

Internal Assessment in History

Zhu Di's Ascension to Power

Was criticism of Zhu Di's ascension to power due to an alleged crisis of legitimacy or his actions and policies following his rise?

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Part A: Identification and Evaluation of Sources

Was criticism of Zhu Di's ascension to power due to an alleged crisis of legitimacy or his actions and policies following his rise?

Zhu Di was one of the greatest rulers in Chinese history. His reign marked an age of power and prosperity surpassing even the Han and Tang Dynasties¹. Yet the controversy regarding his ascension to power is as great as his accomplishments, with many from Fang Xiao Ru to Tan Qian criticizing his “illegitimate” ascension to power². This is despite very little antagonistic sentiment towards rulers such as Li Shi Min who rose from similar circumstances³. Researchers such as Fu Xiao Fan and Li Jie Fei point towards the fact that Li made concessions to his former opponents, while Zhu Di was far more decisive in clearing reactionary forces from the Jian Wen Court⁴. From the Tai Zong Shi Lu which documents the entirety of the Jing Nan Campaign and documents from Hong Wu Era that Zhu Di drew from for legitimacy, one can examine whether criticism of Zhu Di was truly from his alleged illegitimacy or rather actions and policies later on.

Primary Source: Zhang, Fu., Jian, Yi., and Xia, Yuan Ji. Tai Zong Shi Lu. Translated by Julien Liang. Completed in Xuan De Era, China: January, 1430.

The Tai Zong Shi Lu was a collection of records commissioned by Zhu Gao Chi to document the life and actions of Zhu Di, with the first nine chapters devoted to his early life and the Jing Nan Campaign. The foremost value of the source lies in its origin as one of the only records of Zhu Di written around his time, meaning the authors had access to the greatest range of sources that would otherwise be lost. Another value lies in the content being written in annals format, allowing for continuous examination of Zhu Di chronologically rather than from abstract themes. However, the purpose of the source to portray

¹ Zhang, Ting Yu. *Ming Shi: Annals of Cheng Zu*. Translated by Julien Liang. Completed in Qian Long Era: China, 1739.

² Tan, Qian. *Guo Que*. Translated by Julien Liang. Last edited in Yong Li Era, China: 1658. Published by Bei Jing Gu Ji Chu Ban She: 1958.

³ Li Shi Min killed his two brothers Li Jian Cheng and Li Yuan Ji during the Xuan Wu Gate Coup, later forcing his father to step down and becoming emperor himself.

⁴ Xia, Xie. *Ming Tong Jian*. Translated by Julien Liang. Completed in Yong Li Era: China, 1664.

Zhu Di in a positive manner (for his successors would be legitimized by association) may provide limitations to its reliability.

Secondary Source: Tan, Qian. Guo Que. Translated by Julien Liang. Last edited in Yong Li Era, China: 1658. Published by Bei Jing Gu Ji Chu Ban She: 1958.

Guo Que is an unofficial history compiled by Tan Qian with the purpose of documenting an unaltered history of the Ming Dynasty. Written during the Yong Li Era when China was under Manchu occupation, the priceless value of the source lies in its origin as a private collection, meaning it was not subject to the censorship pervasive throughout the Qing Dynasty. Another value is that, unlike official Ming records, the content of Guo Que does not refrain from sensitive topics or events, allowing for an honest account of Zhu Di and the Jing Nan Campaign. However, the source is limited by the contradictions in content that appear in earlier passages which may degrade the reliability of the source.

The scope of this investigation ranges from the Jing Nan Campaign to the end of the Yong Le Era in 1424 and examines key moments in Zhu Di's rule to assess the credibility of narratives that portray him in negative terms. Events discussed include:

- The Jing Nan Campaign (8 August 1399 to 13 July 1402)
- The death of Fang Xiao Ru (1402)
- Relocation of the capital to Bei Jing

After a careful assessment of scholarship on Zhu Di compared to the historical evidence, the investigation will conclude that although the legitimacy of Zhu Di's rise to power may be questioned in light of the methods he used, the true cause for the enduring criticism of his rule lies mainly in his actions and policies that followed.

Part B: Investigation

The Jing Nan Campaign

In the face of Zhu Yun Wen's threat, Zhu Di was left with no choice but to fight back. He killed the officials sent by Zhu Yun Wen to spy on him⁵ and controlled Bei Ping on the same day⁶. This marked the beginning of the Jing Nan Campaign, invoking the Legal Dictates of the Huang Ming Zu Xun that stated "if the court has no righteous officials ... regional kings shall muster troops to resolve the crisis of the nation"⁷. This would mark the beginning of Zhu Di's rise to power, and where accusations of illegitimacy begin.

According to Tan Qian, Zhu Di's actions were upon a misguided instinct of survival that made him fickle. In his book *Guo Que*, Tan argues that Zhu Di's use of force was merely to be rid of the trouble that came upon his family, allowing himself to be manipulated by others⁸ (most likely referring to Yao Guang Xiao). Although this narrative may seem plausible at first, Zhu Di's action as an emperor are in no way reflective of an easily manipulated individual⁹.

Mao Pei Qi indicates that Zhu Di had greater ambitions from the beginning¹⁰. In highlighting the special relation between Yao Guang Xiao and Zhu Di, Mao invokes an anecdote where Yao offered Zhu Di a "white hat"¹¹ which he accepted. Even the thought of becoming emperor would have been considered treasonous, not to mention such an obvious suggestion. The fact that Zhu Di tolerated and even encouraged individuals such as Yao demonstrate his greater aspirations. However, in focusing on intent alone Mao overlooks whether such occurrences were mere whims or truly indicative of Zhu Di's ambitions.

⁵ Xia, Xie. *Ming Tong Jian*. Translated by Julien Liang. Completed in Yong Li Era: China, 1664.

⁶ Zhang, Fu., Jian, Yi., and Xia, Yuan Ji. *Tai Zong Shi Lu*. Translated by Julien Liang. Completed in Xuan De Era, China: January, 1430.

⁷ Zhu, Yuan Zhang. *Huang Ming Zu Xun*. Translated by Julien Liang. Hong Wu Era, China: September, 1395.

⁸ Tan, Qian. *Guo Que*. Translated by Julien Liang. Last edited in Yong Li Era, China: 1658. Published by Bei Jing Gu Ji Chu Ban She: 1958.

⁹ Zhang, Ting Yu. *Ming Shi*. Translated by Julien Liang. Completed in Qian Long Era: China, 1739.

¹⁰ Mao, Pei Qi. *Seventeen Ming Mysteries*. Translated by Julien Liang. Lecture Room, CCTV-10. 2013.

¹¹ The character white (白) upon king (王) formed the first character of emperor (皇), implying greater ambitions.

Although Zhu Di may have had ambitions for the throne, he was not willing to gamble his pre-existing interests unless given no choice. When it became evident that Zhu Yun Wen was not going to leave him untouched, Zhu Di knew that conflict was unavoidable. While he was encouraged in the process by those such as Yao Guang Xiao, such influence was not decisive and Zhu Di would have carried through with the Jing Nan campaign regardless.

The Death of Fang Xiao Ru

Upon entering Nan Jing, Zhu Di politely asked Fang Xiao Ru to draft his inaugural edict. After Fang repeatedly refused and insulted Zhu Di's efforts, he hinted at the execution of his nine kinships. In response, Fang Xiao Ru taunted Zhu Di to execute his ten kinships, to which Zhu Di followed through¹². In a similar vein, Ye Ji records the dialogue having been "What care I [Fang Xiao Ru] have for my nine kinship? And so I [Zhu Di] shall relieve you of your tenth as well¹³." This was crafted by many as an example of Zhu Di's cruelty and justification for negative perception on his rise.

Fu Xiao Fan claims the action was out of anger, suggesting that initially Zhu Di did not intend to kill Fang Xiao Ru, hoping that he could serve in his own court. However, after repeated insults on Fang's part, he surpassed Zhu Di's bottom line, resulting in the bloodshed that followed¹⁴. Fu supports this by citing the courtesy with which Zhu Di initially treated Fang Xiao Ru, despite him being responsible for hindering the Jing Nan Campaign on several occasions and the numerous articles he wrote criticizing Zhu Di. While the evidence cited is accurate, this theory would not be consistent with the mentality Zhu Di exhibits in other events.

Fang Zhi Yuan indicates that Zhu Di faced fierce opposition from the intellectual official class (of senior officials only Yang Rong was willing to help him¹⁵) and needed to establish authority. The rhetoric of Fang Xiao Ru already threatened to undermine Zhu Di's legitimacy, and leaving him unscathed would

¹² Gu, Ying Tai. *Ming Shi Ji Shi Ben Mo*. Translated by Julien Liang. Completed in Yong Li Era: 1658.

¹³ Zhu, Yun Ming. *Ye Ji*. Translated by Julien Liang. Completed in Zheng De Era, China: 1511.

¹⁴ Fu, Xiao Fan. *Ming Mysteries: Disappearance of Jian Wen*. Lecture Room, CCTV-10. June 22, 2015. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tzpBHIdZf7A>

¹⁵ Xia, Xie. *Ming Tong Jian*. Translated by Julien Liang. Completed in Yong Li Era: China, 1664.

set an unacceptable precedent. Fang Zhi Yuan states that for Zhu Di the killing of Fang Xiao Ru was a calculated necessity to consolidate his rule.

When one examines Zhu Di's miracle-like success during the Jing Nan Campaign and his superb statesmanship as an emperor¹⁶, it is evident that he is a pragmatic ruler seldom dictated by personal emotion. He undoubtedly realized the crucial nature of Fang Xiao Ru, and any act against him would have had greater political considerations. Zhu Di hoped Fang Xiao Ru would recognize his legitimacy and convince the remaining officials to do so as well, but the alternative was his death to set an example.

Relocation of the Capital to Bei Jing

Zhu Di's foremost policy pursuit was the relocation of the capital to Bei Jing. This endeavour was completed during the 19th year of Yong Le. Yet after a mere four months, the San Da Dian were destroyed in a fire, reigniting opposition against the relocation of the capital. In response, Zhu Di criticized the shortsightedness of his officials, exclaiming "how could mere scholars understand the intent of great statesmen!"¹⁷ To this day, scholars remained divided regarding the motives behind the relocation of the capital.

According to Li Jie Fei, the primary motivation for Zhu Di was to consolidate his power in the face of remaining regional kings¹⁸. In his book *Long Chuang*, Li points out how following the Jing Nan Campaign, Zhu Di continued the policy of weakening regional kings meant to defend the border and relocating them further inland. This left Zhu Di no choice but to relocate himself and personally defend the frontier of the empire. This line of thought completely ignores the ambitions Zhu Di demonstrated from the expeditions of Zheng He to the Five Northern Campaigns. While consolidation of power may have been considered, it was not the primary motivation.

Mao Pei Qi and Fan Zhi Yuan indicate that Zhu Di was motivated by greater geopolitical considerations. Mao points out that Bei Jing was the only location that could control both China proper

¹⁶ Mao, Ze Dong. *Commenting on Ming History*. Translated by Julien Liang. May 1964.

¹⁷ Zhu, Yi Zun. *Ri Xia Jiu Wen*. Translated by Julien Liang. Completed in Kang Xi Era, 1670.

¹⁸ Li, Jie Fei. *Long Chuang*. Ren Min Wen Xue Chu Ban She. Published January 1, 2013.

and the nomadic plains¹⁹. Fang further indicates how dynasties with an interior capital such as Nan Jing could only become wealthy but not powerful, while dynasties that were both wealthy and powerful set their capital on the boundary between the agricultural and nomadic regions²⁰. By relocating the capital to Bei Jing, Zhu Di was ensuring the creation of a strong, wealthy, and prosperous Ming Empire that could exert its influence across all realms.

In conjunction with Zhu Di's other actions and ambitions, the relocation of the capital to Bei Jing went beyond a mere consolidation of power and was undoubtedly meant to forward the creation of a great empire. Yet throughout this process, the vested interests of much of the ruling class, whose wealth and connections were located in the south, were heavily damaged. This added to the discontent amongst the intellectual official class, resulting in further criticism of Zhu Di.

Conclusion

The Jing Nan Campaign was no more questionable than the actions of Tai Zong Emperors from Tang²¹ and Song²², yet they rarely receive criticism for their actions. It was Zhu Di's actions and policies following his rise that led to the criticism he endures. By executing Fang Xiao Ru, the discontent of the intellectual class against Zhu Di was set in place. To achieve his ambitions and relocate the capital to Bei Jing, the interests of those in the south were fundamentally shaken. Throughout Zhu Di's reign, the pursuit of prosperity for the Ming Empire led those with the power of records to act against him.

¹⁹ Mao, Pei Qi. *Seventeen Ming Mysteries*. Translated by Julien Liang. Lecture Room, CCTV-10. 2013.

²⁰ Fang, Zhi Yuan. 方孝孺舌战朱棣，结果被朱棣灭十族，两人谁对谁错？Bilibili. November 5, 2021. https://www.bilibili.com/video/BV1XQ4y1S7RC?spm_id_from=333.999.0.0

²¹ See footnote 3

²² Zhao Guang Yi succeeded his brother Zhuang Kuang Yin under highly suspicious circumstances.

Part C: Reflection

Historians may encounter a lack of accessible primary source evidence when reconstructing and explaining the past. This was the case for me in pursuing this investigation of a topic over six hundred years detached from the modern-day context. The only relevant record available was the Tai Zong Shi Lu. To compensate, I referenced several secondary source materials from the Qing Dynasty such as Guo Que and Ming Shi which were relatively closer time-wise (Late 16th century).

Still, these were written in classical Chinese, which differs from modern Chinese significantly, adding another layer of complexity. Considerable time was spent interpreting the meaning of characters to understand what the writer truly meant. For example, in Ye Ji, the character “夷” can mean either “eastern barbarian” or “to kill” which required me to draw from the context of the excerpt to determine the proper meaning. While this was a fascinating exercise in source analysis, it required significantly more time than I anticipated.

Moreover, when examining the merit of sources, I realized that although there may be no “absolute truth,” not all sources or versions of events are equal. For example, although Guo Que was written centuries after the fact compared to Tai Zong Shi Lu, I opted in favour of the former in several cases due to its higher willingness to record the truth. In doing so, I treated Guo Que as being of “higher value” when there were significant contradictions in the narrative.

Finally, I also faced the additional challenge in conventional Chinese historiography to prioritize “proper history” to “wild history.” In this case, I realized that there were important limitations inherent in “proper history” (purposeful omissions, revisions for political purposes, etc.) and chose to use “wild history” records such as Ye Ji and Guo Que with equal attention.

This investigation has provided me with valuable experience in addressing challenges that may occur for historians, especially when foreign languages and more ancient time frames are involved. I have also been able to improve my ability to differentiate between the merits of competing sources and linearize them into a more accurate conclusion.

Appendix:

Endnotes - historical records in the original language:

1. 《明史·成祖本纪》：远迈汉唐
2. 《国榷》:谈迁曰：高皇帝在天之灵，歌舞讴思，方切海内，而北平曾不返顾，攔焉举兵，振臂疾呼，用脱家祸，虽茹薇之士，饮血之臣，摇唇鼓吻，终我未谅。
3. N/A
4. 《明通鉴》卷十三：丁丑，杀兵部尚书齐泰、太常寺卿黄子澄、文学博士方孝孺，皆夷其族。
5. 《明通鉴》卷十二：秋，七月，诏至，“逮燕府官属”，于是张昺、谢贵等率诸卫士以兵围府第，……壬申，王称疾愈，御东殿，伏壮士左右及端礼门内，遣人召昺、贵，不至，复遣中使示以所逮姓名，乃至。……一时伏兵尽起，前禽昺、贵，摔葛诚、卢振下殿。王掷杖起曰：“我何病！为若辈奸臣所逼耳。”昺、贵及诚等不屈，皆斩之。
6. 《明太宗实录》卷二：是夜，（张）玉等攻九门，黎明已克其八，惟西直门未下。上令指挥唐云解甲骑马，导从如平时，过西直门，见鬪者，呵之曰：“汝众喧哄，欲何为者？谁令尔为此不义，是自取杀身耳。”众闻云言，皆散，乃尽克九门，遂下令安集城中，人民安堵，诸司官吏视事如故。北平都指挥使俞填走居庸关，马瑄走蓟州]]，宋忠率兵至居庸关，知事不齐，退保怀来，留俞填守居庸。
7. 《皇明祖训·法律》：如朝无正臣，内有奸恶，则亲王训兵待命，天子密诏诸王，统领镇兵讨平之。
8. 《国榷》:谈迁曰：高皇帝在天之灵，歌舞讴思，方切海内，而北平曾不返顾，攔焉举兵，振臂疾呼，用脱家祸，虽茹薇之士，饮血之臣，摇唇鼓吻，终我未谅。
9. 《明史·成祖本纪》：文皇少长习兵，据幽燕形胜之地，乘建文孱弱，长驱内向，奄有四海。即位以后，躬行节俭，水旱朝告夕振，无有壅蔽。知人善任，表里洞达，雄武之略，同符高祖。六师屡出，漠北尘清。至其季年，威德遐被，四方宾服，明命而入贡者殆三十国。幅陨之广，远迈汉、唐。成功骏烈，卓乎盛矣。然而革除之际，倒行逆施，惭德亦曷可掩哉。
10. N/A
11. N/A

12. 《明史纪事本末》（卷18）：“文皇大声曰：‘汝安能遽死。即死，独不顾九族乎？’孝孺曰：‘便十族奈我何！’”声愈厉。文皇大怒，令以刀抉其口两旁至两耳，复锢之狱，大收其朋友门生。每收一人，辄示孝孺，孝孺不一顾，乃尽杀之，然后出孝孺，磔之聚宝门外。孝孺慷慨就戮，为绝命词曰：“天降乱离兮孰知其由，奸臣得计兮谋国用犹。忠臣发愤兮血泪交流，以此殉君兮抑又何求。呜呼哀哉，庶不我尤！”时年四十六。复诏收其妻郑氏，妻与诸子皆先经死。悉燔削方氏墓。初，籍十族，每逮至，辄以示孝孺，孝孺执不从，乃及母族林彦清等、妻族郑原吉等。九族既戮，亦皆不从，乃及朋友门生廖镛、林嘉猷等为一族，并坐，然后诏磔于市，坐死者八百七十三人，谪戍绝徼死者不可胜计。”
13. 祝允明《野记》（卷2）：“文皇既即位，问广孝谁可草诏？广孝以方对，遂召之。数往返，方竟不行，乃强持之入，方披斩袞行哭。既至，令视草，大号，詈不从，强使搦管，掷去，语益厉，曰：‘不过夷我九族耳！’上怒云：‘吾夷汝十族。’左右问何一族？上曰：‘朋友亦族也。’于是尽其九族之命而大搜天下为方友者杀之。”
14. N/A
15. 《明通鉴》卷十三：方燕王之入城也，杨荣迎谒，请曰：“殿下先谒陵乎？先即位乎？”王乃悟。
16. 曰：《明史》我看了最生气。明朝除了明太祖(朱元璋)、明成祖(朱棣)不识字的两个皇帝搞得比较好，明武宗、明英宗还稍好些以外，其余的都不好，尽做坏事。
- 17.
- 18.
19. N/A
20. N/A
21. N/A
22. N/A

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