

# Historical Background

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## Yuan Dynasty (1279–1368)

In 1206, a young man named Temujin was elected as the leader of the Mongol people. He is known to the world by his title, Genghis Khan, which roughly translates as "Great Ruler." By the year of his death in 1227, his armies had conquered a vast territory that stretched from the Caspian Sea to the Sea of Japan (Central Asia, parts of the Middle East, and areas of present-day Manchuria that lay to the north of China and northwest of the Korean Peninsula).

Several years before his death, Genghis divided his empire among his four sons, and designated his third son, Ögedei, as his successor. In 1229, Ögedei was confirmed as the Great Khan by formal election in a *kuraltai* (assembly of the people). The Mongol empire continued to expand during Ögedei's rule, reaching its furthest extent in the west by the time of his death in 1241. The Jin dynasty in Mongolia and northern China fell to Ögedei's forces in 1234, laying the groundwork for a prolonged campaign to conquer the lands of the Song dynasty. During this interval, the Silk Road trade routes were re-established and protected by Mongol forces. The resulting communication between East and West was unprecedented and had long-term effects on the history of China.

In 1264, after defeating other contenders, Kubilai Khan (1215–1294), Ögedei's nephew, became the undisputed fifth and last Great Khan of the Mongol Empire. By 1279 he had defeated the forces of the Song dynasty, uniting China once again. He assumed the title of emperor and chose Yuan, which means "eternal," as the name of his dynasty. He established his capital, Dadu or "great capital," in the area of present-day Beijing. After the death of Kubilai in 1294, weak Yuan emperors failed to deal effectively with internal problems and power struggles. Mongol control disintegrated, and the dynasty came to an end in 1368.

## Ming Dynasty (1368–1644)

By the 1340s the stage had been set for the collapse of Yuan control over China. A great plague wiped out as much as half the population in some areas. Floods resulted from the failure to repair dikes and levees. By the 1350s, these calamities led to numerous peasant uprisings. Zhu Yuanzhang, the capable leader of a group called the Red Turbans, rose to power and prominence in the 1360s. By 1368 he was able to proclaim a new dynasty and begin the process of driving the Mongols out of China. After his forces took Dadu, the Yuan dynasty's capital, without any resistance, the remaining Mongols quietly returned to the northern steppes. Zhu Yuanzhang took the name Ming, which means "bright," for his dynasty, and Hongwu, or "huge force," for his reign name. He chose Nanjing for his capital, leaving his son Zhu Di in charge of Dadu.

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In 1398 Hongwu died and was succeeded by his grandson, Zhu Yunwen. Interested in returning to a Confucian model of government, Zhu took the reign name Jaen ("establishing civil virtue"). However, he only ruled until 1402 when his uncle Zhu Di captured Nanjing and seized power for himself. Zhu Di took the reign name of Dongle, "perpetual happiness." In the early 15th century, Emperor Dongle moved the capital to Beijing ("northern capital"). There, between 1406 and 1420, he built the Forbidden City as his imperial residence and seat of government.

Relative peace in the 15th century resulted in the rapid growth of both the population and the economy. Improved trade routes led to an increase in tea production in Zhejiang and Hunan. Technical innovations energized the textile industry, including the weaving of silk and cotton, which were often richly embroidered. Likewise, new products such as blue and white ware gave the ceramics industry a boost. Cities and urban culture expanded to accommodate the artisans in these industries and the merchants trading in their commodities.

A great flowering of the arts accompanied economic growth. Court painters created landscapes, narrative scroll paintings, and flower-and-bird compositions. Ceramics, metalwork, and lacquer combined traditional Chinese elements with foreign influences that came into China over the Silk Road. Music, poetry, and calligraphy flourished, as did literature: three of the four classic Chinese novels—*The Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, *Water Margin*, and *Journey to the West*—appeared at this time.

In the early 16th century, European traders began to arrive in Chinese ports, hoping to profit from China's sought-after goods. At first the Ming administration resisted their efforts, but by 1557 they granted the Portuguese the right to trade in Macao. In 1565 the Spanish also began trading with China from their base in Manila. China was soon the richest nation in the world as silver from the Spanish colonies flowed into the economy. Around 1600 Jesuit missionaries also sought entrance into China. Impressed by their learning, Chinese emperors welcomed the Jesuits as advisors to the imperial court for the next 150 years.

Around the end of the 16th century, the Ming dynasty faced an increasing array of problems. New interpretations of Confucianism put emphasis on individual morality rather than on cooperative problem solving. This tendency led to political conflicts that prevented effective government operation. Attempts at tax reform failed to consider the disparity in the distribution of wealth in the empire, which led to difficulties for rural farmers. Finally, amid all of these internal challenges, a new power on China's northern frontier was on the rise.

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## Qing Dynasty (1644–1911)

Around the end of the 16th century, a Jurchin leader named Nurhaci (1559–1626) brought together various nomadic groups who became known as the Manchus. To encourage the consolidation of these groups, Nurhaci mandated the creation of a written script and history. He also formed a military organization called the Eight Banners, which divided Jurchin's soldiers into eight groups of Bannermen. His forces quickly conquered the area of present-day Manchuria, and his heirs set their sights on China.

In 1626 the Manchus proclaimed the revival of the Jin dynasty. Their capital city, established at Mukden (present-day Shenyang), was based on the layout of Beijing. In 1636 they chose the new name of Qing, meaning "pure," for their dynasty to emphasize their intention to purify China by seizing power from the Ming dynasty.

Meanwhile, massive revolts had broken out in China. One force, led by a former Ming official named Li Zicheng, managed to capture Beijing. The last Ming emperor hanged himself on a tree just outside the Forbidden City, and Li Zicheng proclaimed his own dynasty. The Manchu forces took advantage of the internal conflicts and successfully defeated Li Zicheng in 1644. The same year, the young Qing emperor Shunzhi was proclaimed the ruler of all China during a ceremony in the Forbidden City. By 1683, Qing forces had conquered the remainder of China and established a dynasty that endured until 1911.

The Qing rulers adopted many aspects of the traditional Confucian-based Chinese bureaucracy, including the imperial examination system, but they were also careful to make various adjustments to ensure their ultimate control of the administration. Qing officials made Neo-Confucian philosophy, which emphasized obedience of subject to ruler, the official state doctrine. They introduced various requirements related to court dress, and they also ordered their new male subjects to adopt the Manchu hairstyle, in which the front of the head was shaved while the remaining hair was pulled into a queue (braid).

Between 1661 and 1795, the Qing Empire was ruled by only three emperors, Kangxi, Yongzheng, and Qianlong. This long period of stability and prosperity resulted in a golden age for China. The borders of the empire were gradually expanded to include large areas of Central Asia and Tibet, which kept the dynasty safe from nomadic invasions. These emperors also supported Chinese arts and culture. Emperors and court officials alike became patrons of painters, calligraphers, poets, and artisans.

By the end of the Qianlong emperor's reign in 1799, troubles began to darken the Qing golden age. The unparalleled increase in population began to strain the limits of Chinese food production. This shortage was coupled with inflation and financial instability. To make matters worse, the Qing policy of isolation from the Western world was sorely challenged. Beginning in the mid-18th century, Western trade was only allowed in Guangzhou (Canton)

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and had to be arranged through state-licensed merchants organized into a guild known as the Cohong (*hong* means “business”). The British sought to change the Cohong system because they wanted to market the products of their newly industrialized economy. The failure of their efforts had dire consequences for China.

The Industrial Revolution, which began in Great Britain around 1760, led to revolutionary changes in almost every aspect of life in European countries. Factories and railways as well as steam- and coal-powered machinery proliferated. The publication of Adam Smith’s *Wealth of Nations* in 1776 fueled the desire of European merchants to trade freely throughout the world. In particular, European governments sought to counterbalance the flow of silver into China by selling products to the Chinese. The British soon discovered that opium, which they grew in India, could be sold very profitably in China, although it was illegal to do so. Eventually, the number of opium addicts in China began to threaten the security of the Qing state, and officials tried to enforce the ban on importing opium. This led to the humiliating defeat of the Chinese in the First Opium War (1839–42). The Qing government was forced to pay an indemnity, cede Hong Kong to the British, and open new trading ports to European ships. European demands for trading concessions continued to escalate, triggering the Second Opium War (1856–1860), also known as the Anglo-French War. Once again, the conflict resulted in defeat and further concessions by the Chinese.

The failure of the Qing government to protect China from foreign domination led to several uprisings, which in turn caused widespread famine. During the Taiping Rebellion, which lasted from 1850 to 1864, rebel forces captured most of southern China and the city Nanjing before they were defeated by Qing armies. Efforts to introduce reform and modernization to China made by the Guangxu emperor were too late to stop the swift decline of the dynasty. Internal opposition, led by Empress Dowager Cixi, overturned his reforms. In the late 19th century, further concessions to European powers sparked the Boxer Rebellion, which was quelled by Western international troops. Emperor Guangxu died in 1908. Pu Yi, the last Qing emperor, took the throne in 1909 at the age of two. An army mutiny in 1911 delivered the final blow to the dynasty, and province after province declared independence from imperial rule. Pu Yi officially abdicated his throne in 1912 at the age of six, bringing imperial rule in China to an end.