

Ming and Qing Novels

Míng-Qīng xiǎo shuō 明清小說

During the Ming and Qing dynasties, highly educated literati increasingly used the long fictional narrative as a popular vehicle to engage in sophisticated storytelling. Drawing on historical events and personal experience, and on popular tales, anecdotes, and legends, novels by these authors provide us with some of our most illuminating sources on Chinese life in the early modern period.

The Ming 明 (1368–1644) and Qing 清 (1644–1912) dynasties witnessed a great flowering of long prose narrative fiction, especially from the sixteenth century onward. Despite the relatively low status of fiction as a genre in Chinese culture, especially when compared with poetry, highly educated writers increasingly turned to novels in the Ming period to express their artistic visions and their moral critiques of society. Before the nineteenth century they tended to publish their works anonymously or under pseudonyms, but with the growing prosperity of the late Ming period and the rapid expansion of the printing industry their works of fiction found a large and growing readership. Confucian orthodoxy had long looked down on fiction as frivolous, morally suspect, and likely to lead readers astray with tales of sex, violence, and villainy. By the late Ming period defenders of fiction argued, to the contrary, that because fiction can capture and hold an audience's rapt attention, it is in fact one of the

best vehicles for the spread and popularization of humane and civilized values.

Late Sixteenth Century

In the late sixteenth century a number of great novels appeared, all of them based to some degree on shorter works and popular themes from previous eras; one even appropriates an historic figure, using much artistic license of course, and creates a fantastical group of animals to guide him on his journey.

ROMANCE OF THE THREE KINGDOMS

Romance of the Three Kingdoms (*Sanguo zhi yanyi* 三國志演義), a sweeping historical saga in 120 chapters based on actual historical figures and events, tells of China's division into three competing kingdoms after the collapse of the Han dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE). The focus on the story is the rise and fall of states based on the talent, wisdom, luck, and loyalty (or lack of loyalty) of its leading statesmen and generals. It was long popularly assumed in China that the Mandate of Heaven—the belief, dating from the Zhou dynasty in the eleventh century BCE, that a benevolent Heaven grants political power only to the moral leader—went to the most virtuous competitor for power, but in this story virtue is less decisive than ambition, cunning, determination, and at times blind luck or the unpredictable interventions of fate. Although highly fictionalized, *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* has given

many ordinary Chinese their basic understanding of the dynamics of power in imperial Chinese history.

WATER MARGIN

Water Margin (*Shui hu zuan*, 水滸傳), is a long rambling narrative ranging from 71 to 124 chapters, depending on the edition, based on popular stories about a band of 108 outlaws from the thirteenth century. It has been famously translated in English as *Outlaws of the Marshes* by Sidney Shapiro in the 1970s, and in an adaptation by Pearl S. Buck called *All Men Are Brothers*. These rough and ready, larger-than-life heroes are forced into banditry by their impulsive but noble resistance to injustice and to the corruption of the imperial government. Many critics have complained about the violence and brutality in this novel, but most readers have relished the drama of the story and

enjoyed its hard-drinking, fun-loving bandits who might murder without a moment's reflection but who would also gladly give up their lives for their fellow bandits. In a society where young people owed their elders and teachers automatic obedience, *Shui hu zuan* has afforded each young generation the vicarious thrill of rebellion and defiance of authority.

JOURNEY TO THE WEST

Journey to the West (*Xiyouji* 西遊記) is a fanciful retelling (in one hundred chapters) of the life of the Chinese monk Xuanzang, who journeyed to India in 629 CE and returned in 645 CE with hundreds of sacred Buddhist scriptures whose translation he oversaw for the rest of his life. In his fictional incarnation Xuanzang is a timid and fearful soul who succeeds despite himself with the able assistance of

A scene from a Ming dynasty historical novel, likely to be *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, adorns the top of a bamboo lacquered box. FROM THE AVERY BRUNDAGE COLLECTION.



four talking divine animal spirits, of whom the most important are the impetuous adventurer Monkey (Sun Wukong) and his lazy sidekick Pigsy. The comic interplay of these contrasting characters is quite captivating as they face a host of demons, ghosts, fallen angels, and monsters on their way through the mountains and deserts of central and Southwest Asia. The novel can be read as a Buddhist allegory of the quest for enlightenment, a gentle Daoist satire of human frailties, or a Confucian call to moderation in all things. However it is interpreted, it is above all a pleasurable adventure story and has enjoyed many modern incarnations in operas, films, and cartoons.

GOLDEN LOTUS (JIN PING MEI)

Jin Ping Mei 金瓶梅 (*Plum in the Golden Vase* or *Golden Lotus*) is a different kind of novel, an erotic story of a hedonistic urban merchant, Ximen Qing, and his six wives (or to be more precise, one wife and five concubines or maids). The most ambitious of these women is Golden Lotus, who exploits Ximen Qing's weaknesses to the extreme in order to triumph over her rivals for his affections. The daily lives of these urban pleasure addicts are chronicled with loving care by the narrator, who weaves together popular songs, plays, stories, and poems into a comprehensive portrait that, despite its erotic theme, he can claim as a moral tale because the protagonist dies two-thirds of the way through the story, a victim of his own excesses.

Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries

Many other novels appeared in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, although only two rivaled the aforementioned four works in their prominence: *The Scholars* and *Dream of the Red Chamber*.

THE SCHOLARS

The Scholars (*Rulin waishi* 儒林外史), written by a frustrated literati, Wu Jingzi (1701–1754), who failed the civil service examinations, is China's first great satirical novel. With an unforgettable series of comic villains, heroes, and antiheroes, Wu Jingzi explored the pressures of competing

for status in the eighteenth century when one could win fame and fortune by passing the examination—or by a whole variety of alternative strategies, including publishing one's poetry or writing model examination essays, holding fashionable poetry parties in idyllic settings, selling or giving away one's paintings, socializing with the successful and prominent, or even impersonating the famous in gullible circles.

DREAM OF THE RED CHAMBER

Dream of the Red Chamber (*Honglou meng* 紅樓夢), also known as *Story of the Stone* (*Shitou ji* 石頭記), is universally recognized as China's greatest novel and was written by Cao Xueqin (d. 1764) at about the same time as Wu Jingzi worked on *The Scholars*. A masterpiece of narrative prose, the novel chronicles the gradual decline of the Jia family against the backdrop of a Buddhist-Daoist mythological framework. The novel emphasizes the themes of contrasting and alternating interplay of joy and sadness, good and evil, beauty and depravity, illusion and reality. No other Chinese novel succeeds as well as *Dream of the Red Chamber* in creating vivid and individualized characters of great psychological depth.

Late Qing Novels

Many other notable novels were published in the late Qing period. Many sequels to *Dream of the Red Chamber* were written, although most fell far short of Cao Xueqin's narrative mastery. *Flowers in the Mirror* (*Jinghua yuan* 鏡花緣) by Li Ruzhen, a fantasy novel from the early nineteenth century a bit like *Gulliver's Travels*, portrays a series of societies that mirrors and/or satirizes Chinese society. In the late nineteenth century several novelists, including Liu E (1857–1909) and Wu Woyao (1867–1910), emulated Wu Jingzi in writing biting satirical portraits of Chinese society in, respectively, *The Travels of Lao Cao* (*Lao Can youji* 老殘遊記) and *Bizarre Happenings Witnessed over Two Decades* (*Ershi nian mudu guai xianzhuang* 二十年目睹之怪現狀). These exposés, written against the backdrop of China's humiliating encounters with Western military and economic might, were powerful critiques of Chinese society, foreshadowing the critical and Western-influenced fiction of the May Fourth Movement in the 1920s.

All of these novels are among the most enjoyable and illuminating introductions to Chinese life in the Ming-Qing period.

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Any book you open will
benefit your mind.

开卷有益

Kāi juàn yǒu yì

Ming Dynasty

Míng 明

1368–1644

The Ming 明 dynasty was established by a peasant rebel who overthrew the Mongol-ruled Yuan 元 dynasty (1279–1368). Over the course of the Ming, the Chinese population grew dramatically—and although the Ming court and its bureaucracy grew increasingly ineffectual, trade, agriculture, and the arts flourished.

The Ming dynasty (1368–1644) was a period of dramatic transformation in the Chinese social and political order. The dynasty began with vigorous efforts by the court to consolidate imperial power and authority over the empire with a vision of stable agrarian society and a small, compliant bureaucracy. By the seventeenth century, a series of ineffective and retiring rulers presided over a vast and largely dysfunctional bureaucracy. By this time, Ming society had been thoroughly reshaped by the emergence of a dynamic economy, fed by elaborate market networks, a burgeoning agricultural sector, and flourishing artisan industries. Ming commodities—silk, porcelain, and tea—found their way to major cities around the globe and the increasingly monetized Ming economy was in turn fed by a dramatic influx of silver from Japan, Europe, and the New World.

Zhu, the Hongwu Emperor

The dynasty was founded in 1368 by Zhu Yuanzhang (1328–1398), a military man of peasant origins, driven

by desperate poverty to become a Buddhist monk in his youth. In the chaos of the last decades of the Mongol-ruled Yuan dynasty (1279–1368), Zhu rose to the head of a rebel peasant army, his forces competing with other warlord groups in the southeast. In 1356, he succeeded in conquering Nanjing, one of the major urban centers in the region and an important Yuan stronghold. He renamed the city Yingtian, “Responding to Heaven,” a clear signal of his imperial ambitions. In 1368, months before his generals routed Mongol forces from the Yuan capital at Dadu (Beijing), he announced the establishment of the new dynasty, the Ming, meaning “Brilliance.” Some scholars have speculated that the name came from the emperor’s early religious associations with Buddhist millenarian groups.

Much of the early years of the dynasty were preoccupied with military concerns as Zhu consolidated the territorial boundaries of the Ming, driving back Mongol forces to the north and subduing non-Han tribes in Yunnan to the southwest. Under the founder’s reign, the Ming army eventually grew to 1 million soldiers. The ruler’s military concerns were reflected in the reign title that Zhu Yuanzhang chose for himself: Hongwu, or “Grand Martiality.” Although the emperor retained a number of scholarly advisors, many of his top officials were military men, some of whom were granted hereditary titles and were married into the imperial family.

EARLY MING INSTITUTIONS

The institutions of the early Ming were built largely along the lines of the preceding Yuan dynasty. A central



Daming tongxing baochao: early Ming dynasty bank note. Nanjing, 1375. BEINECKE RARE BOOK AND MANUSCRIPT LIBRARY, YALE UNIVERSITY.

executive secretariat, directed by a chancellor, oversaw the central government with the six traditional ministries: Rites, Personnel, Revenue, Works, Justice, and War. Based upon the semi-autonomous regional administrative units of the Yuan, the Ming created a layer of provincial governments for the first time in Chinese history. An education system was established to teach Confucian principles and texts at a National University at the capital, with a network of schools in the prefectures and counties. A firm believer in the importance of law, the Hongwu emperor quickly ordered the creation and promulgation of a comprehensive law code.

The civil service examination system, implemented briefly and sporadically under the Yuan, was restored in 1370 as the primary means of civil service recruitment.

Like the Yuan system, the curriculum was largely focused upon Song dynasty (960–1279) neo-Confucian teachings and commentaries on the Confucian Canon. The Hongwu emperor was ambivalent towards the examination system, suspending it in frustration after the second examinations in 1373. The system was restored in 1385 and remained in place until the end of the dynasty. The emperor remained deeply frustrated and suspicious of his government officials. He launched frequent and vicious purges of the bureaucracy, the military and the general populace, executing thousands in campaigns that destabilized and frequently paralyzed the young dynasty.

In 1380, the central administration was dramatically changed when the emperor charged the chancellor with treason, executed him, and abolished the position forever. The immediate effect was to transfer an overwhelming administrative burden to the emperor himself. The long-term effect was a less structured relationship between the emperor and his bureaucracy. Soon afterward, the Hongwu emperor appointed a small group of scholars chosen from the top echelons of the bureaucracy to advise him informally and relieve some of his administrative responsibilities. This body eventually evolved into the formalized institution of the Grand Secretariat, which remained at the top of the bureaucratic power structure for the rest of the imperial era.

The abolition of the chancellor position and the ferocious temperament of the founder were two of the several factors that laid the course for the autocratic nature of Ming government. While scholars have debated the degree of actual control that various Ming emperors had over the realm, their ability to exercise arbitrary power is unquestioned. Over the course of the dynasty, officials were frequently subjected to humiliation and public beatings, sometimes resulting in death. Independent surveillance networks established by the court intensified the risks of bureaucratic service.

In his drive to restore a stable order after the chaos he experienced in the late Yuan, the Ming founder established an array of social policies to regulate local society. He wrote elaborate admonitions to be posted in every community, urging the populace to live harmoniously and virtuously. Extensive travel was forbidden and commoners were only allowed to journey short distances from their homes. Local communities were responsible for the maintenance of order and for mutual surveillance. Local

wealthy families were charged with supervising the tax collection process. Registration of the population and the land was undertaken in the 1380s and early 1390s, with records that formed the basis for determining the tax, corvée (labor paid in lieu of taxes) and military service quotas of each community. Once these quotas were established, many of them remained fixed for nearly two

centuries, until the tax system was significantly revised in the late sixteenth century. By then, official records bore little resemblance to the realities on the ground, as the population had doubled from the estimated 60–80 million in the beginning of the dynasty.

The Hongwu emperor also left behind strict governing regulations for his own imperial family. He clearly



One of a pair of guardians that line the Sacred Way, a path leading to the thirteen Ming tombs in a valley outside Beijing. The guardians make sure that evil spirits cannot approach the tombs and disturb the dead. PHOTO BY JOAN LEBOLD COHEN.

established the rule of primogeniture, partially in reaction to the succession battles that plagued the Yuan. Several of his sons were set up as hereditary princes, strategically placed in charge of garrisoned fiefs throughout the realm. The princes were to enhance the military security of the empire, but strict orders were given not to interfere in affairs at the imperial court.

Yongle Reign Begins

After the founder's death, this nascent political order was violently fractured by civil war in 1399, when one of his sons, Zhu Di, the Prince of Yan (modern Beijing), went to war against the imperial forces of the founder's grandson, the twenty-two-year-old Jianwen emperor (reigned 1398–1402). Various princes were aggravated by imperial plans to rein in their power and resources, and the Prince of Yan clearly coveted the throne. The civil war devastated much of the countryside that had barely recovered from the warfare of the dynastic transition. By 1402, the armies of the Prince of Yan had reached Nanjing. The palace was burned to the ground in the battle, the Jianwen emperor dying in the flames (though some claimed that he miraculously escaped). Zhu Di thereupon ascended the throne as the Yongle emperor (reigned 1402–1424).

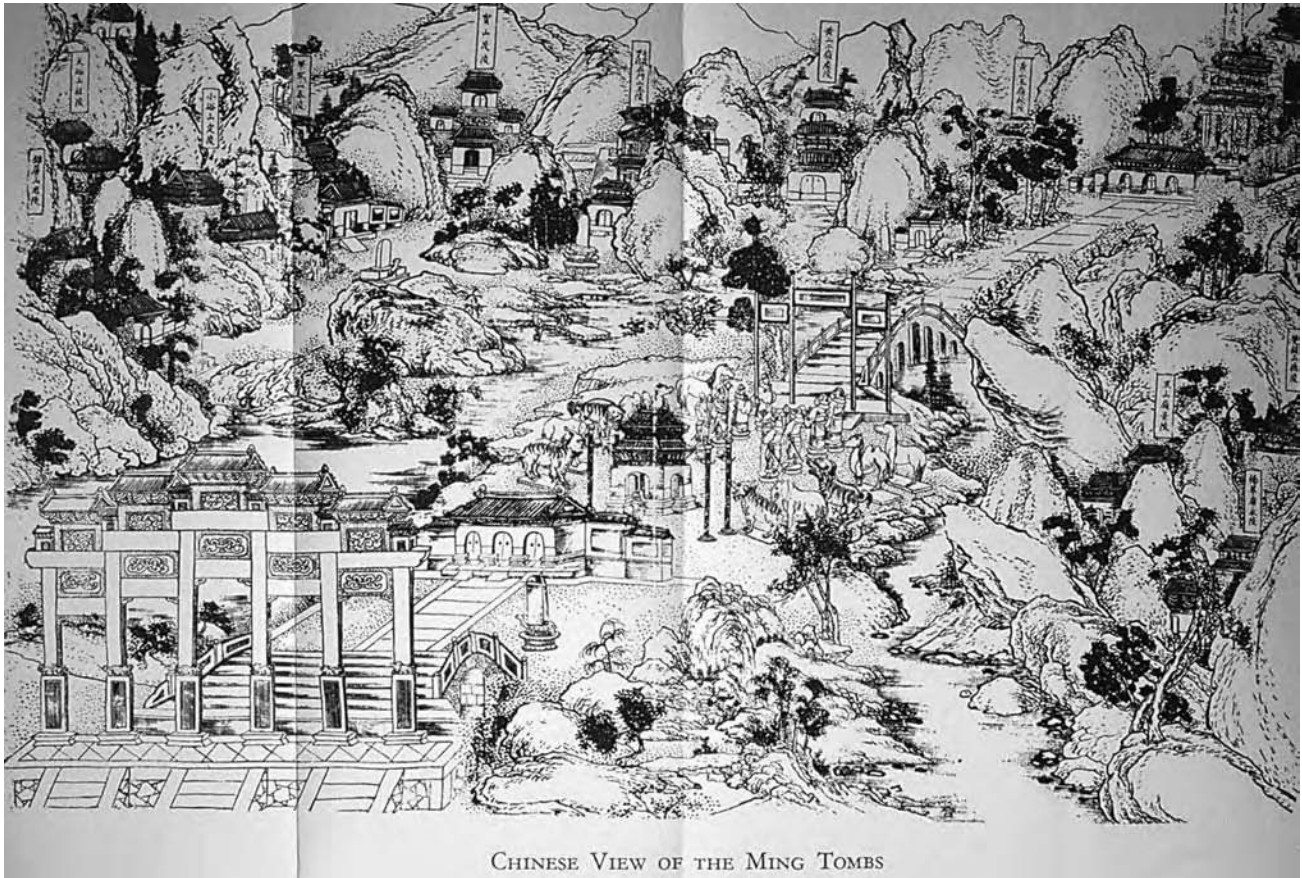
The course of the Ming dynasty was so dramatically reshaped by the Yongle reign that some historians have called it a "second founding" of the dynasty. The new emperor was deeply aware of the need to quickly rehabilitate the empire after the destructive civil war. Although he launched a severe purge against many of Jianwen's top officials, Yongle deliberately charted policies to placate the wary scholar-official community. The civil service exams which had been erratically implemented in the early years of the dynasty were now regularized. He brooked no opposition to his policies, although he did not terrorize the bureaucracy in the way that his father had. He recruited large numbers of the literati into his service by commissioning several large scholarly works, including the *Yongle dadian* (*Grand Compendium of the Yongle Reign*), authoritative compilations of the Confucian Five Classics and Four Books, a massive anthology of neo-Confucian teachings, and a new expansive edition of the Buddhist scriptural canon, the *Tripitaka*.

Under Yongle's direction, the capital was moved from Nanjing to Beijing, signaling that he intended the north to be center of military and political power in the realm. Here the emperor ordered the construction of the monumental "Forbidden City," which served as the imperial palace complex until the fall of the Qing in 1912. The move of the capital was one of the largest projects of the Ming dynasty. The emperor relocated 10,000 households to establish a metropolitan population at Beijing and the move itself took most of Yongle's reign to accomplish. Though no longer the capital, the region around Nanjing retained a special status as the "southern metropolitan district," with several auxiliary branches of the administrative institutions of the capital.

In a departure from the domestically-focused vision of his father the founder, Yongle aimed to assert Ming political power and prestige as far beyond its borders as he could, launching several successful attacks on the Mongols to the north and a protracted and ill-fated military expedition into Vietnam. From 1405 to 1433, a series of flotillas were sent to project Ming power into the Indian Ocean. Commanded by the eunuch admiral Zheng He (1371–1433), these voyages reached destinations as far as Sri Lanka, the Persian Gulf and the coast of present-day Mogadishu. Numerous kingdoms on the Indian Ocean sent tribute to the Ming court. Eventually, the expeditions were abandoned, presumably for their strain on the imperial budget.

Decline of Dynastic Power

Successors to the Ming throne proved far less powerful and capable than the Hongwu or Yongle emperors. Over the course of the fifteenth century, the dynasty saw a diminution of imperial power and sway. One major incident in this declining prestige of the court was the capture of the Zhengtong emperor (reigned 1435–1449 and 1457–1465) during a raid against the Mongols in 1449. The return of the imperial hostage the following year caused further turmoil as his brother, the Jingtai emperor (reigned 1449–1457), had ascended the throne in the meantime, refusing to step down and placing his brother under house arrest instead. With the Mongols as a constant threat to the integrity of the empire, the Great Wall was continuously expanded and fortified as a bulwark against further incursions.



CHINESE VIEW OF THE MING TOMBS

Aerial map of the Ming tombs. COURTESY OF JOAN LEBOLD COHEN.

One factor that contributed to the volatility of the Ming political order was the influence of eunuchs at court. The Ming founder had stipulated that palace eunuchs be kept illiterate and be assigned only menial tasks. Yongle, however, had allowed eunuchs to be trained and frequently charged them with important tasks (such as the exploratory missions under Zheng He). Under subsequent emperors, eunuchs evolved into a powerful constituent force within the imperial court, frequently in control of the great wealth of the imperial household treasury. They also directed the fearsome Eastern Depot, an independent surveillance and interrogation apparatus that lay beyond the civil authorities. By the sixteenth century, the eunuch establishment numbered in the thousands. This network, with its base inside the imperial palace, was frequently at odds with the civil officials who had limited access to the palace grounds and the ear of the emperor. Historical records kept by Confucian scholars castigated the eunuchs for what they

regarded as an unchecked and arbitrary abuse of their power and position.

Rising Economy, Flourishing Arts

The middle and late Ming period saw a steady rise in economic activity. Agricultural production flourished with the evolution of cash crops of cotton, sugar cane, and indigo. Porcelain and silk industries found ready markets, particularly in the southern urban centers of Nanjing, Suzhou, and Hangzhou. By the early sixteenth century demand for these goods had developed in major cities around the world. The Ming economy became increasingly monetized, a development that was recognized and accelerated by the imperial taxation reforms of the late sixteenth century that commuted all tax and corvée obligations into a single payment in silver.

After Yongle's expansive forays, the court returned to the founder's policies that discouraged and restricted foreign trade and foreign contact. By the sixteenth century, however, the court could do little to control the influx of traders from Portugal and other countries. In addition to traders, missionaries from the West arrived on Ming shores in the late sixteenth century. The most famous of these was Matteo Ricci (1551–1610). Ricci and a few of his fellow Jesuits, eventually made their way to Beijing, where they were received at court and eventually developed a rapport with members of the gentry scholar community.

The rising Ming economy fed the growth of an affluent gentry class, a blending of the scholar-elite clans and rising merchant families able to invest their wealth in books and tutors for their sons, hoping for success in the civil service examinations. This was particularly true in the Jiangnan region, just to the south of the Yangzi (Chang) River. This layer of society congregated in the great urban centers of Suzhou, Hangzhou, and Nanjing, while they dominated the resources of rural areas as absentee landlords. These cities were adorned with the ostentatious gardens and mansions of the very rich who competed to demonstrate their wealth and their refined tastes.

As the civil service examination system saw an increasing number of aspirants, quotas became increasingly restrictive and the chances of passing the exams to enter coveted positions in the civil service had become extremely slim. Under such competitive conditions, the examination essay evolved into a highly rigid format called the "Eight-Legged Essay," a style bound up in strict rules. The examination system produced a vast number of unsuccessful and frustrated scholars who increasingly turned to other diversions and professions, contributing to a flourishing milieu of creative innovation in art, music, literature, and drama. The last century of the Ming saw the creation of some of China's most famous novels, such as *Journey to the West*, or *The Golden Lotus*, as well as popular plays like *Peony Pavilion*. A vigorous publishing industry fed an avid readership with a wide range of books from cheap pulp to masterful multicolored, illustrated volumes of the literature of the day.

The arts of the late Ming were in large part inspired by a series of thinkers who offered revolutionary interpretations of the neo-Confucian tradition. Wang Yangming (1472–1529) had questioned early prescriptions of study

as the means to moral enlightenment, arguing instead for an approach that focused upon the individual's intuitive powers to think and act appropriately. Wang's teachings attracted a large following, including scholars like Li Zhi (1527–1602), who argued that Confucians should aspire to the authenticity of the "child-like mind" and eschew the artifice and pretentious hypocrisy of the scholar-elite class. These thinkers valorized emotion, love, and desire as the truest modes of human expression, and these themes therefore figured prominently in the fiction, plays, and poetry of the day.

While the scholar-elite of the early Ming had generally identified with Confucian doctrines and practices, the late Ming gentry dabbled in an eclectic and syncretic array of Buddhist and Daoist teachings and a variety of popular religious practices. Numerous private academies and lay religious societies were formed as venues for study and discussion of ideas and beliefs and for the practice of charity and self-cultivation.

Domestic and Foreign Disputes

The political order of the Ming reached its nadir in late sixteenth and early seventeenth century under the reign of the Wanli emperor (reigned 1573–1620). This emperor found himself locked into disputes with an intransigent bureaucracy over various matters including the selection of an heir-apparent. Disillusioned, he refused to hold a court audience for twenty-five years. Pressing court matters, including key official appointments, were left unaddressed. For its part, the civil bureaucracy was fraught with corruption and contentious factions, paralyzed and incapable of addressing the serious issues of the day. The court came to be dominated by the dangerously powerful eunuch Wei Zhongxian (1568–1627), whose command brooked no opposition. Reformist contingents, such as the Donglin or Eastern Grove Society, moralistically campaigned against official corruption and against the dysfunctional court, but with little success.

The late Ming faced an array of problems that would have challenged the court and bureaucracy even if they had been performing well. The burgeoning economy now operated beyond the scope of governmental control, linked to world-wide systems of trade and dependent

upon a steady influx of foreign silver. When the flow was disrupted in the early seventeenth century, Ming markets fluctuated dramatically and unpredictably. Oppressed by heavy-handed tenancy conditions and caught up in the vicissitudes of the economy, peasants in the late Ming rose up in frequent rebellion.

Foreign threats were a matter of constant concern. Pirates, many of them from Japan, preyed upon international traders and attacked Ming coastal communities with marauding forays that ranged far inland. The threat of Mongol invasion persisted throughout the dynasty. And in the northeast Manchurian tribes began to coalesce into powerful new military groups that threatened Ming borders in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries.

REBELLION AND RESISTANCE

In the 1620s and 1630s, poor harvests and other natural catastrophes led open rebellion in various parts of the empire and an army of peasants under the leadership of a brigand named Li Zicheng (c. 1605–1645) overran the capital in 1644. In a famous fateful decision, Wu Sangui (1612–1678), a Ming general charged with protecting the eastern end of the Great Wall, invited Manchu armies

through the pass to help drive back the rebels. The combined Manchu and Ming forces routed Li Zicheng's forces from Beijing, but then the Manchus placed their own ruler on the throne and declared the new Qing dynasty (1644–1912).

Southern resistance to the Manchu conquest continued through much of the seventeenth century as remnants of the imperial family maintained the semblance of a court in exile until their capture in Burma (Myanmar) in 1661. Resistance against the Qing persisted well into the 1680s, when Ming loyalist forces in Taiwan were finally subdued. Under the Qing, the Ming continued to play such an important role in the scholarly imagination; as anti-Manchu sentiment grew in the nineteenth century, calls were frequently made to “Oppose the Qing and Restore the Ming!”

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