capital from Nanjing to Beijing, which had been his own base as a prince as well as the capital during Yuan times. Construction employed hundreds of thousands of workers and lasted from 1407 to 1420. Although little of the original city walls and gates survives today, the palace complex remains, its layout and architecture still reflecting the fifteenth-century design. The city was a planned city, like Chang'an in Sui-Tang times, built near the site of the Yuan capital, but starting afresh. Like Chang'an, it was built on a north–south axis and consisted of boxes within boxes. The main outer walls were forty feet high and nearly fifteen miles around, pierced by nine gates. Inside it was the Imperial City, with government offices, and within that the Forbidden City, the palace itself, with close to ten thousand rooms. The main audience halls were arranged along the central axis, with vast courtyards between them where attending officials would stand or kneel. The design, as intended, awes all who enter.

The areas surrounding Beijing were not nearly as agriculturally productive as those around Nanjing. To supply Beijing with grain, the Grand Canal was extensively renovated, broadening and deepening it and supplying it with more locks and dams. The fifteen thousand boats and 160,000 soldiers of the transport army, who pulled loaded barges from the tow paths along the canal, became the lifeline of the capital.

Weaknesses of the Imperial Institution

Ming Taizu had decreed that succession should go to the eldest son of the empress, or the latter's eldest son if he predeceased his father, the system generally, but not inflexibly, followed by earlier dynasties. In Ming times, the flaws in this system became apparent as one mediocre, obtuse, or erratic emperor followed another. Yingzong (ying-dzung) (r. 1436–1450), who came to the throne at age eight, liked to play soldier; with the encouragement of his favorite eunuch, he led an army against the Mongols when he was twenty-one years old, resulting in the destruction of his fifty-thousand-man army and his own capture. The Mongols found him so useless that they returned him the next year, after his brother had been enthroned. Xianzong (shyen-dzung) (r. 1465–1488), after coming to the throne at age sixteen, let himself be manipulated by a palace lady almost twenty years his senior; she had his children born to other women systematically killed. Wuzong (r. 1505–1521) willfully defied established practices and spent much of his time drunk. Shizong (r. 1522–1567) refused to treat his predecessor as his adoptive father. Subject to fits of rage, he was so cruel to his palace ladies that a group of them tried to murder him in 1542. In 1565 the brave official Hai Rui (hy ray) submitted a memorial saying that the emperor had failed as a man, a father, and a ruler and had been a disaster for the country. Shenzong, the Wanli (wahn-lee) emperor (r. 1573–1620), was intelligent but refused to hold court for years at a time and allowed memorials to pile up unopened and vacancies to go unfilled.

Because Ming Taizu had abolished the position of chancellor, the emperor had to turn to members of the inner court to help him. At first, relatively junior men in the Hanlin Academy served as secretaries, a practice that became regularized as a kind of cabinet of grand secretaries. Although they were given concurrent titles as vice ministers to enhance their standing, their lack of actual administrative experience hampered their dealings with the outer court. Added to this, they had to work with the eunuchs to manage the flow of paperwork, and some of the stigma attached to eunuchs spilled over to them.

Eunuchs became as serious a problem in Ming times as they had in late Han and late Tang.

rulers, transmit messages of China's peaceful intentions, and bestow lavish gifts. Beginning with the third voyage, rulers invited to come to China or send envoys were offered passage.

Besides envoys, Zheng He brought back exotic animals and goods likely to delight the emperor, including giraffes and lions from Africa, fine cotton cloth from India, and gems and spices from Southeast Asia. Another Muslim who accompanied him on three of his voyages, Ma Huan, wrote a book-length account of the places they visited that gave details about their geography, politics, climate, economy, and local customs.

Why were these voyages abandoned? One likely reason is that they did not bring much of a return. Officials complained of the cost of the expeditions, which they saw as wasteful. Another possibility is that they had special appeal to the Yongle emperor, who died in 1424 after the sixth expedition. The next two emperors had other priorities, including dealing with the rising power of the Mongols. Zheng He did get to make one final journey after his patron's death, in 1430–1433, but he died during it. Thereafter the boats sat in harbor. Four decades later, in 1474, all the remaining ships with three or more masts were broken up and used for lumber.

Not long after the destruction of Zheng He's fleet, the more modest expeditions of Vasco da Gama and Christopher Columbus changed the course of world history (see **Connections: Europe Enters the Scene**).

The Mongols and the Great Wall

The early Ming emperors held Mongol fighting men in awe and saw in them the potential for another great military machine of the sort Chinggis had put together. Both Taizu and Chengzu were determined to avoid the fate of the Song Dynasty, which had to pay off its powerful northern neighbors. Both emperors personally led armies into Mongolia. Chengzu, in fact, died on his fifth campaign in 1424, at age sixty-four.

As it turned out, the Mongols in Ming times never formed the sort of federation that could have seriously threatened China. After he retreated to Mongolia, the last Yuan emperor did not find it easy to keep the Mongols united under his leadership because his loss of China discredited him. Ensuing Mongol civil wars weakened Mongolia and led to division. Through much of the Ming, the 3 million or so Mongols were loosely divided into six groups, located in today's Inner Mongolia, Manchuria, and Mongolia, or north of those areas. Under Taizu and Chengzu, the Ming sent large and well-provisioned armies into Mongol territory, with as many as 250,000 troops. Such campaigns were extremely expensive and did not accomplish much, given the Mongols' mobility. Later in the dynasty, the Ming was less inclined to send armies into Mongolia and concentrated on defending its borders against attack.

Although in Ming times, the Mongols were never united in a pan-Mongol federation, groups of Mongols could and did raid, and twice they threatened the dynasty: in 1449, when Esen, the khan of the Western Mongols, captured the emperor, and in 1550, when Beijing was surrounded by the forces of Altan Khan, khan of the Mongols in Inner Mongolia. The Ming was very reluctant to grant any privileges to Mongol leaders, such as trading posts along the borders, and wanted the different groups of Mongols to trade only through the envoy system. Repeatedly Mongol envoys said friction could be reduced if regularized trade could be introduced, but until 1570, when an agreement was reached with Altan Khan, the Ming court refused.

Two important developments shaped later Ming–Mongol relations: the building of the Great Wall and the Mongols' forging of close ties with Tibetan Buddhism. Work on the wall began by the mid-fifteenth century, when administrators of the western sections of the border began connecting principal garrison points and had some successes in trapping contingents of Mongol cavalry. Extending the wall was later seen as a solution to the deadlock between officials who argued that the Mongols could be managed by allowing more trade and those who insisted that no concessions be made to them.

Much of the Ming Great Wall survives today. It is about 1,500 miles long, from northeast of Beijing into Gansu province. In the eastern 500 miles, the walls average about 35 feet high and 20 feet across, with towers every half-mile for lookouts. The wall itself is faced with brick much of the way, giving it an imposing appearance that greatly impressed the first Westerners who saw it.

Although there was considerable trade between Tibet and China through Sichuan (sih-chwan) and Yunnan, Ming China did not have close diplomatic

ties to Tibet, then largely ruled by the major monasteries. When Tibetan monasteries needed military assistance, they called for help from competing Mongol leaders, and many struggles were decided by Mongol military intervention. Tsong-kha-pa (1357–1419) founded the Yellow Hat or Gelug-pa sect, whose heads later became known as the Dalai Lamas. In 1577 the third Dalai Lama accepted the invitation of Altan Khan to visit Mongolia, and the khan declared Tibetan Buddhism to be the official religion of all the Mongols. The Dalai Lama gave the khan the title "King of Religion," and the khan swore that the Mongols would renounce blood sacrifice. When the third Dalai Lama's reincarnation was found to be the great-grandson of Altan Khan, the ties between Tibet and the Mongols, not surprisingly, became even stronger.

Trade and Piracy Along China's Coasts

The Ming court's obsession with defending against the Mongols was not because its other borders posed no problems. The court wanted trade subordinated to diplomacy and stipulated that envoys from the Philippines were supposed to enter only through the port of Fuzhou, those from Japan only through Ningbo, those from Indonesia only through Guangzhou, and so on. Moreover, the size and frequency of missions was restricted; Japanese embassies, for instance, were not to call more than once in ten years or bring more than two ships with three hundred men. In the sixteenth century, this formal system proved unable to contain the emergence of an international East Asian maritime trading community composed of Japanese, Portuguese, Spanish, Dutch, and Chinese merchants and adventurers. Because the profits to be had from maritime trade were high, both open and clandestine trade took place all along the coast.

Boats leaving China carried silk and porcelains; those entering it brought silver from Peruvian and Mexican mines, transported via Manila, to pay for the Chinese goods. Boats laden with goods attracted pirates. Pirates grew so strong that they took to raiding the coast from Shandong to Guangzhou. Instead of trying to suppress the pirates by expanding its navy, the Ming government forced people to move away from the coast, hoping to starve out the pirates. Anti-pirate efforts did not have much success until maritime trade restrictions were eased in the late sixteenth century. Under the new policies, Portugal was permitted to set up a trading base at Macao in 1557, which it held until 1999.

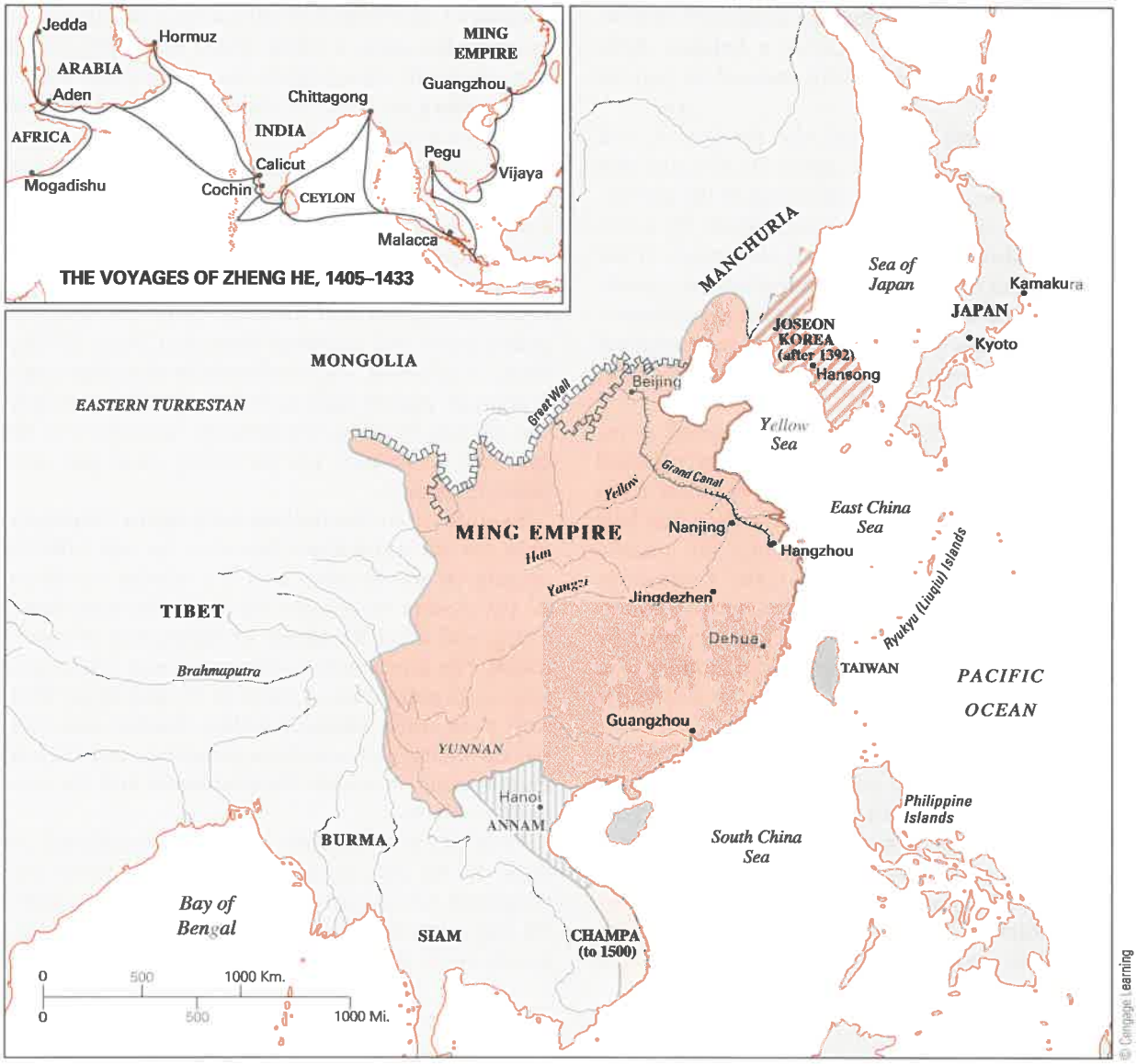
Besides stimulating the Ming economy, the expansion of maritime trade brought New World crops to China. Sweet potatoes, maize, peanuts, tomatoes, chili peppers, tobacco, and other crops were quickly introduced into China. Sweet potatoes and maize in particular facilitated population growth because they could be grown on land that had not been cultivated because it was too sandy or too steep. Spanish and Portuguese ships also began to bring missionaries with radically different sets of ideas about the nature of the world.

SOCIAL AND CULTURAL TRENDS

During the first half of the Ming, as China recovered from the wars and dislocations of the Yuan period, attempts were made to stabilize society. By the sixteenth century, however, Chinese society and culture were breaking free of many of the restraints that the early Ming government had tried to impose on them, and social and cultural change sped up.

The Educated Class and the Examination Life

Despite the harsh and arbitrary ways in which Ming emperors treated their civil servants, educated men were as eager to enter the bureaucracy as in earlier ages. As discussed in Chapter 12, civil service examinations played only a very small part in the recruitment of officials during the Yuan period. In Ming times, the examinations more than regained their significance as the most prestigious way to enter government service. To a greater degree than in Tang or Song times, the Ming examination system created a nationwide culture for all those who participated. All had to learn to write in the approved "eight-legged" style, which emphasized reasoning by analogy and pairing statements. The orthodoxy of Zhu Xi's teachings was an integral part of the Ming system. All had to study the Four Books and Zhu Xi's interpretations of them. Because Zhu Xi considered writing poetry of no value to moral cultivation, the poetic composition component of the examinations was dropped.



Map 14.1 The Ming Empire

Another new feature of the Ming examination system was a screening test taken at the province level, adding to the number of tests a successful candidate would eventually have to pass. There were thus three principal degrees: the *shengyuan* (shuhng-ywan), at the county or prefectural level; the *juren* (jyu-run), at the province level; and the *jinshi*, those selected at the capital examination and confirmed at the palace examination. Fewer men made it to the top in Ming times than in Song times. In contrast to the 135 *jinshi* per year in Southern Song plus the 149 per year given at the same time by the Jin, the Ming average was only 89 per year.

Another difference between the Song and Ming systems was that the Ming made a more concerted effort to ensure that the wealthy and cultured Jiangnan area did not dominate the examination results. Quotas were established for the number of candidates each province could send on to the capital. In 1397 all of those passed at the palace examination were southerners, leading Taizu to execute two of the examiners. Taizu retested everyone and passed

only northerners. Thereafter, the examiners considered regional origin and tried for a balance. After 1427, northern candidates were ensured 35 percent of the places.

The lowest degree holders, the *shengyuan*, had to pass tests periodically to retain their status and compete for the privilege of traveling to the provincial capital to take the *juren* examination. By 1500, there were about thirty thousand *shengyuan* in the country (about one in three thousand people, counting women and children). Because only a small number of the *shengyuan* became *juren* in each triennial exam, taking exams became a way of life for most degree holders.

Preparation for the examinations required, in essence, learning a different language—the classical written language, which was quite different from everyday spoken language. Education thus was best started young. Moreover, the young are usually more adept at memorizing long texts, a necessary part of examination preparation. Calligraphy counted at this level because tests were not recopied by clerks until the provincial level. Literati families who started to teach their sons at age four or five had a significant advantage.

As in earlier periods, well-off families hired tutors for their boys, but schools became more and more available in Ming times. Families that for generations had pursued other careers, such as physician or merchant, had more opportunities than ever before to attain success through the exams (see **Biography: Tan Yunxian, Woman Doctor**). Lineages were especially active in setting up and sometimes endowing schools for their members. Because the lineage as a whole would enjoy the prestige that came with examination success, lineage leaders were willing to invest in the education of any talented boy in the lineage.

The provincial and capital examinations had three sessions spread out over a week and involved a series of essays. In the first session, the essays were on passages from the Four Books and the classic of the candidate's choice. In the second and third sessions, candidates had to write essays on practical policy issues and a passage from the *Classic of Filial Piety*. In addition, they had to show that they could draft state papers such as edicts, decrees, and judicial rulings. Reading the dynastic histories was the best way to prepare for the policy issue and state paper questions.

Examinations themselves were major events not only for the candidates but also for the officials serving in the locality and for nearby residents. At the county or prefectural level, the tests lasted a day and drew hundreds or thousands of candidates. The government compound was taken over to give all candidates a place to sit and write. Outside were stalls selling supplies, friends and relatives pressing gifts on those entering, and curious people eager to watch the examiners and the candidates file in.

Even more elaborate were the weeklong affairs of the provincial examinations. From five thousand to ten thousand candidates descended on the city and filled up its hostels. Candidates would show up a week in advance to present their

Ming Examination Degrees

Degree	How Attained	Benefits	Likely Age	Likely Percentage Passed
Shengyuan	Pass test to enter county or prefecture school	Exempt from labor service; may take test to qualify for provincial exams; need to recertify regularly	17–30	Highly variable
Juren	Pass provincial examinations	Permanently qualified to take capital examinations; may receive less-desired appointments	20–30	2–4%
Jinshi	Pass capital and palace examinations	Qualified for entry-level official appointment	30–40	7–9%

Courtesy, Dr. Stefan Meierhofer, Munchen, Germany

Examination Cells. The spare cells that candidates occupied during the three days of the examination were furnished only with two boards, which could be arranged to make a bed or a desk and seat.

credentials and gather the needed paper, ink, brushes, candles, blankets, and food they would need to survive in their small exam cells. Each cell was open in the front, to allow guards to watch the candidate, and was bare except for two shelves, which could be arranged together to make a bed or set at different levels to form a seat and a table to write on.

Candidates were searched before being admitted because no written material could be taken into the cells. Anyone caught wearing a cheat-sheet (an inner gown covered with the classics in minuscule script) was thrown out of the exams and banned from the next session; he might also lose his status as *shengyuan*. Each exam had three two-day sessions. Clerks used horns and gongs to begin and end each session. Candidates had time to write rough drafts of their essays, correct them, then copy final versions in neat, regular script. Tension was high. Sometimes rumors that the examiners had been bribed to leak the questions led to riots in the exam quarters, and knocked-over candles occasionally caused fires.

After the papers were handed in, clerks recopied them and assigned them numbers to preserve anonymity. Proofreaders checked the copying before handing them on to the assembled examiners, who divided them up to read. The grading generally took about twenty days. Most candidates stayed in the provincial capital to await the results. Those few who became the new *juren* would be invited to the governor's compound for a celebration. By the time they reached home, most of their friends, neighbors, and relatives would have already heard their good news.

Wang Yangming's Challenge to Confucian Orthodoxy

One might have thought that the intellectual conformity encouraged by the examination system would stifle thought or channel it narrowly. But the government's ability to channel the intellectual and literary pursuits of the elite should not be overestimated. Members of the educated class did not lose their love of poetry, even though it was no longer tested, and examiners were not immune to new intellectual trends. Moreover, although the government continued to use Zhu Xi's teachings as the standard for the civil service examinations, during the sixteenth century Confucian thought developed in new directions, with a remarkable official and teacher, Wang Yangming, leading the way.

Wang Yangming (wahng yahng-ming) (1472–1529) grew up in the Jiangnan region in a literati family that had not had an official in a century. When he was ten, however, his father passed the examinations in first place, guaranteeing him a prominent career in the capital. Wang Yangming went with him to Beijing, where as a youth he met court officials, poets, writers, and thinkers and pursued interests in military strategy, horsemanship, and archery. Like so many others, he failed the *jinshi* examinations the

BIOGRAPHY Tan Yunxian, Woman Doctor

The grandmother of Tan Yunxian (tahn yun-shyen) (1461–1554) was the daughter of a physician, and her husband had married into her home to learn medicine himself. At least two of their sons—including Tan Yunxian's father—passed the *jinshi* examination and became officials, raising the standing of the family considerably. The grandparents found Yunxian very bright and therefore decided to pass on their medical knowledge to her.

Tan Yunxian married and raised four children but also practiced medicine, confining her practice to women. At age fifty she wrote an autobiographical account, *Sayings of a Female Doctor*. In the preface she described how, under her grandmother's tutelage, she had first memorized the *Canon of Problems* and *Canon of the Pulse*. Then, when her grandmother had time, she asked her granddaughter to explain particular passages in these classic medical treatises.

Tan Yunxian began the practice of medicine by treating her own children, asking her grandmother to check her diagnoses. When her grandmother was old and ill, she gave Yunxian her notebook of prescriptions and her equipment for making medicines, telling her to study them carefully. Later, Yunxian became seriously ill herself and dreamed of her grandmother telling her on what page of which book to find the prescription that would cure her. When she recovered, she began her medical career in earnest.

Tan's book records the cases of thirty-one patients she treated. She treated only women and mostly women with chronic complaints rather than critical illnesses. Many of the women had what the Chinese classed as women's complaints, such as menstrual irregularities, repeated miscarriages, barrenness, and postpartum fatigue. Others had ailments men could also suffer, such as coughs, nausea, insomnia, diarrhea, rashes, and swellings. Like other literati physicians, she regularly prescribed herbal medications. She also practiced moxibustion. The theory behind burning moxa (dried artemisia) at specified points on the body was similar to the theory behind acupuncture: it stimulated the circulation of *qi*. Because the physician applying the moxa has to touch the patient, it was not something male physicians could perform on women.

Tan's patients included working women, and she seems to have often thought that their problems sprang from overwork. One woman came to her because she had had vaginal bleeding for three years. When questioned, the woman told her that she worked all day with her husband at their kiln making bricks and tiles. Tan Yunxian's diagnosis was overwork, and she gave her pills to replenish her yin. When a boatman's wife came to her complaining of numbness in her hands, Tan found out on questioning that the woman worked in the wind and rain plying the boat and advised a respite. Tan Yunxian explained to a servant girl that she had gone back to work too quickly after suffering a wind damage fever. By contrast, when her patient came from an upper-class family, Tan saw negative emotions as the root of her problems, particularly if she reported that her mother-in-law had scolded her or that her husband had recently brought a concubine home. Two women who had miscarried were told that they had hidden their anger, causing fire to turn inward and destabilize the fetus.

Tan Yunxian herself lived a long life, dying at the age of ninety-three.

Questions for Analysis

1. What do you think of Tan's diagnoses?
2. What would be the advantages and disadvantages of a woman physician for a woman patient?

Source: Based on Charlotte Furth, *A Flourishing Yin. Gender in China's Medical History, 960–1665* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1999), pp. 285–295.

first two times he took them, but he passed in 1499. During his first term in office, he fell ill and had to return to Zhejiang, where he became more interested in philosophy. After he returned to the capital in 1504, he fell afoul of the eunuch dictator Liu Jin by defending two officials who had submitted memorials condemning Liu. Wang was arrested, sent to the eunuch-controlled secret service prison, and severely beaten. On his release, he was assigned a banishment post in an aboriginal region of Guizhou province in

the far southwest. He took this post seriously, however, doing his best to understand the problems of the Miao tribesmen. It was in Guizhou that he had his spiritual and intellectual breakthrough.

Wang had been struggling with Zhu Xi's concept of "the extension of knowledge"—that is, gaining understanding through careful and rational investigation of things and events, usually through study of the classics and other books. Wang came to realize that universal principles existed in every person's mind. People could discover them by clearing their minds of obstructions such as selfish desires and allowing their inborn knowledge to surface. The teachings of others, even those of Confucius and Mencius, are mere aids; they are not the source of truth. According to Wang, "If words are examined in the mind and found to be wrong, although they have come from the mouth of Confucius, I dare not accept them as correct."* Because everyone has a mind with similar capacity, common people have just as much potential to become sages as those who have pored over the classics their entire lives. Wang also argued against distinguishing knowledge and action. Moral action results spontaneously from true understanding. One does not truly understand filial piety if one does not practice it, any more than one understands taste, smell, or pain without experiencing them. True knowledge compels action.

Wang believed firmly that people could pursue sagehood in the midst of everyday activities. When an official told him that his official duties left him no time to study, Wang urged him not to abandon his work: "Real learning can be found in every aspect of record-keeping and legal cases. What is empty is study that is detached from things."† Wang wanted his followers to concentrate on the basic moral truths that everyone could understand. He once asserted that what was truly heterodox was not Buddhism but ideas incomprehensible to average people. Critics of Wang, however, saw his teachings as dangerously contaminated with Chan Buddhist ideas.

Wang Yangming lived up to his own ideals. Even after he attracted dozens of disciples, he did not give up his official career. After the eunuch Liu Jin was executed in 1510, Wang accepted high-ranking appointments

Nanjing Museum/Cultural Relics Press

Portrait of an Official. The man depicted here in official dress, Jiang Shunfu, lived from 1453 to 1504. The front of his robe had a panel with the two cranes, a "rank badge" that indicated he was a civil official of the first rank.

in Nanjing and Beijing while still lecturing to his growing circle of disciples. Conservative officials, disturbed by his message, got him out of the capital by arranging an assignment as governor of a special military district in southern Jiangxi, an area with many non-Chinese ethnic groups. Once there, he had to lead the regional armies into battle and set up a governing structure for the local people. He was a successful military commander, and when a prince rebelled nearby, it was Wang who led troops to capture him. On Wang Yangming's way back to the capital, his father died, which necessitated his retiring from office to mourn him. In 1527 he was called out of retirement because of uprisings among the non-Chinese in Guangxi. He spent a year there, directing campaigns, winning victories, and negotiating surrenders, but his health was failing, and he died on his way home in 1529.

In the century after Wang Yangming's death, his followers extended his ideas in many directions. Some took a new interest in both Daoism and Buddhism. Some questioned the traditional social hierarchy, such as the elevation of the scholar above the farmer. One of Wang's most enthusiastic followers, Wang Gen

*Wing-tsit Chan, trans., *Instructions for Practical Living and Other Neo-Confucian Writings* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1963), p. 81.

†Patricia Buckley, ed., *Chinese Civilization: A Sourcebook*, rev. ed. (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1993), p. 258.

(wahng guhn), came from a plebeian family of salt workers. He gave lectures to crowds of ordinary people, focusing on issues important in their lives and encouraging them to pursue education to improve their lots. In the next generation, He Xinyin (huh shin-yin) was more radical in that he challenged the age-old elevation of the family. To He, the family was a restrictive, selfish, and exclusive institution, and loyalty to family was inferior to loyalty to friends. His contemporary Li Zhi (lee jih) championed the validity of feelings and passion and ridiculed conforming to conventional patterns of behavior. He contended that women were the intellectual equals of men and should be given fuller educations. Li Zhi also reinterpreted history to present some of the great villains as heroes.

Only a small minority of late Ming literati were ready to hear these messages. Both He Xinyin and Li Zhi died in prison, having been arrested on charges of spreading dangerous ideas.

Local Society

As best historians can reconstruct, China's population more than doubled during the course of the Ming Dynasty, from between 60 and 80 million to between 150 and 200 million. Small market towns appeared all over the country. Regional specialization increased as communities took advantage of the availability of cheap water transport to take up cash cropping. By the end of the sixteenth century, the Yangzi River delta area had become a center of cotton and silk production; coastal Fujian was known for tobacco and sugar cane; and porcelain manufacture at Jingdezhen in Jiangxi had achieved unprecedented levels of output. All of this occurred despite continued government suspicion of those who pursued profit.

The Ming founder Taizu had grown up in a family that lived in fear of rapacious tax collectors, and he redesigned tax collection at the village level in the hope that future families would not have to suffer as his had. In each village, the better-off families were identified and assigned the obligation to perform low-level judicial, police, and tax-collecting services without pay as part of what was called the *lijia* (lee-jya) system. In other words, villagers themselves, not underlings of the magistrate, would be responsible for assessing, collecting, and transporting taxes, paid mostly in grain.

Taizu's efforts to organize his government around unpaid service created many headaches for later Ming administrators. Local officials found that legal sources of revenue were so limited that they had no choice but to levy extralegal ones to continue basic services, leading to just the sort of abuses Taizu had wanted to prevent. Ordinary households, for their part, often were devastated by the burden of uncompensated responsibility for delivering taxes or maintaining local hostels for government travelers. Reforms that converted most obligations into a monetary tax eventually had to be introduced.

The *lijia* system and subsequent tax reforms were supposed to be enforced uniformly around the country. Much of local social organization, however, was highly variable from place to place, depending on the crops grown, whether there were significant non-Han populations, when migrants had arrived, and the like.

During the Ming Dynasty, voluntary associations that included both educated men and ordinary villagers became a common feature of local society. Religious associations were formed to support a temple and its ceremonies. Lineages were formed to promote cooperation among relatives descended from a common ancestor. Often the lineage held land in common to support joint ancestral rites. When income was sufficient, a lineage might also build an ancestral temple or school. Generally lineages were more common in the south than in the north, perhaps a reflection of migration patterns. In Fujian, large lineages were evident in Song times and continued to play prominent roles through the Ming. In Huizhou (hway-joe) in Anhui province, lineages were flourishing in the mid-Ming, their strength owing much to the wealth of local merchant families. In Taichang in Jiangxi province, most of the lineages were deliberately formed in the early Ming by educated men to enhance their own status at a time of intense competition for social prestige. In Guangdong, by contrast, most of the major lineages date back only to the seventeenth century or later. In some areas, lineages seem to have been initiated by members of the educated class; in other places, by ordinary people who saw advantages in banding together.

By the mid-Ming, lineages in some parts of the country were setting up systems to discipline and control members, complete with long lists of rules and ways to handle disputes. In this they resembled community compacts, a form of local organization Zhu Xi had praised, believing it could promote moral renewal. Members of the compact had to agree to correct each other's faults, offer assistance to those in need, and expel those who failed to cooperate. Wang Yangming used the term *community compact* for the organizations he set up as part of a rebel pacification

MATERIAL CULTURE

Gardens of Suzhou

Well-to-do families in the Jiangnan region often constructed gardens within the walls enclosing their homes. The gardens of Suzhou (soo-joe) became particularly famous for their sophisticated beauty. These gardens were places to entertain friends and pass leisure hours. They were considered works of art in progress. Like landscape painters, garden designers tried to capture essential features of nature and made use of objects laden with metaphorical meaning, such as bamboo, gnarled pine trees, and craggy rocks.

Architecture was integral to garden design, and Suzhou gardens had walkways, pavilions, bridges over ponds, and other features. Views were appreciated, but they were intimate in scale, not broad vistas. The spaces within a garden were often visually linked by views glimpsed through open doorways and lattice windows.

About twenty Ming gardens still survive in Suzhou. (See Color Plate 19.)

AA World Travel Library/Alamy

Garden of the Humble Administrator. The pathways and small pavilions invite strolling and pausing to view the water and plants.

program. His followers made even broader use of the plan, urging villagers to form compacts in which they all encouraged each other to strive for goodness.

One reason Confucian scholars encouraged this form of voluntary social organization was the common fear that the moral fabric of society was unraveling. Many complained that the rich and poor no longer helped each other but looked on each other as enemies. Some educated men turned to charitable works as a way to try to lessen social tensions. At the end of the sixteenth century, for instance, one man set up the Society for Sharing Goodness, whose members paid monthly dues to support projects such as repairing roads and bridges or offering assistance to families unable to cover funeral expenses.

Urban Culture

Many literati, especially those with ample means, lived in cities where they could pursue the elegant life (see **Material Culture: Gardens of Suzhou**). But

DOCUMENTS

Scene from *The Peony Pavilion*

The Peony Pavilion, written in 1598, is probably Tang Xianzu's best-loved play. Its main characters are a young woman from an official family who falls in love with a young man she encounters in a dream, then pines away for him. Before she dies, she buries a portrait of herself in the garden. Her family moves; the young man moves into the garden, discovers the portrait, and falls in love with her from her picture. His love is so strong it revives her.

With fifty-five scenes, this play was rarely performed in its entirety, but people knew the play and would ask for specific scenes. In the early scene here, the young woman's maid, Fragrance, talks to herself and then with the recently hired tutor.

The parts that are sung are here indented.

Scene 9. Sweeping the Garden

FRAGRANCE:

Little Spring Fragrance
favored among the servants,
used to pampered ways within the painted chambers
waiting on the young mistress,
I mix her powder, match her rouge,
set her feather adornments, arrange her flowers,
ever waiting beside the boudoir mirror
ready to smoothe the brocaded quilt,
ready to light the fragrant nighttime incense,
urged on by Madam's stick on my puny shoulders.
Bondmaid with petaled cheeks just into my teens,
sweet and charming, wide awake to the spring's arrival.
A real "passion flower" is what we need now
to follow our every step with admiring glances.

Day and night you will find me, Fragrance, by the side of my mistress. She, though she might win fame above all others for her beauty, is more concerned with jealous guarding of the family reputation. Maiden modesty composes her gentle features, and it is her nature to be serious and reverent. The master having engaged a tutor to instruct her, she commenced the study of the *Book of Songs*; but, when she reached the lines "So delicate the virtuous maiden, a fit mate for our Prince," she quietly put the book down and sighed, "Here we may observe the full extent of love to the true sage. As men felt in ancient times, so they feel today, and how should it be other than this?" So then I suggested, "Miss, you are tired from your studies, why don't you think of some way to amuse yourself?" She hesitated and thought for a moment. Then she got to her feet. "And how would you have me amuse myself, Fragrance?" she asked me. So I said, "Why, miss, nothing special, just to take a walk in that garden behind the house." "Stupid creature," says the young mistress, "what would happen if my father found out?" But I said, "His Honor has been out visiting the country districts for several days now." Then for ages the young mistress walked up and down thinking, not saying a word, until at last she began to consult the calendar. She said tomorrow was a bad day, and the day after not very good, but the day after that is a propitious day because the God of Pleasure Trips is on duty for the day. I was to tell the gardener to sweep the paths to ready for her visit. I said I would. I'm scared of

literati were not the only cultural force in the cities. As cities grew and the commercial economy thrived, a distinctive urban culture emerged, a culture of those with money to spend in the cities, centered on entertainment of many sorts.

Books accessible to the urban middle classes were now published in large numbers, including reference books of all sorts and popular religious tracts, such as ledgers for calculating the moral value of one's good deeds and subtracting the demerits

Madam's finding out, but there's nothing we can do about that. So let me go give the gardener his instructions. Hello, there's Tutor Chen at the end of the verandah. Truly,

> on every side the glory of the spring
> and what does this old fool see?—
> Not a thing.

TUTOR CHEN *(enters)*.

> Aging book lover
> now for a while "within the green gauze tent"
> where once the learned Ma Rong gave instruction
> curtain flaps against hook in warmth of sun.
> Ha, there on the verandah
> young girl with hair in double coil
> seeming to speak, but wordless, closer now, who can it be?
> Oh, it's Fragrance. Tell me,
> where is your gracious lord
> and where his lady?
> And why is my pupil absent from her lessons?

FRAGRANCE: Oh, it's you, Tutor Chen. I'm afraid the young mistress has not had time for classes these last few days.
CHEN: And why is that?
FRAGRANCE: I'll tell you.

> Spring in its splendor
> cruel to a sensitive nature
> —everything's gone wrong?

CHEN: Why, what has gone wrong?
FRAGRANCE: Ah, you've no idea how angry the governor is going to be with you.
CHEN: For what reason?
FRAGRANCE: Why, that *Book of Songs* of yours, you've been singing a bit too sweetly, my poor young mistress—

> your classical exegesis
> has torn her heart to pieces.

CHEN: All I did was explicate the *"Guanguan cry the ospreys."*
FRAGRANCE: That was the one. *Guan* means "shut in," doesn't it? My young mistress said, "Even though the ospreys were shut in, they still had the freedom of the island: why should a human being be treated worse than a bird?"

> In books the head must be buried,
> but it lifts itself to gaze on a scene of beauty.

Now she has ordered me to take her in a day or two to stroll in the garden behind the house.
CHEN: What will be the purpose of this stroll?
FRAGRANCE:

> Unsuspected the spring has struck and before it hastens
> past she must cast off there in the garden
> spring's disquiet.

CHEN: She should not do this.

> When woman walks abroad
> lest eyes should light upon her
> at every step she should be screened from view.

Fragrance, by the grace of Heaven I, your tutor, have enjoyed some sixty years of life, yet never have I felt such thing as "spring-struck," nor have I ever strolled in any garden.

Questions for Analysis

1. What makes this scene humorous?
2. Why is such a fuss made about a stroll in the garden?

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from bad ones. To make their books attractive in the marketplace, entrepreneurial book publishers commissioned artists to illustrate them. By the sixteenth century, more and more books were being published in the vernacular language, the language people spoke. Writing in the vernacular had begun on a small scale in Tang and Song times, when it was used to record the oral teachings of Buddhist and Confucian teachers. By mid-Ming it was widely used for short stories, novels, and plays. Ming short

stories written in the vernacular depicted a world much like that of their readers, full of shop clerks and merchants, monks and prostitutes, students and matchmakers.

It was during the Ming period that the full-length novel appeared. The plots of the early novels were heavily indebted to story cycles developed by oral storytellers over the course of several centuries. *Water Margin* is an episodic story of a band of bandits set at the end of the Northern Song period. *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms* is a work of historical fiction based on the exploits of the generals and statesmen contending for power at the end of the Han Dynasty. *The Journey to the West* is a fantastic account of the Tang monk Xuanzang's (shwan-tsahng) travels to India; in this book he is accompanied by a monkey with supernatural powers as well as a pig. *Plum in the Golden Vase* is a novel of manners about a lustful merchant with a wife and five concubines, full of details of daily life as well as the quarrels and scheming of the women. In none of these cases is much known about the author. Competing publishers brought out their own editions, sometimes adding new illustrations or commentaries.

Musical drama was also a major element in Ming urban culture. The Jesuit missionary Matteo Ricci, who lived in China from 1583 to 1610, described resident troupes in large cities and traveling troupes that "journey everywhere throughout the length and breadth of the country" putting on operas. The leaders of the troupes would purchase young children and train them to sing and perform. Ricci thought too many people were addicted to these performances:

> *These groups of actors are employed at all imposing banquets, and when they are called they come prepared to enact any of the ordinary plays. The host at the banquet is usually presented with a volume of plays and he selects the one or several he may like. The guests, between eating and drinking, follow the plays with so much satisfaction that the banquet at times may last for ten hours.**

People not only enjoyed watching and listening to plays, they also avidly read the scripts. Perhaps because so much of a dramatic script was composed of poetry, authors of plays were less likely to conceal their identity than the authors of novels. The greatest of the Ming playwrights was Tang Xianzu, whose love stories and social satires were very popular. His *Dream of Han Tan* tells the story of a young man who falls asleep while his meal is cooking. In his dream he sees his whole life: He comes in first in the *jinshi* examinations, rises to high office, is unfairly slandered and condemned to death, then cleared and promoted. At the point of death, he wakes up and sees that his dinner is nearly done. He then realizes that life passes as quickly as a dream. (For a passage from Tang's most popular play, a love story, see **Documents: Scene from *The Peony Pavilion.***)

Fiction and plays were so avidly consumed in Ming times that the values and attitudes expressed in them began to have an impact on the culture of the literati. Educated men and women often seem to have judged themselves and others on the standards of purity of feelings that they had come to expect in literary characters. Headstrong attachments—verging on obsessions—came to be admired. Courtesan culture flourished in this environment, and writers wrote of the romantic liaisons between well-known writers and famous courtesans. Because they associated courtesans with high aspirations and disappointed hopes, writers saw parallels between the frustrated official and the talented but powerless woman waiting for her lover to appreciate her full worth.

DYNASTIC DECLINE

After 1600 the Ming government was beset by fiscal, military, and political problems. The government was nearly bankrupt. It had spent heavily to help defend Korea against a Japanese invasion (see Chapters 13 and 15), had to support an ever-increasing imperial clan, and now was called on to provide relief for a series of natural disasters.

The bureaucracy did not pull together to meet these challenges. Officials diagnosed the problems confronting the dynasty in moral terms and saw removing the immoral from power as the solution, which led to fierce factionalism. Accusations and counteraccusations crossed so often that emperors wearied of officials and their infighting. Frustrated former officials who gathered at the Donglin Academy in Jiangsu province called for a revival of orthodox Confucian ethics. They blamed Wang Yangming for urging people to follow their innate knowledge,

*Louis J. Gallagher, trans., *China in the Sixteenth Century. The Journals of Matthew Ricci: 1583–1610* (New York: Random House, 1953), p. 23.

which seemed to the critics equivalent to urging them to pursue their personal advantage.

At this time a "little ice age" brought a drop in average temperatures that shortened the growing season and reduced harvests. When food shortages became critical in northern Shaanxi in 1627–1628, army deserters and laid-off soldiers began forming gangs and scouring the countryside in search of food. By 1632 they had moved east and south into the central regions of Shanxi, Hebei, Henan, and Anhui provinces. Once the gangs had stolen all their grain, hard-pressed farmers joined them just to survive. Li Zicheng, a former shepherd and postal relay worker, became the paramount rebel leader in the north. The ex-soldier Zhang Xianzhong became the main leader in the central region between the Yellow and Yangzi rivers. The Ming government had little choice but to try to increase taxes to deal with these threats, but the last thing people needed was heavier exactions. Floods, droughts, locusts, and epidemics ravaged one region after another. In the Jiangnan area, tenants rose up against landlords, and urban workers rioted. Meanwhile, the two main rebel leaders were in a race to see which of them could topple the Ming and establish a new dynasty.

Part of the reason people rioted over rents was that real rents had risen due to deflation, itself brought on by a sudden drop in the supply of silver. In 1639 the Japanese authorities refused to let traders from Macao into Nagasaki, disrupting trade that had brought large quantities of silver to China. Another major source of silver was cut off a few months later when Chinese trade with the Spanish in the Philippines came to a standstill after a slaughter of Chinese residents there. For China the drop in silver imports led to hoarding of both silver and grain, creating artificial shortages.

In 1642 a group of rebels cut the dikes on the Yellow River, leading to massive flooding. A smallpox epidemic soon added to the death toll. In 1644, Li Zicheng moved through Hebei into Beijing, where the last Ming emperor, in despair, took his own life. Zhang Xianzhong had moved in the opposite direction into Sichuan, where his attacks on Chongqing and Chengdu led to widespread slaughter. Both Li and Zhang announced that they had founded new dynasties, and they appointed officials and minted coins. Neither, however, succeeded in pacifying a sizable region or in ending looting and violence. That would await the arrival of the Manchus (see Chapter 16).

SUMMARY

After the fall of the Mongols, China was ruled by the native Ming Dynasty for nearly three centuries. The dynasty's founder, Taizu, knew poverty firsthand and ruled for thirty years, becoming more paranoid and despotic over time. Taizu made efforts to ease the plight of the poor but was suspicious of educated men and did not hesitate to humiliate officials. Many officials were executed because he feared they were involved in plots against him. The second important Ming emperor, Chengzu, is notable for moving the capital from Nanjing to Beijing, sending Zheng He out on maritime expeditions to enroll more countries in the Ming tribute system, and putting two thousand scholars to work on a huge compendium of all knowledge.

Few of the subsequent Ming emperors were particularly good rulers. Palace eunuchs, given responsibility to investigate charges of corruption and sedition, came to rival the civil service in numbers and power. Clashes between emperors and officials and between officials and eunuchs occurred several times.

The Ming government had to contend with several external threats as well. The Mongols were still very powerful to the north, and it was to defend against them that the Ming built the Great Wall that we see today. Along the coasts piracy was a major problem, as was sea-based banditry. The Ming tried to limit maritime trade to a few coastal cities, a policy that proved of no use and that was abandoned in the late sixteenth century.

Flaws in the Ming government did not discourage educated men from seeking to become officials. The examination system became much more important than it had been in Yuan times, probably even more important than it had been in Song times. A new first level became institutionalized and regional quotas were set to ensure that the wealthy and cultured Jiangnan region did not dominate the ranks of successful candidates.

In mid-Ming the scholar-official Wang Yangming challenged the orthodoxy of Zhu Xi's interpretations of the classics and developed Confucian thought in new directions. He argued that everyone had the inborn capacity to recognize right and wrong and that there was no gap between thought and action: those who see what is right invariably act on it. Wang attracted many followers, and his movement remained strong through the end of the dynasty.

The Chinese population grew during Ming times, possibly doubling, and market towns developed in many places. The Ming founder had wanted to protect villagers from rapacious tax collectors by setting up a system in which better-off local families did the tax collecting. This system probably caused as many problems as it fixed, in part because communities varied so much from one place to another, but the law was the same everywhere. Cities flourished, attracting both educated men looking for comfort and stimulation and ordinary people looking for jobs. Drama was very popular, and full-length novels began to appear in some number, written in the vernacular language, not the literary language used for government documents, poetry, and essays.

The decline of the Ming dynasty in the early seventeenth century has been attributed to government bankruptcy brought on by a series of crises: the Japanese attack on Korea, floods and droughts, a "little ice age" that reduced harvests, and deflation brought on by a drop in silver imports. As in the Tang and Han dynasties before it, peasant rebellions sparked the wars that brought the Ming dynasty to an end.

All considered, how different was China in the early seventeenth century than in 1368? China was more populous, with a population of perhaps 175 million by 1600. Some of this increase was made possible by pushing deeper into the southwest, but much of it occurred in long-occupied areas that became more densely populated with more towns and larger cities. Many more books were in circulation, and more of these books were aimed at an audience looking to be entertained rather than educated. Regional disparities may well have increased, as the Jiangnan area stayed several steps ahead of other regions. At the intellectual level, China was much more lively in 1600, with writers and thinkers offering much more sustained critiques of inherited ideas. The fear of the Mongols had largely abated, but those fears had left their trace in the Great Wall. The civil service was discouraged by failures of leadership at the top, but with the expansion of education, the number of those aspiring for civil service careers was much larger in 1600 than it had been in the first generation of the Ming.