

CRISIS SIMULATION

FALL OF THE MING DYNASTY



Letter to the People:

Honorable Delegates,

Welcome to the sixth annual Freeman Model United Nations Conference! Our names are Madhushri Muthuraj and Sahasra Kancherla, and we are incredibly excited to lead you through this committee. Madhushri is a Freshman in Freeman's Leadership Center and has participated in Model UN for 3 years. Outside of academics, Madhushri enjoys playing tennis, crocheting, and reading. Sahasra is a Junior in her sixth year participating in Model United Nations. She is also in the Leadership Center and is excited to be a chair for this year's iteration of FreeMUN. We cannot wait to hear all the interesting and well researched ideas that will be presented and hope that you'll enjoy the diverse discussions that await you.

As you dive into these issues, we remind you to stick to your delegate position in any points and refrain from using personal positions. While we strongly encourage delegates to write position papers, they are not required to attend the committee. However, to be considered for an award, papers are necessary. Delegates that demonstrate exceptional performance in committee through organized debate, unorganized debate, problem solving, and backroom performance will be recognized for an award.

We look forward to being your chairs for this committee and wish you the best for your preparations! If you have any questions, please contact us at freemunvimingdynasty@gmail.com for additional information.

Your Chairs,

Madhushri Muthuraj and Sahasra Kancherla



Douglas S. Freeman High School Model United Nations Conference

Historical Crisis

Fall of The Ming Dynasty

Topic I: Perils Facing China

Topic II: Conflicts Facing China

Introduction

Topic I: Perils Facing China

Background:

In the year 1628, the Ming Dynasty was one of the most powerful empires of their time. However, their power was beginning to crumble. While the Ming Dynasty celebrated success for many years, the 17th century brought on an intense decline. Due to the fatal combination of economic instability, social unrest, environmental disasters, famine, revolts, and external threats, the Ming Dynasty slowly teetered towards downfall, leaving the government unable to fend against conquest.

These interconnected crises worked together to weaken the dynasty. Poor environmental conditions led to increased harvest failures. Harvest failures led to widespread starvation, causing unrest among the citizenry. Simultaneously, the government grappled with a severe fiscal crisis, due to the decline in silver supplies. In addition to this, corrupt government

officials, ineffective leadership, and a decline in military strength resulted in an increasingly unsalvageable situation.

Environmental Conditions:

The environment was one of the biggest factors that led to the Ming Dynasty's downfall. During this time, China was suffering the effects of the Little Ice Age, a period of severe cold weather and droughts which spanned from roughly 1300 to 1850. During the 16th and early 17th centuries, temperatures across China dropped, leading to shortened harvests and increasingly extreme weather conditions.

From 1627 into the early 1640s, one of the most impactful droughts in Chinese history, the Chongzhen Drought, spread across Eastern and Central China. The provinces of Chuanxi, Shanxi, and Henan, which relied heavily on agricultural production to support their local populations, were particularly affected. Without sufficient water conditions, crops failed on a large scale. Rivers and canals dried up. Rain became inconsistent and, in some places, nonexistent. These struggles led to widespread famine, and many Chinese civilians starved.

Besides droughts, other natural conditions intensified the situation. Insect plagues infected the already scarce crop supply, causing more starvation. Additionally, diseases caused by malnutrition and unsanitary conditions became increasingly common. All of these factors combined to create intense instability and conflict.

Economic Crisis:

While natural disasters put the land in severely negative condition, the economic stability of the country also declined. The “single whip reform” of the 16th century combined multiple taxes into singular payments, primarily paid in silver. While in theory, this simplified tax collection, it also made tax collection heavily dependent on silver supply.

In the 17th century, this silver supply slowly collapsed. Japan’s Tokugawa Shogunate adopted an isolationist policy and cut off foreign trade. At the same time, King Philip IV of Spain started to prevent the smuggling of silver from South America to China, redirecting silver from China back to Spain. This led to a sharp decline in silver imports. As the availability of silver decreased, the value of silver skyrocketed, making it even harder for the civilians to pay their tax requirements. Inflation and deflation hit at the same time in different regions of China, depending on proximity to trade routes. Tax collection slowed, workers went underpaid or without payment, and unemployment became common. The imperial treasury, once having loads of

silver, was suddenly facing a major downfall. In desperation, the Ming government made the taxes even higher to increase revenue, further burdening the already starving population

Military Collapse:

Along with these environmental and economic issues, there was a growing external threat. The Manchus from Manchuria had begun an uprising, accumulating a large army. By the late 1620s, the Manchus were starting to pressure the Ming Dynasty’s military. The military of the Ming Dynasty was severely underfunded and majorly lacking supplies due to the ongoing fiscal crisis, leading to a lack of morale within the military. Many soldiers were left unpaid and without proper supplies to fend for themselves. In some cases, entire troops were abandoned without sufficient supplies. Besides the Jurchen invaders from the north, the military was also overwhelmed with internal peasant revolts. As Li Zicheng's forces grew inside the borders and the Manchus increased their pressure by the day, the Ming military was left unable to defend the empire.

Peasant Rebellions

Throughout the late 1620s and into the early 1630s, peasant rebellions started throughout the country, particularly in the northern province, where famine was quite intense. One of the most significant figures to make an impact during this time was Li Zicheng. Li Zicheng’s opposition to the government began when he was discharged from government service during the fiscal

crisis. Along with many others in the Ming Dynasty, he found himself unemployed and starving. He began to grow a following of peasants, former members of the military, the unemployed, and the displaced. As a successful military leader, his following grew rapidly among the vast majority of the population that was discontented with the government. Though Li Zicheng's final revolt would happen in the later 1630s to early 1640s, his influence was already spreading throughout the country. Revolts, raids, and uprisings began very common among the peasants. The military, already struggling to handle external threats, was more overwhelmed by the day. The revolts and raids were also draining the government's supplies and weakened the government's ability to govern properly.

Political Instability:

At the center of the issue, the imperial government was in shambles. The government was burdened by increasing pressure from revolts, surrounding countries, and the wrath of natural disasters. The Chongzhen Emperor, who came to the throne in 1627, made an attempt to solve these problems and increase revenues. During the fiscal crisis, to prevent further depletion of the imperial treasury, Chongzhen cut funds for the Ming postal service, leading to major unemployment of men from the central and northern provinces. This led to yet more rebel groups and government opposition. Additionally, his bad decision-making and frequent administrative turnover prevented cohesive problem-solving and long-term crisis

management—during his reign alone, he appointed more than 50 grand secretaries.

Analysis

The Ming Dynasty is facing many perils, leaving it on the brink of economical and political collapse. Silver shortages are causing increased taxation and mass unrest among the citizens of Beijing. Natural disasters have led to widespread famine. Rebel groups have formed in reaction to the country's instability. Military strength is slowly but surely caving under the pressure of these rebel groups and the Jurchen Invasion.

One of the biggest issues is the environment. The Little Ice Age and its effects, particularly the Chongzhen Drought, have spread throughout Eastern and Central China, bringing about heavy crop failures. This has led to widespread famine and increased unrest among the population. At this time, relief programs for the civilians could be incredibly beneficial. Additionally, attempting to appoint provincial leaders may help. These leaders could independently handle issues more specific to different provinces, which may alleviate some of the citizens' concerns.

Besides the environmental factors, China's unstable economic condition has weighed heavily into the Ming Dynasty's decline. It may be time to reconsider the "single whip reform," which combined multiple tax payments into one. Re-separating tax payments would give civilians more time to pay them. Additionally, the country's silver supply

needs to be better managed. China needs to find a way to increase revenue, without taking it exclusively from the civilians. One potential solution could be increasing regional silver mining. Government corruption must also be managed.

Lastly, the newly formed rebel groups are amplifying the chaos. Fueled by starvation and unemployment, revolts and raids have become incredibly common throughout the country. Though the internal issues are severe, the external issues are perhaps even more threatening. The Jurchen invasion puts more pressure on the military day by day. A potential solution for these issues is to prioritize the majority of the military on the external threats and separate the remaining militia into smaller groups, stationing them in different provinces to lessen the impact of the rebel groups.

Questions to Consider:

1. What strategies should the government use to mitigate the environmental stressors?
2. What measures should be put in place to address the economic crisis caused by the silver shortage, without increasing the burden on the suffering population?
3. What solutions can be introduced to reduce corruption and increase the effectiveness of the imperial government for the crises?
4. Should the government make an attempt to negotiate with the rebel groups, or is suppressing them the only possible solution? If so, is

suppressing them the most effective solution?

Topic II:

Conflicts facing China

Background

The Ming dynasty, which began in 1368, started to face significant structural strains by the early 17th century. Tax revenue was tied to silver production, which fluctuated regularly, causing tax yields and liquidity to plunge. Furthermore, the Wanli Emperor's late absenteeism had left deep-rooted factionalism among the scholar-officials, and the following reigns struggled to reassert proper central command. On paper, the Ming still possessed vast resources such as their population, tax base, and fortified passes like Shanghai and Ningyuan, but the state's ability to mobilize them had declined.

Further signs of instability were shown when, in 1616, north of the Great Wall, Nurhaci unified Jurchen banners and declared himself ruler of a new dynasty called the Later Jin. Following defeats at Sarhu in 1619, the Ming strategy shifted from offensive pushes into Manchuria to a defensive barrier anchored on Liaodong fortresses. After Nurhaci's death, Hong Taiji reorganized the Jurchen banners, integrated Mongol allies, cultivated Han defectors and siege expertise, and pressed Ming positions west and south of the Liao.

In the southwestern provinces (Sichuan, Guizhou, Yunnan), which were governed via a patchwork of direct prefectures and semi-autonomous native chieftains (tusi), longstanding tensions, over *corvée*, land surveys, and court attempts to convert hereditary chieftaincies into regular counties, erupted in the She–An Rebellion, which lasted from 1621 to now in 1628, led by She Chongming and An Bangyan. Ethnic Yi and other highland communities were drawn into the conflict, as were lowland Han settlers and salt/horse-trade interests. Ming's suppression campaigns were costly, and even as people died and cities changed leaders, the deeper governance challenge of how to integrate highland societies without constant war remains unresolved in 1630.

Meanwhile, droughts in the 1620s, locust infestations, and the fiscal blow of fluctuating silver imports undermined rural resilience. Tax deficits, conscriptions, and local demands triggered flight and banditry. Early bands that would later consolidate under Li Zicheng and Zhang Xianzhong were forming in the northwest and central plains, exploiting garrison wage liabilities and corrupt granary administration.

In the seas, the Dutch East India Company (VOC) challenged Iberian and Asian rivals for control of trade nodes. The Sino–Dutch conflicts, which started in the 1620s, featured blockades, raids, and set-piece naval battles. The Ming state relied on coastal defense forces and alliances, often transactional, with Chinese maritime families (notably the Zheng lineage in Fujian) whose interests straddled legal trade,

smuggling, and privateering. Control of maritime taxation, salt monopolies, and shipping routes intersected with foreign policy and state revenue.

Current status

In the year 1628, the Later Jin press the Liaodong front; Chahar–Jurchen clashes keep the steppe unsettled; the She–An rebellion has been suppressed in headlines but the southwest remains fragile; peasant uprisings are spreading, though not yet unified; at sea, Dutch–Sino tensions are active, with raids, blockades, and counter-raids shaping Fujian and Guangdong politics.

The Ming court struggles to coordinate multi-front responses. The young Chongzhen Emperor, enthroned in 1627, attempts to restore imperial prestige after the collapse of the Tianqi reign. He dismisses powerful eunuchs like Wei Zhongxian and calls for accountability, but this destabilizes the bureaucracy, creating paralysis. The treasury is nearly empty, with annual deficits mounting. Censors clash with frontier generals over responsibility for defeats. Memorials clash over priorities, whether or not they should defend the northeast vs. secure granaries vs. pacify the southwest vs. invest in a maritime squadron. Regardless, there will be some who aren't left satisfied.

On the northern front, Frontier garrisons complain of unpaid stipends. Some commanders, veterans of Ningyuan-style defenses, argue for entrenched, firepower-heavy tactics; others urge diplomacy with Mongol groups to encircle

the Jurchen. Meanwhile, in the inner provinces, grain shipments along the Grand Canal are disrupted by banditry and tax resistance. Local magistrates improvise relief, but shortfalls and corruption undermine their credibility and exacerbate the discontent. The She-An rebellion is continuing. The southwest remains unstable with the deep resentment of the Yi peoples and other native groups toward Ming taxation and land encroachment. Ming armies are exhausted, and mountain garrisons are expensive to maintain. In the steppe, Ligdan Khan of the Chahar (also known as the Northern Yuan Dynasty) continues to oppose Later Jin advances, clashing near the Kerulen and Xilingol regions. Although a potential ally, the Chahar have also raided Ming northern prefectures, seizing livestock and peasants. In 1628, Ming emissaries attempted to reopen talks with Ligdan, but negotiations faltered due to a lack of subsidies and distrust. Meanwhile, the Jin court tries to win over Mongol tribes, threatening to isolate the Chahar and diminish Ming influence on the steppe.

On the coast Dutch fleets blockade parts of Fujian's coast, attacking merchant shipping and rival Portuguese vessels. They establish semi-permanent bases on the Pescadores and near Taiwan, demanding trading privileges. The Ming naval forces, which are largely outdated with limited artillery, cannot effectively challenge Dutch warships. In 1628, smuggling and piracy intensified, with local merchants torn between collaboration with Europeans or loyalty to imperial prohibitions. Rising

coastal insecurity disrupts rice shipments from the south to northern provinces, worsening famine.

Analysis

The struggle against the Later Jin presents the most immediate danger to the dynasty in 1628. While the Ming benefit from strong fortresses and natural passes such as Shanhai, the chronic corruption in their supply chains, officer defections, and underfunded garrisons weaken their defensive efforts. The Jin's Banner system makes them highly disciplined and mobile, outmatching the Ming's more static defenses. Possible solutions include reforming the supply system by granting governors greater autonomy, rotating or promoting loyal officers to curb defections, launching limited counter-raids to disrupt Jin logistics while avoiding full engagements, and employing propaganda to persuade disaffected Jurchen and Mongol groups to return to Ming loyalty.

The peasant rebellions across Shaanxi, Henan, and other regions also demand urgent attention. These rebels, while poorly organized and lacking advanced weaponry, are fueled by famine, corruption, and Ming brutality, making them difficult to pacify. Suppression requires resources that might otherwise defend against the Jin. Delegates may consider temporary tax remissions, grain distributions, and conditional amnesty programs to weaken rebel coalitions. Empowering local militias led by trusted gentry could reduce pressure on overstretched regular armies, while longer-term investment in irrigation and

famine relief infrastructure would help prevent recurring uprisings.

In the southwest, the She–An Rebellion highlights the challenges of governing frontier minorities. Ming commanders are experienced in such conflicts, but mountainous terrain, poor supply lines, and cultural mistrust limit their effectiveness. Heavy-handed suppression risks worsening the rebellion and alienating Yi and Miao groups. Delegates may debate granting hereditary titles or tax exemptions to cooperative Yi chiefs, forming mixed garrisons to promote shared interests, and offering leniency to rebels willing to submit. Carefully targeted punitive campaigns could also be balanced with policies of cultural accommodation, such as tolerance for local customs, to restore stability without further resentment.

On the northern steppe, the Chahar Mongols under Ligdan Khan continue to resist the Later Jin, potentially serving as allies for the Ming. However, their frequent raids destabilize northern prefectures, complicating any partnership. The Ming lack silver to consistently subsidize them, raising questions about the reliability of such an alliance. Solutions might include barter arrangements with grain or weapons, marriage alliances or symbolic titles to strengthen bonds, and joint campaigns where Ming artillery complements Chahar cavalry. Alternatively, some may argue for diplomacy with the Jin to isolate the Chahar if they prove more of a burden than an asset.

Along the coast, Dutch fleets disrupt trade, blockade ports, and threaten to

establish permanent bases on Taiwan and the Pescadores. The Ming navy, fragmented and outdated, cannot easily counter Dutch firepower, and corruption among coastal officials further weakens defenses.

Delegates might explore controlled trade agreements with the Dutch in exchange for peace, firearms, or naval expertise, or else invest in shipbuilding programs supported by Portuguese or captured Dutch artillery. Empowering merchant guilds to form auxiliary naval militias could enhance local defense, while fortifying strategic islands would block Europeans from gaining a permanent foothold.

Finally, the political climate in Beijing compounds all these crises. The Chongzhen Emperor is energetic and determined, but factionalism, an empty treasury, and his own inexperience hinder decisive leadership. His anti-corruption campaigns alienate both eunuchs and scholar-officials, paralyzing governance. Potential strategies include building coalitions by appointing capable officials across factional lines, imposing austerity measures at court to set a moral example, and establishing anti-corruption commissions directly answerable to the throne. Improving communication between court and provinces through expanded courier systems and stricter accountability for governors may also strengthen the dynasty's ability to respond effectively.

Questions to consider:

1. How should an empire balance military spending with the urgent need for famine relief and economic stability?

2. What strategies can restore public trust when corruption, famine, and rebellion undermine legitimacy?
3. To what extent should a central government delegate authority to local elites or retain tight control in times of crisis?
4. How can diplomacy with external powers—whether nomadic states, neighboring kingdoms, or European traders—be used without sacrificing sovereignty?
5. What role should cultural accommodation and tolerance play in managing diverse populations within an empire?
6. How can states prevent officer defections and internal betrayal when loyalty is tested by scarcity and defeat?
7. Should survival in the short term take precedence over long-term reforms, or can both be pursued simultaneously?

Ultimately, China is in one of the most critical periods in its history. Delegates from both the Ming Dynasty and opposing forces must find solutions to the environmental, humanitarian, and financial issues plaguing the Chinese people. Meanwhile, every delegate must consider how to forge China's future in what way is best, whether that be through reform and reinforcement of the Ming Dynasty, or through the ushering in of a new age for the Middle Kingdom.

Conclusion

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