MING THOUGHT AND CHINESE IDENTITY

By Matthew Turner

ESTABLISHING THE MING

The Yuan dynasty (1271-1368), the dynasty that preceded the Ming, brought China into the Mongolian empire. It also brought a new style of military government to a people who were used to governments run, in part at least, by scholar-officials, the “literati.” And although the Yuan government did attempt to accommodate many of the rhythms of everyday Chinese life, it proved incapable of competently addressing the many problems that beset the dynasty: drought, plague, and food shortages; violent millenarian movements, including both the infamous White Lotus Society and “Red Turbans”; and a change in attitude towards government by the populace at large, including amongst scholar-officials or literati who served the government, who wondered what role they, as individuals, might have in politics broadly conceived. All of these factors laid a foundation for the eventual end of the Yuan dynasty, and what was to become the Ming dynasty: a new political entity that nevertheless recalled previous non-alien rulers, from which new ideas of what it meant to be Chinese emerged.

The much mythologized first emperor of the Ming, Zhu Yuanzhang (1328-1398), began his career orphaned in a destitute village. As a teenager he became a Buddhist monk, although probably more from having nowhere to turn rather than out of religious piety. During his experiences as a monk he came into contact with, and eventually joined, the Red Turbans (红巾起义), a millenarian group inspired by a blend of Buddhist and Manichean (摩尼教) cosmology, who violently challenged the Yuan government. Zhu Yuanzhang quickly proved himself a capable soldier, and military commander. But while the major Red Turban leaders were quickly being defeated, Zhu Yuanzhang, who had a large army at that point, began to distance himself from the Red Turbans. Eventually, he became independent.

He was able to capitalize on the successes of the Red Turbans, as well as their faults — and won over more and more people. He began to compare himself to the Han dynasty emperor Gaozu (刘邦, 256-195 BCE), who, in addition to having a similar background to Zhu Yuanzhang, was seen by most Han Chinese as a man who was in touch with the mainstream of Chinese (Han) culture — primarily someone who reduced taxes and promoted Confucian teachings. By the time that Zhu Yuanzhang was able to actually able to overthrow the Yuan dynasty (who did not acknowledge defeat, but merely retreated into Mongolia) and establish the Ming dynasty, historians were already comparing him and his rule to the Han dynasty — an undiluted “Chinese” dynasty distant enough in memory not to be crowded out by poor leadership and corruption as were both the Tang (618-907) and Song (960-1279) dynasties at the time.

It is important to understand, however, that Zhu Yuanzhang was fully cognizant of the Red Turban “message,” and manipulated it. For example, while still a Red Turban commander, he supported the Red Turban’s call to build a new Song Dynasty. It was only after key successes that he became independent, and associated himself with the Han dynasty. Even the term “ming,” meaning
“radiance,” evoked a Manichean slogan used by the Red Turbans — and this was done at the behest of the many Confucian literati he began to employ. He also began to employ anti-Yuan rhetoric adapted from the Red Turbans: along with restoring China’s (Confucian) order, he would end China’s “shame.” He would focus on the decay of ethics in Chinese society (as a result of poor rule), and the passing of the “mandate of Heaven” (天命) — all undergirding him as the successor to Yuan rule.

It is also worth mentioning that while he did not use any “racist” language against the Mongolian Yuan — he in fact discouraged his ministers from doing so — he did rail against foreign (non-Han) customs, and the cultural loss implicit in Mongol rule. As northern and southern China had been separated for over four centuries, with the north ruled mainly by non-Chinese, it was a key political move to listen to southern officials on what it meant to be Chinese, in order to gain their support. In fact, after his conquest of the northern Yuan capital of Dadu (meaning “great capital”), he renamed it to Beiping (meaning “the north, pacified”), symbolic of the imposition of Chinese rule over alien barbarians. That, along with a strong focus on rural problems and official corruption, made him in the eyes of many a palpable emperor.

After founding the Ming dynasty, Zhu Yuanzhang, now the Hongwu Emperor, quickly got to work. He set up his capital in Nanjing, the palace designed and built within a year. He also set up National Academies, Confucian centers of learning, and civil service examinations, to help supply staff to his government. Importantly, he re-imposed the pre-Song tribute system, reversing “humiliating” treaty relationships with foreign powers, and notified neighboring states that the Ming dynasty had been established, that they would expect tribute, and that upon receiving tribute they would grant legitimacy and protection to those states. Finally, he focused intense effort upon revitalizing the economies of “Chinese” areas: those areas which were predominately Han, spoke and wrote Chinese, and practiced Chinese customs.

During all of this reordering, however, Zhu Yuanzhang also became intensely paranoid that people were attempting to take his power, manipulate him, and that the Confucian literati were secretly laughing at him for his unlearned background. Thousands were executed on his orders for these reasons. In this paranoia, he also rescinded much of his government administration, leaving what was left to his own direct discretion — or to the discretion of the eunuchs he increasingly employed. He became obsessed with the arts: he analyzed poems to find anything that might be critical of him or his rule, even if symbolic, and persecuted the authors for their perceived faults. He also ruled with his own strict interpretation of Confucian teachings: be austere, and ruthlessly root out corruption. This led to purges of officials (and their relations) who, more often than not, were not corrupt, but merely had different thoughts than their emperor. When Zhu Yuanzhang (known hereafter as Ming Taizu, his titled name) died, there was a collective sigh of relief as rule passed to his nephew, Zhu Yunwen (1377-1402).

Zhu Yunwen, the Jianwen Emperor, was to have an extremely short reign, however. Ascending the throne at twenty-one, he saw clearly many of the problems caused by his uncle’s misrule, and intended to be a reformer. Upon ascension, he quickly gave scholar-officials abundant free reign in their policies. He attempted to reduce feudatories, i.e.: reduce prince’s powers in their own territories to amass private armies and riches. He also, perhaps most notably, came under the spell of the literati
Fang Xiaoru (1357-1402), a Confucian scholar who advocated a return to, and reassessment of, early Confucian texts like the *Rites of Zhou* (周礼).

Fang Xiaoru was the son of an official who was executed in one of Ming Taizu’s purges; he was a student of a teacher who was sent into exile by Ming Taizu as well. Nevertheless, he believed it his Confucian duty to serve in a civil capacity, and sought Zhu Yunwen’s attentions: he lobbied to further enlarge the responsibilities of the literati with the direct cooperation of the ruler. Zhu Yunwen thought this was a good idea, and complied. Fang Xiaoru also hypothesized political solutions to social problems without relying on the imperial government, instead depending on a better educated and active populace. Although Zhu Yunwen thought this was a worthwhile experiment, this also gave his uncle, Zhu Di (1360-1424), an excuse to interfere.

Zhu Di, the Prince of Yan — a territory near Beiping — had been amassing a fortune and a very large private army, and had come under a small degree of censure for this. But he claimed to be outraged at the new reforms at court, and sought to “rescue” his nephew from the Confucians misleading him. This “rescue” entailed a full-scale invasion of Nanjing, executions of nearly all the Confucian literati, and the accidental burning of the emperor’s quarters — in which the emperor and his family all died. Following Zhu Yunwen’s death, Zhu Di proclaimed a new era, with himself the Yongle Emperor. What followed was a re-consolidation of power, and a reign of terror that included a massive purge of literati, establishing a pattern of brutality that would remain for the rest of the Ming dynasty. Zhu Di raised more eunuchs to official status, and massively expanded the state security apparatus, including the secret police, with their collaboration.

With swift policing, Zhu Di proved himself to be a far more capable emperor than Ming Taizu. After he consolidated power, he encouraged a number of other projects that he was interested in: restoring the Grand Canal; sending “goodwill” missions to foreign countries in Asia, Africa and the Middle East led by the admiral Zheng He; re-opening the Confucian academies to educate future scholar-officials with his own brand of conservative Confucianism; and he also moved the capital to Beiping, renamed it Beijing (“the northern capital”), and built the Forbidden City.

Following emperors all had their own moments, of course, but it was in these first three that we see a pattern established that would hold course throughout the Ming dynasty, and throughout much subsequent Chinese history: establishment; reform; succession and hardening. Some highlights of other emperor’s reigns are as follows:

**OTHER EMPERORS**

The Xuande emperor (1398-1435), a painter, was a “military” emperor who nevertheless cultivated the arts, and led a stable period. He reversed the Annam (Viet Nam) policy — a decision to forcibly make Annam a tribute state through occupation. He also insisted on a fresh supply of virgins as tributes. He appointed scholar and eunuch Wang Zhen as tutor to his son.
The Zhengtong Emperor (1427-1464) is most well-known for being captured by Mongolian remnants on a military expedition led by his tutor and confidant Wang Zhen, and later being released, placed under house arrest by his brother (the temporary replacement emperor, Jingtai), and then being reinstated as emperor.

The Hongzhi Emperor (1470-1505) restored Confucian teachings as central to governance, and on the advice of a “good” eunuch he fired the many corrupt officials, the “bad” eunuchs, the sycophants and spiritualists that had begun to infest the government bureaucracy — which had by that time developed two distinct tracks: scholar-officials, and eunuchs. He also began, in the spirit of the Jianwen Emperor, a partnership in ruling together with honest officials, and imposing strong management on the government. Finally, he restored grain shipments along the Grand Canal, which had fallen into disuse in the later Yuan dynasty.

The Zhengde Emperor (1491-1521), unfortunately for some, completely disregarded his predecessor’s reforms, disregarded Confucian teachings, and resurrected the police state of Zhu Di through the eunuch Liu Jin.

The Jiajing Emperor (1507-1567) ascended the throne in absence of a designated heir, chosen by a default method. As such, as emperor he was expected to renounce his birth parents in favor of his direct imperial descendants. He refused, and promoted his (dead) father to the rank of emperor. A controversy erupted — called the Great Rites Controversy, over the proper Confucian rites of succession — where hundreds of his opponents were humiliated, jailed, and even executed. Thereafter, Jiajing promoted a superstitious brand of Daoism throughout the government. His experiments in Daoist sexuality are what probably led a group of palace women to attempt to strangle him. After this attempt, he moved outside of the Forbidden City, preferring to spend his time in semi-privacy with a young girl. He also saw the entry of the Portuguese into China, who insisted upon trade and extraterritorial rights.

Jiajing is also known for the Hai Rui episode: a scrupulous Confucian official named Hai Rui submitted a memorial criticizing the emperor’s conduct and governorship, for which he was jailed until Jiajing died. This story has been invoked again and again in Chinese history, most recently in the 1960s when historian Wu Han (1909-1969) wrote his play “Hai Rui Dismissed from Office” (海瑞罢官), which attracted censure directly from Mao Zedong.

Many consider the Wanli Emperor (1563-1620) to be directly responsible for the decline of the Ming dynasty. Although not considered an especially bad emperor, he overspent government coffers on military affairs, leading to the fiscal crisis which would begin consuming the Ming dynasty. Despite this, the Ming military were still poorly trained and equipped. As a new power was rising in the northeast, the Manchurian Qing, from Wanli on, the Ming military underperformed so much that nothing could be done to stop it.

The penultimate Ming emperor, Tianqi (1605-1627), furthered this decline by ordering assassinations of Confucian leaders who sought political reform in order to arrest political decline. By the time of the ascension of the final Ming emperor, Chongzhen (1611-1644), little could be done. Chongzhen
was, by all accounts, conscientious about Ming government, and an active reformer. Unfortunately, the Ming hosted numerous problems: rampant corruption on the part of officials and eunuchs; rival political forces; a fiscal crisis; and perhaps most importantly, a lack of will on the part of the government to do much about it.

Li Zicheng (1606-1645), a bandit who ironically developed a populist image despite brutally taking control of many territories, presented to Chongzhen the offer of either having Beijing invaded (by him), or granting him a title and complete control of all northwestern territories, which he nearly had de facto control over. Chongzhen felt he had little choice but to refuse. He oversaw the suicides of his family members, and then, along with a eunuch companion, went to an artificial hill overlooking the Forbidden City and hanged himself.

NEW POWERS

Following that, Li Zicheng took Beijing and proclaimed the Shun dynasty. He then attempted to wrangle the remainder of Ming forces into his array. While some of the Ming retreated south to become the Southern Ming dynasty, he focused on the troops stationed to the north of Beijing, who could ward off any possible Manchurian invasions. After confiscating the property and imprisoning the family of a Ming general in the north, Wu Sangui (1612-1678), he sent an envoy requesting that Wu Sangui serve the Shun dynasty. Wu Sangui refused, learning that Li Zicheng was also sending a large army to help him comply. Upon hearing of his refusal, Li Zicheng executed Wu Sangui’s father and placed his head on a pike at one of Beijing’s city gates. In response, Wu Sangui accepted entreaties of the Qing regent Dorgon (愛新覺羅多爾袞, 1612-1650) to combine forces, and they together invaded Beijing, decisively ending the Shun Dynasty (1644-1645) and establishing the Qing dynasty (1644-1912).

The Qing, despite then and now being viewed as another alien group, imagined themselves as a return to the best of Confucian, Ming-style rule — as opposed to the banditry of the Shun dynasty. When they entered Beijing, they already had a functioning “Chinese”-style government of their own to use, with many Chinese (Han) members. Indeed, it can be said that the Qing used bureaucratic strategy to replace the Ming, rather than simply using the military to overthrow it.

FOREIGN AND DOMESTIC

During the Yuan dynasty, a top-down military government was in place that was dissimilar in organization and make-up to previous Chinese governments, which relied on multiple bureaus of scholar-officials to help form the core of Chinese culture and learning. During the Ming, despite its difficulties, important structural changes took place — led, not least, by both a government, and public, re-evaluation of what it meant to be Chinese and to live in a Chinese state. Sometimes this involved foreign policy, and sometimes this involved local governance.
INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

The Ming dynasty had a number of crucial foreign relations. In addition to demanding tribute from neighboring states, or states within the sphere of Chinese cultural influence, there were goodwill missions throughout South Asia, and in Africa and the Middle East, led by the admiral Zheng He. More importantly, the Ming also developed full-fledged trade arrangements with areas that recognized China’s dominance. And, although the Yuan dynasty had remnants in Mongolia who refused to accept defeat, trade included any areas of Mongolia that would follow Chinese political direction. Foreign relations included:

- Annam (Viet Nam), once Jiaozhi Province, first as a vassal state and then as a trading partner
- Yunnan Province, only fully annexed when the Yuan dynasty destroyed the local Dali Kingdom, was populated by newly arrived (Han) Chinese during the Ming in the form of military and trading “partners”
- Korea
- Japan, briefly, as a suzerain state
- The Portuguese, who militarily negotiated Macao with local officials (although they were never fully recognized by the Ming court)
- The Spanish
- The Dutch, whom the Ming pushed away from the coast and on to Taiwan, then thought to be an uncolonized no-man’s-land

Eventually, the Ming would withdraw relations completely from Annam, Eastern Turkestan, Inner Mongolia, and outer Manchuria. Despite expanding its power beyond its borders, it chose to concentrate power away from Central Asian states for political reasons.

DEVELOPING PRIVATE INTERESTS

Continuing the trend of the Yuan dynasty, the Ming initially saw little distinction between peoples’ public and private lives. In its villages, there was even a degree of public participation in politics, as they were directed by a village governor with strong local ties. Trades like farming also allowed for direct participation in village economies. In cities, however, a merchant class emerged, acting on behalf of farmers who might otherwise find it difficult to sell their wares. Through those transactions, along with money-lending and property management, merchants gained a louder voice than many others — eventually giving them sway in villages as well as cities. When non-convertible paper money was introduced into domestic commerce, the weight shifted from product to labor, institutionally reinforcing merchants as a controlling interest. The effect of this was to further alienate portions of the populace from direct participation in economy and governance.

Following the rise of the merchant class, and after considerable mismanagement of spending, the later Ming wallowed in economic crisis, and the state neared bankruptcy. But as the later Ming also had what is estimated as probably the highest literacy rate in the world at the time, education allowed many domestic interests to emerge: in economic needs and desires like luxuries; in needs that hedged against the economy, like eroticism and companionate marriage; also, in literature that spoke
to private aspirations that required implied political reform. To some degree, these new “private” interests were also the result of the popularization of Neo-Confucian philosophy.

THE CHARACTER OF NEO-CONFUCIANISM (I)

宋人有耕者，田中有株，兔走触株，折颈而死。因释其耒而守株，冀后得兔。兔不可后得，而身为宋国笑。今欲以先王之政治当世之民皆守株之类也。
—韩非子, <<五蠹>>

Amongst the Song people was one who plowed, and in his field was a stump. A rabbit ran into that stump, and broke its neck and died. Thereafter the farmer wouldn’t plow, but guarded the stump, hoping to get another rabbit. Of course he didn’t get another rabbit, and thereafter all of Song laughed at him. Now, those who want to use the ways of former kings to govern contemporary people are of the same kind as those guarding the stump waiting for another rabbit.
—Han Feizi (280-233 BCE), from “The Five Vermin”

The school of thought that had perhaps the most influence during the Ming dynasty is known as Neo-Confucianism (理学, “the study of principles”; 心学, “the study of mind and heart”), the philosophy inspired by Confucianism (儒学, “scholarship”), which itself was derived from the teachings of the thinker Confucius (551-479 BCE), a teacher from Shandong province in eastern China. Confucius himself did not found a school of thought, and promoted his teachings as simply observing tradition, scholarship, and critical thinking — or, more technically, he utilized aesthetics as a means of achieving correct and ethical governance. He had a large following of adult “students,” or disciples, from very diverse backgrounds, and he traveled extensively in order to persuade various rulers to adopt his theories. Largely unsuccessful, it is said that at the end of his life his disciples collected his sayings into the Analects (论语). Contemporary scholars date the Analects to the Warring States period (475-221 BCE), however, and in any case they didn’t enter the scholarly canon until the Song dynasty (960-1279).

Perhaps more important than Confucius’ own teachings were the texts he referred to, such as the Rites of Zhou (周礼); the texts which he was said to have edited, like the Book of Songs (诗经) and the Book of Changes (周易); and the texts attributed to his disciples, like the Great Learning (大学) of Zengzi. In addition, Confucius and Confucianism had many philosophical opponents, such as the “Daoist” thinker Zhuangzi, or even the Confucian philosopher Xunzi. All of this made for a rich field of philosophy that focused on several key points:

• Transmission of knowledge through inherited cultural forms, like poetry
• A reciprocal hierarchy as the foundation of social intercourse — in which different social positions, as different as a governor and a peasant, are necessary to the social whole
• Nobility as defined by the capacity to learn and act correctly, and not by birth — as embodied in the figure of the junzi (君子)
• The mandate of heaven (天命), the means by which political power is passed from one party to another — based upon ritual observance and social welfare

During the Song dynasty, the philosophers Cheng Yi, Cheng Hao, and Zhu Xi made large contributions to Confucian thought, rearranging the canon, and promoting Confucian principles in government service. They also brought new emphasis to neglected concepts, such as the place of the dao (道) in Confucianism, and developed new fields of epistemological inquiry, such as gewu (格物), the belief that “the extension of knowledge lies in the investigation of things,” a quasi-empirical exploration of Confucian ideas. Unfortunately, by the later Song, and throughout the Yuan, these thoughts hardened into an unimaginative orthodoxy which used Confucian slogans as a means to enforce moral behavior, and as a way to fast-track government jobs through extensive civil service examination preparatory schools.

THE CHARACTER OF CONFUCIANISM (II)

In the later Yuan and early Ming, some scholars, such as Fang Xiaoru, the Jianwen Emperor’s advisor, set aside Cheng-Zhu orthodoxy in order to explore more original interpretations of Confucian texts and aims. However, as the Yongle Emperor had little patience for the kind of philosophical experimentation that could restructure an empire, the fledgling attempts to develop a new Confucianism were outlawed, and those that practised it were severely punished. Indeed, Yongle enshrined the least imaginative aspects of Cheng-Zhu orthodoxy.

Perhaps because of this outright suppression of free thought, Confucian studies began to focus more on “inner” cultivation, instead of pursuing lives of often dogged government service to uncaring and benighted rulers. One of the scholars who pursued and developed this new line of thinking was Wang Yangming (1472-1529), by all counts a brilliant scholar who passed all of the civil service examinations, enjoyed a successful military career, and earned a government post. After publicly disapproving of his emperor’s behavior, however, he was flogged and sent into exile in southern China as a low-level magistrate. There, he developed his philosophical ideas unencumbered by proximity to the capital, lectured regularly on his ideas, and inspired many students with new ideas about attaining “sagehood” (聖; 智者), the goal of inner cultivation. Key amongst those ideas is that knowledge is action; mind and universe are one; and that engagement is consciousness.

These ideas led to a “discussion and study” movement (讲学), which although sometimes persecuted by the Ming government, enjoyed many officials as participants. When the discussion and study movement was outlawed, in the 1580s, it was competing with the rise of Buddhism, the rise of a Confucian-Buddhist-Daoist “church,” and the rise of Catholicism as well as Catholic anti-Buddhism. Additionally, by the time it was outlawed, desire for “inner cultivation” had often degenerated into libertinism. One consequence of this was, conversely, a revival of a Cheng-Zhu Confucianism that emphasized government reform, if unsuccessfully. Another consequence was the emergence of private literary and arts groups and salons informed by some of Wang Yangming’s theories.
Wang Yangming’s teachings can then be characterized in contrast to an earlier Confucianism which emphasized government service and unimaginative observance of social tradition, emphasizing, instead of demonstrability, something closer to intuition — even though Wang Yangming himself was a more than capable administrator, who engaged in government problems. We can summarize some of his thinking with the following points:

- Wang Yangming’s reaction to Cheng-Zhu scholarship was derived in part from his interest in Buddhist and Daoist philosophies of “emptiness” (空) and “non-action” (无为)
- He believed that the faculty of innate knowledge knows what is good and what is not good. We use knowledge to do good and to remove what is not
- He “restored” early Confucian texts against interpretations by Zhu Xi
- Wang Yangming encouraged broad learning and experimentation for all, and thought this was better than blind transmission of tradition
- He perceived that better lives may not be possible under certain political conditions, and advised his students not to expect an emperor to become a sage after simply being reminded of the successes of mythical and antique examples — in direct contradiction to the received Confucian teachings
- One of his disciples, Li Zhi, even insisted that if Wang Yangming’s ideas were taken to their logical conclusion, women are indeed men’s equals, and that they deserve the education to demonstrate their equality — a very novel attitude at the time
- By the end of Wang Yangming’s life, even his critics agreed that the state may not be the locus of good in society — again in direct contradiction to received Confucian teachings

Wang Yangming practically invented a new development in Confucianism, one which impacted Chinese arts and letters heavily until the twentieth century. In it he emphasized the primacy of the individual over doctrine — exactly the ideas that various emperors, officials, and thinkers had experimented with or reacted to during the Ming dynasty.

**LEGACY**

Neo-Confucianism remained an important and developing philosophy throughout the Qing dynasty, especially during the “100 Days Reform” (戊戌变法), where reformers like Kang Youwei, Liang Qichao, and Tan Sitong applied the lessons of Neo-Confucianism to current politics. After a decline in the twentieth century, Neo-Confucianism seems to have returned in contemporary debates over the role of the Chinese government in the lives of various peoples, and the questions Wang Yangming posed — how do we know what is good, and how do we act — remain at the fore.

The intersection of politics, economy, and philosophy in the Ming dynasty is a remarkable example of the ways in which an interpretation of what is and a vision of what should be can and cannot be shaped. Although various emperors, officials, philosophers and others tried to directly shape their own and others’ lives, it rarely worked out the way that was planned. Frequently, theories were
supported or punished based on the personalities of those in power. Unexpectedly, some of those philosophies which were punished re-emerged in unlikely places. Regardless, many political and philosophical lessons can still be garnered from the Ming today, perhaps most forcefully when we ask: What role does a cultural governorship plays in our own self-definition?

SUMMARY QUESTIONS

History comprehension: What are some of the themes of Ming life?
History analysis: If we look at the political history of the Ming, what did it mean to be Chinese?
(New York Social Studies Standards: 9-10.2, 9-10.3, 9-10.4, 9-10.5)

Philosophy comprehension: What are some of the themes of Neo-Confucianism?
Philosophy analysis: What are some of the implications of Neo-Confucian “inner cultivation”?
(New York Social Studies Standards: 6.4a, 6.4b, 9-10.2, 9-10.4, 9-10.5)

Summary 1: If the Ming was a successful Chinese restoration, why did it decline?
Summary 2: How did new ideas shape the course of the Ming dynasty?
(New York Standards for student assignment: 9-10.2, 9-10.4, 9-10.5; MOV, GEO, SOC, GOV, EXCH)
BIBLIOGRAPHY


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