Introduction

Setting the Stage

In 1405, when Batu-Temür, his wife, their sons, and some 5,000 followers arrived at the Gansu border at the western edge of the Ming dynasty with some 16,000 horses and camels in tow, they joined a play already well underway. Nearly four decades earlier in 1368 and approximately (1,600 km) to the east in the city of Nanjing, Zhu Yuanzhang (1328–98), a former Buddhist monk and millenarian rebel, had overturned the Great Yuan dynasty, founded the Great Ming, and declared himself Son of Heaven. In the following years, Zhu Yuanzhang consolidated domestic political control over his seventy-five million subjects (the world's most populous empire by no small measure) and dispatched scores of envoy missions abroad to win recognition for his regime. The Great Yuan had been ruled by descendants of the renowned Mongol leader, Chinggis Khan, also known as Genghis Khan (d. 1227), and a key element of discrediting the Yuan had been recruiting Mongol leaders. In the decades since 1368, tens of thousands of Mongols had chosen to join the new Ming dynasty. When Batu-Temür and his people arrived in 1405, the Ming dynasty was already deep into its first act.

Nearly 240 years later, in 1644, the final curtain fell, and Manchu military aristocrats toppled the Ming regime. After serving the Ming dynasty and enjoying privileged status for more than two centuries, the Wu family – like all Chinese elites – faced hard decisions about their future. Would they observe classical ideals of unswerving loyalty that required either fighting to the death or suicide? Would they offer their service to the new Manchu rulers to protect the people of China and forward the interests of their family? Even within the same Wu family, some chose the former, some the latter, and most just tried to survive.

The Book in a Nutshell

Using the experiences of one Mongolian family across more than 250 years, this book develops three basic arguments: (1) there was more to the military than war; (2) there was more to government than civil officials; and (3) there

was more to China than the Han majority. First, as was true in most great states, the military formed a central element of the Ming dynasty, regularly consuming more than 70 percent of imperial revenues (much more in times of war), and generations of historians have produced a large body of insightful, richly detailed scholarship about key battles and campaigns. Military operations are discussed here too, but the focus is training, performance assessment, administration, and the place of military personnel in security and ceremony. Attention to both war and its supporting institutions is vital for a full and balanced understanding of the military in early modern China.

Second, rulership has long fascinated historians, and in recent decades, scholars from a variety of disciplines have done much to illuminate how Ming sovereigns won, legitimated, and maintained power through war, diplomacy, ideology, institutions, and building projects. This book takes a different tack, exploring how the Ming ruling house addressed issues of difference and ability, most especially in the military realm. The core argument is that consideration of (a) difference – whether of ethnicity, political status, or family background – and (b) ability – from battlefield prowess to administrative acumen – offers new insights into how Ming rulership operated.

Third, and finally, close examination of the experiences of one person, or in the case here of one family, is a way to capture the spirit of an age and feel the texture of daily life. Beginning in the 1940s with Wu Han's pathbreaking biography on the Ming founder, *From Beggar Bowl to Imperial Power*, historians have produced probing studies of Ming emperors, senior statesmen, iconoclastic thinkers, religious leaders, and cultural luminaries.[1] In contrast, here our guide to the Ming is not from the Chinese majority (sometimes called the Han 漢) but instead from a Mongolian family that migrated to China early in the fifteenth century, gained the throne's attention as regional field commanders, won a hereditary aristocratic title, became members of the capital elite by the sixteenth century, and continued to serve the dynasty until it fell in the mid seventeenth century. The contention is that bringing to light the lives of a wide range of people helps us better appreciate the richness and diversity of human experience during the Ming period.

This book makes no pretense of being comprehensive or even balanced, and it is useful to clarify at the outset what it does and doesn't do. It follows the Wu family, but it adopts a state-centric perspective, focusing on their interaction with the Ming dynasty. It discusses the role of women, but far greater attention goes to men. It touches on common soldiers and officers, but the book is elite-centric, chronicling the careers of senior commanders, prominent ministers,

[1] Bryant, *Great Recreation*; Dardess, *Political Life*; Ray Huang, *1587*; Handler-Spitz, *Symptoms*; Ong, *Li Mengyang*; Peterson, *Bitter Gourd*; Spence, *Memory Palace*; Throness, *Yang Tinghe*; Tsai, *Perpetual Happiness*; Yü, *Renewal of Buddhism*.

and most especially merit nobles like the Wu family. It refers to the Mongolian steppe but makes no pretense of providing a sustained analysis of developments there. The book addresses questions of broad humanistic significance like difference and ability, but it focuses on one exceptional family – Mongol immigrants who won an aristocratic title – in a particular time and place – China from the early fifteenth to mid seventeenth centuries. Most of those limitations are determined by my choice of themes, but some are imposed by the nature of historical sources available to us today.

Organization of This Book

History is as much craft as content, as much about how historians organize their materials as the sources themselves. The story I share here unfolds at three levels. The first is the professional and family lives of each generation of the men to hold the title Marquis of Gongshun. The second level is the broader events and trends occurring in Ming politics, society, economics, religion, and ethnic relations. This second level puts the Wu family's experiences in sharper historical context and, at the same time, uses the particulars of the Wu family to reconsider received wisdom and to explore less-familiar dimensions of the Ming dynasty. A third and final level is periodic consideration of the big picture; that is, thinking about the Ming dynasty in its Eurasian context.

The Wu family's place in the polity, and indeed the polity itself, underwent great changes over the 247 years between 1405, when Batu-Temür joined the Ming dynasty, and 1652, when his distant descendant lost the title of Marquis of Gongshun for good. Mirroring the Wu family's initial status as warriors of recent Mongolian descent, the early chapters of this book foreground issues of ethnic difference and fighting ability and refer regularly to developments on the steppe. Following the Wu family as they became members of the capital elite and the Marquis of Gongshun came to hold senior posts in the dynasty's core military institutions, later chapters shift perspective. They focus less on ethnic difference and more on differences among imperial personnel, particularly their relationship to the throne. Issues of ethnic difference and fighting ability did *not* vanish after 1500, nor did Mongolian polities lose relevance for the Ming dynasty; it's just that our focus here loosely follows the Wu family's experiences. By the late fifteenth century, the Wu family became established members of the capital elite, and contemporaries focused far less on their alien or barbaric origins and far more on their privileged standing at court. In sum, there were many kinds of difference within Ming politics and society.

Surviving sources focus on the individual holders of the title of Marquis of Gongshun, but attention to family rather than any single individual better captures social and political reality. Families formed people's primary identity, and attention to families brings out the critical importance of women, who did

not hold office but did occupy statuses recognized by the state and society. Fathers and mothers, grandfathers and grandmothers received posthumous honors from the throne for their progeny's meritorious service; mothers and wives directed family negotiations with officials – including even the throne – over critical issues such as salary, titles, status, and funerary arrangements; women, like men, were enmeshed in marriage alliances orchestrated to advance family rather than individual interests.

The uneven nature of surviving historical sources must be acknowledged at the outset. No collected writings, no letters, no diaries, no speeches penned by anyone in the Wu family survive. Nor have their genealogies, portraits, or tombs come to light. Sometimes we can reconstruct in detail the experiences of the Wu family, and sometimes we can't. Confronted with the vagaries of imperfect evidence, historians have developed work-arounds. Scholars use the experiences of better documented contemporaries to suggest likely perceptions and actions of less well-known actors. Another form of historical speculation involves using earlier and later experiences of the Wu family to extrapolate across the documentary void: "Given what we know of X and Y, it seems safe to say Z." In addition to the challenge of sources is the difficulty of perspective. One limitation of narrating the story of the Wu family generation-by-generation is that one can miss the forest for the trees, becoming so wrapped up in a blow-by-blow description of one person or one generation's experiences that we ignore the longer trends that take shape over decades. Again, historians have developed coping strategies; for instance, periodically stepping back to provide information on those overarching developments.

The stock and trade of historians is written documents, but they also regularly draw on a wide variety of other sources, including material objects, which can deepen our understanding of what we know and sometimes force us to rethink what we assume. Many chapters include descriptions of objects from the Ming period such as stone steles celebrating the imperial civil service examination and commemorating donations to a well-known temple in Beijing, a metal investiture tablet from the tomb of a Ming princess and a pagoda in Yangzhou commissioned by the last man to hold the title Marquis of Gongshun.

Historians are manipulative. We may claim to give voice to the underrepresented and silenced of the past, and we may say that we are saving a forgotten chapter of human experience from oblivion. Other times we talk about preserving shared memories, and sometimes we describe our work as an effort to clarify how we came to the present point in time as a people, a region, a nation, a culture, a gender, or a species. On occasion, we even offer our insights as a way to navigate future challenges. Running parallel to all those noble endeavors is a desire to use the past to tell a story as we see it for our own purposes. We pick the topics, the materials, the tone, and the format that we think will best achieve our objectives. We leave out far more than we include.

Historians are not uniquely manipulative; all writers share the characteristic to one degree or another.

This book uses the experiences of the Wu family to look at ability and difference, especially as they relate to the military. The Wu family would have understood the importance of each these issues, but it is unlikely that they would have used them as organizing principals to narrate their history. Service to the throne and honors from the state; exemplary morals such as devotion to parents and loyalty to friends; cultural achievements like a good classical education, skill in poetry, and fine calligraphy; and the centrality of family fortunes as seen in marriages, children, and grandchildren: these themes are at the center of biographies and funerary epitaphs of the time. Having acknowledged that I am a manipulative historian using the lives of the Wu family to talk about the issues that I find significant, it seems right to explain why ability and difference are important for understanding early modern China.

Ability

Ever since the late sixteenth century when observers like the Jesuit Matteo Ricci (1552–1610) began sharing firsthand accounts of China with West European audiences, meritocracy and the famed civil service have loomed large in our understanding of China, but for the majority of history, they coexisted or were overshadowed by hereditary aristocracies and other methods of recruiting ability.[2] Pre-imperial China (770–443 BCE) had been the "golden age of hereditary aristocracy," and its members dominated the economic, social, and ideological realms. In the following centuries, thinkers debated such issues as what constituted worthiness and merit; the relationship between sovereigns, who ruled by pedigree, and their ministers, increasingly chosen for their merit; and how the state was to define, identify, and promote ability. It was not, however, a simple story of ever-increasing reliance on state-defined merit. For more than a millennium from the third century BCE to the ninth century CE, many dynasties relied on personal recommendations for recruitment, a practice that favored aristocratic lineages and blocked outsiders from joining the national elite.[3] Before collapsing dramatically in the ninth century, those aristocratic lineages' superior education, strategic intermarriages, and de facto hereditary rights to political power helped ensure that the "power and prestige" of the aristocracy "were essentially independent of the regime."[4]

[2] Searching history for origins of the Chinese Communist Party's power in the distant past, Yasheng Huang (*Rise and Fall of the EAST*, pp. 18–19, 31) argues that the examination system "homogenized Chinese human capital" and "strengthened the imperial autocracy and narrowed the ideological space in China."
[3] Pines, "Between Merit and Pedigree." Quotations appear on pp. 162, 166, 179, and 187–88.
[4] Tackett, *Destruction of the Medieval Chinese Aristocracy*. Quotation appears on p. 12.

Later polities to rule China also adopted diverse protocols to identify, cultivate, assess, and exploit human talent. The most well-known and closely studied strategy was the state's recruitment of classically educated men through oral and later written examinations to staff the imperial bureaucracy, which emerged dominant in the tenth century under the Song dynasty (960–1279).[5] However, even after the civil service examinations emerged as the "defining institution of the society" and the new elite produced by the stringent educational demands "dominated Song life," including the realms of thought, politics, literature, and arts, the state maintained other ways to recruit ability.[6] The Song dynasty allowed some officials to nominate family members to receive the *jinshi* 進士 degree, usually granted to those who passed the highest level of the civil service examinations, by the "protection" or "grace" (*yin* 蔭) privilege, a shortcut into the imperial bureaucracy.[7]

Polities such as the Liao (916–1125), Jin (1115–1234), and Yuan (1271–1368) dynasties, which were headed by Kitan, Jurchen, and Mongol ruling houses, respectively, and which governed parts and then all of Chinese territory between the tenth and fourteenth centuries, developed composite systems of recruitment to accommodate their polities' increasing ethnic and cultural diversity. They retained a strong reliance on family pedigree in distributing senior civil and military posts. In addition, they selectively used formal, written examinations and, more commonly, the *yin* or "protection" privilege noted above. The relative proportions of those recruitment methods varied both across the Kitan, Jurchen, and Mongol regimes and within each dynasty over time. In sum, when the Ming founder, Zhu Yuanzhang, took up the reins of power, he had a rich and varied range of options from which to choose.

To demonstrate legitimacy, Zhu Yuanzhang frequently highlighted his restoration of lapsed Chinese values and practices, including the civil service examination, but at the same time, he harbored deep suspicions about classically educated men and aspiring students, whom he periodically derided as incompetent, physically weak, arrogant, and scheming. He worried that the examination system gave southerners, whose affluence directly contributed to superior education, far too much power.[8] Nor was he convinced that the civil service examination was the correct institutional tool to produce the sort of men best suited for the rigors of office. As a result, Zhu Yuanzhang also recruited through personal recommendations and actively sought out new talents; he established a National University in Nanjing and encouraged community-supported elementary schools.[9] His son, Zhu Di, the Yongle emperor

[5] Ichisada Miyazaki, *China's Examination Hell*; Elman, *Civil Examinations*; *Cultural History*; de Weerdt, *Competition*.
[6] Mote, *Imperial China*, p. 153. [7] Mote, *Imperial China*, p. 128.
[8] Elman, *Cultural History*, pp. 88–97.
[9] Hucker, *Ming Dynasty*, pp. 45–50; Elman, *Civil Examinations*, pp. 15–28. As Sarah Schneewind (*Community Schools*, pp. 9–32; "Visions and Revisions") shows, Zhu Yuanzhang's policies

(1360–1424, r. 1402–24), expanded the role of civil service examinations as a recruitment vehicle, and by 1425, the examinations had "become the principal means of filling higher offices in the bureaucracy."[10]

Preparations for the imperial examinations became a central focus of all ambitious families. The examinations created relationships that would figure in officials' professional and personal lives: all those who passed an examination in a given year shared a bond as "same years"; candidates were tied to those who graded their examinations and vice versa; at the highest level, test questions took the form of the emperor soliciting the insights of "men of learning" about vital issues such as rulership, fiscal policies, and military strategies. Successful candidates were fêted in the capital, their examination answers published for admiration and emulation, and their names put forward for posts in the imperial bureaucracy.

To permanently commemorate the examination as an event, the dynasty erected steles, massive polished stone blocks like those held today at the Confucian Academy in Beijing. The names of those who passed, as well as all the examination graders, scribes who copied out the test answers so that graders could not identify exams by handwriting – even the officials who oversaw security arrangements to prevent cheating – were meticulously inscribed in elegant calligraphy on the steles. This was a rigorous system that both demanded and celebrated proven merit as assessed by the state for the state.

Hereditary status, however, was also integral to the imperial government. At the heart of the dynastic polity was the ruling house, and the throne was to pass from father to son, usually the eldest son of the primary wife. In addition, both Zhu Yuanzhang and Zhu Di made ready use of hereditary titles of nobility to recognize and reward exemplary service on behalf of the dynasty, most especially military service (more at the end of this section). During the early Ming, the state imposed hereditary obligations on all households, which were required to provide goods and labor based on registration categories. Each year, *min* 民, or "people," were to supply taxes in kind (usually grain) and contribute a specified number of days of labor for projects like bridge construction and more. Reflecting the huge range of services and goods that the state required, early Ming household registration categories included artisan, saltern, merchant, weaver, smelter, fisherman, boat, cart, sedan chair, express relay-station, hunter, cattle-breeder, horse-breeder, cook, wine, vinegar, flour, miller, tea-growing, vegetable-growing, sheep-breeder, butcher, lake, fruit-growing, fuel, lime, water, melon, rice, waterlily root, palace serving-girl, entertainer, physician, geomancer, astronomer, insignia, land-cultivating,

regarding community schools changed repeatedly and are often difficult to reconstruct through surviving sources and centuries of commentary.

[10] Elman, *Civil Examinations*, pp. 28–41.

mausoleum, tomb, and pearl-diving households.[11] Other major categories included Confucian (*ru* 儒) and military households. The most fundamental function of Confucian households was to provide the throne with literate personnel to fill the ranks of the imperial bureaucracy.[12] Military households were to supply one male to serve as an active-service soldier or officer generation after generation to staff the largest standing military in the world.

The state's objective was not eternal replication of a given social or moral order by forcing sons to follow their fathers in a particular occupation or social status. Instead, the state had in effect outsourced responsibility for key services to designated families. The state stipulated that individual households were to supply a given service, product, or ability on an ongoing basis. As a thought experiment, it is useful to consider alternatives to that arrangement, and perhaps the most obvious is the civil service examination limned above. The state organized a series of examinations for tens of thousands of men, whose written answers were evaluated by state officials who would rank test-takers, provide written documentation of passing the exams, assign a portion of the test-takers posts, and then begin the long process of training them for further service. The decades-long process of test-preparation was, however, for the most part undertaken privately. The dynasty ran a Directorate of Education in the capital and organized Confucian schools in most counties and some military guards, but potential test-takers were not required to study there and in fact most did not. In the dynasty's very earliest years, the state assigned particular households the responsibility to supply a highly literate male each generation but quickly let that regulation lapse. Of the 120 men (out of 189 candidates) who passed the highest level of the civil service examination in 1371, sixty-five were from households registered as "Confucian," five as "military," one as "postal relay," and one was from the Korean kingdom of Goryeo, a man named Gim Do 金淘. The rest were registered as "people" or commoners, which meant that they were subject to the taxes and services expected from farmers.[13] Of the 199 men who passed the same examinations in 1430 and 1433, none were registered as Confucians.[14] The category did not completely vanish – in

[11] Wang Yuquan, "Appendix," in "Some Salient Features," pp. 25–29.

[12] The Ming dynasty's Confucian household drew directly from Yuan-period precedents, when Confucian, or perhaps more broadly understood "scholar," households were to study and to teach. For Yuan Confucian households, see Xiao Qiqing, "Yuandai de ruhu."

[13] *Hongwu sinian jinshi dengkelu* 洪武四年進士登科錄, MKJL 1.2–13. Confucian household does not appear in the list of those who passed the *jinshi* examinations in 1412, but one finds there the designation "commoner/civilian-scholar" (*minji rushi* 民籍儒士) and a number of men registered as "commoner/civilian Directorate of Education student" (*minji guozijian* 民籍國子監), "commoner /civilian-prefectural Confucian school student" (*minji fuxuesheng* 民籍府學生). See *Mingdai dengkelu huibian*, 1.209–63. Benjamin Elman (*Cultural History*, p. 74) notes this was "perhaps the least competitive metropolitan examination in late imperial history."

[14] *Xuande wunian jinshi dengkelu* 宣德五年進士登科錄, MKJL 1.14–28; *Xuande banian jinshi dengkelu* 宣德八年進士登科錄, MKJL 1.33–48.

1439, one in 100 was registered as Confucian and, in 1448, two in 150 were – but the state had abandoned any intention of staffing its bureaucracy from specially designated households with the responsibility to supply a Confucian scholar each generation.[15]

The state established guidelines regarding who would succeed to that responsibility and under what conditions, but it also showed flexibility in implementation. Households and extended families decided who – if anyone – would succeed to the post and its designated set of responsibilities. Finding distant relatives or simply hiring substitutes were common strategies broadly tolerated by the state. The trend away from a narrowly household-based provision of goods and services to one that relied more openly on ready-made goods or "off-the-rack" ability is a main storyline in the tale of the sixteenth century.

And yet, prominent vestiges of hereditary privilege survived. As noted above, the throne passed from one member of the ruling family to another through primogeniture with only a few exceptions, for example when in 1449 one half-brother succeeded the reigning sovereign who had been taken captive on the Mongolian steppe. Offspring of the emperor, male and female, all received investiture, emoluments, and privileged legal status.[16] The further down the generational ladder one went, the humbler were those titles and perks. The long-term result of this proliferation of lesser members of the imperial clan, all of whom resided in the provinces with varying levels of support from the throne, created a substantial financial burden for the court, an issue that periodically sparked heated criticism from a portion of officials. Not only did royals contribute nothing to dynastic health, civil officials fumed, their profligacy, debauchery, abuse of local populations, and constant scheming undermined the moral, social, and political foundations of the regime.[17]

In recognition of distinguished military service, in the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries, the Ming throne granted several hundred men inheritable aristocratic titles, generous salaries, and legal privileges. These men and their descendants are called merit nobles and are discussed in more detail in the 'Merit Nobles' section below. Another much larger group was the hereditary officers corp. Beginning no later than the mid fifteenth century, Ming civil officials began to argue that hereditary status was a poor way to select men to command imperial armies and oversee key military institutions. Critics argued that hereditary privilege bred entitlement, arrogance, ignorance, and corruption, and that in moments of crisis, men who gained their posts through

[15] *Zhengtong sinian jinshi dengkelu* 正統四年進士登科錄, MKJL 1.59–70; *Zhengtong shisannian jinshi dengkelu* 正統十三年進士登科錄, MKJL 1.134–50. The preface indicates that 150 men passed the examination but only 122 are found in the list.
[16] For imperial princesses' privileged status, see Chapter 6.
[17] See Robinson ("Princely Courts") for review.

hereditary succession proved cowardly and incompetent. So why did the dynasty retain merit nobles and a hereditary officer corps? How did it respond to criticisms? How did it try to reconcile its support for rigorous meritocracy as seen in the civil service examination system with its retention of what would seem a deeply flawed relic of the dynastic founding?[18]

The short answer is that the dynasty deliberately cast a wide net in its pursuit of diverse abilities. It used highly competitive written examinations to identify youngish elite men who would staff the ranks of the imperial bureaucracy. But the throne also required abilities in other realms, ranging from midwifery, pharmacology, and cuisine to managing large-scale construction projects, divination, and capturing likeness on paper and silk, which it recruited in other ways.[19] Translating languages, officiating rituals, and killing people were all services the Wu family performed at one time or another. The state secured ability through a dynamic mix of formalized meritocratic testing, informal personnel assessments, and hereditary status, all combined with sophisticated incentive structures.

Difference

With some important exceptions, historians have mostly pushed ethnic difference within the Ming to the margins of the polity.[20] In stark contrast, issues of difference form a cornerstone of much research on the Manchu Qing dynasty, circa 1636–1911. Scholars debate whether contemporaries understood foreignness or Otherness as a result of ethnicity, lineage, or something else, but they agree that issues of difference figured prominently in the conception, representation, and realization of Qing rulership.[21] Historians have done much to elucidate the Qing state's enormous commitment to bringing other rulers and their peoples into its embrace – through sustained and extravagant patronage, far-flung and expensive military campaigns, painstaking creation of political institutions and economic mechanisms, marriage alliances, ceremony and

[18] As David Porter (*Slaves of the Emperor*) convincingly demonstrates, there were other ways to address the issue of hereditary legal status. Other early modern regimes such as the Qing dynasty, Russia, and the Ottoman empire developed large-scale service elites who were both competent bureaucrats and "slaves of the emperor." A key difference between the Qing's hereditary service elite and the Ming's was scale: 2.5 to 5 million in the Qing to a few hundred in the Ming.

[19] Cass, "Female Healers"; *Dangerous Women*; Ching, "Tibetan Buddhism"; Robinson, "Ming Court"; Soulliere, "Imperial Marriages"; Tsai, *Eunuchs*; Weidner, "Imperial Engagement."

[20] Most discussions of ethnic difference and integration during the Ming period have focused on southern China. See Daniels and Ma, "Agency of Local Elites"; Faure, "Introduction"; Herman, *Amid the Clouds*; Shin, *Making of the Chinese State*; Bin Yang, *Between Winds and Clouds*. In his many publications, Henry Serruys traced the experiences of Mongolians in northern China during the Ming.

[21] Crossley, *Translucent*; Elliott, *Manchu*.