

The Ming Dynasty (1368 to 1644)

The Mongols, under the Yuan dynasty, had ruled China for over one hundred years. In addition, China's population had been greatly reduced due to the plague. The dynasty cycle was about to be changed with the emergence of the Ming Dynasty.

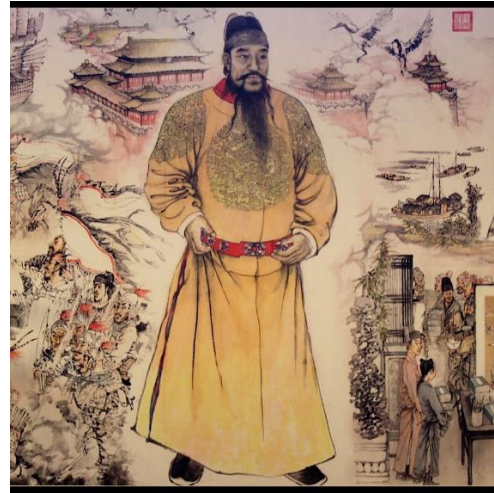


Once of the first actions taken by the Ming was to eliminate all evidence of previous foreign Mongol rule. The use of past Mongol names was eliminated and the dynasty once again promoted Confucian learning and orthodox gender roles based on the earlier Han, Tang, and Song dynasties. The dynasty mandated changes as to how the people dressed. Two empresses even wrote instructions for female behavior, stressing a return to China's traditional past.



When **Emperor Yongle** came to rule (1402 to 1424), he began to consolidate the power of the dynasty and expand its influence. He began by ordering the creation of an 11,000 volume Encyclopedia, created by more than 2,000 scholars. His goal was to put together all previous writing of Chinese history, geography, philosophy, ethics, government and society.

Ming Emperor Yongle, also known as Zhu Di, moved the capital city to **Beijing** and ordered a new imperial palace known as the Forbidden City to be built along with the Temple of Heaven where Confucian-based rituals were held for the well-being of the Chinese people.



The Forbidden City



The Temple of Heaven

Political changes during the Ming Dynasty saw a return of the **civil service examination** that had been neglected during Mongol rule, and a **highly centralized government** was created to assert power directly from the emperor. **Mandarins**, eunuchs (castrated men) who passed the civil service examination and were loyal to the emperor were given great authority, especially over local rulers.



Mandarins during the Ming Dynasty

State building saw the restoration of millions of acres of farmlands and woodlands, repair of the aging canals, reservoirs, and irrigation works. The Chinese economy rebounded, domestic and international trade once again flourished, and the population grew at a rapid rate. China had now become one of the world's most prosperous civilizations.



Emperor Yongle also showed his power by creating the largest maritime expedition in the world. In 1405, and lasting 28 years, he sponsored six expeditions of more than 300 ships and 27,000 men to sail to ports in Southeast Asia, Indonesia, India, Arabia, and East Africa. These expeditions were led by the seven-foot-tall Muslim eunuch **Zheng He**. His role was to bring back order to the world by having distant rulers pay tribute and submit to Chinese rule under Emperor Yongle. Ironically, the Chinese did not conquer these new territories nor did they establish Chinese settlements or spread their culture. They did however, intervene in several local disputes.



An image of Zheng He leading his fleet. Note the giraffe. It is said that Zheng He brought back the giraffe from Africa for the emperor. It was to his liking as the emperor believed that the giraffe was in fact a unicorn.

After the death of Emperor Yongle, the Chinese abruptly stopped these voyages of exploration and discovery. Many high-ranking officials believed that the voyages were a waste of money as China saw itself as the “**Middle Kingdom**” or the center of the civilized world. Officials saw the main threat to China coming from the “barbarians” in the north. Most feared was the reemergence of the Mongols so all efforts were now made to rebuild a larger and stronger **Great Wall**.

The lack of government influence did not stop private Chinese merchants and craftsmen from trading and settling in Japan, the Philippines, Taiwan, and Southeast Asia. Luxury goods made by the Ming became valuable across the region and even reached as far as Western Europe.

(A Ming Dynasty porcelain vase)



In the end, the Ming dynasty deliberately ended on the dominance of creating a large-scale maritime empire in the Indian Ocean basin.