

China (Ming Dynasty)

The Ming Dynasty (1368–1644) restored Chinese rule after the overthrow of the Mongol-led Yuan Dynasty during the Red Turban Rebellion. Building on Chinese precedents, the Ming emphasized **centralized government, a Confucian bureaucracy** (with the continued influence of Neo-Confucianism), and political stability to regulate both **internal affairs and foreign interactions**. Emperors like Hongwu and Yongle strengthened the state through expanded civil service exams, support for agriculture and transportation infrastructure, and monumental constructions like the **Forbidden City** and the further expansion of the **Great Wall**. The dynasty also expanded China's influence abroad through **Zheng He's** maritime expeditions, although later Ming rulers shifted toward more inward-focused policies to exert tighter control over trade. Internally, the economy prospered through trade and agriculture, fueled in part by silver from the Americas, **new crops** like maize and potatoes, and increased specialization in goods such as silk and cotton.

Ming China managed interactions with foreign powers carefully. Portuguese merchants were eventually allowed to establish a presence at **Macau**, and trade with Spain brought Chinese goods to global markets. While commercial growth created wealth, it also increased inequality and resentment among scholar-officials and peasants. Over time, emperors delegated more authority to eunuchs and officials, and military campaigns and building projects strained the state's finances. Famines, high taxes, epidemics, and natural disasters eroded confidence in the dynasty's **Mandate of Heaven**, paving the way for Manchu conquest and the start of Qing rule in 1644. Despite the upheaval, the Qing built on Ming prosperity and ushered in another long period of growth that lasted until 1912.

Japan (Tokugawa Shogunate)

By 1603, the Tokugawa Shogunate unified Japan under a **centralized military government** after **Tokugawa Ieyasu** became shogun. The shoguns increased their control over the **daimyo** through a system of landholdings—daimyo ruled their provinces and collected taxes as long as they submitted to the shogun's authority and remained loyal. In addition, the shogun required the daimyo to spend part of the year in the capital, **Edo**, to prevent them from amassing significant provincial power. Social hierarchy became highly structured under Confucian principles, with samurai, farmers, artisans, and merchants each occupying fixed roles. Peace and stability allowed merchants to prosper, while samurai increasingly took bureaucratic and administrative positions. Because of this long peace, many samurai lost their traditional military role and became landowners or **salaried officials**.

Like China, Japan carefully limited its interactions with foreigners. Early European contact introduced firearms and trade, but Christianity was banned in 1614 due to concerns that it could undermine stability, and only Dutch traders were allowed restricted commerce at Nagasaki through the **sakoku decree**. Meanwhile, trade and diplomacy with China and Korea remained open, and rapid economic growth and urbanization led to the rise of a prosperous **merchant class**. This social and economic change later contributed to peasant uprisings and samurai discontent. Ultimately, the Tokugawa shogunate oversaw the longest period of peace and stability in Japan's history until 1868, when daimyo united to overthrow the shogun and restore imperial rule during the **Meiji Restoration**.

Russia

Under Mongol rule as part of the Golden Horde, the Grand Duchy of Moscow became the leading Russian power and expanded to reunify Russia, consolidating lands previously divided among princes. In 1547, Ivan IV ("the Terrible") was the first to take the title **tsar of Russia**. He established a new law code, a standing army (the **streletsy**), and a council of nobles (**boyars**), integrating them into the administration of his expanding state. To assert imperial control, he limited the power of the nobility, created a personal bodyguard of boyars (the *oprichniki*) with estates and near-complete authority over peasants, and extracted taxes to fund military campaigns. He also restricted the mobility of peasants, solidifying **serfdom** and reinforcing a rigid social hierarchy that tied the lower classes to the land. These centralization efforts and harsh policies contributed to the Time of Troubles, a period of social upheaval and civil war.

Despite these challenges, Russia continued expanding under **Peter the Great** (1682–1725), who looked to Europe as a model for modernization and state-building. He extended territory, modernized the military along Western lines, created military academies, brought the **Orthodox Church** under state control, and promoted centralized governance. Peter sought to integrate Russia into European political, economic, and cultural networks, securing access to the **Baltic and Black Seas** through conflicts with Sweden and the Ottoman Empire, and establishing trade routes with European powers. By the 18th century, Russian explorers had crossed Siberia to the Pacific, claiming Alaska (1732) and setting up **trading posts**, bringing Russia into contact with indigenous peoples and other colonial powers like Spain and Britain. Under **Catherine the Great** (1762–1796), Russia continued to assert itself as a major European power, expanding at the expense of the Ottoman Empire and the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth while adopting additional **European administrative, legal, and cultural reforms**.

Kongo

The Kingdom of Kongo (14th–17th centuries) was a centralized state ruled by the **Manikongo** (Lord of Kongo), who was elected by a royal council that included bureaucrats and several women who wielded significant influence. The Manikongo appointed provincial governors and maintained control through a **hierarchy of officials and local chiefs** who helped administer provinces and collect tribute from vassal states. He also played a spiritual role, believed to protect his people from misfortune. Kongo's economy thrived on trade in ivory, copper, salt, textiles, and slaves, and Portuguese contact in the 15th century expanded these exchanges, introducing firearms and new crops to the region. Elite officials adopted aspects of **Portuguese culture**, including Christianity, European dress, and education, blending local and foreign influences.

However, European involvement also challenged Kongo's authority. While the Kongo benefited from a temporary monopoly on the **slave trade**, Portuguese demand for slaves often conflicted with the king's control, especially as some Kongolese nobles began kidnapping freemen in violation of Kongo laws. Over time, internal disputes over taxation and succession weakened the state, while the Portuguese increasingly interfered in Kongo's political affairs. Despite these pressures, Kongo maintained centralized governance and engaged diplomatically with Europeans, demonstrating how African kingdoms could manage foreign interaction while asserting state power.

Dahomey

The Kingdom of Dahomey (17th–18th centuries) emerged as a centralized, militarized state in West Africa, expanding through conquest and controlling trade along the coast after the arrival of Europeans. Originally paying tribute to the Oyo Empire, Dahomey's kings began conquering neighboring states around 1600, transforming a small chiefdom into a powerful coastal kingdom. Kings such as Houegbadja, Akaba, and Agaja built a strong **bureaucracy and standing army**, including the all-female regiment of “Amazons.” The kingdom's economy and military power were closely tied to the **Atlantic slave trade**, which also brought firearms, wealth, and influence from European traders.

Dahomey's interactions with Europe were pragmatic: the kingdom negotiated trade agreements, maintained diplomatic ties, and balanced power with neighboring states. Military campaigns and control of trade routes allowed Dahomey to consolidate **regional dominance**, showing how African states combined centralized authority with engagement in global networks to strengthen their position. The kingdom was known for its rigid, hierarchical political structure, with the king wielding absolute authority. A notable feature of Dahomey's military was the presence of the “**Amazons**” (**Agojie**), an all-female regiment that helped expand the kingdom and take captives for the growing slave trade. Dahomey was also a center of art, religion, and cultural practices, with elaborate ceremonies and strong religious institutions, including the worship of the **Vodun (Voodoo)** deities. These practices spread to the Americas during the trans-Atlantic slave trade, leading to the **syncretism (blending) of West African and Christian** traditions among enslaved populations in the Caribbean. By 1750, Dahomey had established itself as a significant regional power, balancing relationships with European traders while pursuing expansion and dominance within West Africa. Its participation in the slave trade, however, later contributed to tensions with other African states and European powers.