Confucian Image Politics
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Huang Daozhou, Yang Sichang, and the Chongzhen emperor all died for the Ming. In 1641, Yang killed himself in despair because of his unsuccessful campaigns against the rebels. In 1646, having suffered a disastrous military defeat, Huang, now grand secretary of the Longwu Southern Ming court and head of a poorly coordinated northern expedition, refused to surrender to the Qing and was executed.

In the years between Yang’s suicide and Huang’s martyrdom, the empire went through its most tumultuous period and changed rulers a few times. On Chongzhen 17/3/19 (April 25, 1644), rebels led by Li Zicheng (1606–1645) sacked the capital. The Chongzhen emperor hanged himself at Coal Hill. The rebels and their Shun regime were soon driven out of Beijing by the Manchus. In those months, many still imagined that the Qing might not be here to stay, while others hoped that with a Southern Ming émigré court newly established in Nanjing, the Ming could be restored or at least retain the territories in the south. But Qing troops quickly shattered Ming defenses in Jiangnan and their wishful thinking as well. The city of Nanjing surrendered in Shunzhi 2/5 (1645).

The year between the fall of Beijing and the surrender of Nanjing was particularly chaotic. A violent rupture in political chronology and everyday life, this year constitutes an interlude that is indispensable to understanding seventeenth-century image politics. Not only was attention to officials’ moral images both widespread and acute,
but that intensified focus generated stories with which political figures engaged the new power negotiations in the early Qing dynasty.

Friends and colleagues in Beijing were quickly split into two different worlds, one of martyrs and the other of survivors, as the political landscape swiftly changed in the north. For most officials, the decision to die by suicide and the determination to undertake it were not simply a matter of one’s mental strength and loyalty to the Ming. Contingency, multiple responsibilities, and the desire to live combined to complicate the course of their actions. The struggles of those fighting factional battles in Nanjing were as intense and complex as the struggles of those trapped in Beijing. In addition, once they discovered that persecutions targeting “disloyal officials” (nichen) were under way everywhere, officials who had fled from Beijing to Nanjing then fled from Nanjing to somewhere else.

Until now, modern historians—following the narrative established by Qing literati—have mainly presented two opposing views regarding the moral performance of Han officials during this dynastic change. Whereas some claim that the late-Ming moral decline is manifest in the high percentage of officials who did not commit suicide, others emphasize many officials’ dazzling displays of moral heroism. But only when we abandon a narrowly defined notion of “loyalists” can we gain a deeper understanding of the broader struggles and trends that shaped the identities and actions of these men during this time.

In order to make sense of this period of chaos in the context of seventeenth-century image politics, one has to turn a critical but sympathetic eye to the layered accounts of the moral-political performance of the disloyal official that were produced and circulated by the officials themselves, their friends, factional rivals, and contemporary observers. Precisely because Confucian ethical ideals such as loyalty and filial piety had multiple and flexible meanings, they served as a language of political communication and were used to negotiate survival or initiate persecutions. The myriad versions of the disloyal official created by the loyalists, factionalists, surviving officials, and even martyrs all served specific purposes and shaped the evolving crisis within and between the two former Ming capitals. They also reflected the political, social, and cultural dynamics, such as factionalism, literati interest in filial rituals, the culture of publicity, and sensationalism, that had conditioned officials’ self-expression, behavior, and experience in the late Ming.
BEIJING: HOW NOT TO APPEAR DISLOYAL

With the situation in the north looking abysmal in the last months of the Chongzhen reign, many officials suddenly had to contemplate a real, urgent question: How could they display loyalty and survive in the event of a dynastic change?

In Beijing, these men had endured anxiety and fear on multiple fronts for some time. In Chongzhen 16/7 (1643), the arrival of autumn finally reined in a devastating plague that had run rampant in the capital since the beginning of the year. The plague had already wiped out a huge portion of the population and was but one of many disasters that struck that year. It significantly weakened the defense of Beijing as both rebel troops and Qing forces were rapidly devouring northern Ming territories.³

Around this time, a number of political earthquakes occurred, too. In particular, the political “coalition” orchestrated by the Donglin-Fushe community and the newly reinstated Grand Secretary Zhou Yanru ended with the arrest of Zhou and the Fushe power broker Wu Changshi (d. 1644) when details of their corruption came to light. Both were executed.⁴ No one knew how the various political camps would realign. Natural disasters, rebellions, and the Manchu threat heaped pressure on mingled loyalties and competing interests among the ruling elite. As factional struggles had become entwined with social, economic, and personal relationships, comprehensive political reconciliation seemed as unlikely as a sudden reversal of the Little Ice Age.⁵ The perfect storm had formed.

At one of the last court audiences before the fall of Beijing, the emperor tried to decide whether he should temporarily leave the capital. Factional bickering stalled the conversation. Some officials accused others of disloyalty for urging the emperor to leave and tempting him to abandon his responsibilities to the people. This rhetoric was so powerful that the emperor reluctantly gave up the idea of fleeing.⁶ He was trapped, helpless and desperate.

Finally, on Chongzhen 17/3/19, upon learning that the rebels had entered Beijing and were quickly approaching the Forbidden City, the emperor, accompanied by only one eunuch, dashed out of the northern gate, climbed a hill, and hanged himself from a tree. On his white robe, the emperor wrote these lines: “My inadequate virtues and weak flesh have invited punishment from Heaven. Now treacherous rebels are invading the capital. My officials have caused all this! I
must die, but I am ashamed to face my ancestors. Therefore, I take off my crown and cover my face with my hair. Rebels! You can dismember my body, but do not hurt my people.”

Recorded at the close of the official Ming history, the Chongzhen emperor’s final words show that he blamed the fall of the dynasty on his officials’ incompetence and factionalism. For him, the disloyal officials were self-righteous factionalists. Later, the literati would indeed reiterate this characterization of disloyalty in their historical works.

The emperor’s impeccable performance in his final moments constituted a last challenge to his officials. By his suicide, he fulfilled his role as moral example for the empire and claimed the highest moral ground. To his satisfaction, before his suicide, the empress also killed herself, and the emperor conducted some killing himself to make sure no dishonor would be brought on the imperial family:

[His Majesty] sent for his eldest daughter. They wept together. His Majesty wanted to kill the princess but hesitated for quite a while. Then all of a sudden he jumped up and slashed her twice. The princess raised an arm to defend herself, and the arm was cut off. She fainted on the floor. Then His Majesty began to search the palaces. First he saw that the empress had already hanged herself. Then he went to the Western Palace. Imperial Consort Yuan did not seem to want to commit suicide, so His Majesty slew her with three strokes. . . . Then he sent for the other imperial consorts who had served him in bed and killed all of them.

The emperor’s actions were a somber reminder to officials that they would be judged by their contemporaries and literati historians. Many of those around the capital carried out killings like those in the imperial palaces. In some cases, wives and concubines killed themselves when their husbands died; in others, officials killed their women before completing their martyrdom, as their emperor had done.

The arrangements made by Yang Shicong (1567–1648), an official who maintained close ties with many Donglin-Fushe figures, are revealing. Yang was captured by the rebels soon after they entered Beijing and put under house arrest. He told his wife and two concubines: “I would not have been here without His Majesty’s favor. Therefore I must die. I will follow in the steps of His Majesty, and you three the late empress.” He threw his six-year-old daughter into a well and then swallowed poison. His wife and two concubines attempted to hang themselves. But their suicide attempts were discovered by the rebel guards. Yang and his wife were rescued. The two
concubines, however, died.\textsuperscript{10} Though not entirely successful and hard to verify, Yang nonetheless showed he was not disloyal by trying to replicate the heroic actions of the martyred emperor. Such actions, as well as accounts of them that circulated at the time, pushed officials’ gendered moral performance to the center of the unfolding dynastic crisis.

The fear of projecting a disloyal image, just like the ideal of martyrdom, had been planted deep in officials’ consciousness. Avoiding the appearance of disloyalty could mean different things, depending on the circumstances, even in dire moments. It shaped officials’ actions in nuanced ways. Of importance here is not the degree to which these accounts describe the “true” feelings and intentions of officials who claimed to have attempted suicide, but how these actions and accounts helped officials demonstrate at the time that they were \textit{not disloyal}.

It was difficult for the survivors to authenticate loyalty. How could one verify that a failed suicide actually took place? Stories of failed suicides would be scrutinized by others. So when Yang and his wife fled to the Southern Ming capital, like other survivor officials who managed to escape, they had to substantiate their claim that they had not betrayed the Ming. At the time, tensions ran high and local society engaged in spontaneous campaigns against the families of allegedly disloyal officials. Survivor officials who made it to the south were accused of faking loyalty as a cover for their cowardice or for secret spying missions.\textsuperscript{11} Print material, such as proclamations, tabloid papers, and books, to which the literati reading public resorted to get quick access to the latest news about the situation in Beijing, helped disseminate information but also intensified suspicions.\textsuperscript{12} For instance, stories about the disloyal behavior of the official Zhou Zhong (d. 1644) in Beijing were printed and spread in Nanjing.\textsuperscript{13} Officials trapped in Beijing had anticipated this and accordingly adjusted their expectations.

Further, the officials who committed suicide and those who survived in Beijing might not have had the straightforwardly opposite understandings of disloyalty as one would assume. While some martyrs adamantly embraced a glorious death for themselves as demonstration of their loyalty, they might not have expected their colleague-friends to carry out more than the minimum. The official Meng Zhaoxiang (\textit{jinshi} 1622) was supervising the defense of the southern city wall of Beijing when he learned that the rebels had entered the inner city. He promptly committed suicide.\textsuperscript{14} However, he had not demanded
that others do the same. Just days before, Meng’s disciple, the official Xiong Wenju (1595–1668), paid him a visit and asked what he should do in the event the capital was taken. Meng replied: “No need to discuss such a topic now. We each should make our own decisions. . . . You have aged parents far away and you are not holding a key position in the government. So you have more options.”

Meng certainly made his own decision. Did Meng’s answer help his disciple make his? It did point out an alternative path for Xiong that would not make him appear disloyal. This conversation is a vivid illustration of the moral exercises in which officials had been engaging for some time even before the capital fell. They contemplated how their moral performance could best meet their various political, familial, and personal obligations. Their ultimate actions in the moment of crisis are reflections of these ongoing ruminations.

Xiong Wenju also discussed this issue with his own disciple, Gong Dingzi. As mentioned earlier, Gong was imprisoned by the Chongzhen emperor for impeaching certain high-ranking officials. He got out of prison just two months before the rebel army captured Beijing. Gong had sustained injuries in prison, and the emperor had taken away his official status. While waiting for his wounds to heal, he had little sense of what his career prospects might be. At this point, Gong and his concubine Gu Mei’s social circle consisted mostly of Fushe friends such as Fang Yizhi and, through his mentor Xiong Wenju (also a Fushe member), a few other officials originally from Jiangxi. Fang’s wife, concubine, and children were with him in Beijing, while Gong and his Jiangxi friends were accompanied by their concubines. As these men gathered to discuss the situation, they also had to consider its potential impact on the women in their households and their families in the south.

As it happened, when the fall of Beijing did become reality, Xiong Wenju and Gong Dingzi attempted suicide but failed. Xiong claimed that he twice tried to kill himself but was rescued. He mentioned in personal correspondence, poems, and even a public letter that a disciple and another official, who rescued and prevented Xiong from trying again, witnessed his attempts. In various media, too, Gong recorded that he and Gu Mei threw themselves into a well but that their neighbors pulled them out. He did not give any witness names. However, separated from his parents in Hefei (in modern-day Anhui), this pious Buddhist documented his suicide attempt in the Buddhist prayers he composed for the safety of his parents during those days of
terror. The genre of prayer lends credibility to this confession despite
the vagueness of the phrase “throwing ourselves into a well.” It could
be read as a thwarted attempt, meaning that they actually jumped
into the well but were rescued, or represent many other, less heroic-
looking actions. Regardless of how accurate the details of these men’s
stories may be, such accounts show that the officials made gestures
toward suicide.

If we choose not to dismiss such survivors’ accounts as formulaic
narratives of feigned loyalty or retroactive self-justification, we can
see that their suicidal gestures were a natural course of action shaped
by their intense struggle between aspiring to make a heroic display of
loyalty and taking action simply to avoid appearing disloyal. These
gestures—and inherent moral ambiguity in them—were invoked fre-
cquently in contemporary political negotiations and became an inte-
gral part of ongoing political processes.

Therefore, in those months in 1644, not only did martyrs have
different understandings of the “disloyal official,” but the survivors’
gestures toward suicide and accounts of their actions also blurred the
dichotomy of disloyalty and loyalty. Precisely because the term dis-
loyal official did not have a stable meaning, survivors could anticipate
and eventually attempt to discard the mantle of disloyalty: they did so
by stressing the masculine virtues by which they could authenticate
their loyalty and defy their persecutors.

Fang Yizhi succeeded in fleeing south as the rebel regime was
retreating from Beijing westward, only to face the factional persecu-
tion of Donglin-Fushe figures led by Ruan Dacheng at the Southern
Ming Hongguang court. He narrowly escaped Nanjing as well. As a
political fugitive constantly on the run and feeling wronged, he wrote
to acquaintances in defense of his loyalty. In a letter to a Fushe friend
Li Wen, who remained trapped in Beijing, he complained bitterly: “A
chaste woman is smeared as a licentious woman! This is like the land
sinking to the bottom of the sea. How unjust!” To a loyalist Fushe
friend in Jiangnan, he used the same analogy: “Once Ruan Dacheng
regained power, the chaste woman was slandered as licentious! This
is really unjust! Unjust!”

These letters revealed Fang’s frustration and anxiety. When he fled
Beijing, he even left behind his wife and children. In a poem com-
posed after his flight, he emotionally recalled the painful departure:

Wife and children knelt and wept,
“Stay here a while together!
Heaven and earth are upside down.  
Can your journey be safe?"  
“My destiny is to die a thousand deaths  
To avenge disgrace on the battlefield.  
Once out of the tiger’s lair  
I’ll follow the back roads.”  
Reunion seems so far away;  
It’s dusk, the sun is sinking in the west.  
She cried at my leaving her,  
Seizing a knife to stab herself in the heart.  
“If you die, how will it help?  
Look after our children!  
After many changes in the world  
Maybe you’ll see me again, an old man.”  
I knew this was good-bye forever,  
A wife separated from her husband.  
Said only “I will miss you!”  
And swallowing my sobs, I waved farewell.22

These lines vividly portray a model Confucian official, apparently prioritizing political duty over family, while his wife, determined to be chaste and devoted to him, contemplated committing suicide but was persuaded to give up the idea for the sake of their children. This is exactly how a morally exemplary official wanted to be perceived.

A comparison of Fang’s farewell poem and Xiong Wenju’s depiction of his own attempt to flee Beijing sheds further light on how a manly appearance was crucial to survivors’ self-defense against accusations of disloyalty. Xiong’s account describes how he, Gong Dingzi, and Tu Bihong (d. 1645), another Jiangxi native, tried to leave, and the tremendous hardships they suffered. His description gives the impression that the three officials left their women and families behind,23 but in reality, they moved with their women and other family members. Xiong’s secretary, Xu Yingfen, later specifically recalled that during their flight, Gu Mei stopped frequently to pick up dirt and splotch her beautiful face in order to avoid attracting the rebels’ attention.24

Xiong’s selective account of the escape reflects the serious concern that he and his companions would not be seen as sufficiently loyal if they revealed too many details. Strictly speaking, omission of the women from this account does not constitute a lie. Leaving out the experiences of the women who endured the terrors with them must have been painful. However, an explicit admission that they did not leave their women behind would only have reinforced the widespread accusations of their lack of loyalty—they only cared about their
women. This self-conscious reflection constituted a deliberate countermeasure against the stereotypical image of the disloyal official.

Similarly, the Fushe activist Chen Mingxia (d. 1654) was not caught after the rebels entered the capital because he accompanied his concubine, a Beijing native, to her home and hid there. He attempted to hang himself upon hearing of the emperor’s suicide but was rescued by the concubine’s family. So he planned to flee. By accident he ran into a literatus surnamed Wang, an official in Li Zicheng’s rebel government. Wang recognized Chen Mingxia, who had given him some food years before when he was poor, and tried to persuade Chen to serve the new regime. Chen begged Wang to let him go. At that time Chen learned that his in-law and colleague Song Zhisheng (1612–1669) had been captured by the rebels and tortured for money. Song claimed he was too poor to pay a ransom and enlisted Chen as a witness. Eventually, Song was released, but somehow rumor now began to circulate that Chen had collaborated with the rebels. Chen even wrote a pamphlet to deny the charges, but he dared not mention all the details, worried about the complexity of the circumstances.²⁵

Such intense literary struggle involved in recounting one’s escape from Beijing points to the survivor officials’ acute awareness of the arbitrary nature of loyalty and disloyalty and the ways in which such awareness helped mold their actions and self-image. In fact, their experiences in the most chaotic days cannot be adequately described with the binary. For example, soon after the fall of Beijing, the rebels were hunting down Ming officials by using the official roster. Gong Dingzi thought that since he had been stripped of official status, he might be able to evade detection and sneak out of the capital. Meanwhile, the rebels tracked down Fang Yizhi and forced him to reveal Gong’s whereabouts, which led directly to Gong’s arrest. This pained Fang tremendously, for he had failed the ethical ideals of loyalty and friendship and turned his friend into a suspected traitor.²⁶ Ironically, later, Fang would be admired for being a loyal man while Gong the disloyal official.

After the Manchus defeated Li Zicheng at the Shanhai Pass, the rebels started looting before retreating westward from Beijing toward Shaanxi. With their surveillance significantly loosened, Fang found an opportunity to escape and did not hesitate to leave his family behind with a view to fulfilling the ideal of loyalty. But Gong Dingzi, Xiong Wenju, and Tu Bihong were not so lucky. Due to the extreme chaos and violence in the area, they were able to travel only four
kilometers over a span of six days. Then an encounter with some militia men in a Beijing suburb left them with severe injuries. Hungry and confused, they took shelter in a desolate Buddhist temple. There they learned from an old servant that the Manchus, with the help of Ming forces, had driven Li Zicheng out of Beijing and called upon former Ming officials to attend the Chongzhen emperor’s funeral. When Gong, Xiong, and Tu returned to mourn for their martyred emperor, they found themselves trapped. At this point, they had no choice but to accept appointments from the Manchus. Committing suicide now, strictly speaking, could not even be considered an expression of loyalty to the Ming.

To avoid appearing disloyal was difficult for survivor officials to achieve. Indeed, their complicated personal stories and decisions were being simplified by attackers to fit the narratives produced for political persecution and war mobilization; the image of the disloyal official became increasingly clearer. Still, these officials themselves refused to accept the arbitrary labeling and grouping: their different political identities did not prevent them from maintaining their friendships and extending them to the next generation; and they persistently produced accounts of their wartime experiences, resisting the increasingly dominant narrative of the disloyal official (see part 2 in this book).

**RIGHTHEOUS LITERATI LEADERS IN JIANGNAN**

While some survivors struggled to avoid the appearance of disloyalty in the face of the rapid political change in Beijing between the suicide of the Chongzhen emperor and the arrival of the Manchus, stories that stereotyped the “disloyal official” traveled quickly to and around the south, where it affected survivor officials’ reputations and families. “Witnesses”—former colleagues who had succeeded in reaching Nanjing—reported to the court what they presented as truthful accounts of these survivor officials. How to tease apart the conflicting narratives surrounding survivor officials’ moral performance soon emerged as a major issue in factional struggles.

In the explosive atmosphere of 1644–45, few in the south were seriously concerned about the ins and outs of the survivors’ complicated experiences. Many were busy condemning disloyal officials as a strategy for war mobilization and factional infighting. The self-proclaimed righteous literati of Jiangnan led the effort to stigmatize
officials detained in Beijing. Such actions directed public attention and anger toward officials’ moral images in the moment of dynastic crisis. The accusers were themselves not necessarily motivated by strong loyalism or political insights, though. In fact, much of this posturing was little more than sensational self-aggrandizing spectacles meant to establish their “leadership.”

Ten days after the emperor’s suicide on Chongzhen 17/3/19, officials and commoners in the south began to hear the news. But it was not until Chongzhen 17/5/4 (June 8, 1644), nearly two months after the fall of Beijing, that the regent, the Prince of Fu, issued an empire-wide mourning order, officially confirming the fall of Beijing.29 As gossip continued to trickle south, the public’s condemnation of men who had allegedly collaborated with the rebels appeared in the form of public proclamations in many places across Jiangnan. These proclamations, written and disseminated in counties and prefectures for the purposes of war mobilization, emphasized the rebels’ uncontrollable lust for treasure and women, but they went to much greater lengths to expose the moral corruption of the stranded officials, detailing their deviant lifestyles and the contemptible methods they used to please the rebel leaders. From these proclamations emerged a sharp image of the disloyal official, a figure sadly lacking in Confucian masculine virtues.

The most widely circulated proclamations presented the disloyal official as violating literati-official gender norms and connected these moral defects directly to disloyalty. The “Proclamation Rebuking Turncoat Officials,” drafted by the literati in one county, denounced such men by describing their depravity before the fall of Beijing.30 According to this proclamation, such officials cared only about networking and factionalism; they purloined the people’s wealth to support their indulgence in prostitutes and concubines; they and their friends jettisoned statecraft but engaged in vulgar entertainment.31 Their promiscuity and lack of political integrity were symptomatic of their disloyal behavior upon the fall of Beijing.

Another proclamation, circulated in Changshu County (in modern-day Jiangsu), condemned four of its native sons—Chen Biqian, Shi Min, Zhao Shijin, and Gui Qixian—all of whom held important positions in the metropolitan government in the late Ming. According to the script, these officials’ debauchery before the fall of Beijing had anticipated their disloyalty. Shi Min was said to have engaged in intimacy with other men in order to obtain favors and to have exchanged
and slept with his friends’ wives and concubines. Chen Biqian was said to have habitually used profane language and obsessively gossiped about inner chamber matters, built personal connections through bribery, and shared his bed with both men and women.\(^{32}\)

The image of the “disloyal official,” built on such sensational stereotyping, was used by local literati to stir up public emotion and establish their leadership status. Chen is described in the Changshu County proclamation as “striving to attach himself to the Donglin.” In fact, Chen was unmistakably a Donglin-identified figure. He had stood up against the eunuch faction in the Tianqi reign, and his name had appeared on the Donglin blacklists.\(^{33}\) In the Chongzhen reign, Chen led the Ming army on a series of successful campaigns against rebels in Henan, though he was later penalized for a subordinate’s defeat. Before Beijing fell to Li Zicheng, he had been appointed president of the Board of Works. It was said that the Chongzhen emperor once expressed admiration for the moral rectitude of four officials, Wen Zhenmeng, Chen Biqian, Liu Zongzhou, and Huang Daozhou.\(^{34}\) Being praised together with three iconic Donglin leaders uncontroversially affirms Chen’s status in the Donglin community. The depiction of Chen’s alleged moral corruption, in particular the sensational details presented by the proclamation in support of that image, was meant to stir up emotions and mobilize people for a trial by public opinion. It made the case that this immoral, disloyal official must not have been a Donglin.

The author of this piece seems to have been a supporter of the Donglin-Fushe community who assumed his audience was composed of sympathizers invested in the image of moral superiority of this community. According to Feng Menglong, who was collecting and printing information about the north during this time, people in Chen’s hometown in Changshu had thought highly of him but felt extremely disappointed at his failure to commit suicide.\(^{35}\) The author of the proclamation thus freely labeled Chen. The repackaging of Chen’s image as that of an immoral man and hence a feigned Donglin exposes the problematic nature of the leadership of such “righteous literati.” Their method was easily as damaging as that adopted by the anti-Donglin forces in the Southern Ming government, whose persecution, somewhat ironically, targeted Chen as an evil Donglin factionalist.\(^{36}\)

In Songjiang County (in modern-day Jiangsu), local literati disseminated similar proclamations in which they condemned the officials
Yang Zhiqi, Zhu Ji, and Yang Rucheng. Two proclamations singled out Yang Rucheng, citing corruption and sexual promiscuity as evidence of disloyalty. They claimed he was a former eunuch factionalist and had willingly surrendered to the rebels. He and his cousin Yang Zhiqi also faced charges of sexual immorality. He was greedy and corrupt, and his whole family was smeared as sexually promiscuous. These officials not only were said to have taken orders from rebel leaders but also allegedly offered their wives and concubines to the rebels. This proclamation was accordingly titled “Rebuking Turncoat Officials Who Surrendered Themselves and Offered Their Wives to the Rebels!”

Alongside the figure of the immoral-disloyal official, the rebel was portrayed as a hooligan from the countryside who became a bloodthirsty rapist-bandit. The disloyal official was slandered for serving as the rebel ruler’s subject, and his wife offered sexual service. These statements generally claimed that the rebels spared the turncoat’s life because he had offered his women, reinforcing the stereotypical images of the rebels’ dangerous masculinity and the disloyal official’s lack of Confucian masculine virtues. This reversal of power relations between bumpkin rebels and corrupt elites, brokered through the surrender of the elites’ women, put across the menacing inversion of the social hierarchy in a most startling way. In the Confucian philosophy of politics and society, disorder and boundary crossing were considered the gravest threats. The image of the disloyal official in the fallen capital had a powerful impact precisely for this reason.

Playing on widespread fears, such sensationalistic depictions of the disloyal official and a horrifically subverted social hierarchy appeared to be a sound mobilization strategy. These tactics quickly gave rise to local antagonism toward families of the officials who remained in Beijing. Literati and commoners alike in Suzhou plundered and burned the houses of several such officials. In Changshu County, people attacked one official’s residence and incinerated effigies of four coffins of three generations of his family. In Haiyan County, one turncoat’s home was looted and set alight, and the casket of his deceased father was disinterred and burned. These officials had all been accused and convicted of disloyalty and promiscuity in the court of public opinion at a time of mass hysteria induced by political catastrophe.

The dynastic crisis was thus, to some extent, complicated by media events. Moral attacks aimed at officials caught in Beijing were driven by certain literati’s desire for publicity and self-promotion. These
fame chasers enjoyed having a forum in which to flaunt their literary skills by drafting and disseminating inflammatory proclamations. The audience also went along with the colorful exaggerations in those accounts.\footnote{41}

The early Qing scholar Ji Liuqi (b. 1622), who lived through the transition and documented such events, was so disturbed by what he witnessed that he added a warning to his readers about one particularly provocative proclamation published by the literati in Jiaxing. The rhetoric of the piece was so inflammatory and ferocious that Ji wrote, “It is acceptable to overpraise others, but one should not go overboard with criticism. Such language! Young men would not miss much if they did not read this proclamation. I include it here not to endorse its relentlessness, but rather because it shows an admirable familiarity with historical references. It is a pity that the author only wanted to show off his writing skills and didn’t care about the life and death of others!”\footnote{42}

This criticism recalls the worries and anxiety that had long persisted among officials in the late Ming. The literati had been manipulating the convenient communication system for their own purposes. By broadcasting irresponsible, sensational information about officials’ domestic lives, they threatened their targets’ careers and reputations.\footnote{43} These 1644–45 proclamations carried on a trend that would eventually lead to fatal consequences in the most chaotic and violent years of the Ming-Qing dynastic transition.

The literati’s abuse of public communication at this critical moment raised the stakes of officials’ moral images in the Southern Ming court. It turned resistance campaigns into schemes for public humiliation of individual officials and, more importantly, pressured officials in the Nanjing government to launch a divisive project by which to “authenticate” loyalty. Qi Biaojia (1602–1645), governor of the Wusong area and a Donglin associate, did not endorse the excited Fushe activists of Wu County in Suzhou, who crafted inflammatory public posters and mobilized the masses to attack certain officials’ residences.\footnote{44} Under such inflammatory circumstances, Qi urged the court in Nanjing to take immediate measures to identify officials who most definitely had willingly surrendered to the rebels so that the local literati and commoners would not have excuses for continuing their self-proclaimed righteous campaigns against all officials stranded in Beijing.\footnote{45}

Similar abuses occurred in other parts of Ming-controlled territories. Hundreds of kilometers away, in Jiangxi, the official Xiong
Wenju’s father was detained in a local prison on the charge that Xiong had collaborated with the rebels. Xiong’s teenage son, Xiong Dinghua, went to protest his father’s innocence and volunteered to stay in prison in his grandfather’s place. The grandfather was released, but due to a chronic disease from which Dinghua suffered, the grandson’s health quickly deteriorated due to lack of proper care and treatment. This eventually led to his death.46

This family tragedy was but one of many caused by the peculiar situation in the Southern Ming, when local literati “leadership” and the “Case of Traitors’ Followers” (Cong ni an), a list issued by the court identifying disloyal officials, combined to create a dangerous situation. The Donglin-Fushe officials in Nanjing realized that the self-proclaimed righteous literati were not the only ones who demanded that disloyal officials be rooted out and set apart from the truly loyal ones. They faced similar pressures from their factional rivals at court.

Nanjing: The Battle Between the Pure Element and Its Enemies

In 1644–45, factionalism in the Southern Ming Hongguang government contributed to making officials’ moral image central to political processes. The Donglin-Fushe community and its rivals both invoked the connections between officials’ (dis)loyalty and moral performance as a language of political struggle and negotiation. To understand how this happened, we must first examine how self-righteous officials tried to meddle in the imperial succession by manipulating the images of two princes.

Painting the Portrait of the Imperial Successor

Confirmation of the Chongzhen emperor’s suicide required immediate action in Nanjing, the secondary capital of the Ming. However, responses were hampered as the city became mired in a host of controversies: Which prince was best qualified in terms of lineage to inherit the crown? Which officials should be honored as loyal martyrs and which punished as disloyal collaborators? Should officials formerly associated with the eunuch faction be allowed to serve in the émigré court?47

Unfortunately, the Heir Apparent had disappeared, and the Chongzhen emperor’s other sons were being held captive in Beijing.
Officials of all camps in Jiangnan, whether in office or in retirement at this point, publicly and privately discussed whether the Prince of Fu (1607–1646) or the Prince of Lu (1608–1646) should be enthroned.\textsuperscript{48} In terms of lineage status, the former had the stronger pedigree for inheriting the throne.\textsuperscript{49} However, everything about him provoked anxiety among the Donglin officials. His deceased father, the elder Prince of Fu, had been the Wanli emperor’s favorite son and the cause of serious discord between the emperor and his officials from the 1580s to 1610s. In the eyes of many pro-Donglin literati, that prolonged and difficult negotiation, known as the “Struggle to Defend the Principle of Imperial Succession” (Zheng Guoben), was one of the defining moments in the birth of the Donglin.\textsuperscript{50} Although the Wanli emperor eventually gave up the idea of ignoring the succession rule and designating the Prince of Fu as his Heir Apparent, Donglin-identified officials never let down their guard until the prince died at the hands of rebels in Chongzhen 12 (1641). Now, they were suspicious of his son, the junior Prince of Fu.

Two contrasting images quickly went into circulation in Jiangnan. They depicted a morally corrupt Prince of Fu and a “worthier” Prince of Lu, who was favored by many in the Donglin-Fushe community. Champions of the Prince of Lu claimed that the other prince “had a reputation for lasciviousness, ignorance, and irresponsibility.” They cited reasons why the Prince of Fu should not become ruler: greed, promiscuity, alcoholism, lack of filial piety, abuse of subjects, no interest in learning, and improper intervention in legal processes.\textsuperscript{51} Simultaneously, these officials asserted the moral exemplariness of the Prince of Lu by whitewashing the facts of his less-than-exemplary lifestyle.\textsuperscript{52}

These contrasting representations of the two princes were instrumental not only in the power struggle surrounding the imperial succession but also in the officials’ efforts to promote an image of their own moral superiority over their rivals and gain the political upper hand in the Nanjing-based new court. Such efforts resulted in a backlash that had fatal consequences. For example, between the fall of Beijing and the establishment of the Hongguang court, the most powerful man in Jiangnan was Shi Kefa (1601–1645), president of the Board of War in Nanjing. Like his Donglin-Fushe fellows, Shi had favored the Prince of Lu on the grounds that this prince was morally more fit than the Prince of Fu. Shi’s professed opposition to enthroning the Prince of Fu would inform their lukewarm relationship ever after. The prince
certainly felt disgraced by the widely circulated list of moral charges against him.\textsuperscript{53} Shi’s \textit{de facto} marginalization after the Prince of Fu was enthroned exemplified the heavy price paid by the Donglin-Fushe camp for meddling in the imperial succession by engaging in a moral smear campaign. Now these officials had to scramble to defend themselves against charges of disloyalty. The seed of their future image troubles had been planted.\textsuperscript{54}

\textbf{The Poster Boy for Disloyal Officials}

In the émigré court, factions and factional intrigues returned as soon as appointments were made. The most pressing and sensitive question was whether officials who had been in the eunuch faction should be appointed to government posts. The “pure element” (qingliu)\textsuperscript{55} argued that since such officials had been named in the “Traitors’ Case” (Ni’an) by the late Chongzhen emperor, they therefore should not be reinstalled. Bitter confrontations over the issue meant that old factional divides were quickly revived.

Among the many disagreements, controversy over the appointment of Ruan Dacheng proved the most fatal. Grand Secretary Ma Shiying (d. 1646) had close ties with Ruan and helped him reenter politics. This revived the old animosity between the Donglin and the eunuch faction and presented Ruan with an opportunity to take personal revenge against the Donglin-Fushe members who had relentlessly harassed him in the 1630s. It was in this context that the notorious “Case of Traitors’ Followers” took place.

While the “pure element” protested having Ruan as a colleague, the other party, loosely labeled as the associates of Ma-Ruan in many historical records, launched counterattacks. These attacks and counterattacks centered on individual officials’ moral performance. Ruan understood that the “pure element” at court had friends and relatives stranded in Beijing who could be portrayed as disloyal. If they hesitated to punish those disloyal officials, then how could they repudiate officials incriminated in the “Traitors’ Case” two decades ago? As many contemporaries keenly observed, Ruan and Ma tried to divert attention from Ruan’s troublesome past by deliberately confusing the earlier “Traitors’ Case” with the new “Case of Traitors’ Followers” (Cong ni’an). The cases sounded similar but were completely different in nature.

The strategy of highlighting Donglin-Fushe hypocrisy—by stressing the contradiction between their claim to loyalty and their
opportunism—added to the already inflammatory rhetoric employed by literati loyalists in Jiangnan. Initially, Ruan stated that in response to the attacks against him based on his appearance in the “Traitors’ Case,” he should now propose a “Collaborators’ Case” (Shun an). The Donglin-Fushe officials found themselves in an untenable situation as they were confronted with the agonizing task of articulating a politically sensible stance vis-à-vis the figure of the disloyal-immoral collaborator, a label arguably attributed to their own number or friends. A stark contrast had to be drawn between their public image and that of the disloyal official. Accordingly, some Donglin officials expressed support for the creation of another list, which was eventually known as the “Case of Traitors’ Followers.”

Ma Shiying’s memorial, “Execute the Traitor Officials” (Qing zhu nichen shu) (dated the sixth month of 1644), opened the “Case of Traitors’ Followers” and also set the tone for subsequent purges. It pointedly condemned officials who had disguised themselves as “pure elements” in order to earn promotions in the Chongzhen era and asserted that they betrayed the martyred emperor’s faith when they surrendered to the rebels. This memorial identified Gong Dingzi, an official who had abandoned loyalty to indulge himself with a concubine, as the epitome of such moral hypocrites.

Like the political rhetoric used against survivor officials in the public proclamations, this memorial reinforced an easily recognizable archetype. Ma asserted: “Many of those who had served the emperor in prestigious positions in the metropolitan bureaucracy, as administrative and censorial officials, and had always posed as upright gentlemen, surrendered to the rebels. . . . After Gong Dingzi surrendered, he always defended himself like this: ‘I meant to kill myself, but my concubine would not allow me to do it.’ This ‘concubine’ is Gu Mei, the Nanjing courtesan (Qinhuai chang) whom Gu had taken into his household when he was a censor.”

It is noteworthy that the last sentences of this passage sound so plausible that these characterizations of Gong and Gu were readily accepted and widely circulated. Gong’s relationship with an elite courtesan made them natural suspects for sexual indulgence and disloyalty. Because Gong was identified by some as a Donglin-Fushe figure, Ma Shiying’s choice of Gong as the poster boy for disloyal officials was a clever move. Not only would it damage Gong’s reputation, but it also by implication created image trouble for the entire Donglin-Fushe collective in Nanjing, which had long prided itself on being the community of the “pure elements.”
Many officials became alarmed at the potential harm of such gendered image attacks. Once the court had circulated a tentative list of treacherous officials, the official Li Weiyue expressed strong concerns. He memorialized to argue that the word *ni* (disloyal) should be applied as carefully as *shijie* (unchaste) would be for a woman. “*Officials most cherish their reputations, and labels must be properly given*. . . . If they are not traitors, they should be given only the label they deserve and punished in accordance with evaluation rules. If we call all of them *ni*, we are doing something similar to calling women who have lost their homes but maintained their chastity “unchaste”! That would be most unfair.”

The analogy of masculine loyalty and female chastity was a familiar one. Li’s memorial warned that indiscriminately calling the survivor officials traitors was arbitrary and dangerous because that image was vulnerable to political manipulation. It was an irresponsible label, and officials should avoid applying it recklessly precisely because the state of one’s moral image could mean life or death.

Even in the face of such serious doubts and opposition, an imperial order issued in the name of the emperor pressed the Board of Punishments to finalize the list of disloyal officials. It explained its unforgiving attitude and stressed that, “[for] those who offered their daughters and maids [to the rebels], their crimes should be punished with more than imprisonment and labor. The officials have betrayed their country to such a degree that a judgment must be delivered and shown to the people.”

The language used in the official condemnation of allegedly disloyal officials in Beijing in this list and the negotiations over it mirrored the general political atmosphere in the south at the time. It justified harsher punishments for those who behaved in an “unmanly” fashion by asserting that such immoral-disloyal behavior among survivor officials was especially heinous, echoing the message contained in the proclamations disseminated by the “righteous literati.” It is thus not surprising that factionalists on both sides also used gendered ethics to differentiate “disloyal officials” in the Hongguang court.

**Differentiating the Disloyal Men in the Nanjing Government**

The Nanjing government had been a Donglin-Fushe stronghold since the 1630s. Much of the factional infighting in the Hongguang court naturally aimed to influence official appointments. Unhappy with the
initial personnel decisions, some officials launched moral attacks on Donglin-Fushe associates, accusing them of embezzlement and consorting with courtesans. The latter charge was leveled specifically at two officials, Jiang Cai (1607–1673) and Jiang Gai (1614–1653), brothers and Fushe activists, who indeed had been enjoying the pleasures offered by Nanjing’s courtesans in the legendary Qinhuai district.62

The Donglin-Fushe camp, too, deployed the language of Confucian ethics in its negotiations over personnel choices. In response to the four official recommendations put forth by the official-general Liu Zeqing (d. 1645?), Shi Kefa pointed out that all of the candidates had failed to demonstrate moral rectitude. Shi likely opposed the promotion of these officials because they were known to be close to the former eunuch faction. To avoid sounding factionalist, however, he chose to question their personal moral performance. This proved to be an unwise tactic. One of these officials, Liu Guangdou (1591–1652), had shown himself to be a capable bureaucrat in various positions during his career in the late Ming. In the mid-Chongzhen reign, his career had stalled due to his friendships with former members of the eunuch faction. Now at the Hongguang court, Shi Kefa accused him of indulgence in sensual pleasures.63 By doing so, Shi provoked strong resentment from the Donglin’s rivals.

The Ma-Ruan clique escalated its moral attacks on Donglin-Fushe figures. The most serious, launched by Ruan Dacheng, accused the official Lei Yanzuo (juren 1640) of unfiliality and disloyalty. Lei did not hold a particularly prominent status in the Donglin-Fushe community, but he proved a perfect target. First, gossip circulated, portraying him as an unfilial son, a subject to which I will return shortly. Second, he enjoyed a close relationship with Grand Secretary Jiang Yueguang (1584–1649), the most senior Donglin-identified official at the Hongguang court. Echoing Ruan, Ma Shiying instructed Zhu Tonglei, a member of the Ming imperial family, to submit a memorial specifically targeting Jiang.

In this memorial, Zhu listed Jiang’s five major crimes. The first two involved issues of disloyalty and were based on rumors that he and Donglin coconspirators had plotted to control the government and the military. The third charge against Jiang was that he covered for disloyal officials in the north. The fourth was bribery, and the fifth was an accusation that he had raped his daughter-in-law.64 Unwilling to put up with these personal insults, Jiang resigned. The accusations, however, eventually led to an imperial order that his alleged accomplice, the unfilial son Lei Yanzuo, kill himself in prison.65
The process of differentiating disloyal officials at the Hongguang court once again tested the validity of Donglin-Fushe claims to moral superiority. Ruan Dacheng’s memorial “Condemning the Most Disloyal, Unfilial, and Treacherous Official” (Buzhong buxiao dani yuanxiong shu) accused Lei Yanzuo of ethical violations. First, Ruan maintained that in Chongzhen 8 (1635), when rebels attacked Taihu County (in modern-day Anhui), Lei’s home region, Lei and his wife disguised themselves in shabby clothes but dressed his father in nice clothes so the rebels would release them and, instead, torture his father for money. In a second and related accusation, Ruan reported that Lei had plotted with Jiang Yueguang against the emperor during the period when he should have shunned political activities and concentrated on mourning his deceased mother.\(^6\)

Even though the claim that Lei deliberately exposed his father to danger was likely groundless, accusation of Lei’s violation of filial rituals was based on the impression that Lei failed to perform the role of a mourning son properly. Discrepancies in the sources prevent us from verifying or refuting the charges against Lei. According to the Taihu gazetteer, in Chongzhen 16 (1643), when his mother died, Lei firmly rejected his superior’s attempt to keep him in service with a *duoqing* order. He dutifully took mourning leave, but instead of returning to Taihu, he resided in Nanjing.\(^6\) Given that his hometown had just been sacked by rebels in a bitter battle that had led to its utter destruction and a large number of deaths, it seems understandable that Lei would choose to spend the mourning term in Nanjing.

Lei’s choice of location for mourning might be justified by war and dislocation, but the accusation that he actively participated in political maneuvers during the mourning period was difficult to refute—and this behavior constituted a serious breach of *zhongxiao* ethics on several levels. It was reported that after news of Beijing’s fall reached Nanjing, as Donglin-Fushe officials were plotting to intervene in the imperial succession, a certain “senior Donglin official” (i.e. Jiang Yueguang) went to talk to Lei. This would later be invoked as evidence of Lei’s treason.\(^6\) Lei’s biography in the Shunzhi 10 (1653) edition of the Taihu gazetteer, a compilation in which Lei’s own brother participated, emphasized his filial piety and downplayed his involvement in factional scheming around the imperial succession. This narrative clearly challenged the charges against Lei. Such editorial decisions reflect the understanding shared by many during the Ming-Qing transition that to fulfill one’s filial duty, an official in mourning
should avoid meddling in governmental affairs in any public fashion, let alone involving himself in conversations about manipulating the imperial succession.

However, in contrast to the record in the Taihu gazetteer, in which Lei’s political activity during mourning is described as passive and minimal, Lei’s friend and Fushe activist Chen Zhenhui, who was in Nanjing at the time and extremely well informed, recalled that Lei went around speaking about avenging the martyred emperor. Chen apparently saw no problem in a mourning son’s highly public participation in political activities; to the contrary, such action surely testified to Lei’s loyalty.69 Whereas the biography that downplays Lei’s political participation was meant to stress his victimization by the evil faction in the Hongguang court, the discrepancies between these accounts of Lei’s moral performance clearly revealed the diverse contemporary understandings of zhongxiao that complicated factional struggles.

Once again, the Donglin-Fushe camp, like its counterparts in the Chongzhen reign, had to carve out a politically safe image. A memorial submitted by the censor Yuan Kai is revealing. He commented on the “disloyalty” of Gong Dingzi and Lei Yanzuo in order to refute Ma-Ruan’s attacks on the Donglin-Fushe community. First, he argued that Ma-Ruan should not use examples such as Gong Dingzi to challenge the Donglin’s moral stature: “Guang Shiheng (another survivor official in Beijing) and Gong Dingzi were new to the metropolitan government and prided themselves on making remonstrations. [By the time Beijing fell,] people had not yet been able to judge whether or not these men should be considered gentlemen with true integrity.” Yuan suggested that the court should instead consider martyrs like Ni Yuanlu, whose loyal devotion had been authenticated by their suicides. These men were real representatives of the upright Donglin group.

Next, Yuan pointed out that the moral charges against Lei Yanzuo were really aimed at the Donglin image; Lei’s moral performance merely gave the Donglin’s rivals an easy target: “Lei Yanzuo was observing a mourning term for his deceased mother at his residence when officials were convening about the imperial succession issue. He publicly denounced the Prince of Fu for lacking filial piety, which disqualified the prince for succeeding to the throne. Ma Shiying had tried twice to use the succession controversy to implicate Shi Kefa, but to no avail. He now has to try this tactic again on Lei Yanzuo!”70 Yuan’s
memorial exemplified certain officials’ ambivalence toward Lei’s moral performance and the understanding that had Lei strictly followed mourning rules as many colleagues did, he would not have subjected himself—and the Donglin-Fushe camp—to political attacks.

Hence, some officials explicitly suggested that they should focus their efforts on protecting the reputations of colleagues whom they considered morally impeccable. They defended their collective image with selective counterattacks, letting those with less perfect moral records—such as Lei—fight their own battles.  

However, the Donglin-Fushe image-making efforts were inadequate. It was naive for officials in the Donglin-Fushe camp to imagine that the Donglin-identified martyrs were beyond moral attack. In fact, the Ma-Ruan clique’s efforts to undermine the Donglin-Fushe claim to moral superiority even extended to Ni Yuanlu, who had committed suicide and become a martyr upon the fall of Beijing. In the late Chongzhen reign, anti-Donglin officials had exploited Ni’s domestic problems with his first wife and his failure to maintain a perfect image as a husband. This case was invoked again by the Ma-Ruan faction at the Hongguang court. Liu Kongzhao, who had put forward charges against Ni in the Chongzhen reign, now managed to have the official title of Ni’s second wife, Madam Wang, revoked.  

This ethical charge definitely influenced people’s perceptions of Ni at the time, making it difficult for the Donglin-Fushe community to build its collective image of moral superiority on Ni’s martyrdom.

The image-making struggles surrounding the “disloyal official” in Nanjing during 1644–45, like those in Beijing and in local communities in Jiangnan, continued the trend of image politics. “Gentlemen (junzi) felt sorry for Ni Yuanlu because [his domestic problems] had left a stain on his admirable reputation!” This comment by the literatus Tan Qian (1593–1657) affirms the importance of moral images at this time of political volatility. More importantly, it confirms that the stress on officials’ moral performance in the Southern Ming was not simply a political instrument of some small men. Precisely because Confucian ethics was the shared language of political negotiation, many literati believed that maintaining an impeccable moral image in one’s personal life was crucial for officials.  

Various images of the “disloyal official” circulated within and between the two former Ming capitals, Beijing and Nanjing, in this critical year. The martyrs, survivors, resistance movements, and rival factions all contributed to drawing attention to individual officials’ moral performance, past and present, though their efforts to define
The disloyal official served different purposes and led to complex consequences.

The contested images of the disloyal official, in both Beijing and Nanjing, show that contemporary social, cultural, and political conditions jointly determined how Confucian ethics as a language of political communication operated during this most chaotic year of the dynastic transition. The so-called disloyal officials and pure elements, and their rivals in the Southern Ming, were all bound to engage the fact that moral perfection remained the ideal but was difficult to achieve in an increasingly complex society; the dynastic crisis only intensified and significantly complicated the elite’s struggle to solve this problem.

When the final page of the history of a dynasty has turned, the faces of its officials suddenly look different. In volatile circumstances, individuals undeniably adopted convenient political positions and identities. It also might be true that difficult circumstances tested their moral resolve, and some failed such tests. However, the stark contrast between loyal and disloyal officials in conventional history, focusing in particular on personal moral records, is too neatly drawn. Most officials’ acts cannot be easily pinned down along the continuum of Confucian moralism—between sincere moral pursuits and pragmatic employment of the rhetoric. Not only did they struggle to fulfill multiple ethical duties; the environment of image politics also pressed them hard to dispute disloyalty and authenticate their loyalty through the gendered performance of other Confucian virtues.

Investigating how the images of the “disloyal official” were created and maintained not only helps us recover some of the distorted or buried personal experiences of political actors in seventeenth-century China; it also reveals the high stakes involved for officials who had to perform Confucian ethical ideals properly in order to survive in, and adapt to, the changing political landscape.

Eventually, although the Hongguang court proceeded to issue a list of disloyal officials, after some negotiation, the names of Gong Dingzi and two dozen other officials were dropped into the minor category of “Undecided.” Thus, they avoided the most damning label. But many tragedies and much damage had already occurred. For many of the survivor officials, the image war would continue after the surrender of Nanjing in 1645 as they became “turncoat” officials in the next dynasty. For example, Gong’s notoriety as a disloyal man who had failed to commit suicide because of his concubine would
be repeated in factional infighting in the Qing Shunzhi court. Thus, officials’ image-making remained an urgent task in both the unconquered and fallen regions of the empire. Indeed, it would be central to the intense factional struggles in the early Qing court and to the literati’s recovery.