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Despotism in Late Ming China

Marie Iwamoto

Introduction

Whether the Chinese political system is despotic has been discussed since the time of the enlightenment philosophers in France in the eighteenth century, but no conclusion has been reached because the definition of “despotism” varies according to individual philosophers and scholars. To understand the Chinese political system, I believe it is necessary to analyze the thought patterns of Chinese rulers, emperors in Imperial China, and the influence of the political system on their reigns carefully.

In this book, I dissect the political thought of the two men in Ming China (1368–1644): Emperor Jiajing (1507–1566) and the scholar-official Guan Zhidao (1536–1608). Jiajing was aiming to handle the affairs of his state by his own will, so I attempt to clarify his political thoughts as well as how he tried to handle these. The “Great Rites Controversy” greatly influenced his reign, so I begin by discussing its process. Jiajing thrice issued proclamations and needed a period of 3 years to conclude the Great Rites Controversy and carry out his will. So, in this book, I examine how Jiajing carried out his will during his reign. At the same time, I investigate Guan Zhidao’s thought patterns to clarify the political thoughts of scholar-officials in late Ming China.

Chapter 1: Transformation of the meaning of the term “jun chen tong you (sovereign and subjects play together)”

In this chapter, I clarify the political culture of Ming China before the Jiajing period by tracing the transformation of the meaning of the term “jun chen tong you,” which represented the ideal relationship between sovereign and subjects in Ming China. Emperor Hongwu (1328–1398) devised this term, which was the title of the first chapter of his pronouncements (Dagao 大誥), to criticize contemporary subjects; it was meant to represent the chapter as an antithesis of the contemporary relationship between sovereign and subjects. In the middle period of Ming China, the interpretation of this chapter underwent a transformation in which scholar-officials began to think of it as referring to the emperor’s summoning of his ministers and the ideal relationship between sovereign and subjects that existed during the Hongwu period. At the end of the Hongzhi period (1488–1505), its meaning was restored to reflect the political attitude of Emperor Hongzhi 弘治帝, who was said to carry out the summoning of his ministers actively. Through the transformation of the meaning of “jun chen tong you,” I clarify how the political attitudes of each emperor profoundly affected politics in Ming China.
Chapter 2: Emperor’s summoning of his ministers in Ming China

In this chapter, I analyze the emperor’s summoning of his ministers during the Hongzhi and Jiajing periods. Emperor Hongzhi actively carried out the summoning of his ministers, especially in his closing years, but this did not equate to a good relationship with his subjects; the reason he practiced summoning his ministers was to carry out his will. On the other hand, Emperor Jiajing practiced summoning of the Grand Secretariat during the Great Rites Controversy. Similar to Hongzhi, Jiajing’s aim was also to carry out his will, but all of the discussions ended up as “he said, she said” arguments, so his political decisions were not directly influenced by his summoning of the Grand Secretariat. From these phenomena, I clarify that the emperor’s summoning in Ming China was unrelated to the good relationship between sovereign and subjects and how it reflected the political system of Ming China, which depended exclusively on the emperor’s will.

Chapter 3: The revision of rituals in the inner palaces at the end of Jiajing 6 (1527)

In this chapter, I clarify Emperor Jiajing’s thoughts about the legitimacy of political decisions by analyzing the revision of rituals in the inner palaces at the end of Jiajing 6. To end the everyday rituals in the inner palaces, Jiajing consulted with Zhang Cong 張璁 (1475–1539), one of the Grand Secretaries who had Jiajing’s trust. Zhang and Yang Yiqing 楊一清 (1454–1530), the Senior Grand Secretary, devised the revision plan through private letters exchange with Jiajing. Jiajing once wanted to deliberate the revision plan among the officials concerned at a meeting, but Zhang and Yang did not agree. Finally, Jiajing carried out the revision plan proposed by the Grand Secretariat. However, immediately after the revision, eunuchs lodged a protest to Jiajing. Jiajing then wrote Jiji Huowen 忌祭或問 to argue about the legitimacy of the revision procedures by advocating the concept of “xunmou qiantong 詢謀僉同”; by practicing this concept, he thought that he would show that his will was public, not private. Therefore, to prove the legitimacy of his will, he tried to practice this concept, for example, by holding court counsels, holding meetings among the officials concerned, and consulting the Grand Secretariat.

Chapter 4: The restart of Jiajing’s summoning of his ministers in Jiajing 10 (1531)

In this chapter, I clarify Jiajing’s political style by analyzing the restarting of his summoning of ministers in Jiajing 10. After the Great Rites Controversy, Jiajing always denied proposals to summon his ministers, even when offered by his favorites such as Zhang Cong. At that time, Jiajing had political discussions with his favorites through
private letter exchanges, so he did not feel the need to summon anyone. Subsequently, since he began the reform of the rites system in Jiajing 9, a disagreement occurred between Jiajing and Zhang. Because of his disagreement with Zhang, starting in Jiajing 10, Jiajing began to practice summoning his ministers, including Zhang, by holding up the concept “jun chen tong you.” In addition, he continued to exchange private letters with his favorites to discuss political issues.

Chapter 5: The political position of the nobility class during the Jiajing period: The case of the Marquis of Wuding Guo Xun 武定侯郭勛

In this chapter, I clarify Jiajing’s intention of his relying on specific nobilities by analyzing the political life of the Marquis of Wuding Guo Xun (1475/76–1542). Guo had been a high-ranking noble military minister before the Great Rites Controversy. His achievement in regard to the Great Rites Controversy was supporting Zhang Cong’s proposal as the military’s chief of state. Afterwards, Guo lost political power, but Jiajing appointed him to a principal office to reform the rites system. Guo gradually participated in general affairs of the state, and was involved in political discussions through Jiajing’s summoning and private letter exchanges, similar to the Grand Secretariat. The increased importance of Guo in politics stemmed from his usefulness at the Court meeting for Jiajing. This phenomenon, in which the chief military ministers played important roles, continued even after the tragic death of Guo, when the Duke of Chengguo Zhu Xizhong 成国公朱希忠 (1516–1572) took over. Jiajing aimed to secure the support of public opinion for his will by adjusting opinions with favorites through summoning and private letter exchanges and making them adjust his opinions in accordance with the Court.

Additional Chapter 2: Books written by Xia Yan 夏言: Guizhou Xiansheng Wenji 桂洲先生文集 and Guizhou Zouyi 桂洲奏議

Xia Yan (1482–1548), one of the Chief Grand Secretaries the Jiajing period, played an essential role in Jiajing politics from the reform of the rite system in Jiajing 9 until his execution in Jiajing 27. In this chapter, I reveal various versions of his literary works, Guizhou Xiansheng Wenji, and his memorials, Guizhou Zouyi. Because of his tragic death and not having an heir, many versions of his literary works and memorials exist, so when his books are used, the content of each version should be compared to ensure accuracy.

Additional Chapter 3: Huo Tao 霍韜’s two biographies: Gongbao Huo Wenmingong
Huo Tao (1484–1540) was one of Jiajing’s favorites. In this chapter, I compare his two biographies: Gongbao Huo Wenzhen Nianpu Huanghuaiji, which was transcribed in the Wanli period (1573–1620) and is now part of the collection in Peking University Library, and Shitoulu, which was printed in the Tongzhi period (1862–1874) of Qing China. Huanghuaiji includes some content that is not part of the Tongzhi version, in which articles related to the Li Fuda 李福達 case or that gave a good account of Guo Xun, were removed. At the same time, this version reduced the number of gossip articles about Xia Yan. The reason for the difference in content between the Huanghuaiji and Tongzhi version was the different situations surrounding when they were composed: the editor of Huanghuaiji was Huo Tao’s son, whose family reputation was damaged by Xia Yan and was involved in politics as a middle-level official. On the other hand, the editor of the Tongzhi version was one of Huo Tao’s descendants, Xia, and Guo had already become merely a historical figure with no direct relation to them.

Chapter 6: The formation of Guan Zhidao’s thoughts and political stance: His attitude towards the issue of Zhang Juzheng 張居正’s filial mourning in Wanli 5 (1577) and its aftermath

In this chapter, I clarify the relation between Guan Zhidao’s thought formation and his political stance by analyzing how he tried to get along in the political world as a scholar-official. At the time of Zhang Juzheng’s (1525–1582) filial mourning issue, Guan was closely related to anti-Zhang officials. However, he was also waiting for a vacant post in Beijing, so he did not wish to oppose Zhang openly and thus tried to protect himself. After Zhang’s death, Guan began to call for his own reinstatement because Wang Xijue 王錫爵 (1534–1614), who was from the same hometown as Guan and had opposed Zhang, had been reinstated. Guan then had his acquaintances write prefaces to his memorials to embellish his image in the dispute over filial mourning. His disciple wrote a story describing Guan as a consultant and supporter of anti-Zhang officials at the time of the filial mourning issue. However, his reinstatement drive did not go well, and after Wang lost his excellent reputation, he finally retired from the political world.

Chapter 7: The political thought of Guan Zhidao’s Congxian Weisuyi 從先維俗議

In this chapter, I clarify Guan Zhidao’s political thought by analyzing Congxian Weisuyi, which was written in his later years. He defined the laws made by Emperor Hongwu as a senior exemplar to be followed, and especially valued Hongwu’s Liuwu 六諭. He regarded it as the ju 矩 (rule) to be followed. His ju was more thoroughly external
than the ju defined in Zhuzixue and Yangmingxue. He also regarded Hongwu as the successor of the *daotong* 道統 (the traditional way) and opposed Zhuzixue 朱子学 and Yangmingxue 阳明学 scholars, who recognized their own capacity to carry on the way of Yao and Shun. He sought a different role between the emperor and scholar-officials, and he further tried to limit the responsibility of speaking about state affairs to specific officials. His argument regarding limiting this responsibility was intended to justify the political life that he himself had protected, and did not oppose Zhang Juzheng.

**Conclusion**

In this book, I find that Emperor Jiajing completed his ideal system of handling state affairs in Jiajing 10s’. He successfully installed a political system in which his favorites supported his reign in tandem and became coordinators that adjusted his opinions in accordance with the Court, as opposed to his ideal system, which would have damaged the Ming government and people. His reign could be recognized as the period visualizing the importance of the emperor’s will on the politics of Ming China.

Although the role of the emperor’s will on the stage of the politics in Ming China was vital, it is difficult to say that it was absolute because Jiajing tried to practice the concept of “*xunmou qiantong*” and to avoid making decisions only by his will. These intentions meant shifting responsibility to others as Guan Zhidao sought to avoid the responsibility associated with being a scholar-official.

In late Ming, when Jiajing and Guan lived, both the emperor and scholar-officials were required to have a self-directed ability to handle state affairs. The political thoughts of Jiajing and Guan, both of whom wanted to shift their responsibilities to others, reflect the larger responsibility problem as a leading political actor in Ming China.