



Perpetual Happiness The Ming Emperor Yongle

Shih-Shan Henry Tsai

Seattle and London: The University of Washington Press, 2001

xv + 270 pages

ISBN 0-295-98109-1

RODERICH PTAK

This book is about the life and times of Zhu Di 朱棣, the third Ming emperor (r. 1403-1424). Zhu Di, better known under his reign title Yongle 永乐 (“Perpetual Happiness”), was one of the leading figures in Chinese dynastic history. It was his “destiny” to consolidate what had been achieved by his father, the Hongwu 洪武 emperor, founder of the Ming dynasty, and to strengthen the empire’s position in the broader context of East Asian trade and politics. This being so, Yongle assumed a role comparable to that of other emperors who were second or third in a long line of rulers after the reunification of the empire under a new dynasty.

Tsai’s work is the first English-language monograph dedicated exclusively to the Yongle period. To some degree, it overlaps with the widely circulated accounts by E. Dreyer, A. Chan and the *Cambridge History of Ming China*, but it also contains many new insights and, more generally, it often approaches its

theme very differently. To begin with, Tsai’s work is more narrative in character than these other accounts. It is definitely not a dry piece of philological investigation, nor does it abound in far-fetched theories. On the contrary, it presents history in a lively form, from different points of view and under various headings, by combining facts and common sense “deductions” classifiable as “partly invented,” but not “totally fictional.” This becomes evident in the first chapter, entitled “A Day in the Life of Yongle’s Court: February 23, 1423.” In this chapter, Tsai describes the emperor’s busy court routine, from his getting up in the early morning to his going to bed at night. By carefully following every step of Zhu Di’s activities, readers gain a vivid impression of daily government affairs, the many court institutions involved therein, and the extraordinary amount of work political leaders had to cope with in these early times. Moreover, where possible, Tsai also tries to throw light on Yongle’s

BOOK REVIEW

personality. We are told, for example, what Yongle was worrying about most, and how easily he would be exhausted – on account of his feeble health – by the onerous obligations, both formal and otherwise, he had to fulfil during a long working day.

The chapters that follow give a chronological account of Yongle's life. His youth and education are covered in chapter two, called "The Formative Years." This section is particularly rich in content because, in addition to providing biographical details, it also looks at the internal mechanics of court politics during the Hongwu reign. The next chapter deals with the years during which Zhu Di, as Prince of Yan, began to cement the basis for his future "career." Among other things, his expertise in military matters is well explored.

The famous campaign against his ill-fated rival, the Jianwen ruler (建文), is only described in brief – in chapter four, "The Years of Successional Struggle, 1398-1402" – but readers are adequately informed about the network of personal ties and contacts that assisted Zhu Di in his rise to power. Two other facets of the protagonist's life that are well explored here are that he combined political ambitions with deep respect for his deceased father and that, quite obviously, he was perceived as a charismatic leader by many of his followers.

From a "conventional" viewpoint, chapters five and six constitute the central segments of Tsai's book, as they discuss all the major political events that occurred under the new emperor's rule. They also include long discussions of the economic situation, the state apparatus, and various "structural" and other problems Yongle and his ministers had to deal with. Many more details regarding these issues can be found in the special studies and the accounts mentioned above.

Chapter seven is less "conventional," in the sense that it tries to outline a neglected dimension in Yongle's life: his interest in cultural matters. Indeed, contrary to the story told in most modern books, Yongle was not exclusively a military man; he also had a clear understanding of cultural needs, and initiated several editorial and other projects of long-lasting fame. One of the most spectacular of these endeavours was the costly compilation of the *Yongle dadian* 永乐大典, which took many years to complete. Only fragments of this work have survived to the present day. Another remarkable project was the distribution of the *Gujin lienü zhuan* 古今列女传 for educational purposes,

even amongst the southern "barbarians." Those acquainted with this issue will certainly remember O'Hara's translation of the text by Liu Xiang 刘向, and recent research on the editorial history and internal setting of the *Lienü zhuan*.

Chapters eight and nine show the darker sides of Yongle's career. This includes, for example, his iron determination to subdue Annam (Jiaozhi 交趾) in the deep south, and to crush Mongolian power in the far north. Clearly, Mongol forces were a source of constant trouble, but in this case (as in many others), Yongle overdid things. The campaigns initiated by him against the northern enemy were brutal, drained the imperial coffers of valuable funds, and did not always pay. Worse than that, several ministers spoke out against Yongle's steady quest for recognition and grandeur. In this way, the seeds were sown for internal problems and economic difficulties. These in turn affected the emperor's health. When Yongle died in the northern deserts at the age of sixty-five, the empire was in dire need of a major cure. Here Tsai's story ends.

As noted above, Tsai's account is a well-balanced work that does not get lost in unnecessary details. But in various places, the details that are listed could have been presented more accurately, or with some additional explanation. For example, there are a number of errors and ambiguities in chapter nine, especially in regard to China's maritime relations, which flourished under the Yongle emperor: (a) Table 9.1 (p. 185) records various commodities imported from Annam. Here, Tsai confuses sandalwood and sappanwood. Furthermore, the translations "feathers" and "paints" (for *cuiyu* 翠羽 and *qi* 漆) are not very precise. (b) In the context of Ryukyu-China relations, horses should have been mentioned as one of the chief imports from Naha to Fujian (pp. 196-197). (c) *Heding* 鹤顶 – a tribute item sent by Boni 淳泥 (usually Brunei or Borneo; note that different Chinese orthographs for Boni and other placenames were not recorded here) – probably means hornbills and/or hornbill casques, not "cranes". The relevant information is found on page 8411 of the *Ming shi* 明史 (Zhonghua shuju ed.), not on pages 8412 to 8415 (see p. 200 and n. 65 in Tsai's book). Boni-China contacts, it may be added, are best placed in the greater context of China's contacts with the Sulu region, which Tsai did not consider. (d) "Sumatra" (p. 200) should probably be "Samudra" (or "Samudra-Pasai"?). (e) It

RECENSÃO

is generally assumed that cloves only grew on the Moluccan Islands, not on Java's southern coast (also p. 200). Banda produced nutmeg, but not cloves (n. 67). (f) Tsai's assertion that "Each voyage involved... more than one hundred ocean-going vessels" (p. 201) is certainly overstated – some fleets were definitely smaller. (g) The *Yingya shenglan* 瀛涯胜览 bears a preface of 1416. Tsai might have added one or two lines to explain why he chose the year 1433 – perhaps in accordance with Mills' findings (?) – as the date in which Ma Huan (马欢) wrote his work. Moreover, instead of using the Jilu huibian version of the *Yingya shenglan* (and of Fei Xin's 费信 *Xingcha shenglan* 星槎胜览), he should have consulted an earlier edition of this text, or one of the modern versions. There is also some confusion in regard to the number of chapters / country segments in Ma Huan's (Mills') account (all p. 202). (h) Table 9.2 (pp. 204-205) raises several minor questions: Aru probably refers to a site near a river mouth, not to the Aru group; "Gezhi" 柯枝 should be changed to "Kechi" 柯枝; "Liushan" 溜山 by itself stands for the Maldive (and Laccadive?) Islands (*liu* is derived from a Sanskrit term meaning "island"), therefore the addendum *yang* 洋 (in brackets), which could point to the sea around these islands, is somewhat confusing – unless *yang* is meant to represent the "alternative" form "Liuyangguo" 溜洋国 in Fei Xin's account. In addition, the first syllable in "Zifaer" must be replaced by "Zu" (祖法儿); "Bulawa" 卜刺哇 is correctly given as Brawa, but there are different views regarding the names of "Bila" 比刺, "Sunla" 孙刺, "Lasa" 刺撒, and several other localities. Ma Huan's work includes a segment on Tianfang 天方 (Mecca) that was overlooked. The first "g" in "Bingtonglong" 宾童龙 is not needed, "Banggela" would be better than "Panggola" (榜葛刺), and "Gail" is a very unusual reading for Kayal/Cael, etc. Ma Huan also mentions something about the Andaman/Nicobar region. And

finally, a "g" is missing at the end of "Jialimadin" 假里马丁. (i) *Qilin* 麒麟 normally refers to the giraffe, not the okapi (p. 206). (j) Squadrons were indeed sent to Mecca, but Tsai neglects to tell his readers that Mecca was an inland site, its chief port being Jiddah. Whether Zheng He 郑和 himself really stayed in Sumatra ("Samudra"?) during the voyage in question is not at all certain (p. 206). (k) The circumstances of Zheng He's death – exactly where and when he had passed away – are a matter of debate (p. 207). (l) The conclusions attributed to Paul Pelliot (p. 207, second paragraph) cannot be found on pages 446 to 448 of his "Les grands voyages..." (n. 84 in Tsai's book). (m) Bao Zunpeng's data on the size and structure of Zheng He's ships (mentioned at the end of p. 207 and in n. 86 of Tsai's work) are questionable; much of this goes back to a late Ming novel called *Sanbao taijian Xiyang ji tongshu yanyi* 三宝(保)太监西洋记通俗演义.

Clearly, the above remarks should not lessen the value of Tsai's study. They are merely random observations on minor details that have little to do with the major thrust of the book. Many more trivial matters could be listed in the same way, but, similarly, they would not be essential. The bibliography is restricted to selected works in Chinese and English, while only very few publications in other languages are cited. Those wishing to acquaint themselves with further aspects of Yongle's life and times may profitably consult a large body of additional studies in Chinese, French, German, Japanese, etc.

In sum, Tsai's book is an interesting survey of an important theme, general and somewhat "impressionistic" in nature, easy to digest and therefore suitable for students wishing to enter the field of Ming studies. The dry academic may not wish to indulge in it, but others may see in it a useful contribution towards a better understanding of early Ming history. **RC**