

THE CHINA THAT EUROPEANS DISCOVERED: THE MING DYNASTY POPULATION GROWTH

Hongwu had dreamt of static and self-sufficient rural communities. But, in fact, the expansion of arable land led to a huge increase in agricultural productivity, produced a massive agricultural surplus and fostered both a market economy and spectacular population growth.

The official Ming history gives an initial population of 65 million, following the rebellions, famines and epidemics that had diminished the population during the breakdown of the Yuan dynasty. If you look at the graphic, you'll see that 60 million had been the average Chinese population since the first empire. But modern researchers have worked out quite a different figure, assuming the Ming carried on the population growth that had already started with the Song. The average estimation puts the Chinese population in the mid-Ming period at 155 million. By the middle of the 17th century, at the end of the dynasty, numbers are thought to have rocketed to 268 million. This would explain why Martin de Rada, visiting China in 1575, exclaimed that there were Infinite Chinese. This impressive population growth stemmed from basic internal causes, such as the absence of major wars for 250 years, and the continuous growth of agricultural output.

Improvements in medical knowledge must also be taken into account. Medicine and pharmacopeia had already experienced a swift development during the Song, Jin and Yuan dynasties, and Chinese medicine reached a peak during the Ming, both in terms of diagnosis and surgical techniques. Medical books were extremely widespread: Martin the Rada, for instance bought one about prenatal diagnosis. Medical family encyclopedias were widely used and by the end of the 16th century Li Shizen published **the world's best pharmacopeia**, the Bencao Gangmu, Compendium of Materia Medica.

All Chinese cities had many pharmacies, often specializing in the treatments prescribed by the different schools of medicine. **Let's look at three of them that** appear in the same Ming dynasty scroll. The first one, located beside a bookshop, specializes in internal medicine and strange diseases; the second one, located beside a shop making soups for medical uses, displays a great range of medicinal

plants; the third one specializes in all kinds of childhood ailments, both internal and external.

Compared with the rest of the world, Chinese people during the Ming era enjoyed enviable good health. But an external factor must also be taken into account to understand the population growth: the introduction of American plants. First came sweet potatoes and corn that became rapidly widespread because of their high nutritional value and their adaptability to difficult and poor soils where other plants didn't thrive. Peanuts and potatoes came also from America, and all these new plants provided basic food in times when rice or wheat were scarce, and thus contributed to population growth. **Let's add that tobacco** also reached southwest China by the end of the 16th century, and that it also spread quickly throughout the country. The new methods of cultivating cotton, introduced in the south with the Song, spread quickly throughout all China and cotton began to challenge ramie as the practical wear of the poor.

By the mid-Ming period, cotton wear had become the everyday clothing of urban populations, bringing about a substantial improvement in their everyday lives. In this part of the Ming scroll you can see the widespread use of cotton wear, as well as a second hand shop of cotton clothes. The south never lost its economic, demographic and political primacy that had characterized it since the Song dynasty. Shops like this one, advertising products from the south, were fashionable in all important Chinese cities.

Even with this population growth, male children fared better than female ones. Looking at this chart, it appears that everywhere there were roughly two males to every female. In part this was due to the fact that families were reluctant to register females and pay taxes for them, given that girls would soon leave the home and brought no profit to the family. But it also corroborates what many observers pointed out, that little girls were the subject of infanticide even though this was punished under the Ming legal Code. The most usual method, used already in Song times, was drowning the newborn girl in a water basin conveniently placed under **the mother's bed**. This is what appears in Chinese sources as "**washing the baby**". And in times of hardship girls were always sold before the boys, disappearing from view. If you add to that the foot binding that tormented their infancy, it is clear that the Ming and Qing periods were not happy times for Chinese women.