CHINA SERIES · BOOK FOURTEEN

Zhu Yuanzhang

The Hongwu Emperor — From Humble Origins to the Founder of the Ming Dynasty

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Free Sample · Chapter One

China Series · Book Fourteen · Available April 16, 2027

International Publishing Corporation

Washington, D.C.

Chapter One

The Mandate Wanes

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The Mongol Conquest

To understand the world into which Zhu Yuanzhang was born, we must go back a century before his birth, to the steppes north of China and to the extraordinary career of Chinggis Khan. In 1206 an assembly of Mongol chiefs proclaimed Temüjin, the leader of a confederation of nomadic tribes, as Chinggis Khan, "Universal Ruler." Within two decades his armies had overrun much of northern China, Central Asia, and Persia. His successors carried the conquests further still, into Russia, eastern Europe, and the Middle East, building the largest land empire the world had ever seen.

China was not conquered quickly. In the early thirteenth century it was divided between two states. The north was ruled by the Jin dynasty, founded by the Jurchen people of Manchuria, who had seized northern China from the Song dynasty in the 1120s. The south was ruled by the Southern Song, the surviving branch of the Song house, with its capital at Hangzhou. The Mongols destroyed the Jin in 1234 after a long and savage war that devastated the northern plain. The conquest of the Southern Song took another forty-five years. The south was rich, populous, crossed by rivers and canals that hampered the movement of cavalry, and defended by a large navy and walled cities. Not until Kublai Khan, Chinggis's grandson, mobilized Chinese engineers, sailors, and soldiers on a massive scale did the Song finally fall. Hangzhou surrendered in 1276. The last loyalist resistance ended in 1279 at the sea battle of Yamen, off the coast of Guangdong, where the Song chief minister Lu Xiufu is said to have taken the boy emperor in his arms and leaped into the sea rather than surrender.

That battle has a place in our story. According to the tradition preserved in the Ming records, Zhu Yuanzhang's maternal grandfather, a man named Chen, served as a soldier in the Song loyalist forces under the general Zhang Shijie and was present at Yamen. He survived the disaster, made his way home, and spent the rest of his life as a fortune-teller and practitioner of folk magic in the Huai River region. He lived to a great age, and in later years he told stories of the war against the Mongols to his grandchildren. Whether these tales shaped the young Zhu's view of the world, as later accounts suggest, is impossible to know. But it is a striking fact that the founder of the dynasty that overthrew the Mongols was the grandson of a man who had fought them at the very end of the Song.

Kublai Khan and the Yuan State

In 1271, even before the conquest of the south was complete, Kublai Khan proclaimed a new dynasty in the Chinese style and gave it the name Yuan (元), meaning "origin" or "primal," a term drawn from the Book of Changes. He built a new capital, Dadu, "Great Capital," on the site of modern Beijing, and a summer capital, Shangdu, the "Xanadu" of European legend, on the grasslands to the north. Kublai was a skillful and pragmatic ruler. He employed Chinese advisers, adopted many Chinese court rituals, and preserved much of the existing system of local government. At the same time he remained a Mongol khan, the ruler of a steppe empire whose interests extended far beyond China, and he never fully committed himself or his people to Chinese ways.

The Yuan state that Kublai built had several features that would matter greatly to the later history of China and to Zhu Yuanzhang's rebellion.

The first was its ethnic hierarchy. The Yuan government divided its subjects into four broad categories. At the top were the Mongols. Next came the semu ren (色目人), "people of various categories," a catch-all term for Central Asians, Persians, Turks, Arabs, and other

non-Chinese peoples who had joined the Mongol cause and who served the Yuan as administrators, tax farmers, merchants, and soldiers. Third came the Han ren (漢人), the inhabitants of former Jin territory in the north, a group that included not only Chinese but also Khitans, Jurchens, and Koreans. At the bottom were the nan ren (南人), "southerners," the subjects of the former Southern Song, who made up the great majority of the population. The categories affected who could hold high office, how criminal cases were judged, and in some periods how examination candidates were treated. Modern historians have stressed that the system was not applied with perfect consistency, that many southern Chinese prospered under the Yuan, and that wealthy southern landlords in particular often did very well. But the hierarchy existed, it was visible, and it gave the resentments of later generations a clear target.

The second feature was the weakness of the examination system. Under the Song dynasty, the civil service examinations had become the principal route into government for educated men, and the ideal of the scholar-official, the man of learning who served the state, had become central to Chinese elite culture. The Mongols at first abolished the examinations altogether. They were restored only in 1315, and even then they provided only a small number of officials each year, with separate quotas that favored Mongols and semu. Most posts were filled by other means: by inheritance, by recommendation, by service as a clerk, or by purchase. Many educated southern Chinese found themselves shut out of the official careers their grandfathers had pursued. Some withdrew into private scholarship, painting, poetry, and drama, producing a brilliant cultural flowering. Others served as teachers, clerks, physicians, or fortune-tellers. A good number of them, a generation later, would offer their talents to the rebel leaders who promised a new order, and Zhu Yuanzhang would benefit more than anyone from their service.

The third feature was the Yuan reliance on paper money. The Song had pioneered the use of paper currency, and the Yuan extended it

across the whole empire, making paper notes the main medium of exchange and forbidding the use of copper coins and precious metals for many purposes. Marco Polo, who claims to have served at Kublai's court, described the notes with amazement. As long as the government limited the amount it issued, the system worked. But the Yuan state was chronically short of revenue, and later emperors printed notes in ever greater quantities to pay for court expenses, gifts to Mongol princes, and military campaigns. The value of the currency collapsed, wiping out savings and disrupting trade.

The fourth feature was the government's dependence on the Grand Canal and on the grain of the south. Dadu lay in the north, far from the productive rice lands of the Yangtze delta, and the capital and its garrisons had to be fed with grain shipped from the south, partly by sea and partly along the Grand Canal. Any disruption of that supply line, whether by flood, rebellion, or piracy, threatened the capital directly. When rebellion broke out in the 1350s along the Huai and the lower Yangtze, it cut the empire's lifeline.

The Long Decline

Kublai Khan died in 1294. None of his successors matched his ability or his authority. Between 1294 and 1333 the Yuan throne changed hands roughly ten times. Several emperors died young; at least one was murdered. Succession struggles among Mongol princes, court factions, and powerful ministers absorbed the energies of the court. In 1328, the very year of Zhu Yuanzhang's birth, the death of the emperor Yesün Temür set off a brief but bloody civil war between rival branches of the imperial family, known as the War of the Two Capitals, fought between factions based at Dadu and Shangdu.

In 1333 a thirteen-year-old prince named Toghon Temür came to the throne. He would reign for thirty-five years, longer than any other Yuan emperor, and he would be the last of the line to rule in China. Chinese historians later gave him the posthumous title Shundi, "the Compliant Emperor," because he yielded to Heaven's will and left

China without a final fight. In the early years of his reign real power lay with the chancellor Bayan, a Merkid Mongol of enormous wealth and arrogance, who pursued policies hostile to the southern Chinese. Bayan abolished the examinations again in 1335 and was rumored to have proposed killing all Chinese bearing the five most common family names, a story that, true or not, shows how deeply the resentment between rulers and ruled had grown.

Bayan was overthrown in 1340 by his own nephew, Toghto, in alliance with the young emperor. Toghto was a very different man: educated in Chinese learning, energetic, and determined to restore the effectiveness of the Yuan state. He brought back the examinations, sponsored the compilation of the official histories of the Song, Liao, and Jin dynasties, and launched ambitious public works. For a few years it seemed that the Yuan might recover. But Toghto had many enemies at court, and his fortunes rose and fell with factional politics. He was forced out of office in 1344, recalled in 1349, and dismissed again in 1354 at the moment of his greatest military success, with consequences that we will see in a later chapter.

Behind the drama of court politics lay deeper problems that no minister could solve. The fourteenth century was a time of environmental crisis across much of Eurasia. Climatic records suggest a cooling trend, sometimes associated with the beginning of the so-called Little Ice Age, that brought unseasonable cold, drought, and floods. China suffered a long series of natural disasters in the 1320s, 1330s, and 1340s. Epidemics swept through many provinces. Some historians have connected these outbreaks with the great pandemic of plague that reached Europe as the Black Death in 1347, though the nature of the Chinese epidemics is not clearly established by the sources, which describe them only in general terms. Whatever their cause, they killed very large numbers of people.

The greatest single threat was the Yellow River. The Yellow River carries more silt than almost any river on earth. Over centuries the silt raises its bed above the surrounding plain, so that the river flows

between dikes on a ridge higher than the farmland on either side. When the dikes fail, the river breaks out across the plain, drowning villages and fields, and sometimes shifts its entire course to a new channel hundreds of miles away. In the twelfth century the Yellow River had changed course to flow south of the Shandong peninsula, merging with the Huai River system and pouring its waters and silt into the lands where Zhu Yuanzhang's family lived. In 1344 the river broke through its dikes at Baimaokou in western Shandong, flooding a vast area, disrupting the Grand Canal, and damaging the salt works along the coast that provided a large share of the government's revenue. For years the breach remained open. The flood was still unrepaired when the Red Turban rebellion began.

The Huai River Plain

The Huai River flows eastward across central China, roughly midway between the Yellow River to the north and the Yangtze to the south. It is one of the great natural dividing lines of China. North of the Huai, the climate is drier and colder, and farmers grow wheat, millet, and sorghum. South of it, the climate is wetter and warmer, and rice dominates. The Huai valley itself lies between these two worlds and shares the hazards of both. In Zhu Yuanzhang's time it was a land of poor soils, frequent floods, and periodic drought, one of the poorest and most unstable regions of the empire.

The area around Haozhou, in what is now northern Anhui province, where Zhu was born, was typical of the Huai plain. Much of the land belonged to landlords who rented it to tenant farmers in return for a share of the harvest, commonly half or more. Tenants had little security. They could be evicted at the landlord's will, and in bad years the rent and the taxes, together with debts incurred to buy seed and food, could easily exceed what the land produced. Many families drifted from place to place, taking up new tenancies when the old ones became impossible. The government's demands for labor service fell heavily on the poor, who could not pay to be excused.

The region also had a long tradition of rebellion and of popular religion. It lay close to the salt-producing coast, where the government's monopoly on salt created a large and violent smuggling trade, and smugglers, bandits, and boatmen moved freely across its waterways. Secret religious societies flourished among its villages, offering hope of salvation and of a better world to people who found little of either in their daily lives. These societies would provide the spark for the great rebellion of 1351.

Popular Religion and the Promise of a New Age

The most important of these religious traditions was the White Lotus (白蓮教). It had begun in the twelfth century as a lay Buddhist movement devoted to Amitabha, the Buddha of the Western Paradise, and to the hope of rebirth in his Pure Land. Over time it absorbed other beliefs, and by the Yuan period the name had become attached to a range of popular sects that combined Buddhist devotion with expectations of a coming age of salvation. Central to many of them was the figure of Maitreya, the Buddha of the future, who according to Buddhist teaching would one day descend to earth to renew the world. In popular belief this hope sometimes became much more immediate: Maitreya would come soon, perhaps in the believers' own lifetime, to sweep away a corrupt and suffering world and establish a new age of peace and plenty.

Alongside Maitreyan hopes ran the influence of Manichaeism, a religion founded in third-century Persia that had reached China centuries earlier. Manichaeism taught a cosmic struggle between Light and Darkness, and in China it had become known as the Religion of Light (明教). Its ideas had merged with Buddhist and Daoist beliefs in the popular sects, and the expectation of a Prince of Light (明王) who would appear to save the world became part of the same broad stream. Scholars have long debated how much the name of Zhu Yuanzhang's dynasty, Ming, "Brilliant" or "Light," owed to these traditions. The connection is not proven, and Zhu himself later

suppressed the White Lotus and similar sects. But the possibility is intriguing, and it reminds us that the movement that made him emperor began as a religious revolution.

The authorities regarded these sects with deep suspicion and banned them repeatedly. Bans did not stop them. In the villages of the Huai and the Yellow River plain, among people who had lost family members to famine and plague and who saw the dynasty's officials as corrupt and its foreign rulers as illegitimate, the message that the old world was about to end and a new one about to begin found eager listeners. By the 1340s, local uprisings led by sect members had broken out in several provinces. They were suppressed, but they were a warning of what was to come.

Scholars in Waiting

While the villages of the Huai suffered, a very different world flourished a few hundred miles to the southeast, in the cities and country estates of the Yangtze delta and eastern Zhejiang. This was the world of the southern literati, the educated landowning families who had dominated Chinese culture under the Song and who, under the Yuan, found themselves largely excluded from high office.

Their response to exclusion was remarkable. Denied the official careers their grandfathers had taken for granted, many of them turned their energies to scholarship, teaching, painting, and poetry. The Yuan period produced some of the greatest painters in Chinese history, among them Huang Gongwang, Ni Zan, Wu Zhen, and Wang Meng, the so-called Four Masters of the Yuan, whose landscapes of solitary mountains and empty pavilions have often been read as expressions of withdrawal from a world in which their talents had no place. Drama flourished too: the zaju plays of the Yuan, written in a lively mixture of literary and colloquial language, became one of the great achievements of Chinese literature.

Above all, the southern scholars cultivated the Neo-Confucian learning of the Song philosopher Zhu Xi. In private academies and family schools, particularly in the region around Jinhua in eastern Zhejiang, generations of teachers passed on the classics, the histories, and a vision of government grounded in moral cultivation and the welfare of the people. These scholars studied the institutions of past dynasties with care and debated how a well-ordered state should be organized. Many of them believed that the Mongol order was a temporary aberration and that the day would come when a sage ruler would again need men of learning to rebuild the empire on Confucian lines.

That day would come sooner than they expected, and the ruler who called on them would be a man none of them could have imagined: an illiterate peasant from the Huai. When the Jinhua scholars Song Lian and Liu Ji and their colleagues entered Zhu Yuanzhang's service in 1360, they brought with them the accumulated learning of two generations of scholars in waiting. Much of the institutional design of the early Ming, its ritual system, its legal code, its examinations and schools, drew on the work they had done in the shadows of the Yuan.

The Grain Fleets and the Salt Fields

Two economic lifelines held the Yuan state together, and both ran through the region where Zhu Yuanzhang grew up and where the rebellion would begin.

The first was the transport of grain. Because Dadu could not feed itself from the dry north, the Yuan government shipped several million bushels of rice each year from the Yangtze delta to the capital. For much of the dynasty, the greater part of this grain went by sea, in large fleets that sailed from the mouth of the Yangtze around the Shandong peninsula to the port of Zhigu near modern Tianjin. The sea route was faster and cheaper than the Grand Canal, but it was vulnerable to storms and to pirates. In the 1340s and 1350s, as piracy grew along the coast and as rebellion spread through the delta, the

grain fleets were repeatedly disrupted. When the rebels finally controlled the delta, the court in Dadu found itself dependent on the goodwill of men like Zhang Shicheng and Fang Guozhen, who controlled the grain and the ships, and who sent or withheld shipments as it suited them.

The second lifeline was salt. Salt was a government monopoly, and the revenue from its sale was one of the largest sources of income for the Yuan state, by some estimates more than half of its cash revenue in the later years of the dynasty. The great salt fields lay along the coast of the Huai region and Zhejiang, where seawater was evaporated in shallow pans to produce salt. The salt workers, registered in hereditary salt households, lived under harsh conditions, tied to their work and subject to the demands of officials and contractors. Because the government kept the price of salt high to maximize revenue, smuggling was enormously profitable, and the salt-producing regions swarmed with smugglers, armed boatmen, and gangs who fought the government's salt police and each other.

It was no accident that two of the great rebel leaders of the 1350s, Zhang Shicheng and Fang Guozhen, came from the world of salt and the sea. The salt trade bred exactly the kind of men who could lead a rebellion: tough, independent, experienced in violence and organization, familiar with the waterways, and bitterly hostile to the officials who exploited them. When the Yuan state began to crack, the salt fields and the grain routes were among the first places where it broke.

An Empire Losing Its Mandate

Chinese political thought had a ready explanation for what was happening. According to the ancient doctrine of the Mandate of Heaven (天命), Heaven granted the right to rule to a virtuous dynasty and withdrew it when the dynasty became corrupt and failed to care for the people. Natural disasters, rebellions, and strange portents were signs that the mandate was being withdrawn. When a dynasty lost the mandate, it was legitimate for a new leader to rise and claim it, and his success in doing so was itself the proof that Heaven had chosen him.

By the 1340s, many of the signs were plain for anyone to read. The Yellow River had broken its dikes. Famine and epidemics were killing people by the hundreds of thousands. The currency was collapsing. The court was divided by factions. Corruption was widespread among officials, many of whom had bought their posts and sought to recover their investment. Salt smugglers and pirates operated almost openly along the coast; in 1348 a salt merchant named Fang Guozhen began a career of piracy and rebellion on the coast of Zhejiang that the government was never able to end. Religious sects were preaching the coming of a new age.

None of this meant that the Yuan dynasty was doomed. Dynasties had survived worse crises. Toghto's restoration in 1349 showed that the government still had energy and resources. But the dynasty had little margin for error, and the Huai River region in particular was close to breaking. It was there, in the middle of this gathering storm, that Zhu Yuanzhang was born and grew up. The crisis of the Yuan was the crisis of his own family, and his life would be shaped, from the very beginning, by the failure of the state that ruled him.

The World Seen from Below

It is worth pausing to consider how this world looked from the perspective of a tenant family like the Zhus. They would have known little of court politics in Dadu, of the struggles between Bayan and Toghto, or of the ideological debates over Confucian government. What they knew was the weather, the harvest, the rent, the tax collector, and the demands of the local officials and clerks who represented the government in their lives. They knew whether there was enough rice or millet to get through the winter. They knew the price of salt, which the government monopoly kept high. They knew when soldiers came through, when a neighbor's son was taken for labor service, when the river rose.

For such families the Mongol rulers were distant. The officials they encountered day to day were mostly Chinese: clerks, runners, local headmen, and the tax collectors who enforced the landlords' and the government's demands. Zhu Yuanzhang's later hatred of corrupt officials and clerks, which became one of the defining themes of his reign, was rooted in this experience of government from below. When he became emperor, he would write again and again about the clerks who bent the law, the officials who extorted gifts, and the rich families who bribed their way out of taxes and labor service, passing the burden to the poor. He had seen all of this with his own eyes as a boy.

He had also seen something else: the strength of local ties, of neighbors who helped each other in hard times, of village elders who settled disputes, and of the bonds of family that held people together. As emperor he would try to build a social order in which these village communities governed themselves under the watchful eye of the throne, with as little interference as possible from the officials he distrusted. His vision of the ideal society was, in many ways, an idealized memory of the village of his youth, purged of the corrupt officials and greedy landlords who had made it so hard to live there.

The next chapter turns to that village, to the family into which Zhu Yuanzhang was born, and to the childhood that ended so abruptly in the catastrophe of 1344.

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Book Fourteen available April 16, 2027

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