



The Imperial Tomb Tablet of the Great Ming

大明皇陵之碑

With translation into English, annotations and commentary

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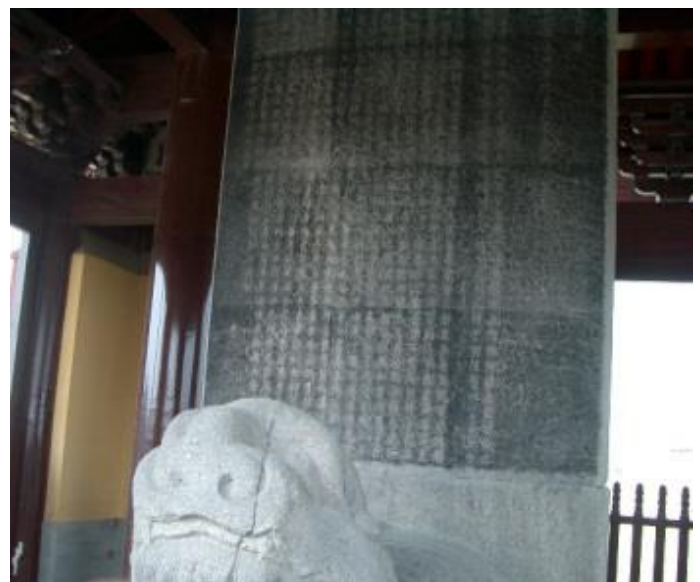
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The town of Fengyang 凤阳, to the north of Anhui Province in the heart of China, may seem at first glance to be an ordinary, and rather unremarkable, provincial outpost. However, carefully preserved in a park southwest of the town lies a key site for the Ming Dynasty, which ruled the Middle Kingdom from 1368 until 1644.

Fengyang is where the eventual dynastic founder lost most of his family to an epidemic in 1344. This founder, Zhu Yuanzhang 朱元璋, was a grieving and impoverished peasant youth when he buried his parents, eldest brother, and a nephew on a remote hillside near the town that he later expanded, renamed, and tried (unsuccessfully) to make his dynastic capital. Though Zhu had to leave his home to survive in the aftermath of the burial, he was a filial son, and regretted not being able to tend his family graves. Soon after becoming emperor, he transformed his family's burial place into a grand imperial cemetery for the House of Zhu, flanked by imposing statues (see the photo above, taken in 2006). He ordered that a stone tablet be placed before the graves, and carved with the words he wanted his descendants to read and ponder for generation after generation. The focus of this monograph is my translation of this remarkable text.

The stele inscribed with the words of Zhu Yuanzhang, known as the *Imperial Tomb Tablet of the Great Ming* 大明皇陵之碑, or the *Huangling Bei*, stands over 7 meters high and is borne on the back of a stone turtle. Modern preservationists have covered it in glass and housed it within a pagoda. The text contains five lines of introduction followed by 96 rhymed lines of text. I have relied on the notes and research of the Fengyang scholar Wang Jianying 王剑英 (1921-1996), among others, for my interpretation and welcome your suggestions for corrections, which can be made on my blog: www.lauridennis.com



The Imperial Tomb Tablet, Fengyang.

Ain't no punctuation, baby!

Or, as this phrase would have been chiseled into an actual stone stele in 1300s China:
aintnopunctuationbaby

For English speakers new to classical Chinese, it can be disconcerting to realize that the original texts contained no punctuation. How is that possible?! How did readers in the Ming Dynasty know when to pause, when to stop thoughts completely, when to ask questions?

For the *Imperial Tomb Tablet* text, sentences are marked through rhymes, and (but not always) through character counting. Most of the lines have two parts and are eight characters long. All lines of the essay (after the introduction) uniformly end with a word using the final sound of “ang.” For example, in the first five lines, the endings are:

方 fang, place
惶 huang, worried
殃 yang, disaster
亡 wang, died
喪 sang, mourning

Zhu Yuanzhang does use “ang” endings within a phrase (for example in Line 4, “皇考終於六十有四, 皇妣五十有九而亡,” each phrase starts with 皇 or “huang,” which means “imperial), but it’s usually obvious when such a word is not meant to end a phrase. When a line goes past the normal length of eight characters, you can find the ending point when you reach the character with an “ang” sound.

Because I am a native English speaker, I cannot function without punctuation, so in this translation I have relied on the commas and periods that were kindly supplied by the scholar Wang Jianying in his careful annotation of this text, completed in 1988.

In my English translation, I was not able to make the lines rhyme. My apologies. I did try, but it sounded stilted. Also, it is my humble opinion that some of Zhu Yuanzhang’s rhymes sound a bit stilted too. For example, in line 17 (乃與兄計,如何是常 therefore I made plans with my second brother about what would make sense), I envision the emperor pacing his study, trying to come up with a good way to say, “we didn’t know what to do next,” and then clapping his hands in joy when he came up with “what would make sense.”

In his case, this adds to the authenticity of the text, as the heartfelt words of a filial son.

So, let’s get started...

Text:

孝子皇帝元璋謹述：
The filial son, emperor Yuanzhang,
sincerely relates:

洪武十一年夏四月，
命江陰侯吳良督工新建皇堂。
In the 11th year of the Hongwu era, during
the fourth month, the summer season, I
commanded Wu Liang, the Duke of
Jiangyin, to supervise work on the new
construction of the Imperial Hall.

予時秉鑒窺形，但見蒼顏皓首，
忽思往日之艱辛。
At this time, I picked up a mirror and
examined my appearance, seeing that my
color was pale and my hair white. My
thoughts abruptly turned to the hardships of
the past.

Annotations:

Intro, Line 1: “Yuanzhang 元璋” is the given name of Zhu Yuanzhang 朱元璋, who was born in 1328 in a rural area south of the Huai River, located to the north of today’s Anhui Province. I have translated 謹 as “sincerely,” but it also could read “respectfully.”

Intro, Line 2: “Hongwu 洪武” (which means “Vast Martial,” with the implied meaning of “achievement”) is the title of Zhu Yuanzhang’s reign period, which lasted from 1368, when he ascended the throne, until 1398, when he died. “The 11th year of the Hongwu era” is thus 1378 by our modern reckoning. According to Wang Jianying (See the “Sources” section at the end of this monograph for a full citation), Wu Liang 吳良, 1324-1381, and his older brother were from Dingyuan 定遠 (the county south of Fengyang), and joined Zhu early in his rise through the ranks of Red Turban rebels. Romeyn Taylor lists the Wu brothers among Zhu’s original “24 heroes,” or soldiers he commanded when he set off on his own in 1353, heading south to cross the Yangzi River. (See “Sources,” Taylor.) “To supervise work on the new construction of the Imperial Hall 督工新建皇堂,” is taken by Wang Jianying to mean the symbolic role of overseeing the entire complex of imperial tombs, located eight kilometers southwest of today’s city of Fengyang 凤阳, Anhui Province.

Intro, Line 3: Zhu Yuanzhang was 51 years old (by modern reckoning) when he wrote this.

況皇陵碑記皆儒臣粉飾之文，
恐不足為后世子孫戒。

Moreover, I realized the original text for the Imperial Tomb Tablet had been embellished by Confucian ministers to the point that I feared it would not sufficiently admonish later generations and descendants.

特述艱難，明昌運，俾世代見之，
其辭曰：

Thus in order to describe the hardships and difficulties while clarifying the advances and good fortune so that future generations can witness this, the text is as follows:

Line 1:

昔我父皇，寓居是方。

In former times, my imperial father lived in this place.



A farmer in Fengyang, 2006.

Intro, Line 4: The word 粉 in the first line has the meaning of applying face powder, and together with 飾, or “ornament,” the two characters mean “adorn to the point of falsehood” which I have translated as “embellish.” Zhu Yuanzhang is referring to the epitaph drafted in 1369 (the year after the Ming founding) by Wei Su 危素 (1303-1372), a scholar and historian. Zhu eventually rejected this draft and personally wrote the new epitaph. As we can see from the phrase “I feared it would not sufficiently admonish later generations and descendants” 恐不足為后世子孫戒, the emperor felt that Wei Su’s text tried to gloss over past difficulties and “pretty up” Zhu’s early years to the point that his descendants would be misled. The late Ming scholar Hok-lam Chan points out that Zhu’s revision “presents a rather straight-forward version of his early years: his humble peasant background, his association with the Buddhists, and his checkered life as a mendicant monk amid the chaos of the rebel uprisings.” (See “Sources,” Chan’s “Facts and Fictions.”)

Intro, Line 5: Here we get to the true point of this epitaph: “to describe the hardships and difficulties while clarifying the advances and good fortune so that future generations can witness this 述艱難，明昌運，俾世代見之.” The entire text, with the introduction, was carved into stone and erected before the graves of Zhu Yuanzhang’s parents. These are the words he wanted his future generations to read and ponder.

And now, for notes on the actual text:

Line 1: “My imperial father 父皇,” refers to a posthumous title, since Zhu Yuanzhang’s father died a poor peasant. “This place 是方,” is located on the outskirts of the town known today as Fengyang 凤阳, to the north of Anhui Province. “Fengyang” is actually the name bestowed on the region by Zhu after he founded the Ming. The name means “South Side of Phoenix Mountain.” At the time when Zhu lived in that location with his family, it was a village under the jurisdiction of the walled city Haozhou 濠洲, located where the Hao tributary branches off from the Huai River.

Line 2:

農業艱辛，朝夕彷徨。

He endured the hardships of agriculture,
working day and night, always worrying.

Line 3:

俄爾天災流行，眷屬罹殃。

All at once, calamities gripped the land and
his beloved family met with disaster.

Line 4:

皇考終於六十有四，皇妣五十有九而亡。

My imperial father had reached the age of
64, and my imperial mother 59, when they
perished.

Line 5:

孟兄先死，合家守喪。

My eldest brother was the first son to die, as
he was keeping vigil with the family.

Line 2: “Working day and night, always worrying 朝夕彷徨,” translates literally as something like: morning night walk-back-and-forth. The phrase 彷徨 has the meaning of “pace” but in the sense of being “hesitant” and not knowing what to do. I have taken this to imply that his father was worrying and given these four characters a rather loose translation.

Line 3: “All at once, calamities gripped the land 俄爾天災流行,” is generally considered to refer to a drought, followed by an outbreak of the plague in the Huai valley. This is the story that Wu Han tells in his seminal biography of Zhu Yuanzhang (see the “Sources” section at the end of this monograph for a full citation). The Black Death can be traced from Syriac gravestones found in Central Asia and is presumed to have followed the Mongols into China and Europe. According to research done by David Herlihy, China lost “between one-half and two-thirds of its population to the plague” by 1351. (See “Sources,” Herlihy) The Fengyang-based historian Xia Yurun offered this musing on Zhu’s terse summary (translated from the Chinese original), “What ‘calamities’? These six characters have sparked considerable speculation by later writers. Some think it refers to cholera, others just use a general term like ‘pestilence.’ We can refer to Egyptian writers of the same era (mid 1300s) describing a poisonous haze and plague outbreak wreaking murderous havoc to verify that this calamity was the historical Black Death that shook the world.” (See “Sources,” Xia)

Line 4: “When they perished,” is how I have translated the characters 終 and 亡, which both mean “died.” The Chinese uses two parallel phrases, but in English this sounds too repetitive. The pronoun “my” is not used in the Chinese in this or the next line. Translation into English sometimes requires removing the inherent flexibility of meaning in the original Chinese.

Line 5: I struggled with how to translate this sentence, especially the timing and the character 先, or “first.” It literally reads “oldest brother first died with family keep vigil.” According to the official *Veritable Records of the Ming Taizu Reign* 明太祖实录 (which Wang Jianying quotes in his notes on this passage), Zhu’s family members all died in the fourth month of 1344. His father died on the sixth day, his eldest brother on the ninth and his mother on the 22nd. Therefore it doesn’t make sense to me to say that the elder brother died first. Instead, I translate 先 to mean the first among the four sons in the family.

Line 6:

田主德不我顧，呼叱昂昂。

Landlord De would not attend to our needs,
carrying on with his arrogant shouting.

Line 7:

既不與地，鄰里惆悵；

Our neighbors were saddened that we had
not been offered a burial plot;

Line 8:

忽伊兄之慷慨，惠此黃壤。

Thus the landlord's elder brother, feeling
indignation, kindly offered some yellow
earth.

Line 9:

殯無棺槨，被體惡裳。

Carried to the grave with no coffins, the
bodies were shrouded only in rags;

Line 10:

浮掩三尺，奠何殽漿。

Floating three feet under, how could there be
proper food and drink offerings?

Line 11:

既葬之後，家道惶惶。

After the burial, the path before us was
fraught with worries and fears.

Line 6: Wang Jianying cites the 国權 Guoque, an unofficial history of the Ming written in about 1653, in identifying Liu De 刘德 as the Zhu family's landlord. "Carrying on with his arrogant shouting 呼叱昂昂" literally reads "berated with-head-held-high" and the last two characters have the onomatopoeic sound of "ang ang" to emphasize the arrogant carrying on.

Line 7: It is the landlord who should have offered the burial plot. This is the need that is referred to in the previous line.

Line 8: The text says "his 伊" but I have changed this to "the landlord" to clarify. Zhu Yuanzhang did not forget the kindness shown to him by this offering of a place to bury his parents. Wu Han (see "Sources," Wu) quotes an edict issued by Zhu after he became emperor, which granted the landlord's elder brother with the posthumous title Marquis of Yihui and commented: "At the time when I was struggling over my parents' corpses, finding a place for them was difficult, and you exhibited a heart of great kindness and benevolence, offering your fertile soil. To see such benevolence, how could I forget it?" Yellow 黃 here has the meaning of "precious."

Line 9: "Coffins 棺槨." This is an old term that refers to the inner and the outer coffin. "The bodies were shrouded only in rags 被體惡裳" literally reads, "quilted bodies bad clothing."

Line 10: "Floating three feet under 浮掩三尺." Wu Han quotes several sources to explain that as Zhu and his brother were burying the corpses, a heavy storm suddenly unleashed torrents and buried the bodies under rubble. This explains the use of the word "浮" which can mean "float" or "immerse" and also has the meaning of "insubstantial." Zhu was deeply upset by this inadequate burial.

Line 11: The Chinese text says, literally, "family path alarmed." The double character phrase 惶惶 has the sense of "a state of anxiety" and fear, and the repetitious sound in Chinese heightens this meaning in a way that cannot be translated.

Line 12:

仲兄少弱，生計不張。

My second brother was young and frail, his circumstances still unsettled.

Line 13:

孟嫂携幼，東歸故鄉。

Eldest sister-in-law took her children in hand and headed east to return to her own village.

Line 14:

值天無雨，遺蝗騰翔。

Heaven offered no rain, only locusts, which rose and circled.

Line 15:

里人缺食，草木為糧。

The people in my village lacked food, with grasses and bark serving as nourishment.

Line 16:

予亦何有，心驚若狂。

As for myself, what did I have but fear to the point of madness?

Line 17:

乃與兄計，如何是常。

Therefore I made plans with my second brother about how to survive.

Line 18:

兄云去此，各度凶荒。

My brother said he would leave, so that we each could each get through the drought.

Line 12: Zhu Yuanzhang was the youngest son in a family of four sons and two daughters. Wang Jianying quotes other texts which describe Zhu's oldest brother as living with his parents when the plague struck, but list brothers 2 and 3 as having marriage contracts that required them to live in the households of their wives. (The norm of that time was for a woman to move into the household of her husband. Both of Zhu's sisters had followed this practice.) However, according to Wu Han, only the third brother was "married out" to a more prosperous family. Thus there is some discrepancy as to whether Second Brother was living in the Zhu household or married out at the time of the plague deaths. Perhaps he was married out but living nearby. Regardless, as we see here, Second Brother became head of the Zhu household when First Brother died. It was a household that had been whittled down to only two of the original six siblings.

Line 13: "Eldest sister-in-law 孟嫂" refers to the wife of Zhu Yuanzhang's eldest brother. Her departure is another reminder of the depleted state of the Zhu family.

Line 14: "天" here has an anthropomorphic meaning of "Heaven," as in the Celestial Ruler, but also the natural meaning of "the sky," which is not producing rain.

Line 15: The character 里 has the modern meaning of "inside," but here means "village."

Line 16: "予" is a personal reference in classical Chinese. Having just talked about the suffering within his village, Zhu now turns to the impact on him.

Line 17: "about how to endure 如何是常." The last word in this phrase has the medieval meaning of "always" but can also mean "enduring" or "permanent." In the context, I think it refers to the two brothers making plans about how to survive.

Line 18: "云" means "to say" in classical Chinese. "度荒" means "survive through a lean year." There is not enough grain in the Zhu household to support two people, so Second Brother has decided to leave, in hopes that his younger brother can survive on what is left at home, and that he can find some other place where there is food.

Line 19:

兄為我哭，我為兄傷。

My brother wept over me, and I grieved for my brother,

Line 20:

皇天白日，泣斷心腸。

Under the bright sun in Heaven sorrow rent our hearts.

Line 21:

兄弟異路，哀動遙蒼。

Elder and younger, we took separate paths, with distant Heaven moved by our grief.

Line 22:

汪氏老母，為我籌量。

Old Mother Wang helped me prepare a temple offering.

Line 19: “傷” translates as “lament, grieve for.” It is used here as a parallel word for “哭,” or “weep,” which also has the meaning of “lament.”

Line 20: “腸” or “intestines” also has the meaning of one’s inner feelings, here further emphasized by adding the word “heart.” “腸斷” translates as “innards split open,” but that sounds too strange in English, so I have gone instead with the sense of being “heartbroken,” which is the figurative meaning. In this phrase, the pain of the two brothers down on the suffering earth is contrasted with the bright sun up in pure Heaven.

Line 21: The verb “to move 動” here indicates a moving of the sentiments. 遙蒼 is literally the distant green, but the 蒼 here is “蒼天,” which means not just a blue-green sky, but “Heaven” in an anthropomorphic sense. This phrase contrasts with Line 20, which featured a merciless sun glittering over the earth, thus in this line further emphasizing the piteousness of the two brothers, which could move even the pitiless sun.

Line 22: Old Mother Wang 汪氏老母 was a widowed neighbor of the Zhu family. 籌量 means “plan out the measure” which here could indicate making general plans to enter the local Buddhist temple, or perhaps measuring out the ritual grain offering that Zhu would need to present to the abbot. According to the original epitaph by Wei Su, Zhu’s parents had promised him to the Buddhist fold in return for prayers restoring him to good health when he was young and frail. Now Zhu is going to act on that promise. Xia Yurun (See “Sources,” Xia) writes that “under the guidance of Old Mother Wang, Zhu Yuanzhang made the correct choice at a key crossroads in his life – he entered the temple and became a monk. This not only kept him alive during a time of plague and famine, the monastic lifestyle also served the key purpose of expanding his learning and enriching his life experience...”

Line 23:

遣子相送，備醴馨香。

She sent her son to escort me, having supplied us with sweet wine and fragrant incense.

Line 24:

空門禮佛，出入僧房。

I underwent the Buddhist rites and entered the monk's world.

Line 25:

居未兩月，寺主封倉。

I had not lived at the temple for even two months when the abbot had to close the empty granary.



Longxing Temple, Fengyang, 2006.

Line 23: She sent her son 遣子. Gravestones and epitaphs in Fengyang list Old Mother Wang's husband as Cao Jun 曹均, who died long before the Zhus moved to the area. Old Mother Wang had three sons, and it was the second son who was closest in age to Zhu Yuanzhang and escorted him to the temple. Zhu stayed in contact with this family friend, and after becoming emperor, gave him the title "Lord of Pine Mountain 松山汪公" and asked him to change his surname to "Wang" to honor Old Mother Wang. The other two brothers kept the Cao surname. In Fengyang today, Xia Yurun says there is still a traditional feeling that Wangs and Caos should not intermarry because they might be relatives.

Line 24: "空門," or "the empty gate," refers to Buddhism, and is a nice reference because Zhu Yuanzhang is literally entering the gate to his new home. "禮" in this case means "paid homage to" the Buddha. The more direct translation is thus "With Buddhist ritual homage." Zhu entered the temple in the ninth month of 1344.

Line 25: As Zhu Yuanzhang will make clear in Line 38, this was happening in Wuhuang Temple 於皇寺, which was located on the outskirts of his village. Xia Yurun explains that the name comes from an old Chu Kingdom era word for "tiger 於菟" with the "於" pronounced not in the modern pinyin of "yu" but rather as "wu 乌." And yes, tigers, were once plentiful there! The "huang 皇" refers to an empress "皇后" who, according to local legends, was raised by tigers in that area. So the temple name can be translated as something like "Tiger Empress Temple." This temple was destroyed at the start of the Red Turban uprising, but restored by imperial decree after Zhu became emperor. The new complex was moved to a more auspicious location and named Longxing Temple 龙兴寺, or "Dragon's Rising." In any case, the temple monks were reeling from the same drought as the villagers. The phrase 封倉 could mean that the abbot "seized my food," but from the context it seems more likely to mean the abbot had to "close the granary" because there wasn't enough food to go around. This interpretation is supported by the original epitaph, which says that after two months, "before I had time to learn the scriptures, the temple suffered from the local crop failure. I fretted and pondered that I had no home to return to, and not enough knowledge to leave the temple, but in the end I resolved to seek food in the four directions."

Line 26:

眾各為計，雲水飄颻。

Everyone made their own plans and the wandering monks drifted apart.

Line 27:

我何作為，百無所長。

What was I to do? I had no special skills.

Line 28:

依親自辱，仰天茫茫。

Turning to my relatives would have been shameful, so I could only raise my face to boundless Heaven.

Line 29:

既非可倚，侶影相將。

With no one to rely on, my shadow became my companion.

Line 30:

突朝煙而急進，幕投古寺以趨躑。

I sought out hearth smoke in the mornings, and hurried to seek refuge at old temples in the evenings.

Line 26: 雲水 or “clouds and water” is the name for the wandering monks who roamed the countryside and could stay temporarily at any Buddhist temple. Zhu Yuanzhang is now being forced to become a Clouds and Water monk.

Line 27: “I had no skills 百無所長.” This is a version of the sayings “百無所成 (accomplish nothing)” or “一事無成 (nothing to show),” which Zhu modifies to fit the rhyme scheme and the situation.

Line 28: “Turning to my relatives would have been shameful 依親自辱,” to say nothing of difficult, since most of his known relatives had just perished. Zhu is likely referring to his father’s ancestral home in Jurong 句容, Jiangsu Province (near the present day city of Nanjing). His father had left this town long before Zhu was born and lost contact with this branch of the family, so Zhu is indicating that to go seek their support at this point would have been improper. He may also have been referring to his father’s elder brother’s family in Xuyi 盱眙, Jiangsu Province (along Lake Hongze), though it is unlikely that Zhu had ever been to that district, and he may have heard that almost everyone in this wing of the family had also died in the recent epidemic.

Line 29: My shadow became my companion 侶影相將. This is a poetic reference, calling to mind such famous lines as Li Bai (Tang Dynasty) raising his wine cup to invite the moon to join him and his shadow for a drink, or Su Shi (Song Dynasty) dancing with his shadow while wishing he could be with his brother.

Line 30: This line continues the poetic imagery. The first phrase is also has a misty inference. Zhu is wandering the countryside of the Huai River Valley, begging for meals and seeking sanctuary at local temples when he can find it.

Line 31:

仰穹崖崔嵬而倚碧，
聽猿啼夜月而淒涼。

Facing the towering cliffs, I would rest
against the green rock; listening to the night
calls of the monkeys, left me cold and
desolate.

Line 32:

魂悠悠而覓父母，無有，志落魄而倘
佯。

My spirit fretted and sought out my father
and mother, but to no avail; so I lost my
resolve and wavered.

Line 33:

西風鶴唳，俄淅瀝以飛霜。

The west wind carried the call of a crane,
and suddenly with a whir a bird flies through
the mist.

Line 34:

身如蓬逐風而不止，心滾滾乎沸湯。

Like tumbleweed, I chased the wind and
could not stop; my heart churning like
boiling water.

Line 31: “Towering cliffs 穹崖崔嵬.” This phrase in Chinese is a string of images: “穹” means “vault” or “dome,” and often refers to the vault of Heaven. “The domed cliffs towering and lofty,” is closer to the text but seemed too flowery to me in English so I simplified it. “Rest against the green rocks 倚碧” is hard to translate because the color word, “碧” can mean either blue or green, and the color needs a noun (to say nothing of a pronoun) to work in English, so it could mean “by the blue waters” as easily as “against the green rock.” My sense is that he is saying he faces the cliffs and rests for a bit. “Calls of the monkeys 猿啼” indicates that Zhu was traveling through the mountain forests – the rhesus monkey can still be found in southern Anhui Province.

Line 32: “Spirit 魂.” The word used here, *hun*, refers to the soaring part of the soul, or 魂魄 *hun-po*. Zhu accepted the common belief of his era that, upon death, the *hun* ascends to heaven, while the *po* crumbles into the earth. He actually uses both terms in this phrase, since the word for “ebbed 落魄” contains the character for the earth-bound *po*. (To read more on Zhu’s spiritual beliefs, see the Langlois and Sun article cited in “Sources.”) In this line, Zhu’s *hun* is seeking the spirits of his deceased parents. The phrase “to no avail 無有” is laden with sorrow and can stand on its own, which is how Wang Jianying punctuates the line, and I have followed his lead. It is the only three-part phrase in the essay.

Line 33: “Crane 鶴.” The crane is often a symbol of longevity in Chinese poetry, but here it carries more of a meaning of loneliness and perseverance, since it appears first as a sound and then as an image, traveling alone through the cold air, just like Zhu. Wang Jianying notes that this section of the Huangling Bei is “really full of emotion 頗具感情” and is a big departure from Wei Su’s original text. (See “Why does this text matter?” below for more on the contrast with Wei Su’s version.)

Line 34: “Tumbleweed 蓬.” The character used here, *peng* 蓬, is defined in Kroll’s Classical Chinese dictionary (see “Sources”) as, “any of several plants that when withered disengage from their roots and are pushed along by the wind.” The descriptive “滾滾” means “roiling” or “rolling” and also is an onomatopoeic term with its repetitive sound of *gun-gun*, but I used the word “churning” since the action is being performed by the heart. This ends a two-line highly descriptive passage highlighting Zhu’s inner turmoil and grief.

Line 35:

一浮雲乎三載，年方二十而強。

Three years passed like floating clouds, until
I was just over 20 years old.

Line 36:

時乃長淮盜起，民生攘攘。

At that time, bandits arose along the Yangzi
and the Huai rivers, making life tumultuous
for the common folk.

Line 37:

於是思親之心昭著，日遙眇乎家邦。

My thoughts turned toward my parents and
all became clear as I glanced with
anticipation toward my distant home.



Rural Fengyang, 2006.

Line 35: “Three years 三載.” In his “Longxing Temple Stele Text 龙兴寺碑文,” written five years after this one, Zhu lists the places he traveled during these three wandering years as: 庐，六，光，固，汝，颍。 This route corresponds to Luzhou 庐州 (modern Hefei, the capital of Anhui Province), and then moves westward through Lu’an 六安 and into Henan Province, where Zhu traveled through cities known today as Huangchuan (the former 光州), Gushi 固始, and Ruzhou 汝州. Zhu returned to his temple via Yingzhou 颍州, today’s Fuyang, in northwestern Anhui Province. “I was just over 20 years old 年方二十而強.” His 20th year would correspond to late 1347, since in traditional China, a newborn is considered one year old. (Note that the Longxing Temple Stele Text can be found in Xia Yurun’s book on Fengyang cited in “Sources.”)

Line 36: “At that time, bandits arose along the Yangzi and the Huai rivers 時乃長淮盜起.” This was the start of the Red Turban uprising, which swept across China in the mid-14th century and led to the downfall of the Mongol Yuan Dynasty. Wu Han, in his biography of Zhu, describes these uprisings in detail. Zhu’s temple was located near the south bank of the Huai River at Haozhou (modern Fengyang). This river is located between the Yellow River and the Yangzi (which Zhu calls the “Chang” or Long River), and is considered the dividing line between the north and south of China’s heartland.

Line 37: Zhu may have been thinking of his parents’ graves and wanting to make sure they were not disturbed by the rebellion. It took him some time to make his way back home, since the character “日” in 日遙眇 indicates that he was scanning the distant horizon “every day,” hoping finally to see Fengyang looming ahead.

Line 38:

已而既歸，仍復業於於皇。

I soon returned and resumed my role at Wuhuang Temple.

Line 39:

住方三載，而又雄者跳梁。

I spent three years at the temple, a time when the gallant ones were once again running wild.

Line 40:

初起汝穎，次及鳳陽之南廂。

They rose from Yingzhou and then reached the southern gate of Fengyang.

Line 38: “At Wuhuang Temple 於於皇.” As is explained in the annotation to Line 25, the character “於” in the temple name (as opposed to the preceding identical character which is a preposition) is pronounced in the local dialect as “wu” and means “tiger.” Wang Jianying researched its location, and found traces of what he considered the temple’s well slightly to the north of today’s wall around the Imperial Tomb complex. Local histories indicate that the temple was founded at some point during the Song Dynasty, abandoned during the Jin, reconstituted during the Yuan, and then abandoned again during the upheavals at the end of the Yuan. Some texts refer to this temple as Huangjue (“Imperial Awakening”) Temple 皇觉寺, but this is obviously a post-Ming founding name. Zhu had the temple rebuilt in a nearby locations and granted it the new name of Longxing (Dragon’s Rising) Temple 龙兴寺, which it has continued to use until today.

Line 39: “I spent three years at the temple 住方三載”. This corresponds from late 1347 until 1350/51. The phrase “跳梁” literally means “jumping on the roof beams.” The noun “雄” can be translated as “gallants” or “bold spirited” or “strongmen.”

Line 40: Ruzhou 汝州 (or possibly Runan 汝南) in modern Henan and Yingzhou 颍州 are both locales to the west of Fengyang, which Zhu traveled through during his wandering years (see annotations to line 35). However, to keep parallel with the city name in the second phrase, I think Ru Ying refers to a single place in the first phrase too – Ruying Circuit’s city of Yingzhou. The Red Turbans rose from this region, led by Han Shantong 韓山童 and his general, Liu Futong 刘福通. The late Ming scholar Hok-lam Chan has the best account of Han Shantong in his 2008 article (see “Sources,” Chan’s “Symbolism and Legitimation”). Fengyang was created after the Ming founding, and so did not have a footprint – much less any gates – at this point, so Wang Jianying considers this a reference to the present town of Dingyuan 定远, the base of the Red Turban leader Guo Zixing 郭子兴 (who Zhu will soon join).

Line 41:
未幾陷城，深高城隍。
The city was taken in no time by
surmounting the walls and moats.

Line 42:
拒守不去，號令彰彰。
I refused to go defend Hao, despite a clear
summons.

Line 43:
友人寄書，云及趨降；
A friend sent me a letter saying that I should
hasten to submit;

Line 44:
既憂且懼，無可籌詳。
But I was too worried and afraid to make
any plans.



Statue of Tang He inside today's Longxing Temple in Fengyang. This statue is at the right hand of the temple's main statue to Zhu Yuanzhang, indicating Tang's importance. (General Xu Da is at Zhu's left hand.)

Line 41: “The city was taken 陷城.” This refers to the walled city of Haozhou 濠州, which Guo Zixing 郭子兴 captured with a small force of Red Turbans. Haozhou no longer exists, having been transformed by Zhu into today's Fengyang (see previous line and the annotation to Line 1). Haozhou was situated at the confluence of the Hao River with the larger Huai River 淮河. Wu Han's biography of Zhu Yuanzhang explains that, “On the 27th day of the second month (of 1352), Guo Zixing led several thousand men on a midnight raid of Haozhou. When the signal cannon sounded, the raiders charged the yamen gate and killed the magistrate... The Yuan general Cheli Buqa was camped many li away from Haozhou and feared the ferocity of the Red Army to the point that he refused to attack.”

Line 42: In his “Longxing Temple Stele Text,” Zhu noted that the temple where he served was burned down in 1352. (See annotations to lines 25, 35, and 38.) Xia Yurun speculates that the Red Turbans who took over Haozhou roamed the countryside seizing grain and that this was when the temple was burned. The “clear summons” in this line may mean the Red Turbans also wanted the monks to join their cause and be part of the defense of Hao.

Line 43: “A friend 友人.” In the 1965 edition of Wu Han's biography of Zhu Yuanzhang, Wu cites Tang He 汤和 as the “friend,” though the 1949 edition is not clear on this point, saying only that Zhu went to discuss the letter with Tang. Wang Jianying concurs with this speculation, also citing Tang He's epitaph, which says that Tang was already in Haozhou serving Guo Zixing when Zhu came to join the rebels. Tang He was a childhood friend, and would go on to be one of Zhu's most trusted military leaders. “Submit 降.” The letter advised that Zhu come to Haozhou and join the rebellion, which would mean submitting to the authority of Guo Zixing.

Line 44: Zhu was afraid to leave the temple sanctuary and did not know if he could make it safely into Haozhou, as he is about to explain. And his fears were justified, as he makes clear in Line 52.

Line 45:

傍有覺者，將欲聲揚。

Others were aware of the letter and wanted to reveal its contents.

Line 46:

當此之際，逼迫而無已，
試與知者相商。

At this point, I was compelled to make a decision, so I consulted the one who was knowledgeable.

Line 47:

乃告之曰：

<果束手以待罪，亦奮臂而相戕!>

I said to this person, “I can either have my hands bound like a criminal, or raise my arms in resistance and end up killed!”

Line 48:

知者為我畫計，且禱陰以默相。

The knowledgeable one made plans for me, and advised that I pray in secret and think it over.

Line 49:

如其言往，卜去守之何祥。

Following this advice, I went to divine whether fleeing or guarding the temple was the most auspicious choice.

Line 50:

神乃陰陰乎有警，其氣郁郁乎洋洋。

The divinity answered with a yin-yin reply as a warning, the clouds of incense billowing.



A pair of jiao shells, on sale now!

Line 45: Guo Zixing was not the only leader at Haozhou. Wu Han and other sources lists Sun Deya 孙得崖 as a rival commander at that point. So the “others” Zhu is concerned about were likely either Sun’s supporters, or perhaps anti-Red Turban locals who would reveal the letter to the authorities.

Lines 46: “The knowledgeable one 知者.” It is not clear who Zhu consulted – likely a villager or someone he trusted at his temple. I was compelled to make a decision 逼迫而無已. Note that the phrase reads literally “I was compelled and could not stop.” The fact that he was compelled to make a decision is implied.

Line 47: Zhu meant that the authorities could arrest him on suspicion of being a rebel, or he could join the rebellion and be killed in the fighting. He explains the problem in more detail in “Story of a Dream,” as translated into English by Prof. Taylor: “Two hazards made it difficult for me to decide what to do. I was afraid that if I came out of hiding and gave myself up to the Yuan authorities they would put a red headband on me and take my life. But I was also afraid that if I did not come forth, the red army would come into my neighborhood and cut me off before my time.” The “red headband” and “red army” are references to the Red Turban rebellion, which was spreading across the Chinese heartland, threatening Yuan (or Mongol) Dynasty control. Guo Zixing is leading a faction of Red Turbans. Note that I have added in “in resistance” to the latter half of this sentence, since I feel it is implied.

Line 48: This sentence contains the advice given by Zhu’s consultant. The next sentence moves on to how Zhu reacted to the advice.

Line 49: “Story of a Dream” adds that Zhu went to pray to (and thus divine before) the guardian god of his temple, the Qielan 伽藍 Buddha.

Line 50: “The divinity 神.” Zhu is divining the will of Heaven by tossing a pair of shells before a divinity. These shells are known as *jiao* cups (杯筊) and typically carved from wood or bamboo in the shape of clamshells. If a shell lands on its back, the concave side face up, this is a “yang” result. The other option, with the exterior of the shell facing up, is a “yin” result. The character “乎” (see also above in lines 34-37) is often used in classical Chinese as a connector or an exclamation, and also (as in the elegant second half of this phrase) to offer poetic rhythm.

Line 51:

卜逃卜守則不吉，將就凶而不妨。

Escaping or guarding, both were inauspicious; then I understood and did not try to interfere.

Line 52:

即起趨降而附城，幾被無知而創。

I hastened to the city gates to pledge allegiance, but some of the gate guards did not know who I was and harmed me.



Fengyang city walls, 2006.

Line 51: “Escaping or guarding, both were inauspicious 卜逃卜守則不吉.” Zhu Yuanzhang is throwing divination shells – like the modern set in the photo advertisement at right – to get an answer from the Qielan Buddha as to whether he should escape the chaos around him, or stay and guard his looted temple. The shells are landing interior side down for Zhu, an inauspicious yin/yin reply. Zhu’s “Story of a Dream,” has a more extended version of this fateful divination prayer. As Romeyn Taylor explains in his analysis of this essay, the divine answer could come in one of three ways: “A throw of yin/yin is unfavorable; yang/yang ‘indifferently good’; and yin/yang absolutely favorable.” “Story of a Dream” goes on to explain that Zhu then asked if he should try something new, and the spirit answered that he should. Zhu interpreted this to mean he should join the Red Turban rebellion. I am indebted to Prof. Taylor’s English translation, and will add one more quote here, because it is so moving: “I then spoke plainly to the spirit saying, ‘If I really do start something, will I be successful in the end? Let the spirit not deceive me in this. Kindly cause the shells to ‘yin’ again.’ I tossed the shells on the ground and, in fact, they ‘yinned.’ Accordingly, I made up my mind to enter Hao city.”

Line 52: Zhu entered Hao in April 1352, a time of considerable factional distrust among the different Red Turban rebel groups trying to hold the city. The phrase in Line 52 does not explicitly say “gate guards,” but I have assumed that “some” at the time of his entry into the walled city has this meaning, especially because Zhu elaborates on who harmed him in “Story of a Dream” (Taylor translation): “The guards seized me and intended to kill me without giving me a chance to explain (why I had come).”

Line 53:

少頃獲釋，身體安康。

After some time, I was released and ready,
my health restored.

Line 54:

從愚朝暮，日日戎行。

I had to deal with fools day and night and
led a military life.

Line 55:

元兵討罪，將士湯湯。

The Yuan sent a force to punish us; their
troops poured onto the field;

Line 56:

一攫不得，再攫再驤。

But what they reached for they could not
obtain, and the more they reached the more
we pranced.

Line 53: “I was released (from capture) 獲釋。” In his memorial text for Guo Zixing (known as the “祭滌阳王文” or “Memorial for the Prince of Chuyang”), written after the dynastic founding, Zhu Yuanzhang poignantly noted that: “When I went to join the army, there were some who harmed me. Only (Guo Zixing) saved me. Now that we have established peace throughout the realm, I cannot forget this kindness.” Thus it is likely that Zhu was thrown into a prison cell by the gate guards, and not released until Commander Guo Zixing intervened. (The memorial text is quoted in Wang’s Annotations.)

Line 54: “I had to deal with fools day and night 從愚朝暮。” Wang’s Annotations cites the Sun Deya group as the fools alluded to here. (See the comments to Line 45 for more on Sun.) When two higher ranking officers, Zhao Junyong 赵军用 and Peng Da 蓬大, arrived in Haozhou, Sun allied himself with Zhao, and Commander Guo Zixing with Peng. Matters soon deteriorated, as has been noted by Wu Han: “The two sides were soon in an open, and yet also behind-the-scenes, struggle for power and neither side would concede anything. Sun Deya worked to provoke Zhao Junyong, saying the Guo Zixing was shortsighted and could only recognize General Peng, and furthermore that Guo was fawning on Peng and blindly serving him only while rolling his eyes contemptuously at General Zhao. This made Zhao furious. He led his personal guard straight into the heat of the fight, seizing Guo Zixing without warning and locking him up in an empty room in the Sun compound.” It was left to Zhu Yuanzhang to extract his commander from this predicament.

Line 55: “The Yuan sent a force to punish us 元兵討罪。” The Yuan Dynasty court sent Chancellor Toghto down from Beijing to suppress the Red Turban rebellion. According to Wu Han, Toghto led 100,000 Chinese troops and successfully attacked the strategic city of Xuzhou (徐州, in today’s Jiangsu Province). The Red Turban generals Zhao and Peng, mentioned in the note above, fled this attack by escaping south to Haozhou. Toghto dispatched his General Jia Lu 贾鲁 to chase after them, and this is the army that Zhu Yuanzhang now faced. According to Taylor’s “Story of Dream” (Note 30), Jia Lu pursued the Red Turbans “with eight guards (about 80,000 men) of Han troops, probably militiamen and new recruits for the most part.”

Line 56: The siege of Haozhou lasted several months, from late 1352 until spring of 1353.

Line 57:

移營易壘，旌旗相望。

When they moved their camp, we changed our defenses, our flags and banners continuing to face off.

Line 58:

已而解去，棄戈與槍。

Eventually the Yuan raised the siege and left, abandoning their battle-axes and swords.

Line 59:

予脫旅隊，馭馬控韁。

I was able to get away from my unit, taking up reins and heading off on my horse.

Line 57: The appearance of Yuan soldiers unified the squabbling Red Turbans in Haozhou. As Wu Han explains, “With the enemy before them, the Red Turban leadership became alarmed and everyone reconciled, joining together to hold the city. Yuanzhang strengthened the morale of the soldiers by spending day and night on the walls directing the defense of Haozhou.”

Line 58: The text literally states “then released and left” but the official Veritable Records of Ming Taizu has the same phrase in an expanded version 元兵解圍去， or “the Yuan soldiers raised the siege and left.” The reason for this sudden departure is that General Jia Lu died unexpectedly from an illness. Xia has the best account of this, which translates into English as: “On the 16th day of the fifth month, Jia Lu ordered, ‘We must take the city this morning, and then we can eat.’ After rallying his troops, Jia Lu himself jumped on his horse to lead the attack. But just as he reached the Hao walls, he suddenly became dizzy and tumbled from his mount. Jia Lu died at camp not long after. With their leader dead, the Yuan troops lost their will to fight, and could only abandon the field and depart.” (Page 114)

Line 59: With the crisis averted, Zhu Yuanzhang was once again faced with the incompetence of the Haozhou garrison leadership, who now focused on awarding themselves new titles. Zhu wrote in Story of a Dream (as translated by Taylor), “Even though I was just a soldier, I had the opportunity to observe the conduct of my commanding officers. When I had evaluated them over a long period of time, (I concluded that) they were very poor at making plans...Peng and Zhao bestowed on themselves the title (of prince) and most of their followers were abusive and insulting towards the others. I understood that they were not following the Way.” Zhu realized that the time had come for him to establish his own army. His first step was to leave Haozhou, under the pretext of finding more provisions for the Haozhou rebels. According to Wu Han, “Yuanzhang came up with a plan to take some salt to Huaiyuan and exchange it for several bags of grain, which he presented to Guo Zixing. Privately, Yuanzhang considered that two princes and a variety of commanders meant too much ambition and too little insight. He feared that he would never advance unless he formed his own band – he needed to be able to rely on a unit of his own as a personal powerbase. With this idea in mind, Yuanzhang asked for leave and returned to Zhongli, where he set up a recruitment banner.” (Zhongli 钟离 was the name of Zhu Yuanzhang’s home village.)

Line 60:

出游南土，氣舒而光。

I ventured southward, where I felt more at ease and could seek glory.

Line 61:

倡農夫以入，伍事業是匡。

I convinced the locals to join my band for the cause of rectifying the state.

Line 62:

不逾月而眾集，赤幟蔽野而盈岡。

In less than a month I had gathered a multitude so that our red banners covered the countryside and spilled over the ridges.

Line 63:

率渡清流，戍守滁陽。

I led my troops across the Qingliu River to defend the Chuyang Garrison.



An old map of Chuzhou

Line 60: The second half of this phrase can be literally translated as: “mood relaxed, then glory.” I have translated 光 to mean “seeking glory,” in the sense that Zhu Yuanzhang’s mood improved as soon as he escaped Haozhou. He finally felt free to follow the command of the divination shells: start a successful movement that would bring about righteous change. By venturing “southward,” Zhu meant that he was heading from Haozhou to the next town, Dingyuan 定远 and beyond.

Line 61: I convinced the locals 倡農夫. These locals were farmers in the Huai River valley, in today’s Anhui Province. Zhu Yuanzhang is calling on them to join a righteous cause (as opposed to what the ruling Mongols would have deemed a rebellion). The recruits would be led by Zhu’s newly-formed band of “24 heroes,” who have been named in several places and included companions like Tang He 汤和 and Xu Da 徐达, the future generals who would fight at his side straight through to the dynastic founding in 1368.

Line 62: I gathered a multitude 眾集. (The pronoun “I” is implied.) In “Story of a Dream” (see “Sources,” Taylor), Zhu gives more details about these “multitudes” who filled out his new militia. They included 3,000 left stranded at a fort in the hills outside Dingyuan, who surrendered to Zhu. Next was a more significant encampment of 20,000 soldiers that Zhu encountered at Mt. Hengjian 横涧, northwest of Dingyuan. This army was part of the larger imperial force that scattered upon the death of Yuan General Jia Lu (see annotations to Line 58 above). Zhu’s men overpowered the encampment in a surprise midnight attack. These maneuvers and skirmishes occurred in the year 1354. The resulting new militia would have been raising Zhu’s personal banners, though using the colors of the Red Turbans, since Zhu’s allegiance remained with Commander Guo Zixing in Haozhou.

Line 63: Qingliu River 清流. The Qingliu flows eastward from near the Dingyuan boundary toward the Yangzi River. “Chuyang Garrison” refers to the walled city of Chuzhou 滁州. Zhu was based in this city for about a year, but Wu Han says that even before Zhu entered Chuzhou, his eyes were on a much bigger prize southeast across the Yangzi: Jiankang, known today as Nanjing.

Line 64:

思親詢舊，終日慨慷。

I thought of my relatives and asked after them, all day sighing with emotion.

Line 65:

知仲姊已逝，獨存駙馬與甥雙。

I knew that my second sister had already died; her only survivors were my brother-in-law and nephew.

Line 66:

駙馬引兒來我棲，外甥見舅如見娘。

Then one day my brother-in-law led his son to my dwelling place. When my nephew saw his uncle, it was as if he was looking at his mother.

Line 64: Sighing with emotion 慨慷. Now we have a major shift from a bold narration of military exploits to Zhu's internal thoughts about his scattered relatives. The term used here, "kai-kang," has an alliterative quality, which adds to the poetic sentiment.

Line 65: As mentioned in the annotations to Line 12 above, Zhu was the youngest son in a family of four sons and two daughters. According to the chapter on princesses in the official *History of the Ming* (明史, 卷 121), his eldest sister was married away to a member of the Wang clan in the town of Xuyi 盱眙, and probably died before Zhu Yuanzhang was born. She had no heirs. His second sister (the character 仲 means "second" in a sequence) married Li Zhen 李貞, also of Xuyi (see notes to Line 28 above). This town along Lake Hongze is where Zhu's parents lived before moving to Haozhou, where their most famous son was born in 1328. Both of these sisters were posthumously named princesses. The term 駙馬 literally means "extra horses for the carriage," but also indicates imperial in-laws. Li's son by Zhu's sister was Li Wenzhong 李文忠, born in about 1341, a few years prior to the plague strike that devastated the Zhu family, though clearly the Li's in Xuyi survived the plague. Li Wenzhong's biography in the *History of the Ming* says that Li's mother died when he was 12 years old, which would have been about 1353. This means Zhu had received news of her recent death, but did not know the whereabouts of her survivors.

Line 66: What a poignant scene! According to the official biography of Li Wenzhong, he and his father were caught up in the fighting around Xuyi, and narrowly escaped death. This occurred at about the same time that Zhu was seeking to capture Chuzhou. (Xuyi is about 100 kilometers north of Chuzhou.) It is likely that Li Wenzhong had never seen his uncle, Zhu, until he arrived with his father at Zhu's Red Turban base in Chuzhou. Having recently lost his mother, it must have been a comfort to meet his mother's youngest brother. Zhu's words here indicate that he resembled his sister.

Line 67:

此時孟嫂亦有知，攜兒挈女皆從傍。
At this time, my eldest sister-in-law also learned of my whereabouts. Holding her son while leading her daughter, she drew near.

Line 68:

次兄已歿又數載，獨遺寡婦野持筐。
My second brother had already been dead for a few years. He left behind a widow, who wandered in the wilderness with nothing but a basket.

Line 69:

因兵南北，生計忙忙。
With soldiers north and south, surviving was a struggle.

Line 70:

一時會聚如再生，牽衣訴昔以難當。
To be able to gather together was like being born again. We grabbed at each other's clothes and remembered old times for as long as we could.

Line 67: Eldest sister-in-law 孟嫂 was last mentioned in Line 12 of this text, when she left the Zhu household after the death of her husband. Now she “has knowledge 有知” which I translate contextually as “learned of my whereabouts.” Her two children have survived (though her oldest child, a son, died in the plague and was buried with his father) and would now be about the same age as Li Wenzhong. So Zhu Yuanzhang has now been reunited with two nephews and a niece. The timing of these reunions was likely due to Zhu's spreading fame in the Huai River valley for having captured a relatively significant city like Chuzhou.

Line 68: As explained in lines 19-21 above, Zhu Yuanzhang and his second-oldest brother survived the plague strike of 1344, but were forced apart during the famine that followed. It appears that Zhu has received news that Second Brother died during his search for food. The widow mentioned here never made it to Chuzhou and probably died not long after Second Brother. The imperial cemetery at Fengyang is said to contain the bodies of Second Brother, his widow and young son, but I wonder if their remains could truly have been located in the wilderness – to say nothing of the turmoil of that era. Zhu is clearly grieving their bitter fate.

Line 69: “North and south 南北” is used figuratively here to mean “everywhere.” As F.W. Mote explained in a book about 14th century China (see “Sources,” Mote), the Red Turbans of the early 1350s consisted of two wings, one centered on the Huai River region (which included Zhu's base), and the other on the mid Yangzi River valley. Meanwhile, the Yuan imperial army continuously sent forces to suppress all of these pockets of rebellion. Zhu's family was trying to survive through this era of widespread upheaval. “忙忙” (with the alliterative pronunciation of “mang mang”) means “busy/hurried” and also “troubled/anxious.” I have translated it here to mean “a struggle.”

Line 70: This is one of the most emotional lines in the entire text. “Born again 再生” does not have a religious context here. It has the meaning of rejuvenation. 難當 is a phrase that has a meaning of “until we could no longer take it anymore,” which in this context becomes “for as long as we could.” This leaves one with the image of the reunited family staying up late into the night reminiscing, incredulous at having found one another, grieving over those relatives who were not able to join them.

Line 71:

於是家有眷屬，外練兵港。

From then on, my household had relatives in it. Beyond us, my soldiers were well trained and ready.

Line 72:

群雄並驅，飲食不遑。

Our band of heroes galloped off, with no more leisure for dining and drinking.

Line 73:

暫戍和州，東渡大江。

We briefly held Hezhou before heading east to cross the great river.



The Red Turban commander Guo Zixing

Line 71: This line marks the transition from an extended description of being reunited with family, to Zhu's military exploits. The second half of the phrase, "my soldiers were well trained and ready 外練兵港" is literally "exterior trained, weapons sharpened." The word "exterior 外" indicates the physical body being strong and ready for battle, but also refers to Zhu's switch from talking about his interior family life to the external world his troops must now face.

Line 72: "Leisure for dining and drinking 飲食不遑" does not mean his soldiers are going on a fast because the next few lines cover a period of many months. Instead, he means no more banquets and entertaining, and no turning back.

Line 73: Hezhou, known today as Hexian 和县, is located south of Chuzhou and closer to the Yangzi River. The word "戍" means "guard" or "defend," but in this case I translated it as "held." The Red Turbans took control of Hezhou in early 1355, and Zhu was given command of the garrison. According to Wu Han, it was at Hezhou that Zhu "went from captain to commander, from leading a few thousand men as a minor officer to heading an entire garrison." Zhu used Hezhou as a base from which to prepare for the river crossing, which took place that summer. His ultimate goal of Nanjing lay on the other side of the river, but the Yangzi at this point is about two miles wide. Bringing an army across it was no easy feat.

Line 74:

首撫姑孰，禮儀是尚。

Once across, we first claimed Gushu, where we gave precedence to ceremonies and propriety.

Line 75:

遂定事業，四守關防。

Thereupon resolving on our purpose, we secured our base.

Line 76:

礪兵抹馬，靜看頡頏。

My soldiers sharpened their weapons and fed their horses and we soberly assessed our rivals.

Line 74: According to Wang Jianying, Gushu was a key river crossing point, and guarded the southwestern approach to Nanjing. The city is known today as Dangtu 当涂 in Anhui Province. Once Zhu made it across the river (which required joining forces with a rebel fleet and fierce battles with imperial troops), Confucian scholars began to pay attention to the new Red Turban leader. We can see that Zhu is careful to point out that he observed the proper (i.e. Confucian) rituals when he entered this city. The respected local scholar Tao An 陶安 and his elderly teacher Li Xi 李習 “led a group of local dignitaries to greet the victor in his camp. Tao was allegedly so impressed by the appearance of the future emperor that he said to his companions, ‘He is no ordinary man; we have found our true lord.’ In a subsequent conversation he praised Zhu for having forsworn the rapacious behavior of other militarists, and encouraged him in his ambition to conquer Nanjing...and make it his capital. He pointed out that it had a glorious history as a seat of dynasties and was so situated as to dominate the Yangzi.” (This quote is from Romeyn Taylor’s entry on Tao An in the *Dictionary of Ming Biography*, Volume 2, though I used modern spellings of Chinese words.)

Line 75: This line refers to the conquest of Nanjing, which fell to Zhu on April 10, 1356, and which Zhu transformed into the first capital of the Ming Dynasty. The second half of the phrase translates literally as: “four (sides) protect / gates defend” by which Zhu means that he established a firm defense of all sides of the city walls.

Line 76: “Assessed our rivals 頡頏.” This phrase actually refers to birds and means “to fly up and down,” but it is term for “equally matched rivals.” And Zhu had many at this point. He considered Köke Temür 王保保 to be the most impressive Mongol general on the field. Among the various rebels were the salt smuggler Zhang Shicheng 张士诚, the pirate Fang Guozhen 方国珍, and also Chen Youliang 陈友谅, leader of the Jiangxi/Hubei wing of the Red Turbans.

Line 77:

群雄自為乎聲教，戈矛天下鏗鏘。

My band of heroes looked to spread our fame by brandishing swords and spears across the land.

Line 78:

元綱不振乎彼世祖之法，豪傑何有乎仁良。

The guiding principles of the Yuan could no longer be restored and its leaders did not consult the Founding Ancestor's laws, while the strongmen lacked benevolence.

Line 79:

予乃張皇六師，飛旗角亢。

I thus expanded my six armies but did not fly my banners until the stars indicated an advantage.

Line 80:

勇者效力，智者贊襄。

My brave generals served with strength while my wise strategists supported them.



General Chang Yuchun

Line 77: “Band of heroes 群雄.” This is the same phrase used at the start of Line 72. The last two characters in this line, 鏗鏘, are pronounced “keng-qiang” which offers the onomatopoeic sound of clanging weapons.

Line 78: The word 綱 means a guide-rope, or the “net to which all other strings are attached” (see Kroll’s Dictionary), used here to mean “guiding principles.” Wang Jianying says that Zhu is referring here to the writings of Köke Temür and others who cited the internal strife and discord within the Yuan court as a reason for its loss of the Mandate. The Founding Ancestor 世祖 of the Yuan Dynasty was Kublai Khan, a grandson of Genghis Khan. The “strongmen” refers to Red Turbans like Chen Youliang, who is said to have assassinated his own ruler (Xu Shouhui 徐壽輝) in an act of usurpation.

Line 79: According to Wang Jianying, 張皇 means “expanded,” and 六師 refers figuratively to the six armies of the ancient and renowned King Zhao. “角” and “亢” are the names of the first and second of the 28 constellations in Chinese cosmology, and Wang says the second half of this phrase indicates that Zhu studied the stars and took the attitude of “soberly assessing our rivals” (see Line 76) to choose the most auspicious moment to contend for the kingdom.

Line 80: Zhu’s most famous generals included Xu Da 徐達 (1332-1385), Chang Yuchun 常遇春 (1330-1369) and Tang He 湯和 (1326-1395). His chief strategists were Liu Ji 劉基 (1311-1375) and Song Lian 宋濂 (1310-1381).

Though the world be in turmoil,
the mind should stay disciplined.

世隨亂而心則治也

-Song Lian

Line 81:

親征荊楚，將平湖湘。

I led a campaign into Jingchu and with my generals pacified the Huxiang region;

Line 82:

三苗盡服，廣海入疆。

To the south the three tribes of the Miao obeyed and the coastal region became part of our territory.

Line 83:

命大將軍東平乎吳越，齊魯耀乎旌幢。

I sent my leading general to pacify the regions of Wu and Yue, while the lands of Qi and Lu were decorated with my banners and streamers.

Line 81 and 82: These two lines can be taken together as a statement of how Zhu pacified the south of China. Wang Jianying points out that the sequence is a bit off and overlaps with the next few lines, but basically this refer to the battles, and ultimate victories over Chen Youliang to the west, over Fang Guozhen along the coast to the east, and against various other warlords to the south and west. “Jingchu,” is another name for the Three Kingdoms era State of Chu, which dominated southern China in ancient times. This region includes Lake Poyang 鄱陽湖 in Jiangxi, where Zhu defeated Chen (who was killed by an arrow) in a major naval battle in 1363. “Huxiang” refers to the Xiang River 湘江 in Hunan Province. According to Wang, the “three Miao” reference is not about specific ethnic tribes but rather a statement that Zhu’s armies had taken control of the Southwest. It may also refer to the three Miao generals who served under Zhu’s theater commander, Hu Dahai. These three generals (Jiang Ying, Liu Zhen, and Li Fu) rebelled in 1362 in Zhejiang Province, cutting off Commander Hu’s head and also killing Hu’s son before running off to join Zhu’s rival, Zhang Shicheng. Ming scholar Edward Dreyer said the aftermath of this rebellion marked a low point for Zhu Yuanzhang, though “he did not lose his nerve even in this crisis.” In fact, he regrouped and, as Zhu states in Line 81, he led his armies toward Nanchang for an all-out war with Chen Youliang, which Zhu won. Dreyer explains the significance of this key moment: “The generals could no longer defy his orders openly, and his power to distribute captured troops among his commanders and to assign commands in the newly conquered territories gave him the means to assert collective discipline for the first time. The military victory in the P’oyang campaign is thus the critical event that made the founding of the Ming empire possible.” (Dreyer, page 52)

Line 83: The “leading general” was Xu Da, and this contrasts to the start of Line 81, in which Zhu personally led his troops. As Wang Jianying notes, after the Poyang campaign victory, Zhu no longer needed to lead military expeditions, but instead could delegate this to his top generals. Wu, Yue, Qi and Lu are all the names of ancient kingdoms along the east coast of China.

Line 84:

西有乎伊洛嶠函，地險河湟。

To the west we claimed the strategic Henan region from the Yiluo River to the Xiaohan range.

Line 85:

入胡都而市不易肆，
虎臣露鋒刃而燦若星鋌。

My armies entered the Mongol capital and the markets did not fall into chaos, while the brave officials came forward to reveal their sharp skills and shining qualities.

Line 86:

已而長驅乎井陘，河山之內外，民庶成仰。

My forces then pushed on through the Jingxing Pass; within and beyond the rivers and mountains the multitudes were respectful.

Line 87:

關中即定，市巷笙簧。

Within the Hangu Pass, the central plain was stable, so that joyful music could be heard in the markets and lanes.

Line 84: This line continues the description of the conquered territories, looking west from Zhu's capital city of Nanjing. Yi and Luo are river names, tributaries of the Yellow River and connected to each other. This is also a reference to the Kaifeng 開封 region, the former capital of the Song Dynasty. Further to the west, Mount Xiao marks the historical border between Henan and Shanxi provinces. Han refers to the strategic Hangu Pass 函谷關, and so this region is also known as Xiaohan.

Line 85: Zhu uses a derogatory term here for the Mongols. “胡” indicates barbarians from the north, and has the meaning of “uncouth.” The capital referred to is Dadu, known today as Beijing (which Kublai Khan had proclaimed as his capital seat shortly after establishing the Yuan Dynasty in 1271). After defeating Chen Youliang at Lake Poyang in 1363, and capturing Zhang Shicheng in Suzhou in the fall of 1367, Zhu sent General Xu Da north to end the Yuan regime. Meanwhile, Zhu founded his new Ming Dynasty in the winter of 1368. The last Yuan emperor, Toghon Temür, fled Beijing in autumn of that year. The phrase 市不易肆, quotes the official Ming biography of Xu Da and literally reads “markets/not/change to/havoc.” After the Ming forces secured the city, a group of former Yuan officials presented themselves to General Xu, and offered their services to the Ming. The general sent these officials south to Nanjing, where Zhu warmly received them. Among this group was Wei Su, the retired court historian who wrote the original (and rejected) version of this text. (See the annotations for the fourth line of the introduction above.)

Lines 86-87: These lines both refer to mountain passes that were famed throughout Chinese history for their military significance. The Hangu Pass (reference above in the notes to Line 84) on the Yellow River was the defensive shield needed to protect the ancient capital city of Luoyang from invasions by Central Asians. The Jingxing Pass is located in Hebei Province along the Taihang Mountains, and guarded a key commercial road for transporting coal and other products. According to Wang Jianying, “within and beyond the rivers and mountains” refers to the area inside the Yellow River and beyond the Taihang Mountains, which is the modern province of Shanxi.

Line 88:

玄菟樂浪以歸版籍，南藩十有三國而來王。

The Xuantu and Lelang Commanderies returned to our domain, while 13 vassal states of the south sent tributaries to court.

Line 89:

倚金陵而定鼎，托虎踞而儀鳳凰。

I settled on Jinling as the dynastic capital, trusting its crouching tiger and performing rites to my phoenix.

Line 90:

天塹星高而月輝滄海，
鐘山鎮岳而巒接乎銀潢。

The stars are high above the Yangzi and the moon shines bright over the blue sea, while the peaks in the Purple Mountain range reach to the Milky Way.



Pathway along Purple Mountain, Nanjing.

Line 88: The text now turns from China's internal struggles to external recognition of the new dynasty. Xuantu and Lelang were two of the "Four Commandaries," or Chinese colonies located in what is now the region of North Korea and the Liaodong Peninsula. The Ming histories list Champa, Annam (both now part of Vietnam), Java and other Indonesian Islands, Cambodia, and other kingdoms in Southeast Asia sending tribute missions soon after the Ming founding.

Line 89: As Edward Farmer has described in his important book on the topic, Zhu struggled to decide on a dynastic capital. "The matter of finding a capital for the new regime remained unsettled for more than a decade after the founding when the decision was made to remain Nanjing," Farmer notes. The Song Dynasty capital of Kaifeng and Zhu's birthplace of Haozhou were both contenders. However, in 1374 Zhu made his decision, writing (as translated by Farmer) from Nanjing that, "I was born poor and insignificant, but thanks to changes in world conditions, I created a base here." Nanjing has had many names over its long history, and in Line 89, Zhu is using an old and prestigious term, rather than Jiqing Circuit 集慶路, which the Mongols called it, or even Yingtian 應天 (Answering Heaven), the name Zhu used for his base as soon as he captured it. The association of Nanjing with crouching tigers (and coiling dragons) dates to the Three Kingdoms era, when the famous military strategist Zhuge Liang (181-234) considered its topography to have these characteristics. Wang Jianying considers "phoenix" to be a reference to Fengyang, which (as noted in the annotations to Line 1) means "South Side of Phoenix Mountain," and was the name Zhu gave to his birthplace. Sounds like he is still feeling a bit guilty for not having made Fengyang his capital.

Line 90: The reference to the Yangzi, China's longest river, is a poetic one: "天塹" or "Heaven's Moat." Zhu uses the old name, 鐘山, or Bell Mountain for Nanjing's most famous peak. I have gone with the better-known "Purple Mountain" name used today.

Line 91:

欲厚陵之微葬，
卜者乃曰：不可，而地且臧。

I desired a more lavish tomb for the modest graves, but the one who divined said that this could not happen, because the burial location was auspicious.

Line 92:

於是祀事之禮已定，每精潔乎蒸嘗。

Therefore the sacrificial duties of performing rituals were established, and each spirit was kept pure through the seasonal offerings.

Line 93:

惟劬勞罔極之恩難報，勒石銘於皇堂。

Thinking of my parents' toil and suffering, I know I can never repay their limitless kindness, I can only carve into stone the inscription for this imperial hall.



Statue in the Huangling Spirit Way, Fengyang.

Line 91: The text concludes with a discussion of the gravesite in Fengyang. As explained above in the note for Line 10, Zhu's parents were buried during a rainstorm, when his family was in desperate circumstances. Naturally, once he rose to power, Zhu wanted a fancier tomb. “厚” means “thick” or “lavish” and is the opposite of “微” which can mean “tiny” or “imperceptible,” but also has the meaning I use here of “modest” or even “hidden.” (See Kroll's dictionary for more on these terms.) Zhu used the same verb for “divined” as in Lines 49 and 51, so perhaps he (or his designate) is once again tossing shells. The burial site was to remain undisturbed, though an elaborate complex was then built around this royal cemetery.

Line 92: Zhu designated 20 families as hereditary custodians of the Fengyang imperial tomb site. He also specified various stone statues to form an ornate Spirit Way. “蒸” is the winter and “嘗” the autumn sacrifice to the ancestors. Wang Jianying says the former consists of an animal sacrifice, and the latter millet. The two terms together refer to the seasonal offerings.

Line 93: The first half of this line is a rephrasing of stanzas in the ancient Book of Odes (“Liao E 蓼莪” from the Decade of Xiao Min in the Minor Odes section). Here is the translation by James Legge (1815-1897):

哀哀父母、生我劬勞。

Alas! alas! my parents,
With what toil and suffering ye gave me birth!

...

欲報之德、昊天罔極。

If I would return your kindness,
It is like great Heaven, illimitable.

Line 94:

世世承運而務德，必仿佛於殷商。

If we rule with virtue, then generation after generation, this dynasty will last as long as the Yin-Shang era.

Line 95:

淚筆以述難，諭嗣以撫昌。

With tears and a brush I write out my difficulties and instruct my heirs to nurture prosperity.

Line 96:

稽首再拜，願時時而來饗。

I bow down, and bow down again, desiring that for time everlasting my parents will receive ritual offerings here.

Dateline:

洪武十一年，歲次戊午，七月吉日建。

Erected on an auspicious day in the seventh month in the 11th year of the Hongwu Era.

Line 94: The Yin-Shang era is said to have been established in 1600 BCE, and to have been ended by the Zhou conquest in 1046, and thus lasted over 500 years. Zhu is hoping that his own dynasty will have this kind of longevity, and be known for its morality. This line translates directly as something like: “generation and generation/ pass/one after another/and then/rule/virtue, must/as if/to/Yin-Shang.”

Line 95: The first two characters used in this line, “tears” and “brush,” could mean that tears were falling onto his calligraphy brush, or that his brush was dripping tears onto the paper. Zhu is writing with great emotion and hoping that his biography contains instructive lessons for posterity.

Line 96: Turning from his hopes for the future, Zhu ends this text as a filial son, bowing in gratitude to the sacrifice of his parents, and hoping that the imperial tomb complex he has established in their honor will last forever.

Dateline: According to the Gregorian calendar, the stele was erected in August 1378.

Why does this text matter?

(Part 1 – The Grieving Son)

It is an old text that is virtually unknown in English. So why bother reading the *Imperial Tomb Tablet of the Great Ming*?

My answer is that it offers a rare insight into the anguished heart of a remarkable man, the only peasant who founded a dynasty in imperial China.

And I think anyone who has a family should take a look at these words, because this is a speech by a son standing with his back to his parents' graves and his face toward posterity, trying to express how his life has given meaning to his surname. What would you say if faced with such a task?

One of the remarkable aspects of this text, known as the *Imperial Tomb Tablet*, is what it does not do: Zhu Yuanzhang, the founding emperor of the Ming Dynasty, who ruled the Celestial Kingdom for 30 years after ascending the Dragon Throne in 1368, does not dwell on his military exploits. The first third of this 96-line text gives no indication of the battles won or the armies defeated. This disinterest in bragging is made clear from the opening line, when Zhu begins by describing himself first as a filial son, and second as an emperor. The only other times when he refers to his royal status, is when he describes his parents as “imperial,” though that was a posthumous title for them.

As is mentioned in the annotation, this text is a second draft. The first was composed by Wei Su, a respected Confucian scholar, and written in consultation with the emperor soon after the dynasty was founded, but Zhu Yuanzhang came to dislike it. He decided to write a new version himself, and his text still stands today, carved into stone and erected at the site of his parents' burial.

So what is different? Zhu's final draft is far more personal, more emotional, and more tragic:

- Where Wei Su wrote, “In the Jiashen year, the Imperial Father and Imperial Mother Chen both passed away,” Zhu ignored the date and mourned, “All at once, calamities gripped the land and my family met with disaster. My imperial father had reached the age of 64, and my imperial mother 59, when they perished.”
- Wei Su noted politely that the poor family had no burial plot, while Zhu angrily named his landlord, Liu De, as a bad person who “would not attend to our needs, carrying on with his arrogant shouting” until the landlord's elder brother came to the family's rescue with the offer of a final resting place.
- Wei Su indicated that the orphaned young man faced an uncertain future, but Zhu cried out “what did I have but fear to the point of madness?”

Clearly, the emperor wanted his descendants to understand the tragedy that he had managed to survive, but that claimed his parents and eldest brother. Moreover, he wanted to express gratitude for those who helped him – he stresses the kind landlord’s brother, and also his neighbor Old Mother Wang, who got him admitted to the nearby temple so that he would not starve to death. Most touching is his description of the sacrifice made by his one surviving brother, who saw that there was only enough food to support one, and so left the village to roam the countryside and leave Zhu with all that remained. “My brother wept for me, and I grieved for my brother; under the bright sun in Heaven, our sorrow rent our hearts.”

It is the emperor’s willingness to face his raw emotions that makes this text so unusual, and so gripping. And because this particular struggling orphan went on to become the ruler of China, the story of his family provides an extraordinary insight into the world of 14th century peasants.

For me, though, the most important reason to read this text, is that Zhu’s words reach across time and place to offer insight into what makes us human – the struggle to survive, the compassion of friends and family, the need to write it all down for future generations to contemplate.

(Part 2 – The Monk Years)

Zhu Yuanzhang is famous as the peasant-turned-rebel who defeated the Mongols and founded the Ming Dynasty in 1368. However, prior to tying on a red turban and joining the rebellion, Zhu spent eight formative years as a Buddhist monk. These years are the focus of the middle third of the *Imperial Tomb Tablet*. Understanding how the Ming founder’s religious beliefs guided his path to the throne is another reason why this text matters.

To recap: after losing his entire family to a plague strike and its aftermath, the orphaned 16-year-old Zhu would have hardly looked like a future emperor. In fact, he ranks as China’s most unlikely dynastic founder. Old Mother Wang, a family friend, advised him to turn to the last refuge of the desperate – the local temple. Unfortunately, the famine, drought and disease ravaging the village had also left the temple depleted and struggling. Without any grain to feed its monks, the abbot sent Zhu to wander the countryside and beg for alms. After a few weeks of temple training, he was sent away and spent the next three years “floating like a cloud” through the Dabie Mountains and the region between the Huai and Yellow Rivers, in today’s provinces of Anhui and Henan. And thus his true education began.

It is interesting that almost the entire first third of the *Imperial Tomb Tablet* text is focused on the repercussions of a single incident: the plague deaths of spring 1344. Calamities grip the land in Line 3 and Zhu’s parents die in Line 4. The next 17 lines are an extended portrayal of how Zhu Yuanzhang and his one remaining brother struggled to find a place to bury all their dead and were forced to separate to avoid starvation. Which is when Old Mother Wang steps in, and which brings us to the text’s middle third, the Buddhist years.

As Zhu is wandering through the wilderness, he is lonely and still grieving for his parents, but he is also becoming politically aware. “At that time, bandits arose along the Yangzi and the Huai

rivers and the lives of the people became tumultuous,” he writes. He returns to his home temple and spends a few more years there, “a time when strongmen were once again stirring things up.”

The Red Turban rebellion finally reaches Zhu in his temple sanctuary when the rebels capture the nearby walled city of Haozhou 濠州.

If the first third of the *Imperial Tomb Text* is about the death of his parents, the second third is centered on Zhu’s prayer seeking guidance as to whether he should leave the fold and join the rebels in Haozhou. Over the course of 10 lines (43-52), Zhu vacillates and turns to the Qielan Buddha, the guardian god of his temple, to divine his path. Revealing his own peasant upbringing, Zhu resorts to a folk method – tossing divining shells – to determine his destiny. The divine answer is, of course, that the time has come for Zhu to set aside the monastic life and head to Haozhou.

Old Mother Wang had packed her basket of offerings (sweet wine and incense) to entice the abbot to accept a new novice in the fall of 1344. Zhu tossed his divining shells in the spring of 1352. This eight-year interregnum served as the bridge between Zhu’s life as a peasant and his life as a soldier, which culminated in his assumption of the Dragon Throne. In this text, Zhu does not elaborate on what he learned in the Buddha halls, and he stresses his continuing grief for his parents and his uprooted spirit, but he also does not shy from the fact that he lived as a monk. “I underwent the Buddhist rites and entered the monk’s world,” he states clearly. And he did not leave the temple walls until he received permission to do so from the Qielan Buddha. Nor did he leave his religious order because he considered it morally inferior – in fact, his initial impression of the Red Turban rebels he encountered inside Haozhou drew his contempt. “I had to deal with fools day and night and led a military life.” What he seems to want to make clear is that he went to join the Red Turbans because he had to – it was his destiny.

In this middle section of the *Imperial Tomb Tablet*, Zhu thus is stressing to posterity that he was a devout Buddhist before he was a soldier, and that his transformation into a military leader had divine backing. Zhu reveals his own understanding, and seeks to influence our perceptions as his readers, about his unlikely rise to unimaginable power.

(Part 3 – The Filial Founder)

It is interesting that the only time the word 明 is used in this text is in the introduction, when Zhu writes that his essay is meant to “describe the hardships and difficulties, while **clarifying** the advances and good fortune 述艱難，明昌運。” He does not mention that 明, which means “bright” and “clear,” is also the Chinese character he selected as the name for his dynasty, the Ming.

Nor does Zhu say that he was a Red Turban – the only hint of his allegiance to this famous rebellion is his description of his banners as red in Line 62. He clearly did not see himself – or did not wish to be remembered – as a rebel. Rather, Zhu carefully portrays his rise to power as part of the natural progression of China’s great dynastic and military tradition. This last third of

the text is larded with references to ancient China – using the grand old names of former dynastic capitals, quoting the military strategist Zhuge Liang (Line 89), citing the old mountain passes (scenes of heroic battles of yore), deriding the Mongols as northern barbarians (Line 85) and professing hope that his own dynasty will last as long as the ancient era of Yin-Shang. He observes proper rituals (Line 74), does not tolerate chaos (Line 85), and thus wins the people’s respect (line 86). He professes admiration for the laws set down by Kublai Khan, the founder of the Yuan Dynasty (Line 78), but scorns the Yuan line for neglecting their “guiding principles.” Zhu is no rebel. In this text, he is the only one capable of restoring righteous rule to the Middle Kingdom.

However, while this last third of the *Imperial Tomb Tablet* has the most to say about Zhu’s military ascent to the Dragon Throne, it also lingers over his family. The longest single image of these last 36 lines is the poignant description of how his growing fame allowed his scattered family to learn of his whereabouts. He spends a full eight lines describing his continuing grief for the sisters and brothers he lost to the plague, and his soaring joy at being reunited with two nephews and a niece. His elder sister may have died, but her son could look at the face of Zhu Yuanzhang, and “it was as if he was looking at his mother.” Zhu sets family unity on par here with bringing peace to the land.

And he concludes exactly as he began: focused on the hardships that his parents had to endure and his debt to them as a filial son. Zhu wrote the Imperial Tomb Tablet text “in order to describe the hardships and difficulties,” and he ends it on his knees and wiping away tears as “I write out my difficulties and instruct my heirs to nurture prosperity.”

This remarkable essay is difficult to translate into English. Classical Chinese is often highly ambiguous and laden with allusions. Modern English is neither. I am sure there is much to contest in my translation. However, as time went on and I kept making changes, I started to worry that I would never feel finished this project. I resolved to pick the English words that made sense to me and set them down – and resist the temptation to parenthesize and prevaricate because the original author was making a bold statement and wanted to be heard.

Thus, it is my fervent hope that this remarkable story of how Zhu Yuanzhang rose to power and founded the Ming Dynasty becomes better known outside of China. My friends in Fengyang who took me to stand before the *Imperial Tomb Tablet* stress that Zhu Yuanzhang became such an important emperor because he suffered so much tragedy and loss in his youth. This experience tempered him and drove him forward. He certainly portrays his story along such lines. If you find in this text words to contemplate, and if it makes you think about the role of a family, the repercussions of suffering tragic losses, and the best way to unite a divided land, then this text will have mattered. And that is all that Zhu Yuanzhang wanted.

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