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“BANDITRY AND SUBVERSION” IN A CLASSROOM GAME

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In the context of a course on Ming working lives, a classroom game requiring no fancy equipment enables students to think through the complex relations of the imperial house and palace eunuchs, commanders and soldiers, bandits and merchants, Mongols and Han folk, as portrayed in David Robinson's work on the capital area and other Ming scholarship.

KEYWORDS: *Ming army, bandits, teaching, Mongols, soldiers, work, game*

In Winter 2017, I taught a course called “Life in Ming China,” enrolling about two dozen students from freshmen to seniors, most with little or no background in History or Chinese Studies. As a way to approach Ming society without bogging down in ideology, the course focused over ten weeks on a series of Ming occupations: farmers and sericulturalists, merchants and pirates, entertainers and courtesans, soldiers and outlaws, Buddhist clergy and doctors, literati leisure activities as work, officials, eunuchs and servants, and finally rulers. Other occupations cropped up in the assigned scholarly articles, Feng Menglong stories, and other readings. In week one students participated in framing course questions about occupations and about Ming, based on readings in the sociology of work.¹ In order to build bridges to the past, as well as writing analytical papers, students created resumes, cover letters, and business plans in the voice of imaginary Ming professionals, based on prototypes from the career center and a federal website. In week five, we played a classroom game that effectively accentuated some major points of the class and led students to read carefully in preparation. This note will explain the game and the points it helped students understand, drawing on the game as it happened and on their written reflections.

The game is based mainly on David Robinson’s article “Banditry and the Subversion of State Authority in China: The Capital Region during the Middle Ming Period (1450–1525).”² The article makes many points about the complex interactions of Ming state and society, but for the purposes of the course “Life in Ming China,” the value of the article lies in its careful adumbration of the exploitation, opportunities, and strategies of people (mostly men) of all walks of life in a naturally poor area that had become the center of a dynasty of astonishing wealth. Robinson shows how government officials and constables, soldiers and commanders, imperial family members and palace eunuchs, bandits and private security forces all were linked through patronage networks. Men moved from one work identity to

another, sometimes turning a profit and sometimes operating under unbearable pressure with their very survival at stake. Mongol and Han ethnic identity, too, could bring exploitation or death at times, but at others could be manipulated or counterfeited for power or wealth. One lesson of the article for the course was that power is not a quality that inheres in one person, but lies in relationships, and has so many modes that a move by a high-status person may be effectively countered, at least temporarily, by a low-status person, especially if he is on his own social terrain and can rally his connections. Contrary to the model of Ming society many students came to the course with, merely classifying someone as a scholar, peasant, merchant, or artisan would tell you little about his sufferings, his comforts, his wealth, or even his social status. In fact, the game and the course led students to question the whole category of “social status” as something that — without nuance or investigation into specifics — can inform us about Ming people’s lived reality.

After some other work on soldiers,³⁻⁵ we read and discussed Robinson’s article; then on Friday I gave each student a professional role on a large index card so they could prepare over the weekend and display their role on Monday. The roles were: empress dowager, imperial in-law, palace eunuch, eunuch military commander, merchant from the south, local merchant, porter, garrison commander, Mongol soldier in the Ming army, Han hereditary soldier in a garrison, Han hereditary soldier from the south, Mongol from outside Ming, county magistrate, policeman in the magistrate’s office, whistling bandit (a couple of these), member of a military family *not* a soldier (although we wound up killing off his brother and making him a soldier pretty quickly), rejected eunuch (who failed to get court employment), unregistered migrant, young strong farmer, and local poor farmer. We could have used a broker, a eunuch estate steward, and others, had the class been larger. And next time, I will ask them to look closely at the images of Ming people that form part of our course material, and to imagine themselves in the roles using the techniques outlined in Grant Shen’s “Acting in the Private Theatre of the Ming Dynasty.”⁶

The rationale of the game was that Travelling Merchant had a jewel casket she was bringing to sell to the Empress Dowager. Everyone was to try to obtain it for himself using his occupational skills, connections, etc., or to help deliver it safely to the Empress Dowager for a reward. On Monday morning, groups of three discussed for about five to seven minutes three questions: (1) Who among you has the highest social status/most power? (This was to call into question the model of a one-dimensional social ladder); (2) How might you come into conflict with each other over the jewel casket?; and (3) How could you cooperate to get it or protect it? I drew on the board an imaginary map that included Beijing, the palace, the empress dowager’s estate, a garrison, two counties and a prefecture, a road, and the canal to Tianjin.

Then all sat in a circle, and I asked for a volunteer to make the first attempt to obtain the jewel casket from Travelling Merchant. Bandit said he would, based on information about Travelling Merchant’s route. “How will you know the route?” I asked. Porter piped up and said he would tell; Unregistered Migrant said he would make Porter’s connection with the bandits, and proposed that Bandit Chief keep him on the payroll to hang about inns and make such connections. But Porter changed his mind and said he would not tell the route, but instead would

report back to Travelling Merchant that an attack was likely. Travelling Merchant said she would request protection from Garrison Commander. Hereditary Han Soldier volunteered to carry a message, and we discussed how Garrison Commander and his Soldiers might either protect Merchant or turn around and rob her themselves. Travelling Merchant contacted Empress Dowager to ask for protection; Empress Dowager turned to Imperial Son-in-law, who consulted with Palace Eunuch and his old friend Eunuch Military Commander. They turned to County Magistrate, who faced a choice of doing her duty by protecting Merchant or demanding a bribe to do so ... And so it went. There were dramatic moments. One stalwart Soldier remained honest and loyal to Garrison Commander even after capturing both the jewel casket and Bandit Chief, and Outside Mongol was rejected as an ally by all but Mongol in Ming Army. As teacher, I did have to pose questions, move things along, and draw everyone in. I took the opportunity to make or reiterate various analytical or data points, for instance about how *corvée* labor was resented. At the end of class, students wrote for five minutes about what they had learned — while I handed out the jewels, which were chocolates.

The straw man of the whole course is the scholar-farmer-artisan-merchant social classification that so many textbooks teach. As the post-game written reflections showed, the game made the point that this classification reflects little about Ming daily social interactions, the distribution of power, and the opportunities and disadvantages of different professions. (In reporting students' comments here I use their given names and do not correct their English.) Shang concluded that it was difficult to say who had the most status or power in absolute terms. Yikang wrote: "The social system lies within Ming dynasty is extremely complex, especially when mixed with governor officials and Bandits ... The existence of the Mongolians and the mix of Mongolian population in the military has further enhanced the complexity." Victoria wrote:

It is obvious that there is no "caste" system or strict hierarchy, so there were many options on who to work with, who one can trust, etc. It also shows how one cannot look at the society starting from the top, but we must first look at the bottom (as Hughes said): the empire cannot function without those at the bottom helping and "fixing the mistakes" of those above them.

Many course readings showed Ming people entering a variety of occupations over their lifetimes, and Kai wrote: "The game gave me a clearer understanding of the fluidity of jobs. For example, a farmer's role in the game could be intelligence for the bandits, or he could be drafted to work for the local magistrate's military." Of course the scholar-peasant-merchant-artisan classification leaves out the 10–20% of the Ming population that were soldiers or military households, but just adding them as a fifth category would not by itself reveal what Soo Ji pointed out: "Soldiers take on a number of different jobs and duties for their success. In this exercise, soldiers were messengers, fighters, outlaws, Mongols, and traders." In the course we also questioned the four-part classification by looking at how connected high and low were in daily life, and Yanping wrote: "I learned that every status of occupation would be contributing to the upper rank officials to make a successful plan." Joanne wrote of both the flexible ways to improve one's own wealth or reputation in any

role, and the way that a high-ranking role might be restrictive “especially if one is taking part in an activity in which one does not wish to get caught.” Daisy saw that the “remarkable” density of the “interconnectedness of people from every occupation and status” gave opportunity even to her as Poor Farmer, even if she wanted to remain on the right side of the law, through intelligence she could provide as a local.

Some students addressed directly the dilemmas of members of particular occupations: what Hughes calls “the social drama of work.” Hengrong wrote that corruption might make selling quickly the best strategy for a merchant, and that trust was essential to his trade since self-interest brought conflict not only among people, but with one’s duty. As Porter, he decided in retrospect that he should have reported directly to Policeman — to earn a reward. Garrison Commander Xuting lamented his inability to control his soldiers and keep them from becoming outlaws. Tara thought that the considerable risks she ran as Travelling Merchant would have to yield a “substantial compensation” to be worth it, and would make the occupation most suitable for young men without families. As Empress Dowager, Amy felt sure she would get her jewelry one way or another, but she realized that for those with lower social status, “they have to act differently according to the situation. If anything happen differently than they planned, they might die.” This was a nice point from a normally weak student. Amy and others were able to put themselves in the shoes of the people of the past to some extent, one of the aims in teaching history.

Some of the more articulate students in class had clearly thought they could win the game. David (Mongol Soldier in Ming Army) had thought that his connections to Outside Mongols and the information he had from being in the garrison would make him unbeatable, but he concluded: “Information is powerful, but if you don’t have the connections to utilize it properly, then it can only serve so much good.” Junjing was shocked at how little she, as Eunuch Military Commander, could do against bandits, and was surprised at the important roles people who were neither wealthy nor noble played in the scenario. Kevin learned how difficult it was to get anything done, “without any loopholes in the plan,” even though his goal had been to carry out an imperial command. Similarly, Nikolai wrote that he (as Han Hereditary Soldier) had fully intended to keep the box from leaving Travelling Merchant’s hands, but that this proved impossible.

This fifty-minute session made Robinson’s points about chains of patronage, and networks of law and violence, vivid to a class, half of whom started the quarter knowing nothing about Ming, and the other half of whom had been taught to think of it as rigidly divided into classes. I hope my account may be useful to other Ming teachers designing class games that require no equipment more complex than a jewel casket.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Hughes, *Men and Their Work*.
- 2 Robinson, “Banditry and the Subversion of State.”
- 3 Filipiak, “Civil Officials Handling Military Affairs.”
- 4 Nimick, “Ch’i Chi-kuang.”
- 5 Szonyi, “How to Dodge the Draft.”
- 6 Shen, “Acting in the Private Theatre of the Ming Dynasty.”

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NOTES ON CONTRIBUTOR

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