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Truth and post-truth: thinking with Chinese history

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Truth and Post-Truth: Thinking with Chinese History



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Bij ons leer je de wereld kennen

Truth and Post-Truth: Thinking with Chinese History

Inaugural Lecture by

Prof.dr. Ying Zhang

on the acceptance of her position as professor

Chinese History

at Leiden University

on Monday June 2, 2025



Universiteit
Leiden

“Aren’t They Strange?”

In 2022, a few months after the war in Ukraine broke out, I arrived at the American Academy in Berlin as a fellow. The Covid-19 pandemic was winding down, but still raging. As a historian who had worked on the 17th-century Global Crisis, I felt I had “witnessed too much history” and wondered how much more “history” was waiting for me to experience. I encountered women who had fled the war zone; I caught Covid for the first time and lived in quarantine for a whole week; I observed rules to reduce energy consumption. All these were new experiences for me, but in some ways, I felt I had seen them in my historical sources and written about them. During my residency at the American Academy in Berlin, I was completing a book on the history of jailing in Ming China (1368–1644), trying to integrate institutional history and the history of family in my analysis. The Academy is located by Wannsee Lake. From my balcony, I could see the historical building where the notorious Wannsee Conference took place. Every morning, I woke up to a different view of the Wannsee; every day, the waves on the lake would stir up different intertwining feelings about the past and the present, about the historical and the personal. Some of these feelings inspired my writing in concrete ways, but most of them could not be articulated coherently.

I was asked to contribute an essay to the *Berlin Journal*. During the pandemic, I began to speak to American lay audiences about imperial China to help them understand the complexity of contemporary political culture. I saw this essay as another opportunity to reach non-academic audiences in Germany, so I agreed to write it. However, global politics developed so fast that my focus kept shifting. As the deadline approached, the essay took an unexpected direction and registered peculiar emotions and concerns at the moment. When, in the Table of Contents of the *Berlin Journal*, the title of the essay “Aren’t They Strange?” appeared next to a trapped crocodile, I could not help but feel amused by the factor of

contingency in the production of this essay and its presentation of Chinese history.¹

Who are “They” in this essay? “They” refers to a group of Western-trained Chinese scholars I have studied. As faculty members at Yenching University (燕京大學), an institution with deep connections to the United States, they were imprisoned by the Japanese occupation forces in Beijing after the Pacific War broke out in December 1941. While in confinement, they were looking for guidance in the Confucian, Buddhist, and Christian traditions. “They” also refers to the practitioners of Confucian ethical ideals in imperial China, whose behaviors have been deemed absurd in new China and in the eyes of Western observers. Nonetheless, they keep coming back and carry new meanings. “They” also symbolizes the Chinese past that modern historians try to access and describe. Sometimes, I am part of what “they” signifies; sometimes, I am gazing at Them.

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I came across these imprisoned Yenching University scholars accidentally when I was researching on jailed officials in the Ming dynasty. Their prison memoirs immediately fascinated me, because some of the details seemed so familiar. Among them was the U.S.-trained theologian Zhao Zichen 趙紫宸 (T.C. Chao, 1888-1979), who chose to record his feelings and religious contemplations in Classical Chinese poetry.² He explained that because the war prisoners were not allowed to have stationery, composing classical poetry was the most efficient form of documentation and self-expression. As we have learned from the study of Early Modern English prison poetry by Molly Murray, the chaotic and fluid conditions in early modern prisons drove some inmates to resort to regulated verses as a preferred art form because they offered a structure of order. “By writing a poem, or a book of poetry, a prisoner could derive two different kinds of consolation... [On] one hand, the social consolation of communication and exchange with others, and on the other, the private consolation offered by the regularity and order of poetic language.”³ In

these two very different contexts—early modern England and Japanese-occupied China, prisoners composed poetry for the same reasons. Put side by side, they both become legible to us. This was an enlightening moment in my research and writing. I began to see the possibility of exploring universal human struggles and human creativity through my project on jailing officials in the Ming.

Among these Yenching University war prisoners, I also encountered the philosophy professor Zhang Dongsun 張東蓀 (1886-1973), whose documentation of his multiple suicide attempts surprised me. The first method he tried was hanging. He blamed the failure of this first attempt on his excitement. Zhang then tried to starve himself to death but then changed his mind because it would have taken him a long time to die. He hit himself with the handcuffs. But already physically weak, Zhang could not hit his head forcefully enough. And the noise alerted the guard. Next, Zhang yelled at the guards, hoping that they would be provoked to give him a quick execution. The Japanese saw through him and left him alone. Zhang then tried to stuff his nostrils to suffocate himself. But this experiment failed miserably. After all these unsuccessful attempts, he became more obsessed with his suicide mission. One day, he saw a nail on the wall. He pointed his head at the nail and ran toward it. Only then did he realize that “the human skull is the toughest thing in the world.” The nail did not immediately kill Zhang but instead caused severe bleeding. He tried to make himself bleed more. “The more the blood on the floor, the happier I was!” is how he described his state of ecstasy. He survived once again. Although Zhang felt that a successful suicide might upset the Japanese because it “could be seen as a sort of resistance,” his primary goal was to end the unbearable physical and mental suffering. He stressed that he was not a “Western-style modern protestor,” even though the public would like to think so.⁴

Historians of imperial China would immediately find this account of suicide very familiar. We see similar details in the biographies of chaste women who wished to die after the passing of their husbands or fiancés. I used to

dismiss the startling number of attempts in such biographies as fabrication, a narrative strategy to highlight these women's moral convictions. But Zhang Dongsun's prison memoir made me question my cynical attitude toward the historical sources. The psychological pain caused by solitary confinement, the threat of torture, and physical illness pushed him to the limits. The conditions were so challenging that even death could not be achieved easily. As my research on jailing continued, I also visited many premodern and modern prisons in Europe. At the Horsens State Prison in Denmark (Horsens Statsfængsel), I saw the tiny tools that the prisoners made with everyday materials and used to end their own lives. These objects once again confronted my suspicion toward the historical records of exemplary women in imperial China. It took some time-travel and real travel for me to come to this realization.

Each historical research project is thus a journey, a journey for the historian to learn, to grow, to discover not only historical truths but also something about herself. It is especially tortuous for those of us who study topics such as war, unfreedom, and violence. A “strange woman” I noticed when reading WWII-era publications on seventeenth-century China was the writer and scholar Su Xuelin (蘇雪林, 1897-1999). She was commissioned by the Propaganda Department of the nationalist government to write war mobilization material. In this book entitled *The Biographies of Loyal and Brave People in the Southern Ming* (南明忠烈傳), Su Xuelin presents individuals who died heroically during the violent transition from the Ming dynasty to the Qing dynasty (1644–1911).⁵ Her colleagues criticized her for promoting traditional chaste women and loyal men in this book. In response, she explained that the sincerity and the moral strengths expressed by these moral exemplars in imperial China should remain an important spiritual resource for citizens of the young Chinese republic. Su Xuelin's understanding of the value of the Confucian moral exemplars in imperial Chinese history begs our attention because she was a Catholic and a New Woman who had studied in France, taught at Chinese universities, and gained much public recognition as a unique literary figure. She

was truly inspired by the Confucian exemplars, even though she had completely different views on gender and society. Her personal and professional journey was also a spiritual journey. It was not a linear process, but a complicated one in which her education, her feminism, and her religion intertwined to shape her deepening understanding of the emotions and aspirations shared by the Chinese in the past and at present.

These three intellectuals' writings in the WWII era demonstrate that there is no simple narrative of historical "continuity" from imperial China to modern China. What we often associate with the dominant ideals of the premodern past had been contested in imperial China. Historical conditions never stopped evolving. People did not blindly follow the norms or traditions; rather, they enacted them selectively and thought about them carefully. In times of crisis and uncertainty such as war or family tragedy, ideals and norms became unsteady streams of subconsciousness breaking into bodily or emotional pains and excitements. As much as I am interested in—and professionally committed to—studying the big structures and systems that shape governance, bureaucracy, state-society relations, and politics, methodologically I prefer to connect such big topics to basic human feelings, needs, and urges. This methodological preference was very much shaped by my intellectual development in the early 2000s U.S. when I was a joint PhD student in History and Gender Studies at the University of Michigan. The rise of cultural history at the time fundamentally changed how political and institutional history could be written.

The Era of "Post-"

During the seven years of study as a PhD student in the History Department and Gender Studies Department, my peers and I witnessed and consolidated our academic ambitions through many fierce debates about "truth." The intellectual and political impacts of poststructuralism in academia had become contentious. As literary scholars became interested in going to the archives, social historians

began to feel threatened by the blurring of the old disciplinary boundaries. At the intersection of historical and gender studies, questions about the most fundamental aspects of our disciplines were raised. For example, what counts as "authentic" evidence of women's experience of gender oppression in the past when the primary sources themselves are deconstructed? Can cultural history be as real as social history when we study women's suffering?⁶ In the field of imperial Chinese history, texts written by the political elite are no longer innocent conduits of information but should be read critically as self-serving representations. These developments in both fields are shown in the two books on footbinding by Dorothy Ko. These two books, published in 2000 and 2007 respectively, broke away from conventional narratives in two major ways.⁷ First, they showed women's cultural, social, and emotive investments in this practice by integrating women's material culture, domestic labor, and mother-daughter relationships into the picture. Second, they de-exoticized the history of footbinding by demonstrating that "rather than stemming from sexual perversion, men's desire for bound feet was connected to larger concerns such as cultural nostalgia, regional rivalries, and claims of male privilege." The publisher's description of the book reflects the controversy at the time. Phrases such as "neither condemning nor defending foot-binding" and "nor were women hapless victims" were interpreted as politically dangerous by some feminist scholars, unfortunately.

This struggle was and is about how historical truths should be produced and communicated to the students and the public. While many of us were methodologically and epistemologically open to poststructuralism, we were anxious about the intellectual and moral stakes of deconstruction. How do we reconstruct historical truths after deconstructing our evidence? Many established grand narratives have derived from and consolidated particular moral convictions and judgments, some traditional and some modern. Writing revisionist histories sometimes means questioning these value systems. Are we ready to do that? What are the consequences?

When writing my PhD dissertation on the Ming-Qing dynastic transition in the long seventeenth century, I tried to empathize with historical figures while keeping an analytical distance from them. It was a traumatic dynastic transition. As the Ming governance was seriously challenged by political factionalism and social and fiscal problems, military attacks from the Manchu-ruled Qing dynasty led to decades of costly wars. After the Qing occupation of Beijing and the de facto fall of the Ming dynasty in 1644, the bloody conquest and ethnically oppressive policies incited strong resistance among some Chinese elite but silenced others. The moral contrast between those who remained loyal to the Ming, especially the martyrs, and those who surrendered and served the new Qing dynasty, was employed as a political and ideological tool in the next three centuries. These binaries were repeatedly invoked in the Qing imperial propaganda, by the republican revolutionaries, and during the war against the Japanese invasion. In popular historical narratives, Ming loyalists are moral exemplars and romantic idealists; those who surrendered are corrupt, selfish cowards. But when we read historical sources carefully, we find strong friendships and mutual understanding between men from these two camps. If we look closely at their personal lives, we find them practicing the same ethical norms and sharing similar social and cultural activities. People who survived the traumatic dynastic change rebuilt their lives together based on a shared commitment to the Confucian masculine ideals. Performing and supporting each other's roles as fathers, sons, and husbands helped the educated elite heal as a community.⁸

The stark contrast between the two camps was a historical construct. Writing about this history required me to be sympathetic to those who surrendered to the Qing. However, sometimes I wondered whether I downplayed the importance of loyalism. When I tried to complicate the story of the martyr Huang Daozhou 黃道周 (1585-1646) by showing his filial image was also a political performance, I became anxious about my methodology. The self-questioning led to a bad dream one evening: Huang Daozhou appeared to be

challenging my interpretation of his family letter. I woke up from the dream, sweating from a racing heart, rushed to the desk, and checked the family letter. I read it a few times and decided that my interpretation was reasonable. I then returned to bed, hoping to argue with Huang Daozhou if he showed up again. But he did not come back to my dream. Indeed, Huang Daozhou was such a determined loyal official that after he died, he became deified in his home province, Fujian. The religious cults that worshipped him soon arrived in Taiwan, the destination of many Fujianese migrants. Today, his temple still receives sacrifices. The historian Lynn Struve, a giant in the field of Ming-Qing dynastic transition historiography who has also translated Huang Daozhou's writings, once told me that she was convinced by my analysis but held a soft spot for this man.⁹ The ethical ideal of loyalty has been employed and promoted by various governments in modern China, in various forms and for their agendas. But it has also inspired and moved people and has made them proud of their ancestors' spiritual strength. People see it as an exceptional human quality. There are still people in China today who, in their everyday life, feel the division between the Ming loyalists and those who served in the new Qing dynasty, because this division had once led to the total devastation of one village and the survival of another in the seventeenth century.

The lesson for a historian of imperial China is complex here. To reconstruct the historical reality of political factionalism and post-war rebuilding in the seventeenth century, I must deconstruct the sources, reading them critically to avoid the influence of the moral judgments (of the Ming loyalists and Qing moralists) embedded in these sources. In the meantime, I have to be cautious about cynicism. I do not need to treat these men as either dogmatic Confucian loyalists or hypocritical Confucian officials who never practiced what they preached. When I pay attention to their emotions, their visceral reactions, and their struggle to survive, I get closer to the truths they lived by and believed in. Ultimately, poststructuralism and the historian's pursuit of truth are compatible. The former does not necessarily lead to a post-

truth intellectual world. On the contrary, it compels us to conduct a more vigorous historical analysis.

The same lesson applies to studying women's history. As many women's and gender historians have already shown in their scholarship and theorizing, critical reading of women's records does not mean we cannot trust their lived experience and throw up our hands declaring there is no access to their "authentic self." Or worse still, settling on the concept of "mediated agency" and moving on. The post-truth attitude contributes to moral relativism and intellectual compromises.

In my research on jailing officials as an administrative-legal procedure in the Ming dynasty, I encountered a woman, Madam Chen, who committed suicide upon the arrest of her husband, an official impeached for misconduct in a provincial position. Ming sources, compiled by the government and by the educated elite, tell us she committed suicide to fulfill her responsibility as a loyal wife. When I presented her story at a conference, fellow historians considered it as yet another example of women performing a dramatic sacrifice for the interests of the family. This reaction disappointed me. Then I asked myself: Why did Madam Chen feel she *had to* die? Her husband was alive; jailing was an administrative-investigative procedure frequently applied to impeached officials. What was she trying to do for the family, if that was her intention? When I began to compare various biographies of this woman to answer this question, it became clear that her motives lay elsewhere.

Madam Chen had failed to bear children due to poor health. In Ming society, this put a married woman in a terrible situation. As a good wife, Madam Chen acquired three concubines for her husband, who quickly brought offspring to the family. When her husband went to his official appointment in Jiangxi, he took with him his wife, his mother, the concubines, and their children. When he was arrested and departing for the capital to be investigated, Madam Chen begged to go with him. He firmly rejected the idea and told her to take care of everyone. She sold her jewelry and

raised enough money for the family's relocation back to its hometown, and then hanged herself. She won the admiration of the people in her husband's jurisdiction, and the sympathy of the imperial dowager who allegedly persuaded the emperor to release her husband. But when Madam Chen decided to die, she wished for a different ending. She recalled a fortuneteller had predicted her husband's mishaps and that a family member's death could reverse the bad luck. Layers of emotions must have struck this woman—disappointed by her husband's rejection, tired of taking care of others' needs and other women's children, and terrified by the responsibility of herding the household on a long journey through the mountains. Why not put on a final fight by staging the magic intervention prescribed by the fortuneteller? She might have committed suicide for more than one reason. But reducing her feelings and impulses as a human being to the single goal of protecting the interests of the patriarchal family takes us further away from the truth.

The "true" reason for her husband's release from jail was also contested at the time, as I have discovered in different historical records. Buddhist hagiography highlights the role of the famous monk Daguan 達觀 (紫柏真可, 1543-1603). The biography of Daguan, composed by the renowned Chan master Hanshan Deqing 憨山德清 (1546-1623), claims that Daguan had instructed this jailed official to recite Buddhist teachings and predicted that he would be released from jail once he had recited them 100,000 times. It is claimed that he was able to regain freedom after completing 80,000 times. Madam Chen would have contested this claim and insisted that it was her death that reversed the bad luck. Meanwhile, the Ming court stated it was the imperial benevolence that put a quick end to her family crisis. The historian has to recognize the post-truth phenomenon in the Ming, overcome the post-truth tendency in our profession, and look for ways to reconstruct Madam Chen's reality and agency. Although her suicide was interpreted as a heroic action and helped her husband's release, she had intended to use magic to intervene in her husband's legal investigation. Furthermore, she refused to perform the ideal

womanhood. Her death caused inconvenience for the family's relocation.

Image Politics and the Ming-Qing Transition Historiography

History tells us that we are not alone in terms of facing a compounded crisis of truth and post-truth. In my first monograph, *Confucian Image Politics*, I look at one such moment. It was the dynastic transition from the Ming to the Qing dynasty, a period that historians have situated in the 17th-century global crisis.¹⁰ I began my PhD research with a strong interest in men in politics: did it matter if they got caught up in sexual scandals? I became fascinated by this question after I read a book detailing the Clinton-Lewinsky affair that almost cost Bill Clinton's presidency. At the time, the dominant historical understanding of the late-Ming gender history was that socio-cultural changes had nurtured a more liberal attitude toward individuality and sexual desire. In reaction, some elites advocated even stronger moral conservatism. But when we read the historical sources carefully, we notice that the same men could exhibit both tendencies, but their public images were polarized: they could be depicted as either morally conservative or sexually indulgent. The flourishing print culture and popular entertainment in the seventeenth century, just like social media in our time, amplified the divisive political culture by widely circulating these polarized moral images of the political figures and by sensationalizing their personal lives. As a result, these media forms became useful political weapons in factionalism and social competition.

Does this sound familiar to you? Historians can offer much to society by analyzing these kinds of similarities across time and space. At least, we can help people situate themselves historically and globally so that they can assess challenges and opportunities in a more informed way. In the case of seventeenth-century China, for instance, we see two familiar circumstances: information explosion associated with media transformation, and political communications that involve moral debates.

First, let's look at information. As Ann Blair and other historians have shown, early modern societies also witnessed "information overload."¹¹ Different traditions shaped how it operated and how it was dealt with in the world. In the case of China, the flourishing print culture simultaneously led to two seemingly contradictory phenomena. It allowed people in different parts of the empire to access and share the latest political news, the hottest gossip, and the latest literary and scholarly trends, effectively expanding and connecting power and knowledge networks. In the meantime, fragmented information and different interpretations of the same texts were circulated widely and inflicted deeper divisions. The most (in)famous example is the creative thinker and writer Li Zhi 李贄 (1527-1602).

Li Zhi's writings were refreshing, provocative, and honest. What he had written and supposedly said was printed and spread quickly in the Ming empire; curious members of the literati society craved news about his confrontations with opponents through print material. Passages of the letters exchanged between them were circulated in various forms; for example, his publications concerning the widowed daughter of a dear friend were scrutinized for signs of moral indecency and, as a result, were sexualized in wild ways. No one foresaw, however, that the irresponsible and casual comments would "go viral" and ultimately cost Li Zhi his life.

Li Zhi's famous critics at the time debated with him about Confucianism and Buddhism for two reasons. First, they had different philosophical understandings of the Confucian classics and their relationship with Buddhist teachings. Second, they were concerned about the unpredictable social consequences of the popularity and commercial success of Li Zhi's provocative writing style. When he wrote that he would rather socialize with prostitutes than with hypocritical Confucian scholars, did he mean it? How would young men in literati society react to such a statement? There was no consensus. Li Zhi himself could not control how his words would be interpreted and spread. He benefited from the flourishing print media but also became vulnerable as a result.

While none of these intellectually serious critics wanted Li Zhi to lose his life over such debates, others turned the confrontation sensational and violent by spreading rumors and organizing mobs to attack Li Zhi's residence. Li Zhi's patrons protected his physical safety and helped him move to the suburb of the capital, Beijing. Rumors entered the court in an official's memorial to the emperor, depicting Li Zhi as a major threat to social morality. The emperor ordered his books banned and had him jailed for investigation, where he committed suicide.

In modern China, Li Zhi was seen as a feminist, anti-Confucian thinker persecuted by evil conservatives. In recent years, historians have gone beyond the dichotomies. We are trying to appreciate his self-expression in more sophisticated ways. Instead of looking at only one dimension of his life or work, we have begun to make sense of his self-contradictions in the broader socio-economic context of the late Ming.¹² I have argued, for example, that Li Zhi had an "image trouble" that was symptomatic of a post-truth political culture.¹³ Instead of looking for a *real* cause of his death, in my new book on jailing officials in the Ming, I show how the circumstances of Li Zhi's arrest and death were not as sensational as some of the historical sources had portrayed. Those who tried to get him released resorted to the most practical, albeit tedious, methods to expedite the legal process. In particular, colleagues from Li Zhi's home region played the most important role in rescuing him. Ironically, he did not want to go back to his home region. Before the verdict arrived, he committed suicide.

Li Zhi's life and death represent the opportunities, dilemmas, and challenges of a new type of society that the Chinese were experiencing in the long seventeenth century. The century has left with us many mysteries in the personal lives of controversial political figures. In historical sources, we find polarized commentaries on them based on partial information and biases. The authors of these sources lived in a post-truth moment when politics was mostly claim-making. Which claims could be accepted as true by the public? How did they assess these claims? In many cases, we do not have

enough historical sources to verify these claims. Instead of selecting the ones that suit a particular narrative, we must acknowledge the mediated nature of existing sources and take the mediatization of political communications seriously. This allows us to understand the actions of historical figures more accurately.

Historical empathy and acknowledgment of the mediated nature of historical sources do not necessarily lead to moral relativism. On the contrary, we can describe more *precisely* what moral values meant for people in imperial China and today. This takes us to the second phenomenon that early modern and contemporary worlds share: the place of morality in political communications. Think about our own societies: Do politicians criticize their rivals' personal behaviors? Are such criticisms effective as a political tactic? Do they help mobilize the masses? In seventeenth-century China, moral attacks became an important political weapon; moral claim-making could determine the outcomes of a power negotiation. In this post-truth moment, a man's image of moral perfection as a father, a son, a husband, and a friend—defined according to Confucian ethics—helped earn public sympathy and garner political support in the government. How did they create and disseminate such images? Through publicly circulated narratives in print material, visual art, and theatrical performances.

Take, for example, the most famous literati organization in the late Ming, the Restoration Society (復社). Scholars who argue that the Restoration Society represented a departure from conservatism have offered different understandings of the Society's moral performance. Some believe that the main concerns of the Restoration Society lay in social and political practices. Others focus on Society scholars' enthusiasm for entertainment and sexual pleasures, suggesting that they justified their departure from the conventional ideal of self-discipline by redefining loyalty as a value that was compatible with and inspired by romantic love.

The historical sources are products of the post-truth

political environment in which the Restoration Society operated. The organization was both an agent and a product of image politics, adept at using print and social spectacles to widen its influence and strengthen mutual support among its members. The public had been exposed to and fascinated by the sensational accounts of Society scholars' indulgence in entertainment and sex. Some of these accounts were true, and some were exaggerated. Within the Restoration Society, a group of scholars not only criticized their friends' behaviors but also predicted serious political damage caused by the image of decadence. To display sincerity and authenticity in their claims of moral excellence, Society scholars manipulated print media. For instance, after a friend failed to rescue his father from factional persecution and died of illness, they edited and published his posthumous poetry collection. To make him a shining example of filial piety and to show the physical suffering endured by this moral exemplar, they removed some "happy" poems from his collection. The scholar who coordinated the editorial team defended the decision by arguing that this served the political goal of highlighting the deceased friend's sincere expression of filial piety. Efforts like this helped the Restoration Society build a public image as an organization of moral paragons and solicit patronage from current officials in the government.

In the case of Fang Yizhi (方以智, 1611-1671), one of the famous Four Gentlemen of the Restoration Society who enjoyed a celebrity status in the late Ming, a shift from the image of a flamboyant student to that of a dedicated son occurred when his father was jailed for an investigation into a military defeat by the rebels during his term as the governor of Huguang. Several days before the metropolitan civil service exam, Fang Yizhi submitted a memorial to the emperor in which he defended his father but also expressed his willingness to receive punishment in his father's place. The emperor replied that he should concentrate on the upcoming examination and stop petitioning. After scoring the coveted examination success, over the next two years, Fang Yizhi was a model filial son: he frequented the imperial prison, knocked

on powerful people's doors, and petitioned repeatedly on his father's behalf. His Restoration Society friends authenticated his filial piety by publicizing a long poem he composed for his father. Many officials in the capital wrote prefaces for and commented on it. They emphasize Fang Yizhi's filial virtue by describing how, during his father's jail time, he withdrew from all social activities even though obtaining the highest degree would normally entail innumerable celebratory gatherings and visits; instead, he stayed away from fancy food, clothes, and entertainment, splitting his time between visiting his father in prison and confining himself in the quiet residence. This image of a Restoration Society celebrity as a filial exemplar was thus firmly established. This image was not only necessary for Fang Yizhi's petition for his father, but it also served to fight the attacks from their political enemies who portrayed the Society as a group of corrupt and deviant students.¹⁴

The filial devotion that Fang Yizhi displayed was at once a personal commitment, a means of self-expression and self-identity, a family tradition, and a spectacle that would generate strong emotions and positive support from his contemporaries. He came from a family that had enjoyed an empire-wide reputation for filial exemplariness. The ascendance of the Fangs' status in their hometown Tongcheng (in modern-day Anhui) from the late sixteenth century onward was closely related to their image as pious adherents of Confucian ethical values. Starting with Fang Yizhi's great-grandfather, generations of Fang men had performed the ritual of lumu (廬墓), i.e., residing next to a parent's tomb for three years. Fang Yizhi also performed it for his deceased mother. His sincere belief and political use of the filial image are not mutually exclusive. In a similar vein, while the Han Chinese literati survived the devastating dynastic transition by rebuilding their community through shared commitments to Confucian ethics of filial piety and friendship, the Manchu rulers employed Confucian ethics as a language of political communication to negotiate trust and distrust.

Confucian image politics in seventeenth-century China thus offers an interesting case for historical comparison.

In the early modern period, why did media shape political culture and institutional changes differently in Europe and China? Scholars have shown that these societies share similar tendencies in information management, knowledge production, and public spaces. However, their political culture and institutions developed in different directions. It gives us a lens through which we can compare how socio-economic developments in technology and communications worked with early modern Chinese and European cultural systems differently. A hotly debated historiographical question is the role of Confucianism in shaping the so-called Great Divergence. This comparison cannot be built on a narrow understanding of Confucianism because Confucianism kept evolving and had a history.¹⁵ Nor should the comparison be conducted based on binary thinking that divides the Chinese into Confucian ideologues and hypocrites. Part of the post-truth problem in seventeenth-century China lay in the impossibility of separating sincere and authentic practices of these values from mere performance for political gains. Hence, a vigorous comparative study of early modern Europe and China would involve historicizing the Confucian system instead of essentializing it.

Justice and Injustice

Why do we care so much about truth? One important reason is that justice rests on some level of consensus about truth. For historians who study imperial China, the historical reality we labor to reconstruct based on scientific analysis of historical evidence produces the precious knowledge foundation for us to appreciate how people have understood justice and injustice in the past and present.

I recently visited the home village of Yang Jue 楊爵 (1493-1549), a Ming official who was jailed for almost ten years as a result of his criticism of the emperor's policies. He was detained for an investigation into his intentions. At the beginning of his jail time, Yang Jue was subjected to torture and solitary confinement. The conditions improved later,

but, as we all know, premodern jails were miserable places. Nonetheless, in family letters, Yang Jue still told his sons not to hold grudges against the emperor. Did he mean it, or did he say so to avoid trouble? When I encountered this letter, I had already written about another Ming official, Zheng Man 鄭曼 (1594-1639), who was jailed and investigated after his political rivals accused him of abusing his mother, which was considered one of the most heinous crimes in premodern Chinese law. Yang Jue and Zheng Man, one hundred years apart, gave their sons the same instructions from jail. Therefore, it was a shared way of thinking that should not be easily dismissed by modern historians as insincere performance.

Do these statements convey truthfully what these two jailed officials intended to say and what they believed? I think so. These two men never gave up claiming innocence and insisted that they were victims of injustice. But they also shared a cosmological understanding of justice and injustice, believing that the individuals often could not see the big picture of cosmological changes that produced the true causes of particular suffering or instances of justice. Hence, they would become obsessed with their mishaps and vengeful impulses. The notion of injustice did not contradict the lack of (obvious) reaction. Proper timing and proper form of reaction were key. These two men explained their thoughts differently to their sons. Yang Jue's attitude is clearly shaped by his intellectual and spiritual interests in the *Book of Changes*. He pointed out that the political dynamics in the government and the country manifested cosmological changes beyond ordinary humans' comprehension. He urged his sons to focus on grounding themselves in their own intellectual and ethical development rather than seeking immediate compensation from the government. In contrast, Zheng Man, who practiced both Buddhism and Daoism in his everyday life, told his sons to adopt a detached attitude toward instances of injustice and even cultivate compassion toward the people who had inflicted injustice and suffering on them. Zheng Man had seen his fellow officials incriminate him with scandalous rumors, and

his unhappy relatives and treacherous servants joined those colleagues. He was disappointed, hurt, and confused. But he decided that since he could not change others, he had to reconcile with himself.¹⁶

Several observations can be made from these two cases. First, Chinese religion and philosophy play very important roles in shaping how people react to political injustice; they exhibit a wide range of reactions. Some of these reactions are familiar to us, while others might sound implausible, insincere, or even escapist. Our task begins with setting aside our preferences and recognizing the subjectivity of these people. Second, the law, social norms, and religion manage the notion of justice with different temporal frameworks. All three matter in meaningful ways.

This particular approach to justice could be observed in the Covid pandemic. In the last week of Feb. 2020, a group of international scholars from various disciplines participated in a workshop on the concept of “exemplarity” in global politics. I was invited to present on the Chinese tradition. I approached the theme from strictly historiographical and theoretical perspectives. As the conference was concluding, evidence of Covid spreading in North America and Europe became clear. Some of these colleagues would fly to or through major airports such as Amsterdam and Frankfurt the next day. We still shook hands at the farewell dinner. The story after that weekend is now all well known. Geopolitical developments in the first months of the pandemic, especially the global media coverage of China, deeply shaped the chapter that I contributed to the edited volume. For the first time in my academic career, I wrote a piece that traced the making of exemplars from the Han dynasty to the Ming dynasty. From the Grand Historian Sima Qian to the Ming official Huang Daozhou, I showed how the exemplary prisoners in imperial Chinese history were not made by the state. Imperial authorities and Confucian scholarly authorities could not dictate who was worshipped as exemplars. Those who had sustained political injustice and endured physical suffering were the most commemorated and even deified in society. In the last part of my chapter, I reflected

on the making of model doctors during the pandemic in China and pointed out the centrality of the notions of justice, injustice, and suffering in state-society negotiations.¹⁷

The notions of justice and injustice are historically specific; they are also universal values. Observing historical and contemporary China together allows a Sinologist to produce knowledge and insights that people in other societies can relate to regardless of how counterintuitive they might feel. This is a type of truth I hope we all pursue. As I mentioned earlier, recently I made a fieldwork trip to Fuping, Shaanxi province, and visited the descendants of Yang Jue. Half of the village is still surnamed Yang. The family shrine, bearing the posthumous honorary title endowed by the Ming imperial court, has been designated by the government as an important historical site. In recent years, it has also been named an “anti-corruption” education site. The village takes tremendous pride in Yang Jue’s moral excellence and political integrity. At the two entrances to the village’s main road stand two gates erected to commemorate Yang Jue. His descendants take good care of the shrine. They do not necessarily know all the details of his political career, but they are proud that their ancestor had even moved Mao Zedong to offer him the highest praise in the Confucian tradition. In the main exhibition hall of the shrine hang not only Yang Jue’s portraits but also the photos of Mao Zedong and Xi Jinping, the current president of China, who has stressed the importance of the anti-corruption campaign among government officials. Yang Jue’s birthday celebration is a major festival for the locals, involving a series of rituals in the family shrine and the village. Visitors, even those from government cultural organizations, burn incense in front of his portrait and bow. In this shrine, lineage, village, social, and political perspectives cannot be clearly distinguished. The past and the present continue to echo each other.¹⁸

Is their way of remembering their famous ancestor incorrect? Does it matter if their historical truth challenges the one I am reconstructing as a historian? These are important questions to consider because they often influence our research methodology and choices. In this post-truth era and after the

linguistic turn in academia, we not only insist on the existence of historical truths but also have developed more sophisticated approaches to studying historical reality. For example, we cannot ignore the fact that it is important for the Yangs that their ancestor deserves compensation for having to endure injustice and should receive recognition as an incorruptible role model from all the governments—from the Ming and Qing imperial authorities to the PRC leaders.

The method of combining textual and ethnographic work and a deep interest in local perspectives—in particular, their manifestations in religious and artistic practices—are some of the key characteristics of Dutch Sinology at Leiden University. They can be observed in the scholarly publications by Erik Zürcher, Kristofer Schipper, Barend ter Haar, and Wilt Idema. The tradition has been continued, in one way or another, by their Leiden students. I now have the pleasure of working with some of them at LIAS.

Dutch Sinology's historical connection to colonialism ended a while ago, as Professor Wilt Idema points out in his reflections.¹⁹ However, its connections to government policymaking, global engagement, and diplomacy remain significant, productive, and meaningful, thanks to the continuing efforts by my colleagues in the Contemporary China section chaired by Professor Florian Schneider. He and Dr. Vincent Chang have included me in an exciting volume on authoritarian memory. I look forward to more conversations between our two sections in the coming years.

Another legacy of Dutch Sinology, the interest in the history of gender and sexuality, can be felt today in the emerging Leiden Chinese Queer Collection. I have the privilege to join Professor of Chinese Literature Maghiel van Crevel and the China subject librarian Marc Gilbert in launching this project. When I started as a PhD student in the history of gender and sexuality, one of the first names on our reading list was the legendary Robert Hans van Gulik.²⁰ I am thrilled to help connect the Leiden Chinese Queer Collection and Van Gulik's legacy at this institution and for the

increasingly diverse field of China Studies. Let's also remember that the *Journal Nan Nü: Men, Women, and Gender in China*, edited by Harriet Zurndorfer here at Leiden, is the most valuable resource for scholars in this field.

The Leiden Chair Professor of Chinese History is a special position in the field of Sinology worldwide. Thank you, Executive Board, the Faculty of Humanities, and colleagues at LIAS, for entrusting me with this chair. I am honored and humbled by the nomination.

I received formal education in the traditions of Japanese Sinology and Chinese History in the U.S. European Sinologies were brought into my training by my wonderful teachers. Last week, I received a congratulatory email from Professor Hisaharu Kushida, one of my mentors in Japan. It was in his class that I became interested in Max Weber's influence on the study of premodern Chinese philosophy, religion, and bureaucracy. He must be pleased that the book I recently completed and the new book I am writing now both revisit Max Weber's works on China. At the University of Michigan, my advisor Professor Chun-shu Chang introduced me to the classics authored by Dutch Sinologists. He allowed me to indulge in complete intellectual freedom and to pursue the scholarly subjects that I was most curious about no matter how strange or impossible they might sound to others. He encouraged me to be imaginative with history by grounding that imagination in fundamental human sensitivities. My mentor in the field of premodern women's and gender history, Professor Dorothy Ko at Barnard College, Columbia University, has not only shown me the value of comparative and interdisciplinary research but also guided me when I looked for more creative and conscientious ways to be an intellectual.

I am grateful, too, for the years I spent in the intellectually stimulating and collegial environment of the Department of History at the Ohio State University. I discovered only recently that the History Institute at Leiden University and my department at OSU had enjoyed longtime collaborations,

thanks to their exceptional reputations in Early Modern—especially the seventeenth-century—history. I have been extremely fortunate in my professional career to start at OSU and from there come to Leiden. Among my OSU colleagues who have become dear friends, I am especially thankful for the mentorship of the great historian Geoffrey Parker, whose erudition, generosity, and humor made my exploration of the 17th-century Global Crisis such a rewarding adventure.

My parents are watching this ceremony online at home in Beijing now. They have given me all the freedom to explore this world and my intellectual potential. Perhaps they have forgotten that one sunny afternoon, when this eight-year-old little girl complained she was bored, they pulled a random book from the shelf and handed it to her. She had not learned all the characters yet, but on one page she did recognize four simple but famous characters: “A white horse is not a horse” (白馬非馬). She was deeply intrigued. I will always remember that moment. I owe special thanks to my partner, Dr. Niels Dam, for his patience, support, and wisdom. From Columbus and Princeton to Durham, Berlin, and Leiden, he has made himself mobile to accommodate my intellectual and professional pursuits. He has been as enthusiastic as I am about visiting historical jails in Europe and Buddhist caves in China. I am thrilled that our family representatives, Wei, Wicki, and Lasse, have come from Washington D.C. and Esbjerg to attend this ceremony. Thank you for being the sweetest family.

And thank you all for coming to celebrate.

Ik heb gezegd.

Notes

- 1 Ying Zhang, "Aren't They Strange: The Exemplary Deaths of Premodern Chinese Individuals." *Berlin Journal* no. 36 (2022-23), 20-23.
- 2 Zhao Zichen, *Xiyu ji* 繫獄記 (Qingnian xuehui shuju, 1948).
- 3 Molly Murray, "Measured Sentences: Forming Literature in the Early Modern Prison," *Huntington Library Quarterly*, Vol. 72, No. 2 (June 2009): 147-167.
- 4 Zhang Dongsun, *Yuzhong shenghuo jianji* 獄中生活簡記 (private edition, 1947). The memoir was initially published in a magazine as a series.
- 5 Su Xuelin, *Nan Ming zhonglie zhuan* 南明忠烈傳 (Chongqing: Guomin chubanshe, 1941).
- 6 Joan Scott; Kathleen Canning, "Feminist History after the Linguistic Turn: Historicizing Discourse and Experience," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* vol. 19, No. 2 (Winter 1994): 368-404.
- 7 Dorothy Ko, *Every Step A Lotus: Shoes for Bound Feet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001); *Cinderella's Sisters: A Revisionist History of Footbinding* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005);
- 8 Ying Zhang, *Confucian Image Politics: Masculine Morality in Seventeenth-Century China* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2016).
- 9 Lynn A Struve, "Confucian Image Politics: Masculine Morality in Seventeenth-Century China (review)," *Journal of Chinese History*, 2017-07, Vol.1 (2): 412-416; *Voices from the Ming-Qing Cataclysm: China in Tigers' Jaws* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993); *The Ming-Qing Conflict, 1619-1683: A Historiography and Source Guide* (Ann Arbor: Association for Asian Studies, 1998).
- 10 The most authoritative and influential monograph on this subject is Geoffrey Parker, *Global Crisis: War, Climate Change and Catastrophe in the Seventeenth Century* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013).
- 11 Ann Blair, *Too Much to Know: Managing Scholarly Information before the Modern Age* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011).
- 12 For latest research on Li Zhi, see Rivi Handler-Spitz, *Symptoms of an Unruly Age: Li Zhi and Cultures of Early Modernity* (Seattle: University of Seattle Press, 2019); Haun Saussy, Pauline Lee, and Rivi Handler-Spitz (eds.), *The Objectionable Li Zhi: Fiction, Criticism, and Dissent in Late Ming China* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2021).
- 13 Ying Zhang, "Image Trouble, Gender Trouble: Was Li Zhi An Enlightened Man?" in *The Objectionable Li Zhi*, eds. Saussy, Lee, and Handler-Spitz, 111-131.
- 14 Ying Zhang, *Confucian Image Politics: Masculine Ideals in Seventeenth-Century China* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2016), chapter 2; "The Green Peony and The Swallow's Letter: Drama and Politics," in *How to Read Chinese Drama: A Guided Anthology*, eds. Patricia Sieber and Regina Llamas (NY: Columbia University Press, 2022), 235-256.
- 15 On the Great Divergence, in addition to Kenneth Pomeranz's classic *The Great Divergence: China, Europe, and the Making of the Modern World Economy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), also see recent studies by Taisu Zhang, *The Laws and Economics of Confucianism: Kinship and Property in Pre-industrial China and England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017); Wenkai He, *Public Interest and State Legitimation: Early Modern England, Japan, and China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023).
- 16 This question has been explored in Ying Zhang, *Religion and Prison Art in Ming China (1368-1644): Creative Environment, Creative Prisoners* (Leiden: Brill, 2020).
- 17 Ying Zhang, "The Truths of Suffering and Injustice: Confucian Exemplarity," in *Exemplarity in Global Politics*, eds. Dorothy Noyes and Tobias Wille (Bristol: University of Bristol Press, 2025).

- 18 This case study is conducted for a chapter in Vincent Chang (ed), *Advancing Authoritarian Memory: Global China's New Heroes*, a volume by Leiden China Studies scholars.
- 19 Wilt Idema, "Studies on the History of Dutch Sinology: A Bibliographical Essay," *Journal of Chinese History* (2023) 7: 327-347.
- 20 Robert van Gulik, *Sexual Life in Ancient China: A Preliminary Survey of Chinese Sex and Society from ca. 1500 B.C. till 1644 A.D* (Leiden: Brill, 1974).

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Ying Zhang joined the Leiden Institute for Area Studies in 2024 as Professor of Chinese History. Prior to Leiden she taught at the Ohio State University (2010-2023). She received her joint PhD in History and Gender Studies from University of Michigan. She researches on premodern Chinese governance, bureaucracy, political culture, family, and gender system. Her book *Confucian Image Politics: Masculine Morality in Seventeenth-Century China* (University of Washington Press, 2016) is the first book-length study of gendered virtues and factionalism in late imperial China. Her second volume, *Religion and Prison Art in Ming China (1368-1644): Creative Environment, Creative Prisoners* (Leiden: Brill, 2020), explores prisoners' cultural and social lives. It grew out of another monograph that she has recently completed, *Ideals of Confinement: Bureaucratic Discipline and Society in Ming China (1368-1644)* (under review), in which she examines jailing as an investigative procedure and its political and social consequences. Her research and publications also intend to connect historical studies and contemporary issues. She is the co-editor of *Nanxing yanjiu* [Masculinity Studies] (Shanghai Sanlian chubanshe, 2012), an interdisciplinary volume on the discipline of masculinity studies.



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