

THE CHINA THAT EUROPEANS DISCOVERED: THE MING DYNASTY
A PEASANT EMPEROR

The Yuan dynasty lasted less than a century. Kubilai Khan had been an effective emperor, but none of the other short-lived monarchs that succeeded him reigned for more than 10 years, and most of them held power for only two or three years. They relied heavily on central Asian Muslim merchants and sold them the right to collect taxes, opening the door to frequent abuses.

Corruption in Mongol and Muslim circles was rampant and the delicate irrigation network of China began to crumble from lack of maintenance. To face these economic difficulties, the Mongols resorted to issuing more and more paper money, and inflation soared. As peasant rebellions spread everywhere, the rebels gained the support of the educated marginalized elites, and one of the peasant leaders, called Zhu Yuanzhang, finally deposed the Yuan and founded a new dynasty.

As is the case with many Chinese dynasties, the Ming came to power as the result of a popular armed rebellion. But this was the only time that the emerging leader was a peasant himself. The newcomer was by all accounts an extraordinary man. Born into a very poor family in central China, Zhu Yuanzhang witnessed the death of his father, mother and siblings, who were struck down by a widespread famine and the smallpox epidemic that erupted in the wake of it. He himself was left pockmarked by the disease. He survived in a Buddhist monastery, begging for alms, until joining a rebel gang called the Red Turbans, who harboured anti-Mongol and extreme messianic sentiments. **Zhu Yuanzhang's** strategic, political and military capacities soon took him to the top of the Red Turbans gang. He married the chief's daughter, the future empress Ma, and on the death of the chief became the supreme commander of an increasingly general rebellion. After ten years of fighting that unleashed Chinese hatred of their Mongol and Muslim overlords, he finally founded the Ming Dynasty in 1368 and took on the reign name of Hongwu. Hongwu is how we will refer to him from now on.

The Mongols were pushed north, back to their Mongolian homeland, where they remained fighting the Ming dynasty for most of its existence. The Ming controlled only half the territory of Yuan China, being reduced to what we now call China

Proper. But even so it was a huge territory, twice the size of the former Song China and equivalent to the area of Western Europe. Hongwu established Nanjing as Ming **China's capital. Hongwu was almost illiterate.** He had no sympathy for the ruling classes, whether Mongols, Muslims, or Chinese scholars, but won absolute power over his comrades in arms. Despite being the leader of the rebellion that swept away the Mongols, he was not so much a warrior as a highly talented administrator. When he acceded to the throne, he already had the basic characteristics that would be the defining features of his reign: he cared for the peasants, distrusted the powerful and was extremely jealous of his authority, fostering it with a paranoid zeal. He never forgot his miserable infancy and firmly believed that the first duty of the state was to promote agriculture, protect peasants and make sure that their grain and labour went to meet essential state expenses. His first step was to encourage land cultivation, extending the productive wet farming and the new agricultural methods that had been the hallmarks of Song.

Agricultural handbooks explained how to create polders, by walling and draining the river's margins; how to construct terraced fields up steep hillsides; which rice variety to choose - by now there were thousands of them - to get a maximum yield in a given environment. All together, during the thirty-year reign of Emperor Hongwu, the area of cultivated land more than doubled.

Emperor Hongwu had a dream of self-sufficient villages that would eradicate hunger for ever in his empire. And to attain this stability, he wanted to immobilize the realm. People were inscribed in their villages for life and nobody could move more than 12 kilometers without the permission of the state. And of course nobody could travel abroad without due permission. Artisans and soldiers were hereditary occupations, while merchants, even when a commercial economy clearly thrived in mid-Ming times, never obtained the political representation necessary to counter state control. **Hongwu's highly interventionist** state vision also prompted him to issue a series of documents that provided a clear and simple set of rules that everyone should follow. One of the very first, the Placard of People's Instructions, aimed to regulate the lives of the people in rural communities. The Placard set out clearly how the supervision of local affairs by the **communities' elders had to be** done, and which matters had to be judged by them.

The emperor loved to issue tract after tract explaining his aims, and wanted everybody in the realm to be familiar with them. One has to wait until 20th century Mao Zedong, who by the way strongly admired Hongwu, to see a national leader producing such a body of written work.