

Brilliant Recovery

Cheers filled the air as Zhu Yuan-zhang crossed the grand courtyard of Beijing's Forbidden City—the emperor's palace—and slowly climbed the long flight of palace steps. At the top, he paused and looked out over the city and the throng of his supporters gathered there. The reality of his hard-won victory had still not sunk in. The year was 1368 and the hated Mongols were gone. Once again China belonged to the Chinese, and Zhu Yuan-zhang was the reason why.

Zhu was born a peasant. His family had farmed for generations. But under Mongol rule, China had little use for farmers, so life was hard—very hard. When the Mongols first swept into northern China a century earlier, they wanted nothing more than to rob China of its great wealth. Because they were nomadic horsemen, the Mongols viewed China's huge network of prosperous farms as a waste of good grazing and hunting land. By the millions, farmers were driven from their lands and their farms left untended. Reservoirs and irrigation systems fell into disrepair. As farms disappeared, famine swept the land, but the Mongol rulers of the Yuan Dynasty seemed little concerned for the sufferings of the Chinese people.

During the Yuan dynasty, high government officials were all Mongols or foreigners. Translators were needed, since the Mongols refused to learn Chinese. Ethnic Chinese had little voice in their government.

Trade was important to the Mongol emperors. Skilled Chinese craftsmen were forced to produce large quantities of porcelain, silks, and other goods that could be sold along the Silk Road and the vast web of trade routes the Mongols created across Eurasia. The craftsmen were paid little, while the Mongols profited greatly from the trade.

Kublai Khan (1261-1295), a fairly enlightened Mongol ruler, tried to encourage agriculture and trade. But the series of less competent emperors that followed him did much damage to China's economy. They and their flatterers lived lavishly, all the while taxing the Chinese populace in order to pay for their extravagant lifestyles. In time, this led to inflation, and the paper money of the empire became completely worthless. By the early 1300's, conditions were so bad on the farm that young Zhu was compelled to leave his starving family and become a Buddhist monk, begging for food at the side of the road.

Then nature added to China's misery. The Huang (Yellow) River changed course, flooding huge expanses of remaining farmland. Zhu's family perished in the resulting famine. Epidemic disease, perhaps bubonic plague, also broke out, killing Chinese and Mongols alike. Along with most other Chinese, Zhu concluded that the Yuan Dynasty had lost the Mandate of Heaven, that is, the divine right to rule China.

Across China, people began to rise up against their Mongol overlords. Zhu led the rebels. A wise scholar advised him that he would succeed if he followed three rules: build strong city walls, gather as much grain in storage as possible, and be slow to assume titles. Zhu followed the wise

man's advice and now, nearly twenty years later, stood victorious atop the steps of the emperor's palace.

With the Mongols gone, it was finally time for Zhu to assume a title. He proclaimed himself, "Ming Hung Wu," Emperor of China. "Ming" meant "brilliant" or "bright" and "Hung Wu," was a traditional dynastic name meaning "Vast Army." The new emperor intended to make China a bright light that would shine for all the world to see. He wrote to the kings and emperors of distant lands announcing his rise to power.

"Heaven, wearied of their [the Mongols] misgovernment and debauchery, thought fit to turn their fate to ruin... When the nation began to arouse itself, We, as a simple peasant...conceived the patriotic idea to save the people... We have established peace in the Empire, and restored the old boundaries of Zhongguo [The Middle Kingdom—China]. We were selected by Our people to occupy the Imperial throne of Zhongguo under the dynastic title of the 'the Great Ming.' We cannot but let the world know Our intention to maintain peace within the four seas..."

With great energy, Ming Hung Wu set out to rebuild China according to its agricultural traditions. He encouraged millions of farmers to move their families north to reclaim abandoned farmland and rebuild the irrigation systems neglected during Mongol rule. Scholarship and philosophy were revived and the civil service examination system reintroduced to ensure that government officials had good qualifications. The new emperor focused his efforts on agriculture and on trade within China. He did not value trade with other lands, which had been so important to the Mongols.

Ming Hung Wu thus took the Mandate of Heaven very seriously and worked hard to make sure his government truly served the interests of the Chinese people. China was on the road to recovery!