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**Fall of the Yuan Dynasty**

Cheers filled the air as Zhu Yuan-zhang crossed the grand courtyard of Bejing’s Forbidden City– the emperor’s palace–and slowly climbed the long flight of palace steps. At the top, he paused and looked out over the city and the crowd of his supporters gathered there. The reality of his hard-won victory had still not sunk in. The year was 1368 and the hated Mongols were gone. Once again China belonged to the Chinese, and Zhu Yuan-zhang was the reason why.

Zhu was born a peasant. His family had farmed for generations. But under Mongol rule, China had little use for farmers, so life was hard—very hard. When the Mongols first swept into northern China a century earlier, they wanted nothing more than to rob China of its great wealth. Because they were nomadic horsemen, the Mongols viewed China’s huge network of successful farms as a waste of good grazing and hunting land. Millions of farmers were driven from their lands and their farms left untended. Reservoirs and irrigation systems fell into disrepair. As farms disappeared, famine (widespread hunger) swept the land, but the Mongol rulers of the Yuan Dynasty were not concerned about the sufferings of the Chinese people.

During the Yuan dynasty, high government officials were all Mongols or foreigners (non-Chinese). Translators were needed, since the Mongols refused to learn Chinese. Ethnic Chinese had little voice in their government.

Trade was important to the Mongol emperors. Skilled Chinese craftsmen were forced to produce large quantities of porcelain, silks, and other goods that could be sold along the Silk Road and the vast web of trade routes the Mongols created across Eurasia. The craftsmen were paid little, while the Mongols profited greatly from the trade.

Kublai Khan (1261-1295) tried to encourage agriculture and trade. But the emperors that followed him did much damage to China’s economy. They and their officials lived lavishly (with great wealth), while taxing the Chinese people in order to pay for their extravagant lifestyles. By the early 1300’s, conditions were so bad on the farm that young Zhu was forced to leave his starving family and become a Buddhist monk, begging for food at the side of the road.

Nature added to China’s misery. The Huang (Yellow) River changed course, flooding large areas of remaining farmland. Zhu’s family died in the resulting famine. Diseases also broke out, killing Chinese and Mongols alike. Along with most other Chinese, Zhu decided that the Yuan Dynasty had lost the right to rule China.

Across China, people began to rise up against their Mongol overlords (rulers). Zhu led the rebels. A wise scholar advised him that he would succeed if he followed three rules: build strong city walls, gather as much grain in storage as possible, and be slow to assume titles (claim to be the ruler). Zhu followed the wise man’s advice and now, nearly twenty years later, stood victorious atop the steps of the emperor’s palace.

With the Mongols gone, it was finally time for Zhu to assume a title. He proclaimed himself, “Ming Hung Wu,” Emperor of China. “Ming” meant “brilliant” or “bright” and “Hung Wu,” was a traditional name meaning “Vast Army.” The new emperor intended to make China a bright light that would shine for all the world to see. He wrote to the kings and emperors of distant lands announcing his rise to power.

With great energy, Ming Hung Wu set out to rebuild China according to its agricultural (farming) traditions. He encouraged millions of farmers to move their families north to reclaim abandoned farmland and rebuild the irrigation systems neglected during Mongol rule. Education and job training helped Chinese workers and officials to be more effective. The new emperor focused his efforts on agriculture and on trade within China. He did not value trade with other lands, which had been so important to the Mongols.

Ming Hung Wu thus took his duties very seriously and worked hard to make sure his government truly served the interests of the Chinese people. China was on the road to recovery!

1. Why did the Mongols allow Chinese farms to go to waste?
2. How did Mongol rule affect the people of China?
3. What policies most likely angered the people of China?
4. Besides the Mongol rulers, what other calamities hurt the Chinese people?
5. What policies did Ming Hung Wu adopt in order to help the Chinese people recover?
6. In what specific ways was the rule of Ming Hung Wu different from the Mongols?

**Source:** National Center for History in the Schools at UCLA. "Landscape Teaching Unit 5.5: Calamities and Recoveries: 1300-1500." World History for Us All. San Diego State University, n.d. Web. 1 Aug. 2014. <http://worldhistoryforusall.sdsu.edu/units/five/landscape/Era05_landscape5.php>