

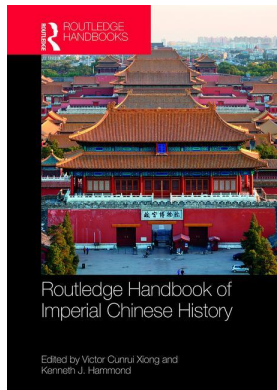
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# 15

## THE MING DYNASTY (PRE-1521)

*Peter Ditmanson*

Over 276 years, the Ming dynasty spanned a remarkable period in Chinese history, marked by dramatic economic growth, the emergence of a vibrant urban culture, and the dawn of relations between China and Europe. The dynasty was established upon the ashes of the crumbling Mongol Yuan dynasty (1271–1368), in which much of the realm was devastated by wars, epidemics and natural disasters. Under these desperate conditions, the founding warlord, Zhu Yuanzhang, sought to create a new stable order, based upon an idealized agrarian economy with trade and mobility tightly controlled. The subsequent evolution of the Ming society, economy and polity went far beyond what he imagined and strained the framework that he left behind. This chapter summarizes the original designs of the Ming founder and the evolution of Ming society and institutions over the century after his death (Map 15.1).



Map 15.1 The Ming Empire. (See Tan Qixiang, vol. 7, 40–41.)

## Foundations of the empire

Zhu Yuanzhang was born in 1328 into desperate poverty in what is now Anhui province in central China. This region saw some of the worst of the volatile conditions of famine, epidemics and warfare in the late Yuan period, with the forces of the dynasty unable to quell the fighting of rebel groups and local bandit strongmen. Orphaned in his teens when his tenant-farmer parents and other family members died from disease, he survived as a novice monk in the care of a local monastery for several years, begging for food and gaining a rudimentary education. Over the course of his life, he reflected on his humble background and railed against the forces of greed, exploitation and neglect that he saw as the root causes of suffering among the peasantry.

In his mid-twenties, Zhu joined a rebel group affiliated with the widespread millenarian Red Turbans. His intelligence and talents soon brought him important connections with local rebel leaders, and it was also here that he found a wife, a young woman surnamed Ma who eventually became his empress and lifelong confidant. By the 1350s, he was the head of a force of several hundred men, leading campaigns of his own. In 1356, he conquered Nanjing, a city of historical significance and economic importance near the mouth of the Yangzi River. Here, he began to create an administrative apparatus, courting local scholars and establishing the groundwork for his own government. In 1364, he declared his regional sovereignty with the title of Prince of the state of Wu (Wuwang 吳王), and in 1368, he established himself as emperor of a new dynasty called the Ming, meaning “Brilliance.” The significance of the name was perhaps linked to religious elements of his millenarian past. He chose the reign-title of Hongwu, “Grand Martiality,” which indicated his warrior orientation and his ongoing campaigns to pacify the realm.

Zhu Yuanzhang’s dramatic rise from orphan to emperor shaped his outlook and policies in important ways. In his desire to remedy all the ills of the world in which he grew up, he insisted that the hallmarks of his new dynasty would be stability, accountability and morality. Over the course of his reign, however, his zealous pursuit of an idealized order descended into frustration and paranoia, with massive purges of those whom he perceived to be evil obstacles.

## Succession and the structure of the imperial clan

The first priority of the new Hongwu emperor (r. 1368–98) was to establish and organize the imperial clan. He formalized the rites of venerating his ancestors, and arranged for the proper burial of his peasant parents. He then began to establish plans for his progeny, his twenty-six sons and numerous daughters and their offspring, laying out his specific instructions in a document called the “Ancestral Admonitions” (Zuxun 祖訓), compiled in 1373 and revised several times afterward until 1397. The Admonitions spelled out the protocols, privileges and responsibilities of the male and female members of the clan in extensive detail. Hongwu declared that succession to the throne would be by primogeniture, from eldest son to eldest son, so that the Ming could avoid the battles for succession that had beset the Mongol Yuan. In a significant departure from preceding dynasties, Hongwu then established a network of noble hereditary domains across the empire for the rest of the male clansmen and their progeny, with the intent that they would provide a loyal bulwark of security. In establishing this system, the emperor saw himself as restoring the political order of the ancient Zhou dynasty.

Within these domains, primogeniture was again the rule of succession, with the younger offspring granted lesser titles and domains of their own. These ever-growing enfeoffed estates dotted much of the landscape of the empire, and by 1600, there were over 100,000 claimants to descent from the founder.

The emperor was uncertain about his designs for the imperial clan and therefore revised the “Ancestral Admonitions” several times. His plans for stable rule by a succession of emperors and a bulwark of imperial clansmen began to falter even in his own lifetime. Malfeasance and criminal behavior were reported in some of the princely establishments, and this was complicated by the fact that the emperor had placed these establishments outside the purview of the legal authorities of the realm. Some of these princes, such as Zhu Youdun 朱有燾 (1379–1439) and Zhu Quan 朱權 (1378–1448), established themselves as men of culture and learning. The former was a noted dramatist, calligrapher and painter. The latter had widely ranging interests in horticulture, music, drama, literature and history, as well as an impressive grasp of Confucian, Daoist and Buddhist teachings. Other princes, however, abused the power and wealth that was granted them, preying upon the populace who had little recourse.

The idealized pattern of succession was troubled as well. The first crisis came when Zhu Biao, the first heir-apparent, died unexpectedly of illness in 1392. After some debate, the founder declared that the throne would then pass to his oldest grandson. Within two years of the founder’s own death in 1398, the tensions between the clansmen erupted into civil war, as the powerful prince assigned to the state of Yan (the environs around modern Beijing) marshaled his military forces and launched an attack that ultimately placed him on the throne as the Yongle emperor (r. 1403–24). After his military victory, the new emperor rewrote the records of his father to legitimate his own succession and eliminated his nephew’s reign from the historical records. Yongle’s grandson, the new Xuande emperor (r. 1426–35), faced a similar coup in 1426 by his uncle Zhu Gaoxu (1380–1429), Yongle’s second son, although this was quickly put down.

The ascent of the eight-year-old Zhengtong emperor (r. 1436–49) to the throne in 1435 brought a problem to the court, for there were no provisions in the “Ancestral Admonitions” for the enthronement of a minor. Under the guidance of the empress dowager Zhang, an uneasy regency was established among the leading civil, military and eunuch officials at the court. From this point on, tensions between civil officials and eunuchs remained a flashpoint in the politics of the dynasty.

Succession was again a problem in 1449, when the Zhengtong emperor was captured as he led an ill-advised campaign against the Oirat Mongols. Court officials quickly placed the Prince of Cheng, the emperor’s half-brother, on the throne as the Jingtai emperor (r. 1450–56). This solution became complicated, however, when Zhengtong was released the following year and returned to the capital. Jingtai refused to cede the throne, appointing his own son as heir-apparent. Finally, in 1457, when Jingtai was mortally ill, a hasty and bloodless palace coup restored Zhengtong to the throne with the new title of Tianshun (r. 1457–64). In the Chenghua reign (1465–87), the establishment of an heir became a matter of dramatic intrigue and contention among his wives.

Despite the efforts of the founder to ensure an ordered structure to his family and a clear protocol of succession, such problems plagued the imperial clan. These crises of succession and tensions with the princely domains presaged further political disruptions in the sixteenth century.

## The Ming military

The Ming founder was a warrior at heart with a close affinity to those who had fought alongside him in his rise to power. In the 1370s, his leading generals were awarded hereditary noble titles and revenue from grants of land in gratitude. Several family members of these military figures were intermarried with the imperial clan, forging close alliances. These men were placed in charge of the military campaigns that continued after the dynasty was founded. Sichuan was conquered in 1371. In 1372, Ming campaigns deep into Mongolia were halted, bringing an end to territorial expansion in the north. To the south, the non-Han territory of Yunnan was brought under tenuous Ming control in 1382.

Soldiers in the Ming armies were drawn from families that were assigned a hereditary military obligation to provide men to serve in the military. These families were therefore not subject to the tax and corvée obligations of ordinary civilians. Under the *weisuo* 衛所 system, garrisons around the empire were intended to be largely self-sufficient military colonies, provisioned by large farms. The majority of those assigned to the garrisons worked on the farms, while the rest served in military capacities.

In the 1390s, the top echelons of the military were crippled in a series of purges launched by the increasingly suspicious and capricious Hongwu. He charged several leading generals with sedition, implicating large numbers of their associates. Numerous experienced men were executed or removed from their command. Some historians have argued that these purges had a lasting debilitating effect upon the imperial armies, leading to their defeat in the civil war with Yongle's forces from the north.

The Yongle emperor reconfigured the military posture of the Ming Empire in several ways. He removed the independent military guards assigned to the princely domains, his own usurpation having proven the dangers of princes accruing too much power against the throne. Over the course of his reign, the capital was moved to Beijing, leaving Nanjing as a secondary capital. This move signaled a more intensive engagement with the northern frontier than that of the Hongwu emperor. A significant portion of the military forces was stationed around Beijing, redirected there from Nanjing and from the princely establishments. To consolidate resources and shorten military supply lines, Yongle dismantled the garrisons that his father had established in the steppe (with the exception of those in Manchuria), re-establishing them further south. A military man like his father, Yongle personally led a series of five costly campaigns onto the northern steppe to further assert Ming authority. As part of his expansive vision of the empire, Yongle also followed the earlier Mongol attempt to incorporate Vietnam into the empire, sending large numbers of troops to the south. Yongle's military endeavors took a significant toll on the imperial treasury, and his leading officials frequently petitioned him to reduce the scale of these campaigns.

Although the military garrisons were intended to be self-sufficient, the productivity of the military farms required significant supplements of grain requisitioned from throughout the realm. In order to provision his garrisons and to feed the new capital at Beijing, Yongle ordered the refurbishment of the Grand Canal that had fallen into neglect over the previous century. The *weisuo* system of military colonies declined quickly in the decades after Yongle's death. Desertion and deterioration of the military farms led to shortages of manpower and a further burden of grain taxes. In 1427, financial pressures led to the decision to abandon the conquest of Vietnam. Ming control over Yunnan remained tenuous with tribal uprisings that disrupted the imperial administration. Large military campaigns in the 1440s were dispatched to the region. While these operations succeeded to a degree, the region remained restive well into the sixteenth century.

Yongle's decision to withdraw the line of northern military garrisons had long-term consequences for the defenses of the dynasty. Without the powerful leadership and campaigns of the Yongle emperor, the capital at Beijing was more vulnerable to attack from the north. Fortified though it was, the city was surrounded by the forces of the Mongol Oirat in 1449 after the disastrous capture of the Zhengtong emperor. The loss of the emperor and the siege of the capital were clear signals that the era of expansion of the Ming Empire had come to an end and that the military would maintain a defensive posture. Concerns about the northern border (Beijing was once again under siege a hundred years later) led to the expansion and fortification of the northern boundary and the rebuilding of the Great Wall in the late fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.

Aside from these tensions along the northern border, the fifteenth century saw several large-scale internal uprisings that taxed the military resources of the empire. A rebellion among the Yao aboriginal peoples engulfed several provinces in the south in the 1460s, requiring several tens of thousands of troops to suppress it. Disturbances among the Yao, Miao and other minority peoples remained a persistent problem over the course of the dynasty and beyond. One of the largest internal rebellions took place in northeastern Huguang (modern Hubei province) from 1465 to 1476. This restive region had been destabilized by an influx of refugees from other parts of the empire. The ensuing insurrections required several large-scale military interventions, until the area was finally pacified by administrative reorganization, land reallocation and relief from tax burdens.

### **Eunuch staff**

In earlier dynasties, eunuchs were often employed within the imperial palace to attend to the needs of the imperial clan. Otherwise, areas of the palace where court women resided were off-limits to men outside the imperial family. In the past, notably in the Han and the Tang dynasties, eunuchs had been known to exploit their position as palace insiders to develop their own power bases. With their special access to the court, eunuchs were often regarded with suspicion and contempt by the scholarly elite, and therefore historical sources were strongly biased against them. The Ming founder was suspicious of their potential influence and restricted their employment. Beginning in the Yongle reign, however, eunuchs were increasingly employed to carry out special tasks on behalf of the emperor and his family, particularly in the areas of foreign diplomacy and the imperial household revenue, but also in the supervision of state-owned operations (such as the famous porcelain kilns at Jingdezhen) and in the military. Eunuchs were entrusted with the directorship of several important agencies, including the notorious Eastern Depot (Dongchang 東廠), charged with investigating and incarcerating those deemed to be a threat to the court. One of the most famous of eunuchs in the early Ming was Zheng He (1371–1433), who was appointed as admiral of the fleet to explore the Indian Ocean in a series of six voyages between 1405 and 1433, personally representing the Yongle emperor at courts along the way and collecting tribute.

Some eunuchs rose to significant heights of power and influence as close confidants of the emperor forging powerful relationships within the court, the military and the bureaucracy. In the fifteenth century, Wang Zhen was the most famous of these, a scholar who underwent castration to serve as a teacher in the palace. From the influential post of Director of Ceremonial (*sili jian* 司禮監), he played a major role in the regency of the young Zhengtong emperor, dominating the court with influential ties in the military and civil administration.

It was under his guidance that Zhengtong personally led his disastrous military campaign against the Oirat Mongols in 1449, leading to the capture of the emperor and the death of Wang himself.

Over the course of subsequent reigns, eunuchs continued to exert significant influence at court and across the administration. The eunuch-led Directorate of Ceremonial controlled the imperial household staff and oversaw most written communication between the emperor and the bureaucracy. Eunuchs often forged close alliances with powerful palace women, the grandmothers, mothers and wives of emperors who played a significant role behind the scene. They frequently served as important go-betweens negotiating imperial patronage of Buddhist and Daoist temples. The eunuch directors of the Eastern Depot, and later the similar Western Depot (Xichang 西廠), wielded considerable powers of surveillance and punishment over their political enemies. And eunuchs entrusted with oversight of the imperial household treasury were granted the authority to collect special taxes across the empire and to oversee tributary transactions from foreign countries. Civil officials within the bureaucracy often forged working alliances with members of the emperor's eunuch staff, although many resented their dominance at court and across the realm, criticizing their abuses in scathing memorials to the throne and in lurid stories circulated among the reading public.

### The scholar elite and civil administration

Elite society in the early Ming was heavily invested in scholarly learning, continuing traditions that had developed in Song times (960–1279), when the Confucian civil service examination system developed as the primary route to government service and social advancement. The examination system ended with the fall of the Song in 1279 and was restored on a small scale by the Mongols in 1315. Nevertheless, South China saw a proliferation of private academies in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. Much of this learning was centered upon the Neo-Confucian scholarship that emerged in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, with a focus on individual moral autonomy that was based upon scholarly pursuit and ritual practice. However, this Neo-Confucian conservatism was tempered by a range of eclectic interests throughout much of elite society, and among those recruited into the early Ming court were specialists in Buddhism, Daoism, medicine and art, as well as practical men with skills and experience in law, warfare and governance. In biographies of members of the elite, men were often praised for their literary skills, their administrative talents and their breadth of learning. In many cases, women were honored for their learning as well and especially for the guidance and direction of their children. In more conservative circles, wives were praised for practicing Confucian virtue, even though they remained unlearned.

Elite communities in the early Ming had been strained by the harsh economic conditions of the mid-fourteenth century and disrupted by the warfare of contending forces in the collapse of the Yuan dynasty. Some scholars chose to serve under local strongmen and warlords, while others sought to remain in seclusion, writing or teaching. Writers noted the destruction of academies and libraries in the wars and battles of the fourteenth century and complained of the difficulty of acquiring, borrowing and copying books. The early Ming was a low point in the trajectory of Chinese publishing, and the production of new volumes was greatly limited. While a few private publishers existed, the court dominated the cultural resources of the empire. The library of the Secretariat (*neige* 內閣) in the Forbidden City was the most extensive book collection in the realm.

## Restoring the civil service examination system

As the Ming founder began to assemble a bureaucracy, he did so with a profound distrust for civil officials, based upon the exploitation and abuse of power that he saw in the rural misery and abject poverty of his youth. Throughout his reign, he wrestled with the problem of how to train and discipline an effective governing bureaucracy. Initially, he relied upon a system of recommendation to recruit scholars into his service. In the early years of the dynasty, he established a system of government schools across the empire and restored the civil service examination system, with the first triennial imperial examinations taking place in 1371. The Neo-Confucian curriculum was chosen as the basis for the examinations, as the emperor was persuaded that these teachings would draw the upright, moral and competent from among the scholarly community. Frustrated with the results of the examinations and suspicious of those who served, he cancelled the examinations in 1373 and returned to a system of recommendations. The examinations were restored again in 1385 and continued with few interruptions until 1905.

## Court-sponsored projects

The Ming founder and his descendants followed the precedent of earlier dynasties by engaging literati in large-scale literary enterprises. Early in his reign, Hongwu arranged for the compilation of the Yuan dynastic history, a compendium of phonetic standards and numerous collections of moral admonishments from historical precedents. After his usurpation of the throne, the Yongle emperor made extensive overtures to the literati community by dramatically expanding the scope of these imperial projects, commissioning the compilation of editions of the Confucian classics with authoritative commentaries and a compendium of Neo-Confucian writings. These were printed and distributed to schools across the realm for use in the civil service examination curriculum. He also ordered the compilation of the largest print encyclopedia in world history, the *Yongle dadian* 永樂大典, or *Great Compendium of the Yongle Era*, in 11,095 volumes completed in 1408. These projects required the recruitment of thousands of scholars from across the realm. Yongle's primary wife, Empress Xu (1362–1407), similarly commissioned works, including a set of biographies of virtuous women, a book of women's admonitions and a collection of moral stories gleaned from history. Yongle's grandson, the Xuande emperor (r. 1426–35) commissioned the production of the *Wulun shu* 五倫書, or *Book of the Five Relationships*, a 62-chapter collection of historical anecdotes illuminating the cultivation of Confucian moral virtues, completed in 1447. And in 1461, a vast empire-wide gazetteer, the *Da Ming yitongzhi* 大明一統志, the *Comprehensive Gazetteer of the Great Ming*, was completed.

## Abolition of the secretariat

In 1380, the emperor grew suspicious that his grand counselor, Hu Weiyong 胡惟庸, the pinnacle figure in the civil bureaucracy, was plotting to overthrow him. After executing the counselor and thousands associated with him, Hongwu decided to eliminate the central administrative apparatus that he inherited from the Mongol Yuan: the secretariat, the central military command and the central censorate office. He left instructions that there would be no more grand counselors in the Ming, a change that left the bureaucracy without an official head and a coordinating center. The emperor intended these maneuvers as measures to consolidate his own power over the government, but the effect was to destabilize and



weaken the bureaucracy. The emperor's fears and suspicions of his officials led him to make repeated changes to the institutions of the government. Over time, Hongwu eventually drew upon a few trusted top-level officials of the bureaucracy to advise him as "grand secretaries" (*daxueshi* 大學士). This informal body gradually became formalized in the subsequent decades, providing guidance to the sovereign and functioning as a central liaison between him and the bureaucracy.

The continuing escalation of Hongwu's paranoia and caprice in his last years disrupted and endangered the lives and careers of the scholar elite class, both inside and outside of the bureaucracy. The Jianwen reign (1399–1402) of Hongwu's grandson appears to have been a little more amenable to the civil officials who served him, but his reign was short-lived and became embroiled in civil war less than two years after the founder's death. The war once again took a severe toll on the literati community, with significant numbers of officials at all levels of the government facing persecution, many opting to die resisting Yongle or to go into hiding.

### Stabilizing civil government

The Yongle emperor inherited his father's bad temper, imprisoning or executing some court officials who offended him, but his reign generally brought a degree of stability and order to civil government. A collection of talented officials was appointed to prominence, several of them remaining in post until the 1440s, offering thoughtful guidance to emperors of four reigns. These men oversaw the appointment of talented and capable officials in the bureaucracy, and also played a dominant role in the literary culture of the day. The "Chancellery" literary style (*taigeti* 臺閣體) of these leading court statesmen in the first decades of the fifteenth century epitomized many of the literati values and ideals of that era. Chancellery referred to a writing style of urbane and polished elegance that valorized the emperor and his court in florid classical allusions. The hallmark of such writing included the poems and pieces written to commemorate events at court, often commissioned by the emperor himself.

By the mid-fifteenth century, the civil service became further regularized. Whereas recommendation had played a significant role in recruitment in the early years of the dynasty, the examination system now became the only route to an important civil service career. The examinations became increasingly competitive, with total quotas of more than 100,000 graduates at the provincial examination level, vying for positions in a bureaucracy of 15,000 to 25,000. With the increased pressure of competition, the prescribed examination essays became more formulaic. The famous "eight-legged essay" came to predominate from the last decades of the fifteenth century onward, a very precise form in which arguments were developed in a highly rigid sequence of "legs." While this essay form had a straitening effect upon the culture of the examinations, it also cultivated generations of writers of supreme literary discipline and talent.

### Diversifying culture

The middle of the fifteenth century saw gradual improvements in the economy and the restoration of literati communities, especially in the south. Greater resources and increasing participation in the examinations led to increased literacy and the beginning of an expanded publishing industry that came to dominate Ming culture in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. With these developments, literati culture began to shift away from the court-centered focus of the early Ming, toward a more diverse array of cultural centers, especially

in the wealthier areas of the lower Yangzi River region, in cities like Nanjing, Suzhou and Hangzhou. The polished chancellery style fell out of fashion, giving way to a wider range of poetry and prose styles, many favoring more personal and authentic sentiments and more vernacular diction. By the end of the fifteenth century, early editions of the famous popular novel, *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* (Sanguo yanyi 三國演義) were published, along with *chantefable* that drew upon popular dramatic traditions. The use of vernacular language signaled not only a shift in stylistic preferences, but also a broadening readership beyond the scholarly community narrowly trained for the examinations. Such popular literature was often advertised as suitable reading material for ordinary men and women. The publication and circulation of “miscellaneous jottings” (*biji* 筆記) or notebooks filled with anecdotes, gossip and ranging observations testify to a growing public readership with diverse interests.

Scholarship of the late fifteenth century expanded beyond the limited resources and scale of the early years of the dynasty. The official records of the court were supplemented and often challenged by independent writings on political events and personalities. Historiography and statecraft emerged as increasingly important topics. As later Ming rulers lacked the forceful vision, effectiveness and charisma of the Hongwu and Yongle emperors, scholars wrote extensively on Confucian ideals of rulership and statecraft, examining and analyzing historical precedents. The most famous such work was Qiu Jun's 邱浚 (1421–95) large *Supplement to the Expanded Meaning of the Great Learning* (Daxue yanyi bu 大學衍義補), completed in 1487, which built upon the writings of the influential Song-dynasty statecraft scholar Zhen Dexiu 真德秀 (1178–1235). Qiu's work combined an emphasis on the moral cultivation of the ruler with an extensive explication of practical knowledge of political protocols and institutions. The later fifteenth century saw increasing challenges to the Song dynasty Neo-Confucian teachings upon which the civil service examinations were based, paving the way for more diversified interpretations of doctrine.

### Ming society and economy

Population estimates are difficult for the Ming dynasty. The population of the empire was roughly 60–80 million around the time of its founding, significantly lower than the estimates for the Song and Yuan dynasties that preceded it, a testament to the ravages of warfare, famine and disease in the fourteenth century. By 1500, the population had roughly doubled to somewhere between 135 and 155 million people, reflecting the relative stabilization of social and economic conditions over the course of the fifteenth century.

The Ming founder sought to restore the pastoral fabric of the empire with low tax rates and tight constraints upon the size and structure of his institutions of government. The Yongle emperor, on the other hand, abandoned his father's notions of fiscal austerity with costly projects like the move of the capital to Beijing and his military campaigns on the steppe and in Vietnam. The revenue for these ventures came not from increased taxes, but rather from direct requisitions and added surcharges upon the tax requirements, as well as expanded *corvée* obligations imposed on the populace. To facilitate the transfer of grain from the south to the new capital in Beijing, the Grand Canal was refurbished in 1415. Dredging and the addition of new locks made the canal operable again after decades of neglect and disuse. Yongle's son and grandson sought to once again reduce government expenditures and to reduce the tax burden upon the populace. Peasants nevertheless sought ways to avoid or reduce their taxes, by attaching their lands to those of tax-exempt examination scholars or imperial domains, or by splitting households into smaller units. The tax allocation system was based upon land surveys conducted in 1386. No further surveys were conducted, meaning that

over time, the tax system became increasingly detached from the actual land-tenure arrangements and the economic realities of the realm.

The Hongwu emperor also devoted considerable effort to the structure and regulation of local society. People were organized into communities (*li*) of 110 households. The most prosperous 10 households were appointed as community-heads (*lizhang* 里長), each over a neighborhood (*jia* 甲) of 10 households. Community-heads were charged with keeping order and with the collection and delivery of taxes. The emperor intended that local society be self-governing, and in his last year, he promulgated a “Placard of Instructions for the People” (Jiaomin bangwen 教民榜文), to be posted in communities throughout the realm. Community-heads were to memorize the items on the placard, which exhorted moral rectitude, urged the resolution of local conflict and crime and warned against corruption and malfeasance by villages or by the officials who oversaw them. There is much debate about the actual implementation and effectiveness of the *lijia* 里甲 system and the impact of imperial regulations on local society. Clearly the Ming court did not have the power or the resources to impose such a rigid order upon the populace, and certainly local conditions and power structures shaped its implementation. By the late fifteenth century, writers complained about the fracturing of local society and reformers attempted to restore order through community compacts and other types of instructional innovations.

In the mid-fifteenth century, agricultural life in Ming China was further disrupted by a series of global climate fluctuations, leading to large-scale regional famines, droughts, floods and plagues from the 1430s to the 1460s. These disasters led to large-scale remissions of taxes by the court and the provision of relief measures to devastated parts of the empire. Conditions improved in the latter decades of the century, although environmental problems persisted. The Yellow River flooded severely on several occasions over the course of the century, causing repeated bursting of its dykes and significant loss of life and destruction across the countryside. In the 1490s, the court directed considerable resources toward the redirection of the river and the construction of further reinforced dykes along its banks.

### ***Textiles and growing monetization***

The fifteenth century saw some trends toward the expansion of interregional markets. The restoration of the Grand Canal, for example, allowed for the movement of some private mercantile goods between the north and the south. The Yangzi River was also an important corridor for trade. Textile production began to expand in the lower Yangzi River region over the course of the fifteenth century, with expanded cultivation of cotton and silk. During this period, the production process became increasingly specialized, as cultivators increasingly sold their raw materials in the market, rather than weaving it themselves as earlier generations had done. This specialization drew farmers and craftsmen further into a monetized economy. Cotton cloth had been part of the tax obligation for the region for decades, but by the 1480s, tax officials were beginning to accept payments in silver instead. Demand for cotton and silk products continued to grow, and textile production continued to expand in other regions as well. These developments set the stage for the extensive expansion of the Ming economy in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.