

THE CHINESE WORLD  
CHINA IN MODERN WORLD HISTORY

In the 13th century, the Mongol expansion, which established the largest contiguous land empire ever seen, marks the start of global history for the Eurasian continent. Central Asian and Persian peoples became predominant in the political and scientific circles of Yuan China.

These Muslim advisors brought to China all the great scientific texts of the Ancient world, including the Greek ones, as well as the wealth of Muslim medieval science. But, while technology does diffuse, whole scientific systems of thought are much more difficult to transport.

The court of Kubilai Khan also attracted a multitude of travelers from far-away Europe drawn by the prospect of benefits that the Mongol coverage offered over the land routes of Eurasia. Marco Polo was among the visitors.

China was now, with the Yuan, a much bigger country than it had ever been before. The Mongol domination left bitter memories among the Chinese, but it also reinforced, in a permanent way, its reunification.

In the middle of the 14th century, the Mongols were overthrown by the Ming, a purely Chinese dynasty squeezed between two foreign ones: the Mongols before and the Manchu after. The Ming execrated the Mongols and spent a century fighting the remnants of the Mongol tribes, but they also inherited the autocratic ways of the Mongols.

The Ming were now players on the world stage. At the beginning of the 15th century, the Ming launched enormous naval expeditions that reached Southeast Asia, India, the Arabian Peninsula and the east coast of Africa. But this naval expansion came to an abrupt end in 1433, when the Ming put a ban on maritime trade, while Japanese and Chinese pirates flogged the Chinese coasts. It is in this context of extreme suspicion about foreigners that the Portuguese arrived in China.

**But the Chinese ban on maritime trade didn't really stop** Chinese goods or Chinese migrants from going abroad. Chinese porcelain flowed to the new economic centers of the moment, to the Turkish Ottoman Empire, to some of the rich Italian city-states.

In Europe, the knowledge of Chinese objects preceded the knowledge of China itself.

By the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, Chinese migrants began to settle in Southeast Asia in significant numbers. It was through the Chinese colonies in Manila that Chinese goods began to flow across the Pacific Ocean and that Mexican and Peruvian silver found its way to China. The galleons also brought American plants like potatoes, peanuts and corn that greatly increased the productivity of Chinese agriculture.

The population growth of the late Ming is in great part due to these new products. By the beginning of the 17th century China was the most prosperous nation on earth and that it had become the central focus of interest in European intellectual circles. The Age of Discovery brought not only the discovery of America but also the discovery of China.

But at mid 17th century the Ming entered a long period of decay, fuelled by the violent struggles between eunuchs and scholars officials and by the diminishing arrival of Spanish silver. When peasant uprisings became a deadly threat for the dynasty, the remnants of the Ming sought the help of the Manchu, a northern tribe that had already evolved into a Chinese style bureaucratic state. In 1644 the Ming were overthrown by the Manchu, who founded the Qing dynasty, that would last down to 1911, closing the cycle of Chinese imperial dynasties. The Ming Qing transition will be the first Chinese political upheaval to find its way to Western narratives.

The three successive emperors that ruled for more than a century, brought China to one of its highest peaks. Even if they always maintained the preeminence of the Manchu over the Chinese, the three emperors attracted Chinese scholars by actively patronizing Chinese culture. It was also with the three emperors that China reached its maximum extension. They conquered Taiwan, from where they expelled the most powerful merchant-pirate empire of all times. They also conquered Mongolia, Tibet and Xinjiang, which put them in direct contact with an also expanding Russian empire.

At the end of the 18th century, the Qing turned to an increasing despotism and a growing reticence towards political and economic changes. The great rebellions that were to undermine the Qing dynasty started just at the turn of the 19th century. At that moment it also became increasingly evident that China's foreign affairs and foreign trade were at odds with 19th century's trend towards globalization. China became increasingly the prey of a voracious colonialism that was already taking hold of both India and SE Asia.

In a few decades, the devastating Opium wars brought with them a thorough reversal of the Western perception of China. From being a model to admire,

China became a failure to disdain. Three centuries of sinophilia gave way to a prevailing sinophobia.