

BACKGROUND GUIDE

THE MING DYNASTY



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HISTORY OF THE DYNASTY



The Ming Dynasty Prior to Emperor Chongzhen

The Ming dynasty was an imperial Chinese dynasty that lasted from 1368 to 1644. It followed the end of almost a century of rule by the Mongols, whose empire emerged from Mongolia, to the north of China. It oversaw many cultural and economic developments, but many factors destabilized it, leading to its eventual collapse. Some successes of the earlier Ming dynasty include the construction of the Forbidden City, large maritime expeditions that reached East Africa, and the fortification of the Great Wall. During this time, more trade opened up with Europe, including European missionaries who became influential in the Ming government, such as Adam Schall.

The Jiajing Emperor ruled from 1521 to 1567. He relied greatly on corrupt officials within his bureaucracy, particularly court eunuchs who proved to be a threat to the power of other government bureaucrats. He neglected his official duties, and was known to be cruel, which led to his attempted murder by sixteen palace women, who failed, and were executed. He spent the government's money excessively on pursuits such as alchemy, which contributed to the decline of the Ming dynasty.

The Wanli Emperor ruled the longest of all the Ming emperors, ruling from 1572 to 1620, and he witnessed many destabilizing events and the decline of the dynasty. His reign included the Imjin War, from 1592 to 1598, which is sometimes referred to as the Wanli Korean Campaign in Chinese. It was a Japanese invasion and occupation of Korea, which largely succeeded, and attempted occupation of China. Before Normandy in 1944, it was the largest invasion by sea in world history.

After the Wanli Emperor came the Taichang Emperor, the shortest rule of all the Ming emperors, lasting for only one month. The Tianqi Emperor ruled for seven years, but his reign was highly unsuccessful. He never learned how to read, so a eunuch and his nanny from his childhood ruled the government with him essentially as a puppet ruler. Living conditions worsened for most people at this time. He was followed by his younger brother, the Chongzhen Emperor, who was the last emperor of the Ming dynasty.

HISTORY OF THE DYNASTY



The Jurchens and the Later Jin Dynasty

Jurchens, later known as Manchus, are a group of people living in northeast China, in a region called Manchuria. Historically, Manchuria refers to not only northeast China but also parts of Mongolia and Russia. The Manchu people speak Tungusic languages. Prior to the 17th century, when they were known as the Jurchens, they had no central government and different groups were isolated from one another. For example, some lived as hunter-gatherers, some lived as pastoral nomads, and some settled down and practiced agriculture. They tended to fall under the rule of neighboring dynasties, but their leaders would still hold positions, even if in name only, and be forced to pay tribute.

The Jurchen people were historically divided into three groups, and the most powerful during this time were the Jianzhou Jurchens, whose leader Nurhaci established the Later Jin dynasty. The Later Jin dynasty was the precursor to the Qing dynasty, which followed the Ming dynasty. It was established in 1616, and was renamed to the Qing dynasty in 1636, eight years before the Ming dynasty fell with the death of its last emperor.

Nurhaci was originally a vassal of the Ming dynasty in the local area, but he became angry with them for meddling in Jurchen affairs. In 1618, he declared war on the Ming through his "Seven Grievances." These grievances included that 1) the Ming had killed Nurhaci's father and grandfather, 2) that the Ming favored the two other Jurchen groups, 3) that the Ming did not respect the territorial agreements that Nurhaci had with them, 4) that the Ming had sent troops to one of the other Jurchen groups, 5) that the Ming supported another Jurchen group breaking their treaty with the Jianzhou Jurchens, 6) that Nurhaci was forced by the Ming to give up lands, and 7) that a particular Ming official, Shang Bozhi, abused his power. This started a series of attacks and conquests known as the Manchu invasions of China, which further destabilized the Ming dynasty and led to its downfall once the Later Jin dynasty became the Qing dynasty.



Topic 1: Internal challenges

Famine

During the early 17th century, the whole globe experienced the “Little Ice Age”. The Little Ice Age was a period characterized by massive famines, blood and other natural disasters. In the late period of Emperor Chongzhen, severe famines occurred all over the country which caused both starvations and disease. The spread of diseases led to the Great Plague in provinces such as Henan, and the shortage of food led to cannibalism in provinces such as Hunan.

The famine was primarily caused by reasons beyond the global Little Ice Age. First, being an agrarian state and having the largest population in the world, the Ming Dynasty was hit extraordinarily hard by droughts and bad harvests. Because of the heavy reliance on agriculture, many Ming peasants struggled to live through the crisis. Besides the lack of an alternative to agriculture, the Ming government also failed to launch effective regional reliefs due to the inefficient bureaucracy. Although the central government urged local officials to prioritize relieving the affected areas, governmental corruption made the reliefs ineffective in their implementation. In addition, the government also lacked the financial capacity to relieve multiple affected areas with a large population, due to the overspending of the previous administration.

Peasant Rebellions

The famine around the country forced many peasants to rebel against the Ming government. The rebellious movements were popular in areas severely affected by the drought such as Shaanxi and Sichuan. Li Zicheng who led the peasant rebellions in Shaanxi, and Zhang Xianzhong who rebelled in Sichuan were the two biggest resistance that posed direct challenges to the Ming authorities. These two popular uprisings were still gaining support from peasants when the committee begins, so the court advisors of Emperor Chongzhen should seek to prevent more peasants from joining the rebellions by meeting their demands or using efficient strategies to suppress the movements.



RESEARCH QUESTIONS

How should the government make the relief efforts more effective?

What production method should the Ming economy take as an alternative to agriculture?

What reforms should the government take to reduce corruption?

What is the most efficient way to prevent more peasants from uprising?



Topic 2: The Jurchen Invasion

In 1616, the Khan of Jianzhou Jurchen, Nurhaci, unified the Jurchen tribes in Manchuria and founded the Later Jin, making himself equivalent in status to the Ming Emperor. In 1618, Nurhaci began his conquest of the Chinese territory controlled by the Ming Dynasty, and had a decisive victory in the Battle of Sarhu in 1619. The Manchu army defeated the Ming army with a ratio of 1:2 at Sarhu, demonstrating the weakness of the Ming Army compared to the Manchu Banner Army, which marked a turning point of the Jurchen-Ming War.

In 1625, the forces of Nurhaci captured the port of Lvshun, thus controlling the whole Liaodong Peninsula. Nurhaci also moved the capital of Later Jin from Liaoyang to Shenyang, symbolizing his determination to enter the Gate of Shanhai Pass. However, in 1626, the Jurchen army suffered a defeat in the Siege of Ningyuan against the army of Yuan Chonghuan. Nurhaci was severely wounded and later died, which led to the succession of his son Hong Taiji as the leader of the Later Jin. In 1635, Hong Taiji changed the name of the Jurchen dynasty to the Great Qing, and officially gave the nation of Jurchen a new name, Manchu.

By the time of Hong Taiji's establishment of the Great Qing, the Manchu forces were threatening the Great Wall of the Ming Dynasty. Once the Shanhai Pass of the Great Wall collapses, the interior territory of Ming will be extremely vulnerable against the Manchu Banner Army. It is the task of Emperor Chongzhen's advisors to resolve this upcoming crisis with a military response or diplomatic terms. Militarily, the Ming Army which still relies on conscription, have little chance to outperform the Manchu Banner Army which are professionally trained for generations. On open terrains, the Manchu Army also enjoyed the advantage of a more powerful cavalry compared to the Ming cavalry, except the Guanning Tiejia trained by General Yuan Chonghuan who matched the quality of the Banner Cavalry. Although lacking in troop quality, the Ming Dynasty was technologically superior to the Manchus, as the Ming Army employed early firearms imported from the west, including early musketeers and cannons that the Manchus did not possess.

As an alternative to facing the Qing Army with force, the advisors of Emperor Chongzhen could also seek peaceful compromises with the Jurchen invaders or make foreign alliances against a powerful enemy. Without ending the domestic crisis such as famines and peasant rebellions, the Ming government can perhaps start paying tribute to the Great Qing or even cede territories in the north. Even though decisions like this would decrease the legitimacy of the Ming Dynasty even more, it represents one of the best solutions in this extremely difficult time for Ming. As for seeking outside assistance, the major enemy of Ming in the past, the Oriat Mongols, has interests in weakening the rising Manchus in their east. The eastwardly expanding Russian Empire can also potentially be a useful ally against Great Qing. No matter which path delegates want to take, they need to be extra cautious in making decisions, with consideration of consequences both domestically and externally.



RESEARCH QUESTIONS

How to improve the quality of the Ming Army?

What are some alternative ways to stop the Manchu invasions?

What peaceful terms can the Ming Dynasty offer in a compromise?

Which states are the potential allies of Ming?

Dossier List

1. Yang He 杨鹤
Governor of Shaan'xi province
2. Hong Chengchou 洪承畴
Governor of Liaoji province (modern day Hebei and Liaoning)
3. Cao Wenzhao 曹文诏
A general who was in charge of suppressing the peasant rebellions
4. Chen Qiyu 陈奇瑜
A general who was in charge of suppressing the peasant rebellions
5. Lu Xiangsheng 卢象升
The minister of reinforcement
6. Yang Sichang 杨嗣昌
The minister of education
7. Xiong Wenjie 熊文杰*
The minister of agriculture and development
8. Sun Chuanting 孙传庭
The general who was in charge of the defense of Tong'guan, an important fort in West China
9. Xu Biao 徐标
The Charge d' Affairs of Hebei and Shandong provinces.
10. Chen Xinjia 陈新甲
The Minister of Defense
11. Chen Yan 陈演
The chancellor (The minister of interior)
12. Guang Shiheng 光时亨
An advisor who advocated for relieving the peasants to prevent rebellions
13. Gong Yonggu 巩永固
A duke who likes to collect antiques and paintings
14. Liu Wenbing 刘文炳
A duke who likes to collect books and antiques
15. Ni Yuanlu 倪元路
A well-known calligrapher

16. Fan Jingwen 范景文

The Minister of Defense who was known for his incorruptibility

17. Wang Jiayan 王家彦

The Minister of Finance

18. Wu Sangui 吴三桂

The general who was in charge of the defense of Shanhai Guan, the most important fort on the northern frontier.

19. Yuan Chonghuan 袁崇焕

The general who was in charge of the army in Liaodong

20. Xu Guangqi 徐光启

A scientist, philosopher and military strategist who converted to Christianity. The minister of diplomacy

21. Adam Schall 汤若望

A Jesuit Catholic missionary from Cologne

22. Mao Wenlong 毛文龙

A general who was in charge of the defense of Liaodong, established the defense line of "Dong Jiang", known as the "Great Wall on the Sea".

23. Zheng Zhilong 郑芝龙

A pirate in Southeast China who became the naval commander of Fujian province. Father of Koxinga who later conquered Taiwan from the Dutch East India Company.

24. Shi Kefa 史可法

The governor of Nanjing, who was essentially in charge of the military in South China

25. Qin Liangyu 秦良玉

The most well-known female general in the history of China

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