

Foreword

Many years ago while working on my dissertation, I happened upon a book sale in the Gest Library, Princeton University. The nice quality of one reprinted late Ming work caught my eye, although the author's name, Dong Fen, did not ring a bell. I purchased the book but put it away until after I should finish my study of late Ming thought.

Later when I took up the book, some tantalizing information in Dong Fen's essays and correspondence drew my attention. A protest against him and the local government's investigation into his family's wrongdoings intrigued me. His successful counterattack that derailed the inquiry was all the more striking. I started digging into his story and harvested a good crop of evidence. Although rarely mentioned by modern historians except for one article about the protest, Dong Fen had been an important player in the corridors of power at the peak of his career. He wielded influence through his associates after he left office. He also excelled in amassing a vast fortune and established his family as one of the richest in the region traditionally known as the Six Prefectures (Changzhou, Suzhou, Songjiang, Huzhou, Jiaxing, and Hangzhou), a region that was the economic and cultural heartland of Ming China. I wrote an article on Dong Fen to wrap up what I thought would be a small project, after which I intended to refocus my interest on late Ming thought.

As I studied him, however, I stumbled across evidence bearing on imperial court politics. Dong Fen's associates, high ranking officials, were deeply embroiled in the brewing political crisis in the capital during the decade of 1583–93. They were confronted by a strong opposition within the government whose leading members also came from the Six Prefectures. These groups clashed on policy issues and waged bitter factional struggles. In research and writing an article about that

decade which heralded the onset of the Ming dynastic crisis, I discovered leads that revealed a great deal about the complicated ties between the central government and the region. It was becoming clear that this research on Dong Fen and his associates was inviting me to look more broadly at the region's social and cultural change during the period of 1500–1644.

Thereupon, I entered a field already tilled by many historians. In the shadow of their studies, what remained to do? I found that none of these works had studied the region as a whole. To bridge this gap seemed a worthwhile endeavor. Moreover, viewed through this wider regional lens, old questions might take on new meanings and thus open up the possibility of further inquiry and explanation.

In fact, Dong Fen's web of contacts had already ushered me into the world of the region's prominent literati. As I pored over a copious body of contemporary writings, a much more complex and larger horizon came into view. Careful study of these writings reveals forces that facilitated and influenced social and cultural change. Notably, commercialization drew scholars into the market, underwrote the social aspirations of the merchant class, and provided scholar-officials an opportunity to amass wealth. Individuals from these various social backgrounds collaborated, competed and disputed, as their interests converged and diverged. Tracing their activities also opened a door to a world of more obscure actors. Bondsmen, for example, served as agents for the rich and powerful. Forgers, pettifoggers and rumor mongers, often the dregs of the educated class, sought opportunities to catch their prey. Student agitators fanned the flames of public outrage against the great families. Further still, contemporary writers were keenly aware of the paradoxical impact that external forces had on their society. The region's political ties with the state as well as commercial ties with outside markets helped it thrive in good times and exacerbated its distress in crisis.

The book aims to work all of these threads into a narrative about the troubled vitality of the Six Prefectures during this period. It is written as an attempt to let the people of the past speak for themselves, to tell their stories on their terms, with a minimum of theorizing, and to recapture some of the flavor of the region's richly textured social and cultural life.

No historian writes alone. The work of generations of great scholars has inspired me to follow in their footsteps. In particular, I am forever grateful for the intellectual apprenticeship I received from Yu Yingshi, Willard Peterson and Andrew Plaks at Princeton University. Their scholarship, encouragement, guidance and help gave me the basis upon which I set out to research and write this book. I wish to thank Pierre-Étienne Will, Tu Wei-ming, Martin C. Collcutt, Martin Heijdra, and Haruko Wakabayashi who have advised me and helped me most generously at the various stages of the process. I feel fortunate to have been given access to the Gest Library, Harvard-Yenching Library, Japan's Naikaku Bunko, and China's Beijing Library and Shanghai Library where, with the generous help of the librarians, I dived into archives, official records and literati works. Ultimately, this book owes most to Professor Craig Dietrich. Over these years he has guided and assisted me in countless ways as a critical reader, insightful adviser and excellent editor. I am deeply indebted to him. My gratitude also goes to my siblings for their love and help with illustrations and maps, to Lu Jingqing, the chairman of Hangzhou's Xiling Yinshe 西泠印社, for providing me with the Ming images, and to Editor Minlei Ye, Editor Agnes Chan, Editor Joyce Liu, and Editor Brian Yu for their professionalism and kindness.