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## **Examining the Evidence: The Literary Inquisition of Zhu Yuanzhang**

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### **Introduction**

Zhu Yuanzhang, the first Emperor of the Ming dynasty (1368-1644 A.D.), is a prominent figure in Chinese history due to his central role in leading the rebellion against the Yuan dynasty (1279-1368 A.D.). His achievements aside, Zhu was a controversial historical figure and remains so. One such reason for Zhu's infamy was his practice of brutal executions and torture as a means of consolidating political power. For example, it is often cited that Zhu conducted a literary inquisition to silence dissident voices and centralize his authority.

Historians have assessed that many executions during Zhu's reign were conducted solely to suppress political dissent (or those who Zhu thought might challenge his authority). The premise of Zhu's literary inquisition (文字狱) was to "deliberately misinterpret words or phrases from intellectual's writings and arbitrarily [leverage accusations] in order to persecute" intellectuals.<sup>1</sup> Henceforth referred to as homophone misinterpretation, this phenomenon describes the

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<sup>1</sup> Zhonghuacidian, Chinese Official Xinhua Dictionary (统治者从作者的诗文中摘取字句，罗织罪名而造成的冤狱).

deliberate or accidental misinterpretation of Chinese tones out of their designated context, which consequently changes their meaning. Some debate exists today; however, over the historical authenticity of Zhu's literary inquisition. In this paper, I analyze the authority and authenticity of available sources and relevant events to conclude that overwhelming evidence exists to suggest that Zhu conducted a literary inquisition. Furthermore, I argue that Zhu's literary inquisition and brutal persecution of intellectuals impeded academic and literary development during the Ming Dynasty.

### **The Emperor Zhu Yuanzhang**

By the late Yuan dynasty, ethnic Han Chinese suffered deeply under Mongol rule—omnipresent military bases sought to prevent insurrection, wealth inequality was rampant, and active discrimination against Han Chinese was embedded into Yuan society. Beginning in 1276, the Yuan confiscated all civilians' potential military assets, such as horses and machetes, and even banned them from learning martial arts. Local officials who were appointed Mongolians, would extort civilians in the guise of tax collection. Soldiers would also force civilians to pay through blackmail and beatings. Officials would also rape men and women under the guise of tribute. One poem from the period recorded "extreme poverty at Yangtze River south, rich and abundant in the far nomad land."<sup>2</sup> This was particularly tragic, as the Yangtze River southern region was often the richest and the most resource-abundant region in China; however, the Mongols extracted resources from inner China especially taken from the ethnic Han to enrich the northern nomad lands.

The Yuan dynasty eventually began to weaken due corruption, failed administration, constant warfare, factionalism, and succession disputes. The straw that broke the camel's back was a proposal to kill

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<sup>2</sup> Ye Ziqi 葉子奇, *Caomuzi* 草木子, 1516: "故貧極江南.富稱塞北."  
<https://zh.wikisource.org/wiki/%E8%8D%89%E6%9C%A8%E5%AD%90>.

off the five largest Han Chinese name groups: Zhang, Wang, Liu, Li, and Zhao—so that Han Chinese would never be able to fight back because the majority of them would be dead. Soon, large-scale revolts began.<sup>3</sup>

Zhu was born in 1328 at Fengyang, Anhui Province, a region heavily oppressed by Yuan rule. Zhu's parents were the servants of the landlords who owned neither possessions nor farmland. Zhu was originally named "Chong Ba," which meant "repeated eighth" in Chinese since he was the eighth cousin in the family.<sup>4</sup> When Zhu was 16 years old (1344), the Huai River region (present-day Hunan, Anhui, Hebei, Jiangsu province) suffered a severe drought followed by a locust swarm. The drought alone greatly damaged agricultural yields, not to mention the subsequent locust swarm. The locals resorted to eating tree bark and plant roots, while some eventually turned to cannibalism. As if these natural disasters were not enough, a plague decimated the population soon after.<sup>5</sup> Many of Zhu's relatives including both parents, his three brothers, and multiple cousins. Zhu's young life was consequently characterized by great misery that would greatly influence his future.

To avoid Mongol harassment and starvation, Zhu became a monk in Huangjue Temple. During his life as a Buddhist monk, he requested alms from people in exchange for blessings from Buddha. Requests for alms entailed begging under the name of Buddha. The Huangjue Temple was eventually burned to the ground by the Yuan dynasty due

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<sup>3</sup> Tao Zongyi 陶宗仪, *Qiangenglu 辍耕录*, 1367, Chapter 2 section 3 卷二三: “堂堂大元, 奸佞专权, 开河变钞祸根源, 惹红巾万千. 官法滥, 刑法重, 黎民怨. 人吃人, 钞买钞, 何曾见? 贼做官, 官做贼, 混贤愚, 哀哉可怜?”

<sup>4</sup> Wu Han 吴晗, *Zhu Yuan Zhang Chuan 朱元璋传*, (Beijing: Beijing Institute of Technology Press, 2016), Chapter 1.

<sup>5</sup> Huang Zhangjian 黄彰健, *Ming Shi Lu 明实录*, Taipei: Academia Sinica, Chapter 3 section 9.

to concerns about insurrection.<sup>6</sup> In his hatred and hopelessness, Zhu joined an insurrectionary rebel group named the Red Army. From then on, he changed his name from Chong Ba to Yuan Zhang (元璋). ‘Yuan’ represented the Yuan Dynasty, and ‘Zhang’ represented a delicate yet vicious jade weapon in ancient China. Therefore, Zhu's new name reflected his determination to overturn the oppressive Yuan dynasty. Zhu began as a low-rank soldier and slowly moved upwards the military ranks. Aided by gunpowder, the Red Army would eventually overthrow the Yuan dynasty and Zhu Yuanzhang would accede as emperor of the newly established Ming dynasty.

After becoming emperor, Zhu had a peaceful and humane political vision to sustain the Ming empire. In doing so, Zhu realized the need for intellectual talent to govern in a manner that contrasted with the ruthlessness and brutality of the Yuan dynasty.<sup>7</sup> By using scholars and intellectuals as advisors, he could also shield himself from criticism and avoid tyranny; instead, he would be regarded as open-minded and considerate. Zhu attempted to express this image of open-mindedness in a 1368 imperial edict: "Now the war is over, [I] invite talented scholars to discuss ruling methods to enlighten me and benefit society. The wise who are not in the government, please support me with your wisdom, use moral ethics to educate people. [If you are one of them,] Come to Beijing, I will give you a position."<sup>8</sup> These edicts encouraged scholars and intellectuals to serve the government, portraying Zhu as an emperor receptive to both advice and criticism.

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<sup>6</sup> Wang Xinlong, *Damingwangchao 大明王朝*, (China Theatre Press, 2009), Book 1 Chapter 1.

<sup>7</sup> Huang Zhangjian 黄彰健, *Ming Shi Lu 明实录*, Chapter 29, 1368: 治国家, 得贤才为先, 贤者天下之望也. (Zhu's Verbial Records).

<sup>8</sup> Wu Han 吴晗, *Zhu Yuan Zhang Chuan 朱元璋传*, “今天下太平, 愿请诸位学问通达的士大夫讲谈治理天下之道, 启迪朕心, 以达到盛世之治. 在野人士, 有能以贤辅我, 以德济民, 地方官必以礼送至京师, 朕将擢用焉.”

Reconciling this perspective with reality, however, Zhu would also begin the persecution of intellectual figures. According to *Taizu Shilu*, the emperor praised the Emperor Taizu of Song for removing generals who threatened his power when he read *History of Song* in 1365.<sup>9</sup> The *Four Major Cases of the early Ming dynasty* from 1376 - 1393, according to Wu Han, caused more than 100,000 deaths of the officials combined.<sup>10</sup> The unprecedented number of incarcerations and the brutality of the executions reflected Zhu's key perspective that ruling also required severe punishment. Zhu would first persecute other founders of the Ming Dynasty by finding ambiguous crimes through literary inquisition, then replace them with obedient officials.

Zhu had a complex personality: on one hand, he claimed that he welcomed all honest advice and suggestions; yet on the other hand, he often beheaded the officials who dared to speak against him. Zhu also strongly admired intellectuals for their knowledge, yet simultaneously despised them because of his political insecurity. Zhu's education was poor; he learned basic words through Buddhist books without an understanding of literature nor Buddhist ideology. His past as a poor farm boy, a sacrilegious beggar monk, an illegal rebel, and a nearly illiterate emperor, likely contributed to these insecurities.<sup>11</sup>

### **Punishment under Zhu's Reign**

Zhu's 1367 proclamation about law enforcement during the Ming Dynasty is telling about his perspective on punishment,

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<sup>9</sup> Huang Zhangjian 黄彰健, *Ming Shi Lu 明实录*: 上禦左閣, 讀『宋史』, 至趙普說太祖收諸將兵權, 謂起居注詹同曰: 「普誠賢相, 使諸將不早解兵權, 則宋之天下未必不五代若也.

<sup>10</sup> Wu Han 吴晗, *Zhu Yuan Zhang Chuan 朱元璋传*.

The cases refer to the Hu Weiyong case, the Lan Yu case, the pre-stamped documents case, and the Guo Huan case.

<sup>11</sup> Chen, "Zhu Yuanzhang wenziyu shuo."

It has been more than forty years since I first took up arms. I have personally ordered the affairs of the realm. The good and bad, true and false, of human nature have all been experienced by me. Those who were of a wicked and crafty nature and had committed serious crimes obviously beyond doubt have been singled out for heavier punishment than the law provides, intending to make people take heed and not lightly dare to break the law. But this was just a provisional measure to punish the wicked... From now on, when succeeding rulers govern the realm, they shall enforce only the Code and the Grand Pronouncements. They certainly shall not employ any punishments like tattooing, cutting off the feet or the nose, or castration. Because the succeeding rulers will have been born and raised in the palace, they cannot have complete knowledge of good and evil in human nature... If there are officials who dare memorialize requesting the use of such punishments, civil and military officials shall immediately submit accusations. The offenders shall be put to death.<sup>12</sup>

This veritable record served as a significant role in explaining the objectives of Zhu's harsh law enforcement. First, Zhu witnessed many hardships and social tragedies throughout his life. From these experiences, he felt as though he had learned correct morality and was

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<sup>12</sup> Huang Zhangjian 黄彰健, *Ming Shi Lu 明实录*, 239, 3477-78. Under Article 1 of the *Huang Ming Zuxun*. The translation has been modified accordingly from the one by Farmer in *Zhu Yuanzhang and Early Ming Legislation*, 118.

consequently capable of distinguishing between good and evil. In facing challenges during the Yuan Dynasty, Zhu justified his use of extralegal punishments and believed that harsh penalties and stringent law would create a stable society.<sup>13</sup> Therefore, Zhu sought to use harsh penalties to punish wicked behaviors and rebellious powers to eliminate social instability and to ensure state authority.

Second, Zhu claimed to be the singular individual with the ability to properly execute the penalties due to his past hardships; a declaration to prohibit future emperors as well as officials from employing cruel penalties attempted to emphasize Zhu's claim that the harsh penalties were only temporary, and lenient laws would come in the future once all evils were eliminated.<sup>14</sup> However, his claim of "temporary harshness" proved incorrect, as this harshness persisted throughout his reign. The *Four Major Cases of the Early Ming Dynasty*, which killed more than 100,000 people, took place 9 years after this declaration. Furthermore, the supposed literary inquisitions happened after 1384, 17 years after the declaration. Furthermore, Zhu published a series of harsh punishments on corruption from 1385 — 1387 included punishments such as "slicing" (dismembering a person by slowly slicing off his or her flesh).<sup>15</sup>

Censorship practices were also pervasive during Zhu's reign, policies which were broadly supported by Ming officials. For example, He Qiaoyuan, a Fujian historian during the Ming Dynasty, thought that Zhu's employment of "extraordinary executions" or "extralegal punishments" served to correct the corrupt policies of the Yuan dynasty and cleanse "polluted customs" away. According to He,

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<sup>13</sup> Huang Zhangjian 黄彰健, *Ming Shi Lu 明实录*, 239, 3477-78. Under Article 1 of the Huang Ming Zuxun (Zhu's Verbal Records).

<sup>14</sup> Jiang Yonglin, "In the Name of 'Taizu': The Construction of Zhu Yuanzhang's Legal Philosophy and Chinese Cultural Identity in the Veritable Records of Taizu," *T'oung Pao*, vol. 96, no. 4, 2010, pp. 408-470.

<sup>15</sup> Wang Shihua, "An Inquiry on Zhu Yuanzhang's 'pile skin' policy", *History Studies*, Second edition 1997, pp. 156-159

Zhu employed harsh punishments to re-establish the Tang-tradition-based Ming legal programs and to consolidate the rule of law.<sup>16</sup> Another Ming official, Huang Jingfang (1596-1662), frequently defended Zhu's legal policies by inserting the concept of "governing a state of disorder with strict law."<sup>17</sup> Furthermore, Huang believed "although Zhu applied law harshly because he was able to discover talents and assign them to official posts he could achieve the government of Yao and Shun."<sup>18</sup> In short, Huang openly supported harsh punishments as a necessary means to eliminate social deviance after the Mongol Rule.

Though uncommon, some officials dared to speak up against Zhu. In 1376, Ye Boju, an instructor, challenged the emperor's practice of extreme punishments and urged Zhu to establish a compassionate, stable, and consistent legal system. He was imprisoned and suffered harsh punishment for opposing the imperial will.<sup>19</sup> The consequence of opposition against Zhu's manner of rule was incarceration and potential death. This suggests that Zhu's objective of the literary inquisition was not only social stability but also to control the public and punish opponents. Contemporary historians have echoed this idea. In Wuhan's *Zhu Yuanzhang Archive*, Zhu's persecution of intellectuals was attributed to Zhu's superficiality and insecurity about his dignity. Zhu wished to protect his reign by silencing any dissident voices. In Wang Xinlong's *The Great Ming Empire*, Wang writes that Zhu persecuted intellectuals to reinforce his legitimacy and supremacy.

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<sup>16</sup> He Qiaoyuan 何喬遠, *Mingshancang 名山藏*, <https://zh.wikisource.org/wiki/%E5%90%8D%E5%B1%B1%E8%97%8F>, 48.419.

<sup>17</sup> Huang Jingfang 黃景昉, *Guoshiweiyi 國史唯疑*, 1644, 1.11.

<sup>18</sup> Highly admired ancient legendary Chinese emperors, roughly 2300 BCE - 2200 BCE.

<sup>19</sup> Xu Daling, *Ming Shi 明史* (Beijing: China Braille Press, 2015), 139.3990-96.



### Assessing the Veracity of the Literary Inquisition

Though it is readily evident that Zhu persecuted his critics, disputes exist about the authenticity of Zhu Yuanzhang's literary inquisition during his reign as emperor of the Ming Dynasty. Some contemporary historians have argued that the persecution of intellectuals was fabricated by anti-Zhu opposition. For example, Chan Hok-Lam, a Princeton-educated historian, refused to acknowledge the extent of Zhu's persecution of intellectuals on two counts. The first of these counts is the unreliability of primary sources describing the inquisition, such as the *Jianshengyewen* 《翦胜野闻》 and the *Chuanxinlu* 《传信录》. Chan describes these accounts as private journals written with personal bias against Zhu. For example, the *Jianshengyewen* describes the execution of Xu Yikui (1315-1400 A.D.), a Ming dynasty official, on the criminal charge of homophone misinterpretation. However, there exist many issues with this account.

First, Xu's death in *Jianshengyewen* is not substantiated by other historical accounts. For example, Xu wrote an epitaph for another person after his supposed 'death' according to the *Jianshengyewen*.<sup>20</sup> Other more credible accounts suggest that Xu died in 1400, two years after the death of Zhu Yuanzhang in 1398. However, according to Chan, this reality discredits the authenticity of *Jianshengyewen*, and questions Zhu's literary inquisition. Other historians echo Chan's argument. Chen Changyun, an expert of Ming dynasty history, has also questioned the reliability of sources describing Zhu's literary inquisition. Chen wrote that the literary inquisition did happen, but the *Jianshengyewen* deserves skepticism for collecting sources through folktales and oral accounts which are often "exaggerated,"

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<sup>20</sup> Hok-lam Chan, *Ming T'ai-Tsu an Illiterate Despot? A Critical Reappraisal of the Alleged Literary Persecution*, (Taipei: Academia Sinica, 1980).

“unreliable,” and tend to ridicule Zhu contemptuously.<sup>21</sup> According to Chen, there are many questionable records of the literary inquisition for the following reasons: first, Zhu’s brutal repression of intellectuals made them resent Zhu, which led to the fabrication of stories to discredit Zhu’s achievements; second, Zhu undermined Xin Xue, a philosophy proposed by neo-Confucian philosopher Wang Yangming, and emphasized the learning of Heart-and-Mind, while supporting freedom of thought, speech, and voice against oppression.<sup>22</sup>

Considering the unreliability of certain sources such as the *Jianshengyewen*, it is crucial to be selective when analyzing accounts of Zhu’s literary inquisition. Not only is the *Jianshengyewen* criticized by renowned historical sources such as *Sikuquanshu* (四库全书), it has also received significant criticism by contemporary Ming historians. Chen’s concern regarding the credibility of personal journals is well placed and should be considered in any analysis. In the context of the *Sikuquanshu*, a comprehensive encyclopedia compiled during the Qing Dynasty under the orders of Emperor Qianlong, the encyclopedia wrote that the *Jianshengyewen*’s “Recorded events are often unreliable.”<sup>23</sup> On the other hand, it is difficult to obtain official records on imperial persecution since records were likely censored heavily by the Ming dynasty; that is, the more unsavory qualities of Zhu were likely overlooked, if not expunged completely. However, a single fabricated event found in *Jianshengyewen* does not discount other available and more reliable

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<sup>21</sup> Chen Changyun 陈昌云, “‘Zhu Yuanzhang wenziyu shuo’ de lishi zhenwei yu chuanbo yongyi 朱元璋文字狱说”的历史真伪与传播用意 [The Authenticity of Zhu Yuanzhang’s Literary Inquisition and Its Spread on Purpose], *Academics* 学术界, no. 05 (2013): 190-198, 287.

<sup>22</sup> Wing-tsit Chan, “Wang Yangming.” *Encyclopædia Britannica*, Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc., 12 Feb. 2019, [www.britannica.com/biography/Wang-Yangming](http://www.britannica.com/biography/Wang-Yangming).

<sup>23</sup> Jin et al., *Si Ku Quan Shu Cun Mu Cong Shu* 四库全书存目丛书, (Jinan, China: Shandong Qilu Press Co., Ltd, 1996): “书中所纪，亦往往不经。”

evidence of Zhu's literary inquisition, such as accounts in the *Guochujishi*, *Mingshi*, and *Taizushilu*. Details regarding Zhu's persecution can also be found in other primary accounts.<sup>24</sup> Chen arrived at a similar conclusion, believing that numerous other official documents indicated the authenticity of the inquisition.<sup>25</sup>

Chan identified other arguments that point to the unlikelihood that a literary inquisition by Zhu took place. First, there are errors in the timeline surrounding the supposed inquisition.<sup>26</sup> For example, persecutions happened mostly after 1384, 17 years into Zhu's reign, which began in 1368, and two years after Empress Ma's death in 1382. Chan argued that it would be illogical that Zhu would suddenly begin persecuting intellectuals after allowing them to write freely in the preceding years. However, this argument is refutable. There are two likely explanations regarding the inaccuracy of this timeline and why mass persecution started 17 years into Zhu's reign: first, the death of Empress Ma in late 1382, and, second, the incompetence of Zhu's offspring.

First, Empress Ma disagreed with execution and harsh punishment, and repeatedly saved prisoners from the wrath of her husband Zhu.<sup>27</sup> After Ma's death in 1382, Zhu could act without restraint and his brutality grew more ruthless. Further evidence of this perspective can be found in cases of literary persecution early in Zhu's

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<sup>24</sup> *Mingshi* was later questioned by historians because it was compiled and documented by Qing officials. Some historians suspected that the Qing officials would deliberately distort Zhu by portraying him as a cruel and ruthless emperor. However, there is no substantive evidence to disprove the authenticity of its information.

<sup>25</sup> Chen Changyun, *Zhu Yuanzhang wenziyu shuo' de lishi zhenwei yu chuanbo yongyi*, 197

<sup>26</sup> Chen Changyun 陈昌云, “‘Zhu Yuanzhang wenziyu shuo' de lishi zhenwei yu chuanbo yongyi 朱元璋文字狱说’的历史真伪与传播用意 [The Authenticity of Zhu Yuanzhang's Literary Inquisition and Its Spread on Purpose],” *Academics 学术界*, no. 05 (2013).

<sup>27</sup> Wu Han 吴晗, *Zhu Yuan Zhang Chuan 朱元璋传*.

reign. Such evidence suggests that Zhu's disposition towards literary persecution was neither a new development, nor concentrated in the time after Ma's death.<sup>28</sup> For example, the infamous execution of Ming poet Gao Qi preceded Empress Ma's death. Second, evidence also suggests that Zhu wanted to ensure a stable power transition to his appointed heir Zhu Yunwen (1377-?). Such fears might be linked to Zhu's paranoia regarding homophones.

According to Chan, homophone misinterpretation can be linked to many cases of literary persecution under Zhu, such as with the Chinese words for 'sound' and 'monk,' 'light' and 'bald,' 'however,' and 'thief.' If intellectuals were persecuted because of their usage of a particular set of homophones, why would subsequent intellectuals continue to make similar errors? According to Chan, if Zhu was truly offended by the usage of certain homophones, Zhu would have created laws to forbid their use by intellectuals. While Zhu did create regulations called the "Report Writing Guidelines" (表笺成式) to standardize report formats, these guidelines focused on increasing the efficiency of imperial reports by ensuring succinct and incisive, rather than ornate, rhetoric.<sup>29</sup> However, these guidelines were unrelated to the literary inquisition and Zhu did not specify forbidden words.<sup>30</sup> It is possible that Zhu resisted providing official guidelines on literary standards. As the emperor, Zhu had to present himself as magnificent and generous while obeying traditional Confucian values such as humility and truthfulness. If he presented writing guidelines that forbid words and phrases that he found offensive for highly personal reasons, he might be perceived as uncouth and small-minded.

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<sup>28</sup> Chen Changyun, 194.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

## Reasoning Behind the Literary Inquisition

The imbalance between the intellectuals and the military marshals was a possible reason for literary inquisition. Zhu favored intellectuals over marshals, leading marshals to hold grudges against intellectuals. Despite their role fighting for Zhu in war, marshals saw their positions in the Ming bureaucracy increasingly occupied by intellectuals. Zhu believed that, without strategic support from the intellectuals, marshals would simply be war machines and could not govern effectively. To gain favor from Zhu, both parties sought to sabotage the other. For example, a marshal once told Zhu that intellectuals teased him behind his back. At the time, intellectuals were discussing the name of an early rival of Zhu during his rebel years named "Zhang Shicheng" (张士诚). Shi Cheng meant "soldier and honesty," but could be misinterpreted as a quote by Mencius. Mencius once said, "shì, chéng xiǎorén yě" (士，诚小人也), but the marshals deliberately misplaced the commas, so it became, "shì chéng, xiǎorén yě" (士诚，小人也).<sup>31</sup> Thus, the marshals concluded that Zhu could not trust the intellectuals. This idea greatly troubled Zhu: he subconsciously felt his dignity and self-esteem was attacked by these intellectuals in their discussions of his rival. Exacerbating these feelings, Zhu did not have a proper education, making it possible he was susceptible to misinterpretation.

Although questions exist regarding the authenticity of the literary inquisition, there is evidence to suggest homophone misinterpretation was punished under Zhu's reign. Cases exist across reliable sources, such as official documents and robust encyclopedias.<sup>32</sup> Many intellectuals were imprisoned and executed due to Zhu's paranoiac misinterpretation of literature. The persecution of intellectuals was conducted under two premises by the secret police of the Ming

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<sup>31</sup> Huang bo, *Xianzhongjingulu* 闲中今古录.

<sup>32</sup> Chen Changyun, 194.

dynasty, the Embroidered Uniform Guards: first, homophone misinterpretation; second, social discourse censorship.

Homophone misinterpretation was closely related to Zhu's dislike for certain words, which were often rooted memories from his personal life. When Zhu became the emperor, he resented anything related to monks and temples. For example, a key feature of monks were their bald heads; therefore, words like "bald" (tū 秃) and "light" (guāng 光, which represented the light reflected by the bald head) were hated by Zhu. Furthermore, when he was in the Red Army during the revolution against Yuan Dynasty, the Red Army was called the "red thieves" or "red robbers" by the government and landlords, which led to Zhu's hatred toward the words "thief" and "red."

Zhu's dislike for certain words was extensive. The word "则" (zé) which meant "however" is the homophone with the word "贼" (zéi), which meant "thief." The authors of *Xiezenfengbiao* and *Hedongzhibiao* 《谢增俸表》, and *Hedongzhibiao* 《贺冬至表》, were beheaded because they used the word "however" in their writings, which in Zhu's eye were an act of criticizing his rebel past. Furthermore, in the *Yuandanhebiao* 《正旦贺表》, the author Jiangzhi wrote "生" (shēng, meaning 'alive'), which is a homophone with "僧" (sēng, meaning 'monk'). In *Qufangxiangwei* 《取法象魏》, 取法(qǔ fǎ) means "to study the laws of", but Zhu thought it sounded like "去发" (qù fā), which meant to go bald.

Numerous other examples of homophone misinterpretation exist. In *Xiecimabiao* 《谢赐马表》, Lü Ruizuo wrote "遥瞻帝扉" (yáo zhān dì fēi) which means "admire the emperor's power and influence from far." However, the pronunciation of "帝扉" is "dì fēi", which is similar to "帝非 dì fēi", which means 'the wrongs of the emperor.' In *Xiedonggongciyanfa* 《谢东宫赐宴笺》, the Lin Yunzuo wrote: "式

君父以班爵禄" (shì jūn fù yǐ bān juélù) which meant "I am privileged because of my father's position." However, the emperor interpreted "式君父" (shì jūn fù) as "失君父" (shī jūn fù) which meant "lose father." In the phrase "体乾法坤，藻饰太平" (tǐ qián fǎ kūn, zǎoshì tàipíng), "法坤" (fǎ kūn) was similar to "发髡" (fā kūn) which the emperor perceived as making fun of bald heads. "藻饰太平" (zǎoshì tàipíng) was a common phrase that meant "a prosperous society," yet it was interpreted by Zhu as "早失太平" (zǎo shī tài píng) which meant "soon to lose reign" or "soon to lose peaceful society." In *Helitaisunbiao* 《贺立太孙表》 by Wu Xianzuo, a passage said "永绍亿年，天下有道，望拜青门"( yǒng shào yì nián, tiānxià yǒudào, wàng bài qīng mén) "有道" (yǒudào) was read as "有盗" (yǒudào) by the emperor which meant "thievery." "青门" (qīng mén) was interpreted as "the temple door," and that reminded Zhu of his past as a monk. A scholar from Hangzhou wrote "光天之下，天生圣人，为世作则" (guāng tiān zhī xià, tiānshēng shèngrén, wèi shì zuò zé) which meant "due to the exposure from the society, a born wise man should be the role model to set the moral standard for the society." The passage meant to praise Zhu, but Zhu was infuriated because of the "生" (shēng), "僧" (sēng), and "光" (guāng) words.<sup>33</sup> Most of the homophone misinterpretations were found in festival greeting messages because Zhu suspected that the intellectuals were secretly teasing his inferior background while congratulating him. Furthermore, in the *Nianershizhaji*, a renowned historical record written in Qing dynasty, the text criticizes Zhu's education, arguing

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<sup>33</sup> Wu Han 吴晗, *Zhu Yuan Zhang Chuan* 朱元璋传. The credibility of the events was discussed in the literary review. Counter arguments have been made by historians.

He Mufeng, 何木风, "Wuzhongshengyou:zhongguo lishi zhongde wugaowangshi" 无中生有：中国历史中的诬告往事 [Create something from nothing: False Allegations in Chinese History] Chapter 5 Section 3

his “education was not sufficient, therefore he often misinterpreted words and persecuted the intellectual arbitrarily.”<sup>34</sup>

Zhu's persecution of intellectuals escalated when he decided to remove the status of Mencius, an esteemed disciple of Confucius.<sup>35</sup> At the time, Zhu was studying Mencius' ideology to improve his rule. When he read Chapter Four, however, "Lilouzhang" (离娄章), in which Mencius described an ideal emperor, Zhu tore the book apart and screamed furiously: "If Mencius was alive today, he shall be punished badly!"<sup>36</sup> The passage said: “People are the top priority, the society is right after (the people), and the emperor is the least (important).”<sup>37</sup> Mencius also said, "If the emperor treats his people like worthless dust, his people should treat him as an enemy."<sup>38</sup> Mencius also wished for the emperor to treat his people with mercy and sympathy, and argued that the emperor ought lower his prestige and act more humbly. Zhu strongly resented Mencius' ideas because he felt as though Mencius' principles questioned his governance—clearly, if Zhu treated his people and officials as “worthless dust,” then, according to Mencius, the people would treat Zhu as their enemy.

Zhu ultimately banned Mencius' writings, an unprecedented move considering Mencius' fame and admiration. The Chinese culture and traditions evolved around Confucius standards, and Mencius was the second sage of Confucianism. When Zhu decided to outcast Mencius,

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<sup>34</sup> Zhaoyi, *Nianershezhi*, 赵翼, *廿二史札记*, “然其初学问未深, 往往以文字疑误杀人。”

<sup>35</sup> Mencius (372 BCE - 289 BCE) was a renowned Confucius thinker during the Zhou dynasty, he was named as the second sage right after Confucius. His works were widely known in Chinese society, so much so that they were used as testing materials during the imperial examination system.

<sup>36</sup> Wu Han 吴晗, *Zhu Yuan Zhang Chuan* 朱元璋传, Chapter 3.

<sup>37</sup> 民为贵, 社稷次之, 君为轻

<sup>38</sup> 君之视臣如手足, 则称视君如腹心, 君之视臣如犬马, 则称视君如国人; 君之视臣如土芥, 则称视君如寇仇 Mingchaoxiaoshi, 明朝小史, Chapter 2



not only were large sections of Confucian teaching abandoned, but this edict risked Chinese traditions, culture, education, and many other aspects of the society would change as well. However, a brave intellectual named Qian Tang decided to defy Zhu's order. Qian proclaimed that, "Dying for Mencius is an honor!"<sup>39</sup> He ordered his servant to carry his coffin with him when he went to court. Zhu was furious after seeing Qian's blatant opposition; he ordered his guards to directly kill Qian on the spot. Arrows were shot into Qian's left arm, right shoulder, and chest. Qian collapsed but he still managed to crawl to Zhu's podium. To everyone's surprise, Zhu was impressed by Qian's determination and decided to forgive Qian. Zhu still decided to carry on the removal of Mencius beliefs in Chinese traditions.

According to the *Jieyitingji* (鮚琦亭集), right after Zhu's prohibition of Mencius, a Chinese astronomer reported that an important religious star grew dim in the night sky.<sup>40</sup> The star was the "Intellectual Star" (文星), which represented the intellectual future of Chinese society. Chinese emperors have a long history of superstitions relating to astronomy, such as with regards to asteroids and eclipses, and Zhu was no exception. Zhu was shocked when he heard of this astronomical change and became scared that Heaven might grow angry at him. Eventually, he decided to bring Mencius back to Chinese society with direct modifications by himself, deleting 85 passages out of a total of 255 pages from Mencius. The simplified version was only used when Zhu was alive; after his death, Chinese society returned to the classic Mencius version.<sup>41</sup> However, the incident did show that

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<sup>39</sup> Mingshi, Qiantang section "臣为孟轲而死，死有余荣。" 《明史·钱唐传》

<sup>40</sup> Quan, Zuwang 全祖望. *Jieqitingji* 鮚琦亭集. Taiwan: The Commerical Press Taiwan 臺灣商務. 1968.

<https://books.google.com/books/about/%E9%AE%9A%E7%90%A6%E4%BA%AD%E9%9B%86.html?id=Wzs7uWEACAAJ>.

<sup>41</sup> Chen Hu 陈虎, "Zhuyuanzhang wei he yao ba meng zi qing li chu kong miao? 朱元璋为何要把孟子清理出孔庙[Why Zhu Yuanzhang Cleared Mencius From

Zhu had no respect for the status of the supposed offender. Even if the person was one of the most revered Confucian thinkers in China, violators would be censored.

The death of Gao is another example of literary inquisition. Gao, born in the early Ming Dynasty (1336 - 1376 A.D.), was one of the four primary intellectuals during his time. He was recruited by Zhu to revise the records of Yuan dynasty history in 1368 but instead grew tired of the bureaucracy and decided to quit against Zhu's will in 1370. Zhu felt disrespected by Gao's decision to disobey his wishes. In 1376, Gao was invited by a local official to write a congratulatory poem regarding the unveiling of an official building. Gao wrote a short poem that was soon passed to Zhu who found (what he thought) was dissidence in Gao's writing.

Zhu believed the ceremony was inauspicious because it was located in the palace of one of his early rivals Chen Youliang's hometown. To celebrate at Chen's palace meant that they were celebrating the past glory of Chen. Furthermore, in the poem, Gao wrote, "hidden dragon, crouching tiger." "Dragon," in traditional Chinese standards, could only be used when describing emperors. By using it in his poem, Zhu interpreted Gao as supporting Chen as his emperor. As a result, Gao's poem was considered treason and he was immediately captured and sentenced to death.<sup>42</sup> Gao's punishment was being chopped in half at the waist. Zhu came to watch the gruesome execution. Gao did not die immediately, instead he started writing characters for miserable (惨) on the floor with his blood as ink and his finger as the calligraphy brush. Gao's excoriating execution was a shocking event for all Chinese writers and intellectuals.<sup>43</sup> It is

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Confucius Temples?]" *people.com.cn* 人民网, Feb. 9, 2011, <http://history.people.com.cn/GB/205396/13879886.html>.

<sup>42</sup> Mingshi 明史 [History of Ming].

<https://zh.m.wikisource.org/zh/%E6%98%8E%E5%8F%B2>.

<sup>43</sup> Mingshi, Chapter 285, Gaoqi Archive.

debatable whether Gao truly meant to praise Chen as an emperor, however, for Zhu to execute one of the most renowned intellectuals using such hideous method, sent a message to intellectuals.

Disagreement has arisen, however, regarding the authenticity of Gao's execution. Chinese historian Lin Jialin argued that Gao's execution was not the result of the literary inquisition, but that Gao had committed treason because the official announcement regarding Gao's execution was a treason case in Suzhou led by Weiguan.<sup>44</sup> However, it was similar to other injustice cases related to the literary inquisition: intellectuals were persecuted not for reasons related to literature, but trumped up charges of treason and corruption. The legal system was neither just nor fair, as cases were at the discretion of the emperor. Zhu's grudges against intellectuals and writers then resulted in their arbitrary prosecution.<sup>45</sup>

### Zhu's Secret Police

Evidence of the Embroidered Uniform Guard, Zhu's omnipresent secret police force, also suggests that a literary inquisition did, indeed, occur. According to the *Guochushiji* (国初事迹), a pacifistic poet complained the government was harming society by imposing heavy taxes and practicing cruel conscripting policies: "A woman cried all night because her husband was conscripted."<sup>46</sup> The Embroidered Uniform Guard heard the poem and presented it to Zhu, and Zhu ordered the poet drowned.

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<sup>44</sup> Lin, Jialin 林嘉林. "Mingchu de wenziyu he chaozheng zhuangkuang" 明初的文字狱和朝政状况 [Early Ming Dynasty's Literature Inquisition and Imperial Court Political Condition]. In *Pipan Man Qing Shi Zhonghua Quanmian Fuxing Zhi Biyao Tiaojian* 批判满清是中华全面复兴之必要条件 [Criticizing Manchurian Qing Dynasty Is the Necessary Condition to Revive China Completely], 2009, [http://kksk.org/tieku/r\\_28538\\_23.html](http://kksk.org/tieku/r_28538_23.html).

<sup>45</sup> Wu Han 吴晗, *Zhu Yuan Zhang Chuan* 朱元璋传.

<sup>46</sup> Chen Yanghao 陈养浩: "城南有嫠妇, 夜夜哭征夫."

Another scholar, Qian Zai, once improvised a poem at home: “four drum beat (3 a.m.) I got up, (the emperor) still blames me for being late to the noon meeting. When can I join the worldly matters? I could sleep till lunch.”<sup>47</sup> The improvised poem was overheard by an Embroidered Uniform Guard secretly monitoring Qian Zai. Once reported, Zhu said to Qian Zai with a smile: “you improvised a good poem yesterday, but I didn’t ‘blame’ you would be late. Would it be better if you change ‘blame’ into ‘worried’?” Qian Zai was so horrified that his face turned pale and knees went weak, and he started kowtowing to apologize for Zhu. Yet because Zhu was in a good mood, he did not behead Qian Zai.<sup>48</sup>

There exists a similar account in the *Mingshi*. Song Lian was famous for his loyalty and honesty in court; however, Zhu still wanted to test his loyalty and obedience. Song held a home party and he invited relatives and family friends. This home party was discovered by Zhu and he asked the Embroidered Uniform Guards to covertly surveil the party as to ensure no illegal activity occurred. Song was brought up in court the second day after the party. Zhu asked him vague questions about the party such as what was eaten and discussed. Song answered with honesty, so his answers aligned with the report of the Embroidered Uniform Guards report. Zhu was very satisfied with Song’s answer and he was glad that Song was completely transparent.<sup>49</sup>

### The Literary Inquisition

Though there is some disagreement about the veracity of certain sources describing Zhu’s literary inquisition, there is a preponderance of evidence, from homophone interpretation to intellectual persecution by the Embroidered Uniform Guards, to suggest that literary inquisition

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<sup>47</sup> “四鼓冬冬起着衣，午门朝见尚嫌迟。何时得遂田园乐？睡到人间饭熟时。”

<sup>48</sup> Ye Sheng 叶盛, *Shuidong riji zhaichao* 水东日记稿钞卷二, chapter 2.

<sup>49</sup> *Mingshi*, Chapter 1 section 28, *Story of Songlian* 《明史》卷一二八《宋濂传》.

did, indeed, occur. Intellectuals were consequently extremely cautious of their behaviors due to the omnipresent secret police system and Zhu's inhumane methods of torture and execution. It is even recorded that officials and intellectuals would say a farewell to family before they left to work out of fear of Zhu's wanton executions.<sup>50</sup> Viewing literature as a dangerous avenue of dissent, it is further evident that Zhu wished to utilize harsh penalties to punish criticism and challenges to his authority. By consequence, the lack of new intellectual and literary florescence during Zhu's reign suggests that the literary inquisition not only occurred but was so threatening that intellectuals feared originality in their work.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Wang Xinlong, *Damingwangchao 大明王朝*, Book 1 Chapter 2.

<sup>51</sup> Yang Xumin 杨绪敏, "Mingqing liangchao kaojuxue zhi bijiao yanjiu 明清两朝考据学之比较研究," *Collected Papers of History Studies 史学集刊*, (Jilin, China: Jilin University, 2007), (5).

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