

*Please share your stories about how Open Access to this book benefits you.*

Did the Mongols Matter? Territory,  
Power, and the Intelligentsia in China  
from the Northern Song to the Early Ming

by

John W. Dardess

2003

In *The Song-Yuan-Ming Transition in Chinese History*  
Paul Jakov Smith and Richard von Glahn, eds.

This is the published version of the book, made available with the permission of the publisher. The original published version can be found at the link below.

Dardess, John W. "Did the Mongols Matter? Territory, Power, and the Intelligentsia in China from the Northern Song to the Early Ming." In Paul Jakov Smith and Richard von Glahn, eds., *The Song – Yuan-Ming Transition in Chinese History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Asia Center, 2003), 111-134.

Published Version: <http://www.hup.harvard.edu/catalog.php?isbn=9780674010963>

Terms of Use: <http://www2.ku.edu/~scholar/docs/license.shtml>

## CHAPTER 3

### Did the Mongols Matter?

#### Territory, Power, and the Intelligentsia in China from the Northern Song to the Early Ming

*John W. Dardess*

The China of the early Ming, around 1400, was in several major respects a different China from that ruled by the Northern Song and the Liao, around 1000, or the Southern Song and the Jin, around 1200. Eighty-nine years of the Mongol Yuan dynasty separate the end of the Southern Song in 1279 from the Ming reunification in 1368; whatever the Ming inherited from earlier tradition, it necessarily inherited it through the Yuan filter. What paths did China travel to get from there to here? How exactly was the China of 1400 different from the China of 1000? And what role did the Mongol Yuan dynasty play in shaping those differences? Three themes stand out—two of them in particularly striking relief.

The first theme has to do with historical geography. What is now considered China proper (China minus Manchuria, Inner Mongolia, Xinjiang, Tibet, and Taiwan) was neither rounded out nor consolidated in 1000 or even 1200. It was the Yuan dynasty that by 1300 brought about the territorial unification of China proper north and south and sponsored further Chinese immigration into peripheral regions such as Yunnan and Gansu that had earlier been under non-Chinese rule. By 1400, the Chinese Ming captured this enlarged national landscape, which has since been passed down through the Qing to modern times.

The second theme is less straightforward. It centers on the question of whether territorial enlargement over the years 1000–1400 enhanced or diminished the power of the central dynastic state. There are three dimensions to this question. One is agenda: did the central government take on more or fewer tasks over this period? The second is centralization versus decentrali-

zation: to what extent did the central government concede or farm out to lower levels important parts of its agenda? The third is imperial authority: did the early Ming emperors play a more commanding role over government than their Song or Yuan predecessors? Although the role of the central government was often the focus of intense factional fighting and therefore often volatile, we can discern tendencies toward the enhancement of imperial authority, a streamlining of the machinery of central government, and some reduction in the size and complexity of its agenda.

The third theme relates to the rise of a national Confucian intelligentsia. As the national territory expanded, and as its rulers struggled over issues related to its governance, it is clear that a Confucian intelligentsia, as yet invisible in the year 1000, emerged and performed an increasingly influential role in national political life, presaging in many ways the role of intellectuals in more recent times in China.

These three developments, which often proceeded along separate tracks, converged with dramatic effect during the Ming founding in 1368.

### POLITICAL GEOGRAPHY: WHAT WAS "CHINA"?

Beneath the shifting dynastic nomenclature and jurisdictional boundaries of the various regimes that ruled in continental East Asia over the period 1000–1400, there lay in some people's minds, at least in latent form, a geographical entity that bore the name "China" (Zhongguo 中國). "Zhongguo" was the name used in Song and Ming on those special occasions when it was necessary to distinguish a constant China from the changing sequence of dynasties that occupied all or part of what we now regard as China from all those other entities out there that were not-China.

The historical cartographer Shui Anli 稅安禮, active in the late Northern Song, understood China as that part of continental East Asia whose territory had, from the dawn of history, been marked off into provinces or commanderies and prefectures (*zhou* 州, *jun* 郡, etc.), whose people spoke Chinese and had heard of the "renowned teachings" (*shengjiao* 聲教) available in written form in that language, and which was ruled, or should be ruled, by a single political system constructed in accordance with those teachings. Judging by the maps he drew and the captions he wrote, Shui believed that

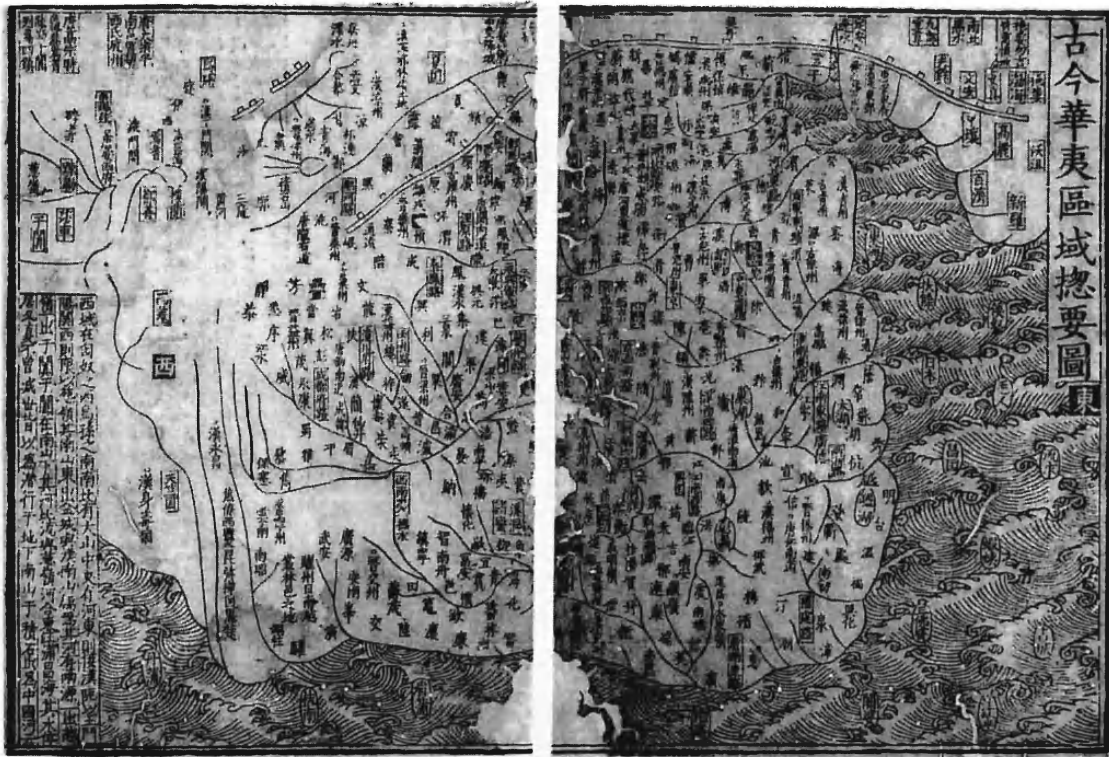


Fig. 3.1 Shui Anli, “Comprehensive Map of the Territories of China and Foreign Countries, Ancient and Modern”

“China” (“Zhongguo,” as he calls it) emerged full-blown at an extremely remote time in antiquity, when Emperor Ku 帝嚳, a legendary predecessor of the sage-rulers Yao and Shun, first laid out its nine classical provinces. His maps suggest that the basic geographical extent of China never changed after that; that all that happened in later times was refinement and detail—infilling, renaming, reorganizing. Shui embeds China in a somewhat larger Asian matrix, which China dominates. Each map, from Emperor Ku’s time down to the Northern Song, features a long rampart, evidently some sort of great wall, extending from southern Manchuria out into Gansu (Fig. 3.1). North of the rampart Shui recognizes in his own days a Khitan entity, but not its Liao dynasty. Northwest of the rampart, he recognizes a Xi Xia state. Each has made what looks like an incursion into China and roped certain Chinese prefectures into its own orbit (Fig. 3.2). A separate map labeled “Prefectures and Commanderies Beyond the Reach (*huawai* 化外) of the Present Dynasty” draws circles around the sixteen Liao-held prefectures in north China,

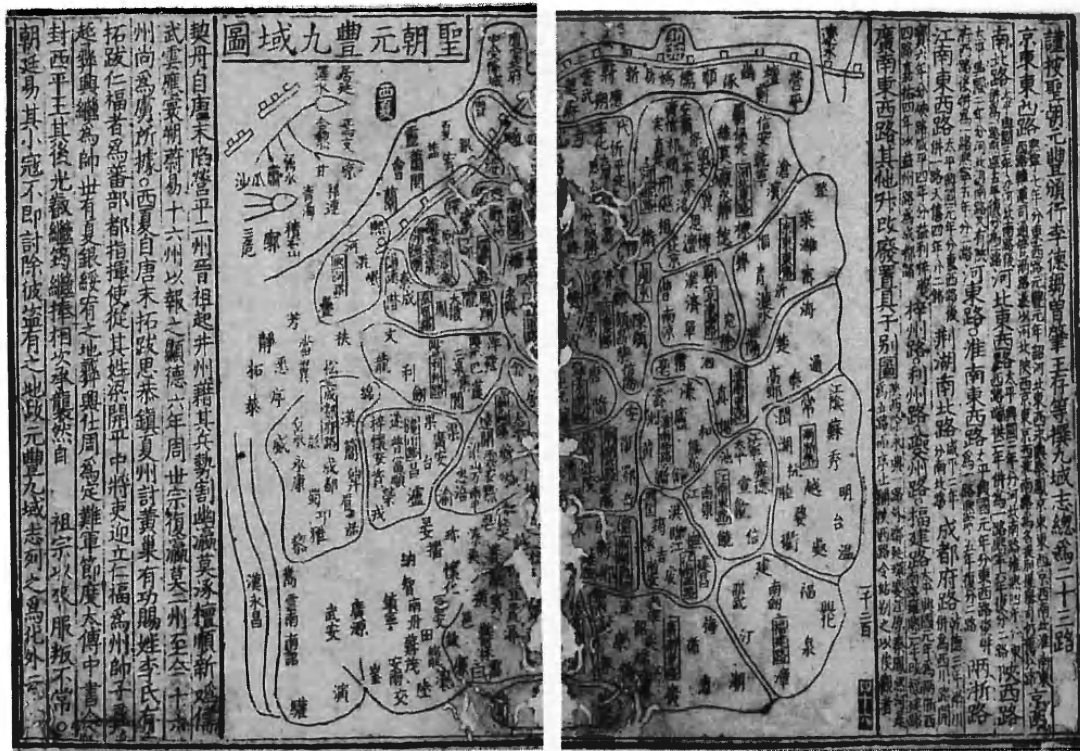


Fig. 3.2 Shui Anli, "Map of the Nine Regions of the Yuanfeng Reign Period of Our Sagely (Song) Dynasty"

plus thirteen in Gansu and Ningxia, ten along the western frontier of Sichuan, and thirteen more in the southwest. These Shui describes as "in the same category as places held at loose rein under the Tang, which do not submit their taxes or registers to the Ministry of Revenue but are places to which [China's] renowned teachings (*shengjiao*) have spread."<sup>1</sup> A curious feature of Shui's maps is their lack of definition to the west and southwest. Aside from the sharp line of the northern rampart, where China abruptly stops, or that of the east coast, beyond which China clearly does not extend, it is never certain just how far China goes in any other direction. Interesting, too, is Shui's use of the term *shengjiao*: it definitely points to the existence out there, beyond Northern Song control, of sinophone populations who through schooling and education maintained "orthodox" lifestyles, learned traditions, and latently "Chinese" political allegiances.

Some two and a half centuries later, during the Yuan-Ming interregnum, Song Lian 宋濂 (1310–81)—who may or may not have seen Shui Anli's maps—touched on some of the same points from an idealized, though less

schematic, more historically grounded point of view. He wrote that when the Zhou dynasty was at its height, China (Zhongguo) had been very small and consisted of no more than several tens of present-day prefectures, an island embedded in a vast non-Chinese sea. Since by contrast the Han dynasty was gigantic (9,302 li east to west, and 13,368 li north to south, he noted), Song wondered rhetorically whether that meant that Han power was superior to Zhou virtue. "Does this mean that intelligence and force are superior to benevolence and righteousness?" he asked. Of course not: "The Zhou dynasty looked upon the realm as a public affair. It followed only where *shengjiao* led, and it had no desire to compel others through force. The Han dynasty looked upon the realm as a private affair; it interested itself in what power could compel through annexation. Indeed it could annex, but look at the short life of the Han as compared to the Zhou! The question is a bad one."<sup>2</sup> For "Han" here, it seems safe also to read "Yuan."

How members of the intelligentsia like Shui Anli and Song Lian conceived of "China" in terms of people and territory surely affected national policy, even if it did not wholly determine it. But precisely how were the Chinese defined as a people? Perhaps the broadest definition was cultural: the outward observance of lifestyle implied by the term *shengjiao*. William H. McNeill has observed that "persons of diverse background [could] become fully and completely Chinese simply by becoming learned" (McNeill 1985: 19). There was also a narrower definition: Chinese were those who possessed Chinese surnames and who shared in a national descent-group patrimony stemming from the mythical Yellow Emperor. As Patricia Ebrey notes, "Those who took themselves as Chinese by descent were neither confident that Chinese culture could or would transform aliens nor comfortable with seeing assimilated descendants of aliens appear to be denying or hiding their actual ancestry" (Ebrey 1996: 25).

Song Lian's student Fang Xiaoru 方孝孺 (1357–1402) was troubled by the survival of Mongol cultural contamination into the early Ming and, in a famous essay he wrote around 1380, bridged the contradiction between culture and race by raising the bar of assimilation. Fang insisted that "becoming fully and completely Chinese" required that families wholly accept the stringent disciplines of the socio-ethical order of China, a process that could be expected to take many generations:

What is precious in China is its system of human relations. [China] can partake of the Way of the former kings, thanks to the beauty of its ritual and culture (*liwen*

禮文) and the social discriminations it observes through its system of robes and caps. . . . Among barbarians, however, nephews cohabit with aunts, and sons fight with fathers, because they do not observe the hierarchical distinctions implicit in human relations, and because they lack the finer things like robes and caps and ritual and culture. . . .

Some argue that because in the Spring and Autumn era, all the territory in what is now south China was barbarian, no one from the south is fit to rule China. I reject that argument, because in the 2,000 years since the Qin dynasty southerners have made the rites and righteousness their heritage, *and therefore they have become part of China*. Their human relations have been clarified, and their customs have been made splendid. People from south China are now in no way comparable to barbarians.<sup>3</sup> (Italics added)

The difficulty for some of the Chinese intelligentsia as guardians of the Chinese socio-moral order in the Yuan period, when many foreigners were domiciled in China, was the susceptibility of the Chinese *shi* 士 class to contamination by foreign lifestyles. Kong Qi 孔齊 (ca. 1315–after 1368), for example, viewed Uighurs (and other foreigners common in China in his day) acceptable as a people but not as a culture, because they did not practice sex segregation. He urged that the Chinese avoid social intercourse with Uighurs, especially because of the fatal attraction their lax customs had for females and other weak-willed elements in the Chinese upper classes.<sup>4</sup> Wang Wei 王禕 (1323–74) recalled that Yuan rule south of the Yangzi River had brought about a most unwelcome cultural revolution among the Chinese upper class:

After the Yuan conquest of Jiangnan, the customs of ritual and culture (*liwen* 禮文) changed under the influence of the overbearing crudity of the conquerors, such that after a few decades everyone became so acclimated to it that it became custom, and the old ways of the Song completely disappeared. The *shi* plaited their hair and wore short coats; they mimicked the Mongol language and dress in order to ingratiate themselves with their rulers, in the hope that they might thereby advance themselves. Those who steadfastly clung to Chinese tradition were ridiculed for being backward and shy.<sup>5</sup>

If the Chinese "nation" was defined by conformity to demanding socio-moral norms, then the political and military expansion of its territory would find itself not stopped, perhaps, but certainly inhibited by ideology. The Confucian Way was not exactly a proselytizing religion. Indeed, far from feeling confident about their own faithfulness to it, the Chinese intelligentsia

seem to have been prey either to real fear or to paranoia that the Chinese people were far more susceptible to barbarization than the barbarians were to the adoption of Chinese socio-moral norms.<sup>6</sup>

The irony is that the Yuan conquest of much of East Asia in fact opened new space for the expansion of Chinese society. To judge from modern historical maps, such as those prepared by Chen Cheng-siang (1980: 204, 218), the territory controlled by the Ming in 1522 was larger by some 30 percent than that controlled by the Northern Song in 1102. The chief gains were southern Manchuria and the Liaodong peninsula, a northern strip of territory along the 41st parallel, the Gansu-Ningxia region, and the southwestern provinces of Guizhou and Yunnan.

Of course, this expansion owed a great deal to the legacy of the military conquests undertaken under Mongol auspices in the thirteenth century, of which "Zhongguo" was the principal beneficiary in the long run. The Mongols did "China" a favor by obliterating several non-Chinese regimes long in occupation of arguably Chinese territories: the Tangut Xi Xia (1227), the Jurchen Jin (1234), and the Tibeto-Burman kingdom of Dali in Yunnan (1254). It was these regions near or contiguous to the Northern Song domain that the Ming effectively repossessed after Yuan rule collapsed in the 1360s.

This raises the issue of dynastic rule over all or part of Chinese territory. The period 1000–1400 featured dynastic regimes of two main types: the culturally homogeneous and the culturally complex, or polyethnic. Basic to the structure of polyethnic regimes was military-political rule by an Inner Asian ethnic minority over a Chinese majority (or near-majority) with the ruling minority deploying political symbols and techniques adapted from the Chinese learned tradition. As rulers, the Khitans, Jurchens, and Mongols accommodated Chinese culture. Although they imposed certain discriminations on Chinese, they also accorded Chinese culture so many official gestures of respect as to place their own ethnic and cultural survival in China at risk in the longer term. The culturally homogeneous regimes were the two Song dynasties and the Ming, in which the ruling house and the higher political and military echelons shared the same Chinese ethnicity as the majority of the population, and no privileges or concessions were given to non-Chinese languages and cultures (although the Ming officially recognized northern Chinese as a disadvantaged regional ethnicity in need of certain special privileges).



One important difference between the two types of regimes was the unwillingness of the culturally homogeneous Chinese regime to assign a place of honor to, or in any way glorify, its permanent military establishment. In part, this downgrading of the military class resulted from unhappy experiences with repeated military coups during the Five Dynasties era and the effective institutional engineering carried out by the Northern Song founders to ensure against the recurrence of such coups. The Confucian revival that began in the eleventh century certainly reinforced this state of affairs by sedulously fostering a permanent suspicion of the professional military and by arrogating to civil authority and to the Confucian community at large the privileges of formulating strategy, managing military operations, and organizing local militias.

What this led to during the three centuries of the Song was the inability, despite occasional aggressive probes, to fulfill the ultimate dynastic goal of recovering those territories under Tangut, Khitan, or Jurchen rule that contained substantial Chinese populations. Song governments regularly postponed the ultimate goal of reunification in favor of one or another proximate or preparatory goal, such as state-directed enhancement of national resources in the Northern Song or moral-spiritual rearmament in the Southern Song.

On the other side of the coin, conquering all of China seems never to have been an overriding aim of the Tanguts, Khitans, or Jurchens. The Khitans were content with their sixteen Chinese prefectures, and both the Khitan and Northern Song courts worked consistently and successfully for over a century to keep the peace, treating each other as though they were members of a single family (Wright 1996). The Jurchens failed to exploit an opportunity to conquer all of China in the twelfth century. James T. C. Liu has argued that they failed to do so because (1) it was never their aim to do it and (2) they would have had to cooperate effectively with Song defectors, which they were disinclined to do (J. Liu 1995).<sup>7</sup> In contrast to the vehement revanchism expressed on occasion by the Southern Song intelligentsia, the Chinese intelligentsia under Jurchen rule appear to have been uninterested in any plan to conquer the south; one of their leading lights, Wang Ruoxu 王若虛 (1174–1243), argued that “there is no reason why every country should be destroyed and unification achieved” (Tao 1988: 104).

The Mongols appear to constitute the exceptional case. Yet Thomas Barfield (1991) has argued that at the outset the Mongols would have pre-

ferred not to conquer China but to exploit it from a distance, just as all Mongolia-based regimes had done before them; they were, however, frustrated by the unwillingness of the Jin and the Xia to make agreements with them. Perhaps so; but starting from the time of Chinghis Khan himself, the Mongols were also poised, by their culture and by recent experience, to commandeer non-Mongol military forces and technical expertise and to patronize religious and intellectual elites from all parts of the world. Their empire was multicultural, not bi-cultural in the manner of the Khitans and Jurchens. Khubilai was not caught in the Jin emperors' dilemma of having to steer between the Jurchen world on the one side and the Chinese on the other, because Khubilai had not two but a good half-dozen major ethnicities (which gradually were reduced to four) at his disposal. He was willing to meet the Chinese part way and "sinify" himself and his regime to whatever extent appeared advantageous. Of course, he desired access to South China's resources, but for some years he seems to have been willing to "coexist" with the Southern Song and tap its wealth by way of tribute. The refusal of the Song to agree to such an arrangement for very long prompted Khubilai's Chinese advisors (who under Jurchen rule had been unaggressive) to urge its outright annexation (Schlegel 1968).

In order to annex Southern Song territory, Khubilai had to commandeer Chinese infantry and naval forces and leadership on a large scale and to agree to let his northern Chinese officials portray him in their overtures to their southern compatriots as a Confucian-style monarch who understood the symbolisms of Confucian governance and would respect Confucian values: By the time Hangzhou fell in 1276, the Mongol rulers already had had about a half-century of intermittent experience in taking Khitan and Chinese advice, reconstructing Chinese-style political and military institutions, and patronizing Confucianism (starting with the founding of the national college and its attached Confucian temple in 1233, and the institution of civil service examinations in 1237). By their careful words and actions in South China, the Mongols made an acceptable case for their competence and legitimacy as rulers there.

After Khubilai, it remained for the Yuan to secede from the larger Mongol world-empire, to cease using China as a resource base for further conquests, to exclude all but those Mongols and other foreigners domiciled in China from the competition for power and privilege, and to begin to behave like a "normal" dynasty whose concerns were focused wholly on China and

its particular problems and issues. By the early decades of the fourteenth century, this shift was almost complete, and it was no longer necessary for Chinese advocates to wage the often desperate fight they had waged until as late as Khubilai's reign to preserve *Hanfa* 漢法 (Chinese as opposed to Islamic or other foreign administrative traditions). Mongol rule became more and more a cover beneath which an increasingly assertive Chinese intelligentsia resumed the struggles and debates that had been put on hold since the fall of the Southern Song a half-century earlier.

Unexpectedly, Yuan rule in China collapsed within a few decades of its evolution toward dynastic normalcy. Just when the Yuan was readier than ever to pay close and sensitive attention to China's needs, it began to unravel. Eventually it came undone in the course of dealing with the aftereffects of the great insurrections of the 1350s.

The most important Yuan legacy in a positive sense was its unification of "Zhongguo" under one sovereign political system. The founders of the Ming never thought to return to Song conditions and satisfy themselves with a "lesser empire." They first created a base area south of the Yangzi and then accomplished what had never been done before: the conquest of the whole of China starting from the south and marching north. The stiff resistance of the Khitans and Jurchens against the northward probes of the Song was scarcely in evidence, so complete was the collapse of the Yuan. The Ming forces undertook further conquests, ostensibly to remove threats from pro-Yuan elements along the outer edges of the Yuan realm: northern Tibet (Lintao 臨洮 and Hezhou 河州, 1370, 1377), Yunnan (1382), and central Manchuria (1387). The Ming founder's armies invaded Mongolia in 1372 and 1388 not to annex it but pre-emptively to destroy what remained of the Yuan court and whatever illusions it may have had about reclaiming its lost possessions in China.

In his *Ancestral Instructions* of 1373, the founder of the Ming, Zhu Yuanzhang 朱元璋 (the Hongwu 洪武 emperor, r. 1368–98), deemed Korea, Japan, Annam, and various countries in Southeast Asia forever off-limits as targets for military attack by the dynasty. No other territories were exempted from Ming conquest (Farmer 1995: 119–21). It seems Ming China was free to colonize and incorporate territory along other frontiers, if conditions were favorable. Indeed the Ming resumed a piecemeal frontier expansion project that the Song had conducted, and the Yuan had enlarged.<sup>8</sup> But unlike the Mongols, the Chinese state (Song or Ming) was uninterested in

the conquest of frontier territory unless it already had a Chinese population or appeared capable of sustaining one. Yet Mongol rule assisted and patronized Chinese frontier expansion: Zhang Wenqian 張文謙 (1217–83), a Chinese official whom the Mongols posted to former Xi Xia territory in 1264, brought in educated refugees from Sichuan to help set up schools to teach Chinese language and customs to children there (de Rachewiltz et al. 1993: 275). According to Ruth Dunnell (1991: 158), perhaps half of the three million people in Xi Xia territory were ethnic Chinese, and it is conceivable that it was mainly Chinese rather than Tangut or Tibetan children who enrolled in the schools. A Muslim official by the name of Saiyid Ajall directed a multicultural development project in the former kingdom of Dali in Yunnan after 1273, in which Chinese immigration was encouraged, Confucian schools and temples were built, and Chinese marriage and funeral rites promoted (de Rachewiltz et al. 1993: 466–79).<sup>9</sup>

As Wang Gungwu (1983) has pointed out, there were several very different traditional modes of discourse that officials or writers in China might use in addressing frontier issues. These included the language of cosmic equality (*ishi tongren* 一視同仁), the language of tributary discrimination and hierarchy (inner versus outer, Chinese versus barbarian), and the language of racism (barbarians as sub-human animals). Early Ming rhetoric about frontier affairs tended toward the euphoric, radiating optimism about the attractiveness of the Way of the Sages and Worthies to non-Chinese ethnicities in places like Hainan island, Yunnan, or the Western Ocean. Xie Jin 解縉 (1369–1415) wrote of the minorities of Guangxi (Yao, Zhuang, Miao, Lao) that their rebellious and treacherous nature was due mainly to their hard and poor lives in a rugged and malarial region: “But if the Chinese people (*Zhongguoren* 中國人) teach them literacy, then before long they will become wholly reverent and obedient, and who will then say that their natures are not good?”<sup>10</sup>

Reality soon set in, however. Along the frontiers, whose Chinese populations in the early Ming were mainly military, there was fear that recognizably Chinese customs were in imminent danger of barbarization and that providing for the cultural needs of the Chinese population had priority over the efforts required to transform barbarians. Zhu Yuanzhang expressed this view in 1384 as the rationale for his decision to set up state-sponsored Confucian schools in the Liaodong peninsula. “If the children of the military live long on the frontier without hearing the teaching of decorum,” he insisted,

"then their natures will suffer change. It will advance their characters to learn the Classics and practice the rituals, and one day they may even become employable [as civil officials]."<sup>11</sup>

What tended to happen over the long run along the western and southwestern frontiers, where "China" thinned out and non-China assumed a heavier presence, was not assimilation in either direction but a standoff in the form of institutional-cultural dualisms, with Chinese-style governance through prefectures and counties next to the colonial control of non-Chinese peoples through the so-called *tusi* 土司 system.<sup>12</sup> To this day, cities in those frontier regions, like Hohhot, Xining, Lanzhou, and Kunming, retain traces of that older dualism of walled Chinese centers and outlying native settlements (Gaubatz 1996).

In sum, to return to the questions of how to define a national territory for China and what happened to it over the years 1000–1400, a historical breakpoint did apparently take place in the Yuan. The Mongols did away with most of the multistate "system" that had prevailed for centuries in continental East Asia and replaced it with a unified sovereignty and system of government, one that accorded official patronage and privilege at the central level to several Chinese and non-Chinese ethnic categories. The Ming assumed control of the empire that the Yuan had created. But as a Chinese regime that championed *shengjiao* exclusively, the Ming "recognized" other ethnicities only at the low systemic level of local chiefdoms along its distant frontiers.

#### AGENDA, CENTRALIZATION, AND AUTOCRACY

What did the Liao, Northern Song, Jin, Southern Song, Yuan, and early Ming central governments try to accomplish? Which were less ambitious, and which tried to use state power to change the world? Contrary to expectation, perhaps, the territorially larger regimes showed the more activism, if only in spurts.

G. William Skinner (1977: 25–26) has argued that China's national agenda underwent a long-term process of shrinkage and reduction after the eighth century, and R. Bin Wong (1994: 55) has noted among scholars "an emerging consensus about the Chinese state becoming less activist in the late imperial period." The Liao dynasty surely exemplifies that trend, but major exceptions must be noted. Contemporary with the Liao was the Northern

Song. There, in the eleventh century, Wang Anshi 王安石 (1021–86) strove to make an activist central government the driving engine for the expansion of the national wealth and the enhancement of its military power. Although he enjoyed some success, his effort did not survive vehement and sustained protest from within the ranks of government and what Robert Hymes (1986: 217) has noted as the profound effects of the Jurchen conquest of North China in the 1120s, which effectively discredited it. Except perhaps for its energetic development of state Confucian schools (Tao 1995), the Jurchen Jin in no way considered itself an heir to Northern Song bureaucratic activism. As for the Southern Song state, it left much of education, food supply, and rural organization—large parts of which had been part of the central agenda of the Northern Song—to the extra-governmental initiative of an emergent Confucian community and landlord-gentry class.

The Yuan's agenda appears complex and crowded in comparison to those of its predecessors. There were also moments of high ambition, particularly in the 1340s–1350s, when Chancellor Toghto (1314–56), responding to natural disasters and popular riots, rerouted the Yellow River, organized nationwide anti-rebel forces, and even tried to turn North China into a major rice-growing region (Dardess 1994: 572–78).

The agenda of the early Ming central government was extremely ambitious, yet very different in profile from either that of the Northern Song or the Yuan. The Ming controlled a China blasted and battered by seventeen years of civil war. Its goals were truly revolutionary. Unlike the Song or Yuan states, however, the early Ming central government had good access to taxable sources of wealth, was fiscally satisfied, and undemanding of more.<sup>13</sup> Also in contrast to the situation in the Song or Yuan, the Ming center was resolved—albeit at the smallest possible fiscal cost, through propaganda and coercion, and through centrally directed local organization (what Farmer [1987: 21–22] calls the Ming founder's "social blueprints")—to accomplish nothing less than the ethical and behavioral transformation of the entire population of China in accordance with ancient norms laid out in the Confucian canon. (That project was soft-pedaled, and then in effect abandoned, after Zhu Yuanzhang's death in 1398.)

Given the shifting agendas of China's various dynasties over the years 1000–1400, there seems to be no useful way in which their governmental systems can be described as either wholly centralized or wholly decentralized. Much depended on the nature of the tasks at hand. Large-scale military

efforts often called for decentralization, as with the Southern Song (Hartwell 1988: 78), the Jurchen Jin (Bol 1987: 523), and the Mongols (both early on, during their conquest of Jurchen-held north China, when they co-opted local hereditary warlords, and later, when they again sought to co-opt warlords).<sup>14</sup> But there was nothing inevitable about this. The center *might* control large military operations, as was the case with Toghto in 1351–55 and Zhu Yuanzhang from the 1360s.

Depending on what the center wanted to accomplish, it sometimes made sense to centralize some activities and decentralize others. Wang Anshi, for example, centralized rural lending at the same time that he decentralized the Sichuan tea-horse trading enterprise (Smith 1993: 77). A principal aim of the Southern Song court was to redevelop military power on a regional basis, which necessitated decentralization, and yet retain ultimate direction and control, which demanded just the opposite. The unforgettable example of the loyalist hero Yue Fei 岳飛 (1104–42) stands as testimony to the acute difficulty of striking a workable balance between central control and local autonomy in the recruitment and deployment of new military forces. Centralization is easier if existing resources are being concentrated, whereas decentralization is often the best choice when new resources must be created (Kochen and Deutsch 1980: 185–206). Yet it must always be asked whether, when the center decentralizes one or more important functions, it thereby forfeits ultimate oversight and control over those functions. On balance, it looks as though all the dynasties under review sustained ultimate central control through most of their lifespans by one means or another. When it is a question of allocating authority to lower levels, it is not certain to what degree the words “centralized” or “decentralized” fit as blanket labels for any of the dynasties ruling in China from 1000 to 1400.

Several leading scholars, however, label the Yuan as inherently decentralized as a system. I think that the messiness of the Yuan establishment in China—its conciliar practices, its proliferation of agencies, its polyethnicity, and its paperwork in several scripts and languages—has fed this misconception. From early on, Mongol/Yuan central authority in fact sustained its vitality and its ultimate powers precisely through the creative manipulation of chaos. The building of Dadu 大都, the capital city, in 1262–83 provides a good example of the phenomenon. This gigantic task was accomplished not through the creation of one huge and unified urban construction firm, but by the centrally directed, ad hoc agglomeration of hundreds of discrete

groups of planners, supervisors, skilled artisans, and laborers, who were imported by central authorities as needed for the job and then dispersed among the many different agencies and jurisdictions from which they had originated.<sup>15</sup> The conquest of Southern Song, which took the Mongols some 45 years, was finally achieved through the effective patching together of Mongol and Chinese commanders; Chinese infantry, engineers, artillery, and marines; and Confucian advisors and propagandists (Xiao 1994: 385–404). A late example, reflecting exactly the methods used to build Dadu and conquer the Southern Song, was Toghto's central control of new forces enlisted to suppress the mass insurrections of the 1350s. Local Chinese militias and large special units were recruited. Mongol and *semu* 色目 (other non-Chinese ethnics) commanders were drawn from central, appanage, provincial, and censorial agencies, as well as the standing army itself. Jurisdictions deliberately conflicted and overlapped. Armies were aggregated to destroy specific targets, then dispersed. Supply, always kept separate from command, was divided among different agencies. Everything was done to ensure that no autonomous regional machines emerged. And somehow it all worked—in the short run. After the emperor dismissed Toghto as chancellor early in 1355, the Yuan collapsed catastrophically. High-level factionalism, fiscal exhaustion, and national calamities of sufficient scale to overwhelm any government were to blame (Dardess 1973: 105–18; 1994). What then developed was not decentralization but fragmentation, in which self-appointed leaders of this or that region of China reserved to themselves the choice of agreeing to a posture of voluntary or symbolic allegiance to the Yuan center or of turning against it.

But was Yuan provincial organization itself an ultimate cause of the fragmentation of the Yuan realm after 1355? Was the Yuan so decentralized along provincial lines that its early breakup was likely? The editors' introduction to volume 6 of the *Cambridge History of China* argues strongly for this thesis. The Yuan provinces, they write,

had a quite different character from the [Song] provinces and were more like governments of external territories or separate vassal states surrounding the metropolitan domain. . . . Viewed from this angle, Yuan China appears almost as a conglomeration of regions under strong regional governments. This relative lack of powerful central control certainly contributed to the gradual disintegration of the state after 1340 when local rebellions and secessionist warlords threatened the empire's unity. (Franke and Twitchett 1994: 26)



But this argument infers too much from organizational charts.<sup>16</sup> Unless it can also be shown that the center could not regularly control provincial appointments or enforce policy, then the thesis fails. In addition, it would need to be shown that the Yuan realm after the 1340s fractured along established provincial lines. In fact it did not. The provinces as such were too weak to play much part in the Yuan breakup. After 1355, the regional warlords owed their powers to the armies they had personally recruited. The territories they occupied and the administrations they developed had no connection with the Yuan provinces. They grew from outside the provincial system.

No one seems to question seriously the notion that the Ming dynasty from its outset was highly centralized as a governing system. Certainly, compared to the Yuan, it was administratively streamlined. But what are we to make of Zhu Yuanzhang's deliberate creation, beginning in 1378, of eighteen hereditary princedoms along the frontiers and in other strategic locations in China to which he entrusted the defense of his empire (Farmer 1995: 73-79; Dreyer 1982: 148-51)? These princedoms were destroyed in the civil war of 1399-1402, but Zhu's act was unprecedented in recent history. Certainly, the Yuan never undertook a comparable move toward military decentralization.

One widely accepted view is that the Song from its founding represented an upward leap in the direction of autocracy or at least of a precondition for it—a ruling family sequestered from the rest of Chinese society and elevated more securely than ever before above politics. Robert Hartwell (1982: 404-5) has drawn attention to a paradox in the post-Song imperial state: the position of the emperor over officialdom was enhanced at the same time that the ability of the central state to regulate the economic and social life of the realm diminished (the shrinking national agenda likewise pointed out by Skinner). Is this an accurate characterization of the situation for the period under review here?

It does not appear to characterize the Khitan, Jurchen, and Mongol rulers very well at all, but then the idea was formulated not so much with them but, rather, with the Song and Ming cases, in mind. Compared to the courts of the Tang, Liao, Jin, or Yuan, the Song throne was remarkably free of violence and challenge. The internal history of the Song was unblemished by palace coups, civil wars, bloody struggles for the throne, or insubordination by provincial governors. All but three Song emperors came to power as mature men, and most of the emperors were conscientious about their duties

(Lo 1987: 46, 220–24). The question is whether this meant the Song emperors became autocrats with unrestricted personal power.

If the Song emperors were despots or autocrats, then it is difficult to understand why they are so obscure as personalities. Why were all the notable Song personalities scholar-officials? And if the Song emperors were truly autocrats, then why did they steadily lose independent resources (fiscal, for example)<sup>17</sup> they had held at the outset and never acquire new ones (such as personal armies)? Moreover, when the Chinese intelligentsia of the Yuan considered the Song in retrospect, they never mentioned an increase in autocracy. Was it that they failed to see it? If they did see the Song emperors as autocrats and simply said nothing about it, then why did they not hold the emperors personally accountable for the Song collapse? Why did they blame treason and malfeasance in high officialdom instead? Chinese literati in the Yuan did consider the Song a weak, “soft” state, a dynasty characterized by three centuries of *yin* emasculation and craven foreign policy, whose only memorable legacy lay in its fostering of “loyal officials and righteous sons” who ensured by their suicidal martyrdoms that, when it finally collapsed, it did so in unprecedented moral glory.<sup>18</sup>

If the Song emperors were autocrats, then they were symbolic autocrats, emblems of paternal authority rather than strongmen or warlords, because that was what the Song intelligentsia wanted them to be. Major crises, such as those of 1126 (the Jurchen invasion of North China) and 1275, found the monarchy incapable of exerting leadership, and the scholar-officials as much in charge as anyone was (Haeger 1975; Jay 1991). Anthony Sariti (1972) and Alan Wood (1995) seem to be on track in arguing that Song Neo-Confucian thought, far from licensing any kind of willful despotism, exalted the ruler symbolically—as an ideal embodiment of abstract principle and impartial moral judgment. The Song rulers were compelled to accept counsel and ethical restraint and could not easily have their own way.

The Khitan, Jurchen, and Mongol emperors lived, behaved, and died in circumstances very different from those of their Song counterparts. The throne was not above the political process but closely involved in it and was often gained and lost in acts of violence. The preferred handbook for foreign rulers in China was not the Four Books of Neo-Confucianism, but the *Zhenguan zhengyao* 貞觀政要, the practical and pragmatic Tang guide to imperial statecraft, which, as Franke points out, is “the only text that has been translated into four foreign languages (Khitan, Jurchen, Mongolian, and

Tangut)" (Franke 1987: 90). The Yuan was the first dynasty to institute civil service examinations based on Song Neo-Confucianism. It was never possible, however, fully to integrate the Mongol emperors as emblematic fathers of a Chinese *guojia* 國家 (family-state), and Confucian bureaucrats were never more than one source of political support among several for competing candidates for the Yuan throne.

Yet the Yuan monarchy provided an explicitly negative model for the founders of the Ming dynasty. The Ming founders chastised the Yuan rulers for being creatures of faction and for letting their rightful powers slip into the hands of prime ministers. Several important developments converged in the early Ming. The early Ming realm governed an expanded national territory; possessed an ambitious central agenda (the ethical remaking of Chinese state and society); achieved a high degree of centralization, in institutions as well as in policy and personnel control; and, in order to make it all work, gave the emperor a visible and commanding role as policy-forming and decision-enforcing autocrat. All this was consciously engineered from the outset, with major contributions from Confucian intellectuals. Never in the past had Confucian intellectuals wielded such influence over a dynasty during its formative years. How did that come about?

#### GOVERNMENT AND THE INTELLIGENTSIA

During the period 1000–1400, Confucian intelligentsias came to play an increasingly vocal role in China's national affairs. Although it cannot be said that they created the foundations of centralization and autocracy,<sup>19</sup> they certainly accepted them and shaped them to their own purposes. It is worth recalling that the Song was founded in the late tenth century by pragmatic rulers looking for ways to centralize their authority over a reunified China, and in pursuit of that endeavor they recruited as officials learned men from both north and south who lacked great wealth or powerful family connections (Bol 1992: 52–56). Yet it took several generations before a national Confucian intelligentsia, consisting of men born in and around the year 1000, emerged.<sup>20</sup> Probably because the Song founders made no pretensions to intellectual orthodoxy, their hold on later generations was weak; this meant that Song policies and institutions could be modified quite freely as the times and perceived national needs changed (Lo 1987: 11). Much the same holds true for the Jin; two generations elapsed before a "self-sustaining" and

“self-conscious” literati culture came into being among the Chinese under Jin rule in the 1190s (Bol 1987: 466).

This was not the case with the Yuan. The Mongols entered a China in which both in the north and in the south sizable *shi* communities had been in place for some time. When the Mongols began taking northern Chinese into their expanding polyethnic empire in the early decades of the thirteenth century, the local warlords and religious and other community leaders who defected to them served as mediators for the Jin intellectuals whom they had taken under their protection. This process began in the time of Chinghis Khan and continued under his successor Ögödei. The influence of the North China intelligentsia peaked in the 1250s–60s, early in Khubilai’s career. Khubilai thought he needed to consolidate all possible sources of political support in China in connection with his coming bid for power and so called them together several times for consultative conferences. Although Khubilai shifted his patronage elsewhere once he achieved supreme power in 1264, northern Chinese intellectuals used the advantages of the moment to acquaint the Yuan founder and his family with Chinese statecraft and ethical traditions and to present him in a flattering light in their writings and other discourse as a major actor, not in Mongol or world history but in the historical tradition of dynastic China.<sup>21</sup> That Khubilai “belonged” as a great founder and unifier in China’s dynastic tradition still held in early Ming, when the officially sponsored *History of the Yuan Dynasty* said of him: “Emperor Shizu’s [Khubilai’s] measures were vast. He knew men and was good at using them. He placed trust in Confucian techniques (*rushu* 儒術) and so was able to sinify barbarian ways (*i hua bian i* 以華變夷) and set up canons and regulations. Because his plans were far-reaching, he succeeded in creating a system for the entire dynasty.”<sup>22</sup>

Intellectual life in the Southern Song was more intense than in its Jin counterpart. The Southern Song witnessed the stormy rise of the Daoxue 道學 movement, a sectarian “fellowship” that was at once intellectual (its claim to represent absolute moral truth), social (with its local academies, rural compacts, and community granaries), and political (with its factional struggle to secure imperial endorsement). Jin intellectuals became aware of Daoxue as early as the 1190s but seem to have been of two minds about it (Tillman 1995). Hoyt Tillman (1992: 233–34) has argued that the timing of the official recognition accorded to the Daoxue movement by Song Emperor Lizong 理宗 (r. 1225–64) in 1241 was spurred by the challenge to ideological

legitimacy posed by (of all people) the Mongols in North China, who in the 1230s built a Confucian temple, instituted civil service examinations, and founded the Taiji Academy 太極書院, dedicated to the propagation of Daoxue, in Yanjing 燕京. The gradual elevation of Daoxue to official orthodoxy in the south followed step by step the stages in the Mongol conquest of the north and the destruction of the Jin (J. Liu 1988: 147–48). It was as if the Song seized on Daoxue as some sort of magic elixir, the best hope for moral strengthening and dynastic survival.

Surprisingly, perhaps, Daoxue was not discredited by its last-minute failure to save the Southern Song. The Yuan rulers patronized it and, indeed, helped internationalize it in a simplified form known as Xinxue 心學 (which de Bary translates as the “learning of the mind-and-heart”). The Mongol rulers made Xinxue available to Chinese through the state system of education and to the many non-Chinese in north China by way of translations of several of its key texts. The Confucian Xu Heng 許衡 (1209–81) eagerly taught the essential Xinxue doctrines of moral-psychological self-rectification to members of the imperial family and to other Mongol and foreign youths in the China of his time (de Bary 1981).

The Yuan conquest of South China in the 1270s brought the southern intelligentsia into the Mongol fold as the last and lowest-ranking of the ethnic classes the conquerors created to manage the allocation of privilege. Effectively barred from most top positions, southern intelligentsia entered the clerical and teaching services, and a few rose to high advisory positions in one or another of the literary academies set up under state auspices in Dadu. The censorate also proved hospitable to Chinese officials of southern origin, and southerners came to regard it as a crucial institutional niche because of the scope it provided for vehement criticism of central policy and personnel.

The rise of the southern intelligentsia in Yuan service took place at a time (1270s–1280s) when the older generation of influential northerners was dying off (Sun 1968: 147–48). Southerners scored their first concrete triumphs in the early 1300s, with the expansion of the imperial college under the directorship of the southern philosopher Wu Cheng 吳澄 (1249–1333); the official canonization of the Song Daoxue fathers; and the restitution of the civil service examinations, featuring for the first time in history the Daoxue orthodoxy in simplified form as subject matter for testing (Sun 1968: 355–60; de Bary 1981: 50–60). The examinations had quotas for each of the four recognized ethnic classes, and thus they served as a mechanism to leverage fur-

ther intellectual conversions to Confucianism of Mongol and *semu* youths domiciled in China. From that starting point, southern Chinese scholar-officials serving in Dadu as censors, educators, or academicians gradually made themselves more politically influential by exploiting the complex factional divisions among the Mongol rulers and making good use of the powerful ethical language of the new intellectual orthodoxy, against which the proponents of Muslim, Lamaist, or traditionally Mongol forms of discourse could not effectively compete.

Meanwhile, the seedbeds of new developments in Yuan intellectual life were found not in Dadu but far away, in several localities in south China, where a new generation of intelligentsia emerged. Shock over the Song collapse in 1275 had by this time faded from active memory, and the new generation began to restudy and rethink the normative foundations of Chinese law and statecraft, and to transcend Daoxue by resuming other lines of philosophical inquiry that had long been laid aside. By the 1330s and 1340s, the intelligentsia in south China was also conducting an intense re-examination of just what it meant to be a *shi* or a *ru* 儒, exactly what the larger social purposes of the educated Confucian elite were, and how the members of that group should go about fulfilling those purposes. Confucian elites in eastern Zhejiang concluded that they must exert personal leadership in planning and executing local reform of long-standing fiscal injustices. These efforts demanded teamwork among landowners, Confucian planners and advisors of several different philosophical persuasions, and local and regional officials. As reforms conducted within the Yuan system, these efforts required and received cooperation from representatives of all the ethnic classes of that system: southern and northern Chinese, Khitans, Tanguts, and other *semu*, as well as Mongols. The reforms were carried out, under the direction of the Confucian intelligentsia, not as technical exercises in tax accountancy but as profoundly moral exercises in local popular mobilization. The reformers also organized local defenses against the Red Turban attack of 1352.

The radicalization of some of these reform groups—their defection from the Yuan cause and their adherence to the warlord and future Ming founder Zhu Yuanzhang—occurred precisely at that point when it became clear that, after Toghto's forced resignation, the Yuan dynasty would endorse a policy of extreme decentralization by co-opting ex-bandits Zhang Shicheng 張士誠 and Fang Guozhen 方國珍 into the dynastic system as autonomous regional governors in south China. That decision by Yuan central authority

in effect canceled all local fiscal reforms, because Zhang and Fang enjoyed support from well-off landowners whose interests the reforms had harmed or threatened.

Here the issues of territory, political order, and national morality—as understood by the Zhejiang intelligentsia—all came together in one combined package. Morality was key. The intelligentsia believed that most people were evil. The good were those few who observed the fundamental Confucian imperatives concerning human relations and who were altruistic and impartial in their behavior. The evil were the selfish and self-interested. The population of China, the intelligentsia believed, was incapable of self-rule. The people would simply destroy one another in a mad frenzy unless the government intervened. But if the government intervened on behalf of those very elements whose selfishness simply abetted society's ingrained penchant for self-destruction, as the Yuan did when it co-opted Zhang and Fang, then civilization must perish. The political unification of China and the centralization of its government are necessary because leadership in any collective endeavor, as Liu Ji 劉基 (1311–75) argued, must ultimately have one person in absolute charge:

One who builds a big house will hire many artisans, but there will be one master-artisan, and no one will dare decide on anything that thwarts his plans. One who pilots a big boat will have a big crew, but they must have a captain, without whose order they would not dare proceed. When sight and hearing are concentrated in one person, affairs do not fail. When the people of the four quarters obey one ruler, they are settled. When an army of a million men obeys one commander, it triumphs.<sup>23</sup>

Liu Ji and several other leading members of the Zhejiang intelligentsia joined Zhu Yuanzhang in 1360 and played a key role in the founding of the Ming.<sup>24</sup> What they (and intellectuals elsewhere in China) best recalled of the Yuan was its disintegration and collapse so soon after its founding. What was it, they asked, that brought that collapse about and led to all the horrors of the years of civil war that followed? Above all, what must be done to ensure that a post-Yuan dynasty would not repeat that awful experience? Concrete and practical answers to the second question shaped with special force the directions that the unforgiving Ming state-builders took. If it were true, as intellectuals in many parts of South China argued, that the Yuan had collapsed because in the end political corruption gave the masses, who would otherwise have remained docile, no choice other than to rebel; and if

it were true that the Yuan had been corrupt because of rampant favoritism, sycophancy, and leniency and that these factors had caused it to die of its own internal rot, then clearly the first task of the Ming was to see to it that public administration was thoroughly cleansed. But how?

The ethical fundamentalism of the Zhejiang intellectuals who joined Zhu Yuanzhang's warlord regime in 1360 helped provide the answer. Nothing less than the total moral reconstruction of the Chinese people in light of principles drawn from the Four Books and Five Classics would suffice. There would be a "restoration of antiquity" (*fugu* 復古), and all efforts of the new Ming regime would be directed toward the truly revolutionary goal of national psychobehavioral rectification, reaching everyone in China, from the founding emperor himself down to his military elite, his civil officials, the Confucian community at large, and even the common farmers in the countryside.

I would argue that the Ming founding constitutes a watershed in China's history. Ming propagandists were not wholly wrong to assert that there was no historical precedent or model except the golden age of antiquity itself for what the Ming was trying to accomplish—not the Song, not the Tang, not even the Han. The Yuan was remembered vividly as a powerfully negative model, even as the Ming founders tacitly copied some of its institutions, adopted its "learning of the mind-and-heart," and took title to the enlarged realm it had left behind. The Song as a dynastic model was largely forgotten.<sup>22</sup> Except for the Ming, no dynasty in the period under review was (1) a Chinese dynasty in control of so much of "China," (2) founded under the close guidance of a militant segment of the national Confucian intelligentsia, or (3) dedicated to the use of centralized and autocratic power to impose a thoroughgoing program of ethical renewal on the realm. Although that program faded after the founder's death in 1398, the autocratic ideal and the institutional order that he created did not. They were directly invoked at many moments of crisis, as in 1468, 1519, 1524, and in the Donglin 東林 upheavals of the 1620s.

So the Mongols mattered. Without their presence, it is impossible to imagine the later history of Ming, Qing, and modern China. It was the Mongols who established the ethnic landscape of "China" proper. It was the Mongols who, early in the fourteenth century, established a simplified version of Daoxue national orthodoxy through state-provided education and



the civil service examination system, an arrangement that continued, under the Ming and Qing, to the turn of the twentieth century. And in ways the Ming acknowledged by way of negative critique, it was the Yuan dynasty whose short and calamitous tenure in China suggested institutional simplification, moral reconstruction, and an unleashed autocracy as solutions to the problems of national governance.