

A GENERAL HISTORY OF CHINA

VOLUME

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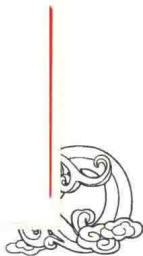
The Ming Dynasty



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Compiled by Dai Nierui and Zhao Xiuning

Translated by Wang Weidong, Peng Ping and Lu Qingliang



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特约译审 / Natalie Zee Elisabeth Hallett

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FORTY-TWO

FORTY-TWO CENTRALISED MONARCHY OF THE MING DYNASTY



1

Downfall of the Yuan Dynasty

The country now had the most extensive territory in Chinese history, stretching beyond the Yin Mountains to the north, to the shifting sands of the remote west, east as far as the Liaodong region and south to islands across the sea. It was the first feudal dynasty in Chinese history to be founded and ruled by a minority nationality. It was a feudal dynasty with multiple differences, where diverse ethnic groups, different institutions and different cultures were all intertwined. After nearly a century of domination in the Central Plains, the Mongol rule lurched back to the northern grasslands. Why did the Yuan Dynasty rule last such a short time? What brought about its complete collapse?

AS WITH THE dynasties established by the Han Chinese, brutal class oppression also existed in the Yuan Dynasty of the Mongols. Ethnic conflicts were intense. As early as in the Kublai Khan era, people of the Yuan Dynasty were divided into four classes according to ethnic difference and the time when they were conquered. The ruling Mongols naturally belonged to the first class, the Semu people to the second class, Han Chinese the third class and Southerners the lowest class. *Semu* in Chinese means 'eyes of all colours' and was a term used by the Yuan rulers to refer to people of the northwest and Western Regions as well as foreigners. Han Chinese also included at that time the Chinese of north China, the Jurchens and Khitans originally under the rule of the Jin Dynasty (1115–1234), as well as local people from Sichuan and Yunnan. The Southerners of the fourth category referred to people of the former Southern Song Dynasty, who surrendered to the Yuan Dynasty, most of them being Han Chinese in ethnicity. By ranking the Semu people in the second class, the Yuan rulers hoped to make them supporters of the Mongol aristocracy and, by dividing Chinese people into third class Han Chinese and fourth class Southerners, the Yuan rulers aimed to separate and weaken the Han, using the strategy of divide and conquer.

While the four-class system temporarily guarded the privileged position of the Mongol nobility, it also brought about a power struggle amongst the Mongol rulers and fed corruption and degeneration. Nine emperors ascended the throne in just forty years, from the death of Kublai Khan in 1294 to 1333 when Toghan-Temür, the last Yuan emperor reigned, with each emperor in power for an average of less than five years. Once they became emperor, they immediately indulged in an extravagant and dissipated lifestyle. For example Emperor Wuzong of

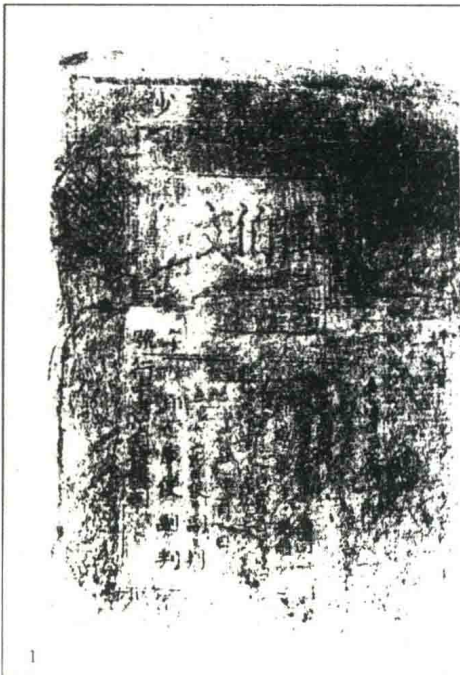


Portrait of Külüg Khan, Emperor Wuzong of Yuan

Yuan had an annual financial revenue of 2.8 million ingots. In less than a year he had spent 8.2 million ingots, leaving a deficit of as much as 5.4 million ingots. Most of the money was spent on religious activities such as worshipping deities and building temples. While senior officers were busy fighting for power and pleasure, local officials at all levels took the opportunity to exploit people and engage in bribery and corruption.

A corrupt government and brutal exploitation left people struggling for their very existence. In 1333, storms and floods that occurred in Beijing, alone led to as many as 400,000 people suffering from famine. In 1345, 1346 and 1348, the Yellow River dyke was breached three times with the river eventually changing course. Thousands of people along the river became famine refugees and such conditions existed everywhere. This ensured that many people would be prepared to join peasant uprisings.

At the time, there was a popular short tonal poem called 'Drunken in Times of Peace and Tranquillity' that contained the lines: 'The great Yuan Empire is ruled by crafty, sycophantic officials. Suffering rising inflation and forced to dig a new Yellow River course, millions of red-turbaned farmers rebelled.'



1



2 伍佰文中統鈔版心（摹本）

It was a microcosm of society in the last years of the Yuan Dynasty, revealing the corrupt and seamy side of government and the depths of people's suffering. Changing the value of money was the Yuan Dynasty rulers' way of dealing with the financial crisis. They recklessly issued paper money, thereby creating serious currency inflation and soaring commodity prices. Paper money was everywhere. People were reluctant to use it, regarding it as no more than wastepaper. Trade in the prefectures and counties was reduced to bartering. Paper money undermined the dynasty's fiscal administration and led to its collapse.

At the same time, in 1344, torrential rain fell in the middle reaches of the Yellow River, breaching the dykes and flooding countless cities and towns along its banks. When the river water overflowed into the Grand Canal, its dykes were also breached, causing widespread flooding. This led to the tragic occurrence of cannibalism in many places. In 1351, Toghan-Temür, the last Yuan emperor, appointed Jia Lu to deal with the Yellow River problem. Jia Lu recruited 150,000 peasants who lived alongside the Yellow River. These peasants, who had suffered flood, famine and epidemics, were now forced to work on the river rerouting project. Moans of agony could be heard, as people died one after another. Corpses remaining scattered along the banks.

Although in less than eight months the Yellow River was restored to its former course and its flow was successfully regulated, how was it that this brought the Yuan Dynasty to the brink of destruction?

Amongst the peasants there was a man called Han Shantong. A native of Luancheng in Hebei, he secretly recruited people into the anti-government White Lotus Society. Together with Liu Futong, a native of Fuyang in Anhui, they secretly carved a one-eyed stone man, inscribing

on its back that when a one-eyed stone man appears, it will be time for people along the Yellow River to rebel. They then buried the stone image in the river bed and waited for it to be dug up. When the stone man was discovered, the peasants were stunned and news of rebellion travelled swiftly, far and wide. People near the Yellow River were eager to see what was going to happen. Originally, Han Shantong and Liu Futong planned to rebel in Yingzhou (today's Fuyang City in Anhui Province) in early May, 1351. However, their plan was revealed unexpectedly and the rebellion was suppressed by the army. Han Shantong was arrested and put to death but Liu Futong and his comrades managed to survive. On 3 May, Liu Futong led another revolt and successfully occupied Yingzhou, which marked the official beginning of the great rebellion. Since all the rebel soldiers wore a red turban, they were called the Red Turban Army. Under the leadership of Liu Futong, the brave Red Turban Army



Jia Lu River ◉

defeated the Yuan armies many times, taking places such as Bozhou in Anhui and Xiangcheng in Henan and increasing the number of their followers to 100,000. In 1355, Han Lin'er, Han Shantong's son, was proclaimed by Liu Futong the emperor of the 'Great Song' at Bozhou. It was the so-called 'Great Song' because Liu Futong wished to garner public support to revitalise the extinct Song Dynasty and reestablish Han Chinese power by rebelling against the Yuan regime.



Statue of Liu Futong in Jieshou, Anhui Province

Liu Futong's successful rebellion at Yingzhou greatly encouraged Peng Yingyu and his followers, who had secretly prepared for a revolt along the Yangtze and Huai rivers. Peng Yingyu, popularly known as 'Monk Peng', was widely loved by people because of his brilliant medical skills. In August 1351, Peng Yingyu and Xu Shouhui rebelled in Qichun of Hubei. As with the Red Turban Army in the north led by Liu Futong, Peng's followers also wore red turbans. To distinguish the two, they were known as the Red Turban Army of the South. After capturing Qishui (today's Xishui in Hubei Province) that October, Peng's Red Turbans made Qishui the capital of their newly-established empire, the Tianwan empire. The Chinese characters for 'Tianwan' contain more strokes than the characters for 'Dayuan (Great Yuan)', because they believed that their 'Tianwan' empire would topple the 'Dayuan' empire.

Meanwhile, rebellions were occurring all over the country. Encouraged by this, Liu Futong's three armies successfully occupied many Yuan cities in 1357, dealing the Yuan empire a heavy blow. Unfortunately, the rebel armies were poorly organised and in the end they were defeated.

At this juncture, the situation within the Red Turban Army of the South also changed. Peng Yingyu died in battle and the Tianwan empire was taken over by Chen Youliang. The empire's name was changed to 'Dahan', which literally means 'Great Han'.

Although the rebellion led by Liu Futong and Peng Yingyu failed to overthrow Yuan rule, their efforts dealt the Mongol nobility a fatal blow and laid the foundations for a final victory against the Yuan Dynasty.

The person who finally overthrew the Yuan Dynasty was Zhu Yuanzhang. He was born into a poor peasant family in Haozhou (today's Fengyang in Anhui Province) in 1328. In the spring of 1344, his parents and elder brother died because of pestilence along the Huai River. Destitute, Zhu became a novice monk at the Huangjue Temple and later left to beg for alms. This helped him to accumulate rich social experience. In 1352, the twenty-five-year-old Zhu Yuanzhang joined the Red Turban Army led by Guo Zixing. Owing to his bravery on the battlefield, Zhu gradually became the chief leader of the rebels. He was not only talented but also highly disciplined, knew his subordinates well and how to deploy them. In 1360, he occupied Jiankang (today's Nanjing in Jiangsu Province), an important southern city at that time.

While on the march, Zhu Yuanzhang managed to attract many talented men into his service, such as Li Shanchang, Liu Ji, Zhu Sheng, Song Lian and others. Li Shanchang suggested that Zhu learn from Liu Bang, who was willing to use able people and killed no one at will, something that would be of great help in building a great empire. Resourceful and adept at military strategy, Liu Ji gave Zhu many good and effective ideas. Zhu Sheng advised Zhu Yuanzhang to 'build high walls, stock up rations and not to be too quick to call himself a king'. After several years' endeavour, Zhu Yuanzhang quickly expanded his military and economic strength. Would he launch a northern expedition against the Yuan court immediately?

While Zhu Yuanzhang occupied the southeast area, Chen Youliang remained along the middle reaches of the Yangtze River. Zhang Shicheng captured Suzhou City and Fang Guozhen settled in Zhejiang. Zhu Yuanzhang first assembled his forces to fight against the powerful Chen



Temple of Liu Ji in Nantian of Wenzhou in Zhejiang Province 📍

Youliang, winning two battles. Not long after defeating Chen Youliang, in 1367, Zhu Yuanzhang quickly eliminated Zhang Shicheng and Fang Guozhen. He then went on to take control of Guangdong and Fujian provinces. Southeast China now basically belonged to Zhu Yuanzhang.

In the same year, Zhu Yuanzhang decided to fight against the Yuan Dynasty in the north. Song Lian, his political adviser, drafted for him the famous 'Declaration against the Mongols' in which Song put forward the rallying cry of 'drive out the ethnic barbarian and restore the Chinese nation, establish rules and disciplines to save the people from suffering.' The first half showed their resolution to overthrow Mongol rule and rebuild an empire ruled by the Han people. The second half said that they should rid themselves of the cruel Yuan rule and provide people with a peaceful

and happy life. This declaration encouraged Han Chinese suffering under the Yuan yoke, and undermined the rival armies' morale. Xu Da and Chang Yuchun, Zhu Yuanzhang's generals, led an army of 250,000 soldiers on a northern expedition. The Yuan Dynasty, however, was in a state of chaos. The few military forces belonging to landlords that the court relied upon were always fighting amongst themselves; and added to this the emperor was addicted to alcohol and beautiful women. Zhu Yuanzhang's army marched in without any difficulty. On the second day of the eighth month in 1368 he took the Yuan capital and on that day, the Yuan Dynasty, which had reigned for ninety-seven years, came to a complete end.



Chang Yuchun's tomb

2

Strengthened Monarchy of the Ming Dynasty

In the first lunar month of the year 1368, Zhu Yuanzhang proclaimed himself Emperor in Nanjing. He was forty years old and his empire was called the 'Great Ming'. He took *Hongwu*, meaning 'vastly martial', as his reign title and so has also since been known as Emperor Hongwu. His posthumous name, Taizu of Ming means 'Great Ming Ancestor'. Zhu Yuanzhang not only showed great valour and skill on the battlefield, but he was also an ambitious and visionary emperor. After the territory of the Great Ming had been secured, Zhu Yuanzhang established a series of political and economic systems, which not only lasted through the entire Ming Dynasty, but also exerted a profound influence on the Qing Dynasty as well. Zhu had risen up from the bottom rung of society and had taken power during a peasant uprising. What changes would he bring to China's feudal system? In which direction would his leadership take the Ming Empire?



Portrait of Zhu Yuanzhang ◉



Portrait of Xu Da ◉

IN THE EARLY days of the Ming Dynasty the whole of society was destitute after the great peasant uprisings that had occurred at the end of the previous era. In order to restore production and life to normal as soon as possible, the central government took over the Yuan Dynasty system, in which the Secretariat was responsible for political affairs and, its head officer, the chancellor, was in charge of civil service officials and had the power to deal with political affairs. Li Shanchang and Xu Da were the first two chancellors. They knew well how a chancellor was expected to behave; they therefore handled matters cautiously and maintained a good relationship with the emperor. However, the position of chancellor was a key political position in central government and this made Zhu Yuanzhang feel extremely uneasy, for he feared that one day the Great Ming Empire he had built up so painstakingly would