Confucian Image Politics

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In the Ming Wanli reign (1573–1620), an era defined by escalating factionalism in politics and a publishing boom in society, politics and print culture were profoundly entangled. This was the cultural environment in which the so-called Donglin faction, the centerpiece of the late-Ming factional saga, emerged. The name “Donglin” derived from the Donglin Academy in Wuxi (in modern-day Jiangsu), where some officials lectured on Neo-Confucianism. In addition to its nod to the Donglin Academy, the term Donglin was known primarily among officials, the literati, and even commoners as a political faction and identity. Clear connections between Donglin intellectual endeavors and political programs in the late Ming have been identified in the following areas: Donglin opposition to the authoritarian grand secretary Zhang Juzheng (1525–1582), the fight against the abuse of power by the so-called eunuch faction (yandang), criticisms of incompetent and indifferent emperors, and gentry local activism. Since the late Ming, much has been written about the Donglin and the several generations of officials who were, in one way or another, seen as Donglin members by their contemporaries. But one crucial question remains unresolved: Just who were the Donglin?

To avoid appearing factionalist, many Donglin-identified officials did not call themselves Donglin associates but acquiesced to the label when it was used in a positive manner. The Donglin label was applied by official and nonofficial literati readers and writers, quite loosely and arbitrarily, to those whom they merely believed to have been Donglin members. In most cases it was the political rivals or
supporters of Donglin-identified officials who attached this label to certain officials and substantiated the labeling by representing those officials in particular ways.

The lack of a clear definition of its membership in the seventeenth century has posed problems for the study of the Donglin’s history. However, we can turn this problem into a productive analytical angle by looking into this history as a type of identity formation. How and why did the Donglin come to be seen as a community of moral exemplars whose reputation constituted a stark contrast to the image of contemporary social deviants and “evil officials?” In the meantime, why were some of the Donglin-identified officials portrayed as “fake” Donglin or anti-Donglin? How did the meaning and image of the Donglin change? How do we explain the similarities in method adopted by Donglin-identified officials and their rivals in the moral tales they produced for political purposes? A cultural-historical approach to the history of the Donglin will demonstrate that the ambiguity and malleability of the image of the Donglin man were both means toward and consequences of seventeenth-century factionalism. The multiple meanings of the term Donglin during the 1590s–1640s and controversies around the image of the Donglin man as a moral exemplar constituted a significant part of late Ming politics.

I use “Donglin-identified officials” to refer to men whose contemporaries classified them as Donglin members and to indicate the instability of that identification. The three officials from whose perspectives I will explore the history of the Donglin never occupied top government positions, nor did they play any role at the famed Donglin Academy. Nonetheless, the ways their lives and reputation were shaped by the intersection of factionalism and print culture throw much light on the increasing importance of officials’ moral images in political processes and help explain the rise of the Donglin man as a moral paragon.

The first of these men, Wu Yuancui (jinshi 1577), whom we encountered in the introduction to this book, was a native of Suzhou. As he gradually lost his eyesight and phased out his bureaucratic career in the mid-Wanli reign, Wu wrote and published much on politics and fellow officials. Not clearly identified with any faction, he claimed to have formed strong friendships with prominent Donglin figures, in particular Gu Xiancheng (1550–1612), a founder of the Donglin group. However, Wu was critical of some Donglin-identified figures,
and his publications were cited by some officials at court against the Donglin group over the course of fierce factional fighting. Wu’s publishing controversies stand as a good illustration of how print culture and intensifying factionalism facilitated the circulation of political information in diverse genres, complicated officials’ political claims, and destabilized the boundaries between truth and perception in political processes. The emergence of the Donglin faction and the power struggles surrounding its meaning and image must be understood in this context.

The greater roles played by various forms of literary production in factionalism of the Tianqi (1621–27) and Chongzhen (1628–44) reigns are revealed by the experiences of the other two officials, Zheng Zhenxian (1572–1628) and Zheng Man (1594–1639), father and son. Admired by some as Donglin vanguards but condemned by others as “fake” Donglin, their ups and downs reflected the unfolding contention over who the Donglin were and what they stood for. The unstable, contested moral images of the Zhengs, produced and circulated in the forms of blacklists, biographies, anecdotal writings, gossip, pamphlets, and vernacular novels, illustrate how the sensational turn of political narratives pulled individual officials’ personal lives to the center of political processes. By the time the son, after years of imprisonment for the unverifiable charges of beating his mother and sexual immorality, was executed, his reputation had been manipulated by multiple parties to help sharpen the image of the “real” Donglin man, the emblem of filial piety and self-discipline.

During the forty years between Wu Yuancui’s publishing ventures and Zheng Man’s efforts to publicize his self-defense from prison, factionalism had spread well beyond the court. It had turned into a transgenerational problem and permeated local politics, complicated regional social networks, crept into the competitive publishing industry, and became the subject of a wide variety of literary production. In other words, factionalism had become, simultaneously, a social, cultural, and literary phenomenon. The moral image of officials produced in these spaces traveled to the court and became a vital part of political processes.

PRINTING POLITICS

The late-Ming literati’s strong demand for political information was met by their increased access to the officially printed gazetteer (dibao)
and to privately printed news that went beyond the carefully worded governmental publications. The enhanced availability of popular literature also profoundly changed the circulation and reception of political information. The interpenetration of politics and literature, in format and content, created both opportunities and confusion for officials. Wu Yuancui’s publishing adventure gives us a glimpse of this development.

Between Wanli 37 and 39 (1609–11), Wu printed and reprinted a collection of anecdotes and notes on contemporary politics in his *Random Notes* (discussed in the introduction). *Random Notes* grew out of a small project but quickly expanded and assumed its current title. The first volume, appearing in Wanli 37 (1609), sparked some interest among official and literati readers. Encouraged by the positive reactions, Wu published additional volumes. He sent the books to former colleagues for comments. Many people borrowed copies from one another to get a glimpse. The work got so much attention that soon it went into another printing, with some revisions.

In Wanli 40 (1622), the official He Canran (*jinshi* 1595) published *Critical Commentary on Random Notes* (*Manlu pingzheng*; hereafter *Critical Commentary*). He claimed he was annoyed by Wu’s first volume but became deeply disturbed by Wu’s further publications. Eventually, after the reprint of *Random Notes* came out, He decided he must publish a response pointing out Wu’s misleading documentation and problematic comments. Outraged by He’s criticisms, Wu published a rebuttal, *Counter-Commentary on Critical Commentary on Random Notes* (*Bo Manlu pingzheng*; hereafter *Counter-Commentary*). Wu also disseminated copies of a short summary of his *Counter-Commentary* among officials, which triggered his rival’s decision to publish a new book, *Counter-Counter-Commentary on Critical Commentary on Random Notes* (*Bo Bo Manlu pingzheng*; hereafter *Counter-Counter-Commentary*). In the course of a single year, these two officials exchanged several rounds of fire in print. Readers’ enthusiasm, together with Wu’s and He’s own interest in self-promotion and self-defense, surely drove them to roll out their exchanges with such speed.

He Canran’s *Critical Commentary* adopted a format that was common in literary commentaries (fig. 1.1). The page was divided into two registers, the upper section for marginal comments (*meipi*) and the lower section for the main text.
In the third round of their exchange, He’s commentary appeared in the form of both marginal comments and double-column interlineal comments (shuang hang jiapi) in the text itself (fig. 1.2).

Scholars of the history of books, scholarly publication, and vernacular novels have examined how commentary formats enhanced commentators’ ability to convey their views persuasively and enriched the reading experience of their audience. When this format was employed in political publications, it not only satisfied the debaters’ need to pointedly present their arguments and evidence but also delivered detailed information to readers who, at the height of the factional infighting in the Wanli reign, craved political news. These two authors—Wu and He—now used this format to retort, clarify, and offer additional evidence by which to establish their own authority and discredit their rival.

As publishing became easier and more available, political reporting, personal attacks, literary views, and intellectual debates blended...
further. For instance, Wu published copiously on a major political controversy of the time: the factional fight over the corruption case of Governor Li Sancai (d. 1623). Li was a strong ally of prominent Donglin figures such as Gu Xiancheng. But in Wanli 37 (1609), allegations of his corruption erupted so forcefully that some Donglin-identified officials had to decide whether to defend him and on what grounds a defense could be formulated. Many, including Gu Xiancheng, did stand behind Li. Amid the fierce factional debate, Wu Yuancui presented himself as an objective observer and politically neutral official. But in Random Notes, partially published in that same year, he attacked the two censors who had criticized his position on the governor’s case, which immediately drew fierce attacks from the pro-Li side. In the next few years, the political division caused by Li’s case grew more and more complex, as shown in the publications by Wu Yuancui and He Canran in Wanli 40–41 (1612–13). In Critical Commentary (1612), which appeared soon after Wu printed and advertised the second edition of
Random Notes, on Wu’s criticism of the above-mentioned two censors, He Canran lambastes Wu for departing from the Confucian principle of tolerating others’ faults. In response, in an interlineal comment in Counter-Commentary, Wu retorted that he never exposed the moral defects of those two censors, even though they had committed misconduct such as buying a concubine and making official recommendations improperly. Of course, printing this response unwisely provided more evidence for He Canran’s observation, in a marginal comment in Counter-Counter-Commentary, that Wu had just demonstrated the tendency to expose others’ personal faults (see fig. 1.2). Using commentary format allowed these two officials to engage questions of factional politics, moral issues, and personal reputation all at the same time. Rather than presenting a coarse mélange, this format simply reflects the reality that these conversations among officials could not be neatly compartmentalized. Printing efficiencies and the creative use of various literary formats further entwined politics and morality and discussions thereof.

The He-Wu crossfire highlights the intricate relationship among print, the explosion of political information, and competition among officials within a progressively factionalist environment. Print promised to expose truths to readers beyond the small group of insiders. In this highly factionalized environment and competitive social domain, officials made greater use of print for their interpretations of political events and their colleagues’ behavior. He Canran’s clever employment of the commentary to establish his own insider status and authority to his readership is compelling.

He carefully checked the two editions of Wu’s Random Notes and painstakingly analyzed any discrepancies and errors that he considered noteworthy. He pointed to the changes Wu made in the second edition as evidence of Wu’s manipulation of the facts. He also discussed discrepancies between Wu’s documentation and more reliable sources—such as the official gazetteer and other officials’ publications—so as to argue Wu’s lack of credibility. To bolster his own credibility, He informed readers that when Wu published a new book, Draft Work from the Yi’an Hall (Yiantang gao), which recycled some material from Random Notes, Wu quietly corrected the problems that He had pointed out even though he publicly dismissed He’s criticisms.

Competition for authority in print was driven by, and also contributed to, the factional battles fought at and beyond the court. Why did
He Canran so patiently—and even a bit obsessively—comb through the two editions of *Random Notes* and publish a point-by-point commentary to discredit Wu? His hostility toward Wu was ignited by a reference Wu had made to him in *Random Notes*, writing that a memorial He had submitted in Wanli 33 (1605) amid the factional disputes over the latest round of bureaucratic evaluations was the most ridiculous of all. Wu accused He of attempting to protect a fellow official from his hometown (*tongxiang*) and of trying to please the powerful grand secretary Wang Xijue (1534–1614), a pivotal figure in Wanli politics and leader of the Zhe faction (*Zhe dang*), whose key figures came from Zhejiang. Wu’s comment exacerbated He’s frustration with factionalism. He Canran had been proud of this particular memorial and felt that precisely because it approached personnel disagreements from a neutral standpoint, he had alienated both the Zhe and Donglin factions. He not only had failed to benefit from being a Zhejiang native but instead was marginalized by all factions and suffered one demotion after another. In response to Wu’s assertions, He took advantage of the ease of access to publishing and effectively attacked *Random Notes*.

Under He’s attack on his credibility, Wu mobilized “public opinion” (*gonglun*) and made it manifest in his *Counter-Commentary* by attaching a long appendix that quoted praise for *Random Notes* from more than twenty colleagues (fig. 1.3). Parading these supposedly fair and representative comments was meant to expose the biased and malicious nature of He’s comments.

He Canran, however, in *Counter-Counter-Commentary*, cynically shrugged off Wu’s parade of “public opinion.” He questioned whether such “public opinion” was objective at all. “When the literati print their works or compose something, naturally they send them to good friends and close associates. The recipients of these publications are not there to express honest or tough-minded comments; they are certain to ring with high praise. Critical friends are rare. These comments are meaningless. Wu gathered all these [flattering comments] and printed them only to show off.”

The Wu-He exchange thus vividly demonstrates how print provided rival authors with opportunities to claim authority, objectivity, and popularity. As the use of print ramped up, officials had to continue exploring for even more effective means of defeating their rivals. It is therefore not surprising that Wu’s and He’s colleagues became interested in employing vernacular literature for such purposes. As
print culture changed the transmission and presentation of political information, it significantly shaped the formation of, and negotiations over, factional identities. Factionalism became an increasingly complex literary phenomenon and subject of cultural consumption. It was under these conditions that competing images of the Donglin—and their increasingly personal content—emerged.

**Factional Identity and Print**

When Wu Yuancui published the first edition of *Random Notes* in Wanli 37 (1609), he did not try to align his political commentary and social activities along the dichotomy of Donglin versus anti-Donglin. His vague ties with the Donglin are reflected in the “messiness” of his publications. However, Wu did feel pressure to carve out a factional position, even though he had already retired. That pressure came from the realities of court politics.
During the Wanli reign, the word Donglin carried positive meanings for some, while for others, the label had only negative connotations. Rival factions, adopting Song-era factional terminology, referred to the Donglin as an “evil faction” (xiedang), one that consisted of officials who either promoted false teachings (weixue) or pursued factional interests.  

One of the first officials to actively publicize the Donglin as a righteous political force and delineate a positive Donglin image in print was Wu Liang (jinshi 1601). Around Wanli 37 (1609), Wu Liang compiled and published a well-received volume, *Memorials of the Wanli Court* (Wanli shuchao). He had very close sociopolitical ties with some of its prominent contributors, such as Gu Xiancheng, Qian Yiben (1546–1617), and Gao Panlong (1562–1626), who were considered among the founders of the Donglin. This publication for the first time presented Donglin officials as having a powerful and distinctive voice. Later, in the course of the heated debate over the Donglin leaders’ support for the controversial Li Sancai, Wu Liang not only defended Li but also took the extraordinary action of having Gu Xiancheng’s letter of support printed and disseminated all over the capital. 

Wu Liang made tremendous efforts to portray the Donglin as a faction of worthy men. He had publicly mentioned three ways in which the Donglin was defined at the time, of which he endorsed only the first one: “Today, worthy men and gentlemen are definitely Donglin; the officials upon whom the Donglin rely are also Donglin.” He expressed strong criticism of those who considered Donglin an “evil faction.” This negative portrayal already had substantial support among officials. 

Meanwhile, Wu Yuancui’s publications reminded Wu Liang that outside the court, the meaning of the Donglin went well beyond the above-mentioned dichotomy. It was negotiated in officials’ social activities and, importantly, in their publications. Individual officials often took a flexible stance. Instead of engaging the Donglin as a political faction, they tended to create a positive social connection between themselves and the most admired Donglin-identified figures, in effect turning them into celebrities. This explains Wu Yuancui’s simultaneous opposition to Li Sancai and claims of friendship with Donglin leaders. 

Wu Liang, a self-claimed Donglin member, strongly contested such appropriation of the Donglin fame. Insisting on identifying a correct
list of Donglin men, Wu Liang defied the ambiguous factional lines drawn in publications such as those by Wu Yuancui. In the memorial in which he defined the Donglin faction, Wu Liang referred to his own book *Memorials of the Wanli Court* as the standard while dismissing Wu Yuancui’s *Random Notes* as an example of a politically problematic list: “No one would refer to *Random Notes* for the names of the worthy men [who are Donglin]!”

But Wu Yuancui unwaveringly maintained his “third position” and put out more books to make his case. He printed a collection of memorials by officials who protested the Donglin leaders’ support of Li Sancai; in other publications he portrayed himself as being in the same intellectual-social camp as certain Donglin icons. For instance, in *Random Notes*, Wu Yuancui stressed that he and Gu Xiancheng had, more than once, attempted to meet for gatherings at the Donglin Academy, but for health reasons he was never able to make it to those occasions. Thus, the circulation of Wu’s book among officials and the literati threatened Wu Liang’s efforts to claim a unified image for the Donglin.

The contentious nature of the meaning and image of the Donglin can also be detected in He Canran’s response to Wu Yuancui’s self-presentation in *Random Notes*. Wu Yuancui claimed:

> In Liangxi (Wuxi, where the Donglin Academy was located) there gathered a number of outstanding gentleman-scholars. Gu Xiancheng not only perfectly fulfilled filial duties but also produced deep and solid scholarship. Ye Maocai shies away from fame and mundane desires in his pursuit of self-cultivation. Gu Yuncheng, An Xifan, Gao Panlong, and Liu Yuanzhen all embrace noble ideals and demonstrate extraordinary character. Their honest criticisms contribute to making decisions about the most fundamental policies and help correct the mistakes made by His Majesty. This group of scholar-officials possessed such amazing talents. [Gu Xiancheng] invited me to meet him at the Donglin Academy. But again and again I was not able to make it due to illness. In the past people talked about making friends with men from history. I have missed meeting these Donglin gentlemen in person. Indeed our encounters [or lack of them] in this life are all predetermined. Still, friendships formed in spiritual attraction from afar are not so different from those found in face-to-face meetings.

Here, besides identifying the key members of the Donglin and associating them with the particular location of the academy in Wuxi, a particular activity (lecturing there), and a particular set of qualities, Wu Yuancui extended the social contours of the group to include
officials like him, who enjoyed “friendships formed in spiritual attraction” (shenjiao) with these Donglin figures.

But He Canran sees Wu as a fake Donglin at best. In his Critical Commentary, He offers the following remarks on the passage above: “In the history of our dynasty, interest in lecturing started with Wang Yangming. In this work (Random Notes), Wu goes all out to denounce Wang Yangming, but he attaches himself to the Donglin (zituo yu Donglin), as we can see in his obsession with the idea of lecturing at the Donglin Academy. Since he knows how to praise contemporary worthy men, why does he disparage a great scholar of the past?” In this way, He Canran mocks Wu Yuancui’s assertion of an attenuated social affiliation with the Donglin, because Wu demonstrates little intellectual affinity with the Donglin or one of its sources of inspiration, Wang Yangming. He has successfully exposed how far Wu Yuancui has to stretch to claim a connection with the Donglin.

Although Wu Liang, Wu Yuancui, and He Canran had different understandings of the Donglin, they were similar in two important ways. First, they were not fixated on identifying the ideal Donglin official with specific personal virtues. Second, the literary genres they chose—document collections and commentary—served their main purpose of recording and spreading political insiders’ views and conversations. However, as factionalism became increasingly social and personal, the genres of publications employed by officials to wage factional battles multiplied and their narratives relied more on moral stereotyping. The image of the Donglin man evolved accordingly.

**Political Lists and Factions**

With the Donglin gaining more and more intellectual and political influence, officials of all factions—and their respective supporters—had a real stake in shaping the meaning and image of the Donglin. They turned to print to assert competing claims about it, but no one could completely control how readers interpreted those efforts. Wu Liang’s “Donglin canon” and Wu Yuancui’s array of “public opinion” testimonials anticipated a convenient form of persuasion: compiling and circulating lists of worthy men. Lists, as a particular genre of political literature, would greatly complicate the image of the Donglin. When the focus of factional contention shifted to the struggles between Donglin-identified officials and the eunuch faction in the Tianqi reign (1621–27), efforts to “list the Donglin” intensified, and
the project of finding innovative ways of characterizing its members took a sensationalistic turn. Political imagination and literary imagination became inseparable and, in some cases, undistinguishable in the ongoing evolution of the Donglin image.

_Donglin Blacklists_

The most important change in the political atmosphere in the 1620s was that the Wanli emperor’s laissez-faire style of managing the officials was replaced, in the Tianqi reign, by violent competition for power between the eunuch faction and its opponents. As this was happening, political battles increasingly focused on individual officials’ moral character. The showdown between moral paragons—often identified as the Donglin—and their allegedly morally corrupt counterparts who collaborated with the powerful eunuch Wei Zhongxian escalated factionalism to a whole new level.³⁰

In Tianqi 4 (1624), the eunuch faction created the _List of Notorious Donglin Fighters_ (Donglin dianjiang lu), mentioning a total of 108 “evil” officials based on the roster of 108 “rebel leaders” from the novel _Water Margin_. This list instantly became the definitive register of the “Donglin faction.” It in turn laid the foundation for the _List of Donglin Factionalists_ (Donglin dangren bang), the officially publicized list of allegedly disloyal officials whom the eunuch faction proscribed on behalf of the emperor (in Tianqi 5 [1625]). The men whose names appeared on this blacklist became targets of the eunuch faction’s political vendettas. They were deprived of official titles and, if alive, were at risk of imprisonment. Those already dead lost their titles and the honors previously bestowed upon them.³¹ The Donglin blacklists as a _literary-political_ project did not simply serve as a tool of factional persecution. They epitomized changes in the mode and mood of political communication, moving it further toward focusing on individual officials’ personal moral image.

Assigning fictional characters’ sobriquets to Donglin-identified officials was a defining feature of the _List of Notorious Donglin Fighters_ and significantly increased the effectiveness of blacklisting. First, at this point, it remained unclear to many people which faction would prevail as the “righteous” force. From our distance across history, we might be tempted to believe that caricatures based on a popular novel would meet with unanimous resistance from the reading public because of their vulgarity. But this seems not to have
been the case. As revealed in an account by the pro-Donglin literatus Xue Cai, even before full-scale anti-Donglin persecutions broke out, in Jiangnan, some local literati already held a negative view of the Donglin-identified officials. The rise of the eunuch faction and its full-fledged, empirewide anti-Donglin campaign unleashed these literati’s resentments. Thus, even before the official Donglin blacklist was issued empire wide, various other versions in circulation had already engaged public curiosity and even aroused support.

Second, by fictionalizing and recycling the old “Donglin” label, the foundational blacklist, the *List of Notorious Donglin Fighters*, gave it new meanings and turned factional politics into an object of cultural consumption. Several versions of this list had existed and did not match officials with the characters in the same way. The *List of Notorious Donglin Fighters* was certainly the most “sophisticated” among them. In society, the *List of Notorious Donglin Fighters* was the best known among the blacklists precisely because readers were familiar with the incredibly popular novel it played off of. Some literati observed that, thanks to this pairing, the reading public was quickly swayed by the portrayal of the Donglin as an evil faction (*diandao le baixing haowu*).

In effect, presenting Donglin officials in this fashion made political persecution entertaining for the eunuch faction and for the literati who disliked the Donglin. The reader participated in a literary and political game; his familiarity with the novel was key to understanding contemporary factional politics.

Matching Donglin-identified officials with fictional rebel characters was intended to indicate—sometimes deliberately inaccurately—these officials’ political importance, interconnections, personal characteristics, or a combination of these. For example, in the *List of Notorious Donglin Fighters*, Zheng Man was assigned the name “Peculiar Star among the Stars of Earth called the White-Faced Goodman” (*Diyixing Baimian Langjun*), the sobriquet of the character Zheng Tianshou. This character was carefully chosen for Zheng Man—not only did they share a surname, but Zheng Tianshou also appears in the novel in a gang of three, which coincided with the well-known trio of allies Zheng Man, Wen Zhenmeng (1574–1630), and Huang Daozhou (1585–1646). Zheng Man’s family was known to be one of the wealthiest in his hometown. The choice of the character Zheng Tianshou also seems to reflect the perception that Zheng Man was a man who had the money and leisure
to take care of his appearance, an image that would later circulate widely among the literati.\(^\text{38}\)

Zheng’s colleague and good friend Wen Zhenmeng became the “Learned Star among the Stars of Earth called the Magic Scribe” (Diwenxing Shengshou Shusheng), the sobriquet for the rebel Xiao Rang.\(^\text{39}\) This was also a clever match. In the novel, Xiao Rang is also a famed calligrapher. Wen Zhenmeng’s grandfather Wen Zhengming (1470–1559) was the most accomplished calligrapher and painter of the Ming dynasty. The younger Wen’s writing and calligraphy also enjoyed fame across the empire and helped earn him first place in the civil service examinations, a status truly deserving of the sobriquet “Learned Star.” Matching Zheng Man and his friends with fictional rebels indicates that the blacklist itself had become a new type of entertaining literature. These Donglin blacklists, by fictionalizing political figures, were parodies of the idealized image of the Donglin man, a self-fashioned image of moral perfection.

Vernacular novels suggested other ways of further fictionalizing the composition of such lists. For instance, *Water Margin* has many examples of brothers—easily identifiable because they share a surname—joining the rebels. When the anti-Donglin officials compiled the blacklists, they felt free to make up factional ties among officials who shared surnames or whose names sounded the same and arbitrarily included them on the lists.\(^\text{40}\) Thus, it is not coincidental that the *List of Notorious Donglin Fighters* matches as many as eleven officials with fictional characters simply by surname. Other Donglin blacklists asserted factional connections via mentor-disciple relationships or because the men came from the same regions.\(^\text{41}\)

In reality, Donglin networking did not neatly reflect these traditional models of faction formation. Ironically, the blacklists’ representation of Donglin factionalists appeared “real” because the lists blended the socially and literarily familiar ways of imagining factional ties. Hence, among officials, these arbitrarily compiled lists deepened and complicated the factional animosities that had already become messy and confusing since the Wanli era. As they became an important index of officials’ political reputations and identities, anxiety and fear levels rose. The men named on these lists worried about being persecuted as factionalists; those who did not appear on the lists were concerned that powerful Donglin officials might block their opportunities.\(^\text{42}\) One official told others that he felt ashamed not to be included on the *List of Notorious Donglin Fighters*. Sadly, a year
later, his name did appear in the official *List of Donglin Factionalists*, and he was murdered by the eunuch faction.\(^{43}\)

Modern historians, like seventeenth- and eighteenth-century literati scholars, have focused their attention on whether these lists accurately documented the names of the so-called Donglin associates.\(^{44}\) Clearly, however, anti-Donglin officials did not prioritize accuracy when identifying and describing their enemies. On the contrary, they sometimes deliberately included unrelated officials in order to confuse the reading public and for entertainment. Although the inclusion of non-factionalists on a factional list was a tactic earlier employed in Song factionalism,\(^{45}\) drawing inspiration from vernacular literature in compiling blacklists was a new phenomenon. The Donglin man was subject to competing imaginative interpretations.

*A List for a List: The Traitors’ Case*

The sensationalistic, literary turn of late-Ming factionalism nascent in these Donglin blacklists not only put forth a powerfully negative image of the Donglin, but more importantly, it irrevocably changed how politics was understood and communicated. This change did not stop with the fall of Wei Zhongxian after the death of the Tianqi emperor in 1627. The influence of the lists and the images they created for individual officials lingered and continued to play a role in court politics.

The Chongzhen emperor (r. 1628–44), newly enthroned, was determined to crush the eunuch faction. However, he also harbored a less-than-positive view of the Donglin. He said at the beginning of his reign: “We cannot punish an official merely because he is associated with the label ‘Donglin.’”\(^{46}\) This statement does not sound enthusiastic about the Donglin; it does reflect the situation at the time, that to various degrees and for different reasons, the negative image of the Donglin still had traction for many.

An early sign of the Donglin image problem in the Chongzhen reign was the emperor’s involvement in an anti-Donglin moral attack. The renowned scholar Qian Qianyi (1582–1664) was accused of participating in examination fraud in Chongzhen 2 (1629). The emperor, before a court audience, roughly dismissed Qian’s self-defense and called him a “bare stick” (guanggun), or rascal, an allusion to the perception that rootless single men gave in to uncontrolled sexual desire and behavior.\(^{47}\) This term would eventually enter Qing legal
discourse from vernacular fiction, but before then, literary vocabulary had penetrated into late-Ming official discourse and even the emperor’s vocabulary. In fact, in the *List of Notorious Donglin Fighters*, Qian Qianyi was matched with the rebel Yan Qing, “The Prodigal,” a “bare stick” type of character from *Water Margin*.

It was not an easy task for the emperor and his officials to undo the effects of the Donglin blacklists and the colorful images they evoked among the reading public. The actions of the Donglin-identified official Ni Yuanlu (1592–1644) reveal the difficulty of breaking away from factional listing and labeling. In response to the emperor’s call for “abandoning cliques and transforming differences to sameness,” Ni stressed the necessity of recognizing the Donglin as a faction of virtuous men who represent “true Confucian Learning of Principle (Lixue), true integrity, true moral character, and true statesmanship.” At the same time, Ni also understood that factional lists would always provide fodder for more disputes. Therefore, he told the emperor that as long as others ceased speaking of factions, he himself would not mention the label “Donglin” again.

But list making now seemed a natural recourse for political actors and continued to evolve as a political technique. Lists were easy to disseminate and quick to produce results by direct impression; they summarized politics and identity in a black-and-white manner that inevitably provoked strong reactions. Even though the status of the Donglin remained unsettled and *Donglin* had become a forbidden term at court, at the urging of officials identified with the Donglin, including Ni Yuanlu, the emperor issued the famous “Traitors’ Case” (Ni’an), a list of officials to be punished because of their association with Wei Zhongxian. It was printed and announced throughout the empire.

The issuance of this new list was critical because it greatly contributed to making the moral image of individual officials central to political struggles in and outside the capital. After the release of this list, officials of various camps and their literati followers competed by questioning their rivals’ moral performance. In particular, they remained concerned over the perceived discrepancies between the dominant moral reputation of a faction and the moral performance of the individuals on that faction’s list. Though not as sensational as the Donglin blacklists concocted by the eunuch faction, the Traitors’ Case undoubtedly added momentum to late-Ming image politics.

Once the Tianqí reign had ended in 1627, the suffering and sacrifices of Donglin officials were widely publicized, and this helped
establish their image as a faction of Confucian moral exemplars. At the same time, the Donglin claim to moral superiority had become a point of contention in the government. To gain the political upper hand, anti-Donglin officials often impeached Donglin-identified officials for violating Confucian ethical ideals such as filial piety and gender propriety. In the late 1630s, Ni Yuanlu and his close friend Zheng Man both lost their jobs after the anti-Donglin faction leveled accusations of domestic ethical violations against them. Ni was impeached for being an irresponsible husband and Zheng for being an unfilial son and wicked father-in-law, a story to which I will turn shortly.

The use of lists and literature as weapons in power struggles effectively blurred the boundaries between “real” and “feigned” moral exemplars and so directed attention to the official’s actual personal character. Whereas lists simplified—or falsified—an official’s political position and thereby made politics more divisive and personal, vernacular literature did much the same thing by supplying sensational details and referring to specific moral stereotypes that readers of popular literature could easily recognize and relate to. The factional images of the Donglin produced by these two related methods—lists and literature—caused confusion among officials and the reading public. As a result, officials faced ever greater pressure to “authenticate” their moral images.

THE FACE OF THE DONGLIN: THE ELDER ZHENG’S IMAGES UNVEILED

The interplay between print culture and politics made officials’ personal performance as fathers, sons, and husbands increasingly important in late-Ming factional configurations and the competition among factions for power at court. To further illustrate this trend in political culture, I shall now turn to the political demise of Zheng Zhenxian and the execution of his son Zheng Man. Their experiences not only illuminate the evolution of the Donglin man as a moral paragon but, more importantly, highlight the role played by Confucian family tales in shaping factional identities.

The Zheng family hailed from prosperous Wujin County (in modern-day Jiangsu). They were related by marriage to another prestigious family in the area, the Qians, whose scions included Qian Yiben, a Donglin founding figure. Zheng Zhenxian became Wu Liang’s brother-in-law when he married the daughter of Wu
Zhongxing (jinshi 1571), who had become famous in the empire for impeaching Grand Secretary Zhang Juzheng and as a consequence being severely punished by the Wanli emperor.

In Wanli 5 (1577), an imperial order of *duoqing* (cutting short an official’s mourning period for a deceased parent) prevented Zhang from resigning from office to mourn properly for his deceased father. This event triggered a series of confrontations between the emperor and oppositional officials, who expressed their opposition to Zhang’s administrative style by framing his “compliance” with the *duoqing* order as a violation of filial piety. The emperor’s decision to have the leading protesters beaten at court turned the incident into a sensational spectacle. This was a watershed moment, setting off the late-Ming factionalism that would evolve into a greater problem.

In succeeding years, the Grand Secretariat became the target of political attacks, while the Censorate grew into a powerful political force, with censors submitting bold memorials to the court and widely circulated essays, plays, stories, and satires between Beijing and Nanjing, the auxiliary capital and political center in the south. These materials claimed to expose alleged ethical defects of powerful officials. Many censors fashioned themselves as loyal officials courageously upholding ethical ideals, but in time, censorial authority was itself eroded by abuses of power. Censors, feared by many as “hungry hawks,” became instruments of political manipulation and character assassination; wielding power in the name of moral uprightness satisfied each censor’s craving for personal fame and wealth.57

Zheng Zhenxian’s image problem arose just as public suspicion regarding the impeaching officials’ self-proclaimed moral superiority was mounting. Literati readers learned about Zheng through two different political images of him that circulated in the late Wanli reign. One image presented him as an upright hero battling against the abuse of power. Wu Liang’s Donglin canon, *Memorials of the Wanli Court*, included Zheng’s “An Honest Memorial Exposing the Most Powerful and Treacherous Officials in the Past and Present” (Zhifa gujin diyi quanjian shu) (Wanli 36 [1608]). This memorial was a perfect fit with Wu’s collection and agenda, as it scathingly called out certain former and presiding grand secretaries as venomous blackguards who abused their political power.58 Wu appropriately placed this memorial in the chapter titled “Exposing Treacherous Officials” (Fajian), a title likely inspired by that of Zheng’s memorial. Zheng had singled out Grand Secretary Zhu Geng’s factionalist behavior and its corrupting effect
on the central government. This view was endorsed and voiced even
more strongly by Wu Liang himself. These attacks on Zhu Geng,
leader of the Zhe faction, likely led to Zheng’s political demise.

Zheng Zhenxian and Wu Liang were both considered Donglin
members at some point. When the above-mentioned memorial earned
Zheng a demotion to a post in remote Sichuan, he received several
poems from Wu, followed by another set of poems after his depart-
ture. In these poems, Wu spoke highly of Zheng’s political integrity
as a fearless, honest, and loyal official. He also dedicated poems to
Zheng’s mother, praising her achievement of the ideal womanhood
and portraying her Confucian motherly virtues as an inspiration for
officials striving to perform diligently their political duties.

The second image of Zheng Zhenxian was not so exemplary. His
impeachment of top officials was considered by some to be nothing
more than vicious character assassination. Some believed that Zheng’s
provocative memorial against Zhu Geng and his ally Li Tingji con-
tained dishonest charges and employed exaggerated and ill-conceived
rhetoric, a typical opportunist’s move. Zheng’s true colors became a
hot topic in official circles.

Vernacular literature was entering official politics around this time.
To enhance their own fame, the censors—siding with their respective
power holders at court—portrayed targeted officials as fictional rebel
characters. These colorful attacks were disseminated through the offi-
cial gazetteer and its private copies. As circulation of such images
widened, they became entertaining morsels swapped at officials’
drinking parties. The famous official and calligrapher Dong Qichang
(1555–1636) once called the situation “a real-life Water Margin” (buo
Shuihuzhuan). Zheng Zhenxian was dubbed the “Bai Sheng of the
Donglin faction.” The Bai Sheng character in Water Margin was a
schemer who would betray his rebel friends under torture. Why this
particular character? One record explained that Zheng had attacked
his colleagues in order to gain an important censorial position, and
in the wake of this betrayal, his friends at court felt ashamed to work
with him.

At first glance, this negative image of Zheng conveys the simple
truth that within the community of Donglin gentlemen there lurked
this morally inferior man. However, the reality was much messier. In
fact, Zheng Zhenxian did not create a clear factional identity for him-
self. At the time, a few factional groups were named after the home
regions of their respective leaders, such as the Zhe faction (Zhejiang),
Xuan faction (Xuancheng, in modern-day Anhui), Kun faction (Kunshan, in modern-day Jiangsu), and so on, many of which later joined forces with the eunuch faction.67 Zheng, while seen as Donglin by some, maintained an extremely close relationship with the Kun faction leaders but had created enemies in the Zhe faction.68

Donglin-identified officials in the last decade of the Wanli reign, surrounded as they were by accusations of factional maneuvering, were unlikely to have called Zheng the “Bai Sheng” of their own faction. Even though contemporary readers loved the characters of *Water Margin* as manly heroes, likening Zheng to a sly fictional character would have served only to ridicule the Donglin itself and reinforce their image as a collective whose loyalty and character were questionable. The damage this impression would do to Zheng and to the Donglin faction suggests that it had been the work of Donglin rivals.

These early images of Zheng Zhenxian as a Donglin man in the Wanli reign had focused primarily on his political behavior. Later, however, the public revelation of a small detail in his private life in a Donglin blacklist indicated that changes were under way: factionalism became personal.

During the Tianqi reign, when Zheng’s name appeared in some Donglin blacklists, he was not matched with a rebel character from *Water Margin*. Nonetheless, at this point, rumors about his personal life were brought to notice for the first time. *The Seditious Donglin Clique* (Daobing Donglin huo), a blacklist compiled in Tianqi 6 (1626), included one sentence after Zheng’s name, noting that he had “shaved his head to fake insanity.”69 This seemingly trivial detail is striking because it introduced local gossip to the list. The author(s) of the list, going out of their way to inject this information here, clearly meant to project a dubious personal image of Zheng in the hope of causing greater damage to his political standing.

This editorial move was the work of former Zhe faction members who were collaborating with the eunuch faction.70 In other words, the previous generation of Zhe factionalists contributed to the later eunuch faction by digging up dirt on Donglin-identified figures like Zheng. This literary-political project would be carried on by yet another generation of Zhe factionalists under the leadership of Grand Secretary Wen Tiren (1573–1638) during the Chongzhen reign. They would make the dubious aspects of Zheng’s domestic life appear credible by writing them into vernacular novels meant to incriminate his son.
To understand how gossip became “fact” and a footnote grew into a fatal scandal as factionalism evolved transgenerationally in the form of family romance, we must look carefully into this locally generated image of Zheng Zhenxian. When the triennial bureaucratic evaluations took place in Wanli 39 (1611), Zheng had already been demoted to Sichuan. There he received a negative evaluation and another demotion. In Beijing, Wu Liang was treated similarly. This was an especially heavy blow for Zheng. Within the span of a couple of years, Zheng and Wu both left government service and returned to Wujin County. While Wu lived a disciplined life in temporary retirement, Zheng sought refuge in Buddhism. Frustrated by factional retaliation and mistreatment, he no longer visited other officials or socialized with local elites; he would not wear Confucian headwear and did not show up at lineage gatherings. He devoted himself completely to studying Buddhism.

Locally, an increasingly bizarre image of Zheng emerged. At the time, many officials admired Master Lianchi (Lianchi Dashi) (usually known as Yunqi Zhuhong [1535–1615]), a pivotal figure in the popularization of Buddhism among the late-Ming literati. His wife, a pious Buddhist, also enjoyed great popularity among gentry women. Zheng Zhenxian and his wife decided to visit the couple together. His son described the rumors that followed:

On my parents’ way back, Father stopped at Kunshan [where I was studying] and took me back home. As soon as we returned, we realized there were rumors flying everywhere. Some said Father had shaved his head and become a monk. Some said I also had become a monk or Mother had become a nun. There were also people who gossiped that Father was involved in a dispute over some maid. All kinds of stories were being circulated. Father and Mother laughed them off, but the rumors didn’t die and continued to spread. It was probably people conspiring to take our property who spread them.

Zheng Zhenxian and Wu Liang’s friendship, once extremely strong, had cooled during this period. In a letter to Zheng Zhenguang (1583–1616), Zhenxian’s younger brother, Wu recalled the strong friendship and mutual trust he and Zhenxian had enjoyed in the old days. According to this letter, after they retired, Wu learned about Zhenxian’s “desire to withdraw from the world” (you chushi zhi xiang). At first Wu admired Zhenxian’s choices, but then he started to question them. He decided that he trusted his friend to break away soon from such distractions and that he should not participate in gossiping about Zhenxian’s domestic situation. However, because certain
ill-intentioned local men had circulated rumors and then directed Zhenxian’s suspicions toward Wu, their friendship had suffered.\textsuperscript{79}

What actually happened within the walls of the Zheng household remains a mystery. Zheng’s friend Wu and his son Zheng Man were obliged to refrain from writing about the specifics. Popular accounts of the Zhengs in seventeenth-century publications all contain questionable information.\textsuperscript{80} Still, it is clear that local politics, personal spiritual pursuits, and domestic relations in combination created a messy situation for the retired Zheng Zhenxian.

For some time, Zheng Zhenxian’s image as an official indulging in Buddhism, as well as the sensational details associated with it, stayed mostly local and within the realms of the concerned clans. As factional struggles intensified during the Tianqi reign, however, as mentioned earlier, some vague information about his domestic life began to trickle into political media, just as the Donglin image took a sensationalistic literary turn. The face of Zheng Zhenxian as an official of the evil Donglin faction, a corrupt man, would become more clearly defined after his death, when, amid factional struggles in the Chongzhen reign, depictions of the Zhengs’ domestic and religious life were exhibited in the empirewide political theater in the form of novels, biographies, and anecdotes.

THE MAKING OF A TRANSGENERATIONAL SCANDAL

The Zhengs, father and son, never served together at court. Image politics is all that connected their careers, which actually overlapped only in lists and literature: they both first appeared on the Donglin blacklists during the Tianqi reign. By the Chongzhen reign, anti-Donglin officials were weaving their stories into various forms of literature as a way of attacking the son. The father’s and son’s different but overlapping experiences with image politics most vividly reveal the evolution of factionalism as a literary problem. In the struggles in and around literary production, the idealized image of the Donglin man as a loyal official, filial son, and self-disciplined man gradually crystallized.

The Fall of an (Un)filial Son

When Zheng Man began his career in Beijing in Tianqi 2 (1622), Donglin-identified officials had just helped enthrone the young
Tianqi emperor. Emboldened by their sudden dominance at court and eager to restore the bureaucratic order they regarded as having been severely crippled in the Wanli reign, these officials alienated enough of their peers to cause factional discord to flare. Meanwhile, the young emperor’s reliance on the eunuch Wei Zhongxian triggered fierce criticism from officials, the most vocal of whom were identified and slandered as Donglin. Wei Zhongxian gradually built alliances with officials who were either marginalized by the Donglin or sought easy promotion. Soon after Zheng Man entered the government, he submitted a memorial backing his friend Wen Zhenmeng’s criticism of Wei’s intrusion into government matters. This move earned him the reputation of being an upright and outspoken official at the outset of his career, but it also offended Wei. Demoted, Zheng returned home. In Beijing, Donglin-identified officials persisted in their campaign against Wei, but within a couple of years, many of them had been demoted, arrested, or even murdered. The most horrific of these cases, the torture and killing of six officials, epitomized the suppression of the Donglin at this time.

From his hometown in Jiangnan, Zheng Man had hoped to help rescue the imprisoned officials but soon learned of their deaths. Because it was said that a six-leaved yellow ganoderma (lingzhi) miraculously appeared upon the martyrdom of the six, Zheng composed a long poem, “Song of Yellow Ganoderma” (Huangzhi ge), to commemorate them. The poem was circulated quickly to and within the capital. Several officials in the eunuch faction who had previously followed Zhu Geng, the former Zhe faction leader and grand secretary impeached by Zheng’s father, took advantage of Wei Zhongxian’s furious reaction to this poem. They identified Zheng Man as a Donglin leader and implicated him in the “confession” of another persecuted Donglin official. When the eunuch faction began persecuting officials with blacklists, they identified Zheng as a key member of the Donglin and included him in almost all such lists. Hearing of his pending arrest, Zheng went underground and fled to the mountains in the south.

After the fall of Wei Zhongxian and the enthronement of Emperor Chongzhen in 1627, the likelihood of Zheng returning to court looked promising. The new emperor announced his dedication to promoting “governing with filial piety.” During the years of terror, Zheng had proved himself a filial son and loyal official. Just as the emperor summoned him back to court along with other officials persecuted by the
eunuch faction, Zheng lost both his parents. He dutifully observed two terms of mourning, establishing his zhongxiao credentials were known among Donglin supporters during the early Chongzhen reign.

But soon after his return to court in Chongzhen 8 (1635), events took a dramatic turn. Chief Grand Secretary Wen Tiren had become determined to best Wen Zhenmeng, Zheng’s close friend and ally, in gaining imperial favor. The emperor had just promoted Wen Zhenmeng into the Grand Secretariat. Wen Tiren worried that his position could be undermined by collaboration between Wen Zhenmeng and Zheng Man. As a result of Wen Tiren’s maneuvers, the emperor demoted Wen Zhenmeng. But Wen Tiren wanted more. He decided to use Zheng to dominate completely his Donglin rivals. Having heard rumors about Zheng’s family issues from Wu Zongda (jinshi 1604), a member of Wu Liang’s clan and a grand secretary, Wen Tiren submitted a memorial that included a shocking story about Zheng Man beating his mother. On the basis of this memorial, in Chongzhen 8/11 (1635), the emperor ordered Zheng Man arrested and jailed. Officials on the Board of Punishments said: “We should not prosecute a grave crime against ethics on the basis of gossip. We would like to ask officials from [Zheng]’s hometown to verify the details.” But the emperor reprimanded them for protecting Zheng.

Eventually, however, the emperor realized that the case against Zheng could not be substantiated. When Wen Tiren retired in Chongzhen 10 (1637), the official in charge of the case submitted a new report at the emperor’s request, which explained Zheng’s innocence this way: The Zheng family was known to worship a jixian, a “planchette spirit” that could perform fortune-telling and miraculous investigation. Gossip had it that this spirit could identify any family member who had not behaved properly and jump out to punish that person. Zheng’s mother was reportedly punished by the spirit for something she did to a maid, but Zheng had nothing to do with the incident.

As the emperor was trying to decide what to do with Zheng, another fierce factional struggle over filial piety erupted. In the summer of Chongzhen 11 (1638), Donglin-identified officials, led by Huang Daozhou, negotiated with the emperor over key official appointments. They vocally challenged the emperor’s decision to promote Yang Sichang (1588–1641) and Chen Xinjia (d. 1642), both of whom were in the middle of observing the mourning term for a deceased parent. They cited the age-old idea that loyal officials must be found among filial men. Defiant, the Chongzhen emperor challenged the
motives of the oppositional Donglin officials by bringing up Zheng Man’s alleged ethical violations. This made the record of Zheng’s moral performance of greater importance for all parties. In the end, Zheng was executed. His “death by a thousand cuts” (lingchi) became a sensational public spectacle.

Zheng Man’s case has been considered an example of the chaos caused by rigid application of moral issues in politics. However, such a reading erases the historically specific dynamics that shaped its course, such as literati religious practices, gender concerns, literati political organizing, and, most importantly, print culture. By situating the competing images of Zheng Man in such a complicated context, we come to understand how the ideal Donglin man was constructed and contested in Confucian family tales and, more broadly, how seventeenth-century factionalism was fought and conceived as image wars.

**Generational Matters**

The emperor saw competing images of Zheng Man presented in the two sets of testimony regarding the case. One argued for his innocence. In addition to the initial memorials submitted by officials to protest Zheng’s arrest, the emperor also received the testimony of two key witnesses from Zheng’s hometown, his colleagues Lu Wanxue and Wang Zhang, who confirmed that the charges were groundless. Additionally, the emperor had in hand the testimony of Zheng’s kinsmen, which also cleared his reputation. However, reluctant to exonerate Zheng and lose the opportunity to use his case as a means of political leverage, the emperor took keen interest in the evidence presented by a literatus named Xu Xi (fl. 1630s).

Xu and a group of Wen Tiren allies submitted evidence of Zheng’s moral corruption and claimed that their position represented “public opinion.” Significantly, their testimony altered the original official charges by supplementing them with information about Zheng’s alleged sexual transgressions. Thus, to those who defended Zheng, the emperor exclaimed, “Xu Xi and others provided clear evidence of Zheng’s crimes. These staff with no bureaucratic rank understand public opinion (gonglun); you officials don’t. Shame on you!”

The so-called public opinion was substantiated by a number of sensational narratives circulated in vernacular literature, biographies, and anecdotes. Zheng Man’s uncle explicitly pointed out in his formal
testimony that unofficial accounts and vernacular novels (xiaoshi xiaoshuo) were written to prove Zheng Man’s alleged immoral conduct and incriminate him.⁹¹ In particular, Zheng’s accusers concocted at least two novels, An Unofficial Account of Zheng’s Dismissal (Fang Zheng xiaoshi; hereafter Zheng’s Dismissal) and A Great Hero’s Story (Da yingxiong zhuan), to incriminate him.⁹² Although the full texts have not survived, we have all the chapter titles. They reveal important information about the content and use of these narratives, in particular how factional attacks found a convenient conduit in family romances and how such narratives appeared authentic with their depictions of the transgenerational transmission of factional ties and sentiments. They drew on delineations of Donglin generations that appeared in the blacklists and further elaborated them.

 Zheng’s Dismissal begins with Zheng Man’s father, Zheng Zhenxian. It depicts him as a sly politician, a womanizer, and an unhappy retired official gone astray with Buddhism.⁹³ His son Zheng Man is presented as a sex maniac and predator who seduced not only his father’s concubine but also his own daughter-in-law. He beat his mother because he was jealous of her love for his younger brother. The novel attributes Zheng Man’s parents’ deaths to his sexual immorality; his alleged sexual interest in his sister and his father’s concubine was also unfilial behavior. In addition, he was depicted as a political opportunist who attached himself to respectable officials in order to advance his career.⁹⁴

The fictional tropes employed in Zheng’s Dismissal demonstrate that family romances played a special role in reifying generational understandings of factionalism and could influence the outcome of a power struggle. The authors’ interest in transgenerational stories recalls one of the Donglin blacklists produced in the Tianqi reign, The Seditious Donglin Clique (Daobing Donglin huo). The authors of that list had tried to highlight the generational change and continuities of the Donglin by creating three sections that signified the group in its early stage (Donglin chu), at its peak (Donglin sheng), and in its later phase (Donglin wan). This categorization reflects the authors’ view that Donglin factional ties were formed based on mentor-disciple relationships, examination cohort, regional identity, and family and were reproduced along these lines. Zheng Zhenxian is listed under “Donglin at its peak,” while his son is part of “later Donglin.” Zheng’s Dismissal substantiates this categorization by highlighting the father’s and son’s similar moral defects.
The novel revisits the messy history of factionalism in the Wanli reign and takes the opportunity to trash the senior Zheng, the Zhe faction’s old enemy, in order to justify its support for Grand Secretary Wen Tiren, the leader of a new generation of the Zhe faction. The novel names two current prominent Donglin figures who had been close to the Zhengs—Sun Shenxing (1565–1636) and Huang Daozhou—as ringleaders. Although we cannot tell specifically how Zheng’s Dismissal represents Donglin factionalism, the title of chapter 37, “The Grand Secretary Wen Led Efforts to Expose the Treacherous Plot,” suggests that the novel explicitly presents Donglin activities as suspicious and Wen Tiren as a nonfactional official who was single-mindedly loyal to the emperor. This corresponds neatly to what Wen had said repeatedly to the Chongzhen emperor—that he was the lone loyal official at court and that, because of his nonfactionalist stance, he had come under attack from the Donglin officials.

Compared to the blacklists, the novels written to incriminate Zheng Man more clearly directed readers’ attention to the personal character of several generations of Donglin factionalists. These were family romances (jiating xiaoshuo) crafted to support a specific political agenda. Zheng’s Dismissal, for instance, recycles old rumors about the elder Zheng’s political demise, spiritual pursuits, and domestic problems, setting up the Zheng household as a realm of disorder and licentiousness. The portrayal of the elder Zheng serves the crucial purpose of “explaining” the son’s disregard for Confucian ethics. In turn, the son’s ethical violations help to “prove” the validity of old allegations that had led to the father’s demise in the Wanli reign.

As literary historians point out, in the seventeenth century, family romance as a literary genre developed distinct themes, vocabulary, and narrative structure to accommodate the complex discursive negotiations. This genre provided ample space for authors to create sensational stories about officials’ moral performance across multiple generations in political, social, and familial domains. The authors of the sensational novels about the Zhengs took advantage of the flexibility of family romance to describe the Zhengs’ transgenerational moral corruption and, by extension, that of the Donglin. Even though this negative image of the transgenerational Donglin factionalism echoed the view of only some literati, it sheds light on the common understanding that politics was a family matter. Generational continuity, a key element of the Confucian ethical system, was a trope deployed in the Confucian family tales concocted as weapons of factionalism.
The mystery around the Zhengs’ domestic circumstances became ideal raw material for a transgenerational tale.

Whereas the literary representation of generational continuity in this family romance makes a specific anti-Donglin political claim, the actual production of this novel reveals the wide scope of factionalism as a social and literary phenomenon. The endeavors of the authors of these novels were clearly informed by their own generational position in late-Ming factionalism. Xu Xi, the literatus who presented sensational stories about Zheng Man to the emperor, was a descendant of Xu Guo (1521–1596), a former grand secretary. Xu Xi joined three other well-connected literati to form a strongly pro–Wen Tiren coalition in Jiangnan. Among these men, Zhu Taifan was the offspring of Zhu Geng, the aforementioned Zhe faction leader. Wang Shimin (1592–1680) was the son of Wang Xijue, another former leader of the Zhe faction. The fourth man, Yuan Shu, whose ancestor had served as a grand secretary during the Jiajing reign, also hailed from Zhejiang.100 This Zhejiang group’s position in contemporary sociopolitical competition with the Fushe (lit., Restoration Society), a literary organization associated with the Donglin, was unambiguous.101 Seen from this perspective, Xu Xi was not just one of those “Jiangnan troublemakers good at cooking up vernacular novels.”102 His participation in Wen Tiren’s political-literary projects was part of the anti–Donglin-Fushe collaboration between Wen and regional literati groups. Considering their affinity for the Zhe faction and the frequent employment of literature in inter-literate competition, their resorting to family romances to portray the Donglin as composed of several generations of morally corrupt men makes perfect sense.

Sex Sells

Family romances might also contain lurid elements that made them a form of pornography. This increased their appeal as a political tool, as seen in the second anti-Zheng novels, *A Great Hero’s Story*. In the seventeenth century, many novellas were read as erotic literature regardless of their authors’ claims to the contrary, including stories that, by our standards, do not much engage sexuality.103 The multiplicity of interpretative possibilities of such narratives could both facilitate the dissemination of sensationalistic stories about factional officials and draw attention to their performance as fathers, sons, and husbands.
A Great Hero’s Story presents many characters from a wide range of social strata, from monks and neighborhood rascals to gentry women and courtesans. Whereas Zheng’s Dismissal represented real people and elaborated on the official charges against Zheng Man in order to reinforce specific political messages, A Great Hero’s Story is a vulgar work, so fantastic in its details that it was certainly meant as entertaining satire. Chapter titles alone, such as “Madame Lu Beat Up Her Lover Out of Jealousy” and “A Gentry Daughter Gets Naked to Have Her Virginity Checked,” were sensational enough to feed its readers’ prurience. This novel focuses so much on stories of promiscuity that, at least based on the surviving chapter titles, Zheng and court politics were convenient narrative elements around which an entertaining erotic fiction could be constructed. It could be read either or both as a piece of pornography intended for pleasure and a vivid expression of political satire.

As factionalism came to be imagined, understood, and fought via the family tales of individual officials, it obviously became more difficult for those officials to control their public image. Sensationalistic representations of political figures seem to have attracted more attention from the reading public than did serious political writings. For example, the biography of Zheng Man published by the literatus Jin Risheng (fl. 1620s–30s) in his book Documents of Heavenly Justice (Song tian lu bi), a collection of sources that recorded the fall of the eunuch faction, highlighted Zheng’s masculine virtues, in particular his filial piety. The biography was printed in Chongzhen 2 (1629), years before the case against Zheng broke. Zheng’s filial devotion must have made a strong impression for it to have earned a mention in this biography. The author also offers a rare account of how Zheng’s career was plagued by the hostility of the Zhe faction, his father’s old enemies. However, the impact of Jin’s thorough documentation paled in comparison to the juicy scandals depicted in novels and anecdotes.

The multiplication of literary genres for political use in this thriving print culture would further destabilize the already arbitrary distinction between “real” and “feigned” moral exemplars. The traditional lack of clear boundaries and the blurred hierarchy between formal documentation and anecdotes (discussed in the introductory chapter) meant that their competition as different genres of political information only sharpened in this period. Literary accounts, even if fictional or anecdotal, colored public views of contemporary
politics and officials. Whether or not these accounts depicted Zheng truthfully was less important than the fact that they were in circulation and suggested the plausibility of his alleged sexual misbehavior. Once the link between Zheng and his presumed ethical violations was established in fiction, it took on a life of its own and could influence politics in a very real way. Like the eunuch faction’s manipulation of Water Margin, the anti-Zheng novels also met the entertainment purposes of contemporary literary-political projects and effectively disseminated negative images of individual officials. Stories about Zheng beating his mother and his sexual immorality traveled everywhere in a variety of genres.108

The consequences of fictionalizing and sensationalizing officials’ domestic lives for political purposes were devastating and alarming. When Zheng learned about the novels, he saw this development as historically unprecedented. He compared his case to the experience of Zhu Xi (1130–1200), the great Song Neo-Confucian thinker, whose career suffered under relentless factional attacks on his character: “Censor Li [Rixuan] sent me a copy of Dao ming lu, which contains several memorials against [Zhu Xi]. These memorials claimed that he seduced and then married two Buddhist nuns. They also accused him of allowing his son to steal cattle. This testifies to the serious nature of factional struggles at the time.”109 The notorious memorials against Zhu Xi recounted his alleged misconduct, which included a lack of filial piety, disloyalty, and sexual immorality.110 This was a brutal and costly episode of factionalism in Song history, and officials of later generations all knew these stories. If Zheng saw many similarities between his and Zhu Xi’s circumstances—even to the libelous nature of the charges—he argued that the attacks he suffered were much worse. He felt bitter and desperate because it “was unheard of” for factionalist officials to stoop so low as to produce a vernacular novel as a means of circulating charges; this was a situation that Zhu Xi had not had to face.111

Ming officials were all familiar with the heavy toll factionalism had taken throughout imperial history and the use of charges of sexual immorality in political attacks. However, they soon came to realize that their knowledge of factionalism in history was inadequate to coping with it in their own time. Print culture, in particular the penetration of politics by literature, invalidated the old political wisdom. Meanwhile, Ming emperors, like their officials, actively engaged the burgeoning print culture of their time. The Chongzhen emperor knew
the Zhu Xi stories, but he also knew he had the power to determine which story represented “public opinion” in his own day. Eventually, he chose to embrace the one that would allow him to challenge the Donglin claim to moral perfection and keep Zheng imprisoned.112

The competing images of the Zhengs—and, by extension, of the Donglin—illustrate why, as print culture and factionalism became further entangled, Confucian family tales became an effective political tool. Spread in a variety of forms—long and short, outright fictional and anecdotal—they would be read as political information and entertaining literature. The more sensational they were, the more attention they attracted. Meanwhile, literary and political traditions complicated officials’ efforts to control images. Moral-political principles, not genre, had constituted important criteria for determining “truth” and defined who was an authentic or fake moral exemplar. For instance, officials who defended Zheng Man did not challenge the emperor’s decision by dismissing the novel as a less reliable genre; instead, they argued that accounts of officials’ domestic issues in any form were always suspicious (see chap. 3). Hence, print culture and popularity of vernacular literature, by exposing officials’ personal lives to more public attention, threatened political tradition seriously and made late-Ming politics more unstable and unpredictable.

Confucian Family Tales from Prison

Late-Ming officials understood the political power of Confucian family tales and employed print in their negotiations with the emperor and with colleagues and in their self-defense, even when they were imprisoned. Zheng Man also published from prison. A talented writer and poet, he wrote copiously while in confinement, including scholarly essays, a chronological biography of the famed Song official Su Shi (1037–1101), and his own chronological autobiography.113 He also compiled his own poetry composed before and during the imprisonment. Some of these were published before his execution. In all his writings, Zheng Man firmly defended not only his own moral rectitude but also the exemplariness of the Zheng family.

Because Zheng Man’s memorials were kept from the emperor’s sight and his self-defense could not be voiced through official channels, he decided to disseminate pamphlets on his case and the trial.114 These specifically countered the various moral charges leveled against him. For instance, one of the pamphlets documented his answers to
the prosecutor’s questions, in which he reflected extensively on his mother’s devotion to his father, including her voluntarily acquiring a concubine in order to obtain more sons for the family. He pointed out the lack of reliability of the information provided by Grand Secretary Wu Zongda, his mother’s brother, due to Wu’s affiliation with the Zhe faction. He also condemned officials who recruited literati writers to concoct novels incriminating him.\textsuperscript{115} This series of pamphlets presented Zheng’s own family tale so as to convince the public that the charges against his family—such as his parents’ disputes over a maid, his beating of his mother, and his sexual immorality—had been fabricated by the anti-Donglin faction.

Zheng Man also utilized other genres to combat the prolonged, serious moral attacks leveled against the Zheng family. He particularly highlighted the family’s tradition of filial piety. In his chronological autobiography, for instance, Zheng set out to debunk the rumors about his parents by giving a detailed account of his father’s filial actions.\textsuperscript{116} Zheng then carefully described how, after his father died, he devoted himself to taking care of his mother. Once he had completed the prescribed three-year mourning for his father, he was scheduled to leave for Beijing and resume his government position. However, since his mother’s next birthday would be her sixtieth, an important one for the Chinese, Zheng chose to remain at home longer. Then his mother fell ill and passed away. He took another three-year leave to mourn her. In the entry for Chongzhen 5 (1632), Zheng’s autobiography specifically mentioned an essay he composed during the mourning term, titled “Zaiyu Asks about the Three-Year Mourning,” to stress his deepened understanding of filial piety during this period.\textsuperscript{117} Although this essay is lost to us, the title suggests that Zheng elaborated on Confucius’s famous criticism in \textit{The Analects} (Lunyu) of his disciple Zaiyu, who was reluctant to observe the full mourning period for a deceased parent.\textsuperscript{118}

Although the initial official charge against Zheng Man was lack of filial piety, Zheng rightly realized that the literature depicting his sexual immorality had become powerful circumstantial evidence in defining his public image. Hence, his autobiography not only asserted his filial piety but also presented his filial performance in connection with literati self-discipline. Zheng recalled a promise he made as a young man to his father, before he departed for Nanjing to study:

Father said: “Do not be distracted by courtesans. Once you get contaminated, you will suffer your whole life.” I respectfully listened
to his instruction... [My classmates] from eastern Guangdong... got me drunk. They asked Qiu Xiaoyu, a courtesan, to take off her clothes and lie down with me. I was not aware of this until I awakened in the morning. I immediately put on my clothes and got up. Later when I traveled to Wulin, my friend Zhang Juxing ordered opera singers to serve me in bed. He said: “It is raining very hard. You can’t go anywhere.” I awkwardly rejected his offer. Friends circulated these stories and considered me a strange person. They do not know that I always remember Father’s instruction and have never violated it.\(^\text{119}\)

Courtesans had become an essential feature of Jiangnan literati social and cultural lives. Zheng’s invocation of this particular episode in his memory of his father not only demonstrates that the Zhengs were self-disciplined men but also illuminates how filial piety contributed to his own moral cultivation.

The autobiography reinforced the main points made in the memorial Zheng had submitted to the Chongzhen emperor upon his arrest, in which he described the *zhongxiao* tradition of his family and in particular stressed the deeds of filial piety he and his father had performed. In that memorial, Zheng had praised the emperor’s commitment to “governing with filial piety” and pleaded for the emperor’s trust.\(^\text{120}\) His autobiography not only reiterated the same message. It also served as a counter-narrative to the claims made in the novels created by his enemies to attack his filial piety and sexual morality. Zheng did his best to show he embodied the Confucian masculine virtues and deserved to be seen as an ideal Donglin man. However, these efforts failed to save his reputation and life.

**DISTINGUISHING THE FAKE DONGLIN MAN**

When the image of Zheng Man became intricately tied to the political fate of the whole group, Donglin-identified officials were confronted with the task of authenticating their collective claim to moral exemplariness. They had two options: they could defend Zheng Man’s reputation and Donglin moral superiority or condemn Zheng’s moral corruption and out him as a fake Donglin. Officials of all sides—and contemporary writers and readers—were divided on Zheng’s case. Their debates focused on proving or challenging the assertion that the real Donglin man embodied filial piety and gender propriety. These debates again show that multiple parties participated in constructing the Donglin image and membership, under the influence
of a cluster of religious, intellectual, moral, and political concerns. In this context, Zheng Man’s manner of self-defense was doomed by the tricky relationship between factionalism and print. His personal image bifurcated. Anti-Donglin officials continued to invoke his alleged ethical defects in order to smear the Donglin with moral corruption and politically untrustworthiness, while some within the Donglin-Fushe community decided to portray him as a “fake” Donglin whose personal moral weakness automatically disqualified him from being one of them.

Publicizing a commitment to Confucian ethics in various media could boost a reputation, but the complexity of the readership—even within the same political camp—often crippled the effectiveness of such image-making efforts. Zheng Man’s self-defense would prove inadequate. This was determined in part by his contemporaries’ complicated understanding of publicity, publishing, and the proper display of literati masculine virtues.

For both intellectual and political reasons, Confucian scholars had remained ambivalent about achieving fame through lecturing and publishing. Politically minded literati needed to emphasize their commitment to, and proper display of, Confucian ethical values in print. When doing so, they had to anticipate readers’ differing reactions. It seriously worried the literati that print material could be used against them. For example, an official’s decision to publish a collection of travel poems—even though publishing and traveling had become prevalent in late-Ming literati world—could potentially cause image problems. There is a revealing discussion of this situation in comments by the Fushe scholar Zhang Zilie (1597–1673) on a publication by Wu Shen (1589–1670), a friend and high-ranking official. In his letters, Zhang asked their mutual friends to urge Wu against publishing the poems he had written over several leisurely months’ travel during Chongzhen 16 (1643). Wu had just been admonished by the emperor for failing to answer his call to lead the Ming army in a campaign to suppress rebels. Although it was said that Wu did not proceed because he was not given enough troops, his response was nonetheless disloyal. As a result, he was demoted and ordered to serve in a remote garrison in Yunnan. Zhang reported to a close friend and official:

[Wu Shen] received the edict to go to the military post. He should have speedily reported to duty. However, he spent the summer at the Wu Garden . . . [and] then went on to have a leisurely time in the
mountains, drinking along the way and partying with literati friends. Now he is eager to publish those poems. All these actions only give others excuses to criticize him. They really do not present the model behavior of an official who had just been admonished by His Majesty. *If vicious men found an opportunity to present the poetry collection to His Majesty along with fabricated slander, as evidence of [Wu Shen]’s disrespect for His Majesty and the imperial order, how would Wu defend himself? I hope you secretly convey my words to him and persuade him not to publish but destroy the poems.*

Zhang also wrote to another official to convey the same message. His letters reveal the very real risks associated with publishing and the adverse attention it might bring in the politically sensitive time. His immediate concern was for Wu’s image and how the publication of his poems would affect Wu’s career. But clearly, worries about officials’ publication derived from the intensifying factionalism and the easier access to information made possible by print.

Compared to Wu Shen’s loss of imperial favor, the gravity of Zheng Man’s case might make it seem too extreme to be representative. However, it is informative for us precisely because it reveals much about the tricky repercussions of publicity. Zheng had to deal with a complex audience, which included the Donglin’s enemies, different groups within the Donglin clique, and Fushe scholars such as Zhang Zilie and his friends who were allied to some Donglin-identified officials.

A crucial factor that prevented all readers from appreciating Zheng’s display of Confucian masculine virtues was the diverse understandings of proper performance of filial piety that had mushroomed among the literati. The famous scholar and Fushe activist Huang Zongxi (1610–1695) considered Zheng a truly filial son. He pointed out that Zheng could not have explained what happened between his father, his mother, and his father’s concubine to defend himself against the charges that he had beaten his mother because talking about one’s deceased parents’ fault itself would constitute a violation of filial piety. Had Zheng disclosed his parents’ domestic problems, he would likely have been criticized for it. Huang Zongxi and Zheng Man certainly represented one type of literati understanding of proper filial expression. However, there were contemporaries who believed that one could fairly prove one’s own filial virtue by exposing the misdeeds of the elders in the household should that become necessary. Among such people, Zheng’s filial piety would not be acknowledged unless he could explain his father’s domestic problems.
Another factor that complicated Zheng’s battle over his image was his audience’s diverse concerns and foci. Zheng’s writings endeavored to portray the moral exemplariness of his family, but his candid descriptions of their domestic world were too complicated to represent the impeccable Donglin man. And they might have reinforced the impression that he lacked literati virtues. In particular, his strikingly honest accounts of the extraordinary Buddhist piety of his whole family—his parents, himself, and his wife and concubines—substantiated for many the troubled public image of the Zhengs and their questionable Donglin status.

Buddhist devotion and patronage were clearly an important part of the Zhengs’ lives and identities, as was the case for many other seventeenth-century literati-officials. But the degree to which an official might wisely incorporate Buddhist piety and morality into his own public image posed a rather different question. A gendered calculation was at play. In some contrast to the situation for gentry women, whose Buddhist devotion in the domestic space could buttress claims of ideal Confucian femininity, “excessive” Buddhist pursuits could provoke the impression of a man led to commit deviant behaviors such as abandoning Confucian commitments. Officials’ Buddhist practices were always vulnerable to suspicion because they were often portrayed in popular discourse together with gender disorder and even sexual immorality. The sensationalistic representation of Buddhist elements in the vernacular novels that helped defame the Zhengs is a telling example.

The ideal Confucian official was expected to handle questions of Buddhism and women carefully when trying to properly display his masculine virtues in published words. However, not only did Zheng Man extensively and explicitly describe the importance of Buddhism in his life, but his stories often involved multiple young women in the Zheng household. His was a complicated household, which made him vulnerable to moral attacks. Zheng had three adopted daughters by the time he turned thirty. His wife, Madam Zhou, failed to conceive in the first six years of their marriage. So his grandmother, Madam Dong, had Madam Zhou adopt a girl from the Dong family. They followed the local wisdom of “raising girls to bear boys” in fulfillment of the filial duty to continue the patriline. Zheng and his wife also adopted two baby girls from remote relatives, girls who would have been drowned due to their families’ poverty. The couple’s Buddhist piety might have inspired these charitable adoptions.
In addition, Zheng had at least two concubines. Over the years, his wife and concubines together produced six daughters and five sons. Later, a girl surnamed Han, the fiancée of a Zheng son, lost her parents and moved into the Zheng household without having the official wedding ceremony. The accusation that Zheng raped his daughter-in-law, a charge presented to the emperor through the novels, apparently derived from rumors that grew from the complex domestic arrangements in the Zheng household.

In Zheng’s self-presentation, he was a man of compassion and a responsible son, father, and husband. Unfortunately, his family did not look like the family of the ideal Donglin man to many literati. A comment by the literatus Zhang Xia confirms how Zheng’s public image was affected by (mis)representations of his domestic situation. Arguing that it was a bad idea to have so many women of various ages and social strata (including maids) residing in the same house, Zhang surmised that Zheng’s downfall originated from the fact that too many women from different backgrounds lived under the same roof and that it was impossible to find the truth in such a messy situation. Zheng himself should be the one to blame for what happened to him. It was such a pity that many considered Zheng a Donglin.

Zheng’s image trouble reflected not only the “purist” view of the Donglin man’s filiality and gender propriety among literati readers but also the different political concerns behind such a view. While certain Donglin-identified officials persistently defended and tried to rescue Zheng, others worried pragmatically about how his dubious moral image might hurt their own standing and that of the Donglin overall. The high political stakes of the moral image of the Donglin man can be seen in the ways in which both the Donglin and anti-Donglin camps scrutinized Zheng’s publications from prison.

For instance, in Chongzhen 10 (1637), a young literatus surnamed Lei, who had spent some time in the same prison, asked Zheng Man to select and comment on the examination essays of that year’s newly minted jinsbi. Zheng agreed. However, he soon discovered that his compilation had been printed and sold. Lei had a relative who ran a printing house, and this relative apparently thought he could make a profit by printing the compilation and did so without asking Zheng’s permission. Later, when Lei asked Zheng to write a preface for the collection, foreseeing potential political risks, Zheng decided to use the opportunity to explain how this publication had come about without his consent. When the young man insisted that he write more on
the selected essays, Zheng complied and composed a second preface to talk specifically about how to compose exam essays. It seems that the publication was not Zheng’s initiative, but he decided to let it be with the two prefaces. The collection went into a second printing.\textsuperscript{134}

The publication raised some eyebrows. Things became serious enough that Zheng Man documented the worrisome development in the Chongzhen 11 (1638) entry in his autobiography, suggesting that there had been grave repercussions. He wrote that the controversy around the publication nearly resulted in another round of attacks against him.\textsuperscript{135} More seriously, it was not just the Donglin’s enemies who paid attention. Chen Zilong (1608–1647), a famed literatus activist associated with the Donglin-Fushe community who had just passed the civil service examination that year and become an official, discovered that Zheng’s preface mentioned that he and his Fushe friend Xia Yunyi (1596–1645), who also became a jinsbi that same year, had visited Zheng in prison just before their examinations. When Chen learned about the publication of the examination essays edited by Zheng from prison, he was outraged and grew anxious.\textsuperscript{136} According to Chen, the official in charge of Zheng’s case showed him the preface in which he was mentioned and helped with arranging to have the preface removed before the manuscript went to print. Chen accused Zheng of lying: “He composed an essay in prison, praising my chivalry, talents, and willingness to help. He claimed that I always tried to offer a hand to those in trouble. He said that even when he was charged with a serious crime and few wanted to visit him, I was the only friend to stand beside him. He was lying.”\textsuperscript{137}

Chen’s accusation is somewhat vague. It does not specify how Zheng’s preface mischaracterized their relationship. Was he upset that Zheng fabricated his visit to prison or that Zheng had implied that they were friends? In addition, Chen’s account misrepresents Zheng’s preface, which only briefly mentions that Chen and Xia visited him in prison. Considering that they had passed the examinations, it was proper for Zheng to mention them in the preface to a collection of examination essays that included theirs.\textsuperscript{138} Chen’s main concern seems to have been to distance himself from Zheng. He had told Zheng’s close friend and strong ally Huang Daozhou, a Donglin icon, that they must abandon Zheng in order to protect the reputation of their faction.\textsuperscript{139}

Chen’s concern vividly reflects the sense of urgency among the Donglin-Fushe camp with maintaining the purity of their moral
image. Publishing complicated officials’ strategies in factional struggles and enhanced their awareness of the importance of moral image. Sensational rumors about the Zheng household and Zheng himself had stoked the reading public’s imagination and in that capacity entered into the factional debates. Fushe scholars, who at the time aggressively employed Confucian ethics in their own image-making, were invested in establishing a stark contrast between the moral rectitude of the exemplary Donglin-Fushe men and the moral corruption of their rivals. Given this delicate situation, who among them, if he was serious about his political future, would want to be associated with such a figure and his dubious popular image? To consolidate the perfection of the Donglin man, some wanted Zheng abandoned as a fake Donglin—an unfilial son and immoral man.

By the time the executors sliced Zheng’s body into a thousand pieces in Chongzhen 12 (1639), his life and moral image had already been torn apart by the factionalists and reading public. Competing political forces, rival social groups, and readers of sensational literature created, manipulated, and were entertained by his polarized images. Those images continued to be spread widely and entered more books. The only value Zheng’s death had at the time might be that his allegedly fake Donglin identity, exposed by his moral defects, contributed to consolidating the connection between the ideal Donglin man and Confucian masculine virtues.

Seventeenth-century literati engaged Confucian ethics not just in treatises on behavioral norms and rituals. Much of the discursive tit for tat took place in cultural production and consumption in theater, literature, and art. Such efforts are reflected in and also affected political communications. The image of the Donglin, evolving with the mutual penetration of factionalism and print culture, sheds much light on the relationship between seventeenth-century politics and Confucian moralism.

The production, circulation, and contestation of the images of the Donglin man help explain how changing political and cultural conditions from the Wanli reign to the mid-Chongzhen reign contributed to defining the Donglin official as a filial son and self-disciplined man. The sharpening of the Donglin image reveals how the moral performance of individual officials—and debates about it—constitutes a vital part of political processes. Instead of pondering whether the Donglin was a fundamentalist Confucian movement or whether the
Donglin was in fact morally superior to its rivals, I have looked at the three officials’ stories to appreciate the ways in which print culture made officials’ moral images crucial in political negotiations. Print culture shaped the meaning and history of the Donglin in paradoxical ways: it contributed to creating a popular image of moral perfection for the Donglin, but it also empowered the Donglin’s rivals who contested that image.

During this period, the development of factionalism—and the Donglin image—was closely related to the proliferation of print. Factional disputes and identifications spilled out of the political sphere into literary and social spaces. As print and politics became irrevocably enmeshed, many officials used print to discuss the state of factionalism, to stake out their own positions, or just to posture as political insiders, when news from the court captivated elites across the empire. Some actively employed print to advocate a particular factional cause, while others used it to circulate negative images of their enemies. As factions evolved under such conditions and became more polarized and stereotyped, centrists like Wu Yuancui—and the incoherent stances his publications represented—became increasingly obscure and even incomprehensible.141

The similarities and differences in the fates of the Zheng father and son should be understood in connection with the late-Ming image politics. As a result of the political chaos of the Tianqi era and the enthronement of the activist Chongzhen emperor, the extent to which factional politics was articulated in and fought through the various forms of Confucian family tales—including political lists, pamphlets, biographies, and vernacular novels—became much greater. The eunuch faction had employed political lists and popular literature to demonize enemies, a practice begun in the Wanli reign. But the practice itself continued to develop, from initially relying on existing vernacular literature to later involving entirely new fictional works fabricated to disseminate political (mis)information. Such stories harnessed the potential of stereotypical characters for manipulating the images of political actors. The genre of family romance, an exception ally flexible literary space in which writers and readers could explore and negotiate Confucian ethics, was used to ever more destructive effect in factional struggles, which were fought and understood through political actors’ images as fathers, sons, and husbands.

As a result, how to properly display Confucian masculine virtues became an increasingly difficult project for officials. First, print
culture made image-making easier but also helped further blur the boundaries between “real” and “feigned” moral exemplars. Zheng Man’s case also reveals the gendered dimension of this tendency. Although Buddhism and concubinage were common features in officials’ lives, they had to be mindful of how to project a proper masculine image in print when they wrote about these topics. Second, as the discursive connections between loyalty and other masculine virtues were invoked by political actors in attacks and counterattacks, Confucian family tales provided a forum for connecting these virtues across generations.

The Chongzhen emperor’s particular interest in promoting Confucian ethics and his attitude toward factionalism at court also contributed to the evolution of image politics. Paranoid about factionalism, he firmly believed that there was no such thing as a “good” faction. Loyalty meant, above all, nonpartisanship. Distinguishing true from feigned loyalty was a main concern in his court. The crystallization of the Donglin man as a moral exemplar took place in this context. This environment compelled officials to contemplate more deeply how to authenticate their moral commitments in multiple media. It put more emphasis on the issue of sincerity, already a key concern in the literati intellectual world, in their moral cultivation and expression.