

## *Ming Dynasty*

The Ming dynasty began in 1368, and lasted until 1644 A.D. Its founder was a peasant, the third of only three peasants ever to become an emperor in China. He is known as Hongwu Emperor, and led the revolt against the Mongols and the Yuan Dynasty. He was constantly

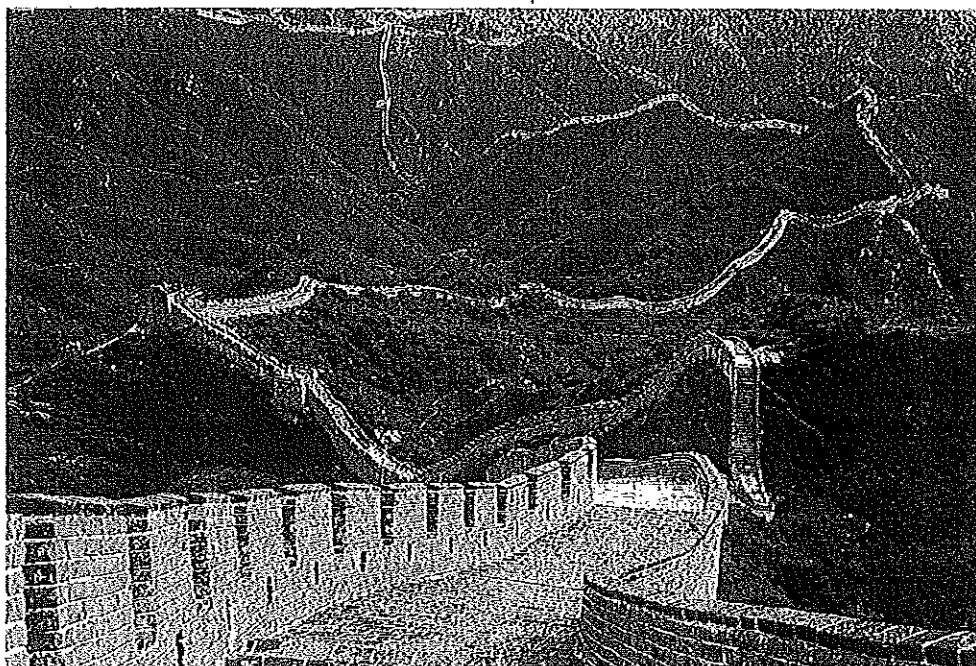
worried about conspiracies against himself, and despite the many moral homilies he gave, favored violence in dealing with any one suspected of plotting against him or associated with the conspirators. The capital was originally located in Nanjing but the third emperor moved the capital to Beijing.

As a result of his peasant origins, Hongwu created laws that improved the peasant life. He kept the land tax low, and kept the granaries stocked to guard against famine. He also maintained the dikes on the Yellow and Yangtze Rivers. However, economically he lacked the vision to push trade. He supported the creation of self-supporting communities and, in a typically Confucian viewpoint, felt agriculture should be the country's source of wealth and that trade was ignoble and parasitic.

While retaining the Confucian view that being a merchant is an inferior occupation, Hongwu discarded the belief that military too was inferior and developed a militant class that ranked higher than any civil servant. Maintaining and having a strong military was important because, even though the Mongols had been defeated, they were still a threat to China. The name Hongwu means Vast Military and reflects the increased prestige of the military.

A great cultural development of the Ming Dynasty was that of the novel. These novels developed from the writings of Chinese story tellers. As a result, they were written in the everyday language, not the language of the nobility. Also, they were divided into chapters at the points where the storyteller would have stopped to collect money. Some of the best known novels of the Ming Dynasty are still read today. Wood-cut and block-printing of art also became more popular at this time. The main market for these prints came from the people who had recently moved into the cities from the country areas. Porcelain production and diversification occurred. Blue and white porcelain became the normal form, but experimentation in two color and even three color porcelain began.

Encyclopedias were written containing important information from a variety of fields, such as geography, music and medicine. Dictionaries were also written; the one that had the most influence on the future was written in 1615 A.D. and reduced the number of signs for Chinese characters to 214, as opposed to the 540 plus signs of previous dictionaries.



Another accomplishment of the Ming was the building of the Great Wall. While Great Walls had been built in earlier times, most of what is seen today was either built or repaired by the Ming. The brick and granite work was enlarged, the watch towers were redesigned and cannons were placed along the wall.

Hongwu wanted to control all aspects of government so that no other group could gain enough power to overthrow him. With this goal in mind, he eliminated the prime minister's office and secretariat, leaving himself incredible amounts of work. As a result of this, the emperors were forced to rely on eunuchs for more administration purposes. This led to the eunuchs, for the first time, being educated. Families that weren't as wealthy or influential as they would have liked, often gained power when one of the males voluntarily became a eunuch.

From the very beginning of the Ming Dynasty, money was a problem. At first, paper currency was used. However, Hongwu did not understand inflation and gave out so much paper money as rewards that by 1425 A.D. the currency was worth 1/70 of its original value. This led to a return to the use of copper coins. The government did not make enough coins and counterfeiting became a problem. At this point, the provinces were required to mint their own coins. Unfortunately, some of them added lead to the coins, which depleted their value. Due to the abundance of counterfeit coins, their value again declined. This coin problem was amplified by an increasing need for money due to the growth of trade.

Although merchants and trade in general were looked down upon, China had established sea routes that were used for trade with Japan and south Asia. Starting in 1405 A.D., Zheng began a series of seven naval expeditions that went as far as the east coast of Africa. These trips followed established routes and were mainly diplomatic. The last of

these voyages was completed in 1433 A.D. At this point, China was far ahead of the rest of the world in naval capabilities. Their ships could carry as many as 500 men. However, after the last voyage was completed none were ever again attempted. In fact, records of the trips were destroyed and shipbuilding was restricted to small-size vessels. As a result, China's coast was frequently attacked by pirates.

As in previous dynasties, internal power struggles eventually led to the downfall of the Ming Dynasty. Groups formed among the eunuchs and the nobility that worked to gain sole power and place one of their leaders as emperor. Weak leaders were overpowered and children were often placed on the throne who had no control over their empire. At this time, the Manchu were also beginning to attack Chinese cities that existed in Manchuria, eventually gaining control first of the whole of Manchuria and then in 1644 over China, thus beginning the Qing Dynasty.