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## Conclusion

### *Community Schools and Ming Autocracy*

It is always far easier to find the *locus classicus* of a Chinese literary allusion than it is to map the way that allusion may have been used across a long period of time.

—Craig Clunas, *Fruitful Sites*, p. 52.

The large number of articles on community schools written by the faculty of teachers' colleges in China shows that Ming community schools are relevant today, as they were to reformers in the Qing and in the 1930s and 1940s.<sup>1</sup> The difficulties the schools faced are like those of contemporary elementary education in China and elsewhere. Ming community schools merit understanding; and because of their many forms and functions, that understanding cannot focus on their origins or on identifying their essential nature. Yet because in Ming thought the *she* altar anchoring a unit of local society represented a meeting point of "local association and central unity,"<sup>2</sup> *shexue* turns out to be an appropriate name for schools that at various times were established at the behest of the throne; by high officials working to save the dynasty; by resident administrators deputized by the central government but operating in accordance with their own ideas about the state; and by local residents wishing to associate schools serving local purposes with the prestige of the center or of civilization. Thomas H.C. Lee warns against conflating a "localist orientation" with "opposition to imperial authority," because harmony and integration were highly valued and were seen to come from the state or even the throne.<sup>3</sup> But on the other hand, the fact that the dynasty commanded the establishment of local institutions and that such institutions were established does not mean that the dynasty or government controlled them or controlled people through them. Six major points summarize my findings about the power of Zhu Yuanzhang and his successors to shape Ming state and society.<sup>4</sup>

First, in response to the initial edict ordering officials to set up a school in every village, at the very most half the counties of the empire and on the available evidence far fewer had even one school, and those left little trace in the historical record. County schools, in which educated families had an immediate interest, did much better, and so did Buddhist temples, despite Zhu Yuanzhang's attempts to limit their numbers. Ming subjects chose which institutions to support. In fact, their recalcitrance, as I have argued at more length elsewhere, actually forced the Ming founder into repeatedly changing his policies.<sup>5</sup> In the case of community schools, wealthy subjects' refusal to have their sons attend led to the schools' abolition after only five years. Zhu's attempt to use elementary schools to indoctrinate his newly-conquered subjects in his newly-established laws was defeated (Chapter 2).

Second, Zhu's successors on the throne changed the regulations on schools, following suggestions from officials. After the Ming founder's death, the schools received no attention at court until a prominent official recognized their potential for quieting border unrest. Then they were revived as central policy, but were placed again into official hands, whence Zhu Yuanzhang had definitely removed them. And while he had meant the schools to teach basic literacy and the law to boys who would return to their fathers' occupations, his successors accepted memorials to change the curriculum and make community schools into the lowest rung of the state school system, in theory a route to office. Ming community schools in this second incarnation were intended to support the state in less coercive ways than in the early Ming. They selected and prepared the empire's brightest boys for state service by introducing them to the state curriculum and training them in ritual and moral behavior, to minimize disorder and mercenary place-seeking in the prefectural, subprefectural, and county schools. At the same time, contact with the classics, Confucian ritual, and model teachers were meant to transform boys who would never reach the county schools into ethical, law-abiding subjects. Moreover, the opportunity to receive an education in the revered classical and postclassical tradition may have been meant to increase popular support for the state (Chapter 3).

Third, despite their official responsibility for community schools, most local administrators neglected community schools and other institutions not directly related to taxation or crime. But more than one hundred recorded officials, in a burst of fervor stretching from the late fifteenth into the mid-sixteenth century, committed themselves to transforming local society. I have suggested that their activities cannot be understood as obedience to central commands. Rather than following the letter of the law, they selected and adapted institutions from the varied local policies of the Ming founder and from other sources. Community schools as these men shaped them proselytized Neo-Confucian religion

rather than the law. Activists also cooperated with wealthy locals in maintaining county schools and the county-level libation ceremony, either out of class solidarity or to solicit their assistance in other matters. For the same reasons, activist officials widely established a pair of shrines, to eminent officials and to local worthies, that do not appear in the central regulations. The Community Elder System and the village-level libation ceremony, on the other hand, were neglected despite their prominent place in Zhu Yuanzhang's orders about local administration. And despite the legality of much of Buddhism and Daoism, and the fairly tolerant attitude of the dynasty toward popular religion, high Ming activists attacked cult temples, monasteries, and hermitages as "improper shrines." Community schools were a weapon in the fight. By drilling into young boys Confucian ethics and ritual, community schools were to prevent their turning to Buddhist and Daoist ritual specialists. Community schools drew on local resources, keeping them away from Buddhist and Daoist institutions.<sup>6</sup> Schools were built on the sites of or with the tiles and bricks of demolished temples, replacing the temples physically in the institutional life of the community (Chapter 4).

Fourth, community schools served local people in ways unrelated to moral improvement. In the early Ming and perhaps later, clerks apparently made money by manipulating attendance policies to earn bribes. Pupils gained educations that could strengthen them in the competition against their neighbors in a number of ways. They might learn to read, write contracts, or overawe others with proper rituals. They might forsake farming to make a living as teachers, or rise to government student status. People educated in schools could read books, not only about how to do family ritual, but also about how to imitate the gentry, how to win law suits, how to pass examinations, how to do business, how to make love. Wealthy families saved money by having their boys educated in these public schools rather than at home. Local men served as teachers, earning or demanding salaries and fees. Other locals were patrons who could dominate those on whom they bestowed the post of teacher, or who could buy their way into the good graces of a magistrate who needed their assistance in establishing or managing schools or in writing a text that recorded his achievement. Local people may have gained from renting or selling space to schools, and they frequently took over school property that might have been seized by the magistrate from a temple. In the late Ming, community schools also served as community granaries and as elite meeting places (Chapters 6 and 7).

Fifth, Ming subjects themselves shaped and blocked policy. State personnel from emperor to magistrate were unable to consistently set agendas and determine the shape of society. Their mandates were taken as proposals,—proposals that carried, indeed, the weight of high-status association with the dynasty, with

Chinese civilization, with Confucianism, but proposals nonetheless, to be taken up or ignored. People fought back against the destruction of their places of worship. Community school pupils petitioned for advancement to the county school and got it. Headmen in border areas asked for schools and got them. Pupils and teachers were granted tax breaks. Locals used gazetteers as political platforms for their views on national policy, just as they used academies for political organization (Chapters 3, 6 and 7). Over time, the Ming founder's vision of voluntary community schools that educated farmers' boys in morality and the law was superseded by the visions of others in the Ming state and society. Creating institutions quite different from what he intended, they could claim to be following his sage directive, because it was all covered by that little phrase, *li shexue*, "to establish community schools."

Sixth, community schools were part of the real and rhetorical material with which Ming people promoted their careers, attacked their rivals, and staked their claims on history. Zhu Yuanzhang's pronouncements on schools, even if they were ineffectual in his time, shaped his image and strengthened a narrative of the centrality of the throne and the state that has dominated Ming history up to our own time (Chapter 2). Later emperors gained legitimacy through edicts establishing community schools in which they claimed to be following antiquity or the Ming founder. High officials increased bureaucratic power by controlling community schools, and used texts about schools to express their faith in, and importance to, the dynasty. Other memorialists drew attention to themselves and to local situations through writing about schools, and perhaps mitigated military force by suggesting schools as a partial substitute (Chapter 3). The activists' commemorative records, which ostensibly recorded the location and property of schools, and their gazetteers, ostensibly local histories, advertised their achievements to their contemporaries and posterity (Chapter 4). When the pattern of Neo-Confucian heroism had been well established, it was adopted by some provincial officials who established and wrote about schools to polish their reputations, follow their beliefs, and argue for their political and philosophical positions (Chapter 5). Community schools, in writing and on the ground, worked for notorious pairs of rivals: Xu Jie and Hai Rui, Wang Yangming and Gui E. Claims in gazetteers written by local men that their county had "a community schools in every village" bolstered the prestige of the county. Late Ming writings sometimes also gave locals the credit for founding or running community schools (Chapter 7). These lowly state institutions, and state documents about them, served many an eminent and not-so-eminent Ming man. Early Ming central commands about local institutions did affect society, but they did so indirectly through creative response and manipulation rather than directly through obedience, and often not in the ways intended.<sup>7</sup>

### The Ming State

In its rituals, the village is invariably less responding to the stipulations of a law than drawing on it for the expression of its own ends.

—David Faure<sup>8</sup>

The sixteen emperors of the Ming dynasty were, respectively, murderous, impractical, grandiose, sickly, licentious, vainglorious, improvident, doltish, hen-pecked, bibulous, self-indulgent, profligate, completely irresponsible, debauched, frivolous, and ineffectual. Yet they commanded the loyalty, the lifetime service, even the death as faithful martyrs of many of their subjects. Why? F.W. Mote explains that

Chinese civilization demanded [the emperor's and dynasty's] existence as the capstone of a social order that made civilization possible. The Chinese were not blind to these emperors' flaws, but . . . the legitimate dynasty was to be preferred to all rebel upstart enemies, while *any* institutional alternative to the imperial system was literally unthinkable.<sup>9</sup>

Certainly, even many of the dynasty's critics operated on monarchical and autocratic assumptions. Liu Kui, imprisoned with others for trying in vain to teach a Ming ruler right from wrong, still formulated matters in terms of the emperor's beneficence; he urged his fellows not to go on a hunger strike because "the emperor's intent . . . was to keep them alive, not to kill them."<sup>10</sup> The unconventional late Ming figure Li Zhi wrote in a letter that

All treasures under heaven are the Emperor's personal property, and it may be all right for the Emperor to consume more than he should. All the people under heaven are the Emperor's people, and they could only endure (the burden) if the Emperor wants to squeeze them more than he should . . . You should only try to console the people; you should not protest against the Emperor.<sup>11</sup>

Yet some Ming men *did* opt to serve Mongol or Manchu rulers, *did* rebel under religious or popular leaders, *did* refuse to serve, to pay taxes, to accept judgments against them. Loyalty to the emperor, to the dynasty, was not beyond the possibility of questioning. It still needs explanation.

The Ming state had armies, prestige, laws and institutions, the sanction of tradition, and vast material resources. Yet it monopolized neither force, nor honor, nor organization, nor ideology, nor wealth. The innumerable bandits and rebels of the Ming period show that the state was far from having a monopoly on violence; even legitimate violence was also exercised by the patriarchal family, while state forces sometimes engaged in banditry (illegitimate in most people's eyes) and social banditry (legitimate from the community's point of view).<sup>12</sup> Many aspects of Ming society show that the state commanded a great deal of

prestige, but most of our sources were produced by those whose status depended partly on that being true, and even those sources show that illegality did not prevent local deities from being honored, and that officials relied on the local prestige of residents to promote state enterprises. At the same time, the mantle of the state did not legitimate all state functionaries; the clerks and runners who manned bureaucratic offices were widely perceived as corrupt. If the state was so very well respected, why was it so difficult to collect taxes from the very people who were donating hard-earned grain and cash to a myriad local temples and shrines, supporting the clergy of their own free will?

While the state's organization was most widespread, other groups in society, from literati to merchants to beggars, were also able to organize across space and time. The Ming state also held no ideological monopoly. It justified its pronouncements by references to the classics and histories, scriptures that anyone could read and interpret. Those writings authorized individual resistance and familial solidarity, and cast doubt on the legitimacy of a bad government. Moreover, the state was ideologically disunited. The imperial family and those they employed promoted three or more religions that offered an array of values, some of which challenged the state's pre-eminence in favor of service to family and the search for salvation. R. Bin Wong has argued that the late imperial Chinese state relied on close control of ideological institutions.<sup>13</sup> Qing control over religious institutions, schools, *baojia*, the "community compact" lecture system, and other local instruments of ideological control may have been tight, as Wong holds, but in the Ming these institutions were not closely controlled by the center but were promoted in a variety of forms at different times by different players. Compared with the personal oaths of allegiance to throne and Church demanded by reformation Tudors, Ming thought control after the first reigns seems relatively harmless. Even the civil service examination system, the most enduring mechanism of political indoctrination in the history of the world, has recently been described as "a cultural arena within which diverse political and social interests contested each other and were balanced."<sup>14</sup>

R. Bin Wong further argues that the late imperial Chinese state had relinquished claims to a large portion of the national product, preferring taxation that in comparison with that of centralizing European nation-states was "routine, light and legitimate."<sup>15</sup> It is true that the social decision for a low-income, low-expenditure state had been made in the Song and again thereafter. But just as community schools succeeded or failed in the context of choices made at all levels of the Ming state and by Ming subjects, light taxation generally must be understood in a context of competition. That competition may have been concealed, or piecemeal, compared with the claims of the Church, parliaments and aristocracies of Europe, but it was nonetheless significant. The dynasty and

bureaucracy competed with clergy, gentry, and commoners; the state lacked control over wealth insofar as others had it. If taxes were relatively low compared with European countries, rents and interests rates were high; parties other than the state actually had greater claims on the wealth of the people.

Yet none of this means that the Ming state was in perpetual conflict with its subjects, or that it was irrelevant to local society. Rather, to answer the question posed above, I believe that part of the explanation for the strength and longevity of the Ming state and for the loyal sentiments and service of many Ming subjects lies in the very thing that Zhu Yuanzhang tried so hard to suppress with his repeated revisions of state institutions and his massacres of “corrupt” officials and their cronies: the manipulation of state institutions for private benefit. Faure’s insight in the epigraph to this section holds for the institutional as well as the ritual realm; for individuals and families as well as for villages; and for ends relating to what people saw as proper governance, as well as to personal aims. The Ming state was a field on which private interests could compete.

The Jiajing emperor used state ceremonial to elevate his father and start a new imperial lineage; Guangdong elites used rituals based on imperial rituals and centered on the tablet of the emperor to build lineage organizations; ordinary folks gained status locally by requesting honors for their filial or chaste kinfolk from the state. Emperors used their control of tax and other state income to enrich themselves and build palaces and temples; officials used their salaries and bribes to buy land and build mansions that would house their descendants for generations; ordinary folks encroached on state altars and schools to gain land or a house. The state employed the educated, the financially gifted, and men of violence, giving them the means to promote their own and their families’ interests. It provided the means for networks of adherents of philosophical schools to spread their doctrines and exert their influence. Perhaps most saliently, the state was drawn unwillingly into disputes over property and propriety, as subjects sued one another in the magistrate’s court and even at higher levels of government. Katherine Carlitz suggests that “the [Ming] legal system . . . offered a sense of agency to all . . . competing parties:” they could file complaints and counter-complaints, suits and counter-suits.<sup>16</sup> Like community schools, other parts of the Ming state were built from below, by Ming people, to serve their social, political, personal, and religious needs and interests. If the Qing state was able to exercise tighter control, perhaps that represented a reclaiming of state institutions from the social realm that had colonized them during the Ming.