

The Reconstruction of Ideology and the Political Intervention in Literature in the Early Ming Dynasty

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Abstract: *In the Ming Dynasty, Confucianism was the basic principle of ethics, and the whole social culture was dominated by Zhu Xi's Neo-Confucianism. Coupled with the development of ancient education and the reform of the imperial examination system, the education at that time also made Neo-Confucianism develop and spread continuously. In this atmosphere, the thoughts of Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism have been gradually politicized under the interference of the imperial power and become a favorable tool to strengthen the centralization of power. At the same time, Emperor Taizu of the Ming Dynasty liked to interfere in literature, which also affected the natural development of literature, resulting in the early Ming dynasty literati's "living-a-life" starting from politics rather than literature.*

Keywords: *Early Ming, Imperial examinations, Confucianism, Buddhism, literati*

1. Introduction

As an extremely special historical period, the early Ming Dynasty witnessed rapid changes in politics, ideology, literature and other aspects. After the establishment of the new dynasty, the emperor Taizu of the Ming Dynasty took a series of measures to strengthen the rule of politics and reconstruct the ideology. Facing the political environment of high pressure and terror, the Hongwu literati have greatly changed their living conditions, ideological mentality and literary creation. Then, how did this kind of political transformation of ideology come into being? How does politics interfere with literature? This paper will reveal the politicized ideological tendency of the early Ming literature and the situation of the literati from the perspective of ideological policy, educational system and the emperor's behavior.

2. Advocate Confucianism and support Buddhism as well as Taoism

The thought of the early Ming Dynasty inherited the fashion of the late Yuan Dynasty. Many thoughts such as Buddhism and Taoism have been very popular in folk culture. The Confucian ideology on which the ruling class depends was a different situation. Because Confucianism is binding on the people, it is difficult to be popular in folk culture. However, the Yuan Dynasty attached great importance to military officials. The ruling class of the Yuan Dynasty and the Han people had a gap between nationalities, so the Han people rarely participated in politics. Therefore, Confucianism was given a cold shoulder. What's more, Confucianism has declined in several wars. In the early Ming Dynasty, Zhu Yuanzhang adopted the policy of advocating Zhu Xi and Confucianism, and allowed the spread of Buddhism and Taoism, which established the dominant position of Confucianism. He believed that Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism played a positive role in governing the country and were indispensable. However, his emphasis on Confucianism was strongest. He said: "If the three ideologies exist together, Confucianism is the most indispensable for the country." (Yang, 2019, P. 180)

Advocating Confucianism is reflected in the following two aspects. On one hand, the office of Yan Sheng Gong in the Yuan Dynasty was continued in the early Ming Dynasty, which inherited by the Kong family, and its status was constantly promoted. The book *History of the Ming Dynasty* records this situation. In the first year of Hongwu, the emperor Taizu of the Ming Dynasty canonized Kong Xixue as Yan Sheng Gong and granted him the official position of second grade (Zhang, 1974, P. 1791). From this, we can clearly see the idea of respecting Confucius. On the other hand, Zhu Yuanzhang's imperial edicts, imperial letters, treatises, tributes and other articles of different styles also show his emphasis on Confucianism. The beginning of some articles is often introduced by the governance strategy of ancient emperors or the relationship between emperors and ministers, which in fact

represent the traditional ethics of Confucianism. For example, through the promotion of “Saint King”, “Sage” and “Worthy Minister”, the requirements of ministers and people are proposed. In this way, Confucianism was established by the rulers as sacred and supreme.

Zhu Yuanzhang also gave some support to Buddhism and Taoism, although the support was much weaker than that of Confucianism. Since the Han and Wei dynasties, Buddhism and Taoism have gradually infiltrated into China’s social and cultural life. By the end of the Yuan Dynasty, its influence had expanded. Zhu Yuanzhang was born in a rough place and once joined the Buddha. He could better understand the situation at that time. Therefore, in the early Ming Dynasty, the two religions of Buddhism and Taoism were advocated. Zhu Yuanzhang said: “I have heard that in ancient times, when emperors ruled the world, the people were engaged in four occupations: scholars, farmers, workers and merchants. From the Han Dynasty to the present day, people engaged in six professions, plus Buddhists and Taoists.”(Chen and Xia, 2001, P. 353)Zhu Yuanzhang’s support for Buddhism and Taoism is mainly reflected in the affirmation or promotion of the social status of Buddhists and Taoists, the interpretation of Buddhism, and the intervention of doctrines. Some Buddhists and Taoists can be promoted to officials and obtain high political status.

Therefore, the development of Buddhism and Taoism gradually coordinated with the national mainstream cultural thought and political pace, which effectively promoted the prosperity and diversified development of culture. The new situation created by the Hongwu Dynasty, in which Confucianism was respected and Buddhism as well as Taoism advanced simultaneously, provided sufficient preconditions and laid a foundation for the further reconstruction of ideology and culture.

3. The development of imperial examination system and the prosperity of Confucianism

During the Hongwu Period, the emperor Taizu of the Ming Dynasty focused on the development of school education and the imperial examination. Their remarkable characteristics were that Confucianism was the basic content, and the main function of Confucianism education was to consolidate the centralized rule. The grand occasion of Confucian education can be concluded from the scale of school education and the treatment of students at that time, which objectively shows the reality of Ideological and cultural development in the early Ming Dynasty. From the establishment and improvement of the Guo Zi Jian, we can see that the state attaches great importance to school education (Zhang, 1974, P. 1790).

The nationwide development of education also included the construction of local schools. In the early Ming Dynasty, the emperor set up the Guo Zi Jian at the local and central levels, so that Confucianism was spread all over the world. In addition, the regulations and treatment for students clearly reflect the state’s advocacy for education. Zhu Yuanzhang’s requirements for students were to let students in all places learn the way of Confucius, help the king, stabilize the world and become sages like Confucius. This simply and clearly reflects the purpose of national school education.

School education aims to train talents, and the imperial examination has become the main way to select talents again. Therefore, the content of the school is basically the same as that of the imperial examination. The imperial examination system of the Ming Dynasty began in the 3rd year of Hongwu and was determined in the 17th year of Hongwu. In the content of the examination, the tendency of respecting Zhu and Confucianism is very obvious. The emphasis on the Neo Confucianism of Cheng and Zhu further consolidated the mainstream ideology and culture in the early Ming Dynasty.

However, the strong praise and excessive emphasis on Confucianism and the imperial examination system in the Ming Dynasty also made the development of Confucianism unhealthy and produced some unreasonable factors. Therefore, the question of “selecting scholars by eight part essay” was born. “Eight part essay” refers to the style stipulated by the imperial examination system, which has seriously hindered the development of literature in terms of content and form, and made writing an article a rigid mode. This had a great impact on the Ming Dynasty and its descendants. Therefore, “eight part essay” has become a derogatory term. The content of the “Eight part essay” is only limited to *The Four Books* and related meanings. The requirements for the form are extremely strict and complex, and the number of words and structure are limited. Such a rigid and stereotyped style would have an adverse impact on the thinking of literati, literary fashion and cultural development if the examinees carefully ponder and train it for many times.

4. The political tendency of Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism

Although Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism had a great spread in the early Ming Dynasty, they had been injected with political color. When the emperor expounded his views with traditional ethics and morals, he often chose the speech that best reflects the interests of the ruling class. Among them, the book *Mencius Jiewen* is a powerful illustration of the strengthening of the political color of Confucianism and becoming a tool of monarchy.

Mencius Jiewen was written by Liu Sanwu and etc. Liu Sanwu was a scholar of the Imperial Academy ordered by Zhu Yuanzhang during the Hongwu Period. He deleted parts of *Mencius*. According to the existing research conclusion, the abridged event is not recorded in the official history, only recorded in Qian Zeng's *Reading for Sensitivity*. The deleted contents include that the king should abdicate, the tyrant should transposition and punish, the king should honor merit, the scholar should have the freedom of official office, the king should abdicate punishment, do not like murder, etc. These accounts for one third of *Mencius*. When *Mencius Jiewen* was widely spread instead of *Mencius*, it played its role as a political means of the ruling class.

Most of Zhu Yuanzhang's articles on Buddhism and Taoism involve political interference in Buddhism and Taoism, including his understanding, opinions and regulations on Buddhism and Taoism from doctrines to daily norms. For example, in *Song Jing Lun*, he said: "The reason why most buddhists are stupid but not kind, and most people are naughty but not obedient is that they understand the wrong things. Buddhism has classics, just like the state issues decrees. Buddhism has commandments, just like the state has laws. All these are to guide people not to commit crimes in advance, and to teach people not to have evil thoughts. Therefore, the ancients said: 'There are no two different Taos in the world, and saints do not have two different spirits. Although their names are different, but the truth is the same.'" (Yang, 2019, P. 179) This sentence has at least two meanings. The first is to compare the role of Buddhist scriptures to laws and decrees in order to create favorable public opinion for the implementation of the legal system and improve the recognition of the subjects. The second is to point out the internal unity of Buddhism and Confucianism, and the unity here is mainly from the political level conducive to feudal rule. That is to say, Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism are internally consistent and indispensable in the role of educating the people.

Most of these statements are emphasized and publicized from the perspective of being beneficial to feudal rule. Therefore, Buddhism and Taoism are also drawn into the political order and become a management system. This, in turn, exerted stricter control over Buddhism and Taoism. The tendency of politicization restricted the free development of Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism. The excessive intervention makes the reformed thought deviate from its essential significance to a certain extent and become an important part of political rule.

Generally speaking, each dynasty was influenced by The Times and society at the beginning of the founding of the states, and showed the phenomenon of "valuing Taoism and neglecting literature" in the cultural perspective. The Ming Dynasty also reflects this characteristic, its ideological rule has a strong political color. Under this, the literati's own value orientation has also changed. They no longer regard the development of literature itself as their mission, but devote themselves to serving politics. Therefore, while Tao dominates literature, it also further divides the distance between them.

5. Emperor Taizu's intervention in literature

The political color of Ming Dynasty literature was not only influenced by the politicization of Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism, but also deeply influenced by the emperor himself. In the era of centralization expansion, the emperor's preference and intervention on literature directly affected the value orientation and specific literary activities of the literati at that time. Zhu Yuanzhang had a very individualized understanding of literature, and his preference deeply interfered with the development of literature in the early Ming Dynasty.

First of all, Zhu Yuanzhang attached great importance to the function of literature. He once said: "If you want to make the world virtuous, how can you harmonize with the people if you do not become wise? If we do not develop literature, how can we educate the people? Literature is conducive to enabling people to have ambitions and people with lofty ideals to practice the principles in literature. Therefore, literature can accommodate all things, explain profound and subtle principles, and cover everything." (Zhu, 1991, P. 153) It was because of his attention to literature that the Ming Dynasty flourished.

Zhu Yuanzhang also had clear requirements on the content of literature and the value judgment of articles. He tended to write with Confucian ideas. In *Bian Han Yu Song Feng Bo Wen*, his views on Han Yu's articles further illustrated his criteria for judging the value of articles (Zhu, 1991, PP. 262-263). In the evaluation, Zhu Yuanzhang separated himself from the taste of the article, and only took whether the content of the article conformed to the etiquette as the evaluation standard. He believed that the purpose of educating Confucianism is to embody Confucianism, which in fact greatly limits and stifles the value and vitality of literature. In the face of such a request, the literati had to obey and applaud. In fact, this situation was very embarrassing for them.

In the form of expression of the article, Zhu Yuanzhang did not like cumbersome, and advocates simple and clear words. During his reign, he had stipulated the format of advice, the format of tables and notes, and the format of imperial examination. In the 9th year of Hongwu, the emperor Taizu of the Ming Dynasty promulgated the format of advice. If the officials and the people had words, they were allowed to tell the facts and not to write too much. In the twenty fourth year of Hongwu, the provisions were further refined, requiring the respondents do not perfunctorily reproduce the text. However, this requirement of smoothness and no ostentation was also emphasized by successive emperors after emperor Taizu of the Ming Dynasty, which continued as a tradition. This actually strengthens the practical and political functions of literature. The specific intervention of emperor Taizu of the Ming Dynasty in literature echoed the literary thought of "literature carries Tao" and promoted the prosperity of Confucianism in the whole Ming Dynasty.

6. Conclusion

After the transformation and reconstruction of the ideology in the early Ming Dynasty, the free and active thought and culture in the late Yuan Dynasty faded down, and the thought based on Neo-Confucianism began to be reestablished. However, the transformation of ideology can not be achieved in one day. After the continuous strengthening of Yongle Dynasty, this ideological and cultural atmosphere with Confucianism as the mainstream can flourish in an all-round way. From this point of view, the reconstruction of cultural thoughts by the Hongwu Dynasty is undoubtedly successful and more critical.

Compared with the relaxed political order of the Yuan Dynasty, the high-pressure and terror under the heavy punishment and torture in the early Ming Dynasty greatly strengthened the political rule and ensured the legalization of political society. At the same time, the reconstruction and resumption of ideological culture and the school imperial examination cause also revitalized the education and culture cause which was in need of revival. In the process of civilization reconstruction, various systems such as education, culture, talents and administration were integrated and promoted each other, which created a unique social phenomenon in the early Ming Dynasty. The overall characteristic of this phenomenon could be the collision and contradiction between the cruel political legalization and the rapid cultural reconstruction. Historical and realistic politics, ideology and culture were all unified in the running track of the state machine. All cultural phenomena that contradicted or exceeded the track were not tolerated by this powerful machine. This situation was undoubtedly inappropriate and tragic for the literati who had the dignity of intellectuals and had been accustomed to the idle life of the Yuan Dynasty. This is the root of the literati's survival crisis.

However, literary creation is the most active part of the superstructure. The non-mainstream value orientation of the times often does not coincide with or even contradict the ideology and culture stipulated by politics, which is the driving force of civilization. In the specific high-pressure politics and the discourse environment prescribed by the emperor in the early Ming Dynasty, the imperial authority and autocratic rule did not allow this pluralistic development, and all literary creation should serve politics. In the competition between politics and culture, the autocratic politics of Hong Wu promoted the gradual transition of literature in the early Ming Dynasty to a bleak and single direction.

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