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ARTICLE

Apocalyptic belief and prophecy: constructing political legitimacy during the Yuan-Ming transition

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Abstract

According to recent research, after the Song dynasty, there was a transformation of the political culture in imperial China according to which Confucian elites and dynastic rulers ceased to construct political legitimacy by interpreting prophecies. By examining the process of how Zhu Yuanzhang, the founder of the Ming dynasty, utilized a popular prophecy and how he concealed his utilization of this prophecy after enthronement, this article offers a more nuanced narrative of the transformation. It shows that during the Yuan-Ming transition, rulers sought to employ prophecies to construct their image as sovereigns favoured by Heaven, but, ironically, in official writings rulers tended to hide their utilization of prophecies so as to highlight their virtues which deserved the Mandate of Heaven. This article argues that after the Song, the role of prophecies changed in the political arena—not from important to unimportant, but from officially recognized to officially concealed.

Keywords: Bingwu dingwei; apocalyptic belief; prophecy; Sheep year; Zhu Yuanzhang

Ever since the Han dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE) accepted Confucianism as the official ideology of the Chinese Empire, prophecies (*chenwei* 讖緯) and the related theory of Five Agents (*wude* 五德) became two important aspects of political legitimacy. By connecting prophecies and the Five Agents with the Mandate of Heaven, Han Confucian scholars developed a complicated system of interpreting prophecies to support claims of legitimacy.[1]

[1] The theory of Five Agents in this context refers to a complex system used by Confucian scholars to construct political legitimacy for rulers. This theory claims that each dynasty was associated with one of the five agents—namely Metal, Wood, Water, Fire, and Earth—and each of the agents could conquer or generate another agent. If a new dynasty replaced an old dynasty, the agent of the new one should conquer that of the old one or the agent of the old should generate that of the new one. This theory also claims that at the end of a dynasty, prophecies, portents, and omens, most of which were related to the five agents, would emerge and that Confucian scholars could read the prophecies and portents to work out who would replace the old dynasty. Normally when a new dynastic regime took power, it would publicly announce the agent associated with the new dynasty and cite prophecies to support its claim of legitimacy. For discussions of the importance of the Five Agents theory and prophecies in imperial China, see, for example, Gu Jiegang 顧頡剛, 'Wude zhongshi shuo xia de zhengzhi he lishi' 五德終始說下的政治和歷史, in *Gushi bian* 古史辨 (Shanghai, 1982), Vol. 5, pp. 404–616; Liu Fusheng 劉複生, 'Songdai "huoyun" lunlue—jiantan "wude zhuanyi" zhengzhi xueshuo de zhongjie', 宋代'火運'論略—兼談'五德轉移'政治學說的終結, *Lishi yanjiu* 歷史研究 3 (1997), pp. 92–106; Hok-Lam Chan, '"Ta Chin" (Great Golden): The origin and changing interpretations of the Jurchen state name', *T'oung Pao* 4/5 (1991), pp. 254–257; Hok-Lam Chan, 'The "Song" dynasty legacy: symbolism and legitimation from Han Liner to Zhu Yuanzhang of the Ming dynasty', *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 1 (2008), pp. 91–94; Yuan Chen,

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In explaining why the Han dynasty chose Confucianism as the state ideology, Robert Kramers convincingly argues that 'the driving force behind the development of the Confucian schools was the prophetic quality of a holistic interpretation of man and the universe in their mutual interaction'.[2] The importance of prophecies in constructing political legitimacy during the late Former Han dynasty is clearly seen in the fact that Wang Mang 王莽 (45BCE–23CE) and his supporters fabricated prophecies and interpreted them as the portents of Wang's mandate to replace the Han dynasty.[3] It also can be seen in the war between Liu Xiu 劉秀 (r. 25–57), the future founder of the Later Han dynasty, and Gongsun Shu 公孫述 (d.36), a powerful warlord centred in the Sichuan area, each of whom sought to interpret a popular prophecy in his own favour.[4] This tradition of utilizing prophecies to strengthen one's claim to political legitimacy remained popular in the political arena during the Sui 隋 (581–618) and Tang 唐 (618–907) dynasties. In illustrating the importance of prophecies to a ruler's legitimation, the eminent modern scholar Gu Jiegang (1893–1980) humorously likened prophecies to 'the certificate of appointment' given to rulers by Heaven.[5]

The legitimation narrative based on interpreting prophecies met strong challenges during the Song 宋 dynasty (960–1279), however. Ouyang Xiu 歐陽修 (1007–1072) was one of the Song scholars who criticized prophecies and the theory of the Five Agents as deluded and absurd. He maintains that virtue was the only qualification for political legitimacy. He asserts:

> Since antiquity, those who rose to become the Kings must have great virtue to receive the Mandate of Heaven. Their merits benefited the people, or they gradually achieved kingly accomplishments by generations of accumulation. How can this be simply attributed to an agent? ... it is a false and ridiculous theory that the rise of emperors and kings must rely on the Five Agents. It is unknown whom this theory originated from.[6]
>
> 自古王者之興，必有盛德以受天命。或其功澤被於民，或累世積漸而成王業。豈偏名於一德哉? ...而謂帝王之興必乘五運者，繆妄之說也，不知其出於何人。

Ouyang suggested that the Song government delete all content concerning prophecies in Confucian classics.[7] Modern scholars like Xu Xingwu 徐興無 and Hok-Lam Chan (1938–2011) attribute attacks by Song Confucians on the prophetic discourses to the development of Confucianism during the Song, arguing that, with the rise of Neo-Confucianism, rationalism eclipsed cosmological theory and consequently prophetic discourses lost their influence.[8] Hok-Lam Chan and Liu Fusheng have pointed out that neither the Yuan nor

'Legitimation discourse and the theory of the five elements in Imperial China', *Journal of Song-Yuan Studies* 44 (2014), pp. 325–364.

[2] Robert P. Kramers, 'The development of the Confucian schools', in *The Cambridge History of China. Volume 1: The Ch'in and Han Empires, 221 B.C.–A.D. 220*, Denis Twitchett and John K. Fairbank (eds) (Cambridge, 1986), p. 765.

[3] Hans Bielenstein, 'Wang Mang, the restoration of the Han dynasty, and later Han', in *The Cambridge History of China. Volume 1*, Twitchett and Fairbank (eds), pp. 230–231.

[4] Ibid., pp. 255–256.

[5] Gu Jiegang, 'Wude zhongshishuo xiade zhengzhi he lishi', *Gushi bian*, Vol. 5, p. 466.

[6] Ouyang Xiu, 'Zhengtong lun shang' 正統論 (上), in *Ouyang Xiu quanji* 歐陽修全集 (Beijing, 2001), j.16, p. 268. For research on Ouyang Xiu's view on political legitimacy, see Chen Xuelin (Hok-Lam Chan) 陳學霖, 'Ouyang Xiu *Zhengtonglun xinshi*' 歐陽修《正統論》新釋, in *Shongshi lunji* 宋史論集 (Taiwan, 1993), pp. 125–174.

[7] Ouyang Xiu, 'Lun shanqu *Jiujing zhengyi* zhong chenwei zhazi' 論刪去九經正義中讖緯劄子, in *Ouyang Xiu quanji*, j.112, p. 1707.

[8] Xu Xinghu, *Chengwei wenxian yu Handai wenhua goujian* 讖緯文獻與漢代文化構建 (Beijing, 2003), pp. 91–93; Hok-Lam Chan, 'The "Song" dynasty legacy', p. 93.

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the Ming associated themselves with a cosmological agent in their official proclamations.[9] And Liu Pujiang 劉浦江 (1961–2015) argues that with the theory of the Five-Agent dying out in legitimation discourses after the Song, the discussion of prophecies also disappeared in official documents of the Yuan and Ming dynasties.[10]

Apocalyptic beliefs, out of which various prophecies emerged, exerted great influence on Chinese history. Some of the major large-scale rebellions in Chinese history, such as the Yellow Turbans in the late Han and the Red Turbans in the late Yuan, were instigated by apocalyptic beliefs. David Ownby points out that the root of popular millenarianism in Chinese history can be traced back to the apocalyptic factors in Buddhism and Daoism, for which he coins the term 'Buddho-Daoist eschatology'.[11] Currently most of the scholarship on Chinese millenarianism addresses its connections with apocalyptic beliefs in Buddhism and Daoism.[12]

This article rethinks the role of prophecies in legitimation after the Song and the root of apocalyptic discourses. The first section introduces an apocalyptic belief that was popularly circulating in Song and Yuan society. Unlike the 'Buddho-Daoist eschatology' pattern, this apocalyptic belief originated among Confucian scholar-officials and then spread to the commoners. The second section reconstructs the process of how a prophecy that predicted an imminent apocalyptic future changed to become a portent foretelling the rise of Zhu Yuanzhang. It argues that he utilized this prophecy to strengthen his claims to legitimacy during the warring late Yuan period. The third section examines how Zhu Yuanzhang concealed his exploitation of this prophecy after his enthronement. This article examines the relationship between prophecies and political legitimacy in the context of the transformation of political culture in Chinese history after the Song. It argues that although, after the Song dynasty, Confucian elites and dynastic rulers stopped using prophecies to support claims to legitimation in official documents, prophecies did not lose their importance in politics. Rulers sought to exploit prophecies to attract support, but these rulers tended to downplay prophecies' importance in official documents so as to highlight their virtue. After the Song, prophecies changed from an officially recognized factor to an officially hidden factor in the narrative of legitimation.

The *bingwu* and *dingwei* apocalyptic belief

The traditional Chinese calendar was not only a system for organizing time, but also a way of thinking. Scholars and astrologists in various dynasties sought to discern overall patterns of history from the calendar. During the Southern Song dynasty (1127–1279), an apocalyptic belief began to spread, suggesting that disasters and chaos would break out in the two consecutive years of *bingwu* 丙午 (a year of the Horse) and *dingwei* 丁未 (a year of the Sheep). This apocalyptic belief was first recorded after the Jurchen conquest of North China. During the first and second years of the Jingkang period (1126–1127), the

[9] Hok-Lam Chan, '"Ta Chin" (Great Golden)', pp. 291–297; Liu Fusheng, 'Songdai "huoyun" lunlue—jiantan "wude zhuanyi" zhengzhi xueshuo de zhongjie', pp. 104–106. But there were some discussions about the agents of the Yuan and Ming dynasties in private writings by Yuan, Ming, and Qing scholars. For a study of the influence of this theory in the Yuan and Ming periods, see Yuan Chen, 'Legitimation discourse', pp. 348–364.

[10] Liu Pujiang, 'Wude zhongshi shuo zhi zhongjie—jianlun Songdai yijiang chuantong zhengzhi wenhua de shanbian' 五德終始說之終結—兼論宋代以降傳統政治文化的嬗變, in Liu Pujiang, *Zhengtong yu huayi: Zhongguo chuantong zhengzhi wenhua yanjiu* 正統與華夷：中國傳統政治文化研究 (Beijing, 2017), pp. 70–73.

[11] David Ownby, 'Chinese millenarian traditions: the formative age', *American Historical Review* 104.5 (December 1999), p. 1528.

[12] There are many works on this field. For example, see Susan Naquin, *Millenarian Rebellion in China: The Eight Trigrams Uprising of 1813* (New Haven, 1976); Barend ter Haar, *The White Lotus Teachings in Chinese Religious History* (Leiden, 1976).

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Jurchens, a people from northeast Asia, sacked the capital of the Song dynasty and captured both the emperor and the retired emperor. The Song had to retreat to southern China and reorganize its court and government, founding what historians call the Southern Song Dynasty. This disastrous event is called the Jingkang Incident in later historiography.[13] Because the two years of the Jingkang period were a *bingwu* year and a *dingwei* year, scholars in the Southern Song dynasty tended to use the phrases the 'catastrophe' of *bingwu* and *dingwei* (丙午丁未之厄) or the 'calamity' of *bingwu* and *dingwei* (丙午丁未之禍) when referring to the Jingkang Incident. Consequently, these two years of *bingwu* and *dingwei* conveyed a special meaning in writings produced during this time.

In Southern Song writings, the *bingwu* and *dingwei* years originally did not represent a chaotic time, but generally referred to a period when influential events would occur. For example, in his imperial memorial submitted to the Xiaozong 孝宗 emperor (r. 1162–1189) in 1178, the renowned irredentist Chen Liang 陳亮 (1143–1194) suggested that the Song court utilize the *bingwu* and *dingwei* years to take revenge on the Jurchens. He writes:

> The Shenzong emperor (r. 1067–1085) ascended to the throne in a *dingwei* year and then state affairs changed. After another sixty years, the *bingwu* and *dingwei* arrived again. It was the Jingkang calamity. Heaven caused Your Majesty to be born in that year, and also nurtured your ambition to take revenge on the north. Now it is less than ten years till the next *bingwu* and *dingwei* will come. The way of Heaven changes every sixty years. How can Your Majesty not get prepared for the changes? It is truly an opportunity to accomplish great things. [Your Majesty] should not lack ambition or idle away time.[14]
>
> 神宗皇帝實以丁未歲即位，國家之事，於是一變矣。又六十年而丙午、丁未，遂為靖康之禍。天獨啟陛下於是年，而又啟陛下以北向復仇之志。今者去丙午、丁未，近在十年間耳。天道六十年一變，陛下可不有以應其變乎？此誠今日大有為之機，不可苟安以玩歲月也。

Chen Liang here emphasizes changes rather than disasters associated with *bingwu* and *dingwei* years. He points out that the Shenzong emperor of the Northern Song, who advocated reform and irredentism, assumed the throne in a *dingwei* year (1067) and changed the situation of the state. Also, Chen mentions that the Xiaozong emperor was born in the *dingwei* year (1127) of the Jingkang period, suggesting that the emperor was destined to take revenge on the Jurchens for the Jingkang Incident. Chen Liang urged the Xiaozong emperor to prepare himself to utilize the next *bingwu* and *dingwei* period (1186–1187), which would come within ten years. Chen Liang stresses that the way of Heaven would change with the occurrence of the *bingwu* and *dingwei* years and create great opportunities.

After Chen Liang, the *bingwu* and *dingwei* years in Song writings became associated with disasters more than with changes. In his discussions, the Song statesman, scholar, and writer Hong Mai 洪邁 (1123–1202) displays an apocalyptic mentality towards the *bingwu* and *dingwei* years. In a section titled '*Bingwu dingwei*' in his publication *Rongzhai suibi* 容齋隨筆 (*The Informal Writings of Rongzhai)*, which was finished in around 1202, Hong Mai

[13] For research on the Jingkang Incident, see Ari Levine, 'The reigns of Hui-tsung (1100–1126) and Ch'in-tsung (1126–1127) and the fall of the Northern Sung', in *The Cambridge History of China. Volume 5, Part 1: The Sung Dynasty and Its Precursors, 907–1279*, (eds) Denis Twitchett and John K. Fairbank (Cambridge, 2009), pp. 639–643; Patricia Ebrey, *Emperor Huizong* (Cambridge MA, 2014), pp. 449–474.

[14] Chen Liang, 'Shang Xiaozong huangdi diyishu' 上孝宗皇帝第一書, in *Chen Liang ji* (Beijing, 1974), j.1, p. 8. For Chen Liang and his philosophy, see Hoyt Cleveland Tillman, *Utilitarian Confucianism: Ch'en Liang's Challenge to Chu Hsi* (Cambridge, MA, 1982).

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writes: 'Unforeseen misfortunes always break out when the Central State (中國 *zhongguo*) meets the years of *bingwu* and *dingwei*. The calamities either occur domestically or are humiliation inflicted by foreign barbarians.'[15] Hong goes on to list many events that occurred in *bingwu* and *dingwei* years. For example, Emperor Gaozu (256 BCE–195 BCE), the founder of the Han dynasty, died in a year of *bingwu* (195 BCE), and in the Tang dynasty, Emperor Jingzong 敬宗 was assassinated in a year of *bingwu* (826). In the Five Dynasties period (907–960), Khitan troops sacked the capital of the Later Jin 後晉 dynasty (936–947) and captured its emperor in a year of *bingwu* (January 946–January 947). Hong finally mentions the Jingkang Incident as the latest in this series of events.[16]

Although these events did indeed occur in *bingwu* and *dingwei* years, Hong also makes far-fetched connections between historical events and *bingwu* and *dingwei* years. For example, although Emperor Taizong 太宗 (r. 627–650) of the Tang dynasty reigned over a period that covered the two years of *bingwu* and *dingwei* (646–647), his rule was marked by a long time of prosperity and peace. Hong, however, claims that these two years were also dangerous to the Tang because during these two years the future Empress Wu Zetian 武則天 (624–705), who later would usurp the Tang throne, was already in the royal palace.[17] At the end of this section, Hong writes: 'Generally the disasters of *dingwei* (a year of the Sheep) are more severe than those of *bingwu* (a year of the Horse). This is the way of Heaven, which the power of human beings is unable to influence.'[18]

After Hong Mai, another Song scholar named Chai Wang 柴望 (1212–1280) further elaborated on the *bingwu* and *dingwei* apocalyptic belief. Chai was a student at the Imperial College and also served as a staff member in the Central Secretariat of the Southern Song. In 1246, a year of *bingwu*, Chai submitted a book entitled *Bingding guijian* 丙丁龜鑒 (The *Bing* and *Ding* Tortoise Mirror) to the Southern Song imperial court. Modelled on Sima Guang's 司馬光 (1019–1086) *Zizhi tongjia* 資治通鑒 (Comprehensive Mirror to Aid in Government), the book was written to offer advice to the Southern Song court. Chai warned the Song court about the two years of *bingwu* and *dingwei*, saying they would be very likely to bring disasters. In the book, Chai investigates in detail the events occurring in *bingwu* and *dingwei* years over a long period of time, ranging from the Qin 秦 dynasty (221 BCE–207 BCE) to the Five Dynasties (907–960). He writes: 'From the Qin and Han down to the Five Dynasties, there were twenty-one periods of *bingwu* and *dingwei*, and the time covered 1,260 years. [During these periods of *bingwu* and *dingwei*], disasters, calamities, and unfortunate incidents were numerous.'[19]

Although Chai Wang claims that disasters and chaos would ensue in the time of *bingwu* and *dingwei*, he suggests that if the Song emperor observed Confucian virtues and rituals, it would be possible to avoid the disastrous effect of the two years.[20] Chai Wang ended the book at the Five Dynasties period, omitting the events that occurred in the Song dynasty.

Chai's book and his systematic narrative of apocalyptic belief attracted attention from his contemporaries. In his *Kunxue jiwen* 困學紀聞 (Observations Culled from Arduous Study), Wang Yinglin 王應麟 (1223–1296) recorded Chai Wang's submission of the *Bingding guijian* to the Southern Song court. Although Wang made no mention of the contents of this book, he agreed with Chai's argument that sage rulers should be aware of previous disastrous events and take measures to prevent them from reoccurring.[21]

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15 Hong Mai 洪邁, *Rongzhai suibi* (Shanghai, 1978), j.10, pp. 928–929.

16 Ibid.

17 Ibid., p. 928.

18 Ibid., p. 929.

19 Chai Wang, 'Bingding guijian xu' 丙丁龜鑒序, *Qiutangji* 秋堂集 (*Yingyin Wenyuange Siku quanshu* 影印文淵閣四庫全書, hereafter SKQS), *ce*1187, j.2, p. 487.

20 Ibid.

21 Wang Yinglin, *Kunxue jiwen* (Shanghai, 2015), j.20, p. 556.

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During the Yuan dynasty, the *bingwu* and *dingwei* apocalyptic belief continued to circulate, and some Daoist hagiographies used the trope of the *bingwu* and *dingwei* disasters as evidence of the supernatural power of Daoist priests. Zhang Jixian 張繼先 (1092–1127), a renowned Daoist priest of the Celestial Master 天師 branch of Daoism during the Northern Song dynasty, featured prominently in later literature as an immortal, an astrologist, and a fortune teller.[22] One of his hagiographies compiled during the mid-Yuan states that before the Jingkang Incident took place, he had warned the Song court of the Catastrophe of the Red Horse and Red Sheep, which refers to the Jingkang Incident.[23] Zhang's hagiography suggests to us that during the Yuan the *bingwu* and *dingwei* apocalyptic belief was circulating among Daoist believers.

Zhang Jixian's prediction of the Catastrophe of the Red Sheep and Red Horse was not only recorded in Daoist texts, but also mentioned in writings by Confucian scholar-officials. In his poem written in memory of Zhang Jixian, Yuan Jue 袁桷 (1266–1327), a scholar official from the Zhejiang region, describes the Jingkang Incident as 'the oceanlike misery of the Red Sheep and Red Horse' (紅羊赤馬悲滄海).[24] Discussing the establishment of the Southern Song dynasty, another Yuan scholar Zhang Zhu 張翥 (1287–1368) uses 'the Red Sheep year of transformative apocalypse' 紅羊換劫年 in reference to the Jingkang Incident.[25] Other Yuan private writings also contain references to the principle that disasters take place during *bingwu* and *dingwei* years. For example, Song Ben宋本 (1281–1334) attributes a serious plague outbreak in 1306 (a *bingwu* year) and 1307 (a *dingwei* year) to the *bingwu* and *dingwei* apocalyptic principle.[26]

During the Yuan, this apocalyptic belief circulated widely in society. Chai Wang's *Bingding guijian* ends at the Five Dynasties period, omitting the events in the Song dynasty. During the Yuan, an anonymous author supplemented Chai's book by adding a new volume covering the events taking place in the *bingwu* and *dingwei* years of the Song dynasty. In the preface to the supplementary volume, the anonymous author tells how popular this apocalyptic belief was in Yuan society. According to the author, although the apocalyptic belief had circulated for generations, he had not believed it at first. But in his lifetime the droughts, floods, and plagues that led to numerous deaths broke out during these two years (1306–1307). This prompted him to supplement Chai Wang's book to show the accuracy of this apocalyptic principle.[27]

Not all Song and Yuan scholars accepted this apocalyptic belief. Some Song scholar-officials denounced it as a groundless hypothesis. The Song official Fang Yue方岳 (1199–1262) argued that the *bingwu* and *dingwei* apocalyptic belief consisted only of rumours and slanders that were used by soothsayers. He warned that if the Song emperor perceived catastrophes as something that were predestined, it would obstruct the emperor from nurturing his virtue.[28]

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[22] On Zhang Jixian's images as an immortal, see Shi Nai'an and Luo Guanzhong, *Outlaws of the Marsh*, (trans) Sidney Shapiro (Bloomington, 1981), pp. 1–15.

[23] Zhang Yu 張雨, *Xuanpinlu* 玄品錄 (*Siku quanshu cunmu congshu* 四庫全書存目叢書, hereafter SKCM), *zi* 259, j.5, pp. 612–613. Because both *bingwu* and *dingwei* years belong to the Red in the Five Colour system and the Fire in the Five Element system, this apocalyptic belief is often referred to as the Apocalypse of Red Horse and Red Sheep, or simply the Red Sheep Apocalypse.

[24] Yuan Jue, 'Zhang Xujing huan'anbianyueguihe ciyun' 張虛靖圜庵扁曰歸鶴次韻, *Qingrong jushi ji* 清容居士集 (*Sibu congkan* 四部叢刊, hereafter SBCK), j.10, p. 6a.

[25] Zhang Zhu, 'Zhou Han zhanggongzhufu linangucheng ertu' 周漢長公主府臨安故城二圖, *Duian shiji* 蛻庵詩集 (SBCK), j.3, p. 21a.

[26] Song Ben 宋本, 'Jixixianyin zhanggong jiuzhengji' 績溪縣尹張公舊政記, *Guochao wenlei* 國朝文類, (ed.) Su Tianjue 蘇天爵 (SBCK), j.39, p. 4b.

[27] Anonymous author, 'Xu bingding guijianlu xu' 續丙丁龜鑑錄序, *Baoyantang dingzheng bingding guijian* 寶顏堂訂正丙丁龜鑑 (SKCM), *zi* 067, j.6, p. 591.

[28] Fang Yue, 'Dai Fanchengxiang' 代范丞相, *Qiuya ji* 秋崖集 (SKQS), *ce*1182, j.18, p. 343.

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In a funerary inscription for the literatus Zhao Keqin 趙克勤 (fl. 1240s), the Song poet and official Liu Kezhang 劉克莊 (1187–1269) tells of differing attitudes toward this apocalyptic belief among Song court officials. He writes that, in the *bingwu* year of 1246, the Song court and society worried about the disasters that these two years might bring to them. But a Confucian scholar-official named Zhao Keqin publicly proclaimed his disagreement with this belief in a court discussion. He argued that this apocalyptic belief was not a tradition and people subscribed to it because the controversial reformer Wang Anshi's assumption of the office of Prime Minister and the Jingkang Incident both coincidentally occurred in the *bingwu* and *dingwei* years. Zhao, quoting the *Book of Changes*, insisted that rulers could transform bad luck into good opportunities by being aware of small omens.[29]

Harsh criticism of this apocalyptic belief came from the compilers of the *Siku quanshu* 四庫全書 (Complete Collections of the Four Treasures) in the Qing dynasty. These compilers did not fully preserve the work *Bingding guijian* in their compendium but only categorized it into the *cunmu* 存目part (works not included in the *Siku*, except for title and brief abstract in the catalogue). In the abstract for the *Bingding guijian*, the compilers explain why the *Bingding guijian* did not qualify for formal preservation:

> [Chai] Wang found that the Jingkang Incident happened in these two years and tried to impress his audience with imaginative language. Indeed, events listed in the book are rather farfetched, and his arguments are not reasonable. Furthermore, the book concerns prophecies and omens, and tends to delude the multitude.[30]

The different attitudes held by Confucian scholars about this apocalyptic belief reflect the changes and continuity of the political culture since the Song. As mentioned before, during the Song, scholars began to attack the prophetic discourse as deluded. The many criticisms of the *bingwu* and *dingwei* theory exemplify this change. However, the fact that many Confucian scholars adhered to this belief shows the continuity of the political culture. Although the prophetic discourse waned after the Song, it still maintained its influence in society. Interestingly, sources show that the *bingwu* and *dingwei* apocalyptic belief has been preserved and circulates even in modern times.[31]

The Wu family state prophecy

One day in the last month of a *bingwu* 丙午 Horse year (1 January 1367–30 January 1367), Han Lin'er 韓林兒 (?–1367), the figurehead emperor of the anti-Mongol Song state established by the Red Turban rebels, drowned in a boat accident.[32] Immediately, Zhu Yuanzhang 朱元璋 (r. 1368–1398), at that time the Prince of Wu and de facto ruler of the Song state, abandoned Han Lin'er's reign title *longfeng* (龍鳳 Dragon and Phoenix) and declared the next year (a *dingwei* 丁未 Sheep year) to be the first year of his own

[29] Liu Kezhuang, 'Zhao Keqin muzhi' 趙克勤墓誌, *Houcun xiansheng daquanji* 後村先生大全集 (SBCK), j.158, p. 2b.

[30] Yong Rong 永瑢 and Ji Yun 紀昀 et al. (eds), *Qingding Siku quanshu zongmu* 欽定四庫全書總目 (Beijing, 1997), j.111, p. 1473.

[31] The most recent *bingwu* and *dingwei* years were 1966 and 1967, when the Cultural Revolution had reached its most violent stage. After this political movement, many intellectuals wrote books recording their misery during this period. The Chinese writer and translator Yang Jiang's 楊絳 (1911–2016) *The Records of the* Bingwu *and* Dingwei *Years* 丙午丁未年紀事 details the sufferings her family experienced during the Cultural Revolution. Yang mentions the two years of *bingwu* and *dingwei* in reference to the disastrous Cultural Revolution. See Yang Jiang 楊絳, 'Bingwu dingweinian jishi' 丙午丁未年紀事, *Yangjiang wenji sanwenjuan* 楊絳文集散文 (Beijing, 2009), Vol. 1, pp. 55–83.

[32] Lu Shen 陸深, *Pinghulu* 平胡錄 (*Conshu jicheng chubian*) (Shanghai, 1937), Vol. 3977, p. 14.

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reign title Wu 吳.[33] In the preceding four years Zhu had maintained his titular allegiance to Han Lin'er and the Song state. When Zhu issued an order, it would begin with the phrase 'at the imperial edict of the Emperor [Han Lin'er] and the order of the Prince of Wu [Zhu Yuanzhang]' and end with dates numbered according to Han Lin'er's reign title *longfeng*.[34] Zhu's adoption of the reign title Wu in early 1367 was an event of profound importance, signifying that he had officially become an independent ruler. In the Chinese tradition, a reign title normally consisted of a few characters that could straightforwardly reflect a ruler's political and social ideals. The meaning of the reign title Wu, however, was unclear. Curiously, Zhu neither explained its meaning, nor gave his reasons for adopting it.

The modern Chinese scholar Wu Han 吴晗 (1909–1969) regarded this reign title as unusual, and his understanding of it has changed over time. In a paper published in 1941, Wu Han pointed out the oddities about the reign title Wu, casting doubt on the authenticity of this account. Wu Han claims that this reign title has only one Chinese character, whereas in all other cases in Chinese history the reign title of a ruler consisted of at least two characters. He also holds that the reign title Wu was the same as Zhu's title the Prince of Wu, which had never happened before. Wu Han suspects that Zhu never actually adopted the reign title Wu and that this record was fabricated.[35] But Wu Han later changed his mind. He argues that Zhu did indeed adopt the unique reign title Wu in order to satisfy a widely circulating prophecy that a Wu Family State would rise in a certain Sheep year (hereafter the Wu Family State prophecy).[36] Wu Han, however, neither interpreted the meaning of this prophecy, nor explained why Zhu intended to fulfil it.

The Wu Family State prophecy is recorded in both the official history *Yuanshi* 元史 (Official History of the Yuan), completed in 1370, and the contemporary private history *Gengshen waishi* 庚申外史 (Unofficial history of the Gengshen emperor [born in 1320]), written by Quan Heng 權衡 (fl. 1370s) between 1368 and 1370.[37] Texts of this prophecy recorded in these two sources are the same. The *Yuanshi* writes:

> In the fifth year of the Zhizheng period (1345), a children's song, circulating in the Huai and Chu areas, says: The rich should not build mansions, the poor should not build huts. But when we see the year of the Sheep, then it will be the Wu Family State.[38]

[33] *Mingtaizu shilu* 明太祖實錄 (Taibei, 1962), j.21, p. 311. For details about the Red Turban rebellions and Zhu Yuanzhang's relationship with the Song state, see John W. Dardess, 'The transformations of messianic revolt and the founding of the Ming Dynasty', *Journal of Asian Studies* 29.3 (1970), pp. 539–541; Hok-Lam Chan, 'The "Song" dynasty legacy', pp. 91–133; Frederic W. Mote, 'The Rise of the Ming Dynasty, 1330–1367', in *The Cambridge History of China. Volume 7, Part 1: The Ming Dynasty, 1368–1644*, (eds) Frederick W. Mote and Denis Twitchett (Cambridge, 1998), pp. 12–44; Edward L. Dreyer, *Early Ming China: A Political History 1355-1435* (Stanford, 1982), pp. 12–65; David M. Robinson, *Empire's Twilight: Northeast Asia Under the Mongols* (Cambridge, MA, 2009), pp. 130–60. For discussion of the religious background of this rebellion, see Barend ter Haar, *The White Lotus Teachings in Chinese Religious History* (Leiden, 1992), pp. 114–139; also Barend ter Haar, 'Rumors and prophecies: the religious background of the Late Yuan Rebellion', *Studies in Chinese Religions* 4 (2018), pp. 382–418.

[34] Wang Shizhen 王世貞, *Yanshantang bieji* 弇山堂別集 (Beijing, 1985), j.86, p. 1633.

[35] Wu Han, 'Mingjiao yu daming diguo' 明教與大明帝國, in *Wuhan shixue lunzhu xuanji* 吳晗史學論著選集 (Beijing, 1986), Vol. 2, p. 383.

[36] Wu Han, *Zhu Yuanzhang zhuan* (1948) 朱元璋傳 (1948), in *Wuhan quanji*, Vol. 5 (Beijing, 2009), p.186.

[37] The *Gengshen waishi* was a major source for the chronology of the last emperor of the Yuan in the *Yuanshi*. See Wang Shenrong 王慎榮, *Yuanshi tanyuan* 元史探源 (Changchun, 1991), pp. 40–50.

[38] Song Lian 宋濂 et al. (eds), *Yuanshi* 元史 (Beijing, 1976), j.51, p. 1107 [hereafter YS]. Children's songs were a common trope used in Chinese historical books in reference to rumours and prophecies. In the Chinese tradition, children have the ability to see invisible figures and to foresee events that adults could not.

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至正五年，淮楚間童謠云：富漢莫起樓,窮漢莫起屋。但看羊兒年，便是吳家國。

The meaning of this prophecy appears relatively straightforward. It urges people, no matter whether rich or poor, not to spend resources building houses and huts. It predicts that in a certain Sheep year, a state named Wu will rise (and replace the Yuan).[39]

Quan Heng associates this prophecy with the abovementioned Zhu Yuanzhang's adoption of the Wu reign title, claiming that this prophecy was a symbol of the mandate given to Zhu Yuanzhang by Heaven. He argues:

> Previously, a children's song said: The rich should not build mansions, the poor should not build huts. But when we see the year of the Sheep, then it will be the Wu Family State. This is because our dynasty (the Ming) established its capital in Jiankang (present-day Nanjing), built altars in the southern gate of Jiankang city to offer sacrifices to Heaven, and received the mandate. [Our dynasty] changed the twenty-seventh year of the Zhizheng period (1367) into the first year of Wu.[40] It was exactly the year of the *dingwei*. It has been confirmed. The Mandate of Heaven has been set. How can human beings change it?[41]

Quan Heng perceives this prophecy as proof of Zhu Yuanzhang's political legitimacy. His view was followed by many Ming and Qing historians such as Huang Yu 黃瑜 (1426–1497), Wang Qi 王圻 (1530–1615), Guo Zhizhang 郭子章 (1543–1618), Jiang Yikui 蔣一葵 (*circa* 1600s), Qian Qianyi 錢謙益 (1582–1664), and Qian Daxin 錢大昕 (1728–1804), who all regard the Wu Family State prophecy as an omen of Zhu Yuanzhang's political legitimacy.[42] For example, the mid-Ming historian Huang Yu mentions this prophecy in his own book as a demonstration of Zhu Yuanzhang's Fire Agent.[43] The late Ming and early Qing historian Qian Qianyi follows Quan Heng's narrative, regarding the Wu Family State prophecy as a manifestation of the Mandate of Heaven that Zhu received.[44]

Modern scholars have also addressed this prophecy. As mentioned above, Wu Han attributes it as the motivation for Zhu Yuanzhang adopting a reign title as unusual as Wu. The modern scholar Hsiao Ch'i-ch'ing 蕭啟慶 (1937–2012) argues that this prophecy reflects a popular mentality in the late Yuan. The mentality was that 'a dynastic change would take place, and people, no matter whether rich or poor, should stop working and awaiting changes'.[45]

[39] In the context of this prophecy, the Wu Family State vaguely refers to a state related to Wu. It might refer to a state with the state name Wu, or a state with its ruling house having the surname Wu, or a state the ruler of which bears a title relating to Wu.

[40] Zhizheng 至正 was the reign title of the last Yuan emperor, who was still ruling North China in this year.

[41] Quan Heng, *Gengshen weishi jianzheng* (Zhengzhou, 1991), j.1, p. 63.

[42] Huang Yu, *Shuanghuai suichao* 雙槐歲抄 (SKCM), *zi* 239, j.1, p. 427; Wang Qi, *Xu wenxiantongkao* 續文獻通考 (SKCM), *zi*189, j.224, p. 258; Guo Zizhang, *Liuyu* 六語 (SKCM), *zi* 251, j.6, p. 242; Jiang Yikui, *Yaoshantang waiji* 堯山堂外紀 (SKCM), *zi* 148, j.78, p. 294; Qian Qianyi, *Chuxue ji* 初學集 (Shanghai, 1995), j.103, pp. 2123–2124; Qian Daxin, *Qianyangtang ji* 潛研堂集 (Shanghai, 1989), *shiji* j.1, p. 922.

[43] Huang Yu, 'Shengrui huode' 聖瑞火德, *Shuanghuai suichao* 雙槐歲抄 (SKCM), *zi* 239, j.1, p. 427. Although Zhu Yuanzhang did not publicly announce the cosmological agent of the Ming, many Ming scholars identified Zhu and the Ming dynasty with the Fire Agent. For related research, see Hok-Lam Chan, 'The "Song" Dynasty legacy', pp. 91–133; Liu Pujiang 劉浦江, 'Wude zhongshi shuo zhi zhongjie—jianlun Songdai yijiang chuantong zhengzhi wenhua de shanbain', pp. 177–190.

[44] Qian Qianyi, *Chuxue ji* 初學集 (Shanghai, 1995), j.103, pp. 2123–2124.

[45] Hsiao Ch'i-Ch'ing, 'Zhonghua fudi guyue huanjia mengyuan xingwang yu chenwei' 中華福地古月還家：蒙元興亡與讖緯, *Yuanchaoshi xinlun* 元朝史新論 (Taibei, 1999), p. 97.

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Neither Wu Han nor Hsiao Ch'i-ch'ing addressed *why* the prophecy predicted a Wu state to replace the Yuan. Nor do they explain why people needed to stop working and await changes during this dynastic transition. In Chinese history some dynastic transitions did not cause widespread chaos and people did not need to stop working during that time.

I argue that a consideration of the original medium of the prophecy can lead to a different reading which sheds light on the question of why the prophecy specified a Wu Family State. According to the two sources, the prophecy first circulated in the form of a children's song, that is, it was originally an oral lyric without a written text. In Chinese, the pronunciation of *wu* has many matching characters, including the surname Wu 吳 and the character *wu* 無, which means 'no' or 'none'. Thus, the original meaning of *wu* in the children's song was not limited to the surname Wu. In the case of this prophecy, the character *wu* 無, meaning 'no', can be seen as a likely reading of the prophecy. The phrase of *wujiaguo* (無家國) could refer to 'families being lost and the state being destroyed' rather than 'a Wu Family State'.[46]

Two other prophecies recorded in the *Yuanshi* reinforce this interpretation of the meaning of *wujiaguo*. During the late Yuan period, the expression 'no families' (*wujia* 無家) was used in prophecies to refer to the miserable situation of people losing their families in chaotic times. According to the *Yuanshi*, in 1356 a blackthorn tree (*lishu* 李樹) in the Zhangde area bore a fruit that was said to be as big as a cucumber. Thus, a prophecy arose that 'a blackthorn bears a cucumber, and all people will have no families (李生黄瓜, 民皆無家)'.[47] Also, according to the *Yuanshi*, in 1355 a popular prophecy circulated in the Dadu (present-day Beijing) area, as follows: 'A blast of yellow wind and a blast of sand; there are no people or families for a thousand and ten thousand *li* (一陣黃風一陣沙,千里萬裡無人家)'.[48] The phrases 'no families (*wujia*)', 'no people or families (*wurenjia*)', and 'no families or states (*wujiaguo*)' have similar meanings in reference to chaotic times that would cause people to lose everything. These records of *wujia* and *wurenjia* in the *Yuanshi* support the identification of 'no families or states' as the original meaning of *wujiaguo*.

With the phrase *wujiaguo* understood as 'no families or states', the original meaning of the Wu Family State prophecy can be interpreted in the following way: 'No matter whether rich or poor, people should not spend resources on building houses and huts. In a year of the Sheep, chaos will break out and people will lose everything, including their families and state.' Examining this prophecy in the context of the *bingwu* and *dingwei* apocalyptic belief suggests why the prophecy specified the Sheep year. This prophecy originally predicted that in a *dingwei* Sheep year, Yuan society would fall into chaos. Consequently, the state and people's families would be destroyed, and people, no matter whether rich or poor, would lose all their property. Thus, there was no point in expending resources on building house and huts. Originally this prophecy suggested that people should stop working and wait for changes not because of a dynastic transition, but because of an imminent apocalypse.

The meaning of '*wujiaguo*' (無家國 no families or states) can be better understood in the context of the narrative of 'having families and states' in the Chinese classical

[46] The phrase *wujiaguo* in this children's song was a colloquial expression. More formal literature such as official histories has similar expressions like *jiaguo juwang* 家國俱亡 or guopo jiawang 國破家亡.

[47] *YS*, j.51, p. 1104.

[48] *YS*, j.51, p. 1107. This prophecy has been cited by modern scholars working on Chinese environmental history. Based on this prophecy, they argue that sandstorms existed in the area of Beijing as early as the Yuan period. See Wang Weiti 王維堤, 'Lishishangde shachen tianqi' 歷史上的沙塵天氣, *Zhonghua wenshi luncong* 中華文史論叢72 (2003), p. 44.

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tradition. Confucius had a famous saying in regard to 'having families and states'. The *Analects* relates:

> Qiu (Confucius) has heard that the rulers of states and the heads of families (有家有國者 *youjia youguozhe*) 'worry not that the population is sparse but that it is unevenly distributed; worry not that the people are poor but that they are not at peace'. For when there is even distribution, there will be no poverty; when there is harmony, there will be no sparseness of population; when there is peace, there will be no upheaval.[49]

> 邱也聞有家有國者，不患寡而患不均，不患貧而患不安。蓋均無貧，和無寡，安無傾。

Confucius suggests that rulers who have states and families should make society stable by ensuring that wealth was evenly distributed and that people lived in harmony and society in peace. On the contrary, 'no families or states' refers to a situation where wealth is unevenly distributed, people are in turmoil, and society is in chaos.

The late Yuan was in the situation of 'no families or states'. Throughout the dynasty, the Yuan had to deal with a serious problem of unequal distribution of wealth and by the late Yuan, things were getting worse.[50] When the large-scale anti-Yuan rebellion broke out in 1351, the rebel leader Liu Futong 劉福通 harshly criticized the Yuan on the grounds that 'while poverty is extreme in Jiangnan 貧極江南 (in China), wealth is boasted of in Saibei 富誇塞北 (in Mongolia)'.[51] According to contemporary accounts, the poor people 'gladly joined the rebellion' and they 'joined the rebellions like coming home' 從亂如歸 because of the 'disparity between the rich and poor' 貧富不均.[52] A group of anti-Yuan Chinese rebels chanted the slogan 'destroying the rich and benefiting the poor' 摧富益貧during the warring late Yuan. [53]

My hypothesis for how this prophecy came into existence is as follows. It originally arose as a response to the serious problem of the unequal distribution of wealth in Yuan society. It predicted that during the *dingwei* Sheep year, the Yuan would fall into chaos, leading to families lost and the state destroyed. Everyone, no matter whether rich or poor, would lose their property. Thus, this prophecy suggests that people stop working and wait for change. As a result of this upheaval, the problem of the disparity between the rich and poor would be finally solved. This extreme solution would have resonated with poor people, and this might be considered as one of the reasons for the prophecy's popularity.

The difference between the original oral meaning of this prophecy proposed above and that of the written texts recorded in the *Yuanshi* and the *Gengshen waishi* indicates that this prophecy underwent changes during its circulation. It transformed from predicting an apocalyptic future to forecasting the rise of a Wu state. Existing sources give no hint of

[49] *Analects* 16:1. This translation is adopted from William Theodore de Bary and Irene Bloom (eds), *Sources of Chinese Tradition. Volume 1: From Earliest Time to 1600* (New York, 1999), p. 61.

[50] For detailed research on the distribution of wealth during the Yuan, see Wu Han, *Zhu Yuanzhang zhuan* 1948, pp. 28–31; Meng Siming 蒙思明, *Yuandai shehui jieji zhidu* 元代社會階級制度 (Shanghai, 2006), pp. 174–181; Han Rulin 韓儒林, *Yuanchaoshi* 元朝史 (Beijing, 1986), pp. 38–53.

[51] Ye Ziqi 葉子奇, *Caomuzi* 草木子 (Beijing, 1959), j.3, p. 51. This translation is adapted from Dardess, 'The transformations of messianic revolt', p. 545.

[52] Ye, *Caomuzi*, j.3, p. 51.

[53] Chen Gaohua 陳高華, 'Yuandai qiyi nongmin de kouhao' 元代起義農民的口號, *Yuanshi yanjiu lungao* 元史研究論稿 (Beijing, 1991), pp. 260–265.

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whether this transformation occurred naturally or whether someone intentionally changed the prophecy's meaning. But clearly the changed text was highly conducive to Zhu Yuanzhang's claims to political legitimacy. When the *dingwei* Sheep year arrived in January 1367, Zhu Yuanzhang had already been associated with the name Wu for many years. In 1361, the Song state conferred the title of the Duke of Wu on him, and in 1363 Han Lin'er, the titular emperor of the Song state, further promoted Zhu to the rank of the Prince of Wu.[54] On the first day of the *dingwei* Sheep year (31 January 1367), Zhu began to use his own reign title Wu, further reinforcing his status as the ruler of Wu. With all his links to Wu, Zhu Yuanzhang's regime seemed to be the Wu Family State predicted by the prophecy.

Zhu Yuanzhang was not, however, the only ruler who chose to utilize the Wu Family State prophecy. His long-standing rival Zhang Shicheng 張士誠 (1321–1367) also had the opportunity to fulfil the prophecy. Zhang, originally a salt smuggler, organized a strong army during the late Yuan period, and his loyalty often fluctuated between the Yuan court and anti-Yuan rebels. Zhang and his army controlled a vast area centred on Suzhou in the lower Yangzi River area. Zhang's regime bordered Zhu Yuanzhang's territory, and battles between the two sides continued for more than a decade. In the middle of 1363 Zhang Shicheng changed his state name from 'Da Zhou' 大周 to 'Wu' 吳 and proclaimed himself to be the Prince of Wu.[55] When Zhu Yuanzhang was promoted to Prince of Wu in the next year, there were two regimes with the name Wu 吳.[56] To distinguish between the two, contemporaries referred to Zhu's regime as the Western Wu (*xiwu* 西吳) and to Zhang's as the Eastern Wu (*dongwu* 東吳).[57]

Both Zhang and Zhu had reasons to identify their own regimes with the Wu Family State. They both arose in the Huai river area, where the prophecy had first emerged. Each ruler had associations with both the place and title of Wu. Suzhou, the centre of Zhang's territory, was the capital of an ancient Wu state, which can be traced back to the Spring and Autumn period (770 BCE–476 BCE). The area surrounding Suzhou had been called Wu ever since then. Zhu also had his reasons. For a time Jiankang (present-day Nanjing), his power base, had been the capital of a Wu kingdom during the Three Kingdoms period (220–280). Strictly speaking, Suzhou had a longer history of being called Wu than Nanjing had, but this was not of much help in Zhang's battles against Zhu Yuanzhang. After a decade of seesaw victories, Zhu began to gain the upper hand. In the middle of 1366, half a year before Zhu adopted his reign title Wu, he launched a large-scale campaign against Zhang Shicheng. After almost a year of fierce fighting, Zhu finally conquered the capital of Eastern Wu, and he captured Zhang Shicheng in the seventh month of the Sheep year (August 1367). The fall of Suzhou marked the end of Zhang Shicheng's Eastern Wu state. Therefore, in the middle of the *dingwei* Sheep year (1367) Zhu Yuanzhang became the only Prince of Wu.

The above analysis addresses the concern of Frederic Mote (1922–2005), who was curious about the fact that Zhu did not proclaim his imperial Ming dynasty in early 1367 but waited until after his conquest of Zhang Shicheng's Eastern Wu regime.[58] This can be explained by the Wu Family State prophecy. In 1367 Zhu sought to strengthen his legitimacy by fulfilling this prophecy. His title as Prince of Wu was useful in associating his

[54] Yu Ben 俞本, *Jishilu jianzheng* 紀事錄箋證, (anno.) Li Xinfeng 李新峰 (Beijing, 2015), pp. 136, 174–175.

[55] Qian Qianyi, *Guochu qunxiong shilue* 國初群雄事略 (Beijing, 1982), j.7, p. 181; *MTZSL*, j.13, p. 172.

[56] Although Zhu Yuanzhang was nominally subservient to the Song state and its emperor Han Lin'er during 1363–1367, his contemporaries, including rivals and allies, knew he controlled the Song and tended to call his regime the Wu.

[57] Qian, *Guochu qunxiong shilue*, j.7, pp. 181–182.

[58] Frederic W. Mote, 'The Rise of the Ming Dynasty, 1330–1367', in *The Cambridge History of China. Volume 7*, Mote and Twitchett (eds), p. 57.

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regime with the prophetic Wu state. Thus, it was better for him to maintain his Wu regime in early 1367 rather than to establish a new one. Furthermore, the conquest of Zhang Shicheng's Eastern Wu was a necessary step for Zhu to construct himself as the only Prince of Wu. In the middle of the *dingwei* Sheep year, Zhu defeated Zhang Shicheng and strengthened his legitimacy by seemingly fulfilling the Wu Family State prophecy, after which he was ready to establish his own imperial dynasty.[59]

Different narratives of the prophecy

While both the private history *Gengshen waishi* and the official history *Yuanshi* preserve the Wu Family State prophecy, they offer different narratives of it. The *Gengshen waishi* treats this prophecy as proof of the Mandate of Heaven given to Zhu Yuanzhang. But the *Yuanshi* includes the prophecy in the Treatise of the Five Elements (五行志 *Wuxingzhi*), which talks about the relationship between abnormal natural phenomena and political malfunction, making no mention of its link to Zhu's reign title or his legitimacy.

In the Treatise of the Five Elements of the *Yuanshi*, the Wu Family State prophecy, together with three other children's songs, are labelled as a poetic augury (*shiyao* 詩妖). According to long tradition, as seen in Ban Gu 班固 (32–92), the author of the *Hanshu* 漢書, poetic auguries were understood to be indirect expressions of the dissatisfaction of the multitude. 'The lord is factious and tyrannical, and ministers shut their mouths in fear of punishment. Then resentment will be expressed in the form of songs. Thus, poetic auguries emerge.'[60] According to a definition of the poetic augury given by a modern researcher, 'poetic auguries were unusual poems created under unusual social circumstances, and they were omens of social disturbance'.[61] This definition is fitting to the above interpretation of the original meaning of this prophecy as 'families lost and the state destroyed'. Thus, the inclusion of the Wu Family State prophecy in the poetic augury part of the *Yuanshi* implies that the compilers of the *Yuanshi* understood the original meaning of the prophecy as indicating social disturbances rather than the rise of a Wu state.

This raises the question of why the *Yuanshi* does not adopt Quan Heng's narrative of the Wu Family State prophecy, which apparently supports Zhu Yuanzhang's claims to political legitimacy.[62] Since the *Yuanshi* reflects Zhu Yuanzhang's political views, this question can be put another way: why did Zhu Yuanzhang not employ a narrative seemingly conducive to his legitimation? Research shows that Zhu dominated the writing of the *Yuanshi*, and his influence is seen in all aspects of the work. Before and during the compilation, Zhu Yuanzhang gave the compilers directives, ranging from the writing style

[59] The drowning of Han Lin'er, Zhu Yuanzhang's overlord, in the twelfth month of the *bingwu* year (January 1367) can also be examined in the context of the *bingwu* and *dingwei* apocalyptic belief. The timing of Han's death was helpful to Zhu Yuanzhang. First, he died in the *bingwu* year, a time that was believed to be dangerous for emperors. The timing of Han's death could, to some extent, dispel the suspicion that Zhu Yuanzhang might have murdered his overlord. Second, the timing enabled Zhu Yuanzhang to adopt his own reign title Wu from the first day of the *dingwei* Sheep year, thus satisfying the Wu Family State prophecy. The relationship between Zhu Yuanzhang and Han Lin'er was quite complex, and I plan to address this topic in a separate article in the future.

[60] Ban Gu, *Hanshu* (Beijing, 1962), j.27, p. 1377.

[61] Wu Chengxue 吴承學, 'Lun chenyao yu shichen' 論讖謠與詩讖, *Wenxue pinglun* 文學評論, 2 (1996), p. 105. For research on poetic auguries, see Sun Rongrong 孫蓉蓉, 'Chenyao yu shixue' 讖謠與詩學, *Wenxue pinglun* 6 (2011), pp. 164–171.

[62] For the relationship between the *Gengshen waishi* and the *Yuanshi*, see Wang Shenrong, *Yuanshi tanyuan*, p. 47.

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of the whole book to the specific wording of a passage.[63] According to Zhao Fang 趙汸 (1319–1369), a contemporary observer, 'all the writings and omissions are up to (Zhu Yuanzhang's) wise decisions'.[64] As the Chinese historian Chen Gaohua 陳高華 puts it, 'to some extent, Zhu Yuanzhang was the real general director of the compilation group'.[65]

The transformation of Chinese political culture regarding the role of prophecies in establishing dynastic legitimacy can help explain this seeming conundrum. As mentioned above, during the Song, Confucian elites attacked prophecies as deluded and insisted that virtue was the sole qualification for political legitimacy. In this context, although Quan Heng's narrative seems useful to Zhu Yuanzhang, it was unsuitable for being included in the *Yuanshi*, which reflects the Confucian view of the Yuan-Ming transition. Zhu Yuanzhang relied heavily on the advice of his Confucian allies to attract support and govern his nascent state and empire. John Dardess points out that Zhu's cooperation with Confucian elites from the Zhedong area in the 1360s set the foundations for the Ming dynasty.[66] Edward Farmer argues that Zhu formulated the Ming law code on the basis of Confucian doctrines and he legitimized his authority by embracing Confucian doctrines.[67] Evidence that Zhu wanted to downplay prophecy and emphasize Confucian virtue as the basis of his legitimacy can also be found in many other Ming official documents. For example, Zhu Yuanzhang's Proclamation of Enthronement makes no mention of any prophecy but emphasizes that Zhu made 'the people safe in their lands and homes' 民安田裡.[68] The *Veritable Records* of Zhu Yuanzhang repeatedly attribute Zhu's success to his virtues, such as 'humanity' 仁, 'lenience' 寬大, and 'respecting Heaven and being diligent in people's affairs' 敬天勤民.[69] Zhu's concealment of the fact that he employed the Wu Family State prophecy is consistent with the transformation of legitimation discourse and a renewed emphasis on the virtue of the ruler as the basis for political legitimacy.

Zhu's efforts to hide his past in the Red Turban Song state were another reason for concealing his exploitation of the Wu Family State prophecy. Qian Qianyi, Wu Han, and the modern scholar Yang Ne 楊訥 all point out that after founding the Ming, Zhu Yuanzhang made it taboo to talk about his service under Han Lin'er.[70] Furthermore, the *Yuanshi* makes no mention of Zhu Yuanzhang's past in the rebel Song state. On the contrary, the *Yuanshi* describes Han Lin'er's Song state in a derogatory way as the 'pseudo-Song' (*weisong* 偽宋) and Han Lin'er as 'the pseudo-Song ruler' (*weisongzhu* 偽宋主).[71] The *Yuanshi* anachronistically calls Zhu Yuanzhang's army prior to the establishment of the Ming dynasty 'our Great Ming' so as to set it apart from the rebel Song state.[72] This background helps to explain Zhu's treatment of the Wu Family State prophecy in the *Yuanshi*. If the *Yuanshi* addressed the links between the prophecy, Zhu's Wu reign title as well as his

[63] Song Lian, 'Jin Yuanshi biao' 進元史表, YS, p. 4673.

[64] Zhao Fang, 'Song Cao Gongwan xiansheng gui fanyang xu' 送操公琬先生歸番陽序, in *Quanyuanwen* 全元文, (eds) Li Xiusheng 李修聲 et al. (Nanjing, 2004), Vol. 54, j.1666, p. 438.

[65] Chen Gaohua 陳高華, 'Yuanshi zuanxiu kao' 元史撰修考, in *Chen Gaohua wenji* 陳高華文集 (Shanghai, 2005), pp. 469–491.

[66] John Dardess, *Confucianism and Autocracy: Professional Elites in the Founding of the Ming Dynasty* (Berkeley, 1983), pp. 185–224.

[67] Edward L. Farmer, *Zhu Yuanzhang and Early Ming Legislation: The Reordering of Chinese Society Following the Era of Mongol Rule* (Leiden, 1995), pp. 18–32.

[68] 'Dengjizhao' 登極詔, in *Huangming zhaoling* 皇明詔令, (ed.) Fu Fengxiang 傅鳳翔, (SKCM), *shi* v. 58, j.1, pp. 4a–5a.

[69] For example, see *Mingtaizu shilu*, Vol. 22, pp. 313–314; Vol. 34, pp. 602–603; and Vol. 76, p. 1396.

[70] Qian Qianyi, *Guochu qunxiong shilue*, j.1, p. 38; Wu Han, *Zhu Yuanzhang zhuan*, in *Wu Han quanji*, Vol. 6, p. 318; Yang Ne, 'Zhu Yuanzhang yu Liu Futong Han Lin'er', in *Yuanshi lunji* (Beijing, 2012), p. 318.

[71] YS, j.44, p. 928; j.142, p. 3397; j.52, p. 891.

[72] See *YS*, j.46, pp. 958, 966, 967; j.47, p. 977.

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title as the Prince of Wu would inevitably remind people of his service as the Duke of Wu and the Prince of Wu under Han Lin'er in the Song state, a situation he sought to avoid.

Zhu Yuanzhang's suppression of popular religion and prophecies after his enthronement was another reason for the concealment. Before 1367, Zhu was part of the Red Turbans who circulated prophecies to mobilize supporters of their rebellions.[73] Although existing sources make no direct reference to Zhu's attitude towards prophecies at this time, his status as a subordinate of Han Lin'er indicates that he did not openly oppose the prophecies that Han Lin'er and other Red Turbans circulated. In the Red Turban Song state, Zhu was promoted to the position of the Duke of Wu and then the Prime Minister. Zhu's career in the Song state laid the foundation for him to found the Ming dynasty. After the founding of the Ming, however, Zhu harshly suppressed popular religion and outlawed prophecies. In the first year of the Ming (1368), Zhu issued an edict outlawing the White Lotus society, Manichaeism, the White Cloud sect, and other 'heretical' practices.[74] The *Great Ming Code*, which was finished in the sixth year of the Hongwu period (1373), prescribes capital punishment for those who used the names of Maitreya Buddha, the White Lotus, Manichaeism, the White Cloud, and other 'heretical' sects.[75] The *Great Ming Code* also specified that those who created and spread prophecies, heretical books, and deluding words would be executed.[76] Zhu's changing attitude towards popular religion and prophecies was understandable. As a rebel leader, he could make use of prophecies to mobilize soldiers to fight against the incumbent government, the Yuan, but when he became the ruler of the Chinese empire, prophecies, which could be used to mobilize a large number of people, became dangerous to the stability of his rule. In the context of suppressing prophecies, Zhu's treatment of the Wu Family State prophecy can be better understood. While outlawing prophecies, Zhu did not want people to know that he ever utilized prophecies to legitimize his rule. Thus, he did not want the text of the *Yuanshi* to address his association with the Wu Family State prophecy.

Zhu's exploitation of the Wu Family State prophecy and later concealment of this exploitation offer important clues to understanding the role of prophecies in Chinese politics after the Song. Existing scholarship has largely emphasized the fact that the Yuan and Ming governments did not publicly discuss their legitimacy by interpreting prophecies, leading to the impression that prophecies completely lost their influence in politics. The above analysis of the Wu Family State prophecy, however, shows that the situation is more complicated. While the official discourse on legitimation had changed after the Song, many commoners and elites in the Yuan still embraced the prophetic idea. Zhu had successfully attracted support by employing the Wu Family State prophecy, but in the context of Confucian ideas that virtue was the most important qualification for legitimacy, he downplayed the role of prophecy in his legitimation.

This analysis of the Wu Family State prophecy shows that after the Song, the prophetic discourse may have died out in official documents, but it did not lose its importance in politics. It continued to exert influence, even if unacknowledged in official sources. The examination of the Wu Family State prophecy shows tensions between official documents and private writings. Although Zhu dismissed his association with the Wu Family State prophecy in official documents like the *Yuanshi*, the Proclamation of Enthronement, and the *Veritable Records*, his efforts to conceal his exploitation of the Wu Family State

[73] Gao Dai 高岱, *Hongyoulu* 鴻猷錄 (SKCM), *shi* 19, j.2, p. 21; He Qiaoyuan 何喬遠, *Mingshanzang* 名山藏 (*Xuxiu Siku quanshu* 續修四庫全書), Vol. 426, j.43, p. 354.

[74] Wang Shizhen, *Mingqing jiji* 名卿績紀 (*Mingdai zhuanji congkan* 明代傳記叢刊), *ce* 42, j.3, p. 78.

[75] Liu Weiqian 劉惟謙 (comp.), *Daminglü* 大明律 (SKCM), *shi* 276, j.11, p. 592. For more on the Great Ming Code and connections to the Mandate of Heaven, see Jiang Yonglin, *Mandate of Heaven and the Great Ming Code* (Seattle, 2015).

[76] *Daminglü,* j.8, pp. 645–646.

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prophecy were ironically unsuccessful. In his private writings, Quan Heng provided a different narrative of the prophecy, regarding it as a portent of Zhu Yuanzhang's rise. Quan's view was much more influential on later writers. Ming and Qing Confucian scholars, such as Qian Qianyi and Qian Daxin, all recognized the Wu Family State prophecy as an omen of Zhu Yuanzhang's Mandate of Heaven. And none of them refers to this prophecy as a poetic augury, as claimed by the *Yuanshi*. These private writings demonstrate that after the Song, many Confucian elites still, at least partially, accepted the prophetic discourse of political legitimacy.

Conclusion

There have been some mysteries concerning the events taking place during the Yuan-Ming transition. Han Lin'er mysteriously drowned at the end of the *bingwu* year, and Frederic Mote was curious as to why Zhu Yuanzhang did not immediately found his Ming dynasty after his death. Wu Han points out the uncommon reign title Wu adopted by Zhu Yuanzhang in early 1367 (the *dingwei* year). These mysteries can be understood in the context of the *bingwu* and *dingwei* apocalyptic belief and from the perspective of the Wu Family State prophecy. The timing of Han Lin'er's death enabled Zhu to use his own reign title Wu at the beginning of the *dingwei* Sheep year and partially dispelled the suspicion that he may have murdered his overlord Han Lin'er. It was plausible that Zhu adopted the reign title Wu to accord with the Wu Family State prophecy. Zhu did not immediately establish his own Ming dynasty after Han Lin'er's death because the reign title Wu, which associated him with the prophecy, could have constructed him as a ruler favoured by Heaven.

The *bingwu* and *dingwei* apocalyptic belief was recorded by Song scholars like Hong Mai and Chai Wang, and it circulated in the Song and Yuan. In this context the Wu Family State prophecy emerged in the late Yuan, originally predicting an imminent apocalypse in Yuan society. In the written texts recorded in official and private writings, this prophecy transformed into a prediction of the rise of a Wu state. Zhu Yuanzhang employed this prophecy to establish his legitimacy. But after his enthronement, Zhu sought to conceal his exploitation of the prophecy.

Zhu's utilization of the Wu Family state prophecy and later concealment of this offer a more nuanced narrative of the role of prophecies in politics after the Song. It is true that after the Song, in their official writings, Confucian elites stopped using prophecies to support claims to legitimacy. Instead, they identified virtue as the most important qualification for the Mandate of Heaven. But this does not mean that prophecies lost their influence in the political arena. Zhu Yuanzhang utilized the Wu Family State prophecy, but Ming Confucian elites, on behalf of Zhu, did not record this in official documents, reflecting state ideology. In other words, prophetic discourse disappeared in official ideology after the Song, but it still functioned as a critical factor in political struggles. After the Song, prophecies changed their role in Chinese politics—not from important to unimportant, but from officially recognized to officially concealed.

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