

Eunuch Versus Historians – The Impossibility of Writing a True Biography of Ma Tang

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Introduction

For most people living under the reign of the Wanli Emperor, a white-haired foreigner dressed in Confucian robes living in the capital Beijing was bound to create curiosity. Equipped with scientific knowledge and intriguing religious concepts, Matteo Ricci was indeed one European, an Italian Jesuit to be specific, who took the spotlight during the late sixteenth century Ming China. He thus had the chance to interact with people of all backgrounds, most of whom were educated officials, and documented these moments in great detail. Among these records, one stood out to reveal the priest's frustrations against a certain individual. The identity of this person is peculiar; he was not only a representative of the emperor but was also a liaison between Ricci and the imperial court. More importantly, he was also a tax eunuch, a castrated servant of the Emperor who was authorized to collect taxes and manage fiscal affairs in a specific locality. His name, presented in Ricci's writing and other historical texts, was Ma Tang 马堂.

What did Ma Tang do to get himself on the wrong side of Ricci? This question would act as a useful starting point for both understanding the past of Ma Tang and recognizing the actions he did that offended the Jesuit. Yet almost in a joking manner, the response is quite simple: Ma Tang was not a Confucian literatus, but instead only a eunuch, which was a position that invited criticisms of his character. In fact, eunuchs were constantly subject to these condemnations. In the prologue of *Ming shi* 明史, the *History of Ming*, compiler Zhang Tingyu 张廷玉 observed that “political power had been moved to the eunuchs” by the end of the Ming dynasty, implying that this shift in authority was key to its decline and the successful rise of the Qing regime.¹ The textual evidence here indicates that Ricci's unpleasant relationship with Ma Tang was rather

¹ Zhang Tingyu 张廷玉, *Ming shi* 明史 (Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 1974), 8629.
The text is translated from “降及末流，权或移于阉寺。”

normal and that blaming the eunuchs in writings was a common practice in late Imperial China. In this light, “how” and “why” was Ma Tang recorded by the contemporary historians of the late Ming era in a specific fashion become questions that are at least equal in significance for exploring the negative illustrations that seem to define his presence as harm.

Tax eunuchs active during the Wanli reign are a category that received a lot of attention in Chinese academia since the late 1970s. One of the first articles discoverable is written by modern Chinese historian Feng Tianyu 冯天瑜, who reinforced that tax eunuchs were greedy officials who constantly profited from the locals and “captured and killed commoners at will, even persecuting local officials.”² In a sense, Feng inherited his rhetoric from Zhang Tingyu’s language that points to the detrimental impacts of eunuchs assuming an authoritative position and would set the tone of discussion on this topic for future Chinese intellectuals. Yang Sanshou 杨三寿 would follow suit and publish various articles on the late Ming economy, contending first in 1988 that Emperor Wanli was working closely with the tax eunuchs to “cruelly mistreat central and regional officials.”³ But in recent years the understanding of this group of servants has evolved to include some praises. History professor Fang Xing 方兴 pointed out in 2016 that

² Feng Tianyu 冯天瑜, “Ming dai huan guan gan zheng kao lue” 明代宦官干政考略 [An examination of the Ming eunuchs interfering in politics], *Hubei da xue xue bao (zhe xue she hui ke xue ban)* 湖北大学学报 (哲学社会科学版), no. 3 (1979): 74.

The text is translated from “矿税监们不仅在经济上对老百姓实行敲骨吸髓的盘剥，而且随意捕杀民户，甚至处置地方官吏。”

³ Yang Sanshou 杨三寿, “Kuang shui da xing yu Ming zheng quan de jie ti” 矿税大兴与明政权的解体 [The rise of mining taxes and the disintegration of the Ming regime], *Yunnan shi fan da xue xue bao (zhe she ban)* 云南师范大学学报 (哲社版), no. 3 (1988): 65.

The text is paraphrased and translated from “凡此种种，明神宗与矿税监狼狈为奸，残酷迫害中央和地方官员，后果是不堪设想的。”

it was the followers of the tax eunuchs who wished to satisfy their wish of becoming rich brought “negative impacts which neither the tax eunuchs nor the emperor could control.”⁴

Western academia, on the other hand, was slightly more aware of the misrepresentations in Ming historical texts. Historian Shih-shan Henry Tsai provided an influential monograph in 1996 on the various roles the eunuchs played in the Ming government, pointing out that the eunuchs were competent enough to be “a threat to the scholar-officials’ cherished role as the instrument of imperial government.”⁵ His work validated the contributions of the eunuchs and stated the necessity of their presence to the state. Similarly, historian Harry Miller’s publication in 2013 dedicated one chapter to study tax eunuchs Chen Zeng 陈增 and Chen Feng 陈奉 contemporary to Ma Tang, arguing that they were part of an “economic warfare” that Wanli had waged against the rising gentries.⁶ In these works, the assumed malevolent nature of the eunuchs is replaced with a new perspective that emphasizes their usefulness to the state affairs, whereas the image of the Confucian scholars, often perceived as the victimized heroes, was reconsidered.

The brief observation here is that both Chinese and Western academia were finally in accord that the issue of tax eunuchs and their portrayals were not necessarily the most accurate. Based on this premise, this thesis is here to use Ma Tang as a case study to demonstrate that the scapegoating the previous historians had conducted was a vast oversimplification of who he was as a historical figure. The first chapter shall provide the basic context of the late Ming era and

⁴ Fang Xing 方兴, “Ming dai wan li nian jian kuang jian shui shi de jie duan xing kao cha” 明代万历年间矿监税使的阶段性考察 [An interim survey on the mining and tax eunuchs in the Wanli era of Ming dynasty], *Shoudu shi fan da xue xue bao: she hui ke xue ban* 首都师范大学学报: 社会科学版, no. 6 (2016): 111.

The text is translated from “散布在全社会急于发财、急于暴富的人们。[...] 所带来的负面影响就不是矿监税使们更不是皇帝所能控制的。”

⁵ Shih-shan Henry Tsai, *The Eunuchs in the Ming Dynasty* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996), 7.

⁶ Harry Miller, *State Versus Gentry in Late Ming Dynasty China, 1572-1644* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 76.

present the complex relationship and conflicting ideals between Confucians and eunuchs. The following three chapters will each explore a type of historical source – court records, private texts, and gazetteers – to demonstrate the various facets of Ma Tang under the brushes of each writer, essentially providing multiple biographies that are built on different interpretations. The final chapter, based on the finding of the previous sections, posits that despite there being various works to capture moments of his life, a complete understanding of Ma Tang may still fail to manifest due to historiographical theories. In other words, this thesis is not strictly an attempt at justifying the judgments that Ma Tang has received. It is instead a call for awareness to help readers understand the life and records of a specific tax eunuch, as well as the processes that made it possible for Ma Tang to appear as the menace he was constructed to be.

Transliteration and Conventions

Due to the scope of the topic, this thesis will depend heavily upon historical texts written in classical Chinese. As they do not have English translations, I have attempted to translate and paraphrase them as accurately as I can, based on my understandings while including the original entries, most of which are punctuated by myself, in the footnotes. For any sources in a third language, I consulted both the existing English and Chinese translations.

Though most sources employed here are in traditional characters, this paper will convert them into simplified characters for an easier reading experience. The names of people, places, and titles of texts are converted to Pinyin if they were not yet translated to English or through Wades-Giles, with simplified characters following them if it is their first time appearing in the paper. There are a few cases like *Analects* that have received an English translation in recent

years; for these documents, I cite from the translated versions, though occasionally making edits to better reflect my interpretations of the original passages.

When nomenclatures of official titles appear in these records, the translations from historian Charles O. Hucker's *A Dictionary of Official Titles in Imperial China* are used.

Dates in classical Chinese primary sources are often recorded in the *ganzhi* 干支 system, also known as the sexagenary cycle. They have been converted to Western equivalents with the assistance of the conversion system from Academia Sinica (<https://sinocal.sinica.edu.tw/>).

Chapter 1: Foundation – Setting the Context for Ma Tang

Historian John W. Dardess observed that Imperial China had “developed a sophisticated and organized bureaucracy at the central and local levels [and] assembled a copious repertory of ideas and techniques for governing the people” since 150 CE.⁷ Some of these conventions had arguably originated before Dardess’s date, with the most notable example being Confucianism, the school of philosophy promoting people to perform rites and uphold virtues. Nonetheless, the social mindset and political traditions were constantly and continuously refined throughout different periods, including the Ming dynasty that ruled over China between 1368 and 1644. Ma Tang, the central character of this thesis, was thus living in a time where these practices were developed to embody values of the Ming culture while retaining the traditions of the past.

To better understand who Ma Tang is and how the Ming historians treated him, it is necessary to situate him in the historical Chinese political system powered by its philosophical ideologies. This chapter explores three interconnected aspects to achieve this goal. First, it will outline how Confucianism, then the state orthodoxy, helped construct a social environment that supplied candidates for political offices and provide a framework for the proper functioning of the imperial court. The system of eunuchs is then similarly analyzed to discuss how they simultaneously became both the servants of the Imperial Household and the enemies of the Confucian officials. Finally, as Ma Tang assumed the position of a tax eunuch, a term that Ming scholars would repeat in tandem with his name, this chapter will address the taxation system in the late Ming period and how the social and natural conditions led to changes that, sparking new controversies for Confucian ministers, allowed these tax eunuchs to rise to the stage.

⁷ John W. Dardess, *Governing China, 150 – 1850* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2010), xi.

Confucianism and Civil Bureaucracy

Duke Ai asked, “What can I do to induce the common people to be obedient?”

Confucius replied, “Raise up the straight and apply them to the crooked, and the people will submit to you. If you raise up the crooked and apply them to the straight, the people will never submit.”⁸

There are many facets to and definitions for this school of thought that was named after the teachings of Confucius, one of the most prominent philosophers in the Spring and Autumn Period. But apart from promoting values that refine individual characteristics and uphold social integrity, Confucianism also strove to motivate political rulers to reform their conduct and become role models for their citizens.⁹ Sometimes Confucius would pronounce his philosophies in rather metaphorical remarks, with a rather classic example being “one who rules through the power of Virtue is analogous to the Pole Star: it simply remains in its place and receives the homage of the myriad lesser stars.”¹⁰ At other times, he would share his thoughts more explicitly with people who sought his advice, often being the rulers of states and his disciples. The quoted conversation between Duke Ai of Lu and himself is considered an example since “straight” and “crooked” were relatively easier terms to comprehend in relation to human quality. These anecdotes and remarks were compiled into the *Analects*, a Confucian Classic that gained its initial popularity in the Han dynasty and would be considered essential for those who wished to become a successful Confucian scholar-official working for the government.¹¹

⁸ Confucius and Edward G. Slingerland, *Confucian Analects: with Selections from Traditional Commentaries* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2003), 14.

⁹ Confucius and Slingerland, *Confucian Analects*, xxi, 78, 134.

¹⁰ Confucius and Slingerland, *Confucian Analects*, 8.

¹¹ Dong Zhongshu, a Han dynasty scholar-official, was responsible for introducing Confucianism to the Han imperial court. However, this Confucianism was “syncretic” and combined elements from other contemporary schools of thought. See Justin Tiwald and Bryan W. Van Norden, *Readings in Later Chinese Philosophy: Han Dynasty to the 20th Century* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2014), 8-9.

Confucianism was disfavored in the Period of Division after the Han dynasty when Buddhism, entering from India, attracted the rulers to employ it as their state religion, and the philosophical and religious aspects of Daoism received greater attention from the general population. Buddhists “pursue their commitments by fleeing the world,” meaning that they conduct a life that is separate from the temporal realm, which is assumed to contain Confucian family ideals.¹² Daoists, on the other hand, turned to anti-ritualism to “tear away the stiff, inhuman façade” and criticize the performative practices of Confucian filial piety at that time.¹³ Despite the difference in their ideologies, these two systems of beliefs were united on the front of rejecting Confucian values. Thus, in this age, people were slowly removing and distancing themselves from the social responsibilities that were encouraged by Confucian values.

Confucian scholars were concerned about this phenomenon and wanted the public to reconsider the merits of practicing Confucianism. For instance, Tang dynasty scholar-official Han Yu 韩愈 submitted his “A Memorandum on a Bone of the Buddha” in 819 to the emperor, protesting his decision to venerate a finger bone, allegedly from the Buddha, and bring it to the royal palace.¹⁴ He was quick to denounce Buddhism in his memorial, claiming that “the Buddha was fundamentally a barbarian [...] how could it be proper to let this decayed bone, this vile refuse, enter the royal palace?”¹⁵ In fact, he argued that the introduction of Buddhism was the primary factor causing the decline of the Han dynasty and the chaos that occurred during the Period of Division. He did not necessarily provide a solution, but his quoting Confucius and listing of sages, role models that Confucians revere, implied that he wished the emperor to revisit

¹² Tiwald and Van Norden, *Readings in Later Chinese Philosophy*, 77.

¹³ Donald Holzman, *Poetry and Politics: The Life and Works of Juan Chi, A.D. 210-263* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 80.

¹⁴ Tiwald and Van Norden, *Readings in Later Chinese Philosophy*, 123.

¹⁵ Tiwald and Van Norden, *Readings in Later Chinese Philosophy*, 125.

Confucianism and become a Confucian ruler and emulate the past sages.¹⁶ Han Yu, believing that only Confucianism could guide the state once again to prosperity, attempted to persuade the emperor with his strong rhetoric and emotions. Although he failed to change the emperor's mind and was nearly sentenced to death, his bold attack on Buddhism was a sign of Confucianism rising back to the spotlights, claiming more political and reclaiming social significances.

Han Yu's effort to make Confucianism relevant again was continued under the Song dynasty scholar Zhu Xi 朱熹, who reshaped Confucianism through two means in the twelfth century. He first combined certain elements of Buddhism and Daoism into his Confucian ideologies, later remembered as Neo-Confucianism that not only helped him explain the metaphysical construction of the surrounding world but also assisted him in generating his philosophies on education. By asking his audience to engage in "maintaining reverence and exhaustively investigating" the Confucian Classics, Zhu Xi encouraged them to try to understand the deeper meanings of the texts of the sages and balance their minds while cultivating themselves.¹⁷ These changes were mostly welcomed since they provided students a way of learning that incorporated elements foreign to Confucian beliefs but were common in society.

Continuing his efforts to promote Neo-Confucianism, Zhu Xi commented on four Confucian Classics, including the aforementioned *Analects*, organized them into the *Four Books*, and made them essential readings for the succeeding generations who wish to become Confucian scholars. It is unclear if Zhu Xi was aware of this development, but his reinterpretations of the ancient Confucian passages eventually became beneficial tools for the state to employ. *The Great Learning*, the first text that he included in this collection, affirmed to its readers that one of the

¹⁶ Tiwald and Van Norden, *Readings in Later Chinese Philosophy*, 123-126.

¹⁷ Tiwald and Van Norden, *Readings in Later Chinese Philosophy*, 178-179.

many essential “steps of the Great Learning” is “putting the state in order,” indicating the significance of politics in his discourse on Confucian concepts and practices.¹⁸ The more important aspect, however, was that these procedures and ideals were applicable “from the Son of Heaven on down to the common people,” thus providing everyone an equal opportunity to cultivate their morals and contribute to the state, thereby building a harmonious society.¹⁹ In short, Zhu Xi considered improving “the moral character of the people who run the state” through education an important step to remove the “social and political ills.”²⁰

In the Ming dynasty, knowledge and expertise in Confucian Classics and Zhu Xi’s commentaries were essential to scholars’ success. The first ruler, Emperor Hongwu, endorsed and declared Zhu Xi’s philosophy central to the imperial civil service exam, a system of meritocracy that awarded respected political positions to the best examiners. Candidates were expected, in different stages, “to write administrative documents in ancient forms and to master the dynasty’s legal code” and compose “policy essays based on contemporary affairs.”²¹ Protests to this curriculum were rare until the mid-sixteenth century, suggesting that the ideas of Zhu Xi were relatively easy to comprehend and accept within the imperial court and the literati circle, as it continued to permeate the examination grounds, the society, and the court.²²

¹⁸ Tiwald and Van Norden, *Readings in Later Chinese Philosophy*, 189.

¹⁹ Tiwald and Van Norden, *Readings in Later Chinese Philosophy*, 190.

For more on Zhu Xi’s philosophies, see Tiwald and Van Norden, *Readings in Later Chinese Philosophy*.

The quoted “Son of Heaven” is a common translation of “天子”, a term identical in meaning to “emperor.”

²⁰ Philip J. Ivanhoe, *Zhu Xi: Selected Writings* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 56.

²¹ Benjamin A. Elman, *Civil Examinations and Meritocracy in Late Imperial China* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013), 24.

²² Wang Yangming 王阳明, a Neo-Confucian who thought Zhu Xi’s ideas were misleading, encouraged “examination essays and commentaries that included Buddhist or Daoist interpretations” to appear in the Wanli era. See Elman, *Civil Examinations and Meritocracy in Late Imperial China*, 70.

Though the competition was fierce, as less than three percent of the examinees would climb to higher ranks in the bureaucracy, there was an implicit and indirect way to succeed.²³ Historian Benjamin Elman noted that “Ming examiners linked the moral cultivation of the mind to the sagely qualities of emperors, not literati.”²⁴ In other words, the exams had largely followed the teachings of Zhu Xi, but there was a curious but constant emphasis on the authority of the emperor. Differing from the lessons of the *Four Books*, the enforcement is indicative of the Ming emperors wanting to consolidate their political regime that was often characterized as autocratic. The centralized government structure would, in effect, force the officials to “prostrate and kneel before [the emperor],” both through physical and literary manners, thereby reinforcing the superior status of the throne over his officials.²⁵ Therefore, to at least guarantee themselves a position in the administration, candidates were often seen criticizing the emperors of the past dynasties while praising the contemporary policies. By having the examinees refer to the emperors of this dynasty as role models, a somewhat propagandistic action in hindsight, the Ming court would receive bureaucrats who submitted to the authority of the emperor.

Once completing the exams, the Confucian literati were assigned to positions that allowed them to direct “hordes of administrative, secretarial, and other assistants who did the drafting, record keeping, and menial labor required in all government agencies.”²⁶ Depending on their extent of achievements, they either managed affairs in a specific department like the Ministry of Justice or were allocated to different counties. They were “subject to continual

²³ Elman, *Civil Examinations and Meritocracy in Late Imperial China*, 10.

²⁴ Elman, *Civil Examinations and Meritocracy in Late Imperial China*, 21.

The term “sagely” refers to the authority of and the influence the ancient Kings and role models possessed, which are qualities that Confucians revere.

²⁵ Elman, *Civil Examinations and Meritocracy in Late Imperial China*, 21.

²⁶ Charles O. Hucker, *A Dictionary of Official Titles in Imperial China* (Taipei: Nan Tian Shu Ju You Xian Gong Si, 1988), 5.

surveillance by their superiors” during their term, with their deeds and conversations recorded and reported meticulously to determine their eligibility for promotion.²⁷ Under this system, the authority of the emperor is once again emphasized, as he, sitting in the most supreme position in the Ming bureaucracy, has direct influence over the career and success of the officials.

But this style of governance, placing the emperor out of the reach of his officials, was seen as unfavorable and “lacked the sense of reciprocity between ruler and advisor [...] that Confucianism praised as an essential principle of good government.”²⁸ Many Confucian scholar-officials considered this matter an issue and sought to change it by sending their memorials to the emperor, constantly voicing their complaints or suggestions on the most recent policies he made. While these actions were part of the responsibilities of the civil officers, the emperor would feel “imprisoned by his bureaucracy,” as was the case with the Wanli emperor.²⁹ In this sense, the emphasis on revering the emperor in the examinations is also a filtration process to eliminate the literati who were critical to him. This preparation would, in theory, shield the emperor from the propositions, which he thought were attacks, of the Confucian officials, though a contrasting and critical interpretation would propose that it was an effort to conceal his insecurity.

Even after succeeding in the exams, some intellectuals believed that they “could not be controlled by the emperor” and that they could still claim the authority of the Confucian sages.³⁰ This belief is key to motivating officials to address their memorials directly to the emperor, reminding him of his responsibility to maintain the Mandate of Heaven that legitimized the ruler to “instruct the people and to protect and preserve them from human and natural harm” while

²⁷ Hucker, *A Dictionary of Official Titles in Imperial China*, 82.

²⁸ Timothy Brook, *The Troubled Empire: China in the Yuan and Ming Dynasties* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010), 87.

²⁹ Brook, *The Troubled Empire*, 102.

³⁰ Peter K. Bol, *Neo-Confucianism in History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008), 149.

constantly quoting figures like Confucius and Mencius.³¹ These dialogues and criticisms were sometimes poorly received, resulting in a tense relationship between the ruler and his officials. While the latter group may have wished to improve the state, the ruler's skeptical attitude to his bureaucrats would prompt him to neglect their demands and instead mobilize his servants in the Imperial Household – the eunuchs – and provide them with opportunities to manage state affairs.

Eunuchs of the Imperial Household in Relation with Confucian Bureaucracy

The history of employing eunuchs in the imperial court goes back to possibly the Shang dynasty of ancient China.³² Unlike the Confucians, however, they did not ascend to power through the civil service examination, but by castration, a very different process that ensured that the “‘treasure parts’ had been permanently severed” from the body of a young male.³³ As eunuchs were servants of the emperor, castration was necessary to confirm that “no child conceived within the palace precincts had any father but the ruler.”³⁴ There were mainly two motives for castrations: involuntary if they were prisoners of war receiving corporal punishment or tribute offerings from neighboring states, and voluntary when a commoner wanted to raise their status but was unable to pass the exams or purchase a degree.³⁵ Even in the latter's case, the extent of their willingness was quite limited since their decisions were often subjugated under social and economic situations. Particularly in the late sixteenth century, the economy was rather inflated due to two reasons. First, the Ming court was increasingly involved in the global trade,

³¹ Dardess, *Governing China, 150 – 1850*, xiii.

Mencius, active during the Warring States period, is the second Confucian philosopher to make his name after Confucius.

³² Tsai, *The Eunuchs in the Ming Dynasty*, 11.

³³ Tsai, *The Eunuchs in the Ming Dynasty*, 4.

³⁴ Timothy Brook, *Great State: China and the World* (New York: Harper Collins, 2020), 88.

³⁵ Tsai, *The Eunuchs in the Ming Dynasty*, 19.

thereby creating a steady amount of imported and exported silver. Second, its military conflict against Japan in the early 1590s had drained the state treasury and caused a strain on the economy. As such, there was an exponential growth in the number of self-castrated eunuchs during this period, for the peasants had been driven out of their lands and away from their sources of income due to the worsening economy.³⁶ In a sense, subjecting themselves as servants and losing their body part was a means to ensure their survival and livelihood.

There were merits in this trade, for the castrated men, while remaining under the supervision of the emperor, often received stable income in their positions, thereby gaining a relative degree of social and political mobility at the cost of their personal freedom. Initially, they were only responsible for housekeeping and taking care of the daily necessities in the palace.³⁷ Fast forward to the Wanli era, there were roughly a hundred thousand eunuchs working in the different agencies inside the Forbidden City and across the provinces, overseeing military, domestic, and diplomatic affairs.³⁸ In this gradual expansion and transformation, there was “a qualitative change in the eunuch status,” where they became regarded as “powerful bosses.”³⁹ Concurrently, it became required for them to receive education and become indoctrinated with Confucian loyalty and filial piety to treat the emperor as their “sage.”⁴⁰ Due to this training, there was a more open dialogue between the master and the servants, where the latter were encouraged to report directly and obey the decrees of the former without any interference or influence. It also helped to create a new mindset for the eunuchs, where “the emperor’s loss was their loss, the emperor’s gain was their gain.”⁴¹ As such, the ruler felt comfortable putting more trust into the

³⁶ Tsai, *The Eunuchs in the Ming Dynasty*, 27.

³⁷ Tsai, *The Eunuchs in the Ming Dynasty*, 29.

³⁸ Tsai, *The Eunuchs in the Ming Dynasty*, 34, 58.

³⁹ Tsai, *The Eunuchs in the Ming Dynasty*, 33.

⁴⁰ Tsai, *The Eunuchs in the Ming Dynasty*, 224.

⁴¹ Fang, “Ming dai wan li nian jian kuang jian shui shi de jie duan xing kao cha,” 110.

people who vowed to devote their body, mind, and soul to him. He also believed that given their education, they were at least equally qualified to take over some civil service positions.

The emperor's reliance upon the eunuchs posed a great threat to the Confucian literati, who began to characterize the castrated servants holding political power as inhumane and greedy officials who should not interfere with the lives of the commoners. The first main reason, and the most obvious, of this mistreatment was the biological difference. "Our bodies – to every hair and bit of skin – are received by us from our parents, and we must not presume to injure or wound them. This is the beginning of filial piety."⁴² This phrase was part of the many statements that a Confucian student learned and memorized. In the context of a debate between the Confucian literati and the imperial eunuchs, the former would suggest that the latter had damaged their bodies, thereby disobeying the concept of filial piety and were thus inauthentic Confucians, whereas they, having retained their reproductive organs, felt more morally upright. This disagreement would lead to another related conflict, which is the eunuchs' inability to "produce a male heir to carry on the family name" that contradicts the writings of Mencius, that "there are three things which are unfilial, and the greatest of them is to have no posterity."⁴³ Thus, the lack of their body part caused the eunuchs to lose ground in a battle that claimed to be philosophical.

The next issues that some officials brought to attention were correlated, being that they were at first dissatisfied with how the eunuchs rose differently from the scholar-officials, then assumed that their close relationships with the emperor would affect both the state and the Son of

The text is translated from “从整体上说，皇帝的得失就是他们的得失，皇帝的利益就是他们的利益。”

⁴² James Legge, *The Sacred Books of China: The texts of Confucianism* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1879), 466.

⁴³ Tsai, *The Eunuchs in the Ming Dynasty*, 17.

Burton Watson, *Sources of Chinese Tradition* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1960), 112.

Heaven negatively. For example, Wei Yunzhen 魏允贞, an official active during the Wanli era, wrote “The Memorial on the Deficiencies of Contemporary Politics” and stated the following:

The newest officials awaiting assessments all originated from the imperial civil service examination [...] but the Emperor does not treat lightly in endowing them with a position. Conversely, for the likes of Chen Zeng, Gao Huai 高淮, Lu Kun 鲁坤, Ma Tang, and Sun Chao 孙朝, which of their conducts were examined? Which of the officials recommended them? Yet they act without any regards to order or hierarchy in their regions; those who praised them would receive good fortune while those who criticized them would be exposed to troubles. When they commit murder, no questions were directed to them; when they forcibly removed a properly appointed official away, no questions were directed to them. How is it that the Emperor values the eunuchs and dismisses the officials awaiting assessments? The officials of the Supervising Secretaries and Censors have read books since a young age and have constantly immersed themselves in worldly affairs. They understand that legitimacy and morality are important matters, and thus converse on the benefits and harms for the state [...] The group collecting mining taxes [...] speak of nothing but matters that are harmful to the state and detrimental to the people [...] How is it that the Emperor only trusts the wicked people but doubts the Speaking Officials?⁴⁴

The report went on to quote Mencius to caution the emperor on whom he should truly trust to ensure the state properly functions. These alienating descriptions against eunuchs who collected mining taxes declared Wei’s preference of having Confucians in political roles. He blamed the eunuchs for taking away the attention of Wanli, thereby obstructing his ability to discover the talents and loyalty of other outstanding officials. In other words, Wei believed that eunuchs, deceiving the emperor of their contributions, were a hindrance to the progress and improvements the state could have made under the guidance of Confucian officials. He thus felt

⁴⁴ *Nanle fu zhi* 南乐府志 (1903), 9:2a-3a.

The quotation is translated from the following sections of the memorial: “今候考各官，皆科第出身 [...] 皇上犹然不轻与一职也。彼陈增、高淮、鲁坤、马堂、孙朝等，试之何事？举之何人？而俨然令专擅一方，所誉立福，所毁立祸，杀人不问，褫夺职官不问，皇上何其重宦寺，而轻候考各官也？科道诸臣，少读书，长涉世习，知名义风节为重，所言皆国家利害 [...] 矿税之流 [...] 其言纯是蠹国害民 [...] 皇上何独信奸民，而疑言官也？”

The terms “Supervising Secretaries and Censors” and “Speaking Officials” are Hucker’s translations of respectively 科道 and 言官. See Hucker, *A Dictionary of Official Titles in Imperial China*, 280, 579.

compelled to persuade Wanli that the scholar-officials were the more competent candidates for his tasks through the contrast in the usage of the terms “wicked people” the “Speaking Officials.” His denunciation of the eunuchs as “people” and neglect of their job titles suggest that they were not worthy of holding political offices, and their “wicked” qualities were further proof of their ineptitude. On the other hand, the Speaking Officials who monitored “the making of policy decisions at court and to recommend or criticize policies” were the antithesis to corrupted actions, hence necessary to the proper functions of the court.⁴⁵ By demeaning the status of the imperial servants, Wei was essentially eliminating obstacles for his peers to rise while posing as an agent of justice and savior himself to help his ruler realize the “apparent truth” he proposed.

Wei’s memorial was just one of the many accounts that criticized the presence of eunuchs in political professions and their performances. Although his words were harsh, his concern for the state was still quite valid, for the imperial servants he addressed in his memorial posed as tax collectors, one of the more necessary gears in a state’s economy. In this sense, how and why did the emperor assign his servants these important positions?

Taxation System

The Ming fiscal administration was incredibly complex, as Professor Ray Huang illustrated in his *Taxation and Governmental Finance in Sixteenth-Century Ming China*. A key takeaway from his work, however, was that the peasants were quite vulnerable to the ever slightly changing tax rates, which Huang estimated to be a rather low “10 per cent of agrarian

⁴⁵ Hucker, *A Dictionary of Official Titles in Imperial China*, 579.

output.”⁴⁶ It was unclear as to how the lower-class people had genuinely reacted, but they were considered as potentially “powerful enough to obstruct justice” when they protected each other from officials who moved to collect taxes from them.⁴⁷ Most of them were also seen using the occasional customary remissions due to special occasions in the Imperial Household as an excuse to pay their taxes in arrears or have their records erased.⁴⁸ The combination of these phenomena suggests that Ming commoners considered tax payments a burden they wished to escape, whether due to genuine reasons or unspoken desires. These displayed difficulties of paying taxes were significant to the eunuch problem in two ways. On the one hand, it was likely that the taxes forced the peasants to find new ways of living, with one of them being to forfeit their manhood and become servants of the Imperial Household. This theory would blend with the conjecture that considers the worsening social and economic conditions in this period a factor leading to the increase in the number of eunuchs. On the other hand, a major group of tax collectors near the late Ming period were eunuchs, which sparked massive controversies among Confucian literati and the peasants that led to public protests.

Another perspective that can explain the sixteenth-century Ming peasants’ reluctance in accommodating any changes in the tax rates is environmental history. The Ming dynasty, ruling over China from the fourteenth to the seventeenth century, was situated in the Little Ice Age, a time where the globe experienced climates colder than normal. For Ming China, “what had been a warmer, wetter world became a colder, drier one,” creating episodes of “sloughs” that historian Timothy Brook termed to describe “what life was like during the worst years.”⁴⁹ In these periods

⁴⁶ Ray Huang, *Taxation and Governmental Finance in Sixteenth-Century Ming China* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1974), 183.

⁴⁷ Huang, *Taxation and Governmental Finance in Sixteenth-Century Ming China*, 159.

⁴⁸ Huang, *Taxation and Governmental Finance in Sixteenth-Century Ming China*, 146.

⁴⁹ Brook, *The Troubled Empire*, 71.

of coldness and dryness, one natural disaster tended to lead to another, thus leading to humanitarian crises that demanded the attention of local and state governments. Particularly from 1586, the beginning point of the first slough that the court of the Wanli emperor would experience, multiple reports of drought-induced epidemics and famine from officials featured indescribable sights of the people. Yang Dongming 杨东明, a Right Supervising Secretary and a prominent Confucian thinker at the time, described the following scenes:

There was suddenly a heavy rain, and soon after the flood measured to a height of three *chi* at ground level, rotting the wheat and damaging the crops. Furthermore, the dikes were overflowed, washing away the shelters of the people and turning the fertile soil into a giant lake [...] The worried peasants, having no resources to fill their bellies and no places for shelter, thus carried their families and drifted from place to place. They were eventually stopped by hunger, creating more tragic scenes in this time of homelessness caused by natural disasters.⁵⁰

Yang was also famous for his *A Pictorial Memorial of the Famished Peasants* submitted in 1594, which caused the Wanli emperor to experience “shocked uneasiness and fear” for its vivid visual depictions of the starving people.⁵¹ In short, the natural conditions only worsened the lives of the Ming commoners, which made taxing them both economically and morally difficult.

Even in this context, the court deemed it necessary to continue taxing its people. In this process, eunuchs were seen collecting revenue for the state mostly from specific areas like the “fisheries, tea production, and fruit” and the “tolls on roads and bridges.”⁵² In 1596, they would

⁵⁰ *Yu cheng xian zhi* 虞城县志 (1743), 8:7a-7b.

The quotation is translated from the following sections of the memorial: “忽经大雨，数旬平地水深三尺。麦禾即已朽烂，秋苗亦复残伤。且河决堤溃，冲舍漂庐，沃野变为江湖 [...] 愁民乃既无充腹之资，又鲜安身之地，于是扶老携幼，东走西奔。饥饿不前，流离万状。”

“Right Supervising Secretary” is a translation of the term 右给事中 that Hucker provides in his *A Dictionary of Official Titles in Imperial China*, 133.

⁵¹ Nan Bingwen 南炳文, and Wu Yanling 吴彦玲, *Ji jiao wan li qi ju zhu* 辑校万历起居注 (Tianjin: Tianjin gu ji chu ban she, 2010), 1190.

The text is translated from “见刑科给事中杨东明《饥民图说》，朕心甚惊慌忧惧。”

⁵² Tsai, *The Eunuchs in the Ming Dynasty*, 172.

be permitted to excavate mines and collect mining taxes in different provinces, which caused great alarms among Confucian civil officers. Specific reasons for these additional taxing were unclear, though plausible ones were replenishing the money used for “the Korean war and the rebuilding of the burned palace structures” that occurred earlier in the year.⁵³ The latter reason was emphasized, as Wanli was seen, years later, explaining to one of his closer officials that he “opened mines and collected taxes because of the incomplete reconstruction of the burned palace structures, but the treasury was empty, and therefore provided those orders after consideration.”⁵⁴

Yet there was one bigger factor that was interestingly covered up by the memorials of the Confucian scholar-officials. Emphasizing the maintenance of a benevolent relationship with the commoners, the literati “regarded any increase on the tax quota as evil and incompatible with their traditional ideal of good government.”⁵⁵ Twentieth-century scholars supported this view, with historian Robert B. Crawford, for example, suggesting that Wanli had treated the state as a source of income “for the maintenance of a luxurious court life.”⁵⁶ However, Tsai has argued that Wanli was actually able to “provide an efficient and honest administration” because of these incomes from eunuchs.⁵⁷ Historian Harry Miller further noted that the emperor was attempting to wage an “economic warfare” against the gentries like Wei Yunzhen who were constantly demanding more power. Since the technology for mining was not the most developed, the targets of taxation were often redirected to the Confucian gentries, essentially landlords exempt from

In his chapter “Eunuchs’ Involvement in the Ming Economy,” Tsai also goes into detail explaining their role in managing the Ming salt monopoly, an area that Ma Tang eventually oversaw.

⁵³ Miller, *State Versus Gentry in Late Ming Dynasty China*, 75.

Dardess also supports the idea that the eunuch tax collectors were sent “to provide revenues sufficient [...] to fund war making.” See more in Dardess, *Governing China*, 78-80.

⁵⁴ Nan and Wu, *Ji jiao wan li qi ju zhu*, 1906.

The text is translated from “开矿、抽税。为因三殿、两宫未完，帑藏空虚，权宜采用。”

⁵⁵ Tsai, *The Eunuchs in the Ming Dynasty*, 173.

⁵⁶ Robert B. Crawford, “Eunuch Power in the Ming Dynasty,” *T’oung Pao* 49, no. 3 (1961): 144.

⁵⁷ Tsai, *The Eunuchs in the Ming Dynasty*, 173.

paying taxes due to their educated status and therefore a hurdle for revenue collection.⁵⁸

Imposing taxes, thus, was a seemingly cruel but necessary procedure for the emperor to secure and reinforce his authority against the constantly unsatisfied officials.

Conclusion

The complaints of civil service officers were either left unheard or ignored, evident in the emperor's lack of responses and his continuous communication with the eunuchs. He was more comfortable with putting his faith in his eunuchs who were relatively immune to the protests of the Confucians and would act according to his will without the influence of the people. Ma Tang was one of the many figures to emerge from this movement. While his contemporaries often overshadow him, his achievements and deeds during his office suggest that he was more than just a tax-collecting eunuch, the identity that Ming historians decided to impose upon him. The following chapters turn to locate him in Ming historical texts, official and vernacular, exploring how his conflicts with the Confucian officials and the commoners shaped his appearance in said documents. *Ming shi lu* 明实录, the *Veritable Records of the Ming Dynasty*, is the first stop.

⁵⁸ Miller, *State Versus Gentry in Late Ming Dynasty China*, 17.

Chapter 2: Ma Tang in *Ming shi lu*

With the previous chapter bringing attention to the basic context and structures of Ming society and government, this chapter and the next two chapters begin providing and analyzing the sources produced in the late Ming that capture moments relating to Ma Tang. Unfortunately, most eunuchs including Ma Tang tend to lack both a biography and an autobiography in this period, meaning that the fundamental pieces of information like his dates of birth and death, place of origin, and years serving the Imperial Household were not and cannot be revealed. However, snippets of his activity are recorded in the historical documents written during and after he was appointed as a tax eunuch between the late 1590s and the early 1620s. These texts, directing unequal amounts of attention to this eunuch, reveal how the contemporaries of Ma Tang remembered him, thereby understanding his importance in the late Ming government and the impression he has made among the Ming public and officials. Thus, it is possible to artificially construct a functional portfolio for him by analyzing the narratives of the late Ming texts, with each of them, having a different approach in comprehending this historical character.

To make the portrayal of his character more multidimensional, this and the following chapters will focus on three types of sources produced before the decline of the Ming dynasty in 1644 to present biographical information on and contemporary impressions of Ma Tang. The first group of texts records their observations from the perspective of the court, with the main one consulted being *Ming shi lu*. It is presented in the form of annals, with each of the thirteen Ming emperors receiving their collections containing political, economic, and other materials related to their reigns. This chapter employs the accounts of Emperors Wanli and Taichang, documenting the events from 1572, the first year when Wanli came to rule, to 1620, the year in

which the succeeding Taichang passed away.⁵⁹ As it is a large multi-volume work, there is undoubtedly a vast amount of information compiled, with documentations of the events that occurred during the reign of Wanli, who ruled over Ming China for forty-eight years, numbering to nearly six hundred *juans*.⁶⁰ A brief search shows that Ma Tang has, impressively, appeared in roughly fifty entries. Some of them are memorials that officials sent to Wanli to convict or impeach the eunuch; others are mentions of his name in specific, some monumental, events. To assemble a concise biography for Ma Tang, this section focuses primarily on the latter group of data that has him either reaching a turning point or experiencing a significant moment in his life. Additional supplements from sources of similar kind and reasonable assumptions based on the text are included to ensure a more coherent narrative that also explores the historical context.

Turbulent Beginning

July 24, 1596 was the day that set Ma Tang and a sizable group of imperial servants on the path to becoming a tax eunuch, responsible for overseeing the excavations of mines and collecting regional taxes under the decree of Emperor Wanli. To be certain, the practice of sending eunuchs out for tax collection had begun in the mid-fifteenth century, allowing them to become “an integral part of the Ming revenue collection machinery” that supported the state treasury.⁶¹ But Wanli’s order to supervise mining activities was even more significant in permitting eunuchs to exercise more political power. Thus, it is peculiar as to how Ma Tang had

⁵⁹ To be more specific in the timeline, Wanli had passed away in 1620, which allowed Taichang to rise to the throne. But due to the Case of the Red Pills, Taichang passed away a few months after he became emperor.

⁶⁰ *Juan* 卷 is a term synonymous with a “chapter” or “volume” in the text, and it is used in this essay when the discussion revolves around classical Chinese documents.

⁶¹ Tsai, *The Eunuchs in the Ming Dynasty*, 170.

gained this important position. The chances of him being arbitrarily selected regardless of the relationship he potentially shared with his emperor, seemed dubious. It is more probable that he had, in his quest to ascend in the ranks, demonstrated his passion for his career and loyalty to the throne to make the ruler recognize and treat him as an asset. Such a conjecture, should it be valid, would further assume that Ma Tang most likely became a eunuch of his own free will and been part of Imperial Household for some time to the extent that Wanli was at least acquainted with him. After somehow demonstrating his dedication and experience within the palace, he would rise above his peers to become a tax eunuch who would also oversee mining activities.⁶²

Ma Tang debuted in Ming history a few years after the decree, when *Ming shi lu* recorded him testifying that Zhang Zihe 张子和, a “local tiger” who was arrested and sent to the capital with thirty-two other people, had “avoided tax collection” on January 6, 1599.⁶³ Tax evasion, as historian Ray Huang observed and the previous chapter addressed, was a problem that persisted to the late 1590s, meaning that Zhang and his group were charged as criminals here. The term “local tiger” is an interesting one to use, most likely suggesting that Zhang was a troublesome character in this region before Ma Tang had settled in his office. In this sense, by reporting the alleged crimes that Zhang conducted, Ma Tang was accomplishing his task as a tax eunuch, fulfilling his role as “an integral part of the Ming revenue collection machinery” and representing justice.⁶⁴ His actions were an attempt to ensure that both the Confucian scholar-officials and the

⁶² Most sources address Ma Tang as a tax eunuch, but his name often appears along with the topic of mining in the memorials and biographies of other officials, implying a strong relationship between the two. Furthermore, two controversial tax eunuchs in this period, Chen Feng and Chen Zeng, were closely affiliated with the mining industry, suggesting that Ma Tang was also likely a tax eunuch who was initially ordered to observe the mines.

⁶³ *Ming shen zong shi lu* 明神宗实录, 339.2b.

The text is translated from “辛酉，逮天津土虎张子和等三十二人至京究问以。天津税监马堂论其曲蔽征租也。”

“Local tiger” is a literal translation of 土虎. Interestingly, this term is spotted in *Ming shi lu* only once.

⁶⁴ Tsai, *The Eunuchs in the Ming Dynasty*, 170.

people recognized his administrative authorities and saw him as a new broom that sweeps clean, demonstrating his competence as a tax eunuch, fidelity to the emperor, and dedication to his job.

But *Da Ming hui dian* 大明会典 or the *Collected Statutes of the Ming Dynasty*, a compilation of the Ming law codes, suggested that those who avoided paying taxes were only sentenced to fifty floggings with a bamboo stick.⁶⁵ Given this description, it may appear then that Ma Tang had overreacted since there was no description of sending the lawbreakers to the capital. Only through reading *Xu wen xian tong kao* 续文献通考 or the *Continuation of Comprehensive Examination of Literature*, a source compiled by the late Ming historian Wang Qi 王圻 examining Ming historical texts, in correlation with *Ming shi lu* can readers perhaps understand the eunuch's judgment. In this account, the emperor had sent the Imperial Bodyguards to arrest the group after Ma Tang had reported that the "local tiger Zhang Zihe and others had interfered and conducted violence and robbery."⁶⁶ With these details provided, it can be said that this account precedes the one presented in *Ming shi lu*, becoming a prequel to this small incident. Ma Tang, trying to collect taxes and complete his tasks in Tianjin, encountered Zhang Zihe, a recognized leader in the community, and his followers protesting fiercely. Ma Tang, new to the position, was victim to the violent and angry "local tiger" who were hindering him from performing his duties and thus had little choice but to notify the emperor of this unusual situation, leading to their arrest and his first appearance in *Ming shi lu*.

⁶⁵ Li Dongyang 李东阳, *Da Ming hui dian* 大明会典 (Taipei: Guo feng chu ban she, 1963), 2300-1.

The translation is paraphrased from "凡客商匿税 [...] 不纳课程者, 笞五十。"

⁶⁶ Wang Qi 王圻, *Ming Wanli xu wen xian tong kao* 明万历续文献通考 (Taipei: Wen hai, 1979), 1786-1787.

The text is translated from "太监马堂奏, 土虎张子和等, 阻挠打抢。上令锦衣卫逮问。"

"Imperial Bodyguards" refer to 锦衣卫 who helped in "maintaining an empire-wide, irregular police and judicial service." See Hucker, *A Dictionary of Official Titles in Imperial China*, 166.

The next major incident that involved him took place in the summer of the same year in Linqing 临清, a county roughly 400 km south of his original post in Tianjin and situated in modern-day Shandong province. Wanli issued this relocation when he learned that Ma Tang had competed with his colleague Chen Zeng to collect more taxes for unknown reasons, and decided that they should have their separate jurisdictions to avoid taxing the same areas multiple times.⁶⁷ Perhaps having a different interpretation of the emperor's words, Ma Tang instead encouraged his followers to acquire taxes without restraints in Linqing, which caused thousands of civilians to surround his office. Frightened at this development, the tax eunuch commanded his servants to shoot arrows at the public, resulting in two deaths that quickly escalated the situation. With the protesters setting fire to his office and killing thirty-four of his men, the local Commandant Wang Yang 王炆 entered to save and shelter the tax eunuch. While Ma Tang was initially appreciative of the assistance, one of his henchmen who held grudges against the Commandant was persuasive enough to change the mind of the tax eunuch and turn Wang Yang to the court.⁶⁸

The actions of Ma Tang in the Linqing Incident sparked several debates in the imperial court, with the main one being whether he had “murdered and decapitated people to assert his dominance and authority.” A number of officials had assumed that he did commit such crimes, but Ma Tang claimed that he was not involved in them and that “the one spreading such rumors was official Yang Guozhi 杨国治.” The emperor thus ordered to arrest Yang, ignored the pleas

⁶⁷ *Ming shen zong shi lu*, 332.1a.

The translation is paraphrased from “陈增马堂争税。上命堂税临清，增税东昌等处，不得叠征。”

⁶⁸ *Ming shen zong shi lu*, 332.2b.

The translation is paraphrased from “逮临清守备王炆。时税监马堂纵群小横征，民不堪命。市人数千，环噪其门。堂惧，令参随从内发矢，射杀二人。众遂大哗，火其署，格杀参随三十四人。堂窘，甚赖王炆救之得免。堂初甚德炆业以状闻，而其党郑惟明以前嫌，故疑炆阴鼓众而阳救堂自解，遂诡易堂奏逮炆云。”

“Commandant” refers to 守备, “a military officer placed in charge of troops in a particular locality.” See Hucker, *A Dictionary of Official Titles in Imperial China*, 433.

seeking to reprimand Ma Tang, and ordered the provincial governors to investigate and punish the culprit. Here, the Grand Coordinator Liu Yicong 刘易从 would step in and have Wang Chaozuo 王朝佐, a local of the Linqing county who proclaimed himself as the chief criminal, shoulder the responsibilities. Wanli was satisfied with letting Wang become an example of disobedience and therefore authorized the minister to behead the commoner, who faced the judgment without complaints. The people of Linqing, thankful that Wang had protected their lives, later built a commemorative hall to praise his deeds.⁶⁹

The Linqing Incident would become one of the most discussed events in relation to Ma Tang. He was certainly responsible for overtaxing those who “collected less than ten piculs of grains or were small businesses” and worsening their living conditions.⁷⁰ His decision to use weapons was also a key moment that intensified and created more bloodshed for the conflict. Finally, his reports had a direct influence on Wanli, moving him to arrest two of his bureaucrats, though one of them was submitted only under the influence of one of his servants. If anything, these decisions that Ma Tang had made were ones that allowed the officials to see him as a violent, merciless, and inconsiderate eunuch just like his peers, and therefore criticize him.

But his involvement in the conflict was arguably limited, in that after overburdening the society, Ma Tang had reacted to the changes in a passive manner akin to self-defense. While his

⁶⁹ *Ming shen zong shi lu*, 337.3b-4a.

The paragraph is paraphrased and translated from “初临清之变，群情汹汹，皆云马堂杀人斩首盘武示威 [...] 堂逐据以奏，谓臣无杀人斩首之情，抚按皆知之。讹传者，差官杨国治也。于是上命逮国治 [...] 上皆置之而勅抚按查为首倡乱者。至是抚臣刘易从以首恶王朝佐一人抵法。命即梟首。本处以儆众心，亦不复问余党也 [...] 临清人德之，为立祠祭焉。”

“Grand Coordinator” refers to 抚臣, a term synonymous to 巡抚 who are sent “from the central government to coordinate and supervise provincial-level agencies.” See Hucker, *A Dictionary of Official Titles in Imperial China*, 255.

⁷⁰ *Wanli di chao* 万历邸钞 (Yangzhou: Jiangsu guang ling gu ji ke yin chu ban she, 1991), 1164-1165.

The text is translated from “不遵本监杂粮十石以下及小本生意，免税条约 [...] 小民度日不前。”

arrows hitting two peasants were interpreted as a sign of aggression, *Ming shi lu* suggests that he had passed those orders in a frightened state. He had dealt with a mob of thirty-odd people in Tianjin, but they paled in comparison against the thousands of commoners who ran amok in Linqing. It was also mentioned earlier that he had an indeterminate number of followers who collected taxes for him, yet they did not appear during the riot.⁷¹ There are two equally possible factors, with the first being that his followers betrayed him or retreated at the sight of the protest, and the second, he was avoiding, most likely due to fear, to aggravate the situation by authorizing a brawl to occur. In fact, his actions in both Tianjin and Linqing reveal that he was inexperienced in communicating with large, hostile crowds, and often had to rely on the emperor for protection. Additionally, Ma Tang was recorded to have spoken only once to clear his name, implying that he wanted his words to clarify matters rather than setting the tone of the debates. Though seemingly an attempt of scapegoating that made him more untrustworthy to officials, Ma Tang declaring his innocence was a similar passive reaction to defend himself from falling into a more unfavorable position. While he did, in some sense, initiate the Linqing Incident, he was more of a victim rather than an aggressor by the end of the event.

Unexpected Praises

Was Ma Tang, then, an incompetent tax eunuch? Not exactly, for he demonstrated his worth in another area – diplomacy. In January of 1601, Ma Tang would serve as the bridge of

⁷¹ *Wanli di chao*, 1164.

The translation is paraphrased from “本监招募答应长随人。”

Here, Ma Tang created a job posting to recruit those who concede to following him long-term, suggesting that his group size was relatively small in the beginning. Nonetheless, it would not be out of the ordinary for them to have the manpower to establish control over the public.

communication between the imperial court and the Italian Jesuit Matteo Ricci, soon to be the first European to enter the Forbidden City. The tax eunuch first reported to the emperor that his tributes, various gifts to be presented to the court, and his belongings were properly examined and labeled, later receiving the decree to deliver these items to the capital.⁷² It appeared that Wanli had trusted Ma Tang in not only his capability to accomplish the task but also his judgment of the foreign products. Two months after this report, Beijing would formally receive tributes from Ricci that were sent under the supervision of Ma Tang. The Ministry of Rites, responsible for “managing visits by foreign dignitaries,” would oppose and claim that these foreign artifacts were “malevolent objects that should not enter the palace,” a warning that the emperor dismissed.⁷³ While the presence of Ricci took the spotlight, Ma Tang was pivotal in introducing him and his tributes to Beijing, a feat that no other tax eunuchs could imitate. The fact that he could, to some extent, initiate the conversation between Ricci and the imperial court suggested that Ma Tang had enough energy to manage affairs outside of his original duties.

After the brief encounter with the Jesuit, Ma Tang returned to collecting taxes in Tianjin, eventually rising in status to become the “Vice Director, employed by the emperor, supervising the taxation in Tianjin and other places, as well as the salt policies in Changlu 长芦 and other areas.”⁷⁴ He would continue to leave behind peculiar interactions, with one of them having him

⁷² *Ming shen zong shi lu*, 354.1a.

The translation is paraphrased from “甲戌，天津税监马堂奏，远夷利玛窦所贡方物，暨随身行李詔审已明，封记题知。上令方物解进玛窦件送入京，仍下部译审具奏。”

⁷³ *Ming shen zong shi lu*, 356.1a.

The text is paraphrased and translated from “万历二十九年二月庚午朔。天津河御用监少监马堂解进大西洋利玛窦进贡土物并行李。礼部曾典 [...] 而随身行李有神仙骨等物失。既称神仙，自能飞升，安得有骨？则唐韩愈所谓凶秽之余，不宜令入官禁者也。”

The “malevolent objects” addressed here most likely contained the crucifix, as the memorial addressed a peculiar “bone of deity” among the tribute Ricci presented.

“Ministry of Rites” refers to 礼部. See Hucker, *A Dictionary of Official Titles in Imperial China*, 306-307.

⁷⁴ *Ming shen zong shi lu*, 356.3b.

The text is translated from “督理天津等处税务，兼长芦等处塩政，御用监少监。”

appeal to Wanli to “stop imposing the collection of taxes on grains, firewood, labor and other related sections in Tianjin and Hejian 河间” in December 1604.⁷⁵ Tax eunuchs were often critiqued as people who cruelly took wealth away from the society, yet here was Ma Tang asking Wanli to generously exempt taxes for citizens in Tianjin. While this proposal was not the first of its kind, as Wanli was seen to encounter similar situations, it is nonetheless a rare one to be made, and certainly more surprising to see it come from a tax eunuch. A memorial sent from Tianjin a few months later would reveal that its residents were overjoyed after the emperor approved to provide relief and alleviate their hardships, producing “sounds of benevolent care.”⁷⁶

This event raises a few interesting observations. First, the reasons to cancel these taxes were either omitted or neglected in the report that Ma Tang had submitted, creating ambiguity in his motive, but Wanli had presumed that it was for removing some of the burdens of the people. The assumption was made based on prior experience, when the emperor approved the request of Liu Cheng 刘成, a tax eunuch from another region, to “consider the disasters and famine” and provide some exemptions.⁷⁷ Wanli accepting the suggestion of Ma Tang without asking him to provide a reason not only highlights the former’s trust in the latter but also indicates that both individuals demonstrated their concern for the wellbeing of their citizens. As such, the ecstatic atmosphere that erupted in Tianjin was an understandable phenomenon.

“Vice Director” refers to 少监, “a common title for 2nd tier executive officials of various agencies.” See Hucker, *A Dictionary of Official Titles in Imperial China*, 414.

⁷⁵ *Ming shen zong shi lu*, 403.2b.

The text is translated from “税监马堂请停天津河间等处米粮柴薪，肩挑背负等税。”

⁷⁶ *Ming shen zong shi lu*, 409.4a-b.

The text is translated from “直隶巡按马从聘奏，该天津税监马堂题奉钦，依米粮柴薪前已有旨不许征税以恤穷民，都着遵行。该衙门知道钦此。随即移文，税监及通行各府管税等衙门尽行免讫。风闻道路，万姓欢传，可谓有仁爱之声矣。”

⁷⁷ *Ming shen zong shi lu*, 393.5a.

The text is translated from “苏松税监刘成疏，乞轸念灾荒，稍宽商旅。奉旨前有旨，米粮柴薪民生日用之需不许征税，以昭恤灾德意。”

The second finding directly relates to the reaction of these locals: were they rejoicing for the emperor making the decision, or for the eunuch submitting the proposal? As the event was narrated by an official unrelated to the event, it is more reasonable to assume that the ovation was directed to the emperor, who was responsible for adopting this act, thereby reaffirming the ruler's superior status and his wise decisions. The diction of "benevolent care," reminiscent of positive Confucian values, further attests to that possibility. Yet should people have cheered for Ma Tang, it would be a significant and emotional moment for him, as it was in this same city that roughly thirty of its citizens greeted him with protest. If appreciativeness was indeed replacing their resentment, he would be a eunuch who was eventually accepted and had successfully reshaped their initial perception, an achievement that perhaps not many of his peers achieved. Regardless of whom the crowd had revered, it is necessary to recognize that Ma Tang had played an instrumental role in assisting the locals to create a somewhat better life.

Constant Criticisms

But from this point on, Ma Tang would not experience a moment of joy, for other officials would continue to reprimand him for being cruel and corrupt. A major factor that created this conversation was the relationship he had with Kang Ning 康宁, an appointed official patrolling the area from 1601 to 1609.⁷⁸ Ma Tang was first seen declaring Kang innocent from tricking another tax eunuch to "gather gangs and arm them with sticks to hoard taxes back and forth."⁷⁹ Yet over the years, the tax eunuch would work with the officer to expand his

⁷⁸ The period of activity of Kang Ning is based on the first and last dates that he appeared in *Ming shi lu*, which turns out to be the text that provides the most comprehensive information about him. He is most likely not a eunuch based on his job title, but there is no biographical information to support that claim.

⁷⁹ *Ming shen zong shi lu*, 363.2b.

administrative region and increase the amount of taxes he could collect.⁸⁰ This alliance raised the attention of the bureaucrats, who reported that “Kang Ning would employ tricks to fool Ma Tang, and Ma Tang would in turn use them to deceive the emperor.”⁸¹ They would eventually list the crimes of Kang Ning and Ma Tang, concluding that the emperor should “properly detain Kang Ning and others to punish these aggressors against the public.”⁸² Perhaps unable to handle the stress or fearful of recognizing his mistakes, Kang Ning later escaped from his post and would disappear from subsequent records, letting Ma Tang take all responsibilities. Although Ma Tang remained honest and admitted to having listened to Kang, Wanli did not seem to blame the tax eunuch much for his previous deeds and relationship.⁸³ He would continue to perform his tasks, as his collected tax revenues were seen redirected to “replenish military funding.”⁸⁴

Here, a pattern is increasingly noticeable to the extent that future scholars treated it as a weakness of the Wanli regime. While the eunuch has continued to rely on the emperor for support, the latter has simultaneously depended on and approved of methods that Ma Tang used to manage the regional affairs. For example, Ma Tang had once investigated and punished the local affluent merchant Shen Shixian 沈时显 and his group who were claimed to have “disrupted

The text is translated from “通湾税监张烨劾奏，巡役康宁拨置鱼苇税监王虎，横行无忌。今复招集棍徒往来抽税 [...] 天津税监马堂又言，康宁熟知鱼厂事务，竭力办采，为人中伤 [...]。”

⁸⁰ *Ming shen zong shi lu*, 419.6a.

The translation is paraphrased from “马堂贪纵特甚，听委官康宁并税及武清等不产银鱼地面，又增苇网等税目二万馀两。”

⁸¹ *Ming shen zong shi lu*, 419.9b.

The text is translated from “户科给事中姚文蔚言 [...] 是康宁谋以愚马堂，而堂又以之诳皇上也。”

⁸² *Ming shen zong shi lu*, 420.6b.

The text is translated from “仍将康宁敕臣等严拘，正法庶威。”

⁸³ *Ming shen zong shi lu*, 461.5a.

The translation is paraphrased from “庚申，天津太监马堂自奏，其参随康宁。上以康宁钻冒较尉，横肆贪暴，辄自奔逃，法纪何在，命会抚按官严提追赃，拟罪具奏。”

⁸⁴ *Ming shen zong shi lu*, 585.5b.

The text is translated from “丙辰，天津税监马堂奏，那解税银。得旨，所奏解部税银，尔即遵前旨，查催解监差官暂解户部一年，以充军饷。”

the codes on salt collection,” with Wanli endorsing his judgments.⁸⁵ Ma Tang was also proficient in collecting tax revenues to the extent that the emperor praised him for “eliminating old frauds and pleasing the people” during his early career, building an intimate relationship with him.⁸⁶ The faith that Wanli held for Ma Tang was to such a degree that the former ignored the suggestions of bureaucrats, betraying the Confucian ideal statecraft of having the emperor listen to their advice. As such, Wanli was seen as an emperor who had lost interest in listening to the officials while favoring the eunuchs in his later reign, causing the Ming regime to collapse. Ma Tang, one of his many trusted assistants, would disappear and become nameless, as he and his peers were grouped together and generalized as the henchmen of an inconsiderate government.

Conclusion

After the passing of Wanli in 1620, Ma Tang would finally be recalled to the capital under a decree by the replacing Taichang emperor that removed the mining taxes, becoming one of the tax eunuchs to remain in office for the longest period.⁸⁷ Over the course of Ma Tang’s appointment, there was “a slight increase in revenue” due to the efforts of him and his peers.⁸⁸ This profit, however, was deemed illegitimate in two ways. First, similar to the descriptions of

⁸⁵ *Ming shen zong shi lu*, 356.3b.

The text is translated from “马堂奏，申明豪商沈时显等，阻挠塩法，罚银一千两，并乞严饬豪强商僧及司府官吏。奉旨各犯追赎完日，依拟发落。尔宜仰体朝廷裕国爱民德意，禁约下人，不许侵越疆界因累地方。”

⁸⁶ *Ming shen zong shi lu*, 345.10a.

The text is translated from “天津税监马堂下原奏官詹锐奏，请及时征收新增监税。新增监税银三万两。极称马堂杜绝夙弊，人心乐愿。”

⁸⁷ *Ming guang zong shi lu* 明光宗实录, 2.2a.

The decree is paraphrased from “罢天下矿税。令旨先年开矿抽税，为三殿两宫未建帑藏空虚，权宜采用。近因辽东奴酋叛逆，户部已加派地亩钱粮，今将矿税尽行停止。其通湾等处税监张烨、马堂、胡滨、潘相、丘乘云等，都著撤回。”

⁸⁸ Miller, *State Versus Gentry in Late Ming Dynasty China*, 92.

the Linqing Incident, tax eunuchs were often recorded to have collected their revenue with force and violence, thereby generating conflicts and dissatisfaction. Second, they were alleged of corruption and remitting a very small percentage of what they had collected. Ma Tang was similarly accused, with Shandong Grand Coordinator Huang Kezuan 黄克缵 calculating that the “within seven years, the tax silver revenue hidden amounted to around one million and three hundred thousand taels.”⁸⁹ Although the validity of these numbers requires further support, Wanli must have deemed the work of the tax eunuchs important to dismiss these charges.

Reflecting on the above events that Ma Tang had participated in, whether willingly or not, from coming across unsatisfied crowds to meeting Matteo Ricci to becoming involved in tax affairs, it is safe to say that he has a rich profile that deserves further investigation. Through analyzing the ways in which his conduct is represented in the text, it becomes clear that he often shared a tense relationship with the public and the officials while trying to fulfill his duties, and was treasured by the emperor as a valuable asset. Moreover, as *Ming shi lu* is created by and for members of the court, these events are recorded with a top-down approach to present a narrative that focuses on the interactions related to the government and the throne rather than those happening elsewhere. Thus, the emphasis, though sometimes implicit in the form of the emperor ignoring the memorials, on the amicable relationship between Wanli and Ma Tang overshadowed how the latter is perceived in the public. The next chapter, using private sources from different historians and writers in the late Ming period, will fill up this gap by bringing forth their observations and commentaries on the activities and personalities of Ma Tang.

⁸⁹ *Ming shen zong shi lu*, 416.9a.

The text is translated from “山东巡抚黄克缵言，税监马堂每年抽取各项税银不下二十五万两，而一岁所进才七万八千两耳。约计七年之内，所隐匿税银一百三十万。乞量追其半以济河工之费。不报。”

Chapter 3: Ma Tang in Ming Private Sources

There is a considerable number of late Ming private texts that can benefit this research due to their ability to offer the voices of the authors, thereby producing a more intimate tone than the court documents. But unfortunately, textual evidence of this type on his activities with Kang Ning after 1601 is lacking, thus limiting this chapter to analyze how each individual had attempted to present Ma Tang in his early days. Each historian here held his perspective and insights that will produce an alternative, sometimes drastically different, narrative than the one presented in *Ming shi lu*. It is the goal of this chapter to bring forth these new images of Ma Tang through each of the sources, with two of them focusing on his actions in the Linqing Incident and two others that capture his conversations with Ricci.

Perpetrator in Linqing

The first entry of Ma Tang that deserves attention is in *Wu za zu* 五杂俎, a compilation of the notes of Ming academic Xie Zhaozhe 谢肇淛 containing “reflections upon reading books and analysis on logical reasonings, thoughts on contemporary political affairs and observations on culture.”⁹⁰ Published in the late 1610s, it was influential in Xie’s circle, with his peer Li Weizhen 李维桢 concluding the prologue with the following comments to indicate the values of this text:

It is often said that the ‘people who have a complete understanding of Heaven, on Earth and Humans are Confucians.’ This edition from Zaihang 在杭 has combined and incorporated all three aspects, and seeing it proves that it is a Confucian work indeed [...] With Zaihang’s wide scope encompassing everything, the text will enlighten people to increase their knowledge. Pan

⁹⁰ Liao Honghong 廖虹虹, “Xie Zhaozhe *Wu za zu* ban ben shu lue” 谢肇淛《五杂俎》版本述略 [A brief introduction on the versions of Xie Zhaozhe’s *Wu za zu*], *Gu dian wen xue zhi shi* 古典文学知识, no. 4 (2004): 115.

The text is translated from “该书不仅有读书心得和事理分析，还记载了政局时事和风土人情。”

Fangkai 潘方凯, a friend, read and took a liking to it; not daring to hide it from publications, he quickly had the woodblocks carved so that the public could cherish this work.⁹¹

The quotation employed in the first part of this paragraph is a reference to the teachings of Yang Xiong 扬雄, a Western Han dynasty Confucian scholar.⁹² Both Xie and Li were envisioning *Wu za zu* to be a text embedded with Confucian moral lessons that will be beneficial towards education, whether the readers want to learn about Confucian philosophy or the author's opinions on current affairs. On top of that, these remarks implied that its contents are authentic and thus are historically significant. With the targeted audience being both the literati and the public, inserting elements of Confucianism as part of the commentary in the narration can evoke a sense of familiarity by seeing how ancient thoughts can tie into contemporary events.

The text is divided into five *juans*: Heaven, Earth, Human, Objects, and Events. Ma Tang and Wang Chaozuo, key participants of the Linqing Incident, appear in the last *juan* when Xie is discussing how the eunuchs have, in relation to taxes, impacted the state politics of previous dynasties and in the contemporary period. The author first sets the tone by describing that “eunuchs were deployed across the state, tax duties were increasingly heavier, and their lackeys were expanding their influences, causing the merchants to remain abhorrent to the eunuchs and lackeys who nearly forced them out of business.”⁹³ In this depiction, the presence of eunuchs and their taxing activities were responsible for the degradation of the living conditions of merchants,

⁹¹ Xie Zhaozhe 谢肇淛, *Wu za zu* 五杂俎 (Late 1610s), Prologue 序.4a.

The text is translated from “语曰：通天地人曰儒。在杭此编，兼三才而用之，即目之儒家可矣 [...] 孰与在杭广大悉备发人蒙覆，益人意智哉。友人潘方凯见而好之，不敢秘诸帙中，亟授剞劂，与天下共宝焉。”

Zaihang 在杭 is the courtesy name, a more common way to refer to each other in Imperial China, of Xie Zhaozhe.

⁹² Yang Xiong 扬雄, *Yangzi fa yan* 扬子法言 (Early 1790s), 9.7a.

The original quotation from Yang is: “通天地人曰儒。”

⁹³ Xie, *Wu za zu*, 15.49b.

The text is translated from “内使四出，税益加重，爪牙广布，商旅疾首蹙额，几于断绝矣。”

who were integral to the late sixteenth century Ming economy. The castrated servants, on the other hand, were an illiterate population who ruin the lives of others and abuse their powers. To signify the divide between the eunuchs and other members of the society, Xie deepens the othering effect in the following paragraph: “those living under Heaven do not complain about the imperial servants collecting taxes and goods, but instead despise them deep to their bones.”⁹⁴

The Linqing Incident, according to *Wu za zu*, began when Ma Tang started collecting taxes with his several hundred “young hooligans capturing people in the daytime,” disrupting the merchants’ business. Wang Chaozuo, furious at the development, led the rioters and set fire upon the eunuch’s residence, leaving thirty-seven of his men in the ashes as a warning for Ma Tang to restrain himself in the future.⁹⁵ Wang’s actions were, as Xie had narrated, “incited by righteousness that disregards his safety,” a description often used for people who fought for a just cause.⁹⁶ Yet as he was the primary culprit, Wang was expected to receive punishments, and with much persuasions from the officials who sided with Ma Tang, he was eventually given the verdict of death. On the other hand, regarding Ma Tang who had experienced the wrath of the public, Xie employed a Confucian quotation to describe his situation: “If he is punished for small matters to avoid making greater mistakes, this is the petty person’s blessing.”⁹⁷

⁹⁴ Xie, *Wu za zu*, 15.50a-50b.

The text is translated from “盖我朝内臣，目不识字者多，尽凭左右拨置一二驱棍，挟之于股掌上，以鱼肉小民 [...] 故天下不怨内使之掊克，而恨此辈深入骨髓也。”

⁹⁵ Xie, *Wu za zu*, 15.50b.

The text is translated from “马堂初以榷税至临清，鸱张尤甚。出入数百人，皆郡国无赖少年，白昼攫人，井邑骚然，商贾罢市。州民王朝佐，不胜忿，率众噪而攻之，火其居。堂仅以身免，其党三十七人，尽毙煨烬中。堂自此戢矣。”

⁹⁶ Xie, *Wu za zu*, 15.51a-51b.

The text is translated from “其激于义，奋不顾身，一也。”

⁹⁷ Xie, *Wu za zu*, 15.51a.

The text is translated from “曩时，所谓小惩而大戒，小人之福也。”

Another way to translate this sentence is “If he is corrected in small matters and commanded in great ones, this is the petty person’s blessing.” While this meaning may also make sense, I decided to modify the sentence to present the message in a more straightforward fashion.

There are a few things to note in this account, with the first one being that the date for the incident is missing from Xie's narration. As this text was not strictly historical and did not emphasize the author's comments and thoughts, it seemed understandable that time was not of major concern to Xie, evident from the phenomenon that he used mainly the name of the dynasties to indicate time. However, it is also possible that the author wanted to create a sentiment, a way of viewing the eunuchs as inferior and petty people, that transcends temporal boundaries, hence forsaking any mentions of time. Relating to this proposal, the quotation used to characterize Ma Tang as a "petty person" originated from the Confucian Classic *Yijing* 易经, the *Book of Changes*, where the term was defined as someone who "is not ashamed not to be humane, is not fearful of being in the wrong. If he sees no advantage he doesn't strive, if he is not forced he doesn't correct himself."⁹⁸ These recalls to Confucian concepts are arguably the elements that the friends of Xie recognized in making this piece a masterwork that deserves publications, as they are both informative and educational. In fact, they become a platform for Xie to propose his ideology that it is up to the educated to make the amends in a Confucian society, as he stated in his conclusion that "the disaster of eunuchs, though they lack awareness on goodness in their nature, is created by our generation; the bureaucrats and officials must not refuse in taking this responsibility."⁹⁹

The next text analyzed, placing more focus on Wang Chaozuo's activities, is *Yong chuang xiao pin* 涌幢小品, a work that Ming historian Zhu Guozhen 朱国桢 finished in 1621. Similar to *Wu za zu*, this work encompasses "politics, economy, people, cultural practices,

See Zhu Xi, *The Original Meaning of the Yijing: Commentary on the Scripture of Change*, trans. Joseph A. Adler (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019), 292.

⁹⁸ Zhu Xi, *The Original Meaning of the Yijing*, 292.

⁹⁹ Xie, *Wu za zu*, 15.53a.

The text is translated from "宦官之祸，虽天性之无良，而亦我辈让成之，辅相大臣，不得辞其责也。"

religion and other records, assuming an important position in the ‘historical jottings’ produced during the late Ming era.”¹⁰⁰ Qing scholars commented that it “also contains textual information so that it does not distort the genuineness. In the section discussing events occurring in the Ming era, the narration is supported further by facts.”¹⁰¹ Zhu had also participated in editing other historical works like *Huang ming da zheng ji* 皇明大政记, meaning that provided his background and familiarity with writing history, this text is most likely also quite authentic.

Though similar to Xie in that the Linqing Incident was described simultaneously with another event, Zhu had decided to dedicate more space to narrate the event, this time with another civil movement in Suzhou. The story of Wang Chaozuo came with more specificities, introducing that he was a vendor who came across Ma Tang in 1599 when the tax eunuch and his hundreds of hooligans were recorded to commit the following actions:

In daylight, they move to arrest people on the streets. If these delinquents witness anyone from good families who are wealthy, they would confiscate half of their properties and force both men and women into service. For those who carried small amounts of grain and short lengths of fabric to trade, they will move forward to confiscate the items without hesitation [...] Due to their activities, families of moderate means and upward are mostly ruined, and the surrounding areas, becoming empty, saw a halt in business activities.¹⁰²

¹⁰⁰ Zhang Xiufeng 张秀峰, “Ming Zhu Guozhen ji *Yong chuang xiao pin*” 明朱国桢辑《涌幢小品》 [Ming Zhu Guozhen’s *Yong chuang xiao pin*], *Lanzhou wen li xue yuan xue bao* 兰州文理学院学报 32, no. 3 (2016): ii.

The text is translated from “涉及到政治、经济、人物、风俗、宗教等记载，在明代后期的笔记小说中占有重要地位。”

“Historical jottings” is a type of literature that is relatively short but contains detailed information in a form like novels.

¹⁰¹ Yong Rong 永瑤, *Si ku quan shu zong mu ti yao* 四库全书总目提要 (Shanghai: The Commercial Press, 1933), 2685.

The text is translated from “亦间有考证。其是非不甚失真。在明季说部之中。犹为质实。”

¹⁰² Zhu Guozhen 朱国桢, *Yong chuang xiao pin* 涌幢小品 (Late 1620s), 9.31a-31b.

The text is translated from “白昼手银铛通衢。睨良家子富有力者，籍其业之半，佣夫里妇，负斗粟尺布往贸易者，直搯而夺之 [...] 于是中家以上大率破，远近萧然罢市矣。”

Wang Chaozuo, infuriated by the raids that negatively affected the community, decided to knock on the doors of Ma Tang's office at midnight with a horsewhip and ask for a meeting. The locals cheered at this sight, with thousands more joining him. Meanwhile, Ma Tang, not daring to go outside, ordered soldiers to shoot "strong arrows" at the crowd, causing a few injuries. Seeing that people are now furious with the tax eunuch, Wang Chaozuo roused them to action by breaking open and setting fire upon the office. Ma Tang was lucky to escape due to his "trusted subordinate" Wang Yang carrying him out, but thirty-seven of his followers, noted to be "the thieves of the surrounding counties, with tattoos on their arms still fresh" instead of being "young hooligans" as *Wu za zu* observed, had died. The emperor would later order his officials to first arrest Wang Yang then punish Wang Chaozuo. While the interrogators wished to record everyone who participated, the commoner stood out to take full responsibility for inciting the event and was eventually sentenced to death.¹⁰³ Zhu went on to provide the following details:

[Wang Chaozuo] remained resolute and straightened his neck to await the blade. It was the twenty-sixth day of the seventh month. The sky turned dark in the middle of the day. Spectators numbered to several thousands, all of them sighing and weeping. Chaozuo had no descendants, and with his mother and wife were still alive, the Grand Masters of the county offered them compensations. The merchants of Qingyuan 清源, feeling grateful to Chaozuo, offered gifts to his tomb annually afterward. The flames of the eunuch, meanwhile, had been doused. With the natives constantly thinking of Chaozuo, they constructed a memorial hall to worship him.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰³ Zhu, *Yong chuang xiao pin*, 9.31b-32a.

The text is paraphrased and translated from "凌晨，仗马捶挝中使门，请见。州民欢呼，荷担随以万数。堂惧不敢出，则令戟士乘墉发强弩，伤数人。众益沸。朝佐攘臂大呼，破户而入，纵火焚其署。堂有心腹王炆者，时为守备，负而趋以免。毙其党三十七人，检视之，皆郡国诸偷，臂上黥墨犹新也 [...] 上怒王炆以救不蚤逮系，下朝佐御史治，时欲尽录诸胁从者。朝佐曰，死，吾分耳，吾实为首，奈何株及他姓。"

The tattoos are a sign of the men's status as criminals or convicts.

¹⁰⁴ Zhu, *Yong chuang xiao pin*, 9.32a.

The text is translated from "临刑崛强，挺颈待刃。时七月二十有六日也，天地昼晦。观者数千人，无不叹息泣下。朝佐无子，有母及妻，郡大夫厚恤之。清源诸大贾，心德朝佐，岁时馈遗不绝。而中使焰顿戢。故州民益思朝佐不置，立祠祀之。"

Qingyuan 清源 is another name for Linqing.

One of the most outstanding aspects of Zhu's rich account is how he captured, or rather described since he likely did not witness the event firsthand, the complex emotions that Wang Chaozuo and the local population had exhibited during the aftermath of the Linqing Incident. Throughout the story, Wang is seen as a warrior fighting against social unjust, putting his life at risk without wavering to power nor fate. His bravery contrasts nicely with the eunuch's state of fright during their confrontation, which reinforces his characterization of righteousness. The strength he demonstrated is instrumental in evoking different emotional reactions from the public, whether it be their initial excitement or later remorse, moving them to become active participants and expressing their voices in his life events. Zhu also interestingly included a quick observation of the darkening sky, reflecting the sorrow of the audience and transferring that mood into real life to help his readers sympathize and understand Wang as an unlucky victim.

In contrast, notice how Ma Tang is treated as an antagonist who started the scene but eventually faded to the background, with the emperor and other officials becoming the new authorities. The tax eunuch was not only absent from determining Wang's execution but was also witnessed to change his heart and restrict his conduct. The above descriptions contribute to this final message: Wang Chaozuo is a role model who fought against the government to improve the lives of his and his neighbors, while Ma Tang is just one of the many enemies against the people. Bear in mind that this interpretation, seemingly anti-government, still fits in a Confucian narrative, with Wang being a courageous person who "sees what is right to do and does it, without being intimidated by-physical force or threats, which is why he does not fear."¹⁰⁵

¹⁰⁵ Confucius and Slingerland, *Analects*, 96.

The quotation used here is a commentary to the following saying in *Analects*: "The Master said, 'The wise are not confused, the Good do not worry, and the courageous do not fear,'" with Wang's emotional state throughout these events fitting the last part.

Conflicts with the Christian

In both accounts, Ma Tang is treated as someone who initiated a conflict but learned his lesson and became more cautious with his subsequent actions. *Wanli ye huo bian* 万历野获编, also known as the *Miscellaneous Notes of Wanli*, is a historical text completed by Ming dynasty scholar-official Shen Defu 沈德符 in 1619 that would somewhat contradict this statement. Shen had made an effort to guarantee that his narration of included events is authentic, as he vouched that the “information heard and seen are all personally obtained in the life of Defu.”¹⁰⁶

Ma Tang is mentioned three times in this source. One of them resembles the entry of Matteo Ricci’s entrance to the Forbidden City, which received objections from the Ministry of Rites, from *Ming shi lu*. Another one of them, added as part of a supplement by Shen after he first completed, names a group of eunuchs, with Ma Tang being the first on the list, who were credited to “spread poison” across the state.¹⁰⁷ The last instance on this list, the one that should attract the most attention, is spotted in Shen’s biography of Ricci when Ma Tang was seen to interrogate the foreign party in Tianjin from traveling to the capital, “keeping all the unnamed treasures and giving only the portraits of Jesus and Virgin Mary as tributes.”¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁶ Shen Defu 沈德符, *Wanli ye huo bian* 万历野获编 (Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 1959), 4.

The text is translated from “然耳剽目击，皆德符有生来所亲得也。”

¹⁰⁷ Shen, *Wanli ye huo bian*, 819.

The text is translated from “若天津之马堂，福建之高棠 [...] 几遍天下，其播毒皆杨伯仲也。”

Yang, referring to Yang Rong 杨荣, is one of the first eunuchs sent out to excavate mines, but was claimed to use this opportunity to “search for gems and disturb the various foreign yi” (The text is translated from the same source on the same page “今上二十六年，又遣中使杨荣入滇，开采诸矿，因而搜取宝石，诈扰诸夷。”).

¹⁰⁸ Shen, *Wanli ye huo bian*, 783.

The text is translated from “入都时在今上庚子年，途经天津，为税监马堂所谁何，尽留其未名之宝，仅以天主像及天主母像为献。”

This moment was also recorded in *Ming shen zong shi lu*, 354.1a, but with fewer details on the foreigners and their tributes.

At the outset, it appeared that the tax eunuch wanted to find causes to legitimize his desire to profit from the Jesuits, thus interrupting their journey. Yet Ma Tang had certainly returned at least portions of the valuables he confiscated back to the Jesuits, for they presented, on top of the religious paintings, “one large clock [...] one smaller desk clock [...] a handsome edition of Abraham Ortelius’s cartographic masterwork, *Theatrum Orbis Terrarum* [...], and a small harpsichord.”¹⁰⁹ The conditions that changed the fate of these items are addressed later in this chapter, but it is somewhat strange for Shen to have omitted their names, grouping them as “unnamed treasures,” and neglected how Ma Tang returned them. After all, Shen had mentioned that his friend, Zhu Guozuo 朱国祚, was working in the Ministry of Rites and responsible for objecting against the tributes that Ricci sent to the palace.¹¹⁰ This evidence implies that Shen had some knowledge of these novel artifacts, but consciously downplayed their presence to focus on the fact that Ma Tang had taken them away. Shen had decided that between listing the objects while describing their whereabouts and blaming the tax eunuch to have coercively claimed them, the latter story that demonstrated the rude and greedy nature of Ma Tang was more enticing to his readers. There is a foundation for this call for sympathy, as Shen confessed that he was once neighbors with Ricci and praised him to be a fascinating person, meaning that the Ming official recognized the talents of the European literato.¹¹¹ This admiration is perhaps enough for Shen to shape Ma Tang into an antagonist, allowing the readers to sympathize with the foreigners.

¹⁰⁹ Jonathan D. Spence, *The Memory Palace of Matteo Ricci* (New York: Penguin Books, 1985), 195.

¹¹⁰ Shen, *Wanli ye huo bian*, 784.

The information is obtained from “万历二十九年二月庚午朔，天津河御用监少监马堂，解进大西洋利玛窦进贡土物并行李，时吾乡朱文恪公，以吏部右侍郎掌礼部尚书事，上疏曰 [...]” The following text would be the memorial that is also recorded in *Ming shen zong shi lu*, 356.1a.

Wenke 文恪 is the posthumous name for Zhu Guozuo.

¹¹¹ Shen, *Wanli ye huo bian*, 783.

The translation is paraphrased from “曾与卜邻，果异人也。”

Although Shen's negative portrayal of Ma Tang is arguably limited, he still held strong opinions on the eunuchs and listed examples relating to their ill conduct in a specific *juan* titled "Eunuchs." Shen had found the presences of tax eunuchs and mining taxes troubling, as he claimed that "the whole world does not have any remaining pieces of land that is pure."¹¹² The eunuchs overseeing the mine excavations are seen as vermin devastating their jurisdictions, with Shen reinforcing this unfriendly image by comparing Ma Tang's colleague Chen Zeng and his followers to scattering animals.¹¹³ In more general instances, tax eunuchs were described as ruthless people who got rid of competitions and obstacles in various ways:

Impeachment against governors and poisoning the officials, the tax eunuchs saw them as normal matters. For those whose ranks are below the Prefects, if they say that they wish to interrupt, the eunuchs would send Imperial Bodyguards to arrest them; if they say that the eunuchs are indulgent and greedy, they will begin to chase after thieves. The eunuchs essentially saw everyone else as slaves.¹¹⁴

For the eunuchs in the palace, Shen had criticized their personal lives. Initially a taboo in the early Ming, eunuchs were more commonly seen to be on friendly, arguably romantic, terms with women, mostly concubines from the palace, and would often marry them.¹¹⁵ As eunuchs were men without their manhood, their intimate relationship with women was incomprehensible for Shen, which added more fuel to his hostile language against the castrated servants. In

¹¹² Shen, *Wanli ye huo bian*, 175.

The text is translated from "矿税流毒，宇内已无尺寸净地。"

¹¹³ Shen, *Wanli ye huo bian*, 176.

The translation is paraphrased from "增不胜愧悔，一夕雉经死。名下狐鼠惧罪，即时鸟兽散去。"

¹¹⁴ Shen, *Wanli ye huo bian*, 174.

The text is translated from "参督抚，鸩按臣，视为恒事。至于守令以下，但云阻挠，即遣缇骑。但云贪肆，即行追贼。直奴隶视之而已。"

"Prefects" is used to represent 守令. See Hucker, *A Dictionary of Official Titles in Imperial China*, 433.

¹¹⁵ Shen, *Wanli ye huo bian*, 158.

The text is paraphrased from "太祖取内官极严，凡阉人娶妻者，有剥皮之刑[...] 今中贵授室者甚众，亦有与娼妇交好，因而娶妇者。"

If one were to directly translate the latter part of this passage, the term that Shen used to describe the women would be equivalent to "whores."

retrospect, the words Shen used to portray Ma Tang and his actions in Ricci's biography are slightly less severe than the ones he employed in this *juan* specifically targeting the eunuchs. His absence in the "Eunuchs" *juan* of Shen's text implies that his deeds, though nonetheless disruptive, were insignificant or not as outstanding when compared to his contemporaries.

If anything, the most confrontational words used to capture the behaviors of Ma Tang were not found in any of the Ming works above but were instead seen in *Fonti Ricciane*, an agglomeration of sources regarding the life of Matteo Ricci. Within this collection is *Storia Dell'Introduzione del Cristianesimo in Cina*, a memoir containing the everyday interactions of Ricci that is divided into two volumes based on chronology, with the latter half dedicated to the events that occurred between 1598 and 1611. There is undeniable value in examining his works, as he was one of the only people who have directly recorded his interactions with Ma Tang while ensuring that he "was a conscientious writer and that his work is reliable throughout."¹¹⁶

Ricci's original texts were Italian, but there are now modern resources to overcome the language barrier. Taiwan publishers had published a Chinese translated version, historian Ronnie Po-Chia Hsia included thirty primary documents translated from Italian to English in his *Matteo Ricci and the Catholic Mission to China: A Short History with Documents* and journalist Michela Fontana produced *Matteo Ricci: A Jesuit in the Ming Court*, an enriched translation of the Italian original. This essay will consult all of the translated versions interchangeably.

Ricci met Ma Tang first in Linqing, where the Jesuit learned of the eunuch's deeds last year and realized that he was a troublesome person who "asserted that no one had more power

¹¹⁶ H. Kroes, review of *Storia dell'Introduzione del Cristianesimo in Cina, scritta da Matteo Ricci S. J. Parte I: Libri I-III*, by Pasquale M. D'Elia S.J., *Monumenta Serica*, 13 (1948): 415.

than he did at the court of Wanli.”¹¹⁷ Their real conflict came after Wanli’s lack of response to Ma Tang’s memorial that had a list of tributes from Ricci, causing the eunuch to develop ill sentiments to the missionaries. He finally panicked and barged into Ricci’s temporary residence in Tianjin with his “entire court, like assassins, numbering about two hundred persons,” suspecting that the foreigner had hidden some priceless gems and wished to obtain them.¹¹⁸ The atmosphere was further intensified when the eunuch discovered a crucifix and thought it was “a fetish that [the Ricci had] made to kill [his] emperor.”¹¹⁹ Even as Ricci explained the history of the object, Ma Tang remained suspicious and attempted to take away several items, including a chalice that he immediately returned after hearing the protests of the Jesuit. It was not until months after that the emperor ordered Ma Tang to let Ricci bring his tributes to the capital, forcing the servant to return the rest of the items to the foreigners and allow them to travel freely.

The tone of the text strongly suggests the distaste that Ricci and his fellow Jesuits directed to Ma Tang.¹²⁰ The eunuch had demonstrated not corruption, but instead unchecked desires and uncontrolled emotions, allowing the foreigner to describe the eunuch as an “ignorant” person.¹²¹ Coupled with his claim that he had a close relationship with the emperor, the appearance of the eunuch was not a pleasant addition to the journey of the missionaries, since they disliked and were fearful of his interruptions and wrath.

¹¹⁷ Michela Fontana, *Matteo Ricci: A Jesuit in the Ming Court* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2011), 179.

¹¹⁸ Ronnie Po-Chia Hsia, *Matteo Ricci and the Catholic Mission to China: A Short History with Documents* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 2016), 95.

The Chinese translation uses “强盗,” meaning robbers, to describe those two hundred men. See Liu Junyu 刘俊余, and Wang Yuchuan 王玉川, *Limadou Zhongguo chuan jiao shi* 利玛窦中国传教史 [The history of Ricci’s proselytization in China], vol. 2 (Taipei: Guang qi wen hua shi ye, 1986), 2:340.

¹¹⁹ Hsia, *Matteo Ricci and the Catholic Mission to China*, 95.

¹²⁰ While I have used only Chinese and English translations, the fact that they both contained spiteful tone and strong diction against Ma Tang suggests that the original text contained similar emotions.

¹²¹ Hsia, *Matteo Ricci and the Catholic Mission to China*, 95.

Yet due to the text employing such strong dictions, there is a small possibility that Ricci was narrating from a biased perspective and that Ma Tang had those behaviors because he was concerned with the security of the state. One instance that may support this argument is when the eunuch confiscated some books on mathematics, among which contained Euclid's *Elements of Geometry*, on the basis that studying this subject was prohibited and would face execution.¹²² In a sense, Ma Tang was following the law verbatim to prevent Ricci from facing any punishments, and he had intended or made it appear that he had the intention, to ask the emperor what to do with these books.¹²³ While he had also threatened to "have [the Jesuits] expelled from China in chains," it was likely due to his distrust against the foreigners and their religion.¹²⁴ Since these events happened after he had experienced a major cultural shock, Ricci's explanation was understandably not sufficient to ease the eunuch.

Thus, a new interpretation of their interactions is born. The eunuch, raised in a traditional Ming society and exposed to the political atmosphere during his time in the Imperial Household, felt uneasy but did his best at first when connecting with the foreigner, whom himself heard horrid tales of the eunuch and his kind and remained alert when the two parties came into contact. When disagreements arose and neither groups wanted to back down, one side had to take the blame; from the perspectives of Ricci and the Jesuits, who were responsible for writing

¹²² Fontana, *Matteo Ricci*, 183.

Both the original and the translated version from Liu include a bracketed annotation stating that this law was not obeyed by anyone nor observed anymore. Fontana also notes this issue in her *Matteo Ricci*, 183.

¹²³ Liu and Wang, *Limadou Zhongguo chuan jiao shi*, 2:345.

According to the Chinese translation, Ma Tang created a label for this box of confiscated books: "Tax eunuch Ma Tang has discovered these books in the baggage of foreigner Ricci. Because they talk about science, according to national laws they are prohibited books. They are kept in this storage temporarily for now to wait for another memorial asking for the Emperor's decision." (The text is translated from "税使马堂在外国人利玛窦的行李中找到这些书籍。因为是讲数学的，按国法是禁书。今暂寄存此库，以待另上奏章，向皇帝请示。")

Fontana also mentioned the presence of the label but provided a different read, suggesting that Ma Tang held those books "with the intention of using them as evidence against the Jesuits at the right moment." See Fontana, *Matteo Ricci*, 183.

¹²⁴ Fontana, *Matteo Ricci*, 182.

the texts in *Fonti Ricciane*, Ma Tang was the person who created the mess and an easily established antagonist who was an obstacle they overcame in their path to success.

Conclusion

Four “Ma Tangs” emerged from each of the texts analyzed above. In *Wu za zu*, he is considered a petty person who learned his lessons the hard way. In *Yong chuang xiao pin*, he is a minor character who agitated the public and caused tragedy to occur in his precinct. *Wanli ye huo bian* uses him as a tool to both garner sympathy for Ricci and exhibit the tax eunuch’s greediness, all the while showcasing the controversial lives of other eunuchs. Finally, *Storia Dell’Introduzione del Cristianesimo in Cina* raises above these portrayals and present Ma Tang as an irredeemable eunuch unwilling to change his opinions of the European envoy. Each of these sources had their perspectives and understandings of the events they chose to narrate, but there was one thing the authors had in common: they wanted to establish Ma Tang as a fuse that sparked troubles for people to overcome, a prologue to significant events, and a eunuch who would receive only criticisms. Their unanimous agreement to present the castrated servant as an unlikeable character through the use of literary skills reinforces the negative impressions that he may have created among the public and overshadows his activities in the latter stage of his post.

Apart from Ricci’s records that are reserved for the Europeans, the Ming private sources are mostly meant for contemporary and future literati, resulting in a potentially narrow readership. To further spread these images of the tax eunuch, the local gazetteers rise to become the next proponents that take on this role, as the next section demonstrates.

Chapter 4: Ma Tang in Ming Gazetteers

Imperial Chinese history professor Joseph R. Dennis defined a gazetteer as “a cumulative record of a territorial unit published in book format, generally by a local government, and arranged by topics such as topography, institutions, population, taxes, biographies, and literature.”¹²⁵ The format of these local records bears a sense of professionalism, and their contents are generally restricted to local events, thus having a narrow focus that reveals more details in their narrations. Though constrained to the literate group once again, gazetteers have bigger potential to attract more readers, as they are necessary assets that reveal the history of a locality through introducing important people, significant events, distinct landmarks, and more to both the court bureaucrats and local governments. Furthermore, there are cases when the editors of these gazetteers indicated in their prefaces that they wished to have a larger audience to read their work, with local Confucian schools also tending to keep a copy of these editions.¹²⁶ Knowing that they can have a broader influence, the compilers had to ensure that their narratives were accurate by the standards of Confucian literati circles. This phenomenon meant that in describing the events and people, the good deeds of the Confucian officials are magnified, and other actions conducted by other parties, including Ma Tang, are either neglected or criticized.

Up until the end of the Ming dynasty in 1644, there are a total of five gazetteers that mentioned the name of the eunuch, all of which are included in the biography of another official.¹²⁷ Considering that he was only active during the late Ming era in mostly Linqing and Tianjin, it is interesting that officials with different places of origination would encounter him,

¹²⁵ Joseph R. Dennis, *Writing, Publishing, and Reading Local Gazetteers in Imperial China, 1100–1700* (Cambridge: Harvard University Asia Center, 2015), 1.

¹²⁶ Dennis, *Writing, Publishing, and Reading Local Gazetteers in Imperial China*, 255.

¹²⁷ This paper uses *Erudition*, an electronic database containing Chinese historical documents and gazetteers from the Tang dynasty up to the early Republican era, to search for gazetteer records.

resulting in two entries collected from Jiangsu and one of each from Fujian, Shandong, and Shanxi provinces. As a rather desired by-product, more readers would gain knowledge about their lives and, as a minor addition, become aware of the tax eunuch. But because each of these entries is referring to a specific person, descriptions of Ma Tang would also correspondingly become limited, as the officials would only have one instance of interacting with the eunuch, with the more frustrating matter being that the time during which the two parties meet is not recorded. Even then, analyzing how Ma Tang appears in these texts should provide another understanding of how contemporaries scholars and historians thought of his role in history.

The Military Commandment

Of the five biographical entries, only one of them introduces an official whose educational background is not mentioned and is the only person to have received an unnatural death. *Laizhou fu zhi* 莱州府志, the prefectorial gazetteer for Laizhou, a county in Shandong province, is the earliest of these works containing Ma Tang to appear in the public, being published between 1604 and 1605, and it presented none other than Wang Yang, the Linqing Commandment during the Linqing Incident. His biography is short: “Wang Yang. Guard and Assistant Commander in Laizhou and was promoted to Commandment in Linqing. Arrested because of the provoked commotion that the tax eunuch Ma Tang caused. Died due to Imperial Guards; was wronged at the time.”¹²⁸ But there is a slight difference between the narratives that *Ming shi lu* and *Yong chuang xiao pin* presented and the one that this gazetteer illustrated, in that

¹²⁸ *Laizhou fu zhi* 莱州府志 (1604), 5.25b.

The text is translated from “王炘，莱州卫指挥僉事，升临清守备。以税使马堂激变，被逮。死锦衣卫，时冤之。”

there is no third person involved in the apprehension of Wang Yang in the latter document, whereas the former texts indicated that there was a motive for Ma Tang to report the Commandment and that Wanli had a reason to do so. The gazetteer also did not mention Wang Yang saving Ma Tang in the midst of chaos, though the possible intention there is to reduce their contacts to simplify their relationship and story. Concise as it may be, it is a powerful biography for the readers as they learn that Wang Yang was accused unjustly because of the tax eunuch's actions in the Linqing Incident. If anything, the animosity directed to Ma Tang exists quietly.

The Educated Literati

The remaining four gazetteers here each showcases a new bureaucrat. *Changshu xian si zhi* 常熟县私志, produced during the Wanli era in Jiangsu province, introduces Gu Yuncheng 顾云程. *Weinan xian zhi* 渭南县志, published right after the Wanli era in Shanxi province, presents Yang Guangxun 杨光训. Six years after Chongzhen, the last emperor of the Ming dynasty, ascended to throne, *Haicheng xian zhi* 海澄县志 became available to mainly the people of Fujian province, featuring information on Wen Ruzhang 温如璋. Finally, in 1642, *Wu xian zhi* 吴县志, also with a focus on Jiangsu province, records the life of Yan Yipeng 严一鹏.

Peculiarly, the hostile emotions directed to Ma Tang, while still present in the four other gazetteer entries, were not emphasized as much. Rather, they began to follow a similar format of having the tax eunuch make a quick appearance and using identical diction to demonstrate his violent actions in the biographies of the scholar-officials. This transition occurred partly because these new characters are relatively successful in their careers, meaning that there were more discussions on their positive deeds and contributions to their jurisdictions. In these descriptions,

however, several commonalities, small but important, emerge and begin to construct a new narrative that minimizes the presence and role that Ma Tang had in Ming society, placing the eunuch in a stereotype with no room to break free.

These similarities are easy to spot, with the first of them being that all four officials are educated Confucian literati, evident from the fact that they received the title of *jinshi* 进士 from the civil service examinations, which is the highest degree obtainable to guarantee them “high political appointments.”¹²⁹ To help readers gain awareness of these outstanding individuals, it was important to lay out their academic achievements to acknowledge that they are qualified and competent for their jobs. In specific cases, the stories prior to their involvement in the civil service examination are included to serve as motivating factors for the officials to rise above others. *Changshu xian si zhi* highlights an interesting anecdote from the early years of Gu Yuncheng: Gu would boast about becoming a *jinshi*, and if a diviner he approached did not tell him that same thing, Gu would, without hesitation, spit on the face of the diviner.¹³⁰ *Wu xian zhi*, on the other hand, focuses briefly on the tragic life that Yan Yipeng had before taking the exams, when “his clothes could not cover his entire body and he could not have a second meal in the same day.”¹³¹ These pieces of contextual information are important for allowing the readers to hold high expectations for the depicted individuals when they assume office.

On a related note, the second trait shared between the gazetteer entries is that the featured officials, apart from encountering Ma Tang, share a similar experience of providing humanitarian

¹²⁹ Benjamin Elman, *A Cultural History of Civil Examinations in Late Imperial China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 8.

¹³⁰ *Changshu xian si zhi* 常熟县私志 (1617), 14.29b.

The translation is paraphrased from “少自许进士，问日者，不以进士对，必唾其面。”

¹³¹ *Wu xian zhi* 吴县志 (1642), 44.45b.

The text is translated from “衣不蔽体，日不再食。”

and or financial aid in times of crisis. Gu Yuncheng has the most detailed accounts, as he was seen to both converse with the local merchants on the prices of grains and, when he was overseeing matters in Jiangxi province, make decisions on the policies of agricultural products, resulting in “no dead bodies in surrounding counties.”¹³² *Weinan xian zhi* indicated that Yang Guangxun, immediately after arriving in Nanchong 南充 in Sichuan province, had asked about the local conditions, and received praises from the people within a month.¹³³ Wen Ruzhang, as shown in his records, was seen donating his salary and medicine during an epidemic.¹³⁴ Last but not least, Yan Yipeng, having witnessed the hardships of the locals in Zhejiang province, decided to distribute tens of thousands worth of silver exchanged from crops to provide relief.¹³⁵

These acts of kindness unveil two things. First, as the officials each tackled an issue in their areas, it is clear that the Ming society was facing unfavorable conditions, with the natural world adding on to the turbulences of the people. Second, the commoners were powerless against natural threats; only through the actions of the bureaucrats did their lives and wellbeing improve. Yet through this set of interactions between the public and the authorities, both sides build and enjoy a considerably beneficial relationship. The elite minority, due to their responsibilities, arguably felt both willing and compelled to give the weak majority resources and indirect protection, and in turn, they would receive positive comments that contribute to their prestigious

¹³² *Changshu xian si zhi*, 14.30b-31a.

The text is translated from “江西饥，请缓南运粮，减价糴之，比秋余以充赋。所连郡无殍。”

¹³³ *Weinan xian zhi* 渭南县志 (1621), 12.9a-9b.

The translation is paraphrased from “受南充，下车即询利病兴废之，不匝月民歌。”

¹³⁴ *Haicheng xian zhi* 海澄县志 (1633), 10.9a.

The translation is paraphrased from “岁大疫，捐俸施药。”

¹³⁵ *Wu xian zhi*, 44.46a.

The translation is paraphrased from “巡按浙江，目击民艰，便宜发漕折万两赈济。”

reputations afterward. Hence, the civil servants can do their job better because it is not only part of the expectations of the citizens but also key to receiving the grand reward of fame.

It is here that Ma Tang enters the biographies of these officials as a bogeyman. There are some troubles in determining when exactly did they encounter their political enemy, but certain diction from the gazetteer entries suggests that at least three out of four of these officials had met or heard of Ma Tang before or after the Linqing Incident. *Weinan xian zhi* recorded Ma Tang to have incited a public movement in Linqing with his “strictness.”¹³⁶ The narrative of *Haicheng xian zhi* is quite similar to the one presented in both the previous *Wu za zu* and *Yong chuang xiao pin*, in that Ma Tang, having “abused his subordinates,” was pacified after Wen Ruzhang appeared on the scene.¹³⁷ And while Yan Yipeng had not had physical contact with the eunuch as the other two did, he did catch wind that Chen Zeng and Ma Tang, fueled with greed and arrogance, had “thousands of followers spreading and raiding,” which was before the protests in Linqing considering that these two had worked for a while.¹³⁸

A rather interesting trend appears, in that as the publication year moves closer to the decline of the Ming, Ma Tang’s actions are further exaggerated to represent the corrupt side of government affairs. All Yang Guangxun did, according to *Weinan xian zhi*, was “condemn the primary culprit” and forgive the other participants, sharing little to zero interactions with the tax eunuch.¹³⁹ Yet compare how the biography of Yan Yipeng in *Wu xian zhi* claimed that Ma Tang

¹³⁶ *Weinan xian zhi*, 12.10b-11a.

The text is translated from “税使马堂，以峻刻激乱清源。”

¹³⁷ *Haicheng xian zhi*, 10.9b.

The text is translated from “税监马堂，暴横所部。如璋疏纠甚力，瑯为气缩。”

¹³⁸ *Wu xian zhi*, 44.46b.

The text is translated from “税监陈增马堂，贪残骄横，纵参随千人，布散劫掠。”

Refer to *Ming shen zong shi lu*, 332.1a, for evidence of Chen Zeng and Ma Tang working together.

¹³⁹ *Weinan xian zhi*, 12.11a.

The text is translated from “光训单骑往谕罪首事者。”

had thousands of followers when *Wu za zu* indicated that there were only hundreds. Granted that the number in the former source included men from Chen Zeng's side, it still made relatively little sense how Ma Tang had fewer minions than he originally did if he really had the power and influence. This deterioration of the tax eunuch's image suggests that the negative impressions are increasingly strengthened among the literati, who wish to imprint them in the readers' minds as well to have them realize the unfriendly nature of these castrated men.

Changshu xian si zhi is an anomaly from this collection, as it described a moment of Ma Tang that was not recorded in any of the previous sources. In this account, Ma Tang, being hubristic in his conduct, was arrested by Gu Yuncheng, who immediately went to a place called Panggezhuang 庞各庄 to remove those in power. Ma Tang, most likely wanting to escape from the predicament, shifted the blame and secretly reported to the emperor that Gu was the one who caused the troubles in the region. When Gu Yuncheng, this time in another location called Liangxiang 良乡, heard that the Imperial Guards had arrived, he exclaimed that "the emperor wishes to capture me, I am willing to die for the people," then wore the clothes for prisoners to wait for the decree. Dozens of residents were initially kept captive, but they were released by the emperor after Gu had argued for their case.¹⁴⁰ The fate of Ma Tang was not revealed, but he was freed either along with the numerous civilians or when the Imperial Guards arrived.

Without any indication of time, it is unclear when this interaction took place, although there are a few hints to imply that Gu Yuncheng had met Ma Tang in the latter's early days. The title is a giveaway, in that Ma Tang appears as an Imperial Commissioner 中使, essentially

¹⁴⁰ *Changshu xian si zhi*, 14.32a-32b.

The above text is paraphrased and translated from “權中使馬堂橫甚。程繩之，急會龐各庄民，逐其用事者。堂謂程使之密聞于上，程巡良鄉令謁曰緹騎至矣。程曰，上逮我，愿為百姓死，赭衣以待詔至。則止收庄民數十。程仍為民疏辯，天子并釋之。”

someone “specially dispatched as a representative of the Emperor,” in *Changshu xian si zhi*, whereas in most of the other sources he bears the title Tax Eunuch, meaning that Ma Tang had not yet assumed the responsibilities of the latter position.¹⁴¹ The locations are also another clue to support this speculation. Panggezhuang and Liangxiang are both counties near the capital Beijing, and yet Ma Tang was not seen to leave his posts in Tianjin and Linqing ever since he was charged to oversee affairs in those areas. There is, of course, the possibility that Gu Yuncheng had dealt with another eunuch who was also called Ma Tang in this event, but the chances of this coincidence to take place are rather unlikely. It is more probable to assume that Ma Tang, prior to his official assignment as a tax eunuch, was sent to the two counties on behalf of the emperor to deliver a message of sorts, but came across Gu Yuncheng in the process.

But the lack of time, seemingly a common phenomenon in gazetteers, takes on a new meaning here when readers consider the level of bravery and emotional intensity that Gu was shown to have demonstrated. Of the sources observed in this chapter, while other officials had attempted to impeach the tax eunuch, Gu Yuncheng was the only official who had arrested Ma Tang and punished him through legal means, even if it was only temporary. He was also seen expressing his willingness to sacrifice himself for the residents in the counties by ensuring that he was the only figure of authority for the court to blame and dressing up as a prisoner to outwardly convey his determination, a move quite similar to the actions of Wang Chaozuo during the aftermath of the Linqing Incident. A slight difference lies in their statements, in that Gu specifically mentioned the involvement of the emperor, voicing his dissatisfaction against the decisions made in the upper levels. This detail in his outburst implied that for all intents and purposes, the one who was the closest to the people was not the emperor who ruled the state and

¹⁴¹ Hucker, *A Dictionary of Official Titles in Imperial China*, 192.

most certainly not the tax eunuch who caused the troubles in the first place, but the local official. Without any specific mentions to time, this sentiment would remain ageless.

Conclusion

By this period, gazetteers were becoming an essential element to “invigorate local literati culture, which was viewed as a key to strengthening the state after the ‘localist turn.’”¹⁴² With more emphasis on the lives of the worthy, educated elites in their region, it was necessary to establish the literati as role models and heroes of the society who will guide the state and its people to a better life. To achieve this goal, their successes and achievements, whether it be the moment they received the proud status of *jinshi* or the victory they gained after solving a problem, are emphasized in their biographical entries. Unfortunately for Ma Tang, he was seen as an obstacle that scholar-officials faced and successfully overcame, and gazetteer compilers took advantage of this phenomenon to make their biographies more glorious. Over time, both the name Ma Tang and the term “eunuch,” or “tax eunuch” if one were to be specific, were consolidated to become associated with negative connotations and synonymous to pests of the society. Gazetteers, while praising Confucian officials, degraded and downplayed the significance that Ma Tang would have had in other sources.

¹⁴² Dennis, *Writing, Publishing, and Reading Local Gazetteers in Imperial China*, 63.

Chapter 5: The “True” Nature of Ma Tang

The analyses from previous chapters have hopefully demonstrated the complexity of Ma Tang to such an extent that it is rather troublesome to define his character, which speaks to the difficulty of reconstructing this controversial historical figure. In other words, trying to combine the accounts from the court records, private sources, and gazetteers to form one uniform narrative for Ma Tang would prove unfruitful. One has to consider that *Ming shi lu* is an outlier from this collection since it is the only text that explicitly commended Ma Tang and revealed a comprehensive list of deeds, some of them positive, that he did when he was in power. The other two categories of works do create somewhat similar narratives that either place the tax eunuch on the sideline or paint him as a minor antagonist to praise the protagonist of the event. After all, they are written from the perspective of the literati and are intended to captivate like-minded readers who wish to become educated. Yet in both groups of sources, some of them evidently use more severe diction to demean Ma Tang and, as a by-product, evoke more emotions from the audience. Rather than trying to understand the complex roles that Ma Tang and, by extension, other tax eunuchs had played in state politics, it seemed much easier for the authors to simplify the relationship they had with the literati into one of black and white, evil and good.

The seemingly conflicting narratives, then, become the starting point of investigation for this chapter. Through comparing these three types of documents, exaggeration, supplementation, and omission of information are seen constantly occurring. This phenomenon indicates that these authors, be them court or local officials, Chinese or European, were conscious in their processes of creating these works and are actively providing a specific plot and narrative within them. To quote historian Hayden White, the Ming literati were actively engaging in the process of emplotment, “the way by which a sequence of events fashioned into a story is gradually revealed

to be a story of a particular kind.”¹⁴³ There are ways to categorize the texts that appeared in the previous chapters by their modes of emplotment, argument, and ideological implications, but this chapter is not strictly following this order. Rather, building on White’s theory that the scholars did emplot their historical work, this chapter argues that there is not an authoritative record that dictated or defined what happened in the life of Ma Tang.

Emplotment

[...] Events that are offered as the proper content of historical discourse [...] are real [...] because, first, they were remembered and, second, they are capable of finding a place in a chronologically ordered sequence. [...] For an account of them to be considered a historical account, it is not enough that they be recorded in the order of their original occurrence. [...] [It] must be susceptible to at least two narrations of its occurrence. Unless at least two versions of the same set of events can be imagined, there is no reason for the historian to take upon himself the authority of giving the true account of what really happened.¹⁴⁴

One of White’s breakthroughs is he observed that the value of narratives and narrativity “arises out of a desire to have real events display the coherence, integrity, fullness, and closure of an image of life that is and can only be imaginary.”¹⁴⁵ His concepts and conjectures were made as he analyzed the European archival sources like the *Annals of Saint Gall*, but they can apply equally to the Ming texts as well. The intention to communicate information in this narrative form, to discard the “nightmares about the destructive power of time,” is a major motivating factor for the authors of Ming private works.¹⁴⁶ Particularly, Shen Defu, roughly fifty years old when he started finalizing *Wanli ye huo bian*, stated that although he still held reflections that

¹⁴³ Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973), 7.

¹⁴⁴ Hayden White, *The Content of the Form* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), 20.

¹⁴⁵ White, *The Content of the Form*, 24.

¹⁴⁶ White, *The Content of the Form*, 11.

were not yet forgotten, he was “afraid that these lingering thoughts would ultimately disappear and thus, without asking about new or old, began recording randomly and eventually produced this work.”¹⁴⁷ This sense of vulnerability is not only a method of gaining sympathy from the readers and credibility for himself but also supports White’s conjecture, suggesting that his philosophies on history and historiography are quite applicable for Ming history.

The quoted paragraph is one of the many points that White raised in his text, discussing that the key to classifying an account as historical is that it needs to survive in at least two separate versions of retelling. To simply appear in one archival source that only provides a timeline of what has occurred does not mean that this event is necessarily historical. Despite this outwardly simple definition, the following paragraphs will compare how the texts from the previous chapters had narrativized the Linqing Incident and reveal that it is an event that simultaneously conforms to and disputes with White’s definition of a “historical account.” It then steps back and compares them with a broader lens, examining their compositional differences. In the end, it is this process of interpretation, which seeks to explain the distinctions, that provides the tax eunuch a fulfilling role in history.

Comparison

As hinted in Chapter 2, the Linqing Incident in 1599 seemed to establish Ma Tang as an inexperienced, inconsiderate, and ruthless tax eunuch, making it the only event that has made its appearance within all three categories of sources provided throughout the previous chapters.

¹⁴⁷ Shen, *Wanli ye huo bian*, 4.

The text is translated from “胸臆旧贮，遗忘未尽，恐久而并未尽者失之，遂不问新旧，辄随意录写，亦复成帙。”

Ming shi lu presents this from the perspective of the court, keeping a relatively close eye on the activities of officials and Ma Tang. The private texts, specifically *Wu za zu* and *Yong chuang xiao pin*, took a completely different approach and focused on Wang Chaozuo, the peasant who was blamed as the culprit and later portrayed as a victimized hero. The gazetteers only briefly mention this incident, but *Laizhou fu zhi* and *Weinan xian zhi* are two entries that explicitly address it, with the former detailing the biography of the local military Commandment Wang Yang and the latter recording official Yang Guangxun arriving at the scene in the aftermath. This brief observation is beneficial in identifying the Linqing Incident, with multiple sources recounting the experience, as White's "historical account" and suggesting that Ma Tang had played a considerable part during its development.

Grouping *Ming shi lu*, *Yong chuang xiao pin*, and *Laizhou fu zhi* and treating them as a case study, several variations in their details surface and further solidify the status of the Linqing Incident as a historical event. Spotted most clearly between *Ming shi lu* and *Yong chuang xiao pin*, the number of people involved in the incident is seen to fluctuate in three places. The former indicated that there were only several thousand commoners who surrounded the office of Ma Tang during the height of the conflict, whereas the latter indicated that there were tens of thousands involved. When counting the deaths as a result of the arrows that Ma Tang permitted to shoot out, the court record specified the figure to two people, while the private text generalized it to several. Finally, the bodies of the followers, according to entries of the court, amounted to thirty-four, three less than the number Zhu Guozhen provided in his work. Apart from the numerical differences, Zhu is seen providing a more in-depth description of the death of Wang Chaozuo, as he included an illustration of the weather on the day that Wang was executed

and the efforts of Prefect Li Shideng 李士登 to save Wang from his misfortune.¹⁴⁸ The gazetteer has none of these pieces of information, even lacking specificities on the process through which Wang Yang is arrested when compared to *Ming shi lu*.

Through comparing the above three texts, it is reasonable to assume that there is a large collection of data regarding the Linqing Incident accessible to compilers. Yet each of them held a unique perspective, thereby interpretation, on this event, resulting in distinct presentations. This phenomenon is later explained in the writings of American historian Edward Hallett Carr and French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss during the twentieth century. Carr expressed that “history consists of a corpus of ascertained facts [...] like fish on fishmonger’s slab,” and each historian can serve them “in whatever style appeals to him,” revealing that the products of historians are processed to suit their purposes.¹⁴⁹ Lévi-Strauss further explains this processing, stating that “historical facts are in no sense ‘given’ to the historian but are rather ‘constituted’ by the historian himself.”¹⁵⁰ When situating these two comments in the context of Ming society and texts on Ming history, it becomes evident that by employing certain facts and arranging them in a specific order, these Ming authors were actively creating a particular narrative that claims to accurately reflect the Linqing Incident, thus emplotting their texts. In this sense, each source, while asserting to narrativize a supposed complete and authentic account, had already undergone a process of filtration of facts and thus can only reveal partial information. Even reading them together would not necessarily be enough to disclose the full image, for the amount of data available to Ming historians to construct this event in their literary publications is undefined.

¹⁴⁸ In this instance, “prefect” refers to 知府. See Hucker, *A Dictionary of Official Titles in Imperial China*, 158.

¹⁴⁹ Edward Hallett Carr, *What Is History?* (London: Penguin Books, 1964), 9.

¹⁵⁰ Hayden White, “Interpretation in History,” *New Literary History* 4, no. 2, (Winter, 1973): 287-288.

While the quotation is cited from White’s article, he was at the time referring to the ideas of Lévi-Strauss. See Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson Ltd, 1966), 257.

However, the differences in the illustration of details are relatively simpler problems to reconcile. A closer look suggests that the tone of the language the writers established in their works are quite similar, which may challenge the status of the Linqing Incident being historical. *Yong chuang xiao pin* has the strongest voice of contempt against Ma Tang among the three documents, as it reshapes the event into a story that eulogizes the noble and fearless Wang Chaozuo while implicitly blaming the cruelty of the tax eunuch. *Laizhou fu zhi* achieves a similar effect that labels Ma Tang and his reckless actions as the primary cause of the death of Wang Yang, with the shortness of the entry being beneficial in depicting the Commandment as a previously insignificant official who was caught in the mess that the tax eunuch created. *Ming shi lu* is more indirect in this process of scapegoating, as there is a way of interpreting him as a victim of the mob rather than an aggressor who incited further troubles. Yet notice that in the debates that occurred in the court on whether he did behead people to assert his dominance, those who sided with and defended the tax eunuch were seen as the ones who disagreed with those who sought to blame him, meaning that the recorders wanted to frame Ma Tang as a wrongdoer.¹⁵¹ Even though there seem to be disagreements on some elements, the three sources do share the view of criticism that is directed to the tax eunuch.

¹⁵¹ This citation recalls the entry from *Ming shen zong shi lu*, 337.3b, “理科臣郭如星复上疏，右光宅而左大谟。”

Guo Ruxing 郭如星 here is the last official recorded to have sent his memorial in this period on convicting Ma Tang as the culprit, supporting Fu Guangzhai 傅光宅 and opposing Chen Damo 陈大谟. The placement and inclusion of this brief entry, however, is evident that the chroniclers of *Ming shi lu* wanted to validate those rumors of Ma Tang.

German sinologist Wolfgang Franke expressed this similar concern, claiming that “the chances for the author to express his personal opinion rested mainly in the selection of some documents and in the suppression of others. [...] In addition, documents could be condensed so as deliberately to distort the original meaning, even though this was against the regulations.” See Wolfgang Franke, “Historical Writing During the Ming,” in *The Cambridge History of China*, ed. Frederick W. Mote and Denis Twitchett (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 7:747.

The uses of “右” and “左” in the summary of the memorial from Guo are also worth noting, for the latter character connotes “disagree” but can also refer to something improper like a religious cult.

The differences in the facts included may qualify White's definitions at a superficial level, but their employment of identical tones adds more ambiguity and complexity to the issue. If the latter part is not necessary to this conversation, the former element would also become insignificant. There has to be a reason that prompted Zhu Guozhen to put the number of people who rose against Ma Tang into tens of thousands, while an equal, motivating factor also exists to push the compilers of *Ming shi lu* to present a lower headcount. Likewise, there has to be an explanation for the lack of details on the process through which Wang Yang was arrested in *Laizhou fu zhi* and the inclusion of said details in *Ming shi lu*. These examples are not to say that *Ming shi lu* contains more authenticity than the other sources. White, referring to the ideas of French philosopher Paul Ricœur, submits that a chronicle, the format of *Ming shi lu*, still depends on the chronicler to insert events in a "culture-specific and conventional" manner, meaning that it is "a figured representation of events" that is no different from the private texts and the gazetteers.¹⁵² The takeaway from these comparisons and White's summary, however, is that the dissimilarities in the facts presented in the three categories of archival documents exist due to a motive, common to these authors and compilers. Recall that they were literati who lived in a Confucian society that did not exactly tolerate the conduct of eunuchs and thought that they "wielded power out of proportion to [their] education."¹⁵³ With this overall culture of disdain, pieces of factual information were either filtered or edited to suit the needs of the narrators, all of whom were presenting a similar underlying criticism. In this sense, despite having multiple versions of data shown, the Linqing Incident may not qualify as a historical account.

¹⁵² White, *The Content of the Form*, 176.

¹⁵³ Miller, *State Versus Gentry in Late Ming Dynasty China*, 76.

Note that although Ricci was not native to Ming society, he was actively engaging with the literati circles and studying Confucian Classics to connect Confucian concepts with Christian theology. His mastery in the former knowledge would later help him earn the nickname of *Xiru* 西儒, a Western literato.

Conclusion

What does this conclusion mean for Ma Tang? On the one hand, it still seems difficult for the tax eunuch to escape the negative image that the Ming authors imposed upon him, for their voices and narratives were both convincing and overwhelming. The more unfortunate matter in this discussion is that Ma Tang lacks his voice in Ming history, as he did not have any agency in influencing how other writers would record his conduct and correspondences. Activities of him were, quite literally, like “fish on fishmonger’s slab,” if one considers that none of the other Ming historians, apart from the compilers of *Ming shi lu*, included any events relating to him after his interactions with Ricci. On the other hand, it is precisely this seemingly compelling and negative image of Ma Tang that provokes doubts and offers a chance at re-evaluating him in Ming history. The elaborated efforts in the previous chapters have indicated that at least *Ming shi lu* is willing to present some benefits that the tax eunuch brought to people and the emperor, whereas the other private documents and gazetteers had sought to explore the negative impacts he created. Thus, there are now contrasting versions of Ma Tang that, while helpful at generating discussions, cannot contribute to a conclusive verdict on the nature of his character. In a paradoxical way, reading one category of text does not suffice in providing a full picture of the roles that Ma Tang had played in history, yet reading samples from different groups together does not necessarily lead to an easier definition either. Perhaps Lévi-Strauss, having said that “a truly total history would cancel itself out – its product would be nought,” had already foreseen this situation from happening.¹⁵⁴

¹⁵⁴ Lévi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind*, 257.

Epilogue

While Ma Tang may have silently retreated into the corners of the Forbidden City in 1620, his legacy, or rather portions of it, was still passed on and repeated in the historical texts produced in the Qing dynasty. An extension of this paper, then, would turn to focus on how Ma Tang's image has been reinterpreted and re-presented in these pieces of literature.

To shed some light on this topic, Ma Tang was, quite arguably, further mistreated in these historical texts. Recall, for instance, the time when he was arrested by Gu Yuncheng, and the interactions between the two were recorded in *Changshu xian si zhi* with relative great details. During the reign of Emperor Kangxi in the Qing dynasty, another *Changxu xian zhi* 常熟县志 is produced to reveal nothing more than the following lines: "Tax eunuch Ma Tang was arrogant and presumptuous [in his conduct]. Yuncheng would restrain him under law."¹⁵⁵ Not only has the identity of Ma Tang changed significantly, other elements such as the location and the supposed involvement of the Imperial Bodyguards were also neglected. His biography in *Ming shi* also deserves separate attention, in that it bears an uncanny resemblance to the entry recorded in *Yong chuang xiao pin*.¹⁵⁶ But while there is a reduction in the number of details in these texts, there is instead a rise in the number of records that begin to reveal more officials whose lives were

¹⁵⁵ *Changshu xian zhi* 常熟县志 (1687), 18.24a.

The text is translated from "税使马堂横肆。云程绳之以法。"

¹⁵⁶ Zhang, *Ming shi*, 7808.

The entry from *Ming shi* is included here: "当奉劾商畊等时，临清民亦噪而逐马堂。马堂者，天津税监也，兼辖临清。始至，诸亡命从者数百人，白昼手银铛夺人产，抗者辄以违禁罪之。僮告主者，畀以十之三，中人之家破者大半，远近为罢市。州民万馀纵火焚堂署，毙其党三十七人，皆黥臂诸偷也。事闻，诏捕首恶，株连甚众。有王朝佐者，素仗义，慨然出曰，首难者，我也。临刑，神色不变。知府李士登恤其母妻，临清民立祠以祀。后十馀年，堂擅往扬州，巡盐御史徐缙芳劾其九罪，不问。"

A further problem with this biography of Ma Tang is that it is inserted in the biography of his contemporary Chen Feng. While Ma Tang's name is mentioned again when *Ming shi* addresses the presence of Italy as a foreign state that shared interactions with the Ming court, it is nonetheless interesting to ask why his actions in Linqing are still extensively focused in court records, as well as why his name appears as an attachment to someone else rather than an individual entity.

entangled with the eunuch in some way. These reductions and growths, contributing to the “one-sided” narrative of Ma Tang being harmful to the Ming society, all deserve a separate analysis.

In this attempt to create a biography for Ma Tang while exploring and explaining the intricacy of this process, this thesis has also, hopefully, demonstrated the impossibility of creating a set description for him or a concrete definition for his role in Ming history. The stereotypical image of eunuchs, where they are seen as corrupt, inept, and inhumane servants of the court who did things as they pleased with disregard to authority, was not seen to apply to Ma Tang. But as the Ming society was a complex entity that treated Confucian practices and ideologies as the norms, the presence of eunuchs, even if they were necessary to state affairs, was bound to draw the attention of judgmental eyes, especially when Wanli mobilized them for tax collections. Some entries of *Ming shi lu* indicate instances when he did contribute positively to his job, receiving praises and support from the emperor. But records of him in the private texts, where they peculiarly united in focusing on only two specific moments in his life, suggest that he was a detestable character, but that quality would slightly change when the intentions of the authors are questioned. His appearances in the Ming gazetteers arguably made his life look insignificant when compared with the lives of other Confucian scholar-officials, leaving him with no room to defend himself anymore. The only way his image is saved from further defamation is to pose a paradox that affirms the existence of the negative impression he has received and negates their full validity. Though an inconvenient solution, it is one that allows for re-evaluations and gives the eunuch another ground to present himself.

“It is high time that eunuchs be allowed to speak for themselves and be seen as the subjects rather than the objects of Ming history.”¹⁵⁷ Tsai’s opening to his work felt like a bold declaration to overthrow the previous, deep-rooted impressions and narratives that blame the eunuchs for the wrong turns the dynasty had taken. But Ma Tang is only one of the many tax eunuchs in the late Ming era, who are just a portion of the massive group of imperial servants working for the Ming Imperial Household and tend to court affairs. If records of Ma Tang did not and could not contribute to a full representation of this historical character, then it is reasonable to assume that the documentation of his peers also deserves some re-considerations, which would provide a new direction that a sequel of this thesis could take.

Bear in mind, however, that it was not exactly the intention of this thesis to defend Ma Tang or provide him with a new judgment. The reason it kept attempting to offer new insights to a seemingly simple matter is to illustrate the hidden aspects of the records we took for granted. Only by realizing this fact and understanding that there are hidden parts to these archival sources can there be a new step taken in the direction of providing a more nuanced perspective to understand Ming history and the writings of it. Ma Tang is, after all, a historical character caught in the midst of the perpetual conflict between Confucians and eunuchs. Having coordinated the meeting between the imperial court and Ricci to occur and asking for exemptions in the taxes collected in Tianjin, it seemed too cruel to only place a single, depreciative label on him and forget him among the wave of tax eunuchs sent under the reign of Emperor Wanli. It is with this intention that this thesis has provided Ma Tang with a new platform of expression, a stage where he may enjoy the spotlight and become the main character for his life for the first time.

¹⁵⁷ Tsai, *The Eunuchs in the Ming Dynasty*, 8.

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