

TOPICS IN THE HISTORY OF YUAN AND MING CHINA 1271 TO 1664

Coordinator: Eric Zimiles

This is an introduction to important social, political, economic and religious aspects of traditional Chinese civilization through the historical lens of the Yuan and Ming dynasties. The short-lived Yuan or Mongol era (1271-1368) was a foreign dynasty and an attempt to join China with many central Asian peoples. The Ming (1368-1664) was the last of a series of native Chinese ruling dynasties dating back to the Qin (221 B.C).

This study group builds backwards from my previous two study groups on the Qing dynasty. It is an ongoing attempt to get an overview of “traditional” Chinese society—pre-industrial, pre-Communist and pre-western. A huge complex civilization, China’s borders, structures and belief systems remained remarkably consistent for over two millennia. We will frequently go further back in time to discuss the origins of different aspects of Chinese society, but we will concentrate on the manifestations of Chinese “traditional” society during the era of the Yuan and Ming empires.

Eric Zimiles was an administrator in various agencies for the City of New York and has graduate training in history and city planning. This is Eric’s fourth study group. In addition to the Qing dynasty, he led the History of Ukraine study group.

Type of Study Group: Primarily presentation followed by discussion. Reports by participants are encouraged on topics of interest not directly covered by the course, e.g., the art, porcelain, music and calligraphy of Yuan and Ming China.

Readings and other Materials/Online Services:

The Troubled Empire: China in the Yuan and Ming Dynasties by Timothy Brook (readily available);

Weekly supplemental secondary and optional readings provided electronically by coordinator.

***** SYLLABUS - A WORK IN PROGRESS *****

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WEEK 1

TOPIC: Geography of China and Dynastic review of pre-Yuan history

READING:

China: A History by Harold Tanner, Chapter 1

QUESTIONS:

What are the key aspects of Chinese geography? How did these geographic characteristics affect Chinese civilization? How does China compare geographically to the United States? To the Roman empire?

WEEK 2

TOPIC: The amazing rise of the Mongols—Genghis Khan, greatest conqueror in history

READING:

Genghis Khan and the Making of the Modern World by Jack Weatherford, Chapter 4

QUESTIONS:

Was the triumph of the Mongols inevitable? Why was it successful as a conquest society? Is China a multiethnic society?

WEEK 3

TOPIC: Kublai Khan—Barbarian ruler of China

READING:

Khubilai Khan by Morris Rossabi, Chapter 5

QUESTIONS:

What is the difference between Chinese and barbarians? What is the significance of a change in dynasties? Is there a pattern in the rise and fall of Chinese dynasties

WEEK 4

TOPIC: The decline and collapse of the Yuan

READING:

Imperial China, 900-1800 by F. W. Mote, Chapter 19

WEEK 5

TOPIC: The Hongwu Emperor, founder of the Ming

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READING:

Mote, Chapter 22

WEEK 6

TOPIC: The Yongle Emperor, the building of the Forbidden City and Ming political structure

READING:

T.B.D.

WEEK 7

TOPIC: Social and economic institutions; the construction of Grand Canal and the Forbidden City

READING:

Brook, Chapter 5

WEEK 8

TOPIC: Gentry society and the Examination System:

READING:

Brook, pp. 149-156

WEEK 9

TOPIC: Religion: Confucianism, Buddhism and Daoism; the role of the state and popular religion.

READING:

Brook, Chapter 7

WEEK 10

TOPIC: Families and possessions

READING:

Brook, Chapters 6 and 8

WEEK 11

TOPIC: The Ming and the World: the voyages of He; the new Great Wall

READING:

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Brook, Chapter 9

WEEK 12

TOPIC: The end of the Ming

READING:

Brook, Chapter 10

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