

Thumbnail Sketches:

Ming (1368 - 1644)

Then came the Ming. The Ming rulers distinguished themselves by being fatter, lazier, crazier, and nastier than the average Imperial family. After the first Ming Emperor discovered that his prime minister was plotting against him, not only was the prime minister beheaded, but his entire family and anyone even remotely connected with him. Eventually, about 40,000 (no, that is not a misprint) people were executed in connection with this case alone. They were also virulent Neo-Confucianists.

In the early 1400s, a sailor named Zheng He (with a fleet of some 300-plus ships) sailed as far west as Mogadishu and Jiddah, and he may (or may not) have gotten to Madagascar. But once the sailors came back, the trips were never followed up on. Conservative scholars at court failed to see the importance of them. For the first time in history, China was turning inwards, clinging to an incorrect interpretation of an outmoded philosophy.

Qing (Manchu) (1644 - 1911)

The Qing weren't the worst rulers; under them the arts flowered and culture bloomed. Moreover, they attempted to copy Chinese institutions and philosophy to a much greater extent than then the Mongols of the Yuan. However, in their attempt to emulate the Chinese, they were even more conservative and inflexible than the Ming.

To live during the Qing Dynasty was to live in interesting times. Most importantly, the Western world attempted to make contact on a government-to-government basis, and, at least initially, failed. The Chinese (more specifically, the ultra-conservative Manchus) had no room in their world-view for the idea of independent, equal nations (this viewpoint, to a certain degree, still persists today). There was the rest of the world, and then there was China. It wasn't that they rejected the idea of a community of nations; it's that they couldn't conceive of it. It would be like trying to teach a Buddhist monk about the Father, Son, and the Holy Ghost. This viewpoint was so pervasive that Chinese reformers who advocated more flexibility in China's dealings with the West were often accused of being Westerners with Chinese faces.

MING / QING (CH'ING) CHINA

OVERVIEW

- Ming China (1368-1644) and Qing China (1644-1911) were late traditional cultures, more static than Europe during the same period.
- China has a highly cyclical history. A dynastic, centralized bureaucratic Confucian state has been the stable, workable pattern of government and society for centuries.
- In the 1200s, China had been invaded by the Mongols, who turned them out of their own government and discriminated against them in their own administrations. It took over a hundred years for a native Chinese dynasty to overthrow the invading force. The Ming government which returned to power was more *xenophobic* than previous Chinese dynasties had been, and less in love with foreign ideas and influences.
- The Ming and Qing dynasties were China's last two dynasties. The first was Chinese, the second a conquering power, in which the ruling house and an important segment of the military leadership were Manchu, another ethnic group.
- The two periods were nevertheless very similar in their attributes. Many of the economic and demographic developments which began under the Ming continued under the Qing.

Population Growth:

- China's population doubled over course of Ming dynasty, from 60 million in 1368 to 125 in 1644. It tripled under the Qing dynasty, reaching 410 million in the mid-19th century. This population growth stimulated commerce and gave new prominence to the scholar-gentry class.
- Population growth was partly triggered by an increase in the food supply. New rice strains and the spread of food cultivation methods learned under the Sung dynasty led to 40% higher yields. New lands brought under cultivation accounted for the rest. During the late Ming, new crops were also brought in from America (maize, sweet potatoes, peanuts) which increased the food stocks.
- The strong population growth during these centuries is still something of a mystery. Ming-Qing China did experience the longest continuous period of good government in Chinese history — Ming rule was stable for longer than previous dynasties, and the transition period to the Qing era was shorter and less destructive than was usually the case in Chinese history.
- By the 18th century, the citizens at large were generally the most prosperous in Chinese history; but by the 19th century, the standard of living was in decline, in part due to the pressures of this population surge.

Commerce:

- Early Ming emperors were isolationist and agrarian in their orientation, and tried to restrict foreign trade.
- By the mid-16th century, trade started to grow again, buoyed by the rising population and a relaxation of governmental controls. By the early 19th century, China was the most commercialized non-industrial society in the world.
- Stimuli to commerce came from imported silver from mines in western Japan and from the Spanish colonies after the 1570s. The Chinese traded silks and porcelains.

Family Structure:

- Family structure changed little during these two dynasties. The family ideal was still Confucian; women were expected to obey the male heads of households.
- Women became physically more restricted. Footbinding, which had appeared among the elites in the Sung dynasty, spread through the upper classes in the Ming dynasty and to some commoners by the Qing dynasty.

Political System:

- The government remained similar to that of the Sung or Yuan (Mongol) eras, only much stronger.
- The government was strengthened by the spread of education, the use of Confucianism as an ideology, and by stronger emperors, better government finances, more competent officials, and a larger gentry class.
- The uniform quality of Chinese Confucianism gave a unitary character to Ming and Qing culture.

The Emperor:

- The Ming-Qing emperors were strong, absolute rulers who ruled personally.
- Unfortunately, during the 16th and 17th centuries the Ming dynasty saw a series of emperors uninterested in government, who were devoted to physical or aesthetic pleasures or religious quests. Power increasingly passed into the hands of court officials or eunuchs. But the Qing era reestablished the pattern of strong personal imperial government.
- Emperors wielded despotic power at their courts, and had personal secret police and prisons. They tortured even high government officials. Despite this, Chinese court officials were highly loyal and dedicated, following Confucian ethical codes.

The Civil Service Exam:

- The quality of the Ming-Qing government was largely a product of the ethical commitment and exceptional ability of its officers. No officers today approach the power and prestige of these Chinese officials. Rewards for a career as an official were great and competition was intense.

The Gentry

- One aspect of government of growing significance under the Ming-Qing system was the rising gentry class, an intermediate layer which developed between the elite bureaucracy dominated by the ruling classes, and the villagers beneath them.
- The Chinese gentry were not a rural elite, but rather an urban upper-middle class, living in market towns. They usually owned land, were able to avoid manual labor, and had sufficient funds to educate their children. They performed quasi-official functions like maintaining schools and Confucian temples, roads, bridges and infrastructure.
- The gentry class was the matrix from which officials arose. They were generally conservative upholders of Confucian values, and sustainers of the dynasty.

Culture:

- The Ming and Qing Dynasties were periods of cultural explosion. A far greater number of literary works were written in this period, and bookstores came of age. Chinese culture had turned inward in response to Buddhism during the Sung dynasty, and out of antipathy towards Mongols during and immediately after the Yuan dynasty. These inward-looking tendencies increased in during the Ming-Qing period, and Chinese culture became almost impervious to outside influence.
- Neo-Confucianism orthodox philosophy held great dominance, and traditional high culture was most greatly valued.

Ming Foreign Relations:

- The third emperor and his successors managed China's frontiers with a **tribute system** — ambassadors of tribute kings acted out their subordination to the emperor, in return for confirmation of their status, and appointment to the Chinese nobility. This system conferred significant benefits on those willing to participate.
- The most far-ranging ventures of the 3rd Ming emperor were the Zheng He maritime expeditions which sailed to Southeast Asia, India, the Arabian Gulf, and East Africa between 1405 and 1433. Trade was not the primary purpose of the expeditions, which were undertaken mainly to make China's glory known to distant kingdoms and to enroll them in the tribute system.

- These costly expeditions ended as suddenly as they began, due possibly to other financial pressures in the empire — there had been dynastic fighting in Mongolia and the capital at Peking was under construction. The voyages were remarkable not only because they came a half century before the Portuguese explorations, but also because they showed the Chinese had the same maritime technology as the Europeans had, but ultimately decided not to use it.
- The final foreign threat to the Ming were the **Manchu**. After coming to power in 1644, the Manchu court spent decades consolidating its rule within China — it had several rebellions and claims against the throne to put down.

QING (CH'ING / MANCHU) CHINA

- The collapse of Ming power in 1644 and the transition to Manchu rule was a surprisingly smooth transition.
- The Manchu, unlike the Mongols, were already partly "*Sinicized*" at the time of conquest. They had been vassals of the Ming Chinese state, and had had experience ruling over the Chinese who had settled in Manchuria to the north of the Great Wall.
- In the late 16th century, the Manchurian tribes were united by an extremely able ruler who proclaimed a new dynasty. When the Ming government collapsed, the Manchu presented themselves as conservative upholders of Confucian stability and order. The Chinese gentry preferred the Manchu to the Chinese rebel leaders who were claiming the Ming throne, whom they regarded as bandits.
- As a tiny fraction of the population, the Manchu adopted institutions to maintain themselves as ethnically separate group. Manchurians were given stipends and lands to cultivate, and were not permitted to marry Chinese, their children had to study Manchu, and they were not permitted to bind their daughters' feet. This ethnic distinction of became less important as the dynasty became more Sinicized. Beneath the governors, most officials and virtually all district managers were Chinese.

Contact with the West:

- Europeans had first arrived in China during the T'ang and Yuan dynasties. But only with Europe's large ocean expansion in the 16th century did they arrive in large numbers.
- Some came as missionaries, of which most successful were the **Jesuits**, who first dressed as Buddhists and then Confucians, learned Chinese and the Chinese classics, and engaged in conversations with Confucian scholars. They used their knowledge of western science to win appointment to the Chinese courts. The Jesuits kept their positions when the Manchu came to power in 1644. They tried to propagate Christianity and hence attacked Buddhism and Taoism as superstition, but they saw Confucianism as a rational philosophy which complimented Christianity. They reinterpreted Confucian ancestor rites as secular traditions. They made a few converts to Christianity but not many, creating small minority enclaves of Chinese Christians. When the Vatican came down against ancestor worship and forbid Chinese Christians to practice it in 1715 and 1742, the emperor banned Christianity in China, the missionaries were forced to flee, and the Chinese Christians became persecuted.
- Other Europeans came to trade. At first the Western ships mingled openly with other ships from Southeast Asia in a fairly open multi-port trade. Then during early 18th century the more restrictive "**Canton system**" evolved, where westerners could only trade at the seaport of Canton, outside its city walls. European traders were subject to strict regulation, but the trade was still profitable, and the British East India Company in particular developed a triangular commerce between China, India and Britain that first brought tea and silk to the English. For China, this trade brought in an influx of specie, or hard currency, and the Chinese officials in charge grew tremendously wealthy. The Chinese kept European trade restricted to Canton so that Chinese contact with Westerners would be minimized.

End of the 18th Century:

- By the 19th century, the ample financial reserves that had existed to run China throughout the 18th century were dwindling, but China entered 19th century with a stable government and peaceful society, and few visible signs of the coming trouble.

I. The quest for political stability

- A. The Ming dynasty
 1. Ming government (1368-1644) drove the Mongols out of China
 - a. Centralized government control; faced new invasions from the Mongols
 - b. Rebuilt and repaired the Great Wall to prevent northern invasions
 - c. Restored Chinese cultural traditions and civil service examinations
 2. Ming decline
 - a. Coastal cities and trade disrupted by pirates, 1520s--1560s
 - b. Government corruption and inefficiency caused by powerful eunuchs
 - c. Famines and peasant rebellions during the 1630s and 1640s
 - d. Manchu invaders with peasant support led to final Ming collapse, 1644
- B. The Qing dynasty
 1. The Manchus (1644-1911), invaders from Manchuria to the northeast
 - a. Overwhelmed the Chinese forces; proclaimed the Qing dynasty, 1644
 - b. Originally pastoral nomads, organized powerful military force
 - c. Captured Korea and Mongolia first, then China
 - d. Remained an ethnic elite; forbade intermarriage with Chinese
- C. The son of heaven and the scholar-bureaucrats
 1. Emperor considered "the son of heaven"
 - a. Heavenly powers and an obligation to maintain order on the earth
 - b. Privileged life, awesome authority, and paramount power
 2. Governance of the empire fell to civil servants, called scholar-bureaucrats
 - a. Schooled in Confucian texts, calligraphy
 - b. Had to pass rigorous examinations with strict quotas
 3. The examination system and Chinese society
 - a. Civil service exam intensely competitive; few chosen for government positions
 - b. Others could become local teachers or tutors
 - c. System created a meritocracy with best students running the country
 - d. Wealthy families had some advantages over poor families
 - e. Confucian curriculum fostered common values

II. Economic and social changes

- A. The patriarchal family
 1. The basic unit of Chinese society was the family; the highest value, filial piety
 - a. Included duties of children to fathers, loyalty of subjects to the emperor
 - b. Important functions of clan
 2. Gender relations: strict patriarchal control over all females
 - a. Parents preferred boys over girls; marriage was to continue male line
 - b. Female infanticide; widows encouraged to commit suicide
 - c. Footbinding of young girls increased
 - d. Lowest status person in family was a young bride

Neo-Confucianism combined Taoist and Buddhist ideas with existing Confucian ideas to create a more complete metaphysics than had ever existed before. Many forms of Confucianism have, however, declared their opposition to the Buddhist and Taoist belief systems, despite their importance and popularity in Chinese tradition.