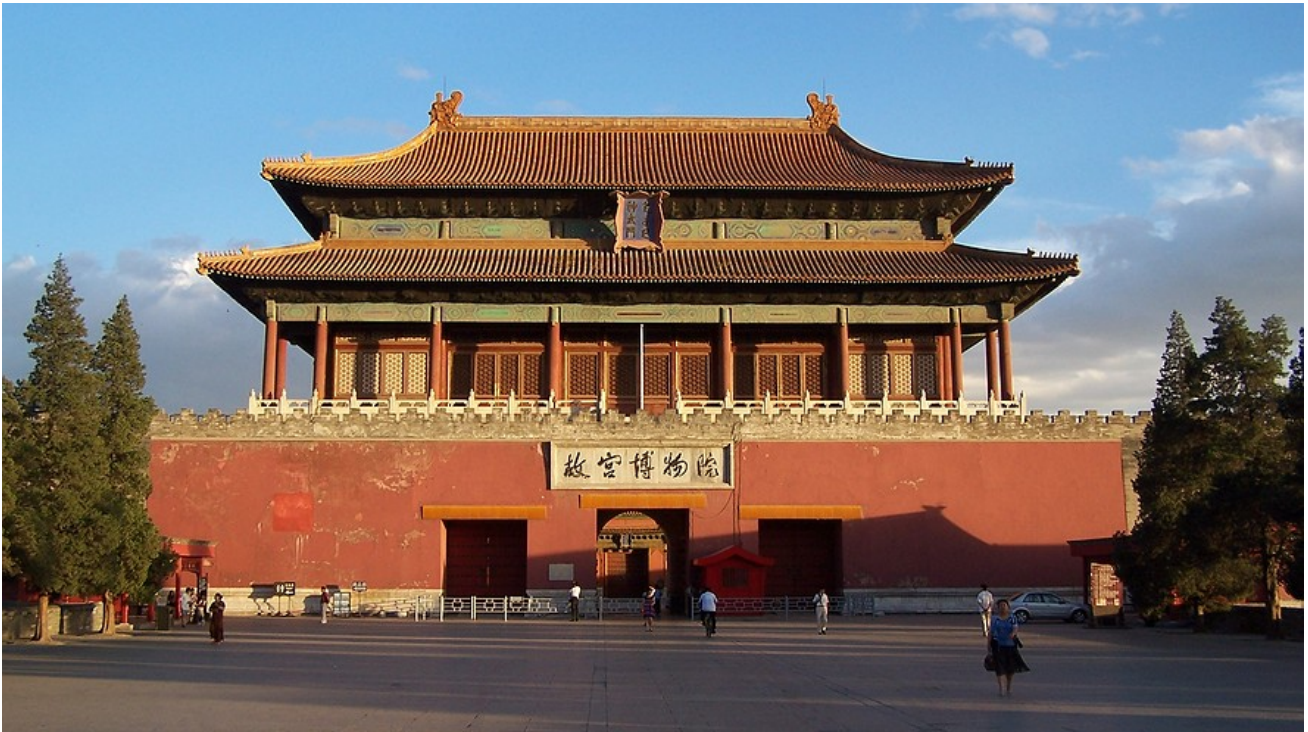


# The Ming Dynasty of China: 1368-1644

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Ming architecture is often associated with the Forbidden City, a palace complex built in Beijing in the 15th century by the Yongle emperor. Photo from Wikimedia

The Ming dynasty ruled China from 1368 to 1644. A dynasty describes a period when a single family rules a country. When the ruler of a dynasty dies or passes on the power, one of their relatives usually takes over. The years of the Ming dynasty were an important time that provided a period of Chinese rule between eras of Mongol and Manchu dominance.

During the Ming period, China exerted immense cultural and political influence in East Asia and the Turks to the west. China also influenced Vietnam and Myanmar to the south.



The Ming dynasty took over after the Yuan (Mongol) dynasty, which lasted from 1206 to 1368. The Ming dynasty was founded by Zhu Yuanzhang. The Ming became one of the most stable of all Chinese dynasties, but the Ming were also very autocratic. The term autocratic describes a ruler who has absolute power and does not care much about other people's wishes.

The Ming structured the Chinese government in a way that the Qing (Manchu) dynasty continued. The Ming structure lasted until the imperial institution was abolished in 1911 to 1912.

### **Yongle emperor had different ideas**

The civil service system was perfected during the Ming, and almost all the top Ming officials had to pass a government examination. The Censorate (Yushitai) was an office designed to investigate wrongdoing by officials, and the office was made a separate part of the government. Affairs in each province were handled by three agencies. Each agency reported to separate bureaus in the central government. The position of prime minister was abolished, and instead, the emperor took over personal control of the government.

The Ming relied on the literati to manage government affairs. The word literati refers to educated people who are interested in literature. However, the Yongle emperor who took over after the Ming did things differently, as the Yongle emperor relied on trusted eunuchs to contain the literati. Eunuchs were castrated or had their reproductive organs removed. They served as guards.

The Ming also introduced a system of punishment by flogging with a stick in court. By decree of the emperor, a vast spying service was organized under three special agencies.

## **Mings were not the best of neighbors**

Struggles with peoples of various nationalities continued throughout the Ming period, including clashes with Mongols, which were nearly constant. On the northeast, the Juchen pressed the Ming army to withdraw southward. Eventually, the Ming made the east end of the Great Wall their last line of defense. The Ming devoted considerable resources toward maintaining and strengthening the wall, especially near Beijing, the dynasty's capital.

In early Ming times, China's domain extended considerably in the south as a result of its successful invasion of northern Vietnam. But the Vietnamese resisted. The Ming government quickly decided to restore the boundary to its original line.

In the 15th century, Japanese raiders teamed up with Chinese pirates to make coastal raids in Chinese waters. The Ming government eventually tried to stop Japan's attempt to control Korea, which became a long and costly campaign.

## **Painting, pottery and the arts took off**

During the Ming period, cultural developments were characterized by a generally conservative and inward-looking attitude. Ming architecture is exemplified by the Forbidden City, a palace built in Beijing in the 15th century by the Yongle emperor. The best Ming sculpture is found not in large statues. It is found in small ornamental carvings of jade, ivory, wood and porcelain.

The major achievements in art were in painting and pottery.





There were two main traditions in painting in the Ming period. The two traditions were that of “literati painting” (wenrenhua) of the Wu school and that of the “professional academics” (huayuanpai) associated with the Zhe school. Artists generally stressed independent creation. They produced work that showed off their personal styles.

There were many new developments in ceramics, along with the continuation of established traditions.

The Ming Dynasty restored the former literary examinations for public office. That was a change that pleased the literary world. In their own writing, the Ming sought a return to classical prose and poetry styles. As a result, the Ming produced writings that were imitative. Some writers made real contributions, especially in novels and drama. Chinese traditional drama originating in the Song dynasty had been banned by the Mongols but survived underground in the south. In the Ming era, it was restored. This was chuanqi, a form of musical theatre with numerous scenes and contemporary plots. What emerged was kunqu style. Kunqu style is less bombastic than other popular theater. It was adapted into a full-length opera form, which, although still performed today, was eventually replaced in popularity by jingxi (Peking opera) during the Qing dynasty.