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LETTERS

RESPONSE TO SCOTT GREGORY, “DAYDREAMING DYNASTY”

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One of the many points in Scott Gregory’s learned and multifaceted article on *Three Treasures* (“Daydreaming Dynasty: *The Eunuch Sanbao’s Journeys in the Western Seas* and ‘Present-dynasty’ Fiction of the Ming,” *Ming Studies*, 70 (2014/15), is to distinguish the novel about Zheng He from other Ming “present-dynasty novels” by arguing that it neither relates to a specific historical moment of crisis in Ming, nor definitively resolves such a crisis. Rather, it addresses an ongoing “anxiety” among literati about whether the Ming could be legitimate without the seal of state made in Qin times, and defuses that anxiety by suggesting that the seal of state, the object of the novel’s quest, was unimportant as long as the Ming had a good reputation among barbarians. Gregory argues that present-dynasty novels generally — contrasted with those that use earlier dynasties as stand-ins — present a dilemma: that the dynasty still stands draws the sting of any criticism. True, readers could not know in 1598 that the dynasty would fall in 45 years, but that does not necessarily mean that they lacked a sense of crisis. If we look a bit more closely, I think we can see that the seal might have been the center of a felt “crisis.” Moreover, I think the Zheng He voyages, which dominate the novel, both constituted a crisis in their time and are presented as one in the parts of the novel Gregory discusses. And finally, I think that the dual crisis, of seal and voyage, is neatly and definitively resolved in the end, not simply dismissed as “inconsequential.”

The novel was printed in 1598. In the preceding decade, the Ming state was fighting the so-called Three Major Campaigns — against a rebellion in the southwest, Hideyoshi in Korea, and a mutiny with Mongol connections in the Ordos. Furthermore, according to Ray Huang, by 1593 “everybody saw at this point that Nurhaci would sooner or later rise to challenge the Ming dynasty.”¹ North and southwest were real worries. Gregory writes that the novel’s presentation of tribute and recognition from the barbarians of the south seas “surely evoked commercial abundance” (19), but instead it may have reassured Ming readers by counterbalancing challenges from the north. Within those challenges, the lack of the seal of state was not just a concern among some literati (13), but was a specific challenge to Ming by Mongol and Manchu leaders. Representing the Mandate of Heaven, the seal made for Qin Shihuangdi had passed down through the dynasties from Wei through Song, to Jin, and then to Chinggis Khan, according to Mongol sources, or from Song to Khubilai according to Chinese sources.² A Chinese tale tells that it came into the

hands of an Oirat chief, Mahmud, who in 1409 pledged allegiance to Yongle and offered him the seal; but by then the Ming had replaced it with seventeen functionally specific imperial seals and, in the view of some, “had no need for such a seal.” In this telling, Yongle had already transcended a wish for the seal.³ That is highly unlikely, since Yongle systematically pursued every avenue of legitimation, as Shih-shan Henry Tsai shows.⁴ In the 1590s the seal of state was, in Johan Elverskog’s words, an increasingly “important aspect of propaganda for Mongol legitimacy;” later it was “a powerful tool in the propaganda arsenal of [Manchu leader] Hong Taiji,” who claimed to have acquired it from the wife of Ligdan Khan.⁵ This traditional symbol of Heaven’s Mandate had completely bypassed the Great Ming; and that fact was a live part of Mongol-Manchu attacks on Ming legitimacy, attacks that had force behind them and were perceived as a real danger at the time the novel was printed.

In the novel, the seal is not merely lost. Rather it is probably in the hands of someone who claims superiority to the Ming emperor. For one of its siblings is held in Heaven itself, controlled by Celestial Masters there. The other is held by a Daoist at Maoshan, and when the emperor gets it, it rejects his sovereignty, making a Daoist mark no matter how it is recarved (16).⁶ Given the two stones’ power to outrank the emperor, and the stress on the seal of state itself as a sign of legitimacy, it must, although “lost,” be held by someone who is making great and effective claims to authority. Where was it? Who had it? Of the eighteen places visited as listed in chapter 9, none seems to have been in the real-world danger zone of Mongolia-Manchuria. Since it was found nowhere else, that must be where it was held.

To resolve the troubling absence of the seal with presence was not a possibility for the novel; as Gregory quite rightly argues, to put the seal in the fictional emperor’s hands would have unacceptably undermined the real Ming, which lacked it (19). Gregory argues that the “lingering original doubt” around the lost seal “rather than being resolved, is deemed in the end to be inconsequential” (25). Where other “present-day novels” definitively resolve a clear crisis, this one merely “defus[es]” literati anxiety and offers reassurance in the form of foreign admiration (19, 25). Yet if we reconsider the Zheng He voyages themselves, we can see how the end of the novel resolves the seal crisis. Historically, the voyages assured Yongle’s reputation abroad, and secured him giraffes and exotic goods, but many scholar-officials thought they did so at great cost to the people’s livelihood: deforestation is a possible, though unproven, result of the voyages,⁷ along with the disruption of family life as labor was requisitioned for the building or conversion of ships, and the impoverishment attendant on requisitions of all kinds of supplies, for the voyages themselves, as gifts for foreign rulers, and for the feeding and housing of the large groups of envoys. Officials remonstrated repeatedly against the voyages, which hurt the people’s livelihood to no purpose, as the Qing historians concluded and Edward Dreyer agrees.⁸ That damage, and the practical need to defend the northern border instead, led the Yongle emperor himself to “temporarily suspend” the voyages in 1421; they were officially ended in 1424 by the Hongxi emperor and resurrected just one more time by the Xuande emperor out of nostalgia for the cosmopolitan court of his grandfather’s time.⁹ The records were destroyed precisely to prevent another such crisis.

The novel presents this crisis clearly. When first approached by Celestial Master Zhang with coy references to a missing treasure, the emperor says that “the realm belongs to him and its people are his children” (14). And when, having been misled by the Celestial Master into ruinously expensive and pointless voyages, he finally sees the light, he says: “It costs tens of thousands of cash a day to feed lions, elephants, and the like. That is enough to feed dozens of average people. Which would be considered more pressing?” (16). Has the trade been worth it? Gregory’s translation is ambiguous but could be read to put the voyages in a positive light: “This journey ... has spread the customs of the empire to the Western barbarians. There is no greater benefit than for the barbarians to admire China.” But 夷而慕華, 莫大之益 could mean “We’ve gotten no greater benefit [out of the voyages] than barbarians admiring China [which is hardly worth it]” (16–17). This fits with the next comment, that the exotica gained cannot even be considered treasures. It seems odd to conclude, when all the animals have been turned to use or put out to pasture, when the birds have been let go, the useful items distributed to officials, and the expensive items hidden away in storehouses, that the emperor’s main point in this passage is to thank the heroes for spreading the Ming reputation. Rather, the passage resolves the issue of the seal precisely by not mentioning it, and by signaling the emperor’s return to the true source of dynastic legitimacy: the people’s livelihood. This resolution transcends, rather than dismissing, the whole question of whether the dynasty does or does not have the seal. No matter what exotic items the Mongol-Manchu alliance may possess, the true seal of legitimacy is the dynasty’s adherence to the Mandate of caring for the people.

Not only did the fictional emperor raise this in his initial, what we might call predaydream, response to the Celestial Master in chapter 9. Chapter 8 also sets it up in the triumphal presentation of tribute from two different groups (14). One is the foreigners who reappear at the end. But the other is more integral to the legitimacy and survival of the dynasty as a whole: elders representing commoners across the country, who report omens of the kind that have since Han times demonstrated Heaven’s approval of the dynasty. It is these people whose livelihoods and lives the dynasty has in its keeping, as the emperor says. It is these livelihoods that the Celestial Master tricks him into abandoning in the pursuit of foreign approbation and of the seal of state. In the final resolution of the novel, the foreigners are there again. Their animals and goods are balanced explicitly against the livelihood of the people, are found to be not worth the cost, and are therefore dispersed. Because the elders were paired with foreigners in the opening tribute scene, we look for them here. Their admiration should appear alongside that of foreigners. But they are not there, precisely because, as the emperor belatedly recognizes, he has sacrificed their interests and their good will. In giving up the quest for the seal, in recognizing its meaninglessness and dispersing the foreign tribute, the emperor of the novel resolves the crisis in a very definite and positive way. Waking from his daydream, he recognizes that his true legitimacy springs not from a chunk of jade associated with Daoists and despots and deserts, but from the good will of the people, earned by attention to their livelihood. The emperor finally returns to the Confucian/pragmatic populism of Ming political theory; so it is true that, awakening from this daydream of empty pursuit of a magic bauble, Ming readers could find a changed “perspective on the polity in which they lived” (25). That perspective was the hardly surprising message that commitment to

preserving the people could best preserve the dynasty in the face of the very real challenges it faced in 1598 from the holders of the seal of state.

NOTES

- ¹ Ray Huang, "The Lung-ch'ing and Wan-li Reigns, 1567–1620," in *The Cambridge History of China: Volume 7: The Ming Dynasty, 1368–1644, Part One* edited by Frederick W. Mote and Denis Twitchett (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988): 563–574, 575.
- ² Johan Elverskog, *Our Great Qing: The Mongols, Buddhism and the State in Late Imperial China* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2006): 30–31. Shih-shan Henry Tsai, *Perpetual Happiness: the Ming Emperor Yongle* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2001): 149.
- ³ Tsai, *Perpetual Happiness*, 149.
- ⁴ Tsai, *Perpetual Happiness*. Warlords in the 1920s still ardently desired the seal; 149.
- ⁵ Elverskog, *Our Great Qing*, 30–31.
- ⁶ It is hard not to suspect that the Celestial Master tricks the emperor into seeking for the third part of Mr. He's jade, the seal of state, only so that he himself can somehow get hold of it, since Celestial Masters hold the other two-thirds.
- ⁷ Sally Church, "Zheng He: An Investigation in the Plausibility of 450-ft Treasure Ships," *Monumenta Serica*, 53 (2005): 1–43, 35–36.
- ⁸ Edward L. Dreyer, *Zheng He: China and the Oceans in the Early Ming Dynasty, 1405–1433* (New York: Pearson Longman, 2007): 34.
- ⁹ Dreyer, *Zheng He*, 32.