The Fall of the Ming

Ming Dynasty 明: 1368 -1644
   Jiajing Emperor (r. 1522-1567) (11th emp.)
   Wanli Emperor (r. 1573-1620) (13th emp.)
   Tianqi Emperor (r. 1620-1627) (15th emp.)
   Chongzhen Emperor (r. 1628-1644 (16th emp.)

Shun Interregnum 大順: 25 April 1644 - 5 June 1644 (reign of Li Zicheng in Beijing)

Qing Dynasty 清: 1644 - 1911 (last imperial dynasty; ruled by the Manchus, a tribal people whose homeland lies to the northeast of Ming China; consider themselves the successors to the Jurchen Jin dynasty [1115-1234])

Hai Rui 海瑞 (1513-1587), as a minor official he memorializes the throne with a harsh indictment of the emperor. Before sending in his memorial, he buys himself a coffin. Nearly dies in prison. Comes to symbolize the morally upright scholar-official – willing to sacrifice his own life as a kind of moral suasion against errant, abusive autocratic power. Becomes the subject of a historical drama written by Wu Han in the 1960s, which serves as a veiled critique of Mao Zedong. Criticism of this play is one of the first salvos in the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976).

Donglin Society 東林; founded in 1611; comprised of scholars and officials united by their opposition to Taizhou radicalism, bureaucratic corruption, and eunuch power at court; victimized by the powerful eunuch Wei Zhongxian in the 1620s.

Restoration Society (Fu She 復社); a second generation of Donglin scholars and political activists; gain influence in bureaucratic circles in the 1630s & 1640s; are not able to stem the tide of corruption and factionalism at court; internal fighting helps to doom their cause of restoration of the Ming Dynasty in the 1650s & 1660s.

Wei Zhongxian 魏忠賢 (1568-1627); a powerful eunuch who dominates the court between 1620 & 1627; gains influence over the emperor via association with the emperor's former wet-nurse; terrorizes and persecutes his political enemies, especially the Donglin scholars.

Late Ming rebels:
Zhang Xianzhong 張獻忠 (1605-1647); leads a destructive rebellion in the region of Sichuan in the 1640s; conducts class warfare against the gentry; greatly depopulates the province of Sichuan; finally defeated by Qing troops.

Li Zicheng 李自成 (1606-1645); a laid-off post-station groom who launches a peasant rebellion against the Ming from his power base in Shaanxi in 1639; succeeds in taking the capital in Beijing unopposed in 1644; establishes the short-lived Shun Dynasty; eventually defeated by the former Ming general Wu Sangui and Manchu troops.

Wu Sangui 吳三桂; general under the Ming; first sides with Li Zicheng's rebels; then allies with the Manchu troops, paving the way for their entry into the city of Beijing and establishment of the Qing Dynasty; in 1673 Wu launches a rebellion against the Qing, which is suppressed by 1681.