Conclusions
Judgments on the Ends of Times
Robert E. Hegel

Although the focus of this chapter is the literary representations of and reactions to the fall of the Ming in the seventeenth century, I will refer to two later ends of time(s) by way of contrast: when read against the fall of real dynasties, unconventional conclusions in Ming and Qing works of historical fiction reveal levels of political engagement and significance often overlooked by other readings. I begin by examining the beginnings of two novels.

Predictions of Dynastic Renewal

My first example consists of three short but very famous lines, which have colored the reading of the novel they begin as well as most subsequent works of traditional historical fiction in the vernacular. In the middle 1660s, when the consolidation of Qing rule was mostly completed, Mao Zonggang 毛宗崗 (ca. 1630–after 1700) and his father, Mao Lun 毛綝 (ca. 1610–after 1665), rewrote the beginning of the immortal Sanguo zhi tongsu yanyi 三國志通俗演義 (Romance of the Three Kingdoms) to read: 話說天下大勢這久必合而久必分 (Here begins our tale. The empire, long divided, must unite; long united, must divide. Thus it has ever been). Several elements are worthy of note in these lines, which are reminiscent of Mencius 3B.9. Most particularly, the novel declares that dramatic, even catastrophic change is apparently inevitable and will (apparently necessarily) be followed by a period of peace. This optimistic conclusion stands in marked contrast to Mencius’s apparently gloomy observation that periods of good rule are transitory and had, to his time, always been followed by extended pe-
periods of “great disorder,” daluan 大亂. The key difference in the Maos’ statement is the introduction of the word bi 必, “must,” or “inevitably.” Another question raised by the Maos’ epigraph is what “unity” (he 合) signifies in the context of the early Qing, when this reconstruction of the novel appeared. I will return to these observations to explore the ironies they suggest.

Another work, from the end of that dynastic period, Liu E’s 劉鶚 (1857–1909) Lao Can youji 老殘遊記, published initially between 1904 and 1907, begins with the evocative image of China’s ship of state foundering in heavy seas, being torn apart by forces ostensibly extrinsic to itself; however, the people on board, crew and passengers alike, seem totally oblivious to their imminent destruction. The image of a ship representing a political institution is, presumably, Western in its origins; even so, its symbolism is transparent, its relevance as a representation of China’s immediate political situation compelling.

However, the rest of Liu E’s novel is far less explicit in its political engagement, as it traces the adventures of first one and then another wanderer across the social and cultural landscape. The novelist’s intention concerning its ending is far from clear: there is scholarly debate about how much of Liu’s miscellaneous extant writings should be appended to the generally accepted fifteen chapters; some believe that the

1. Sanguo yanyi huiping ben 三國演義會評本, ed. Chen Xizhong 陳曦銘, Song Xiangrui 宋祥瑞, and Lu Yuchuan 魯玉川 (Beijing: Beijing daxue chubanshe, 1986), p. 21; Luo Guanzhong (attrib.), Three Kingdoms: A Historical Novel, trans. Moss Roberts (Berkeley: University of California Press; Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1991), p. 5. One might argue that the Maos’ version “begins” with the ci 詞 poem on the theme of transience that appears before the title of the first chapter, but the prose lines cited above are the more memorable and the most frequently quoted. The original line from Mengzi 孟子 reads 天下之生久矣。一治一亂。“The world has existed for a long time, now in peace, now in disorder” (D. C. Lau, trans. Mencius, 2 vols. [Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 1984], p. 127); see the entire passage (pp. 126–33), in which Mencius explains that he is disputatious because it is his only means to counteract heretical ideologies and political policies. Nowhere in this discussion is Mencius optimistic about the inevitability of the reappearance of good government, in contrast to his general optimism elsewhere about the perfectibility of human nature and hence human society.

2. Liu E 劉鶚, Lao Can youji 老殘遊記 (Beijing: Renmin wenxue, 1957; reprinted—Hong Kong: Guangzhi shuju, 1967), which has the usual twenty chapters plus a “supplement” of six more; see Liu T’ieh-yün (Liu E), The Travels of Lao Ts’an, trans. Harold Shadick (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1952), pp. 3–11.
novel’s conclusion had not been worked out when the author died. This indeterminacy may well have been an artifact of the periodical press and the demand from publishers for ever more material; an author might well not conceive the ending until he had written the bulk of the narrative. On the other hand, the lack of an ending, or more to the point, the absence of any conclusion of—or conclusion about—the dream of grave national peril with which the novel began, is particularly striking when contrasted with similarly suggestive works of the early Qing. Judged against that background, the lack of an ending clearly has meaning, to his readers perhaps more than to the author himself: it seems to suggest that earlier novelistic practices do not apply here; the conventional discourse of the novelistic tradition has been truncated, or riven, like the gap in the ship’s hull as it drifts aimlessly into an unknown and perilous future. Sanguo zhi yanyi’s seeming affirmation that return to order is inevitable finds no corresponding echo at the end of Lao Can youji, leaving the outcome predicted by this Western image unrepresented and unresolved.

Reflections of Mid-Ming Confidence

To exemplify how far Lao Can varies from previous literary practice, we might consider the ideological implications of conclusions reached in fiction dating from a less problematic time, novels written during the sixteenth century when the Ming was ostensibly at the peak of its vigor. A consistent idea of dynastic legitimacy is implicit in these early works of popular historical fiction; most conclude with peace and stability restored by a secure dynastic line. They project an arc of development, with one dynasty losing its moral authority, or “Mandate of Heaven,” Tianming 天命, and another taking it up—ultimately to lose it to an-

3. Shadick translates the first twenty chapters and gives a brief synopsis of six more that Lin Yutang published in his Widow, Nun, and Courtesan (New York: Day, 1951); a total of 34 were published by the Tiensin Daily News, Shadick reports, but the last six have been lost. “They continue the story of Lao Ts’an’s wanderings,” Shadick observes (Liu, The Travels, p. xvii). Writing in 1936, Liu E’s son Liu Dashen criticized those who forged endings to the novel in his father’s name. In one of these, the fortieth chapter does end with awakening from a dream to round out the narrative as Liu E began it. See Liu Dashen 劉大紳, “Guanyu Lao Can youji” 關於老殘遊記, in Liu E ji “Lao Can youji” ziliao 劉鶚及老殘遊記資料, ed. Liu Delong 劉德隆, Zhu Xi 朱禧, and Liu Deping 劉德平, pp. 390–412 (Chengdu: Sichuan renmin, 1985), esp. pp. 399–401 and 409n12.
other dynastic house. This became the standard outline, the master narrative, for vernacular fiction, the discourse conventionally applied to questions of national calamity and the beginnings of new dynasties. In History and Legend: Ideas and Images in Ming Historical Novels, Shelley Hsueh-lun Chang observes:

For the Ming Chinese who were looking back, the pattern of history was clear: the rise and fall of dynasties ran zigzag on the path of the past. There was no enduring disunity in the long history of imperial China to challenge the observation of the San-kuo. The world, when long divided, is sure to be reunited; when long united it is sure to be divided. The drama of history, for the novelists, thus naturally focused on the process of the fragmentation of an old empire and the emergence of a new one. And at the center of the drama were the dynastic contenders including both the successful and unsuccessful ones.4

Although I fully agree with her characterization of conventional historical fiction of the middle Ming, the Maos’ revision of Sanguo reflects a different time and draws different, and more complex, conclusions—conclusions perhaps not so different from those suggested by Lao Can.

Novels produced in Fujian by the Jianyang publisher Xiong Damu 熊大木 (Xiong Zhonggu 鐘谷) during the sixteenth century narrate a sequence of events from (relative) stability through periods of conflict and strife to conclude with newly established stability and order. This is true in Da Song yanyi zhongxiong yinglie zhuan 大宋演義中興英烈傳 (Heroes of the restoration, a narrative of the Great Song, dated 1552); Tang shu zhibzhuon tongsu yanyi 唐書志傳通俗演義 (Chronicles from The History of the Tang, 1553); Quan Han zhibzhuon 全漢志傳 (Chronicles of the entire Han [period], 1588); Nan Bei liang Song zhibzhuon 南北兩宋志傳 (Chronicles of the two Song [Courts], Southern and Northern, undated). So, too, was the earlier Huang Ming kaiyun yingwu zhuan 皇明開運英武傳 (Heroic warrior founders of the imperial Ming, 1537) structured around the process of consolidation of empire; it concludes with a celebration of the establishment of the Ming through the efforts of its loyal ministers and generals. Somewhat later Ming historical novels, including Lieguo zhibzhuo 列國志傳 (Chronicles of the Warring States), compiled by Yu Shaoyu 余邵魚 perhaps around 1570, follow the same pattern, as did popular works published by Yu’s

grandnephew, the Jianyang bookseller Yu Xiangdou 余象斗. Novels following this general pattern produced by the younger Yu include 

*Kaipi yanyi tongsu zbizhuan 開闢衍綪通俗志傳* (Developments from the beginning of the world, a popular chronicle, printed in 1635); *Pan Gu zhi Tang Yu zhuang 盤古至唐虞傳* (Stories of culture heroes from Pan Gu through Tang Yu, undated); *You Xia zbizhuan 有夏誌傳* (Chronicles of the Xia, undated); and *You Shang zbizhuan 有商誌傳* (Chronicles of the Shang, also undated). Each concludes with stability and harmony in the realm.5 In general, then, fictional works from the middle of the dynasty tend to express an unproblematized view of dynastic potential for reasserting order.

**Late Ming Literati Doubts**

Notably different conclusions are reached in historical novels by literati written nearer the end of the Ming, however. Let us examine two briefly: Feng Menglong’s 馮夢龍 (1574–1646), *Xin Lieguo zhi 新列國志*, ca. 1630, and *Sui shi yiwen 隋史逸文*, 1633, compiled by Yuan Yuling 衣于令 (1599–1674).6

Of the several historical novels that date from just before the Ming fall, Feng Menglong’s *Xin Lieguo zhi* (New chronicles of the Warring

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5. For synopses of each of these and the novels published by Xiong Damu listed above, see *Zhongguo tongsu xiaoshuo zongmu tiyao* 中國通俗小說總目提要, ed. Jiangsu sheng shehui kexue yuan, Ming Qing xiaoshuo yanjiu zhongxin 江蘇省社會科學院明清小說研究中心 (Beijing: Wenlian, 1990). For a table of these alternations between consolidation and civil war, see Chang, *History and Legend*, p. 45; Chang includes discussions of nearly all these novels in her detailed study. She outlines the theory of dynastic cycles on pp. 34–35; see pp. 74–79 for an illuminating study of the parallels in characterization of the model strategists/advisors in major works of historical fiction.

States) was among the most popular. Its Chapter 108 narrates the final consolidation of the empire by Qin armies with their conquest of the major states of Chu, Yan, and Qi, along with several smaller states. Now finally in control of his world, the king of Qin gives himself a new title, huangdi (皇帝), with himself as first to hold it, Shi, and decrees that his successors should be numbered after him (Ershi 二世, Sanshi 三世, and so on) for eternity. He originates the use of the imperial pronoun zhen (We), has new imperial insignia engraved, identifies his dynasty with water among the five phases (wuxing 五行), and inaugurates a new year with a reorganization of the calendar. If this were a more conventional historical novel, it might end here, with stability achieved and the Mandate in the hands of the First Emperor. However, the ending suggests a different conclusion: his loyal follower Wei Liao, disgusted by Shihuang’s ambition, takes his disciples and leaves, sighing, “Even though Qin has control of all under Heaven, its essential vitality (yuangi 元気) is in decline. How could it possibly endure?” (p. 1234) The final lines are succinct: “Thereupon [Shihuangdi] burned the books and buried the Confucian scholars, carried out surveillance without limit, and constructed the Great Wall to keep out the barbarians. The people cried out in their misery and could find no means to support themselves. By the time of the Second Emperor, the brutality was even more extreme: followers of Chen Sheng and Wu Guang arose everywhere and destroyed the state” (p. 1236).

The novel ends with a lengthy poem by an “historian” (shichen 史臣) recounting the rise and fall of the important states of the Warring States period, followed by another, more reflective, piece of verse by a “reader” (duzhe 論者) named Ranxian 盡仙 (the Curly Bearded Transcendent); it concludes with the lines (p. 1238):

Considering all the rises and falls throughout the ages
All stem from whether the court uses the obsequious or the worthy.

These lines, by a literary associate of Feng Menglong presumably, reiterate a common refrain about the transience of power and lay the blame on the central leaders’ inability—or unwillingness—to choose

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scrupulous ministers. Presumably, too, contemporary readers might have found in these comments an oblique reference to the recent reign of the eunuch Wei Zhongxian 魏忠賢 (1568–1627), favorite of the Tianqi emperor, and his campaign to destroy all possible opponents among the upright ministers.8

In the novel Qin Shihuangdi also originates a civilian administration for the entire country, but because of the barbarian (Hu 胡) threat from the north, he establishes military commanderies along the frontier and orders the Great Wall constructed to keep them out. As in the later Sanguo, Feng’s pointed reference to dangers from the northern “barbarians” may well have been seen as more a topical than a historical reference, as the novel was read and reread in subsequent decades. However, his condemnation of ineffective leadership would have struck a responsive chord among his politically engaged contemporaries. And what does it suggest when the novel ends with the suffering caused by a strong and determined leader? A warning about the complex consequences that may obtain when a new dynasty replaces the old and corrupt one, perhaps? Or that mere unity may never be stable over time, or that leaders cannot be relied on to create lasting stability? By ending with the beginning of the inexorable Qin decline, this novel seems to be structured to question whether order “naturally” succeeds disorder; rather, disorder is predicted to continue—echoing Mencius.

Let us now consider another historical work from the end of the Ming.

An early edition, perhaps the second printing, of Sui shi yiwen (Forgotten tales of the Sui), written by Feng Menglong’s younger friend Yuan Yuling bears scars indicating that it was subsequently read as politically charged in reference to contemporary events. At the end of the novel, the generals who had fought successfully to establish the Tang dynasty are enfeoffed and granted noble patents. Qin Shubao 秦叔寶, the character most fully realized in the narrative,9 is granted the title Huguo gong 胡國公, Duke of [the state of]

8. See Chang, History and Legend, pp. 36–37, for a discussion of this novelistic unwillingness to accept “usurpers” as legitimate heirs to the Mandate of Heaven.
Hu. Obviously reading “Hu” as “barbarian,” some reprinter of the novel apparently using woodblocks carved earlier effaced the character hu from a reference to this title in the novel’s preface. This physical gap demonstrates that the novel was most likely printed more than once; this silencing of the text on this point presumably occurred either around the time of the Manchu conquest or soon thereafter. No such excision is made in the late seventeenth-century Sui Tang yanyi 隋唐演義, which quotes extensive passages from this earlier novel; when this novel appeared in 1695, hu seemingly could be used with impunity.  

Despite its focus on the battles between various contestants for the throne, Sui shi yiyen ends with reminders of how its various characters turned out: the virtuous Qin Shubao, on the whole a positive character, received high honors in the end. He recognized the imperial aura surrounding Li Shimin 李世民, and eventually, after following several contenders in turn, swore allegiance to the leaders who would found the Tang. By contrast, others were branded as criminals, shamed as fools, or killed needlessly in power struggles at the fall of the Sui. The novel’s final poem reiterates the necessity of following Heaven’s mandated ruler in order to be successful; allying with a pretender brings only ruin. But how is one to determine the correct pretender? Could this also be read as a comment on the Wei Zhongxian years of recent memory? The novel was printed only four years after Wei committed suicide and his clique was exterminated—after years of successfully eliminating his opponents and finding support from among administrators at both local and national levels. I would think so, although the expunging of hu would indicate that the publisher feared reprisals from the “barbarians,” even when they are clearly figured as heroes.  

11. See Chu Renhuo 茶人獲, Sui Tang yanyi 隋唐演義 (Shanghai: Gudian wuxue chubanshe, 1956).  
12. Liu Wenzhong succinctly identifies the heroic qualities of Qin Shubao; see Yuan Yuling 段咏凌, Sui shi yiyen 隋史演义, ed. Liu Wenzhong 刘文忠 (Beijing: Renmin wuxue chubanshe, 1989), pp. 513–17. For Song Xiangrui’s insightful comments on the plight of this novel after the Ming fall, see note 22 to this chapter.
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rate, the conclusion of the work would seem an attempt to counteract the novel’s exciting contests among the contenders as they jockeyed for power on the battlefield and in one-on-one confrontations of will; the novel ends on a sober note, with relevance for the reader as a commentary on the times: the master narrative of loyal follower bringing the rightful ruler to power as social harmony spreads across the empire is questioned, even compromised by what we might read as a politically realistic, but ideologically problematic, conclusion.

Other literati novels that mention historical figures or historical situations dating from the Ming period’s last decades also include elements that question the dominant discourse. Jin Shengtan’s 金聖嘆 (1610–61) extremely popular Guanhuatang 貫華堂 version of Shuihu zhuan 水滸傳, ca. 1641, clearly castigates rebels, but it also presents a weak and ineffective ruler manipulated by unscrupulous ministers. None is a eunuch, but their arrogation of imperial authority for their own personal, even corporal, ends conveys doubt about the imperial institution and the holders of the throne in general. By truncating the work, Jin makes the ending ambiguous for the ruling dynasty. Older versions had narrated the suppression of successive rebellions by imperial strategies; even the Liangshan band itself is won over by the appeal of imperial pardon. In Jin Shengtan’s version, however, Heaven intervenes directly to exterminate the rebels en masse because the imperial court is powerless to do so. Be that as it may, the novel was still seen as a political threat, to judge from its official proscription during the Qing. Perhaps its compromises on the inevitable success of imperial goodness provoked official apprehensions about the text.

A second novel produced during the same year is instructive in this regard. Xiyou bu 西遊補 (A supplement to Journey to the West, known in English translation as The Tower of Myriad Mirrors, 1641), by Dong Yue 童說 (1620–86) and his father Dong Sizhang 董斯張 (1586–1628) takes the Monkey Sun Wukong 猴王 to the realm of Yama 閻羅王, King of the Underworld. There the Monkey serves as judge to correct political crimes that had been left unpunished or were insufficiently resolved in the world as recorded by history. Although one could argue that the master narrative is irrelevant to this work of fantasy, that model is shown to be inapplicable to the real world as represented by the historical figures named in this scene.
Comforting Reports of the Fall

Several fictional works about events surrounding the Ming fall, compiled both before and after the Manchu takeover, are seldom mentioned in scholarly writing and were generally not available until the recent spate of reprints began to appear. Most focus on the much-hated Wei Zhongxian, “one of the most powerful eunuchs in Chinese history.” The anonymous novel *Huang Ming [zhongxing] shenglie zhuan* (Tales of the sagely and virtuous in [the restoration of] the imperial Ming) most likely appeared in 1628, within months of the death of the crafty and presumptuous eunuch. It was compiled, according to its author’s preface, from official reports in the *Dibao* (the “Capital Gazette” circulated by the central government among local administrators) and from anecdotes circulating at the time. The novel castigates the Wei Zhongxian clique and exposes the suffering that it occasioned. It is hardly “factual,” however. Not without a bit of humor and enthusiasm for its subject, *Shenglie zhuan* begins by tracing Wei’s early life. Wei’s mother was a good-looking woman; his “father” was a highwayman, although Wei was conceived when his mother was raped by a *huli* or fox spirit. After his parents die, the amiable Wei settles down to a life of idleness. He opens a gambling den with several buddies, but before long he loses everything by keeping company with an expensive prostitute (whose fees are one liang per night) and by winning too much from the local bully, who then destroys Wei’s place in his frustration. Wei’s parents had arranged a marriage for him before they died, to an independent young woman who takes a lover in his absence. Later when the bully rapes Wei’s mistress and drives her away, Wei falls ill and develops a large ulcer, with the result that his male organ ultimately atrophies and falls off. However, a fortuneteller predicts that he will be “second in the empire” nonetheless.

Before setting off to Beijing to make his fortune as a eunuch, Wei Zhongxian marries his wife to her lover and gives the new couple the remainder of his possessions to make a clean break with the past. He stops for the night in a temple; there he dreams of a deity with a snake’s

head and a cow’s body who confirms his future as a eunuch in the imperial court. It takes him over five years of work to save up enough money to bribe the wet nurse of the crown prince, but thereby his future is assured. This first part of the novel reads more like the early chapters of Sui shi yiwen, which deal with the misadventures of the youthful Qin Shubao, than it does a work of pure condemnation: is this the “rise” section, albeit lighthearted in tone, that precedes the inevitable “fall” of the man and the political power he appropriates? The rest of the novel, about three-fourths of its length, narrates Wei Zhongxian’s increasing cruelty as he takes virtual control of the government and extends his power into the countryside through his creatures. His usual approach is to torture any real or suspected opponent; he even contrives to have temples to himself constructed throughout the country. But all his efforts come to naught; the final (of five) juan of the novel recounts the Chongzhen emperor’s reassertion of power and punishment of Wei and his clique.  

This portion of the novel demonstrates something of what I perceive to be the ambiguities confronting the Ming historical novelist who wrote about contemporary events. When the outcome of a conflict or crisis was clear, as it seemed to be when Shenglie zhuan was written, closure is available and desirable; that the novel ends positively is hardly surprising when the reigning emperor might well have taken offense at anything less. Although these strictures would have allowed little freedom in crafting the conclusion, the novelist might still enjoy considerable latitude in embroidering the personal life of his central character to make it entertaining, even if morally offensive. For example, when Wei, now a eunuch in the imperial palace, is finally reunited with his erstwhile mistress the prostitute, he still feels desire for her, as does she for him. They disrobe and snuggle, even though obviously intercourse is out of the question in his physically altered state (Shenglie zhuan 1.34a–b). The unnaturalness of this event forms an ironic contrast to the debauchery pursued by fictional doomed emperors such as Sui Yangdi 隋煬帝; so there is an ironic distance between Wei Zhongxian’s dream of “greatness” and the portentous dreams of emperors in other historical novels. Despite this comic element, the

14. Several copies of Shenglie zhuan can be found in Japan; it has not been reprinted. I have relied on the late Ming blockprint edition in the Tōyō bunka kenkyūjo at Tokyo University.
novel concludes conventionally with the fall of all the wicked characters and the re-establishment of firm central control (be, “unity”). The times were bad, but all is set right by the novel’s final juan, not just its final pages.

The anonymous Jingshi yinyang meng 警世陰陽夢 (Dreams of role reversals to startle the world) was published in the same year, 1628. It also concludes conventionally with appropriate punishments in hell for the soul (and body) of Wei Zhongxian and his closest henchmen—and with the admonition that the reader must not engage in evil acts. A third 1628 novel, Wei Zhongxian xiaoshuo chijian shu 魏忠賢小說斥奸書 (The tale of Wei Zhongxian: a condemnation of villainy), ends similarly with the extermination of Wei and his clique as Ming imperial control is reasserted. (In these novels Wei Zhongxian has himself castrated to avoid gambling debts, as he did in reality.) The slightly later Jinhao congtao Pinglu zhuan 近報霆譚平虜傳 (Pacification and capture of the invaders: recent reports and collected anecdotes, 1630) was rushed into print soon after the events it narrates: the attempted invasion of Beijing in 1629 by Manchu forces under the dynastic name of the Later Jin 後金. The work’s factual material is based on the Capital Gazette; it ends optimistically with the reunion of husbands and wives separated during the fighting and the (pathetically premature!) declaration of universal peace.15

Novels written just after the fall of Beijing record these events with considerable urgency—but again from cautiously conventional perspectives. Jiao Chuang tongsu xiaoshuo 勤闈通俗小說 (Popular tales of the extermination of the Dashing Prince, 1645) traces the career of the Chongzhen emperor with sympathy: even though he snuffs out the Wei Zhongxian clique, the spiritual essence of the Ming house has declined to the point that factional struggles and intrigues are beyond his power to control. Li Zicheng 李自成 (1605–45) begins his uprising with only a handful of followers, but before long others join because of official malefiscence and his army becomes invincible. Even though Li is initially hailed as Chuangwang, “the Dashing Prince,” his greed and

15. For synopses of these novels, see Zhongguo tongsu xiaoshuo zongmu tiyao, pp. 209–13 and 225–26. A modern edition of the first is Jingshi yinyang meng 警世陰陽夢, ed. Bu Weiyi 卜維義 (Shenyang: Chunfeng wenyi, 1985). One might argue that these “novels of contemporary events” are generically different from historical novels. In regard to their presentations of the dynastic cycle, however, their conventions are adopted from earlier historical fiction.
desire for power alienate all those who harbor any virtue—and identify him with the conventional image of the morally flawed contender for power. The cause of the Ming demise is not only personal, however: the influence of the Wei clique had produced a generation of incompetent officials both in the imperial court and in the provinces. The increasing number of popular revolts, such as the one that brought Li Zicheng to power, are the result of greed and venality among local officials, which in turn caused widespread poverty in the countryside. Even so, the novelist seems more interested in avenging the death of the Chongzhen emperor, which in effect General Wu Sangui (1612–78) did by crushing Li Zicheng, than in expressing concern over what soon became the last days of the Southern Ming. The novel contains no criticism of the system that brought eunuchs to power, nor did any of the novels of the middle of the sixteenth century. The failures that occasioned this national cataclysm are personalized; they are the product of bad men in powerful places, not of weakness in the imperial system. Consequently the conventional fictional discourse remains fundamentally unchallenged.  

The contemporaneous Taowu xianping 檜杌閒評 (Idle critiques of despicable matters), attributed to Li Qing 李清 (1602–83) a jinshi degree holder who served in several bureaus of the central government, was also most likely written in 1645. The novel begins with historical precedents for keeping eunuchs under control; allowing them too much power was the cause of the Ming decline, it asserts. Taowu ends with an accounting of the fate of all the central characters, both the historical villains and the romantic couples woven through the historical narrative. Wei Zhongxian and his close followers were reincarnations of snakes, the goddess Bixia Yuanjun 碧霞元君 explains at

17. For a modern edition, see Taowu xianping 檜杌閒評, ed. Liu Wenzhong 劉文忠 (Beijing: Renmin wenxue, 1983). As Liu points out (p. 571), the term taowu in the title has two possible meanings, both relevant to the novel. The first is a contemptible person, which could easily refer to the central figure, Wei Zhongxian. But the term might also mean a type of historical record; a historical record from the ancient state of Chu had this title. Consequently, Liu argues, this meaning fits well into the title of a historical novel. Taking the second as self-deprecatory, I have tried to combine the two in my translation. Xue Hongji 薛洪精 attributes the novel to Li Qing in Zhongguo tongshu xiaoshuo zongmu tiyao, headnote to the synopsis, pp. 291–92. Liu Wenzhong (Taowu xianping, p. 570) cites evidence to suggest Ying Bi 映碧 as the author.
the end of the novel: each of them and all the other characters will receive appropriate punishment as cosmic order and harmony are restored.

The slightly later Qiaoshi tongsu yanyi (A popular romance from the rustic historian, ca. 1645–46), compiled by the reclusive poet Lu Yingyang (ca. 1572–ca. 1658), begins by narrating the rise and fall of Wei Zhongxian and then traces the career of Li Zicheng from local bully to bandit chief, whose occupation of the capital occasions the suicide of the Chongzhen emperor. By the end, Li Zicheng, too, has succumbed, to illness, as the narrative follows the rump Ming royal house in its flight to the south. The novel concludes by blaming those who brought the Ming low, Wei Zhongxian and his crony Cui Chengxiu who weakened it, as well as the self-serving general Ma Shiying and playwright-minister Ruan Dacheng, both archenemies of the reformist Donglin party of intellectuals who dominated the Southern Ming court. The final commentary confirms the veracity of the novel’s endings for its villains: when Ma Shiying’s outraged underlings found him in his hiding place, they took him in fetters to Wenzhou, where they flayed him alive and ate him. For his part, Ruan Dacheng was struck from his horse by a thunderclap, and according to eyewitness accounts he died there on the ground, the commentator declares. Thus the fall of the state was a product of evil advisors to the throne, not of any fault intrinsic to the institutions themselves, and in the end the evil-doers received their just desserts. Thus in Qiaoshi as in other novels, the Ming collapse fits into the “dynastic cycle” pattern, with its optimistic expectation that stability will inevitably return, even when the reassertion of central authority is not directly narrated.18

All these novels on events leading up to the fall of the Ming, even when romantic tales are woven through the historical facts, confirm this same pattern. In marked contrast to earlier fictions about last emperors, which generally portray them as fools and lechers, these works regularly express sympathy for the Chongzhen emperor, because he was forced to commit suicide, even to murder his wife and daughter.

18. For a synopsis, see Zhongguo tongsu xiaoshuo zongmu tiyao, pp. 323–24; Qiaoshi tongsu yanyi has explanatory postfaces by Shi Yu and by historian Meng Sen, the latter reproduced from the 1937 edition, which was photoreprinted by Zhongguo shudian in Beijing in 1988; see Lu Yingyang, Qiaoshi tongsu yanyi, ed. Shi Yu (Beijing: Renmin wenxue, 1989).
Conclusions: Judgments on the Ends of Times

Surely no blame is cast on the imperial house as an institution. To re-
iterate: the dynastic decline can be traced to individual actions having
disastrous effects for the state. It is individuals who are culpable for the
loss of political and social harmony; there is no question here of the
rightness of the imperial system or of the novelistic discourse that re-
flects and endorses that master narrative. Nor is there any ambivalence
over whether, ultimately, order and harmony can be restored.

Early Qing Reflections on Disaster

Conventional expression was to change in several novels dating from
soon after the demise of the Ming, however, when the disaster had
become complete and its details less clear in living memory. Novelistic
practice during the middle of the seventeenth century seems to have
favored short novels, perhaps because of the topicality of their subject
matter and the urgency to get them into print while the content was
still “newsworthy.” Moreover, the widespread social and economic
disorder occasioned by the conquest disrupted, if not precluded, the
circulation and printing of new books until normal economic activities
could be restored. By the end of the seventeenth century, earlier long
novels had appeared in reprint editions, and new ones came to be
written. This is not to say that all novels circulated only in finished
condition. Chu Renhuo’s 粤人穽 (ca. 1630–ca. 1705) Sui Tang yanyi is a
case in point: according to its author’s preface, the work was mostly
finished in 1675 and then it circulated for twenty years in manuscript.
Only when Chu got his drafts back could he publish it, in 1695, obvi-
ously without having polished its last third. Even without the careful
editing it still needs, the ending of Sui Tang problematizes the many
political changes it narrates, from the decline of the Chen through the
rise and fall of the Sui and then through the Tang to the reign of Em-
peror Minghuang. By concluding his novel before the end of a dynasty,
instead of closure Chu Renhuo projected an ongoing situation similar
to that with which he began—political instability and ineptitude in
government, with no certainty of a positive outcome.

The political turmoil engulfing one ruler after another, one dynasty
after another, is punctuated in Sui Tang by periods of relative stability
and harmony—and by periods of virtual anarchy—throughout the
narrative. As I argued some years ago, the novel seems intended to
suggest a balance of contrastive elements along its narrative axis among
fictional segments and among events in the fictionalized history it narrates. This balance had a structural value, I believe, but it may in addition have had political significance. However, the ending is inconclusive about whether harmony will again balance out the disorder and political disunity that dominates so many of its pages; balance and order are functions more of the novelist’s narrative shaping than of intrinsic factors in the historical events he narrates. Instead, Chu Renhuo used the reincarnation of Sui Yangdi and his favorite consort Zhu Guier 朱貴兒 as Yang Guifei 杨貴妃 and Tang Minghuang 唐明皇 to tie its two ends together rather than resort to any arc of the conventionally understood dynastic cycle. A poem on the penultimate page comments on Minghuang as an individual rather than on larger political changes:

Two lifetimes of glory were nothing more
than a dream,
Only now as he leaves life from his dream
does he awaken.

Although this poem attributes enlightenment to this protagonist, a satisfactory outcome for his troubled life, his successor as emperor, Suzong, dies shortly afterward, and the novel ends ambiguously at a lull in the ongoing civil strife, leaving unnarrated the mei’e zhi shi (the beautiful and ugly events) of the reigns of the ensuing thirteen Tang emperors. Nor was the novelist’s plan for this ending merely to introduce a sequel. According to its final verse, this tale was meant to narrate the links between “the former cause and the later effect, [Sui] Yangdi and [Tang] Minghuang” 前因后果。炀帝與明皇. Chu Renhuo thereby avoided the necessity to bring closure to his story and to make any final pronouncement on the Tang in general or even on the High Tang in particular. By its conclusion, this lengthy historical novel is reduced to an imperial love story or, more to the point, a tale of romantic attachments, even obsessions, with far-reaching political ramifications. Furthermore, the opportunity to comment on the broader political significance of these numerous events and figures is eschewed, with the justification being the novel’s ideologically trivial structural needs. 19 From a novelist who lived through the later years of the Ming

19. Quotation from Sui Tang yanyi, p. 774; Chu does acknowledge here that a sequel would be appropriate to bring the narration of the Tang empire to a close. However, he declined to write one himself, and the novel’s final lines endeavor to
and the Manchu conquest, we might well find significance in this self-conscious lapse, this silence where we should expect clearly articulated didacticism, specifically the conventional discourse of historical fiction.

Perhaps Chu Renhuo’s early Qing historical romance responds to the fatalistic pronouncement on political change made by friends of his, the passage with which I began, from the first page of the Maos’ version of Sanguo zhi yanyi. But let us turn that relationship around: especially because of Chu Renhuo’s conclusion, I would suggest that the dictum fenjiu bi he becomes ironic when juxtaposed with events narrated in that earlier novel. Although it is generally recognized that Mao Lun and Mao Zonggang reduced the general level of didacticism in Sanguo when editing it to its present, and popular, form, several political concerns of the original compiler(s) were heightened in this edition. Read in the context of the still ongoing Manchu conquest of the 1660s, their changes suggest immediate relevance for the Maos’ own days.

tie the ending to its beginning. The interpretation offered here complicates my earlier discussions of this work; see Hegel, Novel in Seventeenth-Century China, pp. 189–208. It is worth noting that several of Chu Renhuo’s friends and acquaintances wrote plays in the lengthy chuanqi 傳奇 form. They included Yuan Yuling and Hong Sheng 洪昇 (1645–1705), whose Changshengdian 長生殿 (The Palace of Lasting Life, 1688) chronicles some of the same events as Sui Tang yanyi. It was conventional for plays in this format to end happily, with a “grand reunion” 大团圆 scene in which protagonists were reunited and crises resolved. In this context, Chu’s novel is all the more striking for its indeterminacy. This difference would also suggest that writers perceived considerably greater structural flexibility in the novel than they did in the chuanqi. This is a question that deserves to be explored in detail on another occasion. Chu Renhuo did leave the door open for a sequel, although he seems to have made no effort to produce one. Except for the novel’s final ci poem, it concludes with these lines: “After Daizong there were the reigns of thirteen more emperors, and the beautiful and ugly events during those times were legion; one should compile a separate record of them. Gentle readers, if you are not wearied by my verbosity, allow me to submit a sequel for your critical review (容續刊呈教). But in this book I do no more than explain the fated incarnation of the emperors of the two dynasties, Sui Yangdi and Tang Minghuang; subsequent events have not yet been recorded (尚未及載).” Perhaps this was meant sarcastically; Chu’s “recording” actually concluded here. For information on possible sequels by other hands, see my “Rewriting the Tang: Heroics, Humor, and Imaginative Reading,” in Snake’s Legs: Sequels, Continuations, Rewritings, and Chinese Fiction, ed. Martin Huang (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2004), pp. 185–86914.
All versions of *Sanguo* function as apologies for the Han house in terms of moral stature, and more important, all versions privilege the successor state of Shu-Han 蜀漢 founded by Liu Bei 周備 (161–223). In the very first entry in his "Du *Sanguo zhi fa* 談三國志法 (How to read *Three Kingdoms*), Mao Zonggang addressed the question of the legitimacy of ruling houses:

Why should the state of Wei not be accorded legitimacy? According to territorial criteria, control of the Central Plain might be sufficient to establish legitimacy; but according to the criterion of principle, legitimacy should be accorded to the Liu clan. The criterion of principle ought to take precedence over territorial considerations. . . . As long as the Liu clan had not yet perished and the state of Wei had not succeeded in unifying the country, it is obvious that the state of Wei should not be accorded legitimacy. But when the Liu clan had been deposed [in 263] and the Jin dynasty succeeded in unifying the country [in 280], why should it not be accorded legitimacy? The reason is that the Western Jin dynasty was established by regicide and thus is no better than the state of Wei.20 .

And so Mao continued, debunking the Eastern Jin’s legitimacy as well, and then explicitly throwing into question the right to rule of both the Tang and the Song. (He does not address later dynasties, however, most likely a politically induced silence itself.)

No matter whether these comments might often have been read in the abstract at later, more tranquil, times, we must consider how they resounded when they first appeared. That is, soon after the execution of the last pretender to the Ming throne, a member of the Zhu 楚 royal house with closer ties to the line of succession than those of Liu Bei centuries before, and at a time when the final defeat of Zheng Cheng-gong’s 鄭成功 (1624–62) rump Ming regime on Taiwan was a very fresh memory. By these criteria, the question of the legitimacy of the Manchu court was not yet settled, it would appear; nor had a state of unity (be) been reinaugurated by contemporary events. A full decade after the novel appeared, the Three Feudatories (Sanfan 三藩) rose in open rebellion, during which time Wu Sangui declared his aim of re-

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establishing the Ming.\textsuperscript{21} Thus, the original readers of this edition might well have read the introductory comments \textit{against} the narrative, as a platitude not literalized either by events in the fiction or by events in their own time: although dynasties inevitably fall, there is no inevitable subsequent rise to “unity,” and the legitimacy of a new imperial house is not guaranteed by mere seizure of power, according to the Maos’ contention. Significantly, the Kangxi emperor was taking the reins of government at about the time this novel appeared. One might, thereafter, have attributed legitimacy to the Manchu Qing on the basis of durable political stability—legitimacy that was still in question in 1661 when judged by the Maos’ criteria. Was this novel commenting on the current situation? I would say hardly less so than Liu E was some 250 years later.

But Liu E’s unfinished \textit{Lao Can youji} does not come to any conclusion, in contrast to its predecessor \textit{Sanguo}, and this may be the significant element in the novel for our purposes here: ends of periods of stability and real, contemporary, millennial changes, as opposed to the fall of fictional dynasties, do not necessarily encourage or permit conjecture about a future that resembles the past, that falls into the familiar pattern. That is, the conventional discourse of fictional historical narrative did not allow the presentation of a present-day decline into chaos; deliberately avoiding this discourse would seem to problematize conventional optimism about happier futures to come. Historical fiction is set, comfortably, in the past—when the future, in terms of the narrative, is already settled and order has been re-established. Consequently, novelists living through the ends of Ming and Qing could only change the subject and redirect the reader’s attention to more personal and less specifically political, hence less problematic, concerns.\textsuperscript{22}


\textsuperscript{22} I am reminded of \textit{Mengzi} B.6 where, when during a discussion of the art of ruling Mencius brings up the question of how the people should respond to misrule, King Xuan of Qi looks away and changes the subject (see Lau, \textit{Mencius}, 1: 37). Song Xiangrui (Yuan Yuling, \textit{Sui shi yiwen}, ed. Song Xiangrui, pp. 533–54) observes that even though the Qin Shubao story from \textit{Sui shi yiwen} seemingly promotes bandit uprisings, Chu Renhuo was able to utilize this material in his own Kangxi period novel by interspersing it with the tale of Sui Yangdi’s moral decline and the subsequent fall of his dynasty. This decline could be read as emblematic of the Manchus’ justification for taking the empire: the moral bankruptcy of the Han
Let us scrutinize the last lines of the Maos’ *Sanguo zhi yanyi*. The novel concludes with the consolidation of the Eastern Jin dynasty: the last Wu commanders surrender to the Jin, and the former heads of the states of Wei, Wu, and Shu-Han are given new positions under Jin suzerainty. The novelist then comments: “Thereafter the Three Kingdoms came under the rule of the Jin emperor, Sima Yan, who laid the foundation for a unified realm, thereby fulfilling the saying, ‘The empire, long united, must divide, and long divided, must unite.’” The Maos’ version of the work concludes with a long poem, adapted from the original Hongzhi ernals edition of 1522, that summarizes the major events of the period narrated; it ends with the lines:

The world’s affairs rush on, an endless stream;
A sky-told fate, infinite in reach, dooms all.
The kingdoms three are now the stuff of dream,
For men to ponder, in vain to praise or blame.

The final line is a product of the Maos’ pen: its invitation to ponder the significance of this period of protracted political chaos replaces the earlier line: 一統乾坤歸晉朝; “In unification the whole world swears allegiance to the house of Jin.” A note by Mao Zonggang appended to the poem emphasizes the point: 此一篇古風將全部事蹟隱括其中而未二語以一夢字一字字結之正與首卷詞中之意相合. “This old-style air cleverly contains references to all the events of the entire book, and yet its last two lines conclude with the words ‘dream’ 夢 and ‘in vain’ 空, in perfect consonance with the *ci* poem that began the work” (which the Maos themselves had written).²³ In contrast to the original simple acknowledgment of the completed change of dynasties, this intensified air of brooding sadness sounds more like a eulogy for the loss of something great, but transient.

What are we to infer from this comment? In this context, the concluding lines of *Sanguo zhi yanyi* seem to destabilize the apparent certainty with which the novel began: political unity does not bring satisfaction of social or emotional needs in its wake. Was Mao Zonggang a concealed Ming sympathizer? Scholars have debated that question throughout the twentieth century, and perhaps before, but privately. Modern opinion has it both ways, finding evidence to support Ming sympathies and yet acknowledging that the Manchu court had the novel translated into Manchu and made it required reading for their young men—without the Maos’ commentary, of course, since the Manchu translation appeared in 1645. Mao Zonggang’s contemporary Dong Yue was among the *yimin* 遺民, or Ming loyalists, who went into retirement, some of them taking the tonsure as Buddhist monks to avoid wearing the queue required of Qing subjects. Furthermore, there are adequate reasons to suspect that Mao Zonggang’s friend Chu Renhuo harbored Ming loyalist sentiments as well. Surely many of

24. Moss Roberts (*Three Kingdoms*, pp. 966–71) explores the Maos’ purposes and possible links between contemporary events and various political statements in the novel. Roberts draws attention to parallels between events of the late Han and the late Ming: manipulation of power by eunuch cliques, widespread peasant rebellions, military threats from non-Han peoples on the northern frontier, the allegiance of groups of loyalists to remnants of the imperial house after the dynastic fall. Roberts also notes efforts on the part of the Maos to avoid language potentially offensive to the Manchus. Likewise, attributing a *Sanguo* preface to Jin Shengtan, who was executed as a subversive—even though it probably was added by an editor subsequent to the Maos’ work—could only contribute to the novel’s anti-Manchu aura. Even so, various aspects of the novel supported the overall political strategies of the Manchus, evidence for those who doubt any inherent pro-Ming stance in the novel. I am not convinced that the two interpretations contradict each other, given the many possible readings of any one text: the “pro-Manchu” reading simply ignores the striking evidence that implicates the novel at the least as an elegy to a fallen Han dynasty.

25. See Hegel, *Novel in Seventeenth-Century China*, pp. 145–48, for a brief biography of Dong Yue; I argue for the Ming loyalist sentiments of Chu Renhuo on pp. 266–7. In his biographical sketch of Chu Renhuo, Yu Shengting 吳盛庭 in Zhou Juntao 周鈞詠 et al. eds., *Zhongguo tongshu xiaoshuo jia pingzhuan* 中國通俗小說家評傳 (Zhengzhou: Zhongzhou guji, 1993), pp. 167–76, esp. p. 167, concludes that Chu was a Manchu sympathizer. After discussing the evidence, Martin Huang and I concluded that acknowledging the reality of political change and adapting to the new situation was not necessarily antithetical with profound nostalgia for the lost dynasty. Although I disagree with Yu’s conclusion, there is no necessary contradiction between my interpretation and his, given the paucity of explicit political
their generation did. Yet the problematic contradictions of the novel-
istic master narrative in their works of fiction, even if not
self-consciously created, provide mute testimony to their personal
judgments concerning the ends of times: such conclusions may well
open onto uncharted, and perilous, futures.

Confusion About Chaos

Among the observations engendered by the differences between Liu E’s
early twentieth-century narrative and those seventeenth-century nov-
els, the most striking may well concern the contrastive atmospheres of
these works of fiction. The tenor of Liu E’s first chapter is despondent,
even urgent, as if the dreamer were frantic to find some way to salvage
the situation it symbolizes for all those involved. On the other hand,
the introduction to the Maos’ version of Sanguo seems to reflect the
narrator’s resignation to individual helplessness in the face of the
greater forces that control human affairs. In the more conventional
historical novels dating from the decades before 1650 and in those on
contemporary events, individuals had everything to do with national
stability: selfishness, cruelty, and ineptitude could fatally weaken a
dynastic house; only a true ruler could rectify a slide into moral, hence
political, chaos. But the novelists of the second half of the seventeenth
century seemed to have faith, from the perspective of the standard
Confucian optimism reflected in the historical master narrative of
vernacular fiction, that chaos could be brought to an end, and that
peace and tranquility might indeed ensue.

The uncertainty and anxiety that we see in the judgments of Liu E
and the late seventeenth-century authors who lived through the Ming
fall are at considerable variance from the fervent optimism of writers
captured in the midst of calamity. By contrast, the early Qing historical
novelists realized how transitory stability could be. Yuan Yuling
brought his hero Qin Shubao through the wars at the end of the Sui to

commentary on Chu’s part. I discuss further the complex negotiations of Chu
Renhuo and other late seventeenth-century writers with the new regime in my
essay “Dreaming the Past: Memory and Continuity Beyond the Ming Fall,”
forthcoming in Trauma and Transcendence in Early Qing Literature, ed. Wilt
L. Idema, Wai-yee Lee, and Ellen Widmer (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University
Asia Center, 2005).
aid his chosen lord in the establishment of peace under the banner of the Tang. Forty years later Chu Renhuo wove that optimistic story into his own reluctant testimony to man’s ability to reassert political order in the world. In *Sui Tang yanyi*, the best efforts of the individual might come to naught: success may be momentary, and final outcomes cannot be fathomed, or perhaps even safely conjectured. Terminating the narrative unconventionally may not imply that history will come to an end—but it implies that events may not proceed in the hoped-for pattern. Reaching no conclusion in fiction when the times seemingly demand at least the hope of one in reality is a significant narrative choice. Instead of rulers whose ineffectuality is a repeating pattern in the earlier fiction, Liu E’s ship of state has a captain and a crew. It is within their power to direct the course of the vessel; they lack either the knowledge or the determination to do so. The major point of affinity between this late Qing novel and the work of the Maos and Chu Ren-huo is a feeling of helplessness about the outcome of the events they narrate. That helplessness suggests a fundamental subversion of the optimistic formula that all periods of instability, the ends of times, will necessarily come to a satisfactory and lasting conclusion.

**Apocalyptic Tendencies in Nonfiction Alternatives**

The poignancy and the political relevance of these novelistic features may be brought into sharper focus by comparisons with contemporary writings in other categories. Consider the real dilemma of that often fictionalized figure, the last emperor of the Ming. As Li Zicheng’s rebels swarmed into the imperial palace, in his final anguish the Chongzhen emperor reportedly cried to his daughter: “Why were you ever born into my house?” Thereafter he killed her, to prevent her being captured, and then he hanged himself. This tragedy, as the contemporary Confucian thinker Huang Zongxi 黃宗羲 (1610–95) concluded, was brought about by the Ming dynasts themselves.

“Once [the country] comes to be looked upon as a personal estate, who does not desire such an estate as much as a prince? . . . At most it can be kept in the family for a few generations, and sometimes it is lost in one’s own lifetime, unless indeed the life’s blood spilled is that of one’s own offspring. . . . Reflecting on [the Ming founder’s] accession to power, upon his ambition to own the whole world, who would not be disillusioned and wish he had desisted? . . . It is not easy to make plain the position of the
prince, but any fool can see that a brief moment of excessive pleasure is not worth an eternity of sorrows.”

Clearly Huang found the causes for the fall of dynasties in the acts—and the misdeeds—of individuals rather than in any inexorable cosmic forces. Indeed, he began his work with these words: “I have often wondered about Mencius’ saying that ‘periods of order alternate with periods of disorder.’ How is it that since the Three Dynasties there has been no order but only disorder?” Of course, Huang Zongxi himself wished for the millennium; he made reference to tortuous calculations that seemed to suggest that the end times were at hand, with the dawn of a radically new day just over the horizon.

Yet this unorthodox thinker was not content simply to condemn benighted individuals for thousands of years of social and political chaos. Instead of avoiding judgments like the novelists, Huang was very much to the point in his comments: he blamed the system in all its ramifications, in which weak and malleable individuals were merely the pawns of forces they could not control. Huang Zongxi began his *Mingyi daifang lu* 帝議大防錄 (A plan for the prince, preface dated 1663) with a critique of rulers, who felt they must control the world as if it were their personal possession. He moved then to critique the ministers of his day, concluding: “Whether there is peace or disorder in the world does not depend on the rise or fall of dynasties, but upon the happiness or distress of the people.” In fact, Huang did not just question received wisdom; he advocated replacing these views with a radical alternative.

Of course, as a prominent intellectual, Huang Zongxi could go far deeper into the analysis of causation in human affairs than could a novelist, even the more unconventional writers of the early Qing. They questioned the conventional formulation of major trends of history; he challenged the rightness of the basic structure and values of the Con-

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27. Ibid., esp. pp. 91–103 (for the quotation), and 8–11.

28. Ibid., *passim*; the quotation is from p. 95. See Huang’s virulent denunciation of the use of eunuchs, esp. p. 166. Huang Zongxi’s critique was expressly formulated to sound conservative, not radically innovative: he made numerous references to the proper relations between levels of administration in high antiquity, portraying his own times as the perigee of a long period of steady decline in the morality of governing.
fucian state system. The curiosity here is how the Maos’ views on political legitimacy seem to accord with the conclusions reached by a contemporary thinker.

Finally, let us take a second look at the 1628 novel Huang Ming shenglie zhuan, with its narrative of the nefarious career of eunuch Wei Zhongxian. Given its single-minded devotion to explaining the fall of the eunuch clique, it can be used as a model for tracing the end of a period of rule. Once the novel begins to narrate the events of Wei’s reign at the Ming court, his consolidation of power through cruel exploitation of others in the central administration and in the countryside, the text is frequently punctuated by reports of popular protests and natural disasters: the stability of the cosmos is quite literally breaking down. These calamities are historical; the novelist did not make them up. But in his selection of material for his narrative, these signs of Heaven’s displeasure are emphasized for didactic effect. 29

When we turn to narratives produced at the end of our own millennium, we see the same sort of attention given to protests and to natural disasters: I refer to expatriate journalistic writing on China today, some of which reprints opposition reports from observers within China. Bandits have arisen to oppose the oppressive tactics of local officials, they report; virtuous administrators go unrewarded or are punished for their concerns. Consequently Heaven is sending down calamities, for example, disastrous floods along the Yangzi, to demonstrate its wrath with its “sons” in power on earth. 30 The Shenglie zhuan was at great pains to rationalize the fall of the Wei Zhongxian regime; so, too, the “underground” press hints at the fall of the Communist regime and traces responsibility for moral chaos to the corrupting influence of the late Great Helmsman. Is the traditional fictional master narrative still seen as somehow applicable? Certainly elements of it

29. See, e.g., Shenglie zhuan 1.25a (portents), 2.4b (a solar eclipse), 2.23a (a headless corpse wails), 2.29a (a whole city weeps in outrage at official malfeasance), and 4.7b (an earthquake).

reappear in these nonfictional media. But, probably significantly, many of these contemporary narratives do not articulate a clear path toward a conventional end for our age, a period of glorious stability under democratic rule at some time in the future. Instead, they end inconclusively, like *Sui Tang yanyi* and the Maos’ version of *Sanguo zhi yanyi*. Like the model presented in *Lao Can*, the Chinese ship of state lists ever more dangerously as it drifts aimlessly into the future. We readers are presented with descriptions of decline and yet more decline, as Mencius indicated so long ago. It is not my contention that these observers are fictionalizing these ominous signs of impending disaster. But their sense of crisis regarding the stability of the ruling house bears a striking resemblance to Liu E’s prescience when he began *Lao Can*. Like Liu E’s novel, these disturbing reports herald the end of an age; in the absence of a presentable master narrative, the outcome is left to the reader to ponder.