# Confucianism and Autocracy

## Professional Elites in the Founding of the Ming Dynasty

John W. Dardess

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*To my parents*:
John Dardess, M.D.
Edna W. Dardess

# Acknowledgments

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# Introduction

IN CHINA the years 1350–1400 saw the collapse of the Yuan dynasty of the Mongols, seventeen years of popular rioting and civil war, the founding of the Ming dynasty, its momentary collapse and more civil war (1399–1402), followed by its re-founding under the Yung-lo emperor.[1] The legacy of those years to the rest of the Ming (1368–1644) and to the Ch'ing (1644–1912) was a sustained principle of imperial autocracy, raised to a higher and purer level than at any earlier time in history. The question that prompts this book is why conditions in the last half of the fourteenth century appear to have been so propitious for the enhancement of political centralization and autocratic control.

The problem is not simple, and it can be approached from more than one direction. G. William Skinner's recent contribution attacks the matter from the lower end as it were, by showing that from the eighth century A.D. onward the Chinese political system failed to expand apace with the population and the economy and so gradually reduced its functions, sacrificing extent of control in the interest of maintaining at least a minimal degree of unity and security over China's large geographical space. In this context, the enhancement of imperial autocracy would have to be seen as an adjustment within the political apparatus, an effort to intensify its internal controls at the same time that its administrative capacities over society at large were becoming ever fewer and weaker.

An approach along these lines might help explain why the main features of Ming autocracy, once put into place, could manage to last some five hundred years. It is less helpful, however, in explaining the origins of that autocracy. The fourteenth century was a period not of growth but of economic and demographic decline in China, just as it was in western Europe, the Byzantine realm, and in the Middle East. China's population, somewhere in the 80–100 million range early in the fourteenth century, shrank to some 65 million late in the same century. In these depressed conditions, the administrative results that the autocratic early Ming regime was able to achieve in the fields of economic redevelopment, popular education, population transfer, tax reassessment, and the like were quite impressive. It therefore seems likely that the conditions that created the Ming political system must be separated from the conditions that later perpetuated it.

This book looks into the Chinese social system for clues to the origin of the Ming autocracy. What classes or interests wanted it? Two possibilities can be dismissed at the outset. The Ming state was clearly not a military dictatorship, despite the creation of a powerful military machine in the wars of foundation. Nor, despite the humble peasant origins of the founding emperor, can the Ming system be construed as an instrument of social revolution, put together on behalf of a poor and downtrodden peasant mass.

I began the project by examining a large and little-used body of source material, some 128 collected works (*wen-chi*), most of them authored by Confucian literati and ranging in date from the late thirteenth to the early fifteenth century. I expected that these might somehow yield insights into the problem of the formation of the Ming. As I read these works, it slowly became evident that the essential point to be grasped was that the writers considered themselves inhabitants of a special social universe of their own. They obviously took themselves to be an extraor-

dinarily select group. Yet it proved hard to explain exactly in what kind of social framework the reality of their sense of elite-ness might best be understood.

Did the writers constitute or represent a class in a socio-economic sense? Were they "gentry class" spokesmen? and as such did they protect class interests in landholding, office-holding, and privileged fiscal exemptions? and could the found-ing of the Ming state be analyzed in those terms? Long ago, I began with that assumption. Then I found that arguing it would require that the writings of the literati be taken as fraudulent, or at least irrelevant to the real facts of the Ming founding. There is also the difficulty that local gentry theory (*kyōshinron*), as that idea has been developed in recent years in Japan, has so far been unable to make a firm conceptual link between the nature and structure of the Ming-Ch'ing imperial state and the socio-economic interests of the dominant landholding classes of the countryside.[2] Dennerline has shown quite clearly that the no-tion of a gentry class does not fit the social facts even in late Ming times. As for the early Ming, a Soviet scholar, A. A. Bokshchanin, has pointed out that the political order does not reflect any perceptible class interests very well. In social terms, then, the Ming founding appears to be an event impossible to explain.

The key to the matter must lie in comprehending Confu-cianism as both philosophy and sociology at one and the same time. If one takes the Confucian writers and activists as a self-conscious elite within the compass, not of a social class per se, but of a *profession* in the sociological sense (as the Chinese counterpart of an ulema in the Islamic world), then far from dismissing them and their writings, one can use them to help explain the early Ming urge toward reform, centralization, and autocracy.

The solution seems so obvious that it is odd it was not pounced upon long ago. One obstacle to it may have been

Joseph R. Levenson's widely read essay "The Amateur Ideal in Ming and Early Ch'ing Society: Evidence from Painting" (available in his *Modern China and Its Confucian Past*, New York, 1964), a brilliant study that unfortunately, through an idiosyncratic use of concepts, succeeded in firmly pasting the label "amateur" upon the Ming-Ch'ing Confucian elite. Amateur painters of a very special sort they may have been, but amateur Confucians they decidedly were not. The first chapter of this book argues systematically that there existed in fourteenth-century China something approaching a national community of Confucian public-service professionals, and that while the early Ming state reflects class interests very poorly, it does reflect quite accurately the identifiable interests of a national Confucian professional elite. The aim is to help solve the specific historical problem of the Ming founding, but the analysis should prove to have some relevance for other periods and contexts as well.

The 128 collected works, the main source material for the first chapter, constitute a nearly full listing of all extant works by writers who flourished sometime between the years 1340 and 1400, with a much thinner representation from earlier and later times. These are but a fragment of the total output of fourteenth-century writing, most of which has not been preserved. The remainder cannot be taken as a true statistical sample. Geographical provenance, as determined by the writers' native places, shows an irregular distribution. Only 12 works, or 9 percent of the total, are by writers whose native places lay north of the Yangtze. The other 91 percent are by Southern Chinese, in whose milieu the Ming state originated. Excluding Szechwan and Yunnan (no examples), only 28 percent of all South China prefectures or the equivalent are represented by writers whose works survive. The distribution ranks Chin-hua prefecture (Kiangche, or Chekiang province) first with 19, then Chi-an (Kiangsi province) with 18, Hui-chou

(Kiangche) 11, Soochow (Kiangche) 7, T'ai-chou (Kiangche) 6, Ning-po (Kiangche) 6, Shao-hsing (Kiangche) 6, Lin-chiang (Kiangsi) 5, Lin-ch'uan (Kiangsi) 5, Ch'u-chou (Kiangche) 4, plus 1, 2, or 3 each from eighteen other South China prefectures.

The second chapter details the reactions of the Confucian professional community as a whole to the national crisis of the 1350s, and of an important regional segment of that community to the special manifestations of that crisis in the Che-tung "hinterland." The chapter shows how the Confucians—as professional men who considered themselves uniquely competent to diagnose societal ills and prescribe remedial measures—responded to the popular uprisings and the Yuan dynastic breakdown. It further shows why the Confucian elite of Chin-hua and Ch'u-chou prefectures (in Che-tung circuit of Che-kiang province) played so strong a hand in the early stages of the Ming founding. It discusses in historical context the special interests of the Che-tung elite, and shows why those interests were well served by as extreme an autocracy as that of the early Ming.

Chapter three moves from history into philosophy and provides an analysis of the work of four Confucian writers of Che-tung, who wrote on the problem of national salvation just before the armies of the future Ming founder conquered their home territory. Three of the writers soon became top-level advisers in the new regime. They were the theoretical founders of the Ming autocracy, although their real interest was not so much in autocracy for its own sake as it was in the larger question of the reform and purification of the Chinese social system.

The fourth chapter shows how the unusually long-winded founder of the Ming dynasty adapted the Confucian outlook generally, and the reform ideas of the Che-tung writers specifically, to the task of creating an autocratic political system for the purpose of effecting a program of national sociomoral regeneration. The revolting horrors the founder perpetrated in the

course of pursuing that goal may have owed something to a violent streak in his personality, but even if that is true, that violence was expressed well within the moral and political framework devised by the Che-tung theoreticians. They had failed to foresee the terrible abuses the totalitarian order they built would almost certainly engender.

The fifth and last chapter covers one final attempt by an elite movement within the Confucian profession to prescribe and carry out a nationwide reform, a matter that had been a Confucian preoccupation in one form or another for about half a century. After the collapse of that effort in the Yung-lo imperial usurpation of 1402, the familiar "Ming Confucianism" with its emphasis on significant but rather less ambitious questions began to take shape. The chapter describes the process of elite formation that led to this last attempt at national reform. It shows how the new elite generation of the 1380s and 90s tried, though it failed, to repair the theoretical errors of its predecessor, dismantle the totalitarian moral and political structure of the early Ming, and impose a quite different kind of normative order upon China.

The sociological approach to Confucianism and its role in the Ming founding does not at all require that a static and ideal construct, devised in the West, be clamped as rigidly as a vise upon a group of real people acting in an alien historical and cultural context. What the modern sociology of the professions has to offer is a highly general set of logically connected propositions that appear applicable to certain kinds of occupational groups in certain times and places. Whether Confucianism, in an ideal and static sense, *was* in fact a profession is beside the point.[3] What matters is that the overall behavior of those who considered themselves Confucians was consciously aimed at, and in some ways achieved, a self-definition and a social role in which one can see a certain logical consistency. The pattern of

that consistency falls within the parameters of what in Western sociology goes by the name of profession. Rather than simply yielding a stale definition, that concept can be used to provide a comprehensive framework for an historical analysis and critique of the Confucian endeavor.

Some further remarks are in order about the conceptual terminology deployed in this study. There is of course a risk of distortion whenever alien terms are imposed upon a source material, but either the risk has to be accepted or else there is no way to render systematically the recorded experience of one culture into the frame of reference of another.

"Confucianism" is an example. The most often used Chinese equivalent of the fourteenth century is *sheng-hsien chih tao*, the "Way of the Sages and Worthies," a phrase that takes in not only Confucius, but also Mencius, the Duke of Chou, and all the other creators of normative civilized life. The substance of Confucian learning I call "knowledge base" or "body of knowledge" when speaking of it as a corpus of professional learning; "theory," with respect to its abstract, general, and systematized character; or "doctrine," with reference to the imperative that Confucian knowledge be firmly trusted, believed in, and put to work to ameliorate a range of social or individual ills. The Chinese equivalents for any or all of these are *tao*, the "Way"; *chiao*, "teaching"; or *hsueh*, "learning."

I have, however, generally avoided the word "ideology," even though Confucian theory or doctrine often functions as ideology insofar as it "promotes an orthodox and simplistic view of issues in place of one that is skeptical and appreciative of the complexities of political life."[4] I prefer to avoid it because however value-laden and heroically simplistic Confucian ideas may have been in their practical application, they were not ad hoc distillations from the general culture (as ideology tends to be), but were worked out by a distinct corps of professional experts

on the basis of the established system of doctrinal truth that they guarded and maintained. The word also has further complications that make it a likely source of confusion in a study such as this.

An individual Confucian in Chinese is often rendered with reference to how good a Confucian he is judged to be. Thus we have *sheng*, "sage"; *hsien*, "worthy"; *chün-tzu*, "gentleman"; *hsiao-jen*, "small man"; and the like. The strictly untranslatable terms *ju* (someone who studies, usually meaning the Confucian books) and *shih* (someone prepared to lead others) are neutral in this respect, unless qualified by some adjective (for example, *chien-ju*, "ignoble *ju*"). A terminological distinction between occupation and profession is not made in the sources; both are *yeh*.

Inasmuch as this study deals with the ethos of the Confucian professional community, I have also tried to use its own frames of social reference and its own sociomoral terminology, and have provided translated excerpts from the original sources partly for that purpose. Yet I found unavoidable the intrusion of exogenous concepts, for which there are no good equivalents in the written Chinese language of the time. One case in point is "reform." There are some occasional approximations to that word (*keng-hua*, "change and transformation"; *fu-ku*, "restoring antiquity"; and the like), but nothing in routine use that corresponds to it consistently. By reform I mean the intended outcome of the application of expert Confucian knowledge to the remedy of public crises or abuses. Another such concept is "centralization," whose meaning the Ming founder approaches when he talks about "shaking the cords of the net" (*chen chi-kang*). Again, however, no Chinese concept in routine use matches very well the word in question. By centralization I mean a change from a state of diffusion toward the visible concentration of responsibility and decision-making authority

that, owing to the practical demands of carrying out a reform, must normally accompany it.

This study challenges, in some ways, an earlier view of the character and outlook of the Confucian elites who contributed to the Ming founding. A useful and influential study published by Ch'ien Mu in 1964 surveys the writing of Sung Lien, Liu Chi, Kao Ch'i, Su Po-heng, Pei Ch'iung, Hu Han, Tai Liang, and Fang Hsiao-ju—all of whom figure in this book. He comes generally to the conclusion that the first five exhibited a certain "psychopathology" (*hsin-ping*), both in their disinclination to condemn the Mongol Yuan dynasty on nationalist or ethnic grounds and in their evident lack of emotional enthusiasm for the Chinese Ming house. The others he praises either for staunch Yuan loyalism (Tai Liang), or for advanced anti-barbarian views (Hu Han and Fang Hsiao-ju).

In the light of the present analysis of Confucianism as a public-service profession, loyal to its own norms above all, a weak commitment or emotional attachment on the part of its elites to one dynasty or another is less a symptom of psychic ill-health than it is a likely manifestation of a latent tension between a profession and the organization that happens to employ it. The vehement position of Ou-yang Hsiu (1007–70) in favor of dynastic loyalty was by no means a universally accepted part of the Confucian ethic in late Yuan and early Ming. Professor Ch'ien neglects to point out that the question of dynastic loyalty was openly discussed, pro and con, by such writers as Liu Chi, Wang Wei, Chou T'ing-chen, and Ch'en Mo. The last-named writer devoted an essay to a refutation of the view that the Confucian community had to assume a fanatical (*chih-i*) posture of loyalty to a failing dynasty.[5] No such loyalty ethic bound the Confucians; individuals were free to choose for themselves how loyal they thought they should be. It was not along pro-