Confucian Image Politics
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Introduction

In 1620 (the forty-eighth year of the Ming Wanli reign), the literatus Feng Menglong (1574–1646) published a large collection of amusing stories titled *Jokes from History and the Present Day* (Gujin xiao).\(^1\) In the very first chapter, Feng presents an anecdote about an encounter between courtesans and the Cheng brothers, two Neo-Confucian thinkers and officials of the Song dynasty (960–1279): “The Cheng brothers went to a banquet hosted by a literatus. Courtesans were called upon to entertain the guests. Cheng Yi’s face changed and he left in anger, while Cheng Hao stayed on and had a good time. The next day, Cheng Yi visited Cheng Hao’s studio and was still complaining about the banquet. Cheng Hao said: ‘Yesterday there were courtesans at the banquet, but I did not have courtesans on my mind. Today there are no courtesans in my studio, yet you have courtesans on your mind!’ Cheng Yi had to admit his brother was the superior.”\(^2\) This story had been invented and circulated among the literati in the sixteenth century, when the Yangming school of Neo-Confucianism dominated intellectual circles and its flirtation with Chan Buddhism became a fad.\(^3\) It was said that Wang Yangming (1472–1529) himself particularly liked this story and often referred to it.\(^4\) Feng Menglong, whose intellectual trajectory had been tremendously influenced by the stress on human intuition by Yangming-school followers, in particular the radical thinker Li Zhi (1527–1602), claimed that he did not publish this story to slander or encourage social deviance. Rather, it was meant to question dogmatic understandings of moral cultivation and the images of moral superiority based on such understandings.\(^5\)
As Feng himself points out in the preface to the collection, reading such anecdotes as amusing allows the reader to “recognize the genuine” (renzhen) instead of “taking things to heart” (the common meaning of renzhen) so excessively that one loses the ability to see the truth.6 This anecdote also appeared in Daily Compilations at the Zuofei Studio (Zuofei’an ri zuan), published by the official Zheng Xuan (jinsi 1631) in the 1630s–40s. Stylistically, Daily Compilations manifested the late-Ming literati passion for xiaopin-style literature, or jottings that engage topics, emotions, and aesthetics outside the realm of classical and political studies.7 In Zheng’s book, the anecdote about the Cheng brothers appears in the chapter on the importance of tolerance and transcendence.8 It exemplifies Zheng’s interest in the philosophy of living a good life shared by many xiaopin authors, who often also shared a belief in the syncretism of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism.

The success of Feng’s book of “jokes” and Zheng’s leisurely collection on living a good life reflect the seventeenth century’s “confusions of pleasure.”9 But these books, their authors, and their enthusiastic readers represent only one side of the story of this period, a time of flourishing print culture, thriving entertainment, and a reconfiguration of the Neo-Confucian moral economy and ontological order as China worked through the upheavals of a dynastic transition from the Ming (1368–1644) to the Qing (1644–1911).10 In some people’s eyes, the popularity of this anecdote about the Cheng brothers was symptomatic of serious moral confusion among the literati, many of whom abandoned self-discipline and justified their indulgence in sensual pleasures by invoking the language of “no courtesans on my mind.”11 The anecdote entered didactic texts. Liu Zongzhou (1578–1645), a scholarly giant and accomplished official, included it in his work on literati self-cultivation, Manual for Man (Renpu). Liu had presented the notion of “watchfulness over the solitary self” (shendu) as the correct method of moral self-cultivation, which represented a critical inheritance of the Yangming legacy. In the “Ledgers Recording Transgressions” (Jiguo ge) section of Manual for Man, Liu explicitly lists “mingling with courtesans” as one of the “miscellaneous transgressions” of which one should beware.12 In the collection of anecdotes he compiled to further illustrate such transgressions, Liu not only placed the story about the Cheng brothers among “warnings against mingling with courtesans”13 but also introduced a section on the harms of jokes and jest.
The intellectual and cultural shift exemplified by Liu’s deployment of this anecdote intersected with the deepening political crisis of the Ming dynasty: factionalism, social unrest, and Manchu threats were cracking the illusion of a “floating world.” The intellectual turn and the emergent factional infighting clearly showed in Random Notes Taken in Retirement (Linju manlu; hereafter Random Notes) by the official Wu Yuancui (jinshi 1577), a collection of stories and thoughts on Ming politics. Wu claims the anecdote about the Cheng brothers to have been a fabrication by Cheng Yi’s political enemies in Song factionalism, a fabrication disseminated by figures of the Yangming school in the Ming and conveniently embraced by morally corrupt literati. Wu denounces not only the Chan Buddhist flavor of the anecdote but also the very idea that Cheng Hao ever mingled with courtesans. He urges the reader instead to adhere strictly to male-female separation, a central doctrine of the Confucian gender system.

Wu invoked the history of Song factionalism to question the authenticity of the anecdote, but he does not seem to have anticipated a factionalist attack on his own publication. After his book came out, his former colleague He Canran (jinshi 1595) published a book-length commentary in which he offered the following words on Wu’s reference to the anecdote: “Pretty courtesans and alluring boys are both uncontrollable. [Wu Yuancui] has confessed that he loves boys. Therefore, if he is seated at a banquet with a courtesan, he might imagine her as a boy and still refrain from getting intimate with her. That would be fine as well.” When He Canran published his comments on Wu’s book in Wanli 40 (1612), officials were engrossed in intensifying factional struggles in the government over a host of important policy issues. Bitter sentiments and hostility spilled over into their social world. He’s tactic here is personal but representative: he took revenge for Wu’s political attacks by publicly discrediting Wu’s book and questioning his self-presentation as a moral exemplar and his authority as an objective political insider. In response, Wu published a counter-commentary, accusing He of ignoring “public opinion” (gonglun) and misrepresenting his views.

These intellectual, cultural, and political adventures and tensions were signs of the fundamental transformations and challenges that seventeenth-century Chinese elites were experiencing, a kind of “authenticity crisis” that affected all spheres of life. Before these men could work out a solution to that crisis, rebellions and the Manchu
invasions put an end to the Ming dynasty. When the rebels stormed the Ming capital of Beijing in the spring of 1644, the Ming emperor’s suicide prompted the surviving elites to establish a Southern Ming court in Nanjing, the Ming’s secondary capital. Within a year that region was conquered by the Qing, too.

The Qing conquest and its aggressive sociopolitical agenda ushered in the decline of the legendary Nanjing pleasure quarters, a staple of late-Ming literati culture. In the early Qing, the Ming loyalist Yu Huai (1616–1696) published *Miscellaneous Records of the Plank Bridge* (Banqiao zaji), a work on the Nanjing courtesans and their literati lovers, as an alternative means of recording Ming glory and expressing anti-Qing sentiments. At his request, one of his non-loyalist friends, the Qing official You Tong (1618–1704), contributed a preface, in which he invoked the anecdote about the Cheng brothers.

Someone said: “When Yu Huai was young he indulged in frequenting courtesans. Now this old man still enjoys writing about them. You have determined to purify your mind and pursue the Way. Why do you bother to read this stuff?” I smiled: “In history, Cheng Hao ‘did not have courtesans on his mind even through there were courtesans in front of him,’ while Cheng Yi ‘had courtesans on his mind even though there were no courtesans around.’ Clearly one is superior to the other. Now, there are courtesans in Yu Huai’s writing; therefore I do not have courtesans in my work. Why not compose a preface for him?”

As Yu’s book, You’s preface, and their literary allusions demonstrate, in the early Qing, writing about officials’ moral performance was a means by which Han elites negotiated between romantic nostalgia and critical self-reflection, between Ming loyalism and the reality of Manchu conquest.

All these print references to the invented anecdote about the Cheng brothers throw light on the various dynamics that pulled the moral image of officials to the center of politics during the Ming-Qing transition (1570s–1680s), when the intersecting issues of intellectual shifts, literary publicity, factionalism, and dynastic change jointly shaped elite men’s political concerns, actions, and experiences in particular gendered ways. These dynamics gave rise to seventeenth-century Chinese image politics, which unfolded in the many stories about officials’ personal lives that circulated in gossip and anecdotes, in print and theater, and in social and political spectacles. The tales about officials as fathers, sons, and husbands exemplified how political
actors employed Confucian ethics as a language of communication in their efforts to negotiate, adapt, and survive.

SEEING THE MING-QING TRANSITION IN THE MIRROR

To explore the multiple, intertwining changes and continuities in this crucial era in Chinese history, “the seventeenth century” and the “Ming-Qing dynastic transition” are used as interchangeable chronological frameworks. This helps us go beyond simplifying binaries, such as “decline and revival” and “conservatism and progress,” that permeate both the sources and the historiography of this time period.

In Confucian historical narrative, the late Ming and early Qing constitute a typical transition in the dynastic cycle, a political change that delivered the empire from a morally defective regime to a new benevolent government that would carry forward the Mandate of Heaven. Late-Ming literati complained profusely about the deteriorating moral standards in society and in government. Faced with a highly commercialized economy, the rise of the merchant class, tensions between landowners and tenants, and urbanization, elites employed Confucian moral rhetoric to articulate their understanding of changing socioeconomic dynamics and to propose ways of restoring order and maintaining their relative privileges.

After the Ming was overthrown by domestic rebels and then replaced by the Manchu Qing, many argued that the erosion of literati moral standards, partly brought about through the popularity of the Yangming school and the radicalization of some of its number, had contributed to the moral deterioration of officials in general. In the late Ming, they had engaged in chronic factionalism, shamelessly allied themselves with evil eunuchs in the pursuit of their own self-interest, and failed to honorably commit suicide when the Ming fell. After the dynastic change, the Qing rulers’ moral condemnation of the fallen Ming and their posturing as a legitimate civilizing force surprisingly struck many of the same notes as had the literati criticisms.

The grand narrative of this period produced by modern historians also delineates a picture of decline and revival, though it disputes the validity of the “dynastic cycle” theory. From the mid-sixteenth century, the Ming empire felt the combined effects of novel environmental, socioeconomic, cultural, and political developments. In its last seventy years, it was overwhelmed by poor harvests, natural disasters, social instability, rebellions, and factional infighting in the
government. Moral crisis was manifested in, and contributed to, its political decline.\textsuperscript{27} The “seventeenth-century global crisis” framework also describes the Ming-Qing transition as part of a global phenomenon in a time of climate change. Interestingly, the timing of decline and revival posed in this narrative does not deviate much from the one recorded in the Chinese moral-meteorological narrative.\textsuperscript{28}

Another dominant narrative in the historiography of this period evaluates social, cultural, intellectual, and political developments in the framework of “progress versus conservatism.” Evidence of political “progress” seemingly identical to the early modern European experience is found in the flourishing print culture and a host of related socioeconomic, cultural, and political changes. Lack of institutional control over late-Ming publishers resulted in the proliferation of a wide range of nonorthodox interpretations of the Confucian classics, some of which could even be considered dissenting or outlandish.\textsuperscript{29} Most such publications did not explicitly or fundamentally challenge the imperial court or the Confucian system. Rather, they diffused the authority of the previous or established scholars of the classics. They accomplished this partly by redefining “heterodoxy” (yiduan) and introducing unconventional reference genres in their expository uses. Buddhist texts, unofficial histories, and even novels all entered the expository vocabulary.\textsuperscript{30} Literary authority shifted from the court to the reading public, and the “literary public sphere” expanded well beyond kinship networks and the official examination system, as seen in the proliferation of literary societies.\textsuperscript{31} Print culture changed the sociopolitical landscape. Information flew in and between urban centers, weaving an increasingly complex and dense web of media representations. It was an important open domain for literati who could access and participate in it, either as readers or producers of work, from pamphlets and treatises to vernacular novels and plays.\textsuperscript{32} Although literati could not use print to disseminate seditious language, they could employ it to shape public sentiment, promote their own agendas, and take limited but often effective action against their rivals.\textsuperscript{33}

Did this flourishing print culture result in the emergence of a “public sphere” in the Habermasian sense in the late Ming? Scholars have not reached a consensus.\textsuperscript{34} But some see democratic tendencies in the new types of literati associations and some of their political influences.\textsuperscript{35} It has been implied that the joint forces of the Ming-Qing monarchical autocracy, self-destructive factional infighting, and the dogmatic
application of moral norms in Confucian society repressed signs of “progress.” For instance, in the late Ming, the literati cultivated more effective and egalitarian networking, some seeing friendship as parallel to the fraternal relationship in the Confucian Five Cardinal Relations (Wulun) and therefore compatible with that order. But literati interests in friendship, which ranged from intellectual companionship to homosexual love, from idealistic devotion to hard-nosed networking, also faced pushback from conservative Confucians and from the paranoid Manchu court, which saw the elevation of friendship as potentially weakening familial bonds, contributing to factionalism, and fomenting seditious sentiments and actions. In other words, according to this perspective, Confucian conservatism and the Qing conquest prevented the country from transforming its political system in meaningful ways.

Both of these narratives depict in different ways a system resistant to political change. Can we build a more nuanced analysis of seventeenth-century Chinese political culture based on critical but also sympathetic engagement with these established historical frameworks? Historians have begun to contextualize the narrative of decline and revival, a common self-expression of the literati, to illustrate the specific intellectual, social, and cultural strategies they undertook so as to adapt to and even implement changes. Recent scholarship has also moved away from “public sphere” to “public spaces” in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century urban history. Similarly, in the sphere of official politics, paying close attention to the lived experiences and emotions of officials—the most important group of political subjects—helps raise productive questions. This book asks: During this time, when a large amount of moral tales about officials were created in and circulated between the court and literati society, what kinds of political negotiations were taking place, and how did this process reconfigure the political spaces?

To answer these questions, one has to accommodate some particular problems with the primary sources that have long bedeviled scholars of the Ming-Qing transition. Rebellions and dynastic change not only eliminated a huge portion of the population but also led to multiple layers of censorship imposed by the state, by literati communities, and even by individuals themselves. Meanwhile, the flourishing print culture and a well-integrated empirewide communication network generated an unprecedented amount of material in and about this period. Hence, the sources are abundant but replete with stereotypical images of the “gentlemen” and “small men.”
The problem with the sources was further complicated in the high Qing. To meet the needs of its particular moral-political agenda, the court sponsored historical projects that combed through the archives and generated new accounts about the Han and Manchus of the seventeenth century. They typically eulogized the narrowly defined moral exemplars.\textsuperscript{41} Then in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, driven by modern intellectuals’ “national salvation” programs, large-scale efforts to discover, compile, and reprint seventeenth-century materials mushroomed. In these historical processes, Chinese elites, men and women, kept revisiting the Ming-Qing transition and the many metaphors, tales, and images from that eventful era, but especially those that fit into modern, nationalist categories.\textsuperscript{42} Albeit with slightly different categories, they nonetheless further consolidated the contrast between the moral and the immoral. Hence, as images of the Ming-Qing transition are continuously multiplied by repeated reflection around familiar moral-political binaries, the lived experiences of our historical subjects grow ever more elusive.

This “image problem” of seventeenth-century sources and historiography reveals the “image trouble” of the most important political actors of the period, the officials, on both individual and collective levels. Late-Ming officials and their literati associates have been conventionally cast in morally contrasting stereotypes: the gentlemen’s camp (the Donglin faction and the Fushe literary society) versus the evil men (the eunuch faction and rivals of the Donglin-Fushe communities). For the early Qing, the moral contrast has been drawn between Han officials who surrendered to the Qing (\textit{erchen}) and Ming loyalists (\textit{yimin}). These stereotypes are not merely an invention of modern historians. They were a means and result of political struggles in the seventeenth century. Making images in a large variety of genres and forms significantly transformed the political spaces and political processes of the late Ming and early Qing. Image was politics. The production, circulation, and effects of officials’ competing moral images—as fathers, sons, husbands, and friends—serve as an excellent entry point into this matrix.

**POLITICKING WITH CONFUCIAN VIRTUES**

Across the dynastic divide, in factional infighting, political organizing, war mobilization, and postwar recovery, officials and their literati associates used fictional and nonfictional writing, art, rituals, and
public spectacles to deliver and repel attacks, express opinions and emotions, and rally support. Changes in the intensity and media of political communication during this period led to not only the reconfiguration of political spaces but also interesting development in the ways Confucian ethics were employed in power struggles.

Mediated and Mediatized Political Spaces

In the seventeenth century, officially sanctioned political spaces were sites of political communication that took the form of court audiences, memorials, and negotiations among officials as well as their interactions with literati communities. Within and around these political spaces, important changes were taking place. Many factors and dynamics contributed to these changes.

In the late Ming, as people, goods, and books became more mobile, the circulation of political information gained extraordinary vigor and unprecedented complexity. The elite became experienced producers and consumers of highly mediated political information. Court politics, literary production, cultural consumption, and literati “public opinion” formed a circuit of mediated—and to a certain degree, mediatized—political realities.

One of the main sources of political information at the time was the official gazetteer (dibao) published by the government and circulated in both official and private copies. Highly developed networks of transportation and print facilitated wider and faster circulation of the official gazetteer. Catering to the reading public’s thirst for interesting information, writers and publishers often channeled material from the official gazetteer into popular literature, where it was re-presented to local and regional audiences in a more sensational manner. Politics became a form of cultural consumption. In turn, literary trends also influenced the mode and mood of political communication.

The employment of literary publications for political purposes played an important role in reshaping political spaces. In imperial China, gossip and anecdote were recognized as “unruly” literary-political forces, but they had nonetheless always had a place in official historiography and power negotiations. If gossip and anecdote embodied “tensions between public and private knowledge, between reliable and unreliable sources of information,” then seventeenth-century print culture and political volatility only enhanced such tensions. Precisely due to readers’ enhanced access to information and
the diversification of information channels and genres, spreading myths, rumors, and half-baked assertions about an official’s personal life in the forms of anecdote collections, commentaries, and even vernacular novels could have serious political consequences.

Vernacular novels were so widely and enthusiastically consumed by the literati that the Qing scholar Qian Daxin emphasized that the “teaching of novels” (xiaoshuo jiao) had transformative power and the potential for disseminating heterodox views. The term xiaoshuo could refer to a range of literature, including fiction and petty discourse that originated in miscellaneous, unverifiable sources. Many officials, as well as their literati supporters and opponents, fell under the sway of the “teaching of novels.” As readers, they perceived their world through “sensational stories and intriguing dramas.” As political actors, they made efforts to use literature to influence negotiations with the emperor and between factions, rendering the already porous boundary between fact and fiction considerably more penetrable but politically more consequential.

Hence, using print intelligently to create a positive moral image, to paint a negative picture of enemies, and to avoid having the medium turned on oneself became an important skill for political actors. It was common for officials to resort to print and literature in order to cope with the increasing political uncertainty and volatility of their era. They published materials explicitly publicizing their moral-political accomplishments, refuting attacks, or circulating insider information about court politics. Although in some cases, a dearth of evidence prevents us from accurately gauging the outcomes of publishing endeavors, clearly, much of the published material found its way into memorials and court discussions.

One important genre of unofficial political publication was pamphlets. These allowed officials to present their views and positions, influence opinion, and garner sympathy and support, especially when they encountered difficult situations in their political lives. Increasingly, political pamphlets were printed and disseminated as a means of boosting individual or collective political reach and effectiveness. Officials also published books to communicate with the emperor, their colleagues, and the literati reading public. The contents of these books might include many genres, ranging from documentary to autobiography. For example, in late Chongzhen 11 (1638), Sun Chuanting (1593–1643), an accomplished official-general, published a book titled Records of My Endeavors (Jianlao lu), in which he meticulously
documented battles, strategies, memorials, and the imperial edicts that conveyed recognition of his career accomplishments. Sun published this book to express his gratitude to the emperor for trusting him despite some officials’ criticism, and he hoped that it would prove his loyalty. The next year, Sun was impeached by a factional rival, Yang Sichang (1588–1641), and imprisoned by the emperor. From prison, Sun had his book reprinted with a new postscript that pleaded with the emperor to consider his loyalty and correct the wrongs done to him by the factionalists. Although it is not completely clear to what extent this reprint contributed to Sun’s release, it nonetheless affirms that officials, even while in prison, might resort to printing books to publicize their virtues and make a case for themselves.

In addition to their use of print materials, seventeenth-century literati enthusiastically pursued an interest in religious rituals and social spectacles, which also affected the outlook of political spaces. Literati in particular paid a great deal of attention to ritual in their efforts to restore social order and promote Confucian ethics. The rise of Confucian ritualism amounted to a cultural reform movement. The Ming-Qing dynastic transition also gave rise to a culture that craved novelty and extremity. Dramatic and even violent displays of moral heroism and devotion—often with the aid of religious and ritual tropes—filled not only the books of the period but also public spaces such as the court, theater, gatherings, and so on. All these trends helped turn political spaces into platforms on which political figures could perform and authenticate moral exemplariness.

The transformation of political spaces was complex because, in the seventeenth century, tendencies toward fragmentation and integration in the cultural-political spheres coexisted. Since the late sixteenth century, all major political developments—debates over policies and reforms, the eunuch faction’s persecution of literati-officials, chronic factionalism, war and violence, and the change of regime—affect large numbers of officials and their families and friends. Their stories frequently traveled with them between the political centers and local communities. In local power struggles in which officials and literati groups used literature, theater, and social spectacle to influence public attitudes, such tactics could quickly assume state-level significance. All over the empire, with unprecedented speed and breadth, printed pages, theatrical performances, and travelers circulated news and opinions about controversial thinkers, fashionable writers, notorious politicians, and unpredictable emperors. The formation of an
empirewide political theater also contributed to the prevalence of competing—and often polarizing—images of prominent public figures, a situation in which controlling one’s public image became increasingly difficult (see chap. 1).

Confucian Family Tales

Texts, arts, and rituals, written or performed, served as means of intensive image-making efforts and key media of seventeenth-century political spaces. I treat them as “Confucian family tales” in this study. Although not all were completely new, they were deployed in political struggles more widely and more substantially in this period.

The Confucian family tales examined here fall mainly into three categories. The first group of family tales includes biographies, pamphlets, and anecdotes about officials, genres that might impress readers as relatively reliable presentations of fact. Instead, these materials not only echoed and recycled ideas and messages that appeared in fiction but also played the most important part in channeling details of officials’ personal lives into various political spaces, often providing raw material for the production of sensationalized moral images in other genres. In fact, biographies are known for their preoccupation with moral lessons, and even gossip and anecdote constitute “the acknowledged building blocks” for constructing official histories and images of public figures. This particular literary tradition played an intriguing role in shaping image politics.

Second, the frequent employment of extant popular literature such as Water Margin (Shuihu zhuan) in late-Ming politics helped circulate polarized moral images of political actors. The effectiveness of such a technique was predicated on readers’ familiarity with the characteristics of well-known fictional characters. In turn, associating an official with a famous fictional figure could easily mold his public image into a moral archetype. Although this method did not always draw the audience’s attention to the official’s performance of any specific ethical expectations, it nonetheless helped frame and sensationalize political battles as moral contests.

The third category of Confucian family tales relevant to this study also involves fictional narratives, but these were vernacular novels and dramas composed specifically to represent current political events, caricature factional opponents, or glorify someone as a moral paragon
and loyal official. These stories can be read as family romance (*jiazu xiaoshuo*). Novels of this genre depict the experiences of many characters of the same family, household, or clan against some significant historical background. They were multigenerational and engaged the ethical ideals patterned on the Five Cardinal Relations. The genre of family romance boomed in the seventeenth century as a result of people’s amplified interest in politics, the negotiation of Confucian values, and the immense popularity of historical novels, crime-case fiction (*gong ’an xiaoshuo*), and gods-and-demons fiction (*shenmo xiaoshuo*). When deployed as political narratives, their portrayals of elite men and women as patriarchs and matriarchs, sons and daughters, also reflected the gendered and gendering nature of Confucian ethics as a language of political negotiations in and beyond the court.

**Political Processes as Image-Making Efforts**

Integrating the developments in print culture, cultural trends, and political changes into the analysis of seventeenth-century political communication not only sheds new light on changes in political spaces but also generates a more nuanced account of how the elites experimented with political processes in order to adapt to new conditions. An in-depth investigation of two critical problems in seventeenth-century politics—factionalism and the Qing conquest—from the perspective of image politics allows us to describe changes in the Confucian moral-political system in its own terms.

Factionalism (*dangzheng*) appears repeatedly in Chinese imperial history. A faction was not defined simply by economic, political, or ideological interests. Rather, the bases on which factions were formed were complicated and included “family connections, common origins, patronage relationships, and simple instances of friendship and enmity.” The term *faction* did not always correspond to groups with a clear sense of identity, a coherent agenda or set of interests. Often times, officials were labeled as factionalist simply to undermine their political credibility at court. Within a group of officials perceived as a single faction, some might embrace the label and insist that theirs was a “faction of superior men,” a notion made famous in the Song dynasty by some seeking to justify the alliance among righteous officials. Others might not actively associate themselves with a factional label, assuming the more traditional posture that denounced all forms of factionalism.
Did seventeenth-century factionalism significantly differ from that of the earlier dynasties? It has been argued that, like Song factionalism, the late-Ming variety adopted a court-centered approach.\(^{64}\) Factions all claimed to be collectives of loyal ministers devoted to serving the public good; they did not contest imperial authority.\(^{65}\) New developments in the social sphere, in particular late-Ming “public opinion,” instead of facilitating a real “public sphere” or fundamental changes in government mechanism, only exacerbated factionalism.\(^{66}\) In addition, moral issues had always mattered. For instance, in the Song dynasty, factional attacks were often dealt out in impeachment of officials for their association with courtesans.\(^{67}\)

Meaningful changes did take place in the seventeenth century, however. In spite of the seeming similarities in the techniques of factionalism across time, the particular conditions of this era turned factional activities into much-mediated, multi-centered processes.\(^{68}\) Seventeenth-century sociocultural developments significantly complicated factionalism. The intellectual problems of “authenticity” and “sincerity” became real political issues on their own account (see chap. 2). The question of how to best present and digest “facts” in print material assumed unprecedented urgency and significance in power competition. As political struggles were mediated through literary production and consumption among rivals, friends, and families, factionalism existed as and operated in the Confucian family tales; it was narrated and fought in various media and spaces. The production and circulation of officials’ images as fathers, sons, husbands, and friends in novels, plays, anecdotes, and social spectacles simultaneously targeted three audiences: the court, the literati reading public, and each official’s personal social base. While the issue of loyalty remained central, the factional narratives themselves ceased to be court-centered. Thus, the ruling elite did not haplessly fall into an inevitable recurrence of factionalism; they actively engaged factionalism as not only a moral rhetoric but also an evolving cultural phenomenon at a time of historic change.

By the time of the Ming-Qing transition, imperial history had accumulated many examples of factionalism. The troubling, unsettled history of factionalism, especially from the Song dynasty, fed the Ming-Qing rulers’ strong fear of deception by factionalist officials—who were by definition disloyal—and caused them to overreact. Meanwhile, these rulers themselves learned to employ factionalism as rhetoric and as a tactic in their efforts to control and manage their
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officials. Historical memory and emperors’ interventionism, in combination with print culture and intellectual shifts, made debates about the authenticity of officials’ moral images a central trope in factional negotiations. The multiple, competing images of the Donglin official, the Fushe scholar, and the Han “turncoat” in factional battles across the dynastic divide best illustrate the many kinds of measures undertaken by elites in their efforts to cope with change.

Examining factionalism as a forum for image battles also deepens our understanding of political experiments in the early Qing. During the times of Regent Dorgon (1612–1650) and the Shunzhi emperor (r. 1644–61), factional ties and conflicts crisscrossed among and between Han officials and the Manchus. Violent military conquest and fierce factional struggles created an environment of uncertainty, anxiety, and suspicion. Political actors had to constantly improvise if they were to survive and adapt. Manchu rulers and turncoat officials tapped Confucian ethics creatively to achieve specific political goals. Turncoats’ moral images as fathers, sons, husbands, and friends were at the heart of Manchu and Han experiments that coped with political uncertainty and established Manchu superiority. In turn, the intensive deployment of Confucian ethics as a language of communication in the early Qing facilitated changes in the political meaning of some Confucian practices and in the ruler-subject relationship. For instance, individual officials now had to negotiate hard with the emperor for opportunities to display their Confucian virtues. Interaction between emperor and officials regarding officials’ filial rituals became a means of conveying trust and favor (see chap. 4).

Image politics reached an interesting point in the Qing emperors’ dazzling self-fashioning. Their propaganda successes in projecting the image of imperial exemplariness have been well studied. Scholarship on this topic has advanced our understanding of the nature of Qing rulership and expanded our knowledge of how different traditions and influences shaped its course of action. The Qing emperors were preoccupied with their image. They drew on Neo-Confucian orthodoxy to appeal to the Han but at the same time strove to maintain a Manchu identity so as to perpetuate their dominance. The Qing “ethno-dynastic rule” involved an ongoing manipulation and revision of Confucian ideas in the imperial self-image.

The historical developments described above did not necessarily result in the breakdown of the loyalty–filial piety unity, as previous scholarship has suggested. Neither do they fit neatly in the
framework of “sinicization” that took a simple conservative turn. Rather, early Qing political culture resulted from a series of complicated political negotiations and experiments among various parties. In addition, as the Qing emperors gradually consolidated Manchu supremacy by personally embodying moral exemplariness, the moral-political division of labor among the ruling elites underwent a reconfiguration, which paralleled other innovations in Qing governance, such as placing less emphasis on Han officials’ personal moral reputation than on other ministerial qualities. Even though these changes would remain hidden behind a facade of continuity, the Qing conquest was indeed an image conquest (see chap. 4).

**THE CONTINUUM OF CONFUCIAN MORALISM**

Approaching seventeenth-century Chinese political culture as image politics does not suggest that the elite’s moral performances were all superficial and hypocritical. On the contrary, the notion of image politics is sensitive to the reality that officials’ moral endeavors not only constantly moved along the continuum of Confucian moralism but also succumbed to differing interpretations by a diverse reading public and by political competitors in an increasingly complex sociocultural environment. Further, the lens of image politics demands that we denaturalize the separation of political negotiation and moral debate—and subsequently denaturalize our assumption that the former has to be privileged over the latter to conduct good governance.

Confucian ethical ideals, in particular filial piety and gender propriety, had a long history of being employed by emperors and officials as a political weapon; moral image had always been important for the ruling elite. To better understand the relationship between politics and morality in the seventeenth century, it is necessary to look into the structure of Confucian moralism and trace how its various discursive components interacted with the above-mentioned broader political, cultural, and social environment.

Within the Confucian template of the Five Cardinal Relations, loyalty, filial piety, gender propriety, and friendship form a web of virtues centered on zhongxiao (lit., “loyalty and filial piety”); they continuously give one another political relevance. The history of seventeenth-century Confucian moralism shows how this web of virtues operated as a whole, and how the discursive connections among these masculine virtues were invoked and reinscribed. Of central concern are two
questions, which point to the two dimensions of the continuum of Confucian moralism: In the seventeenth century, which Confucian masculine virtues could help “authenticate” an official’s loyalty? How and why did political actors debate whether an official’s moral performance was sincere and proper? Answers to these questions can be found in Confucian didactic texts and intellectual works. They also emerged in everyday negotiations among emperors, officials, and literati groups.

**The Virtuous Circles of Filial Sons and Good Husbands**

The ethics of zhongxiao encompassed the multiple meanings of the concepts of loyalty (zhong) and filial piety (xiao). Around the third century BCE, the compound first appeared, reflecting historical developments in culture, society, and government that demanded terminology that would theorize the relationship between these ideals—for example, how they were mutually constituted, and which one should be privileged conceptually and in practice. By the Han dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE), filial piety had been extended to include loyalty to the sovereign. The notion of zhongxiao took the practical form in the Han policy of offering government positions to filial sons. Although the elite prioritized different expressions of filial piety under different political conditions, the connection between filial performance and political success remained strong.

Emblematic of this development in the changing environment of the Han dynasty was the political ascendance of the *Classic of Filial Piety* (Xiaojing), which would later be designated a Confucian classic by the state.

The zhongxiao discourse gained momentum in the late Ming and profoundly shaped officials’ self-understanding, self-expression, and behaviors in the seventeenth century. The principle of “governing with filial piety” (xiaozhì) had been enthusiastically embraced by Ming rulers. Although the notion of zhongxiao was prominent in the popular mentality and vernacular literature, it had a particular impact on an official’s career and life, caused by certain status-specific expectations such as that an official should resign from office to mourn a deceased parent for twenty-seven months. We cannot understand seventeenth-century Chinese political culture without carefully examining how officials’ images of zhongxiao were produced, circulated, and contested.

My use of the term zhongxiao in this book reflects its multivalence and diverse meanings in seventeenth-century China. I use it as
an analytical category when examining political negotiations around officials’ images as (un)filial sons. In most places throughout the book, it is the transliteration of the word *zhongxiao* that our historical subjects used in the sources. It is important to remember that, depending on the specific context, this word could be used to refer to the unity of loyalty and filial piety, to praise a man’s moral exemplariness, or to mean Confucian moral principles in general.

The diverse ways our historical subjects employed *zhongxiao* as a term, an ideal, and an intellectual problem expose the fallacies of a central motif of the dominant narrative of the Ming-Qing transition: namely, its narrow understanding of loyalty as Ming loyalism. This narrow understanding did indeed help mobilize Ming resistance. It inspired many officials to commit suicide after a military defeat or at the death of the Ming emperor and compelled some literati to withdraw from public service in the Qing. It also shaped Qing policies not only toward the Han population but also toward those who had fought as or for the Manchus. However, loyalty in practice was a much more complicated phenomenon.

Examining multiple definitions of loyalty in connection with other Confucian virtues complicates our understandings of late-Ming political struggles as well as early Qing recovery. For instance, in the seventeenth century, across the dynastic divide, political actors negotiated “permeable categories and fluid boundaries” in their search for creative ways to adapt and survive. Multiple Confucian ethical ideals were employed by the turncoats and their families to unite the two conflicting loyalties, loyalty to the Ming and loyalty to the Qing. The turncoats’ complicated images as sons, husbands, fathers, and friends—produced by Manchu rulers, by their factional enemies, and by the turncoats themselves—reveal the most fascinating and complex ways Confucian moralism generated interlocking narratives of loyalty, filial piety, manly self-discipline, and friendship and thereby mediated and transformed political and social reality.

The continuum of Confucian moralism that centers on *zhongxiao* fundamentally shaped literati masculinity. The *Classic of Filial Piety* not only reiterates the compatibility of loyalty and filial piety but also affirms the connection between the *zhongxiao* ideal and elite men’s other gendered roles and responsibilities. These discursive connections would be invoked and elaborated upon in political negotiations and experiments. There are ample instances of this in officials’ lives during the Ming-Qing dynastic change.
In the Five Cardinal Relations, the only ethics that explicitly deals with the regulation of a man’s gender and sexual behaviors is the proper relationship between husband and wife (fufu), or gendered distinction (bie). The applicability of this ethics to an increasingly complicated society was predicated on its strong but subtle connection with other ethical expectations for elite men. In everyday politics, this concept could imply and be used to discuss a wide range of gendered expectations, such as fulfilling responsibilities as a husband, maintaining proper order and sexual separation within the household, and resisting sexual distractions, as well as advocating women’s chastity and commitment to domestic harmony.

Looking at officials as men complements the insights of women’s historians regarding the resilience of the Confucian gender system in late imperial China. Under the Confucian gender system, elite men faced a distinct set of issues in times of change and crisis. The seventeenth century witnessed the emergence of alternative intellectual, spiritual, and career choices. In this more thoroughly commercialized society, elite men’s access to women, like their access to luxury goods and entertainment, had grown significantly. Meanwhile, educated women in elite households and pleasure quarters played an increasingly prominent role in men’s social and cultural lives. These developments had sharpened the tension between the discourse on literati self-discipline and the culture of pleasure and leisure. As a result, the notion of self-restraint itself became a matter to be intensely contested and negotiated.

Elite men’s lived experiences in this period cannot be reduced to an ideological struggle. Political actors’ invocations of gender norms in power negotiations gave these norms specific meanings and reinscribed them. As official politics in the late Ming and early Qing turned into intense battles over personal image, officials struggled to display gendered virtues properly and intelligently, learning to walk a fine line when publicizing their masculine qualities and virtues. Their relationships with wives, concubines, and entertainers were subjected to a greater degree of scrutiny, as the flourishing print culture and reconfiguration of political power increased the exposure of officials’ personal lives to public critique and expanded the circulation of competing interpretations of their behavior. Failure to fulfill one’s duties as a husband, indulgence in sexual pleasures, and messy domestic arrangements all could be cited as lack of filial piety and loyalty. Conversely, an official’s display of self-discipline and his spouse’s feminine...
virtues helped to affirm his zhongxiao commitment. The web of masculine virtues centered on zhongxiao, constituting the first dimension of the continuum of Confucian moralism, determined how political struggles tangled Confucian family tales.

**Sincerity and Authenticity in Moral Cultivation**

The other dimension of the continuum of Confucian moralism concerns the political usefulness of the binary understanding of moral performance as either sincere or hypocritical. Across the dynastic divide, as scandalous and exemplary images of officials mushroomed inside and beyond the court, investigating and explaining discrepancies between their political reputations and moral actions became a significant part of political processes.

This development was closely related to contemporaneous intellectual and religious trends. During this time of widespread social upheaval and political corruption, the elite vehemently debated, and creatively explored, the question of how to produce worthy officials through moral cultivation. However, not only was no consensus reached, but diversity and contentiousness increased.

Seventeenth-century literati devoted much attention to the issue of authentic expression and sincere pursuit of Confucian virtues in the intellectual and literary realms. Their critical reflections on the Yangming school, the rise of ritualism, and the trend toward syncretism all engaged these concerns.

Questions of sincerity and authenticity operated as tropes in political negotiations. Officials made efforts to differentiate “sincere” from “perfunctory” moral endeavors. To communicate with the emperor, defeat political rivals, and assemble what could be presented at court as “public opinion,” they extensively employed print, social spectacles, and rituals to display their sincere moral commitments.

Meanwhile, political actors’ practice of Confucian ethics far exceeded the simple dichotomy of sincerity versus pragmatism. Simultaneously addressing audiences in governmental, societal, and familial spheres, a political actor could invoke Confucian ethical values for complex reasons that might combine religious belief, familial obligation, and political convenience (see chap. 3). Political experience also informed the new ways officials understood and theorized the sincere and proper pursuit of Confucian masculine virtues to fulfill both political and familial duties (see chap. 2).
Because friends and the ideal of friendship played indispensable roles in authenticating “sincerity,” the success and effectiveness of officials’ image-making relied heavily on the support of their social networks. Hence the ethics of friendship is particularly important to our investigation of seventeenth-century image politics. First, on a discursive level, the notion of friendship was legitimized and promoted by officials’ shared commitment to loyalty, filial piety, and gender propriety. As a language of political communication, friendship in association with other sanctioned ethical values helped create a positive, politically meaningful narrative of moral exemplariness. Second, on a practical level, the literati published writings and commented on the poetry and art made by friends, thereby not only publicizing one another’s moral performance but also expounding on the meaning of sincere and proper moral pursuits. In the Confucian family tales jointly created by officials and their friends, one’s loyalty was authenticated by one’s image as a filial son, trustworthy friend, and good husband. For many, this display of Confucian ethics was no less authentic than other forms (see chap. 5).

Confucian moralism thus includes a wide range of views, emotions, actions, and dynamics communicated in the language of ethical values. It also encompasses varied inspirations and rationales that cannot be neatly defined as either purely moral pursuits or instrumentalism. Its operation defies evaluations framed in terms of “progress,” “stagnation,” or “dysfunction.” When we look at moralism from today’s point of view, we are tempted to emphasize its normative aspect and regulating functions. This tendency suffers from a particularly modern preoccupation with the question of sincerity. If we recognize Confucian moralism as a continuum that allowed flexible options and creative experiments, many officials begin to look considerably different from the stereotypical images that have been imposed on them by seventeenth-century loyalist literature, eighteenth-century court propaganda, and twentieth-century nationalistic narrative.