1. The Ming at Its Greatest Extent
Fairbank and Goldman (1992: 131)

1 Crossley (1999: 87) notes that many Ruzhens joined the Yi garrisons established in the vicinity of the Yalu, and others entered trade, frequently assuming Korean surnames.

2 Hsiao (1978: 4)

3 Yong-le let the admiral Zheng He, a Muslim Turk undertake seven grand diplomatic naval expeditions between 1405 and 1423, visiting 30 countries as far as the African east coast with 26,800 men in the very first voyage. The shipyards near Nanjing alone built 2,000 vessels, including about 100 state-of-the-art treasure ships unprecedented in human history; 370-440 feet in length and 150-180 feet abeam, weighing 3,000 tons apiece with 4-9 masts up to 90 feet high, 16 water-tight

Zhu Yuan-zhang (r.1368-98) was a peasant who had obtained literacy from Buddhist priests. Rising as a rebel warlord in the lower Yangzi region, he succeeded to establish the Ming dynasty (1368-1644). He had stationed his sons in the northern border territories as fiefs, while keeping only the heir designate in the capital, Nanjing. The oldest son Yong-le (r.1402-24), who was a popular and experienced frontier military commander, killed the boy emperor and then transferred the capital to his former princely fief, Beijing.

Mongol rule in Koryeo had already collapsed in 1356. The Mongol rulers maintained themselves as Northern Yuan and kept occupying the Liao River basin until the Ming armies took over the Liao-yang area in 1387. As the professed successor to Koguryeo, Koryeo previously claimed all lands east of the Liao River. The new Ming dynasty, however, proclaimed in 1388 its intention to occupy even the northeastern frontier area of Koryeo that had been administered under the Yuan commandery. Resenting this proclamation, Choe Yeong (who had seized power by driving out the rival faction in 1388) decided to invade Liao-dong, appointing Yi Seong-kye as deputy commander. Yi, however, turned his army back at Wi-wha Island (in the mouth of Yalu River), seized power, and was eventually elevated to the kingship of the new Chosun dynasty (1392-1910) by the Neo-
Confucian literati-bureaucrats. The Chosun retained the cis-Yalu territory, but gave up the Laio River basin in order to maintain good relations with the Ming. By adhering to the traditional Sa-dae (Serve the Greater) strategy, the Koreans yielded to the Stronger, the Han Chinese Ming, and the Chosun dynasty could maintain its independent nationhood free from the ravages of warfare.

The Ming maintained the Yuan system of decimal military organization, and also the system of hereditary military families, amounting to 2 million units. In 1409, Yong-le sent a force of 100,000 troops to attack the Eastern Mongols. Yong-le himself marched with 500,000 troops in 1410 and destroyed the Eastern Mongols. He organized an army for a campaign against Oirat Mongols in 1414, and won a victory at the Kerulen River by firing cannons against the nomads.

Yong-le had mounted another major campaign against the Eastern Mongols in 1422, and led his fifth steppe campaign in 1424, the last Ming expedition on the steppe. He died en route to Beijing. Yong-le's exploits may be compared to those of Qin Shi-huang-di, Han Wu-di, and Tang Tai-zong. His successors, however, had absolutely no taste for renewing steppe campaigns.

Han campaigns on the steppe against the Xiong-nu were successful only while Wu-di was on the throne. Tang Tai-zong succeeded in obtaining temporary control of the steppe, but his militant policies were dismantled in favor of a passive defense under the reigns of his successors. After Yong-le's death, the Ming court also reverted to the more traditional pattern of fixed defenses. The Ming army was made largely self-supporting by allotting farm land to soldiers' families. The reinforcement of the Great Wall was an expression of the siege mentality of the Ming court that proved to be a futile effort.

For a Manchurian or a Mongolian dynasty, Beijing was ideally located to serve as the dynastic capital because of easy access to tribal troops from Manchuria or the Mongolian steppe. With a leader like Yong-le, who understood frontier warfare and tribal politics, a northern capital was an asset. But for a Han Chinese court in the absence of Shi-huang-di, Wu-di, Tai-zong or Yong-le, Beijing was a liability. It was remote from compartments, and stern-post rudders. Persuaded by the Confucian-trained bureaucrats, Yong-le's successors prohibited foreign contact and trade altogether, letting the Zheng He's Armada rot in shipyards and leaving the world to be explored by Europeans. See Fairbank and Goldman (1992: 137-8).

5 Barfield (1989: 235)
6 Jagchid and Symons (1989: 139-40) states: “Yearly payments were received by the Xiong-nu Shan-yu, Mao-dun, as early as the Han period, which set a precedent for the huge demands made on the Song and Southern Song dynasties by the Qidan Liao, Tangut Xia, and Ruzhen Jin states. Bestowals were also presented throughout these dynastic periods, with the level of presentation determined by the relative power of the sedentary and nomadic states. … Although bestowals and yearly payments were … extremely costly to maintain, they did provide Chinese courts with an alternative to expensive and dangerous warfare with their nomadic neighbors.”

7 After Yong-le's death, until the fall of Esen in 1454, the Ming were really paying tributes to the
Mongols. Jagchid and Symons (1989: 138) quote a passage in the Ming Shi-lu: “It was impossible to satisfy their desires… The chief of the barbarians … increased their demands each year. Sometimes they asked for many expensive and luxurious things which we did not have. Even so, the court always tried to give those things to them if they were ready in hand…; The barbarian chief … if he got … less than what he asked … always got very angry…”

8 See Barfield (1989: 235-6 and 251). According to Spence (1990: 26), “the policy of the Ming was to control the Ruzhen by formally defining their territory as a part of China’s frontier defensive system, by offering them honorific titles, and by granting them trading privileges.

9 The Ruzhens may be classified into three groups: the Jian-zhou tribes hunting and farming in the region of Changbai-shan (along the northern edge of Korean border) north of the river Tumen; the detribalized (or “tamed”) Hun-lun tribes farming and trading in the land east of the Liao River and north of Shen-yang (trading and mingling with Chinese emigrants, called Nikan, in Fu-shun and Shen-yang that were the heartland of the old Jin empire); and the Savage Ruzhens engaged in fishing, hunting, gathering, and elementary agriculture, further north in the east of the river Mu-dan (up to the bulk of China’s resources and, furthermore, put the court directly on a vulnerable frontier defense line, liable to sudden nomadic attack.

The Ming dynasty did not campaign on the steppe after Yong-le’s death, and never directly controlled either the northeast or the northwest frontier regions. Yet it refused to make peace treaties with the nomads. According to Barfield (1989: 246-49), the Ming rulers reasoned that the Song court had paid huge subsidies to the Qidan, Ruzhen, and Mongols, only to lose first northern China and then be completely swallowed by the Mongols. They believed that subsidies had simply enhanced the power of nomads, ultimately leading to the destruction of the Song dynasty.

The Ming court, however, belatedly recognized the fact that the subsidies to nomads were cheaper than raising troops or building walls for defense. In 1449, the Ming suffered the embarrassment of Emperor Ying-zong being captured by the Oirat Mongols, recalling the Xiong-nu encirclement of Han Gao-zu in 200 BC. The Ming peace treaty with the Mongol tribal leaders provided subsidies, trade rights, and titles to every minor chieftain, helping to cement the fragmented political structure on the Mongolian steppe.

The Ming dynasty, unlike Yuan, lacked the power to maintain military control over the whole of Manchuria outside Liao-dong and a narrow coastal strip of Liao-xi. The Ming court granted honorific titles and tributary benefits to about 200 petty Ruzhen tribal leaders in order to maintain influence in the region and keep them out of the sphere of Koryeo influence.

Toyotomi Hideyoshi succeeded in unifying all of the Japanese islands by 1590, and then decided to ship the now useless warriors to the Korean peninsula in 1592, declaring that they were on their way to conquer Ming China. Spence (1990: 18-19) notes that “since the Ming regarded Korea as a loyal and dependent ally to be protected at all costs, Chinese troops were sent in force to help the hard-pressed Koreans. The war might have continued, at terrible cost to all three countries, had not domestic turmoil in Japan, coupled with effective disruption of Japanese supply lines by the Korean navy, led to the recall of Japanese troops from Korea in 1598.”
After being saved by the Ming army, the tendency for the Koreans looking toward the Han Chinese Middle Kingdom over the shoulder of their Manchurian cousins was very much amplified.

By the year 1600, on the eve of the dynasty’s violent end, the empire of Ming was the most sophisticated of all the nations on earth and its population of some 120 million was larger than that of all European countries combined. Positions in the bureaucracy and the military officer hierarchy were acquired by passing the examinations which were administered at the county, provincial, and capital levels. At the very moment when the Ming culture and arts seemed at the height of their glory, however, the state and economy began to unravel. Those who brought order to the chaos in mainland China were the Ruzhen tribesmen in Eastern Manchuria.

THE RETURN OF THE RUZHENS

Nurhaci (1559-1626), the founder of the Qing dynasty (1616-1911), was the son of a Jian-zhou tribal chieftain, who had made marriage alliances with the Hun-lun tribes. On lunar New Year’s Day in 1596, Nurhaci had told Sin Jung-il, an envoy from the Chosun court, that: “From this day forward, our two countries will be as one, our two families will be one, forever united and amicable, for generations, without end.” Nurhaci sent a letter to the Chosun court, saying that: “The honorable Korean country and our Ruzhen nation, we two countries, will advance toward customary good relations, and our two peoples will not habitually raise troops against each other.”

Nurhaci declared himself the Khan of Later Jin in 1616. In the sixteenth century Manchuria, Chinese-style intensive agriculture was conducted only in the southernmost region below Shen-yang (the modern Muk-den). The Ming rulers had maintained strong garrisons in the Liao River basin under their own generals. Ming military recruitment for service in Liao-dong was surging among Ruzhens and Koreans. Crossley (1999: 47) reiterates Owen Lattimore’s view that the Liao-dong-Jilin region prior to the Ming-Qing transition was a “reservoir” in which the fluid elements of Chinese, Mongol, Korean, and native cultures swirled in response to political and economic forces. Crossley (1997: 57, 59) notes that Sin’s mission had been to impress upon the Jian-zhou Ruzhens the necessity of observing the integrity of the Northern Chosun border, and not to create a political alliance with Nurhaci against the Ming.

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The imperial lineage of the Qing is referred to as the Aisin Gioro. Aisin means “gold” and this was sufficient proof for the emperor Qian-long that the Qing imperial lineage was a branch of the original Jin Ruzhens.

By 1621, Shen-yang and Liao-yang fell to the Ruzhen troops, Nurhaci made Shen-yang the capital of Later Jin in 1625 and, in due course, his scions established the Manchu Qing in 1636.

THE RULERS OF THE JIN AND QING DYNASTIES BELIEVED THAT THEIR PROGENITOR HAD ORIGINALLY COME FROM KOGURYEO OR SILLA

In the preface of Researches on the Manchu Origins (Man-zhou Yuanliu Gao), the Qian-long emperor (1736-96) states that the ancestors of the Jin imperial clan had lived among the Mohe confederation, within the territory of the ancient Su-shens where were found the Long White Mountain (Changbai-shan) and the Black Water (the Hei-shui), and this was the very scene of the rise of the Ruzhens, later renamed as Manchus which was presumably a reflex of the Su-shen. The Qing rulers clearly believed that the founders of the Ruzhen Jin dynasty were their direct ancestors, and hence they initially called their nation Later Jin until 1636.12

The Man-zhou Yuan-liu Gao traces the origin of the Manchus not only to the Mohe-Ruzhens and the Parhae, but also to the peoples in the Korean peninsula. The Wan-yan section of Book 7, Buzu, states that, although the History of Jin states that the founder of the Jin dynasty came from Koguryeo, the Chronicle of Great Jin records that he had originally come from Silla. The Hei-shui Mohe were described in the Tang history as an uncultured people of terrifying fierceness, possessing a deadly poison for arrow tips. The emperor Qian-long apparently believed that the Manchus were rooted not only in these warlike peoples, but they were also rooted in the peoples of the ancient kingdoms of the Korean peninsula (see Crossley, 1997, pp. 122-5).