

THE EUROPEANS DISCOVERY OF XINA POMPEU FABRA UNIVERSITY BARCELONA

THE CHINA THAT EUROPEANS DISCOVERED: THE MING DYNASTY A SUSTAINABLE ADMINISTRATIVE PATTERN

Immediately after taking power, emperor Hongwu undertook an administrative territorial organization that would connect the court with all the households of his empire. All China was divided into a hierarchy of territorial units. On top were the provinces, which although smaller than the former Yuan provinces, were huge entities, many covering an area equivalent to that **of today's Spain. Provinces were divided into prefectures, these into sub-prefectures**, and then into counties, which were the lowest entity to which the central government appointed a civil service official and a military garrison.

By the end of the dynasty there were more than a thousand counties. Each of these levels - prefecture, sub-prefecture and county - was governed by a triangle of powers. This pyramidal pattern of overlapping and divided powers contributed decisively to the long-term sustainability of the dynasty. First of all came the civil service, which held the highest authority. All members of the civil service were rated every three years by their superiors. The second power at each level was the military administration although this was clearly subordinate to the civil service. Finally there was the body of censors that surveyed both the civil service and the military administration. These were the visible powers down to the county level. But 90% of Chinese people lived in areas that were below the county level. These areas were organized into cantons, townships, and finally wards. At these levels there were no officials in charge, but all households were grouped into permanent registered units that were supposed to be self-sufficient and from which the state could extract taxes, organize the service levy and guarantee law and order. This organization was done through the lijia system. All households were organized into groups of ten, and eleven such groups constituted a lijia. Inside the lijia, the ten wealthiest households were grouped together and were designated as the elders of the lijia who secured contact with the civil service appointees of the county level above. The lijia were basically fiscal units and the members of the lijia were mutually responsible. If, for instance, one household avoided taxes, the fiscal burden that it avoided would fall on the rest.

The Yuan had farmed out the tax collecting to the Muslims, creating such a growing resistance among peasants that in the end it became an insurmountable task. To avoid this, the Ming turned over the collecting and administration of tax levies to the elders of the lijia.

The efficiency of the system will amaze the first European visitors to China. All Chinese households were inside the system, and so were people and land. Every house had to hang a notice on its door stating how many people and cattle there were in that household, something that Marco Polo had already noticed in Yuan China, and that 16th century European travelers will also signal in Ming China. But the Ming state was much more effective than the Yuan, and was really able to draw up a register of every family and every plot of land that could be taxed. The fact that bureaucratic appointments stopped at county level had important administrative consequences. Even with steady population growth, the number of centrally appointed bureaucrats did not need to expand, because at lijia level - which covered 90% of Chinese population - the tasks were not done by the civil service, but by the elders. This is why the number of employees in the Chinese civil service stayed more or less the same throughout the Ming dynasty, rarely exceeding 20,000 for the whole empire, whether its population was 60 million or 250 million. The civil service budget did not increase either. What did grow a lot however, keeping pace with population growth, was the number of people holding some kind of political responsibility at sub-county level.

There were of course some cracks in the system.

Ming China had been designed as a broad blanket of well controlled communities, living on the resources provided by agriculture and internal trade.

But there were areas where this control vanished: the mountainous interior and the south east maritime front.

Bandits and pirates thrived there, at times menacing the dynasty's stability.

From mid 15th to mid 16th centuries, rural south China lived through serious upheavals, while in the same period the south-east coast was a constant prey of pirates.

Even so, Ming China lasted for 3 hundred years because for most of its time both the elite and the peasants were happy with it.