China: Ming dynasty (AD 1368-1644)

The Ming (literally 'brilliant') dynasty was founded by General Zhu Yuanzhang in 1368. He came from an unusual background, being an orphan and a Buddhist novice from Nanjing.

The previous rulers, the Mongols, had generally been ineffective towards the end of their Yuan dynasty (1279-1368). Peasant unrest was compounded by droughts and famines, and there were many rebellions against the alien ruling power. Zhu Yuanzhang emerged victorious among the various warring factions, and pushed the Yuan court back into Inner Mongolia. He declared himself emperor, with the title Hongwu ('vast military accomplishment'). He kept his capital at Nanjing and ruled until 1399. In 1421, under Yongle (1403-24), the third Ming emperor, Beijing was completely rebuilt and became the official capital. Although the city has been rebuilt in part many times since, the Ming design has been maintained.

The Ming dynasty was one of the more stable and longer-lasting dynasties of Chinese history. Hongwu reorganized the government in a way that was effective when the emperor was strong and capable, but worked badly when the emperor was not conscientious. After Hongwu and Yongle, few of the Ming emperors stand out as great rulers.

The short reign of the Xuande emperor (1426-35), however, was regarded by later Ming scholars as a golden age of good government and patronage of the arts. Xuande was himself a talented artist and poet, and he gathered a group of artists at court. Notable advances were made in the porcelains produced at the imperial kilns at Jingdezhen.

In the later fifteenth century, Chenghua (1465-87) and Hongzhizhi (1488-1505) presided over competent administrations. The later Ming rulers, however, were less interested in the details of government, which deteriorated as a result. By the late sixteenth century, the Ming dynasty was further weakened by foreign marauders and internal rebellions. Following the suicide of the last Ming emperor, the Mancus invaded northern China and proclaimed the Qing dynasty.