Essential Questions

- How did the population and economy develop in sixteenth and seventeenth centuries China?
- What defined the reigns of Qing emperors Kangxi and Qianlong?
- What was the social structure of China during the Ming and Qing dynasties, and what was the role of women?
- What role did the patriarchal family play during the Ming and Qing dynasties?

Keywords
- comprador
- trade protection
Set the Stage

China in the fourteenth century had been taken over by a new dynasty, the Ming, or “brilliant,” whose rule lasted some three centuries and saw a pinnacle of achievement in the arts and crafts. Under Ming control, China grew prosperous through continued devotion to Confucian principles, which called for a rigid social structure with authoritarian men in charge of family and government alike. The Qing dynasty replaced the Ming in the middle of the seventeenth century, and while they represented foreign control, they nevertheless sought to follow the Ming example by embracing China’s past in order to take it into the future. Under both dynasties the future looked quite bright. Populations boomed as new agricultural crops and techniques led to bountiful harvests. And the economy boomed as a result of foreign trade that brought silver bullion to China in exchange for goods. But there were cracks in the social structure; the patriarchal system that left women with virtually no opportunities also left little flexibility. China in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries was solidifying its reliance on a social order that would prove too unbendable when the modern age arrived.

China in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries

When the Ming dynasty took over China in the fourteenth century, its emperors created a government fashioned on the centralized imperial model of earlier Chinese dynasties. They re instituted traditional Confucian approaches to government and society, filling the ranks of bureaucracies with civil servants who had completed a battery of exams based on a Confucian curriculum, and promoting time-honored hierarchical and patriarchal values within the social order. Yet even as Ming leaders clung to conservative policies, emperors held no sway over sweeping changes that transformed China. Population growth altered the country’s demographics. Production of highly sought trade goods exposed China to outside influences. And an enormous influx of wealth transformed the economy. Throughout the course of these changes, leaders of the Ming dynasty struggled to adapt. When their rule was overthrown in the mid-seventeenth century by a new dynasty—the Qing—China’s rulers would continue to seek stability by preserving a conservative approach. By then, however, global advances had left China, still clinging to the past, behind.

Ming China

In 1279, the Mongol leader Kublai Khan (1215–1294) established the Yuan dynasty to rule China, and for the next six decades, the Chinese people suffered under Mongol control, paying high taxes and having no authority within their own government. Meanwhile, terrible famines created starvation and hardship. By the middle of the fourteenth century, the people of China had enough of foreign rule. A rebellion
launched by Zhu Yuanzhang (1328–1398), a peasant from southern China, drove out the Mongols and established the Ming dynasty, which lasted some 300 years.

By 1368, Zhu Yuanzhang had defeated the Mongols and his Chinese rivals in the south, and he went on to capture the northern part of China and drive out the last Mongol emperor. He called his new dynasty the Ming, which means “brilliant,” and for his reign, he took the imperial title Hongwu (r. 1368–1398), which means “vast military power.” He would maintain and expand that power with an army drawn from nearly two million households that were obligated to provide him lifelong military service. Soon, every neighboring country from Korea to Thailand was paying tribute to China. To prevent rebellion, the Hongwu emperor executed anyone suspected of fomenting rebellion against his rule, a policy that saw him kill as many as 100,000 of his own bureaucrats and army officers over the course of two decades. To keep order, the Hongwu emperor revived the Confucian value system, which emphasized the need for each person to accept his or her place in a rigid social order.

**Growth and Development under the Ming**

Hongwu and the other Ming emperors who followed created jobs and economic strength in China, in large measure as a result of the many projects undertaken to repair damage inflicted on the country by the Mongols. They repaired and rebuilt China’s vital irrigation systems, including a major overhaul of the Grand Canal, which connected China’s two major rivers and allowed crops to be transported from south to north. The Ming also undertook other massive building projects, including the creation of the Forbidden City at the heart of the capital and a renovation of the Great Wall. Construction of the Forbidden City, a 9,000-room palace complex which served as a private refuge for the royal family and the court, not only put people to work, but also helped convince the Chinese people of their own greatness and ability. The Great Wall, which under the Ming emperors became a 1,550-mile unbroken barrier of thick stone and formidable defense, also provided countless construction jobs, while at the same time providing security on China’s exposed northern border and creating a sense of Chinese insularity.

The Ming period also saw a profound transformation of Chinese agriculture, thanks in part to the revitalized irrigation system, but also because of dramatic changes to the tax system that reduced the burden on small family farms. The result was a sharp increase in the amount of land under cultivation, and over the first century of Ming rule, harvests were bountiful. Improved roads and waterways allowed farmers to get their products more easily to market, so they began growing more profitable crops, such as tea. During the 1600s, Spanish merchants in Asia introduced previously unknown food crops from America, most notably high-calorie species like maize (corn), sweet potatoes, and peanuts. Chinese farmers continued to grow traditional crops like rice, wheat, and millet, but the introduction of new crops allowed production to increase, because they grew well in previously uncultivated soils. Advances in agriculture allowed China’s population to hit an all-time high, rising from 85 million in the 1400s to 120 million by 1600. Bustling market towns sprang up across the Ming Empire.

The increased agricultural output and relative prosperity of China’s hardworking farmers meshed well with Ming leaders’ embrace of traditional Confucian values, which held that everything of worth came from the land. Under Ming rule, the importance
of farming as the foundation of society was symbolized at the start of every growing season when the emperor himself plowed the first furrow in the land. But agricultural success helped spur economic development in other areas, most notably global trade, which actually eroded traditional Confucian values within some segments of society. As the population grew, the cities also grew, undermining Confucian teachings that rural life trumped urban life as a way to develop good character. Similarly, the sharp rise in China’s involvement with traders from around the world countered traditional Confucianism, which held merchants and financiers in low esteem.

In the mid 1500s, Europeans began arriving in China in earnest, seeking highly prized trade goods like tea, silk, textiles, and—perhaps more than anything else—porcelain. Chinese craftspeople had invented porcelain centuries earlier, but during the early Ming period developed a new style with a distinctive blue-on-white design. Already the tableware of choice among China’s social elites, Ming-era porcelain became so popular in Europe that soon all fine plates, platters, and tea cups became known simply as “china.”

China’s leap into the world of global commerce would have far-reaching consequences. Initially, the trading boom brought prosperity throughout the Ming Empire. High demand led to industrial-scale production of porcelain, which gave rise to crowded and smoke-filled industrial cities. Ming producers also increased
their output of other trade goods, including finely woven silk and high-quality cotton textiles. This output in turn led to increased growth among the agricultural sector which provided the raw materials for those industries. In the seventeenth century, foreign trade brought to China a massive influx of silver from the Americas, which further stimulated trade and commercial expansion.

But despite the wealth and economic vibrancy that global trade created in China, Ming officials slowly worked to close the country off from foreign influences, especially following the unparalleled voyages of the famed navigator Zheng He (c. 1371–1433). Ming emperors distrusted European traders and viewed them as members of a barbaric race, and their Confucian values led them to look down on all merchants. Ultimately, Ming officials decided to open a select number of port cities to European traders and prohibit them from coming inland. They later banned the construction of oceangoing ships and forbade their merchants from leaving Chinese waters.

**Ming Decline and Rise of the Qing**

Despite the efforts of the Ming emperors to isolate China from outsiders, by the mid-sixteenth century European traders had begun arriving en masse, eager to return home with valuable and profitable Chinese products. The prosperity China experienced as a result of commercial trade was followed by a series of crises brought on by the flood of silver. Inflation soared. Ming officials continued to print paper money, compounding the problem. Widespread government corruption prevented officials from being able to fix the economy, and by the late Ming period in the seventeenth century, economic distress gave rise to strikes and anti-government protests. In one labor uprising at Jingdezhen in 1601, workers at a porcelain factory threw themselves into the kilns to protest working conditions.

At the same time, the agricultural bounty China had long enjoyed under the Ming began to diminish, in part as a result of climate change. The global phenomenon of the seventeenth century known as the Little Ice Age affected China, much as it did the rest of the world. Annual temperatures dropped to a low point in the mid 1600s, and did not rebound until the eighteenth century. The reduced temperatures hurt agricultural production and led to famines and the spread of epidemic disease that created a sharp decline in local populations. The resulting social distress fueled large-scale popular protest against Ming rule.

The Ming dynasty had sought to shut China off from outsiders, but by the mid-sixteenth century European traders had begun forcing their way into China at will, and Japanese pirates launched raids on coastal cities. Adding to pressures from outside, the empire’s northeastern borders were under attack from a new group of foreigners, the Manchu, whose homeland lay in the grasslands north of Korea.

In 1644, an army of rebellious peasants rioted in Beijing and seized control of the Forbidden City, leading the Ming emperor to hang himself in desperation. To combat the insurrection, China’s leading general appealed to the Manchu for help. The Manchu complied, sending troops that quelled the riots and took over the city. But instead of returning power to the heir of the Ming throne, the Manchu proclaimed themselves China’s true rulers and announced a new dynasty, the Qing (pronounced *ching*), meaning “pure.” The Qing would be China’s last imperial dynasty, ruling from 1644 until 1911.
Kangxi and Qianlong

Once the Qing took control of China, their officials began collecting taxes that had gone unpaid during the final years of Ming rule. Some families owed as little as one-thousandth of an ounce of silver, but the Qing collected from them anyway, wanting their new subjects to know that the government would not allow lax obedience to their authority. To a great majority of the Chinese people, the Qing, like the Manchu, were as foreign as the Mongols who had established the Yuan dynasty. But in fact, the Qing shared much with the Chinese people they governed. From the Manchu homeland in the north, the Qing had been in contact with China for generations and had adopted many Chinese ways, including the writing system and Confucian values. Once in power, the Qing continued using the traditional Chinese civil service exams to select government officials.

Still, under Qing rule the Manchu endeavored to preserve their own cultural traditions and an ethnic identity separate from the Chinese people they controlled. Marriage between Chinese and Manchu people was prohibited, and native-born Chinese were not allowed to serve in the military, although they could take the civil service exams and obtain government jobs. The Qing forbade Chinese from travelling north to Manchuria or learning the Manchu language, and they forced Chinese men to shave the front of their heads and grow a long ponytail, called a Manchu queue, to show obedience to the government. Thus, the Qing used repressive tactics at the same time that they maintained China’s traditional institutions to govern the country, allowing roughly a million Manchu to control a nation of over 150 million for some two centuries.
In 1696, the Qing emperor Kangxi (r. 1661–1722) crushed China’s traditional foes, the Mongols, in a decisive battle in the north that ended the Mongol threat to China forever and extended the empire far into new territory in the north. Later, Kangxi went on to conquer the island of Formosa (Taiwan), off of China’s east coast, where many Ming officials had fled following the collapse of their “brilliant” dynasty. To the west, he extended Qing control across huge parts of Asia, almost to the Caspian Sea, and to the south he subjected Tibet to Qing authority as a subordinate kingdom.

A Confucian scholar and amateur poet, Kangxi had come to the throne as an eight-year-old boy, but after emerging from the shelter of a series of authoritative regents, he took power into his own hands and personally shaped the sort of government he envisioned. Recruiting Confucian scholars to his court helped Kangxi
establish a traditional Confucian system that endeared him to both educated elites and ordinary people. He saw himself as an enlightened ruler informed by China’s traditional values of leadership. Devoted to Confucian classics, the emperor believed that a good ruler should protect the welfare of his subjects and promote farming as the bedrock of a strong government. Thus, he focused, as early Ming leaders had, on repairing China’s irrigation systems and flood-control facilities. He also undertook projects to repair roads and resettle areas left devastated by peasant uprisings.

In 1722, Kangxi fell ill while staying at the imperial villa of Changchunyuan, northwest of Beijing, and died after battling for months. The next year he was buried in a mausoleum called the Jingling. Kangxi is usually considered one of China’s greatest rulers. He reigned for 61 years and laid the foundation for a long period of political stability and economic prosperity in China.

Kangxi’s grandson, the emperor Qianlong (r. 1736–1795), extended Qing control and continued the advancements made by his predecessors. In fact, China reached its greatest extent under the Qianlong—bigger even than the modern-day country. The Qing Empire controlled Central Asia by establishing military strongholds in what is today the Xinjiang province in western China. Qianlong also subjugated Vietnam, Burma, Nepal, and Korea, making them subordinate kingdoms.

Like his grandfather, Qianlong was educated and held traditional Confucian values in high esteem. He composed thousands of poems and was an avid supporter of the arts, including traditional Chinese painting and calligraphy. He also supported the work of European missionary-painters who lived at the court, such as Giuseppe Castiglione (1688–1766) and Jean-Denis Attiret (1702–1768). Qianlong’s reign marked the apex of the Qing dynasty, and during his six decades as ruler, China reached new heights of prosperity. In fact, the treasury contained so many surpluses that on four separate occasions Qianlong was able to cancel annual tax levies on the people.

**Growth and Development under the Ming**

For the first century and a half of Qing rule, prosperity prevailed throughout China. During these years, Europeans imported many goods from China—porcelain, rugs, jewelry, silk, and furniture—but in the midst of all this global trade, one product from China became especially popular. A great demand for Chinese tea developed in Russia, western Europe, and America. The demand had begun in the late seventeenth century, when the first English merchant to import tea from China brought five chests to England. The tea made an immediate impression there, and it quickly spread to Britain’s American colonies and beyond. Over the next 40 years, English imports of Chinese tea rose to 400,000 pounds, yet the Chinese continued to demand silver in exchange for their tea and they imported virtually no products from Europe or elsewhere.

As British traders continued to purchase more and more Chinese tea, China’s policy of **trade protection** gradually led to a sharp imbalance. China stockpiled silver, which was simultaneously drained from the British economy. Because the Chinese saw no need to import British manufactured goods, or anything else for that matter, trade with China largely violated the inherent rules of Britain’s mercantilist system. The organization with a monopoly on the tea trade in Britain, the East India Company, teetered on the edge of bankruptcy.
To remedy the problems created by its trade imbalance with China, the British
government sent Lord George Macartney as a diplomat to the court of Qianlong in
1792. The Macartney mission included scientists, inventors, and artists in addition
to diplomats. Macartney’s plan to create balance between the two nations relied
on convincing the emperors that China should import the marvelous new devices
being produced by England’s burgeoning manufacturing industries. But Emperor
Qianlong was unimpressed. In fact, the Qing court viewed the British diplomatic
mission as a group of “tribute emissaries” who had come to fete the emperor on
his eightieth birthday. Qianlong sent Macartney home without having achieved
any change in China’s trading policy, and bearing a letter for the king stating that
China had no use for British goods—or a diplomatic relationship. Silver would
continue to be required to trade for Chinese goods, and only one port, Canton,
would be open to British trading vessels.

While the British struggled to correct their trade imbalance with China, the
trading partnership proved lucrative for many members of Chinese society. As it
had under the early years of Ming rule, the agricultural sector blossomed for the
first century of Qing command. Tea producers did especially well, but farmers who
grew traditional grain crops also flourished as prosperity fueled population growth.
The availability of cash made possible by British traders’ silver payments allowed
Chinese farmers and artisans to find financing for new ventures.

Profits from overseas trade also gave rise to a wealthy new merchant class
know as compradors. Their name coming from a Portuguese word that means
“buyer,” the compradors were hired to negotiate the maze of currency-exchange,
translations, and security required by both sides of the global trade network. Many
compradors became extremely wealthy through their interactions with British and
American traders especially, and in modern times the term is used derisively to
refer to people who allowed foreigners to exploit China.

**Society and Gender in Ming and Qing China**
The Ming emperors’ embrace of Confucianism had restored the traditional Chinese
civil service exams that had been abandoned by Mongol rulers. The exams tested
candidates’ knowledge of Confucian classics, and candidates who scored high
enough could enter government service. After the Ming dynasty collapsed and the
Manchu took over, Qing rulers continued the practice. Like Chinese governments
for centuries, the day-to-day operations of the state were in the hands of the scholar
bureaucrats who had spent years studying to pass the civil service exams. These
men dominated political and social life in China, and some had the potential to
work their way up through the ranks of the Chinese social hierarchy.

At the top of the social structure in both the Ming and Qing dynasties was
the authoritative head of the strong central state: the emperor, who though not
precisely viewed as divine was certainly more than a mere mortal. By tradition, he
was considered the “Son of Heaven,” ordained to be the human ruler and charged
with maintaining order and stability. He lived with his family in the Forbidden
City, apart and isolated from the millions of ordinary citizens he controlled, where
he was attended by concubines and eunuchs. Anyone graced with the emperor’s
presence was required to perform the kowtow.
Just beneath the emperor in the social hierarchy was a class of gentry that included the scholar-bureaucrats who operated the government. These members of society served as the go-betweens for the local communities and the central state apparatus. They organized local efforts to control irrigation and provide public safety, and could be identified by their characteristic black attire highlighted with blue borders that displayed insignias of rank. The gentry, who enjoyed large incomes from the land they owned and from their government service, were exempt from paying taxes.

Under the gentry were Chinese commoners, grouped by Confucian tradition into three classes: the peasants, the artisans and workers, and the merchants. Peasants formed by far the largest group. Made up primarily of agricultural workers, from day laborers to tenant farmers, the peasants were viewed as the most honorable class of commoners because of the Confucian view that agriculture and farmwork were the bedrocks of society.

Artisans and workers filled a wide variety of roles in Chinese society, producing the goods and services that consumers sought. Often they found jobs working for the

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How did the economy develop under Qing rule in China?

A Piece of History

Yan Lien, Memorial to Emperor Ming Xizong Concerning Eunuch Wei Zhongxian

How would anyone have expected that, with a wise ruler like Your Majesty on the throne, there would be a chief eunuch like Wei Zhongxian, a man totally uninhibited, who destroys court precedents, ignores the ruler to pursue his selfish ends, corrupts good people, ruins the emperor’s reputation . . . and brews unimaginable disasters? The entire court has been intimidated. No one dares denounce him by name. My responsibility really is painful. . . If today out of fear I also do not speak out, I will be abandoning my determination to be loyal and my responsibility to serve the state. I would also be turning my back on your kindness in bringing me back to office after retirement . . .

This memo sent to the emperor by a high court official during the late Ming period illustrates the power enjoyed by court eunuchs. Charged with the day-to-day operation of the palace, the influence that eunuchs wielded was formidable and grew more so during the reigns of emperors who had little interest in governing. Eunuch influence was opposed by Confucian tradition, however, and the scholar-bureaucrats who were steeped in Confucian philosophy resisted their growing power.

This conflict came to a head in the 1620s when the eunuch Wei Zhongxian rose to power during the reign of Emperor Xizong. With the backing of a network of palace supporters, Wei, a former butler for the emperor’s mother, slaughtered his enemies, levied new taxes, and flouted Chinese tradition and court customs. In 1624 a scholar-bureaucrat named Yang Lien denounced Wei’s actions in this memorandum to the emperor. Yang informs the emperor that he is investigating Wei for the glory of the emperor and China, and out of a sense of personal loyalty and duty.
government or for members of the gentry. The wealthiest class of commoners—the merchants—were also those least admired in the traditional Confucian worldview, which held that merchants were unscrupulous and made money without doing any actual work. Over time, the wealth enjoyed by the merchant class served to blur the lines in China’s social hierarchy, because they gave their sons the kind of education that qualified them for civil service, and they entered the ranks of the gentry as scholar-bureaucrats.

The hierarchical structure of Chinese society was a macrocosm of the traditional family. In Confucian cosmology, the family was as hierarchical, patriarchal, and authoritarian as the imperial government. Fathers led the family as the emperor led the country, and as head of the household Chinese fathers passed their leadership on to the eldest son. Children in turn were subservient to their father, just as the Chinese people owed filial piety to the emperor. As parents grew older, it was the duty of their children to care for them. This veneration of elderly relatives extended beyond the grave, and the ritual devotion to dead members of the patriarch’s family tree, a rich part of Confucian tradition, was mandated by the government.

The rigid patriarchal structure of Chinese society also determined rigid gender roles, and within that structure girls and women had little room to maneuver within the male-dominated world. Most women’s lives were centered on maintaining a household, although among some lower-class families women might work in the fields or sell produce in the market. Marriages were arranged by the fathers of the groom, and they often chose brides from families from a slightly lower class. Because such marriages required families to provide expensive dowries, raising a daughter could be a financial liability. When they left with their dowries, they became members of their new household and subservient to a new patriarchal head of household. On the other hand, a family who raised a son could hold out hope that the boy in time might land a lucrative career in civil service and be able to provide for his parents. These circumstances led parents to prefer boys to girls, and resulted in a high rate of female infanticide in Ming and Qing China, where eventually men far outnumbered women in the population as a whole. At the other end of their lives, women in China fared little better, as widows were virtually prohibited from remarrying, and society honored those women who committed suicide to follow their husbands to the afterlife.

A custom that had most likely originated during the Song dynasty centuries earlier, foot binding was practiced widely during the Ming and Qing eras. Young girls’ feet were broken and bound tightly in strips of linen so that over time, the bones grew bent and deformed. The painful procedure was intended to give adult women tiny and dainty feet, which were seen as beautiful and attractive to men. The now-notorious practice, which remained popular into the twentieth century, prevented such women from performing physical labor, and further relegated females to a life of few opportunities. Foot binding was especially popular among the wealthy, but sometimes a common family would bind the feet of a baby girl in the hopes of someday marrying her to a prosperous family.
The emperors of both the Ming and Qing dynasties had sought to return traditional Confucian values to China, in large part because those values provided a justification for their power. The rigid patriarchal and authoritarian nature of Chinese society supported the supreme power wielded by the government. But China’s rigidness would eventually lead to its downfall; embrace of the past prevented China from seeing the future. New technologies that had failed to impress the emperor would soon create a sharp realignment of global power. Half a world away, changes were occurring that would leave China vulnerable and unable to catch up with the world of which it had long seen itself as the center.

**Summary**

When the Ming dynasty took control of China, it set about trying to repair the economy through projects that brought jobs and increased agricultural production. In addition to constructing the Forbidden City and refurbishing the Great Wall, the Ming made improvements to the irrigation infrastructure and created a new tax system that reduced the burden on small family farms. These measures, along with the introduction of new crops, helped fuel population growth and commerce. At the same time, Ming China became part of a global trade network.

Climate change and other pressures contributed to the popular protests that rocked the final years of Ming rule. A new dynasty, the Qing, was established by a group of foreigners, the Manchu, who tried to emulate Ming political structures while maintaining a separate identity. The Qing emperor Kangxi expanded China’s borders and revived the agricultural base and supporting trade. His grandson, Qianlong, witnessed the height of Qing power. The economy prospered during Qing rule as Western demand for tea brought a great influx of silver and created a trade imbalance in China’s favor, while farmers thrived and compradors grew wealth. But society was rigid and patriarchal, giving women few opportunities.

**Looking Ahead**

For all the prosperity and power China achieved under the Ming and Qing dynasties, the country was slowly falling behind the people whom the Chinese had long derided as “barbarians,” the Europeans. In 1500 China was far ahead of Europe both economically and technologically. But the Ming and Qing dynasties believed China to be exceptional and the center of civilization, and Chinese trade policies limited Europeans to the port of Canton, cutting off the country from the world just as Europeans were beginning to make great advances in science.

Though credited with creating power and prosperity, the policies of both Ming and Qing rulers would eventually leave China vulnerable. A society with such a rigid order lacked the flexibility needed to take it into the modern age. In the nineteenth century, when Britain finally found a product it could trade with China and repair its long-standing trade deficit, the Chinese government resisted only to find that it lacked the strength to put up much of a fight against the industrial powers of the West.
1. Increased agricultural production under the Ming was the result of improvements made in the irrigation infrastructure, a new tax system that reduced the burden on small family farms, and the introduction of new crops that could be grown in previously uncultivated areas. Increased production helped fuel population growth and commerce.

2. During the Ming period, China became part of a global trade network, and Chinese goods were prized throughout the world, leading to a rise in the merchant class, industrial-scale production of items like porcelain and silk, and a massive influx of silver.

3. Kangxi expanded China's borders and defeated the Mongols in the north, while reviving the agricultural base and supporting trade.

4. The economy prospered during Qing rule as Western demand for tea brought a great influx of silver and created a trade imbalance in China's favor, while farmers thrived and compradors grew wealthy.

5. Women had very limited opportunities in Chinese society, which was patriarchal and male-dominated, leading boys to be valued over girls and a high rate of female infanticide.