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Edited by Frederick W. Mote and Denis Twitchett

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INTRODUCTION

This volume and the following volume are devoted to the history of the Ming dynasty. The present volume offers a narrative account of political developments from the rebellions of the mid-fourteenth century that ended the Mongol Yüan dynasty's control over China—and from one of which the new Ming dynasty was formed in 1368—until the last Ming remnant, called the Southern Ming, was extinguished in Burma in 1662. That was almost twenty years after the new Manchu Ch'ing dynasty had proclaimed the success of its conquest of the Mandate of Heaven, and of China, in Peking in the spring of 1644.

That period of roughly three centuries from the 1340s until the 1660s, or more closely defined, the 277 years from 1368 until 1644 during which Ming rule formally prevailed, is the only segment of later imperial history from the fall of the Northern Sung capital to the Jurchen invaders in 1126 until the Revolution of 1911 ended the imperial era during which all of China proper was ruled by a native or Han Chinese dynasty. The actual impact of that alternation of native and conquest dynasties on Chinese life was, to be sure, of varying significance, and at its most destructive it probably never threatened to interrupt the cultural continuity of Chinese development. Nonetheless, the success of the Chinese in regaining control over their own government is an important event in history.

In Ming times and even more so in the recent nationalistic-minded century, the Ming dynasty has been seen as an important era of Chinese resurgence. The life of that resurgent society in social, intellectual, economic and other dimensions is surveyed in Volume 8. There we see much evidence that the Ming period witnessed the growth of Chinese civilization, the filling out of the realm, and, if one may indulge in biological metaphor, the maturing of the traditional Chinese civilization in that last phase of its relatively secure intramural isolation and splendor. We can see steady if undermeasured population increase, a significant increase in literacy, and the growth of learning throughout sub-elite levels of society, accompanied by a flourishing of sub-elite as well as elite cultural forms. We observe the filling out of the system of urban networks, reflecting the expansion of

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productivity and of exchange. The growing importance of the maritime southeast provinces and the centrifugal forces that propelled many of the region's hardy residents into lives abroad preceded Europe's era of mercantile expansion and might have rivaled it. The absorption of China's inland southern and southwestern provinces during the Ming also is evidence of the age's expansiveness. The boundless energies of Ming society must be kept in mind as the political history of the age is recounted.

What should be the final assessment of Ming government? Was the Ming an era of strong government, or merely one in which the throne and its accessories could intimidate the civil government in awesome displays of willful violence? Was it an era of effective administration, or one in which the practical limitations imposed by the milieu seriously limited political accomplishment? Was domestic administration the tool through which the imperial institution in this period of its long history more perfectly than before realized its potential to govern, or was it in fact the vehicle by which class interests and local interests in society achieved their counter purposes? Such questions, perhaps themselves framed in misleading terms, have long been asked. The reader here will want to ask his own questions of this material. It may help to identify some of the components of Ming political history that have led to so broad and contradictory a set of questions about it.

Outwardly at least, the Ming dynasty appears to be a period of very powerful government. Its founder made it a strong, assertive, highly centralized regime. But are those appearances misleading? It can be argued that the early emperors' will to centralize and to assert the supremacy of their will over all acts of governance was never in fact as effectively institutionalized as those rulers intended and perhaps deceived themselves into believing it was. Professor Ray Huang, here and elsewhere, argues that the Chinese preference for ethical over technical solutions to all social problems created limitations in the working style of government that deflected the exercise of power. His arguments have compelling force—but the aura of great power cannot be dispelled. For evidence, one need only look at China's enhanced position in East Asia in Ming times.

Several military-minded early emperors reestablished China's dominance not only in Inner Asia, whence China's conquerors traditionally had come, but also throughout the sea lanes of Asia. A previous era of diplomatic reciprocity between China and the other Asian land powers was succeeded by an era of a sinocentric world order based on the Chinese presumption of Chinese centrality and superiority and at least nominally acknowledged by many other states, great and small, through the vehicle of the tribute system. Domestically also there was again a structure of centralized control and supervision—the thousands of local and regional administrators, as well

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as the central government's officials, were recruited by merit and appointed directly through agencies of the central government. Even more than in model early dynasties, the Ming attempted to regularize the exercise of political power and to make uniform the patterns of bureaucratic behavior so as to correct what early Ming rulers saw as the lenient, slipshod, and corrupt mismanagement that had been imposed by a succession of alien dynasties. Above all the early Ming state, for better or for worse, sought to consolidate its power by stimulating a uniform ideological basis for private and for bureaucratic behavior. The resulting "revised" neo-Confucian ethos was in many ways a new Ming achievement, and it had profound consequences for political life.

Despite those strong beginnings, the political history of the Ming is not one of consistent achievement. The chapters that comprise this volume often focus on political weakness. Ming government has been described by some modern scholars as the great achievement of Chinese civilization. It also has been seen as proof of ineradicable anomalies of forms versus actualities, as a working system ever in need of patching up but never susceptible to thoroughgoing rational correction. Reflections of both points of view will be encountered here. Yet whatever criteria assume the greater significance for these authors, one must conclude that the governing of Ming China was a vast undertaking, grand in its assumptions, lofty in its professional ideals, and exhaustingly intricate in the interplay of ideal and actual patterns that marked its daily existence.

If those fundamental characterizations of the quality of Ming government remain inconclusive, some long-range trends in the development of governing modes seem clear enough. Despite the rigidly prescribed norms and procedures made binding on all his heirs by the autocratic dynastic founder, Ming government was not unchanging. Trends become discernible over the course of these three centuries. It may serve a useful purpose here to point out some of those trends.

A most intriguing feature of Ming political history is the trend from direct rule by a highly competent (in his own eyes, omniscient) founding emperor toward the evolving system of shared authority, whether properly delegated or usurped. Ming emperors were the capstone in an authority structure that could not function without them. They were the ritual heads of state and society within a civilization in which ritual possessed a scope of functional significance scarcely comprehensible to us today. Ming emperors also, however, were the executive officers of a system that required their daily participation in deciding and validating routine acts of governing. In the absence of that, some not-strictly-acceptable substitute for the emperor's own ruling actions was required.

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Implicit in that system is the impractical notion that emperors could and would make informed decisions on a very broad range of matters of state from routine appointments for all the thousands of offices to be filled by ranked civil and military officials to vast or trivial modifications of policy. True, that would in most cases mean merely reviewing and approving prescreened lists of candidates for most offices, as worked up by the Ministry of Personnel, or making no more than minor alterations in the course of approving action proposals submitted for his notation of “accepted” and his seal. Yet no actions or appointments were possible without at least the seal, and in all matters of higher import the emperor was expected to have digested analyses and arrived at his own judgments. Although that scope of competence and function was inherent in the Chinese conception of monarchy, it was operationally institutionalized in Ming times to a degree hitherto unknown. From the fall of the dynasty in the seventeenth century onward, historians have judged that to have been the crucial weakness of Ming government and have blamed the founding emperor for abolishing the offices of chief ministers of state and their supporting secretarial and advisory staffs in 1380.

The reorganization of government stemming from that “abolition of the prime ministership,” removal of the top level of authority in the outer court, and the resulting assumption of those support functions by the ruler and his inner court, gave a new shape to the structure of Chinese central government that would last through all of Ming and Ch’ing times until the revolution of 1911. In reality, the intention of the Ming founder was modified already in his own reign and was reshaped by cumulative accretions and conventional adaptations in every reign thereafter according to the current conditions and the age, competence, and commitment of the successive rulers. The suspicious-minded founder’s fear, of course, had been that his professional bureaucrats in senior roles as advisors and administrators would bend the acts of governing to serve their own interests or might even attempt outright usurpation. He also feared that the same breed of scholar-officials in lower-ranking roles as local magistrates would misuse their authority.

Some scholars have seen genuine benefit to the farming masses from the founder’s emphasis on improving the conditions of rural society and tightening up the norms of local government, whether he did that out of simple altruism or was shrewdly cognizant of the state’s interests, or both. If his suspicion of bureaucrats was in that matter constructive, at the higher levels of the complex political machinery, corrosive suspicion backed up by unfathomable terror was profoundly destructive, the more so because once institutionalized, it continued to influence the long range of history. One

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can argue that as a political leader of China's fourteenth century he had no choice but to build a government reliant on the services of cultivated men who would proclaim their neo-Confucian commitment. The contradiction lies in his acknowledging that necessary condition of governing Chinese society, while remaining deeply suspicious of its consequences; he institutionalized his officialdom's constant intimidation and distanced the throne from the kinds of rational administrative supports that the bureaucracy itself should have best provided. That was to build a regime with serious weaknesses.

It is fascinating, then, to observe reign by reign through the chapters comprising this volume the range and cumulative effect of the institutional adaptations that were made in the effort to overcome that basic administrative flaw. We do not know much about the second emperor (1398–1402), but it seems clear that he greatly upgraded the advisory functions of his principal scholar-mentors, because the impropriety of having done just that was one of the excuses given for the usurpation. The usurper who held the throne from 1402 until 1424 in a reign of great vigor and high competence was not bound by the principles he claimed to defend. Because his interests lay in solving border problems away from the court, he began to create the inner court institutions that would free him from the drudgery of governing.

Most pertinent was his plan to select top examination graduates for elite careers in the Hanlin Academy, leading to the posts that in time came to constitute the *nei-ko*, or grand secretariat. At the same time he assigned larger roles to eunuchs, even insisting that numbers of them be formally educated in government practices and precedents. That, of necessity, led to intricate forms of cooperation between civil bureaucrats and their eunuch counterparts, even as each group contested for emperors' support and the increase of its own powers at the expense of the other. Mostly, it must be noted, that practice worked smoothly enough, but the recurrent failures were spectacular, as when eunuchs managed to become all-powerful dictators who manipulated emperors and defied the norms of bureaucratic government.

The first such case came in the 1440s in the reign of the boy emperor Ying-tsung. The flamboyant abuses in half a dozen such cases to the end of the dynasty are what come to mind immediately in relation to eunuchs in Ming government. If most of the tens of thousands of eunuchs who were in civil or military service at any one time from the late fifteenth century onward were more or less routine performers and not flamboyant abusers of power, nonetheless it is likely that in some of their regular functions— notably as managers of international trade along the inland frontiers and at the maritime entrepôts, and as procurers of supplies and special revenues

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for the imperial city—they probably performed very badly most of the time.

The loss in 1380 of the chief ministerships and the isolation of the emperor from responsible senior advisors having their proper place at the head of the outer court thus can be seen as the starting point for the development of both the grand secretariat and the regular bureaucracy's counterpart eunuch bureaucracy, both elements of the Ming inner court. The interplay between these irregular, though eventually highly regularized, elements of Ming government is the major focus of political history throughout the dynasty. Some emperors worked well within the system, sometimes adding to it significantly. Others, as these chapters show, seriously defaulted or resisted the norms, with varying consequences. From our modern point of view, it is all too understandable when the reader of history feels oppressed with frustration that the system's obvious irrationalities could not be overcome by generation after generation of acute-minded and devoted statesmen-bureaucrats.

The dismal account of political failures can perhaps assume too large a place in our consciousness as we read this volume. There is another side to the story that must not be lost sight of. The world's largest society, spread across an area as large as Western Europe, truly flourished under this fallible system of governing, and the flow of well-prepared, committed officials-expectant never diminished. In each decade there was a new group of able persons eager to make careers in government service. Whenever one group's energies and enthusiasms were dissipated by the frustrations of service, eager replacements were at hand to carry on. There was a freshness and energy in the civil service under this dynasty that is not matched in later times, even though governing often faltered.

Was Ming China, then, poorly governed? The Ming government's strengths were simultaneously its weaknesses; for example, its heavy emphasis on cultivation, on learning, and on ethical obligations bound it to limited responses that accepted the primacy of precedent, of compromise, and of face saving. It had the weaknesses and the strengths of a massive stability. We might better ask whether any of the Ming state's contemporaries throughout the world (and none faced problems of Chinese scale) was better governed. In most historians' minds, such a question probably does not embarrass China until well into post-Ming times. Given the scope of the Ming government's tasks in maintaining the unity and sense of shared destiny throughout so large a territory and in providing enough self-renewing features to keep the society flexibly if slowly changing, usually at peace and in order, its achievements are impressive. Moreover, Ming government allowed those Chinese people who could attain more than mere subsistence to employ their resources mostly

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for the uses freely chosen by them, for it was a government that, by comparison with others throughout the world then and later, taxed the people at very low levels and left most of the wealth generated by its productive people in the regions where that wealth was produced. Inequities abounded. But the society remained open, and it offered people at all levels a wider spectrum of choices than they have known more recently. The government of Ming China is not to be dismissed out of hand.

Other trends encompassing change from the fourteenth century to the seventeenth can be followed through successive reigns of Ming history. One is apparent in the defense posture of the Ming state. The stable element in that is the obsession with the threat posed by the neighboring Mongol nation to the north, understandably so, since the dynasty came into being by resisting and then expelling China's Mongol conquerors; it had to guard against their resurgence until another northern neighbor, the Manchu, superseded the Mongols early in the seventeenth century as the enemy to the north. If that focus on the Mongol enemy was the enduring part of the situation, what long-range trend of change emerges? It is one of retrenchment. At first the new Ming state met the Mongols in their kind of warfare on their home ground; before the middle of the fifteenth century, that had changed to a defense policy of withdrawal behind fixed barriers along the line marking the northern extent of Chinese-style sedentary life. The founding emperor planned to maintain garrisons far out into the steppe. The usurper, the Yung-lo emperor in the first quarter of the fifteenth century, repeatedly campaigned in the steppe, but failed to make the forward garrisons viable parts of an active defense by offense. He withdrew the garrisons to more readily defended, fortified strategic passage points. Despite that consolidated defense line, the Mongols invaded, disastrously for China, in 1449 and again in 1550, and raided constantly. By the 1470s China had begun to connect the fortified barriers with long walls supported by towers and bastions. The fabled Great Wall, more accurately a series of long walls, came into being. For the rest of the dynasty, wall building and the garrisoning of the wall defense zone became the preoccupation of the Ming state. The Inner Asian frontier became a stifling burden.

Frontier problems can be the source of great stimulus to a nation. The Inner Asian frontier had been that for China in earlier dynasties such as the Han and the T'ang, but in Ming times the consequences seem to have been wholly negative. Far greater opportunities for Ming China's involvement with the rest of the world—whether with Japan and Korea, or with the maritime states to the south and beyond, or with the European powers whose first ships to reach China were those of the Portuguese who sailed from Goa and Malacca into the estuary of the Pearl River below Canton in

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1517—were neglected. Early fifteenth-century Ming China had sent out the largest and farthest-ranging flotillas in world history up to that time; they had gone as far as the Persian Gulf and the coast of Africa. Whatever promise that might have held, it all passed from the scene, in part surely because the obsession with the Great Wall left no time for the Ming state to look elsewhere and assess other opportunities in positive terms.

The revealing counterpart to that trend of retrenchment and passivity in the north and the consequent failure of the Ming state to expand in other directions is the trend of increasingly imaginative and bold participation in maritime commerce by private interests—in defiance of government sanctions—all along China's eastern seaboard, particularly from the Yangtze Delta south to Canton. What might that have accomplished if, like its counterparts in Europe in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, it had gained state sponsorship and support? Even without state sponsorship, Chinese merchant and craftsmen colonies, and eventually agricultural settlements as well, came into existence from the Philippines through Southeast Asia, and mostly date from Ming times. The boundless energies, ingenious entrepreneurship, aggressive risk-taking, and creative leadership within the society seen within this Ming maritime expansion is at curious variance with the retrenchment and managerial failures of the state in its northern defense posture.

Less striking perhaps, but another trend of great significance, is the expansion of the Chinese population throughout the border provinces of the south and southwest, the displacement or absorption of non-Han minorities, and the extension of Chinese administration to the borders of modern Burma, Laos, and Vietnam. The earliest of the Ming emperors lent the full force of the state's military resources to that; Yunnan was conquered and absorbed for the first time under Chinese rule (although Khubilai had conquered the region in the 1250s and had set up a somewhat attenuated Mongol administration there); Kweichow was organized as a province; Annam was warred upon and unsuccessfully absorbed in the 1420s. The "pacification" of tribal peoples throughout the southwest is also a recurrent theme throughout the chapters of this volume. Eventually, however, the state's role became less aggressive. Cultural assimilation continued, but now the impulse for further assimilation came from trade and mining and Chinese population growth pressing into the richer valleys of the region.

The interesting counterpart to that growth in the south and southeast is the striking trend of shrinkage and decline in the northern defense zone and particularly in the far northwest. Climatic change may have lowered the margin in agriculture throughout that marginal zone, but social factors also contributed. The siege mentality that descended on the region as the

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defense zone buildup developed through the second half of the dynasty was crippling enough. Trade diminished. The movement of goods and of people was decreased as much by economic decline of the region as by the restrictive military conditions. The normal concerns of civil government were secondary to the military administration. Finally, the state's policy of underpaying or abandoning its defense garrison soldiers, especially the undertrained and overaged, drove them into banditry. All these forces working together induced increasingly unstable conditions within this narrow band of the northern and northwestern frontier. It is not surprising that the region's endemic disorder, although quite atypical of late Ming society in general, should spawn the two large movements of roaming banditry that became a peril to the rest of China in the 1630s. One of these, dignified as the "rebellion" of Li Tzu-ch'eng, plundered at will through North China and, quite fortuitously, found an unguarded moment when it could breach the gates of Peking. That formally terminated the dynasty in 1644.

These are some of the trends obvious to the reader of Ming history. Also apparent throughout this volume is the richness of detail that can be reconstituted in many aspects of this history.

The procession of the sixteen incumbents of the throne between 1368 and 1644 and the several would-be successors who fought on against the Manchus from the far south until 1662 are a gallery of diverse types whose lives beg for fuller reconstruction. There is no full political biography of any of them in a Western language. Even though Chinese emperors are among the most elusive of subjects in Chinese historiography, much could be done to remedy that lack. But beyond those imperial figures (and countless others of the imperial clan), there is a wealth of documentary evidence for lives, for places, and for actions of all kinds. There are countless volumes of Ming writings—poetry and belles lettres, serious scholarship in many fields, religious and philosophical studies, plays and stories and other entertainment writings, reports written by officials on all governmental subjects, and the writings of Ming historians beginning the task of putting their history in order. No scholar can know more than a fraction of all this vast sea of words, comprising more printed books in existence at any time during this dynasty than in all the rest of the world together. Many large aspects of the field have been virtually unstudied in the present century, during which the total volume of relevant materials has been greatly augmented by facsimile printing, archeology, and archival labors.

During most of the present century Ming history has not been a widely studied subject in China, in Japan, or in the West. The vast array of traditional historical materials, ably described by Wolfgang Franke in

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THE MING DYNASTY, 1368–1644, PART I

Chapter 12 of this volume, now attracts the attention of a generation of new scholars, and the world of scholarship begins to appreciate how important the history of these centuries must be in the larger frameworks of Chinese and of world history. The authors and editors have undertaken the effort of compiling this volume with a certain confidence that it carries scholarship some modest steps forward, but in greater confidence that the field will quickly move beyond it in larger steps. I am confident that a number of these authors will be present to contribute to the early retirement of this work, as they move forward to supersede it. I hail their present achievement and look forward to their early success in surpassing it.