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What Happens When Wang Yangming Crosses the Border?

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The emperors of the Ming dynasty ruled a bounded territory. There might be occasional doubt as to where exactly the border ran in places where the terrain was rough and the state's ability to control local populations weak. But everyone understood that borders existed, and all who served the Ming understood that imperial sovereignty extended only that far and not an inch beyond. A border marked a clear break between the order that Chinese sovereignty was thought to create and the disorder that its absence must imply. Being at the edge of sovereignty, where one thing became another, borderlands were places where sovereignty was difficult to enforce, where control required more stringent enforcement than was necessary elsewhere, and where administrative operations had to permit innovations and compromises that were unacceptable in the heartland. Borderlands were troubling to rule-enforcers; they were also politically dangerous for those faced with adjusting heartland rules to conditions in the periphery. This chapter is about one instance of alleged border-crossing in a Ming borderland and the great political excitement that this allegation caused.

Wang Shouren (1472-1529), better known by his sobriquet Yangming, was not only the most innovative philosopher of the Ming dynasty but one of its leading field administrators. His experience of dealing with civil disturbance and armed revolt, notably his suppression in 1519 of the rebellion of the Prince of Ning, Zhu Chenhao (d. 1521), in Jiangxi province endowed him with a reputation as a trouble-shooter. Although being politically savvy was the key to his success in the field, it was his military genius that he was most known for. Political rivalry at court turned his accomplishments against him, however, and he was sidelined by the Zhengde emperor (r. 1506-21) for the remainder of that man's reign. The ascendancy of the Jiajing emperor (r. 1522-66) brought Wang out of retirement to serve as minister of war in Nanjing, but, in 1522, the obligation to mourn his father once again removed him from the corridors of power. He remained sidelined until June 1527, when the emperor ordered him to lead a campaign to quell a rebellion



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in the borderlands of Guangxi province, where violence among aboriginal tribes and between aboriginals and settled agriculturalists was endemic. Reinstated as minister of war, Wang was additionally invested with the rank of left censor-in-chief; was appointed superintendent of military affairs for Guangdong, Guangxi, Jiangxi, and Huguang; and was given wide discretionary powers to bring the uprising to an end.¹

Wang doubted his reputation as a military genius. He says as much in the memorial he sent back to the emperor, asking that he be excused from the commission to quell the southwest on the grounds that he was in poor health. Health aside, he insisted that the emperor should place his trust in the regional military leaders already on site as he himself was not the person best qualified for the job. "Your servant is only a student of books and is not skilled in military command," he insisted. "My service in years past in Jiangxi led happily to a successful outcome entirely because I happened to meet with fortunate circumstances."² The emperor denied his request, and so Wang had no choice but to proceed to Guangxi. There he was successful again, through the same combination of good fortune and an ability to see his assignment in relation to larger problems. After the leading insurgents, Lu Su and Wang Shou, surrendered without a fight, Wang extended his

campaign to quell Yao raiders in central Guangxi and bring the entire region under state control. The pacification of Guangxi would be Wang's last great contribution to his dynasty. Too ill to wait for imperial authorization, Wang left his post and headed home, dying en route. Qing policy analysts would look back on this campaign as the last significant Ming intervention on the southern border.³

Wang's biography in the voluminous dynastic history gives only a brief account of the campaign and of the politics surrounding his service in the southwest.⁴ While he was on the campaign, Wang came under attack from Minister of Personnel Gui E (d. 1531). Wang's biography provides a brief summary of Gui's charges, one of which was that he tried to capitalize on his success in Guangxi by using the surrendered rebel forces under his command to invade Jiaozhi (a classical term used for Vietnam, and sometimes Laos). It was a serious charge, and Wang's supporters at court were alarmed. Both Hanlin Academician Fang Xianfu (d. 1544) and Minister of Rites Huo Tao (1487-1540) submitted memorials in his defence. Fang's original memorial seems no longer to exist, but Huo's does. Huo rose to the charge by arguing: "An official may be permitted to cross the border (*chu jiang*, which might also be translated as 'proceed beyond a borderland') when it is purely to do something that can bring peace to the *guojia* (nation) and benefit to the *sheji* [altars of soil and grain]."⁵ Wang Yangming thus stood accused by one party of crossing a border without authorization and stood defended by another of doing so for a legitimate reason.

This chapter is an exegesis of Huo Tao's statement, which I have undertaken in order to answer these three questions: Why was border-crossing selected as the charge designed to ruin Wang Yangming's reputation? What was at stake in the charge? And what does this tell us about the understanding of borders and borderlands in Ming political theory and practice? To approach these questions, we need first to survey the contexts central to this story: (1) the politics at the Jiajing court, (2) the reputation and political status of Wang Yangming, and (3) the security situation in Guangxi province. That done, we can turn to the charge and the defence and, more particularly, the language of the defence, in order to assess why border-crossing was regarded as a politically vulnerable act as well as why it could be defended. None of this will reveal much about what went on in the borderland; but some of it should indicate what borders could be made to do through the process of being talked about as well as how the borderland could provide fodder for political struggles that had nothing whatsoever to do with borders.

Court Politics

Gui E's attack on Wang Yangming was part of a larger political campaign to discredit Wang at court. Wang Yangming's biographer in the *Ming shi*

suggests that the person behind Gui's attack was Senior Grand Secretary Yang Yiqing (1454-1530). To judge from their prominence in the court's *Veritable Records* for 1527, Yang Yiqing and Gui E dominated the politics of the Jiajing court that year. Neither was indifferent to Wang's considerable talents nor averse to using him. Indeed, as I shall note later, it may even have been Gui who was responsible for bringing Wang back into government service. And yet, within a year of Wang's return to service, it was Gui who proposed that Wang was scheming to cross the border into Vietnam.

Yang and Gui were powerful in the 1527 court, but they did not enjoy a political monopoly. Another important group of courtiers had formed around Minister of Rites Xi Shu (1461-1527), who was a one-time political ally of Gui E. Xi was in poor health as the year dawned and would die that April, but he controlled a key ministry at the end of his life – the Ministry of Rites, where the difficult issues arising from the Jiajing emperor's succession had to get sorted out (see below). Xi was both a student and patron of Wang Yangming, and he surrounded himself with ardent supporters of Wang, among them Fang Xianfu and Huo Tao. Huo Tao, who would take over the Ministry of Rites in 1528 when Gui E was promoted to the position of grand guardian of the heir apparent, was politically most influential within this group. Another member of the group was Huang Wan (1480-1554), who moved up from Nanjing to Beijing in 1527 to assume the post of vice-minister of the Court of Imperial Entertainments and to take part in editing the *Minglun dadian* (Great precedents for clarifying morality) (again, see below). He would soon play an active role among the Huo Tao group as vice-minister of Rites.⁶

In 1528, whether to attack or support Wang Yangming became the wedge that drove a factional cleavage between the Yang/Gui group and the Fang/Huo/Huang group. Prior to this parting of ways, men on both sides of the cleavage shared a common admiration for Wang Yangming. All had been minor capital officials at the time the Jiajing emperor came to the throne in 1521, and all had come to notice and higher position by supporting the emperor in the struggle that dominated his first five years on the throne: seeking to have full posthumous imperial honours granted to his natural father. Jiajing had come to the throne as the successor of his cousin, the Zhengde emperor, and imperial convention required that he sacrifice to that cousin as though he were his father. He also wanted his mother to be elevated to the status of empress dowager. The issue divided the bureaucracy in what was known as the Great Rites Controversy.⁷

Those who supported the emperor would stay, and those who opposed him would go. All the men I have named submitted memorials within the first three years of Jiajing's reign backing his position. Their support for Jiajing placed them in conflict with senior grand secretary Yang Tinghe (1459-1529). Yang had held the senior secretaryship under Zhengde and had

weathered the transition to Jiajing's reign, but he was not keen on the new emperor's demands that his father be given full imperial status. Yang encouraged the emperor to accept the precedent of investing his natural parents with the titles of imperial aunt and uncle rather than empress dowager and emperor, but Jiajing held out. Those who supported the emperor went on the attack against Yang Tinghe, among others.⁸ Huo Tao had already gone on the offensive as early as 1522, declaring Yang unfit for the noble rank he might otherwise have expected to receive for his service to the throne. Others followed Huo's lead. Once Jiajing imposed his own settlement of the matter in 1524, Yang found himself completely politically outmanoeuvred and was "permitted to retire." The emperor then rewarded his supporters. Four months after Yang Tinghe's retirement, he made Gui E chancellor of the Hanlin Academy on the strength of Gui's attack on Yang.⁹ Yang Yiqing, Xi Shu, Fang Xianfu, and Huang Wan also won political favour for siding against Yang Tinghe. Their joint support of the emperor reached its apogee in 1527, when the documents relating to the Great Rites Controversy were officially published as the *Minglun dadian*. When the book was issued in June 1528, Yang Yiqing, Gui E, Huo Tao, and Huang Wan were all prominently named at the beginning as its compilers. It was, however, a last gesture of unity among those who had come to power on the back of this controversy and who were now jockeying for control among themselves.

Fifteen twenty-eight would prove to be a pivotal year in the politics of the early Jiajing court. In the three or four years leading up to it, power at court had been controlled collectively by those who supported the emperor's ritual claims for his father. In 1528, when the emperor purged the last of Yang Tinghe's associates and punished all who had continued to oppose his wishes, that collective leadership collapsed. Thereafter, willingness to support the emperor's position in the Great Rites Controversy lost its salience as a base for political advancement. It also lost its capacity to ensure factional unity. What might be called the Great Rites leadership came apart, and one of the points of stress causing cracks to open was whether to support or to condemn Wang Yangming.

The Problem of Wang Yangming

Wang was a lightning rod for faction-formation in the mid-1520s for two reasons. One was his political reputation. His stature as a statesman capable of formulating comprehensive solutions to intractable problems was so great that many serving officials were offended by the political conniving that had turned his impressive defeat of the Prince of Ning into grounds for dismissal. They believed that the Zhengde court had acted shamefully and that Wang should be brought back into government service at the highest level. In a memorial in 1525, Minister of Rites Xi Shu went furthest by recommending that Wang be appointed to the Grand Secretariat. This proposal

was not warmly received by the other grand secretaries, even those who recognized Wang's talents. Xi's comment that there was no one of Wang's ability currently serving at the grand secretarial or ministerial level offended other high officials as well as the emperor who had appointed them, though it is not clear that Xi intended to be quite so sweeping in his criticism.¹⁰ The proposal opened factional rifts within the court. In the zero-sum political game played by those, an increase in Wang's reputation could only mean a decrease in theirs. Bringing the southwest under control could earn him political capital that might alter the balance of power in Beijing. Were Wang to stage a comeback and show up in Beijing as a grand secretary, Gui E and Yang Yiqing, among others, would certainly be eclipsed. They had to block this from happening.

The second reason that Wang was a lightning rod for faction formation was his intellectual posture. Although Wang himself was careful not to get entangled in the debates kicked up by the Great Rites Controversy,¹¹ his followers were sympathetic to Jiajing's desire to respect his filial obligations rather than to adhere to established precedents that required an emperor to place himself in ritual sequence to the previous emperor. In their view, although this is never explicitly stated, Jiajing was following his innate moral urging. This, in Wang Yangming's philosophy, was the necessary foundation for ethical action.¹² As James Geiss has noted in his history of the Jiajing era, the issue of whether to support the emperor's position was decisive in opening a split between those who accepted the authority of Song neo-Confucianism and its reverence for textual precedent, and those who believed that moral judgments had to arise from ethical promptings within the individual. Jiajing's desire to honour his father was not a self-contained constitutional issue, therefore; rather, it represented the first clear public declaration of Wang Yangming-style moral independence from narrow neo-Confucian ritual convention – and by none other than the emperor himself. Wang's innovative philosophy was thus no longer simply an academic project: it had found political footing, albeit by accident. As a result, Geiss points out, "Wang's teachings became known throughout the empire in a very short time and remained a subject of great interest and contention into the seventeenth century."¹³

Those who feared Wang's political re-emergence and disdained the subjectivist tendency of his philosophical position – a fear and a disdain that came to be held by the same people – were unwilling to allow his latest contribution to the military stability of the realm to alter the status quo within either court politics or neo-Confucian debates. Conversely, those among Wang Yangming's adherents who sought to weaken the grip on power that Yang Yiqing and Gui E were enjoying found it useful to champion their teacher as both a man of action, whose political morality placed him above all other office-holders, and as a man of wisdom whose unparalleled grasp

of the essence of Confucius' teachings authorized his own actions as well as the emperor's decision. If you were not for Wang Yangming, you had to be against him.

The Problem of the Southern Borderland

Gui E charged Wang with seeking to capitalize on his military success in Guangxi by bringing the surrendered rebel forces under his personal command, crossing the southern border, and capturing Jiaozhi. The allegation that Wang was plotting to take Vietnam was consciously designed to cast the most threatening suspicion Gui could formulate, which was that Wang harboured great, possibly even dynastic, ambition. The capacity of military power to morph into political power, even in Chinese political theory, made this allegation the perennial sword of Damocles hanging over the head of every competent military commander, especially one in a borderland. A commander with his own army was vulnerable to the charge that he would go beyond the terms of his command and turn the personal loyalty of his troops into resources to remove the emperor from the throne. A commander who crossed a border without an order permitting him to do so was turning his back on the authority of his ruler. Gui did not dare voice that much on either count, given Wang's towering reputation for having served the dynasty during the troubled Zhengde reign. Yet by suggesting that Wang had overstepped his commission to the extent of crossing a border when explicit instructions to do so had not been issued, he could hint at this ambition.

There is no evidence that Wang actually crossed a border, as I shall note later, but let us set this question aside for the moment. More interesting is the charge itself, particularly as it came from someone who appears to have played a key role in getting the emperor to assign the task of quelling Guangxi to Wang in the first place. In the spring of 1527, the Ming faced heavy raiding on the northern border and endemic banditry in the south. The situation in the south was not a recent development. As Huo Tao put it in his memorial in 1528, southerners such as himself had a popular saying: "Of every ten Guangxi people, three are loyal subjects and seven are bandits." Some aboriginal tribes had been quelled in 1472, Huo noted, but those in the Eight Forts (Bazhai) region, right in the heart of Guangxi, had gone unchallenged by the Ming since the dynasty had been founded in 1368.¹⁴ Huo uses an anatomical metaphor: the Eight Forts region is the heart of Guangdong and Guangxi, and when the heart is sick, the body – the south – is threatened.¹⁵ A hugely expensive military campaign was undertaken in 1525-26 to deal with the problem. Victory was reported to the court in March 1527,¹⁶ but it won barely fifty days of peace before Lu Su and Wang Shou rose against the Ming.¹⁷ In early May, the emperor asked Gui E to submit a memorial suggesting how to resolve the situation in Guangxi.

In his review of the situation, Gui traced the troubles back to the 1440s, when aboriginal bands became sufficiently strong to assert independence from the chiefs whom the Ming had appointed, raiding other local communities and robbing travelling merchants with impunity. Gui observed that the intra-ethnic conflict among the aboriginals was worse than was their raids on Han Chinese, indicating that the problem went deeper than inadequate security around centres of population or along transportation routes. Recently the conflict had escalated to a level ten times what it had been during earlier reigns, in large part because military and civil officials were now in cahoots with the aboriginals. The solution Gui proposed was two-fold: (1) dispatch a high-ranking military leader to the region to coordinate and focus the work needed to assert military control in the region and (2) establish a new system of civil administration by suspending the rule of avoidance and appointing local degree-holders to local leadership positions. Gui believed that, were these two proposals to be adopted, a comprehensive solution was feasible not just in theory but also in practice.¹⁸

Emperor Jiajing agreed to proceed as Gui proposed. Wang was chosen for the task, and on 9 June 1527 he was ordered to proceed to the prefectures of Sien and Tianzhou to suppress the Lu/Wang uprising.¹⁹ It seems that Gui played a key role not just in having a new campaign mounted but also in getting Wang Yangming assigned to the job. No actual proposal naming Wang appears in the *Veritable Records* in the months prior to 9 June, but Gui's role is confirmed in a later entry for 19 July. This is the date upon which the emperor answered a memorial from Gui E, in which Gui pointed out the pressing dangers on the Ming's northern and southern borders and proposed that Wang Qiong (1459-1532) and Wang Yangming, respectively, be sent to deal with them.²⁰ The emperor notes in his reply that day that he had acted on the second part of the suggestion six weeks earlier.²¹ If Gui E was indeed pivotal in bringing back Wang Yangming, it makes his later allegations all the more interesting.²²

Wang Yangming's initial assessment of the Guangxi problem in his first full memorial to Jiajing, dated 23 December 1528, was similar to Gui's. He regarded Lu Su and Wang Shou as symptoms of deeper problems. The difficulty was not loss of military control but inadequate regional administration. The only hope for restabilizing the region was to introduce a comprehensive program linking local administrators to a larger network of civil, not military, control, of which the base consisted of the aboriginal chieftains (*tuguan*) upon whom the Ming had always relied, not officials sent in from outside. It would be much better to empower local leaders; doing otherwise meant that the state would have to bear the enormous military costs needed to keep the latter in place. In the course of explaining the capacity of aboriginals in the region to escape state control, Wang mentions in passing

that Tianzhou prefecture “closely neighbours on Jiaozhi” and that locals were able to move unhindered through the region. The control needed to prevent this promiscuous mobility could only be imposed by local chieftains. “Were local [appointments] to be changed to rotating [appointments] (*gai tu wei liu*), the trouble in the borderland would only be cause for regret in the future.”²³ The borderland needed reorganization, but it should not be hastily assimilated to the heartland model of appointing officials from the outside, as Wang’s predecessors in Guangxi had tried to do.²⁴

Soon after arriving in Guangxi, Wang proved the first part of his argument by negotiating with Lu Su and Wang Shou to bring their forces over to the dynasty’s side.²⁵ Presumably Wang’s reputation as a military genius preceded him as the matter was settled in a few short weeks without any battle. He then proceeded to operationalize the second stage of his analysis by mounting a larger campaign against the regional Yao insurgency in Liuzhou prefecture, which stretched from the Eight Forts on its west side, where it bordered with Sien prefecture, to Broken Rattan Gorge (*Duantengxia*) on its east side.²⁶ To underline the manageability of this project, he made the dramatic gesture of sending the soldiers who had been transferred from Huguang province for the original campaign back to their home province. In their place he used the 70,000 soldiers whom Lu Su and Wang Shou had turned over to the Ming. Using surrendered troops to attack other enemies was a time-honoured Chinese military tradition. It also promised to greatly reduce the costs of the campaign. But it could raise the question as to whether Wang had the authority to command an army that had not existed at the time he was given his command. His decision to suppress the Yao in Liuzhou also left him open to the charge that he was deploying his new force in an area for which he had not been given jurisdiction, thus enlarging his campaign beyond the terms of his appointment, which was restricted to Sien and Tianzhou prefectures.

Before these questions could boil up into a full-scale controversy, Wang was able to successfully conclude his campaign against the Yao.²⁷ He followed it up almost immediately by laying out a comprehensive overhaul of civil institutions following the model he had pioneered in rural Jiangxi a decade earlier: the formation of community compacts, the investiture of local elders, the revival of community rites, the promotion of schools, and the organizing of militia, among other programs.²⁸ It was, even by his competitors’ accounts, a complete success. The problem of the southern borderland had been solved, at least for the time being.

The Crime of Border-Crossing

The comment that Wang made in his 23 December 1527 memorial – that aboriginal rebels in Tianzhou had moved down across the border into neighbouring Jiaozhi – appears to have been merely one item of information

added to supply the larger picture rather than a telling detail.²⁹ In fact, Tianzhou and Vietnam did not share a border. Guangxi's border with Vietnam was over 100 kilometres further southwest, with half a dozen small prefectural and subprefectural jurisdictions lying between it and Tianzhou. The identification of Tianzhou as a border prefecture was apparently not to be taken literally: it simply highlighted the peripherality of the prefecture. There is no evidence that Wang crossed the Ming-Jiaozhi border, nor is there any evidence that his soldiers did. Indeed, the bulk of Wang's second-stage operations against the Yao were up in Liuzhou prefecture – to the *east* of Sien and Tianzhou (i.e., even further away from the border). Gui's charge that Wang intended to invade Vietnam thus seems to have been taken from a passing comment in his memorial rather than being a response to what he was actually reporting from the field.

The Ming Code is explicit on the matter of crossing national borders. The fourth chapter construes departure from one's home county as evasion of the service levy; the official compendium of statutes of 1500 extends this article to include crossing a frontier border.³⁰ The fifteenth chapter, in the section on laws governing the military, specifies that neither soldiers nor military supplies are to be taken across a border, strangulation being the penalty for doing so. The stated reason for this rule was to prevent military supplies from being sold to an enemy, though the standard commentary goes on to declare that, even if the purpose of crossing a border was only to hunt or cut wood, these too must be judged as infractions.³¹ The code's logic of closed borders is basically fiscal: crossing one implies a loss to the state of revenue or property. A military commander who crossed a border without explicit authorization, however, was committing a potentially more serious offence since the border marked the extent of the space within which the emperor enjoyed sovereignty. To step beyond it was to step outside that sovereignty. This seems to be what Gui E's charge of crossing into Vietnam was meant to imply. Entering Vietnam was not the issue: leaving the Ming was.

Gui E filed his charge well after his memorial in mid-May advising the emperor to give Wang a free hand to appoint either chieftains or graded officials as he deemed necessary. I suspect that it also postdates the clumsy attempt by an officer of the Embroidered Guard at the beginning of July to impeach Wang for having bribed his way back into office – a charge that the emperor had the good sense to dismiss as groundless.³² The officer had probably been put up to this by his superiors. Huo Tao's defence of Wang appears in the *Veritable Records* on 6 December 1528.³³ Huo had no way of determining whether Wang had crossed a border, but he decided to play it safe and float an argument that accepted that he had, and that his border-crossing had been justified. Curiously, he makes no reference to Jiaozhi; rather, he enunciates the principle that “an official may be permitted to

cross the border” in relation to a different charge – that Wang had overstepped his commission by extending his campaign beyond Sien and Tianzhou when he went into the Eight Forts and Broken Rattan Gorge regions (i.e., by crossing a prefectural, not a national, border).

To support his argument, Huo recounts a story from the Han dynasty. In 154 BC the principalities of Wu and Chu started a rebellion by attacking the principality of Liang. Emperor Jing ordered Zhou Yafu to go to Liang’s defence. Huo says that Zhou ignored the literal order to proceed to Liang and instead went behind Wu and Chu to cut their supply lines. The result was the decisive defeat of Wu and Chu, the pacification of seven principalities, and the resecuring of the Han dynasty. Even though Zhou went against the emperor’s directive, he was rewarded rather than criminalized.³⁴ The emperor recognized that Zhou acted on a higher principle and, therefore, should not be judged as having committed a treasonable act. “The way of the ancients” (*gu zhi dao*), which Huo cites from the *Zuozhuan*, was to leave domestic affairs (*nie yinei*, “that which is within the threshold”) to the emperor and external affairs (*nie yiwai*, “that which is outside the threshold”) to his generals. This was the sensible course for a trusted commander in the field to take.

The story sets out for Emperor Jiajing the precedent he should follow in judging this case by declaring that Wang had the right to make his own decisions in the field. But it is a muddy judgment because it points to many things at once. First of all, the order Zhou Yafu ignored had not restricted him to act within certain borders (the emperor had earlier given him *carte blanche* to do what he needed to do to cut supply lines). In the way Huo Tao presents it, however, Zhou went where he was not authorized to go in order to achieve victory for the emperor, though there is nothing about transgressing borders in the original story. Following it up with the adage about the emperor leaving what lies beyond the threshold to his generals is similarly ambiguous. Narrowly interpreted, it means that the emperor should not interfere in the command of ongoing military operations, but the explicit spatial reference manages to invoke the notion of the realm’s periphery, its border, which lay at the point at which *nei* becomes *wai*. From this statement, Hou then segues to his assertion that a general in a borderland should be free to *chu jiang*, “cross the border.” Up to this point, though, Huo has not given any example of crossing a border. He thus uses a story that is not explicitly about crossing borders to defend the concept of border-crossing. Why?

The implicit analogue for Wang’s willingness to cross borders in the Ming would seem to be Zhou’s indifference to interprincipality borders in the Han. The problem here, at least in terms of making sense of a Chinese political theory of borders, is that internal borders in the Han have no exact counterpart in the Ming. Was the issue that Wang went across the Sien

border into Liuzhou, another prefecture? The analogy seems inapt, for the borders between Ming prefectures were much “lower” than were those between Han fiefdoms. On the other hand, the border between Guangxi and Vietnam was much “higher” than the border of a Han fiefdom. It is hard to think that Huo would have regarded Liang’s position within the Han Empire as being the same as the Ming’s position within the larger world – and yet that could be what his rhetoric was designed to imply.

If there seems to be ambiguity in Huo’s declaration that “an official may be permitted to cross the border,” that ambiguity was intentional. He was trying to formulate an evasive answer to a question that he did not want asked. That question – should a field commander be permitted to cross a border at will? – was an awkward one, given the legal restrictions on cross-border movement. Making it explicit could only go against the man he was trying to defend. Instead, he had to cast around for a higher principle that could acceptably trump such restrictions and then press the particularities of the case onto metaphorical ground so that the original charge would get overridden. The analogy to the Han dynasty did double duty, covering both overstepping marching orders and overstepping a border. Huo was not trying to get the emperor to accept a pan-China theory of borders that treated the Guangxi-Jiaozhi border as analogous to the Liang-Wu border; rather, he was interested in persuading the emperor to “lower” the Guangxi-Jiaozhi border, at least long enough to let Wang Yangming back across.

The Borders of the *Guojia* and the *Sheji*

Thus far we have concentrated on the front end of Huo Tao’s declaration that border-crossing is defensible. Now we need to look more closely at how he phrases the back end: peace and security (*an*) for the *guojia* and benefits or advantage (*li*) for the *sheji*. Both terms are abstract concepts, slippery with connotations but well-weighted with an abundance of real-world correlatives.

Guojia may be said to describe the space coterminous with the sovereignty of the emperor (i.e., the national realm), although it could also be used to name the imperial line and even the emperor himself (i.e., the dynasty). The invocation works either way, depending on context. Both might apply here, for Wang Yangming acted to bring security to the dynasty and peace to the realm. *Sheji*, the altars to the spirits of soil and grain, is a more emotive piece of rhetoric, something to conjure with – neither the nation nor the dynasty but their spiritual vehicle or counterpart. Huo’s decision to juxtapose *guojia* with *sheji* suggests that he wanted to evoke the sacred character of the dynasty and yet gesture towards something broader. Indeed, he had primed the emperor to respond in this fashion to the concept of *sheji* by using it to conclude the story from the Han dynasty of Zhou Yafu. Zhou’s unauthorized actions, Huo declares in language he does *not*

borrow from a Han source, brought *an* [peace/security] to the sheji of the Han dynasty. To secure the continuing survival of a dynasty was the highest contribution an official could make to his ruler. There was nothing stronger that Huo could say in praise of Zhou Yafu.

Sheji was not just an abstraction in the Ming as every county had such an altar, where the magistrate was required to regularly perform sacrifices to alleviate local troubles or to sustain good fortune. Beijing, too, had its sheji altar, to which the emperor sent officials to pray in troubled times.³⁵ Prayers in times of natural disaster were particularly apposite, given that Chinese political theory read natural disasters as the worst of omens: that heaven was sending signs of changing the mandate to rule. The purpose of imperial prayers to the spirits of the soil and grain was not simply to ask that the realm survive into another year. Pacify the spirits, and the dynasty should continue for ever. Of more immediate concern to Jiajing in his first decade of rule was the role of the altar as the place where the ritual designation of empresses, heirs, and ancestors had to be carried out.³⁶ Huo's invocation of sheji and guojia together may seem innocuous, yet I suspect that it had a more specific referent. If Wang's bold actions could be described in terms of securing peace and benefits for the guojia/sheji, then his success could be taken as evidence that these spirits approved of Jiajing's rulership and, more particularly, of his judgment that full sacrificial rites were owed to his natural father and full dowager status to his natural mother. In other words, Huo Tao was implying that Wang's efforts not only pacified Guangxi but also confirmed the legitimacy of the emperor's ritual decisions.

It was a brilliant rhetorical move. By defending Wang Yangming in terms of guojia and sheji, Huo was mobilizing key constitutional language in Ming political theory. Gui could not now decouple Wang from this rhetoric, lest he risk casting doubt on Jiajing's position on the question of succession rites. It was always difficult to argue against the spirits, as anyone who invoked these terms understood.³⁷ In Wang's case, service to the state's security in Guangxi was also service to the emperor's ritual decisions in Beijing. It had nothing to do with crossing, or not crossing, the southern border and everything to do with assuring Jiajing of his right to determine imperial ritual. It could also protect Wang Yangming from his enemies.

Soft Concepts, Hard Boundaries

The accusation that Wang Yangming had crossed a border should not be taken as an instance of what happens when someone crossed a border in the Ming, since Wang did not; rather, it suggests what borders could be made to do in Chinese political theory. The immediate context of the accusation was the politics of the early Jiajing court, but context was everything. Those at court who feared Wang as a competitor for power could have invoked any number of other motifs that Chinese political theory

made available to political discourse. They did not just happen to choose the matter of borders. Those who feared Wang's comeback needed something big enough to convince the emperor that Wang was a threat to his security. There was little, other than outright rebellion, with which someone this able and this senior could be charged. A crossed border would do.

Was Bui E's suggestion that Wang be moved down to a borderland a case of brilliant political strategy? Probably not. Wang, after all, was the best man for the job. Once he was there, however, Gui had him in a political periphery where he was vulnerable, especially should he turn out to be successful. What was important was not what Wang did in the borderland but, rather, what he could be imagined to be doing – that is, plotting with the rebels who populated borderlands, or even with the foreigners who inhabited the territory on the other side of the border, to take authority into his own hands. In that sense, a borderland was not just a liminal space: it was a politically dangerous space where any sign of loss of sovereignty or control could be taken as evidence that the existing political order was under threat and as proof that treason was brewing.

The theory of borders that this episode points to is a simple one: Ming Chinese had a clear understanding that a border was a hard break on the field of sovereignty. This is a notion more usually associated with the modern nation-state and its obsession with mapping, closing, and patrolling its outer edges. The border of the Ming emperor's realm was no different. It showed where sovereignty ended, not where something as vague and culturally comforting as civilizational influence continued to radiate its fading light. Despite the language of culture into which it might be braided, a border was a political, not a cultural, concept. Those who lived along the border, and who crossed it at will, may have imagined borders differently; but those at the centre knew that one step over the territorial limit of legitimate action was all that was needed to end a career, even Wang Yangming's.

Notes

- 1 The circumstances of Wang's return to power and his campaign are surveyed in Chang Yü-chüan, *Wang Shou-jen as a Statesman* (Peking: Chinese Social and Political Science Association, 1940), 52-67. The campaign is also examined in Leo Shin, "At the Empire's Edge: Boundary and Identity in Ming South China," forthcoming, chaps. 3-4.
- 2 Wang Shouren, "Ci mian zhongren qian yangbing shu" (1527, 6th month), *Wang Yangming quanji* [The complete works of Wang Yangming] (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1992), 461; a summary is entered on 16 August in *Shizong shilu* [Veritable records of the Jiajing reign] (Nanjing: Liang Hongzhi, 1940), 78.7a-b; a portion is translated in Chang, *Wang Shou-jen as a Statesman*, 53.
- 3 Zhao Yi's appreciation of Wang's success imposing stability on the southern borderland without installing a vast standing army is noted in Alexander Woodside, "The Ch'ien-lung Reign," in *The Cambridge History of China*, vol. 9, edited by Willard Peterson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 275. The success was temporary, however, as Leo Shin argues in "At the Empire's Edge," forthcoming, chap. 3.
- 4 *Ming shi* [Dynastic history of the Ming] (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1975), 195: 5166-68.

- 5 “Fu daifu chu jiang, you keyi an guojia, li sheji, zhuan zhi ke ye,” *Ming shi*, 5167. Huo Tao’s original memorial, entitled “Wei Xinjian bo song Liangguang gongshi shu” [Memorial defending Wang Yangming’s record of accomplishments in Guangdong and Guangxi], is reproduced in *Ming jingshi wenbian* [Compendium of statecraft documents of the Ming], edited by Chen Zilong, 186.16b-23a (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1980s [reprint]). Portions of this memorial are translated in Chang, *Wang Shou-jen as a Statesman*, 63-65. The *Veritable Records* lists Fang Xianfu as the co-author of this memorial (*Shizong shilu*, 94.14a), but the full text appears under Huo’s name alone in *Ming jingshi wenbian*. For Fang’s defence of Wang on another matter, see *Shizong shilu*, 80.12a.
- 6 In September 1527, Huang Wan argued that once Wang’s assignment in Guangxi was completed, his defeat of the Prince of Ning should be re-evaluated along with Yang Yiqing’s role in the matter; *Shizong shilu*, 79.5a-b.
- 7 The controversy is examined in Carney Fisher, *The Chosen One: Succession and Adoption in the Court of Ming Shizong* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1990). On the roles of Gui E, Xi Shu, Fang Xianfu, Huo Tao, and Huang Wan in this dispute, see 72-80.
- 8 See, for example, Wang Bangqi’s attack on Yang in *Shizong shilu*, 73.1b-2b (1527, 2nd month).
- 9 Chou Tao-chi, “Kuei O,” in *Dictionary of Ming Biography*, edited by L. Carrington Goodrich and Chao-ying Fang (New York: Columbia University Press, 1975), 756; see also Chou’s biography of Yang Yiqing, “Yang I-ch’ing,” 1518.
- 10 Chou Tao-chi, “Hsi Shu,” L. Carrington Goodrich and Chaoying Fang, eds., *The Dictionary of Ming Biography* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1976), 524. On Xi Shu’s early association with Wang Yangming, see Wei-ming Tu, *Neo-Confucian Thought in Action: Wang Yang-ming’s Youth (1472-1509)* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), 147-48.
- 11 Wang never expressed a direct opinion on the subject, but he was sympathetic to Jiajing’s position. See Fisher, *The Chosen One*, 163-67. He seems to be showing his hand in his third detailed memorial from Guangxi, in which he praises Jiajing as “the emperor who promotes perfect filial piety to rule the realm.” See *Wang Yangming quanji*, 470. See also *Shizong shilu*, 88.2b, 4b.
- 12 On Wang’s philosophy, see Weiming Tu, *Wang Yangming*.
- 13 James Geiss, “The Chia-ching Reign, 1522-1566,” in *The Cambridge History of China*, vol. 7, edited by Frederick Mote and Denis Twitchett (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 450. Despite Geiss’ sensitivity to the politics of the late 1520s, neither the campaign in Guangxi nor the struggle over Wang’s reputation draws his attention. Oddly, volume 8 of *The Cambridge History of China* is equally silent on the campaign.
- 14 The Eight Forts were Siji, Zhouan, Gumao, Guteng, Gubo, Duzhe, Luomo, and Chating. In his memorial introducing the *Yudi tu* atlas to the emperor, Gui E explains in the section on Guangxi that the Eight Forts region lies within the prefectural boundaries of Liuzhou, which was contiguous with the east side of Sien prefecture, and that “it is known as a bandit zone.” See his “Jin yudi tu shu” [Memorial presenting the *Atlas of the territories of Yu*], reprinted in *Ming jingshi wenbian*, 182.13b. See also Chang, *Wang Shou-jen as a Statesman*, 90-91.
- 15 Huo Tao, “Wei Xinjian bo song Liangguang gongshi shu,” 186.18a (see note 5 above).
- 16 *Shizong shilu*, 73.3b.
- 17 The comment about fifty days comes from Huo Tao’s memorial, 186.17a. The uprising of Lu Su and Wang Shou is first mentioned in *Shizong shilu*, 74.6a.
- 18 Gui’s memorial, “Lun Guangxi Tong Man shiyi shu” [Memorial on arrangements for dealing with the aborigines of Guangxi], *Ming jingshi wenbian*, 181.18a-20b. Gui suggested that the appointment of local degree-holders be handled within his ministry, the Ministry of Personnel, on a three-year trial basis.
- 19 *Shizong shilu*, 76.6a. Tianzhou was a prefecture until August 1528, when it was demoted to the status of subprefecture; it was made an independent subprefecture in November 1529. See *Ming shi*, 1164. The uprising in Tianzhou is described in Shin, “At the Empire’s Edge,” Ch. 3.
- 20 *Shizong shilu*, 77.6b.
- 21 The emperor’s delay in responding to the first part seems to have occurred because rehabilitating the exiled Wang Qiong was a more difficult problem than was clearing Wang

- Yangming for service. Wang Qiong had played a key role in the suppression of the Prince of Ning and, as a result, like Wang Yangming, found himself in political disfavour at court. Unlike Wang Yangming, he was not just sidelined by Yang Tinghe when the Jiajing emperor came to power but, rather, was exiled to Shaanxi. Gui E's proposal to bring him back was yet another move on the part of the Great Rites clique to bring eminent opponents of Yang Tinghe back to office (though under their patronage). See Benjamin Wallacker, "Wang Ch'ung," *Dictionary of Ming Biography*, 1367-68.
- 22 Equally interesting is Gui E's posthumous dismissal of Wang's thought and conduct, cited in Tu, *Neo-Confucian Thought in Action*, 6.
 - 23 *Wang Yangming quanji*, 465-66 (12th month, 1st day). The quoted passage appears verbatim in *Ming shi*, 5166.
 - 24 Wang reiterates the importance of using local chieftains again and again in his Guangxi memorials (e.g., *Wang Yangming quanji*, 472, 477, 480-86, 495, 497). Contemporaries were pitching the same argument elsewhere in the southwest. For example, Hu Shining, who in April 1529 argued against installing appointed officials in areas of eastern Sichuan except where local chieftains were doing a conspicuously bad job. The Jiajing emperor agreed, and ordered that an edict go out to all local chieftains in Sichuan and Guizhou confirming their status so long as they maintained local order. See *Shizong shilu*, 96.6a-7a.
 - 25 Wang's report of victory, dated 4 March 1528 (2nd month, 13th day), appears in the *Veritable Records* on 29 May (5th month, 12th day). See *Shizong shilu*, 88.2b.
 - 26 The history of the Rattan Gorge region, renamed Broken Rattan Gorge after the Ming conquered it in 1466, is provided in Leo Shin, "At the Empire's Edge," chap. 4.
 - 27 Wang's report of victory over the Eight Forts and Broken Rattan Gorge, dated 25 July 1528 (7th month, 10th day), appears in the *Veritable Records* on 1 December (10th intercalary month, 20th day). See *Shizong shilu*, 94.21a.
 - 28 These proposals are outlined in a series of documents in *Wang Yangming quanji*, 626-55. These documents are significant for being the last administrative writings Wang would compose, yet they have received no attention from Yangming scholars.
 - 29 Wang's point was to stress the impact of the close border on his suppression efforts. In another memorial two and a half months later, he rephrases Tianzhou's propinquity to Jiaozhi in terms of its "defending externally against Jiaozhi" (*Wang Yangming quanji*, 472).
 - 30 *Da Ming li* [The Ming Code], edited by Huai Xiaofeng (Beijing: Falü chubanshe, 1999), 49, 370, citing, *Wenxing tiaoli* [Substatutes on punishments]. One of the precedents for the substitute may have been the Hongwu emperor's ban on soldiers or civilians crossing the western border of Sichuan to trade; *Taizu shilu* [Veritable records of the Hongwu reign], 106.1a.
 - 31 *Da Ming li*, 119-20, 399.
 - 32 *Shizong shilu*, 87.9a, 90.12a.
 - 33 *Ibid.*, 94.13b-15a.
 - 34 *Ming jingshi wenbian*, 186.20a. On Zhou Yafu, see Sima Qian, *Shi ji* [Records of the historian] (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1973), 2073-80. Sima Qian's version of the story says that Zhou already had the emperor's explicit permission to cut the Wu and Chu supply lines. The order he did not follow was the one calling on him to abandon his position and move into Liang when the prince of Liang begged for protection from Wu; by ignoring this order and remaining where he was, Zhou was able to cut the supply line that resulted in the defeat of both Wu and Chu, 2076.
 - 35 For example, *Xiaozong shilu* [Veritable records of the Hongzhi reign], 160.5a.
 - 36 None other than Gui E was involved in the designation of the empress at the *sheji* altar at the end of 1528. See *Shizong shilu*, 95.3b.
 - 37 Officials later in the century more often used these terms to object to imperial innovation than to support it. For instance, the phrase "the root of the *guo*" (*guoben*, with "guojia" shortened for euphony to "guo") was used to remind emperors that they were not free to alter ritual precedents whenever they liked. Xia Yan uses this expression in 1534 to challenge Jiajing's request to change rites for a female relative (*Shizong shilu*, 180.5b). In 1586, when the Wanli emperor was refusing to follow precedent in selecting his heir apparent, an official argued that only the eldest son of the empress could be so named, since "rectifying

names and fixing status is how the root of the *guo* is made right" (*Shenzong shilu* [Veritable records of the Wanli reign], 171.5b). Seven years later, a lightning storm over the dynastic founder's tomb in Nanjing was the occasion for an official to prod the Wanli emperor on his failure to appoint the proper heir by speaking again of "the root (*ben*) of the *guojia*": "When the prince establishes (literally, "plants") the *guo*, this may be compared to planting a tree. A tree's branches and leaves may be luxuriant, yet if its core is hollow, it will burn; a *guo*'s cultural and material achievements (*wenwu*) may be impressive, yet if its root wobbles, it will sicken. What is important is the root provided by the spirits of soil and grain (*sheji*)" (*Shenzong shilu* [Veritable records of the Wanli reign], 260.4a-b). By ignoring what the *sheji* spirits would accept as ritually proper, Wanli was undermining the stability of the dynasty. This distinction implies that the vitality of the dynasty depended not on the acts of the ruler but on the legitimacy of his emperorship, and so implicitly separates the monarch from his own person, even the country from the dynasty (though no Ming statesmen would have phrased it quite this way).