

A HISTORY OF IMPERIAL CHINA

Chinese History

Part IV

From Song Reunification to the Fall of the Qing Dynasty

Six centuries of dynasties, conquest, and cultural brilliance

DYNASTIES AT A GLANCE • 979–1644 AD



KEY EVENTS OF EACH ERA

Reunification (979) · Movable type · Paper money · Naval commerce boom

Jurchen rule of northern China; coexisted with Southern Song

Mongol rule · Marco Polo · Grand Canal extended

Great Wall rebuilt · Forbidden City · Zheng He's voyages · Silver economy

The Northern Song: Reunification & Prosperity

Reunification (979 AD)

Emperor Taizong completed China's reunification by subduing the last independent kingdoms, ending the chaotic Five Dynasties & Ten Kingdoms era and restoring centralized Han rule.

Expanded Civil Service

The civil examination system was dramatically widened, opening government careers to talented scholars regardless of birth and producing a highly educated Confucian bureaucracy.

Economic Revolution

Kaifeng, the Song capital, held over 1 million residents — one of the world's largest cities. Paper money, credit instruments, and a flourishing maritime trade connected China to the world.

1 Million+

Residents in Kaifeng
(Song dynasty capital)

300 Years

Total duration of
the Song Dynasty

~30%

Share of world GDP
held by Song China

Song Dynasty: Culture & Innovation

Movable Type Printing

Bi Sheng invented ceramic movable type around 1040 AD, centuries before Gutenberg. Books became affordable, literacy spread, and Chinese literature flourished across East Asia.

Gunpowder Weapons

Song engineers developed fire arrows, incendiary bombs, and proto-firearms. The world's first known formula for gunpowder appears in a Song military manual of 1044 AD.

Magnetic Compass

Chinese sailors adopted the magnetic compass for open-ocean navigation, enabling the Song to build the most advanced maritime trade network in the medieval world.

Landscape Painting

Fan Kuan and Guo Xi created monumental hanging scrolls depicting misty mountains — works still regarded as the pinnacle of Chinese visual art and brush technique.

Neo-Confucianism

Philosopher Zhu Xi synthesized Confucianism with Buddhist and Taoist ideas into a moral system that shaped Chinese, Korean, Japanese, and Vietnamese thought for 700 years.

Porcelain & Maritime Trade

Song blue-and-white ceramics were exported to the Islamic world, Africa, and Southeast Asia. Maritime Silk Road trade generated revenue that dwarfed the land route.

Conquest of China & the Yuan Dynasty

1211 Genghis Khan launches invasion of northern China (Jin Dynasty)

1215 Zhongdu (modern Beijing), Jin capital, falls to the Mongols

1234 Jin Dynasty collapses; Mongols control all of northern China

1271 Kublai Khan proclaims the Yuan Dynasty — first foreigners to rule all of China

1279 Naval battle of Yamen — last Song loyalists defeated; dynasty ends

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Heaven is weary of the inordinate luxury of China. I am its punishment.

— Genghis Khan

Mongol Rule & Global Connections

● New Capital at Dadu

Kublai Khan built Dadu (modern Beijing) as his imperial capital — a cosmopolitan hub linking China to the Mongol realms of Persia and Central Asia.

● Marco Polo's Account

The Venetian traveler spent 17 years at Kublai Khan's court (1275–1292), and his published memoirs introduced Europeans to Chinese civilization.

● The Grand Canal Extended

The Grand Canal was lengthened to supply northern Dadu with rice from the Yangtze Delta, a monumental feat of hydraulic engineering.

● Paper Currency at Scale

The Yuan deployed paper money (chao) as the sole legal tender across the empire — the first such system in world history at this scale.

THE YUAN IN NUMBERS

97 Years

Yuan ruled China
1271–1368

30–50%

Population decline in
northern China during conquest

17 Years

Marco Polo's stay at
Kublai Khan's court

1368 AD

Zhu Yuanzhang drives
out the Mongols

Rise of the Ming Dynasty • 1368–1424 AD

From Peasant Rebel to Emperor

Zhu Yuanzhang — orphaned son of a peasant farmer — rose through famine-driven rebellion to found the Ming Dynasty in 1368, driving out the Mongols and restoring Han Chinese rule.

Hongwu Emperor (r. 1368–1398)

Zhu Yuanzhang rebuilt state institutions, purged officials, and restructured agriculture. He concentrated power directly in the emperor's hands, abolishing the position of Chancellor.

Yongle Emperor (r. 1402–1424)

After a bitter civil war, Yongle moved the capital to Beijing, commissioned the Forbidden City, sent Zheng He on maritime voyages, and compiled the Yongle Encyclopedia.

Nanjing → Beijing (1421)

After a decade of construction, the massive Forbidden City was complete. Beijing became China's political and symbolic center for the next 600 years.

KEY DATES

1368

Zhu Yuanzhang founds the Ming Dynasty at Nanjing

1380

Hongwu abolishes the Chancellery; total imperial control

1402

Yongle seizes the throne after the Jingnan civil war

1405

Zheng He's first great sea voyage sets sail

1421

Imperial capital formally transferred to Beijing

The Great Wall, The Forbidden City & Zheng He's Voyages

The Great Wall

Military Engineering

Most of the Great Wall visible today dates to the Ming period — rebuilt in durable brick and stone. Stretching over 5,500 miles with watchtowers and garrison posts, it was an enormous state infrastructure project employing hundreds of thousands. It defined China's northern frontier for two centuries.

The Forbidden City

Imperial Architecture

Built 1406–1420 under the Yongle Emperor, the Forbidden City was the world's largest palace complex: 980 buildings, an estimated 9,999 rooms. Home to 24 Ming and Qing emperors over nearly 500 years, it embodied cosmic order — its layout aligned with heaven, its name meaning 'Forbidden to the common people.'

Zheng He's Voyages

Maritime Exploration

Between 1405–1433, the Muslim eunuch admiral commanded seven treasure fleets to Southeast Asia, India, Arabia, and East Africa. His flagship measured over 400 feet — four times Columbus's Santa María. The voyages projected Chinese power, established tribute networks, and brought back exotic animals like giraffes to the imperial court.

Ming Culture, Society & the Silver Economy

ARTS & LITERATURE

Classic Novels

Journey to the West and Water Margin — two of China's 'Four Great Classical Novels' — were written during the Ming era, blending mythology, adventure, and social commentary for mass audiences.

Blue-and-White Porcelain

Jingdezhen's workshops produced porcelain of extraordinary quality. Ming blue-and-white ware was exported globally and shaped ceramic traditions in the Islamic world, Europe, and beyond.

Kunqu Opera

Kunqu, the oldest surviving form of Chinese opera, flourished under Ming patronage — combining refined music, poetry, costume, and dance into an art form now a UNESCO Intangible Heritage.

ECONOMY & TRADE

The Silver Economy

Spanish silver from the Americas poured into China to pay for silk, porcelain, and tea exports. By 1600, China absorbed an estimated one-third of all New World silver production.

New World Crops

Sweet potatoes, maize, and peanuts arrived via the Manila trade route. These high-yield crops transformed Chinese agriculture, enabling farming in marginal soils and supporting population growth to ~200 million.

Single Whip Tax Reform

The landmark 1581 reform (Zhang Juzheng) consolidated all taxes into a single silver payment, simplifying administration, cutting corruption, and spurring commercialization across the empire.

THE FALL OF THE MING • Early 17th Century – 1644

Decline, Disaster & Dynastic Collapse

Eunuch Power

Powerful court eunuchs — especially Wei Zhongxian — dominated the late Ming court. Bureaucratic factional warfare paralyzed effective governance for decades.

Little Ice Age

Severe cold and drought from the 1620s devastated harvests across northern China, triggering the worst famines in centuries and collapsing state revenues.

Peasant Rebellions

Li Zicheng's rebel army captured Beijing in April 1644. The Chongzhen Emperor hanged himself on Coal Hill behind the Forbidden City as rebels entered the gates.

Manchu Invasion

The Manchu, unified under Nurhaci, built power northeast of China for decades. In 1644, they allied with Ming general Wu Sangui and swept into Beijing.

Financial Collapse

Disrupted New World silver flows, plague, and multi-front military campaigns bankrupted the imperial treasury. The state could no longer pay its armies.

1644: The Chongzhen Emperor's death ends the Ming Dynasty. The Qing Dynasty begins a new chapter of Chinese history.

The Manchu Conquest & Founding of the Qing

The Manchu Rise

Nurhaci unified the Jurchen tribes of Manchuria in the early 17th century, founding the Later Jin state and creating a formidable military machine built around the Eight Banners system.

Beijing Falls (1644)

When rebel Li Zicheng sacked Beijing, Manchu forces allied with Ming general Wu Sangui and swept through the Great Wall. The Shunzhi Emperor was enthroned in Beijing within months.

Pacifying the South

Full conquest took decades. Resistance in southern China, Taiwan (held by Zheng Chenggong until 1683), and scattered Ming loyalist movements required sustained military campaigns.

268 Years

Duration of the
Qing Dynasty

Last

Imperial dynasty
in Chinese history

1683 AD

Taiwan annexed;
China fully unified

The High Qing • 1661–1796

Three great emperors presided over China's last imperial golden age — vast territory, population growth, and cultural brilliance.

Kangxi Emperor

r. 1661–1722

China's longest-reigning emperor consolidated Qing rule, suppressed the Revolt of the Three Feudatories, annexed Taiwan, and patronized a famous dictionary and encyclopedia bearing his name. He was celebrated as a scholar-emperor who studied Western science.

Yongzheng Emperor

r. 1722–1735

A diligent and ruthless reformer, Yongzheng purged corruption, overhauled the tax system, and created the Grand Council — a small inner cabinet that concentrated executive power. His reign was brief but transformative for Qing administration.

Qianlong Emperor

r. 1735–1796

Under Qianlong, the Qing Empire reached its greatest territorial extent — absorbing Xinjiang, Tibet, and Mongolia. He commissioned the monumental Siku Quanshu encyclopedia. But his later reign saw the rise of the corrupt favorite Heshen, planting seeds of decline.

Qing Culture, Society & the Canton System

ARTS & LITERATURE

Dream of the Red Chamber

Cao Xueqin's masterpiece — written in the mid-18th century — is widely regarded as the greatest Chinese novel, weaving family saga, romance, and Buddhist philosophy across 120 chapters.

Qing Poetry & Painting

Orthodox painters revived Song and Yuan landscape traditions while eccentric artists like Bada Shanren developed bold, expressive styles. Eight Eccentrics of Yangzhou pushed ink painting into new territory.

The Four Treasures

Scholarly culture revolved around the 'Four Treasures' — brush, ink, paper, and inkstone. Qing emperors patronized vast literary projects including the 36,000-volume Siku Quanshu.

TRADE & FOREIGN CONTACT

The Canton System

From 1757, the Qing restricted all foreign trade to the single port of Canton (Guangzhou). European merchants dealt only with licensed Chinese merchants (Cohong) and faced strict limits on movement and contact.

Tea, Silk & the Trade Deficit

Britain's insatiable demand for Chinese tea created a huge trade imbalance. The East India Company paid in silver, draining British reserves — setting the stage for the opium trade.

The Macartney Mission (1793)

Lord Macartney traveled to Beijing seeking expanded trade rights. The Qianlong Emperor famously rebuffed him, declaring China had 'no need for your country's manufactures.' The cultural gulf was vast.

The Opium Wars & the Century of Humiliation

1839 Commissioner Lin Zexu destroys 20,000 chests of British opium at Canton

1842 First Opium War ends; Treaty of Nanking cedes Hong Kong, opens five treaty ports

1856 Second Opium War begins after the Arrow incident; Britain and France allied

1860 Anglo-French forces burn the Old Summer Palace; Beijing Convention signed

1860s System of unequal treaties imposes extraterritoriality and tariff limits on China

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Our ships can't fight their steamers, our swords can't match their guns.

— Qing official, 1842

UNEQUAL TREATIES

20+ ports opened
Hong Kong ceded
Extraterritoriality granted
Christian missions allowed

Rebellion, Reform & Dynastic Crisis • 1850–1900

Taiping Rebellion 1850–1864

The deadliest civil war in history. Hong Xiuquan, claiming to be the younger brother of Jesus, led a millenarian movement that controlled much of southern China. An estimated 20–30 million people died before Qing forces and Western-led troops suppressed it.

The Self-Strengthening Movement 1861–1895

Officials like Li Hongzhang and Zeng Guofan sought to modernize China's military and industry without abandoning Confucian values. They built arsenals, shipyards, and sent students abroad — but reform remained partial and poorly coordinated.

Sino-Japanese War 1894–1895

China's humiliating defeat by Meiji Japan shattered confidence in the Self-Strengthening Movement. Taiwan was ceded to Japan. The shock galvanized a new generation of reformers and revolutionaries who concluded that deeper change was needed.

Hundred Days' Reform 1898

The Guangxu Emperor issued sweeping reform edicts over 103 days. The Empress Dowager Cixi staged a coup, imprisoned the emperor, and executed the reformers. The episode revealed the court's deep resistance to genuine change.

Boxer Uprising 1900

Anti-foreign Boxer rebels besieged foreign legations in Beijing. Eight foreign powers invaded and looted the capital. The Boxer Protocol imposed a crippling 450-million-tael indemnity, further bankrupting the dynasty.

THE FALL OF THE QING • 1900–1912

Revolution, Republic & the End of Imperial China

New Policies (1901–1911)

After the Boxer debacle, Cixi finally launched the New Policies: abolishing the civil exams (1905), creating new armies and schools, and promising a constitution. Reform came too late to save the dynasty.

Sun Yat-sen & the Revolutionaries

Sun Yat-sen organized overseas Chinese and military students around his Three Principles of the People — nationalism, democracy, and people's livelihood — calling for the end of Manchu rule.

Wuchang Uprising (Oct 1911)

A mutiny by New Army soldiers in Wuchang ignited a cascade of provincial declarations of independence. Within weeks, most of China had broken from Qing control.

Abdication (Feb 12, 1912)

The six-year-old Xuantong Emperor (Puyi) abdicated. The Empress Dowager Longyu signed the edict ending 2,000 years of imperial rule. Yuan Shikai became provisional president of the Republic.

February 12, 1912: Puyi's abdication ends the last imperial dynasty and closes nearly 2,000 years of continuous Chinese empire.

979–1912: A Civilization Shaped in Dynasties

- The Song's printing press, gunpowder, and compass were transformative technologies that altered the course of world history
- The Great Wall and Forbidden City remain iconic symbols of Chinese power, artistry, and imperial ambition
- The Confucian civil service system shaped governance and culture across China, Korea, Vietnam, and Japan for centuries
- The Opium Wars and unequal treaties set China on a path of national revival that defined its 20th-century politics
- Qing territorial consolidation — Xinjiang, Tibet, Mongolia — established the borders of the modern People's Republic
- The fall of the Qing in 1912 ended 2,000 years of imperial rule and launched China's turbulent modern era