

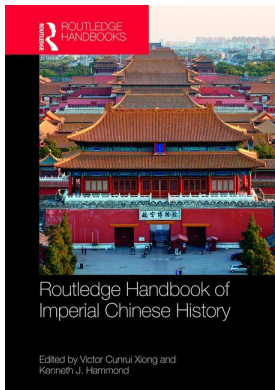
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Victor Cunrui Xiong, Kenneth J. Hammond

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Harry Miller

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THE MING DYNASTY (POST-1521)

Harry Miller

The maturation of Ming society

Population growth

By the sixteenth century, Ming dynasty China had grown into a thriving and populous realm. The disease and warfare that had marked its founding generation was far in the past, and the long peace, disturbed only by a small number of localized revolts, ensured a sustained recovery. Not since the Song dynasty, at least, had China enjoyed such growth and prosperity; and one contemporary observer, a well-traveled governor who had reflected much on China's demographics, believed the Ming situation to be unprecedented: "During a period of 240 years when peace and plenty in general have reigned," he wrote, "people have no longer known what war is like. Population has grown so much that it is entirely without parallel in history."

Though household registers compiled by the Ming government notoriously underreported population (for local officials were loath to note any increase in population that might have added to their taxation responsibilities), it is generally accepted that China's population more than doubled over the course of the Ming, from around 65 million at the time of the founding to at least 130 million by 1600, and it may even have reached 150 million. It is easy to imagine symptoms of "overpopulation" in such numbers, and references in Ming sources to infanticide and vagrancy might reinforce notions of population pressure and scarcity of food. However, the fact remains that no amount of occasional dearth or natural disaster was sufficient to alter China's course of steady population growth. Even the incidence of vagrancy can be taken as evidence not of a scarcity of food but of a surplus of it, for China's floating population was able to bring new acreage under cultivation or simply to remain landless and to rely on others to produce food. In either case, it is clear that the agricultural sector became productive enough to excuse more and more people from participation in it and to continue to support them nonetheless.

The essential increase in productivity resulted from a more extensive use of different crops and farming techniques that had fueled population growth in the past and would do so again in the future. Chief among the relatively new strains of crops was early-ripening rice, called Champa rice for its origin in that Indo-Chinese country. Champa rice had

been introduced to China during the Song dynasty, but its planting had been limited to the Yangzi River valley. During the Ming, the cultivation of Champa rice spread to the Huai River area and to upland Nanjing Province (present-day Anhui), as well as to Huguang Province (modern Hunan and Hubei), which became the leading food-producing region of the empire. Requiring less water than native strands, Champa rice could thrive in these higher elevations, in paddies fed only by a spring or by rain and not necessarily by a river. This greater adaptability enabled Chinese rice agriculture to expand beyond the lowland regions where it had traditionally been confined. In addition to bringing more land under cultivation, the use of Champa rice also opened up more months of the year to cultivation. As it ripened early – in as few as 60 days after transplantation from nursery to paddy, as opposed to the earlier norm of 150 days – it was, at the least, ready to eat earlier, sparing the farmer from going hungry while waiting for later crops to come in. More significantly, the early harvesting of Champa rice left enough time for a second planting of some kind in the same fields, a practice commonly known as “double-cropping.” Either a winter crop such as wheat could be sown, or another seeding of rice could be attempted. By the turn of the seventeenth century, double-cropping and even triple-cropping were common. Other experiments in agriculture yielded further arithmetic growth. Dry agriculture, based on wheat and barley and other crops, was gradually disseminated from North China to central and southern regions, in some cases supplementing rice agriculture there, resulting in greater diversification and sophistication. Finally, toward the end of the dynasty, American crops such as peanuts, maize, and sweet potatoes began to appear. The Portuguese introduced the peanut around 1516, and it began to be cultivated in the lower Yangzi region, near Shanghai. Maize became somewhat common in southwest China, and the sweet potato showed up in Yunnan and Fujian. The American crops permitted the exploitation of hills and mountains that were too dry even for Champa rice, and they also increased the productivity of sandy areas that had never been much good for farming of any kind. In sum, the development of China’s agricultural base during the Ming dynasty laid a sound foundation for continuous population growth throughout the period. The general sufficiency of food permitted not only the increase of the population’s numbers but also the broadening of the scope of the population’s endeavors. The vibrancy, the richness, and the novelty of Ming life proceeded apace from the agricultural and demographic revolution.

The development of commerce

The Ming minister and economic theorist Qiu Jun 邱浚 (1420–1495) wrote that as little as 30 percent of the population grew their own grain, leaving 70 percent to rely on others, via the market, for food. The modern historian Timothy Brook suspects that Qiu was exaggerating things a bit, out of concern that over-reliance on the market exposed the non-producers to potentially catastrophic disruptions of the food delivery network. That such a network existed, however, was an acknowledged fact. Based on the transportation infrastructure established in the early Ming, the interconnected market of grain and other commodities became national in scale. With the provinces of Huguang and Guangxi producing most of the empire’s grain, the populations of other regions soon turned to textile production; yet even the latter became regionally specialized, with Shandong and Henan provinces contributing raw cotton, and households in the Jiangnan region (meaning “south of the River” or the lower Yangzi valley) weaving these into finished fabrics. In fact, Jiangnan seems to have changed its regional specialty more than once over the course of the dynasty, as rice production gave way to cotton production – so much confidence did Jiangnan residents have in imported food

that they abandoned their paddy irrigation works – and as cotton production then gave way to textile finishing. The process did not really end there, for some Jiangnan farmers took the plunge into sericulture (silk production), devoting their fields entirely to mulberry bushes (silkworms eat mulberry leaves). Brook describes this system as a true commodity economy, for the people involved were not simply selling occasional surpluses. They were producing entirely for the market.

Supplementing the internal regional trade upon which this specialized market system was based was a growing foreign trade. Seafaring merchants from Fujian Province plied trade routes to Southeast Asia, where they sought spices and sappanwood (a medicinal plant also used as a dye). The trade was lucrative and consequently a bit lawless and dangerous, especially after Portuguese traders sought to dominate the sea lanes by force. The Ming government outlawed foreign trade for much of the sixteenth century, though it continued illegally, catalyzing the problem of “Japanese” piracy, which was really a transnational phenomenon, in which rogue traders operated along the coasts and sometimes raided inland. By the time outside trade was legalized again (in 1567), the Portuguese had been granted a treaty port at Macao, and the Spanish had consolidated their empire in the Philippines and begun trading with the Chinese at Manila. Ming China soon became part of a sophisticated world trade system, to which China contributed exotic foods, live animals, furniture, porcelain (which became known to outsiders as “china”), metal work, gunpowder, a plethora of textiles and fabrics, and a nearly endless catalogue of miscellaneous produce. In return, the Chinese imported South American and Japanese silver, one of the few commodities they wanted, but one that they sorely needed, for unminted silver was becoming the chief measure of value in China, used as the leading means of exchange for expensive purchases and for paying taxes.

The foreign silver pouring into China attests to the tremendous productivity of its domestic economy, which obviously created enough material wealth to satisfy native demand first. Jacques Gernet has written that Chinese silk could be sold in Japan at five to six times its Chinese price, highlighting this general reality. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Chinese cities and towns became bustling emporia in which nearly everything seemed to be for sale, not only goods like textiles, foods, curios, artworks, and books, but also services like storytelling, music-making, and other forms of entertaining. Fashion and style emerged as commodities too, as the newly wealthy consulted various manuals of taste, to determine what luxuries should be acquired and how they should be displayed to the best advantage. Late-Ming China was fabulously opulent. It is clear that its inhabitants were a prosperous people.

The effects of money on society

The participation of more and more people in China’s market economy made their separation into discrete social categories quite difficult. The traditional conception of Chinese society as consisting of four tiers – scholars, peasants, artisans, and merchants, in descending order of moral purity – had never been more than a vague nostalgia, though a persistent one. By the sixteenth century, at the latest, Chinese society had become extremely complex, as every citizen played a specialized part in economic life, such as rice farmer, cotton weaver, and book publisher. At the same time, though, all the members of this complex social system, in the performance of their myriad tasks, sought a single, simple, reward – money – which had the effect of reducing them uniformly, as Adam Smith later theorized, to the status of merchant. Everyone was also a consumer, graded on no formal social scale but only by the amount of his cash on hand, his ability to consume. When Wang Shizhen 王世貞

(1526–1590) listed the elites of Jiangnan and of Shanxi Province by income level and not by any other criteria such as pedigree, record of government service, or cultural attainment, he was recognizing a society that was based on money and nothing else. (The fact that Wang was not too happy with such a reality will be dealt with later.)

There were three chief ways in which money worked to dissolve, or at least to lower, all identifiable social barriers in the late Ming. The first was by encouraging conspicuous consumption itself. The second was by providing the literacy and education that enabled individuals to enter the scholar-official elite. The third was by encouraging newly wealthy persons to appropriate the cultural repertoire of the elite, without formally entering its ranks.

Conspicuous consumption

Wealth became increasingly visible in the sixteenth century, owing to the non-enforcement of sumptuary laws that had been designed to keep wealth from becoming a measure of social status. Whereas earlier in the dynasty the state had greater success in prescribing simple styles for commoners and regulating the dress of officials according to rank, in later years, the incidence of civilian and official dress transgression increased. Some evidence suggests that sumptuary discipline began to go lax among officials first, as they began to sport colors and emblems they were not entitled to wear. Encouraging this misbehavior was the Jiajing emperor (r. 1522–1567), who often bestowed inappropriate attire upon his favorites.

Soon, the tendency to overdress became general. It was reported from the marketplaces of Yangzhou in the 1570s that “Brokers and the common run of insignificant and base people wear gentry hats, while actors, lictors, bankrupts, and peddlers wear courtiers’ shoes.” In the Songjiang area, meanwhile, “Everyone, no matter whether rich or poor, has used horsehair [hats]. The prices are...very cheap.” The “extravagance of custom” in Songjiang 松江 extended also to furniture, as “Every family, though they be servants or errand boys, have used fine wood pieces.” As a result, it was no longer possible to tell anyone’s social class from his appearance or from the furnishing of his house.

The entrance of the newly wealthy into the official class

Money could also propel commoners formally into the official class. Ming officials were chosen by a set of civil service examinations, based on the Confucian canon. Those able to afford a Confucian education, therefore, found official careers theoretically within reach. “There can be little doubt,” wrote the historian Ping-ti Ho, “that traditional Chinese society considered entry into the ruling bureaucracy the final goal of upward social mobility.” In addition to prestige, official status simply conferred too many practical advantages to be ignored. Perhaps the most significant of these advantages was a partial exemption from taxation that greatly facilitated the consolidation of land. The fact that China’s hybrid scholar-official elite were often prominent landowners as well has led both contemporary and modern observers to describe them as “gentry.”

No fewer than three general academic milestones – the securing of stipendiary student status (*shengyuan* 生員), the winning of the provincial (*juren* 舉人) degree, and the earning of the metropolitan (*jinshi* 進士) degree – generally marked the path to power, affluence, and social importance. A family of reasonable means would select one of its sons to pursue an education and sit for the exams, while its other members would carry on with business as usual. If this son did not reach the metropolitan level quickly or at all, his family would have to content itself with his stipendiary or provincial status for a while, hoping that its basic privileges

(such as the aforementioned tax shelter) might make education more affordable for a later generation. One Ming writer compared this process vividly to the turning of a wheel, with its alternating spokes representing the successive generations of a striving family, alternately engaged in commerce and study. The metaphor characterizes Ming families as occupational combines, with different members dedicated to money-making or scholarly or official pursuits. It also suggests that several generations – several turns of the wheel – would often be required for a family to reach its goal of power and prestige.

Ping-ti Ho's authoritative study, *The Ladder of Success in Imperial China*, found that the Ming dynasty "created a chapter of social mobility probably unparalleled in Chinese history," with a high proportion of metropolitan degree winners coming from families who had never (in three generations) achieved even stipendiary status. Ho did note that, toward the end of the sixteenth century, the proportion of new blood in each metropolitan cohort began to trend lower, as "members of successful families naturally had various competitive advantages [to help them] prevail over the humble and poor in the competitive examination." Still, though, when families who had earned only stipendiary status (for three prior generations) are added into the mix, Ho's statistics show that the proportion of new blood in each cohort of metropolitan degree winners never fell below 41.6 percent, through the end of the dynasty. In these relative terms, the Ming ruling class was astonishingly open. Ho attributed this high rate of social mobility to the widely prolific publishing industry, which made classics and reference books readily available to anyone with money, as well as to the institution of private educational academies, which likewise enjoyed tremendous growth in the Ming. Ho also credited the individualist and popular philosophy of Wang Shouren 王守仁 (a.k.a. Wang Yangming 王陽明, 1472–1529), which will be discussed immediately.

The popularization of philosophy and culture

The most influential philosopher of the Ming dynasty, Wang Yangming, was a fully accredited official, who passed the metropolitan exam in 1499. His approach to the Confucian philosophy tended to reduce emphasis on the external investigation of principle and to encourage instead the recognition and cultivation of the moral knowledge inherent in each individual. "How can the signs of sagehood be recognized?" Wang asked. "If one clearly perceives one's own innate knowledge, then one recognizes that the signs of sagehood do not exist in the sage but in oneself." Indeed, sagehood might theoretically be found anywhere. "If words are examined in the mind and found to be wrong," Wang made clear,

although they have come from the mouth of Confucius, I dare not accept them as correct. How much less those from people inferior to Confucius! If words are examined in the mind and found to be correct, although they have come from the mouth of ordinary people, I dare not regard them as wrong. How much less those of Confucius!

One of the ordinary people who claimed to speak with the authority of Confucius was Wang Gen 王艮 (1483–1540), a salt merchant who never sat for the civil service exam. He studied the classics while on business trips, and later, as his economic situation improved and required less of his attention, made time to study and ponder in private. A visit to Confucius's tomb in Qufu 曲阜 convinced Wang of the Sage's accessible, human nature; soon Wang began dressing and traveling by cart like Confucius, claiming to have a special insight into Confucius's teaching. Significantly, he inserted himself into the scheme of the transmission of sagely lore, bestowing upon himself an anointed, nearly holy status. As he inscribed above

his door, “My teaching comes down through [the ancient sage kings], the Duke of Zhou, and Confucius. To anyone who earnestly seeks it, whether he be young or old, high or low, wise or ignorant, I shall pass it on.” While many laughed at the presumption, many others were intrigued by his rather populist message. In his hometown of Taizhou 泰州, Wang attracted a number of disciples (for which reason, his following is known as the Taizhou School), and he also traveled around, addressing the assembled crowds on his philosophy.

Wang Gen’s practice of drawing large audiences to hear Confucian discourse went by the name of *jiangxue* 講學, and it was an extremely important historical phenomenon, copied by many. The literal translation of *jiangxue*, “lecture and discussion,” is very inadequate at capturing its truer essence as a mass gathering, rally, or movement. Considering also its charismatic leadership and tendency toward spiritual enthusiasm, “*evangelism*” is probably the best way to express the full meaning of *jiangxue* in English. Wang Gen did in fact see himself as a prophet saving the world, reporting to have dreamed that he literally kept the sky from falling, transforming a people crazy with panic to one nearly crazy with joy and gratitude. *Jiangxue* evangelism symbolized the new inclusiveness of Ming society, as well as the infiltration of commoners into philosophical and cultural realms heretofore dominated by scholar-officials. A description (though not a first-hand one) survives of an enthusiastic gathering presided over by Han Zhen, a potter and associate of Wang Gen’s brother:

Farmers, craftsmen, and merchants amounting to more than a thousand, they all came to study under him. In the autumn, during the slack season for farming operations, he traveled to village after village, gathering all students and discussing philosophy with them. [Wherever he gathered a crowd,] the sound of book-chanting was spontaneous; one started saying [the words] at the front, and the others picked them up at the back.

The wider implications of *jiangxue* will be discussed more fully later. As for the themes of individualism and subjectivity also suggested by Wang Yangming, they were fully realized in the person of Li Zhuowu 李卓吾 (a.k.a. Li Zhi 李贄, 1527–1602), who wrote, “What people consider right and wrong can never serve as a standard for me. Never from the start have I taken as right and wrong for myself what the world thinks right and wrong.” Those who attempted to impose any form of fixed standard were ignoring what Li called the “childlike mind” (what Wang Yangming might have called “innate knowledge”) and were therefore in Li’s eyes “phony men speaking phony words, doing phony things, writing phony writings.” What made them so phony was that they failed to admit that the true social relations currently prevailing – and prevailing among phonies as well – were material ones, which Li all but identified as those of the marketplace. As he explained in a personal letter,

To wear clothing and eat food – these are the principles of human relations. Without them there are no human relations...The scholar should learn only what is real and unreal in respect to these relations and not impose other principles of human relations on top of them.

Unsurprisingly, perhaps, things did not end well for Li Zhi. An officially incited mob burned him out of the temple where he lived in 1600, and two years later, he was accused by a central government official of publishing dangerous books, of questioning the judgments of Confucius, and of “inviting wives and daughters of respectable people to come to a temple to listen to his discourses – some of whom went so far as to bring bedding and pillows to spend the night there.” (This last part of the indictment should probably be taken with a grain of salt.)

He was accordingly taken into custody. It is not clear whether he was formally tried, but he was certainly not tortured. Requesting a shaving razor, he sent the barber away, cut his own throat, and died two days later.

The question of reaction

The suicide of the free-thinking Li Zhi may conjure up visions of a Chinese Socrates, bravely trying, and failing, to revolutionize a conservative, repressive regime. The analogy is problematic, for it seems that Li Zhi simply wanted to die before or because he got old, with as much heroism as possible, “just to give vent to my resentment,” as he said in a last statement. Nevertheless, since everything about the late Ming suggests a prosperous, socially mobile, and intellectually innovative civilization, the fact of its fractious collapse in 1644 might lead us to suspect that the Ming fell not merely in spite of this progress but because of it. Somehow, as this theory goes, Ming China just wasn’t able to metabolize those same incipient forms of progress that were transforming Western Europe at the same time. Instead, it proved almost allergic to them, and succumbed to an impulsive convulsion of reaction.

The theory is mostly false. The first aspect of it that can be ruled out is that of simple social reaction, for the Ming social revolution was never reversed. The reader will recall Ping-ti Ho’s assertion that new blood continued to permeate the elite for the duration of the dynasty. If this onslaught of new blood or new wealth was considered by anyone at the time to have been a problem, no practical solution was ever proposed. The late Ming period saw no craze for genealogies or for prefixing surnames with native places that would be evidence of a reactionary preoccupation with pedigree, and, emphatically, nothing like the class re-segregation or the revival of sumptuary regulations that occurred in Japan at the same time ever occurred in China. True, there was no shortage of curmudgeonly complaint about the *nouveau riche* in Ming China, but it only thinly camouflaged the *nouveau* origins of the complainers themselves and thus was only a hypocritical ritual common to every changing society in history. Wang Shizhen’s lamenting about the decadent influence of wealth on society did not prevent him from writing a eulogy of the merchant Xu Fu 許鈇, who Wang welcomed into the gentlemanly class on the grounds of his Confucian education and bearing; and lest Wang’s acceptance of social mobility seem too dependent on elitist Confucian trappings, it should be pointed out that others in the late Ming were more fully appreciative of social amalgamation on its own merits. Yuan Hongdao 袁宏道 (1568–1610) celebrated in his poem “Making Fun of Myself on People Day” what Katharine Burnett has called “the remarkable freedom and openness for social identification and cultural expression available to individuals in late Ming China”:

This official wears no official sash,
This farmer pushes no plow,
This Confucian does not read books,
This recluse does not live in the wilds.
In society, he wears lotus leaves for clothes,
Among commoners, he is decked out in cap and jade.
His serenity is achieved without closing the door,
His teaching is done without instruction.
This Buddhist monk has long hair and whiskers,
This Daoist immortal makes love to beautiful women.
One moment, withering away in a silent forest,
The next, bustling through crowds on city streets.
When he sees flowers, he calls for singing girls:
When he has wine to drink, he calls for a pair of dice.

His body is as light as a cloud
 Floating above the Great Clod.
 Try asking the bird, flying in the air:
 “What clear pond reflects your image?”
 How free! the dragon, curling, leaping,
 Liberated, beyond this world or on it...¹

The second argument against reaction in the late Ming is that the influence of Wang Yangming’s individualism was pervasive and was never eradicated. Of the copious superficial condemnation of Wang Yangming’s followers, there can be no doubt, but, as is the case with the upstart condemners of upstarts in the social realm, even the critics of Wang Yangming’s individualist doctrine displayed a remarkable propensity to indulge in it. He Liangjun 何良俊 (1506–1573), a gentleman of Songjiang Prefecture, criticized Wang’s thought as overly speculative and insufficiently grounded in the classics, but as a supposed antidote, he favored the bohemian and barely Confucian sensibilities of the Jin dynasty (265–420), an extremely unorthodox and idiosyncratic preference. The philosophers of the so-called Donglin movement, considered by modern scholars to have led a reaction against at least the excesses of Wang Yangming’s subjectivism, were nonetheless rather eclectic in their own beliefs, with founder Gu Xiancheng 顧憲成 (1550–1612) approving of Wang’s method of cultivation – “to realize the inborn knowledge” – and friend Gao Panlong 高攀龍 (1562–1626) believing himself to have experienced a sudden enlightenment, in spite of his more orthodox stress on cultivation. Of course, the blind follower of tradition is something of a straw man, for everyone must exercise at least some individual judgment as to which traditions to follow, but the point is that the late Ming thinkers, in spite of anything they might have said against Wang Yangming, Wang Gen, or Li Zhi, were all innovative and quirky philosophers themselves. Indeed, it could be said that Wang Yangming won the debate by opening it, for even someone such as Gu Xiancheng determined to oppose what he took to be the nihilism of Wang’s followers was more or less compelled to improvise, choosing his own truth to counter or coordinate with the truth of others.

The third, related bit of evidence against reaction in the late Ming is the fact that, in spite of what happened to Li Zhi, China’s cultural and intellectual atmosphere remained vibrant and unrestrained. Late Ming painters exuberantly explored every frontier of their art, celebrating and never deploring the new freedoms. Nanjing-based Gong Xian 龔賢 (c. 1619–1689) boasted that

Paintings by other artists are all of places where people have gone. They cannot paint places where no one has ever gone. This painting of mine greatly resembles a place where no one has ever gone – or at least, where people do not ordinarily go.

Representing the fresh optimism of his age, Gong wrote, “The world has many wondrous and inaccessible places... But it is not necessarily a matter of these very places actually existing in the world – anything that exists in the minds of artists also exists in the world.” In the realm of letters, the playwright and novelist (and publisher) Li Yu 李漁 (1610/11–1680), active mostly in the early Qing) was irrepressibly innovative and subversive. Weaving plots that gleefully inverted literary and moral stereotypes, Li urged his readers to “persistently seek the new, changing not only the things that can be changed but also tampering with those that absolutely must be preserved, in order to display their novelty.” Elsewhere, he declared, “I claim this merit – I haven’t copied the ancients,” and he evinced in general a striving, insatiable drive for novelty: “Not only is the work of past authors now obsolete, there is a

gulf even in my own writing between what I wrote yesterday and what I am writing today.” In sum, there was no nostalgia for a simpler world in late Ming creative arts, nor was there any trace of repression.

Given that no general reaction against social and intellectual progress occurred in the late Ming, it does seem, however, that the specific phenomenon of evangelical *jiangxue* was deemed threatening enough to elicit a response, first from the gentry class and then from the Ming state. The gentry resented the presence of commoners at the head of evangelical movements, for they seemed to be challenging the gentry for the position of social leadership. As Wang Shizhen summarized:

During the Jiajing and Longqing eras (1522–1572), the proponents of *jiangxue* flourished throughout the land. They relied on their lectures and teachings to cover their gatherings as ‘heroic braves’ and used this image to indulge their perverse lusts. Their doctrines were fundamentally unable to move men [to the good], and their misguided intentions and presumptuousness led them to beat drums and blow horns, gathering and scattering as quickly as lightning, nearly leading men into the evils of the Yellow Turbans or Five Pecks of Rice [rebellions].

As it turned out, though, *jiangxue* was not allowed to develop as a populist movement, either a constructive or destructive one. Instead, it was co-opted by the official class, which employed it as a bureaucratic and grass-roots networking tool. The first master of this “political *jiangxue*” was the rising minister Xu Jie 徐階 (1503–1583), who staged a series of philosophical gatherings as a means of countering the influence of his powerful rival Yan Song 嚴嵩 (1480–1567). Supposedly ambivalent (or perhaps coy) about the exploitation of philosophical gatherings for political purposes, Xu sponsored annual or semi-annual gatherings of several hundreds of people, which would last for weeks or months, in the suburbs of Beijing, from the early 1550s to 1565, by which time Xu had become chief grand secretary (de facto prime minister). Naturally, Xu’s tactics aroused suspicion, with one contemporary calling it “grandstanding, greatly disruptive of government.” As though realizing he’d gone too far, Xu belatedly toned down his *jiangxue* activity, claiming distress at its tendency to promote cliques, but by then, the damage had been done. In 1570, the court prohibited local education officials from engaging in *jiangxue* themselves, in a move that seems to have been aimed at Xu Jie’s constituency.

The issue, however, was far from settled, for Xu had introduced the specter of philosophical faction to late Ming government, and no one was ever able to exorcize it. The most notorious practitioners of political *jiangxue* after Xu Jie were the members of the so-called Donglin 東林 faction, led by Gu Xiancheng and named for the Donglin Academy he founded in 1604. Whereas, in the days of Wang Gen and Han Zhen, evangelical *jiangxue* had been synonymous with mass gatherings of common people, Gu Xiancheng imagined *jiangxue* to be the means by which the gentry would both reconstitute and preside over the other classes. “From the gentry,” he claimed, “no farmer, artisan, or merchant shall not receive *jiangxue*.” Gu’s Donglin Academy became the next great venue for *jiangxue* gatherings, with unprecedented numbers of gentry and others meeting there. Meanwhile, assemblies outside the Donglin’s purview were discouraged by others in Gu’s circle, such as the powerful regional official Li Sancai 李三才 (d. 1623), who went so far as to ban “Taizhou”-style agitation on the part of stipendiary students. In sum, by the turn of the seventeenth century, *jiangxue*, perhaps the most vivid manifestation of social amalgamation in the late Ming, had been transformed into a tool of reaction, a means for the gentry class to reassert its general dominance and leadership.

In fact, it was the appropriation of *jiangxue* by ambitious, class-conscious gentry, not the mass rallies of commoners that so disturbed Wang Shizhen, that triggered attempts at suppression on the part of the Ming state, such as the abovementioned prohibition of 1570. Many of these campaigns to bring discipline to self-asserting gentry-officials were authored by Zhang Juzheng 張居正 (1525–1582), who was chief grand secretary during the minority of the Wanli emperor, from 1572 to 1582. Motivated by strong Legalist tendencies (another product of Wang Yangming’s individualization of the search for truth), Zhang sought to compel obedience from gentry-officials serving in the state’s bureaucracy and to thwart the engrossment and tax evasion of gentry-officials building their estates in the countryside. His efforts to “build respect for the sovereign power” of the Ming state ran headlong into the desires of the righteous gentry that came to be led by Gu Xiancheng; and he seemed to hate the gentry as personally as Gu exalted them chauvinistically. Zhang’s administration marked the beginning of the bitter factional rupture that would characterize the rest of the dynasty. Its chief dynamics were the claim by some gentry-officials to wield the evangelical power of *jiangxue* and the revulsion of others by their claim. It would leave the Ming dynasty politically disrupted and less capable of meeting the military and other challenges that began to appear at the turn of the seventeenth century.

Military challenges, political ferment, and collapse

Mongols and pirates

The Ming dynasty began to face pressure on its northern frontier as well as on its south-eastern coast, just as the controversies about *jiangxue* began to come to a head. Indeed, the military crises might have catalyzed the politicization of *jiangxue* by introducing a sense of unease and increasing desperation.

The Mongols, who had been displaced by the Ming after 1368, remained a constant source of anxiety, though they were usually mollified by trade. In 1550, Altan Khan, ruler of the Chahar Mongols, invaded the country surrounding Beijing, hoping to extract permission to trade horses for textiles. The Ming government granted the privilege only grudgingly and haltingly, and a permanent settlement remained problematic. At the same time, the aforementioned problem of “Japanese” piracy flared up along the coast.

As might be imagined, these violent encroachments raised much alarm. Xu Jie believed that the government’s response to its frontier difficulties was in fact hampered by the wooden-headedness of the Jiajing emperor and by the complacency of Yan Song, who refused to recognize unpleasant facts that would have reflected unfavorably upon his administration. It was Xu’s impatience with Yan that might have compelled him to turn to *jiangxue* as a means of organizing against him. Both the Mongol and pirate threats were removed through the liberalization of trade under Xu Jie’s leadership in the 1560s and early 1570s, as both the Mongolian horse markets and overseas trade were reopened. However, the sense of crisis would remain, making it more likely that the leaders of subsequent years would turn to increasingly desperate political expedients.

The Japanese and the Manchus

The Wanli period (1573–1620) saw more serious military challenges, resulting in further political disruptions. In the 1590s, the Japanese warlord Toyotomi Hideyoshi 豊臣秀吉 (1536/37–1598) invaded Korea, hoping to use the peninsula as a bridge to attack China.

Wanli committed about 140,000 soldiers in 1592 and in 1597 and managed to save Korea, though at tremendous cost. Finding his treasury depleted and the government under the influence of the recalcitrant Gu Xiancheng, Wanli dispatched eunuch-led “mine tax commissioners” to attack the gentry economically and neutralize them politically. Some of the latter, who soon organized under the Donglin banner, bitterly opposed Wanli’s policy (which he himself called off, when it became clear that his commissioners were keeping most of what they stole) and sought to ensure the Ming state would never be so bold again.

In 1618, the Manchu chieftain Nurhaci (1559–1626) revolted against the Ming, presenting the latter with another costly, defensive war. The Ming government began levying a number of special surtaxes, which tended to affect only the poor, as the gentry class continued to exempt itself from fiscal burdens. The Donglin partisans then holding the political initiative offered few solutions to the frontier problem and seemed rather fixated on purging the bureaucracy of rivals. A group of these would-be victims, finding protection under the court eunuch Wei Zhongxian 魏忠賢 (1568–1627), turned the tables and violently suppressed the Donglin; but their dubious victory was short-lived, for another coterie of moralists, soon to be called the Restoration Society, deposed Wei’s faction and overspread the empire with an ever-wider network of *jiangxue*. Ming politics were deplorably stalemated as the military crisis continued unabated.

Natural disaster and roving banditry

As had frequently happened in China’s past, natural disaster made a bad situation worse. Flood, famine, and disease struck different areas with sometimes considerable ferociousness, and the overburdened Ming state was hard pressed to meet the additional challenges. The Ming’s famine relief capability may have been declining even before 1618 (the year the Manchu revolt began) and seems to have become negligible after that. The aggregate of popular misery, a combined result of natural calamity and increased taxation, soon led to desperate uprisings, which became yet more problems the Ming state couldn’t solve. By the 1630s, among numerous renegades, the bandit leaders Li Zicheng 李自成 (1605?–1645) and Zhang Xianzhong 張獻忠 (1605–1647) had emerged, and although government forces occasionally defeated them, they were too preoccupied with other threats to finish them off.

It was Li Zicheng who established himself in Henan Province in 1640, enlarged his army with famine and disease survivors, and marched on Beijing in 1644. With Li’s rebels having entered the city on April 24, the Chongzhen emperor (r. 1627–1644) summoned his officials the next morning – and nobody came. It was a fitting testimony to the political dereliction that had crippled the Ming from within. Leaving a final note, in which he blamed his officials not just for abandoning him in his final hour but for obstructing him during the whole of his reign, Chongzhen tried to dispatch his daughters and concubines with his own sword (two survived wounded) and hanged himself on Coal Hill, behind the palace.

Through a series of vicissitudes, the Manchus would wind up in control of Beijing that summer and would proceed to consolidate their regime, the Qing, over the next several years, a task that would require them (and their Chinese adherents) to eliminate the rebels Li and Zhang and also to finish off Ming remnants in the south. The Qing would also have to deal with many of the problems that had plagued the Ming, chiefly those of taxation and security. Perhaps most significantly, the Qing would solve the problem of *jiangxue* by making it a prerogative of the throne, specifically, the Kangxi emperor (r. 1661–1722). Although all of the Ming dynasty’s other achievements – economic, social, and intellectual – would endure, it was only *jiangxue*, located at the nexus of these three fields, that had triggered such

a reaction. Serving in the mid-sixteenth century as the means by which commoners could justify their economic gains and legitimize their new places in society, *jiangxue*, by the end of the century, had become a tool for the new elites among them to assert their dominance over it. This claim to preeminence could not be reconciled with those of the imperial state – neither the Ming state, which fell before it, nor the Qing state, which appropriated it for itself. Thus did *jiangxue* fully devolve, from a force that empowered the many, to a force that empowered the few, to a force that empowered the one. If there is any sense in which the Ming dynasty seems to have fallen short of its promise, it is this one.

Note

- 1 Chaves, *Pilgrim of the Clouds*, 39. Reproduced with the kind permission of White Pine Press.