Those Ming Things: Chinese Internet Literature and Popular History

by

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Analysis

Introduction

According to the annual Internet Statistics Report published by the China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC), in 2012 around 40 percent of all internet users in China made use of applications providing access to online literature – a figure roughly equal to that of people using the internet for online shopping.¹ This strikingly high percentage, combined with the existence of a special section for “internet literature” in bookstores across China, both attest to the remarkable social and cultural significance online reading and writing have in Chinese society.

This paper discusses a particularly influential example of internet literature in China – Those Ming Things 明朝那些事儿 by Yesteryear’s Moon (real name: Shi Yue 石悦²). As a work of popular history originally posted online that achieved best-selling success, Those Ming Things is an ideal case study to examine the reasons behind the popularity of Internet literature. In examining its uniquely internet production and literary merit, I argue that its massive success is largely due to the author’s “relaxed and fun” aesthetic style, which ultimately reflects how Chinese internet users are using the internet to do what they want to do – a well-needed and necessary perspective given the often skewed digital Orientalism in scholarship on the topic of Chinese internet research.

² Chinese naming convention places surnames first and that is what I will be following in this paper. I have also translated any online usernames mentioned instead of romanizing them with pinyin as I feel that is closer to the spirit of a username.
Internet Literature in China

History and Background

The definition of Chinese Internet literature seems obvious at first glance — it is Chinese-language writing, either in established or innovative literary forms, written specially for publication in an online interactive context and meant to be read on screens, whether that be computer or cellphone. Yet this definition is overly broad. What really distinguishes internet literature from traditional print literature is, I contend, not in its content, but in its form, namely, publication source, the corresponding medium, and methods of expression.

Internet literature is not a new phenomenon; it has been significant in other East Asian countries as well, like the Japanese keitai shosetsu (cellphone novel) published on dedicated sites like Maho i-Land. Western countries, on the other hand, do not have any real equivalent of the same “scale and scope.” The significance of the genre in East Asian societies means however, that while there are still some scholars who do not consider Internet literature “proper” literature, the genre has become a topic that attracts intense scholar attention and interest in China in recent years, with over 800 academic papers and 200 dissertations on the topic of internet literature published by 2008.

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3 Hockx, Internet Literature in China, 4.
4 Haiyan Chen, "Wangluo xiaoshuo de xingqi" [The Rise of Internet Novels], Xiaoshuo pinglun [Fiction Criticism], no. 3 (1999): 31.
6 Hockx, Internet Literature in China, 4.
The brief history of Internet literature in China can be roughly split into six different stages. The first stage was the “budding stage” from 1995-1996: with the PRC joining the international World Wide Web in 1994, Bulletin Board Systems (BBS) began to appear on servers in Chinese universities the following year, distributing some original literary works but mainly copying those from Taiwan.\(^8\) The next two years, 1997-1998, formed the “development stage”. Under the Banyan Tree, the longest-standing literary website in website in China, was founded in 1997, while in 1998, Taiwanese writer “Ruffian Cai” (痞子蔡) serialized his novel *First Intimate Contact* 第一次亲密接触 on a BBS, which later became a published best-seller in Taiwan and the PRC, familiarizing many readers with the by then recognizable “online writing style” – colloquial language broken down into many short segments – and paving the way for the Internet literature craze to come.\(^9\)

The number of people pursuing and engaging writing of Internet literature increased in the next stage – the “first wave” from 1999-2000; however, many such websites shut down in the in the next two years in what is known as the “low point” phase of the development of Chinese Internet literature. Increased commercialization and an influx of capital caused Internet literature to witness a resurgence in the “second wave” stage from 2003-2005. The two primary sources for Internet literature in China – commercial websites and forums – both settled on their respective business models. Commercial websites like Qidian (起点中文网) adopted a VIP reading payment revenue plan while forums like Tianya Club (天涯社区) remained mostly non-commercialized, relying on unpaid moderators (more

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\(^8\) *Ibid.*, 102.

commonly known as “mods”) to manage their free platforms. Both models have proven successful and since 2006, Internet literature in China has remained in a state of steady growth, with such works becoming increasingly popular and widespread and even being adapted across different media into TV shows and cartoons. *Those Ming Things* is one of the most notable works of Internet literature in this last and current stage, making it an ideal case to study.

**Those Ming Things**

*Background*

On March 10 of 2006, the first of a long series of posts was posted to a niche forum “Warming Wine & Talking History” (煮酒论史) on the Chinese BBS website Tianya Club. It was titled *Those Ming Things* 明朝那些事儿 and the author’s username was Yesteryear’s Moon (当年明月). The reaction was overwhelmingly positive. By May, his post had over one million views and almost 10,000 comments – an unprecedented figure for this small forum, which had only ever seen posts with views in the tens of thousands. Yesteryear’s Moon became an internet sensation almost overnight. His many fans officially dubbed themselves “Alums,” playing on the homophonic relationship between the Chinese word for the chemical compound alum (mingfan 明矾) and “Ming fan” – the Ming referring to both dynasty and author.

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Fame brought its own problems. On May 19, when Those Ming Things was at the cusp of one million hits, two big names on Tianya Club, “King Helian Bobo” (郝连勃勃大王) and “Song Scar” (歌痕), wrote posts openly suspecting its view count of being faked through bots or backroom deals. In the days afterwards, countless sockpuppet accounts popped up in the comment section of Those Ming Things hurling toxic abuse as well as flooding the post with both text and picture spam that slowed down the server and hindered the author from writing and the readers from reading. The mods of the “Warming Wine & Talking History” forum further escalated tensions by removing posts supporting the author and banning those users. This whole incident, dubbed “Mingyue-gate” (明月门), eventually exploded dramatically: gory car accident pictures were spammed in an act of “internet terrorism,” both King Helian Bobo and Song Scar left the forum after being accused of colluding with the mods, three of the five mods resigned, and Yesteryear’s Moon left Tianya for good.  

He transferred Those Ming Things over to his Sina blog and continued posting there, where its monthly hit count remained well over a million. The sensational popularity was picked up by a publisher. However, the controversy didn’t stop with the end of Mingyue-gate. Even a year later in 2007 – when the original Tianya post was at over 20 million views – posts like the one titled “Why a liar and the Ming dynasty are so famous – a case study of successful cheating in the digital age” were still appearing on Tianya Club. It suspected either the author or an unscrupulous book publisher of manufacturing around one million fake hits through spamming in order to generate hype for its future publication.

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13 Yong Zhao, “Haokan de mimi: Mingchao naxie shier de wenben fenxi” [The Secret of "Interesting": Textual Analysis of Those Ming Things], Wenyi zhengming [Literature and Art Debate], no. 3 (2010): 133.
14 Mo, “Cong Mingchao naxie shier de rexiao shuokaiqu,” 58.
In response, Yesteryear’s Moon posted a statement on his blog saying, “Faced with the website’s verbal violence, I am powerless.”

Reception

This controversy on Tianya Club did not affect the work’s popularity in the slightest. The popular reception of Those Ming Things has been absolutely astounding. In September 2006, the work was officially published, with an initial print run of 50,000 copies – all sold out within a dozen days. A second run of 200,000 copies was printed that same month. From then on, the sale numbers kept climbing, with additional printings ordered nearly every month. To date, it has sold over 20 million copies, topped the best-sellers list for the 2007-2011 period, won numerous awards from Amazon, Sina, and other retailers, been officially recommended by the Ministry of Education as “one of the 10 must-read books for elementary and middle school students,” and dubbed “the best-selling history work since the founding of the new China.” Critical reception has also been very positive. Mao Peiqi (1943-) – notable Ming historian, lecturer on the CCTV “Lecture Room” program, and professor at Renmin University of China – commended Those Ming Things for “closing the distance between ancients and people today” and wrote the foreword to the first print

16 Wensheng Ma, "Mingchao naxie shier shi renming de shier" [Those Ming Things are the People’s Things], China Book Review Monthly 2 (2017): 28.
17 Dangnianmingyue, Mingchao naxie shier [Those Ming Things], no. 3, (Beijing: Beijing lianhe chuban gongsi, 2011).
18 Li Li, "Lun wangluo xiaoshuo dui zhongguo dangdai wexue zhi gongxian - yi Mingchao naxie shier weili" [Contribution to Modern Chinese Literature by Internet Novels - Those Ming Things as Case Study], Creation and Criticism, no. 14 (2017): 40.
edition. Other academics have also “agreed with [the work’s] interpretation of history,” praised its “reflection and refinement of traditional Chinese political wisdom,” and deemed it a “masterpiece of Chinese Internet literature and even of modern literature as a whole.”

*Style and Features*

As a piece of writing, *Those Ming Things* is somewhat confusing as it resists categorization. The author explicitly states on the first page of the first volume of the series that “he’s not sure what literary form he’s writing in” but that in his opinion, the “form is unimportant.” What he wishes to write is “not a novel, not a history” but “a book in which you can understand history relaxedly, a book of fun history.” “Relaxed” and “fun” are the two defining aesthetic features of Yesteryear Moon’s writing style – it strives for “fun” as its creative mission and “relaxed” reading as its ultimate goal. Yesteryear’s Moon might consider his “not a novel, not a history” work to basically be “reading notes (zhaji 札记)” but its length, scope, language, expression, and depth of intellectual thought far exceeds the confines of that particular literary form.

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19 Dangnianmingyue. “明月的写作不仅笔锋活泼幽默，而且加进了自己的感情，这就拉近了作者与读者的距离，也拉近了古人与今人的距离。”
20 Ibid. “我很赞成《明朝那些事儿》对历史的解读，毕竟历史是一堆堆的故事和生动的人物组成，用老百姓喜欢接受的方式让它们去了解，是好事。”
22 Li, “Lun wangluo xiaoshuo dui zhongguo dangdai wenxue zhi gongxian,” 40.
23 Zhao, “Haokan de mimi,” 134.
24 Li, “Lun wangluo xiaoshuo dui zhongguo dangdai wenxue zhi gongxian,” 40.
25 Ibid., 41.
Yet, it is also not like anything else. It is not a history like the *Records of a Grand Historian* 史记, nor is it a more academic work like Ray Huang’s *1587, a Year of No Significance* 万历十五年, nor a traditional work of historical fiction like Eryue He’s *Kangxi Emperor* 康熙大帝, nor even a modern deconstruction of classic texts like Stephen Chow’s *A Chinese Odyssey* 大话西游.\(^{26}\) Compared to such works also on historical subjects, *Those Ming Things* has three distinguishing features. The first is that it has a smaller ratio of “show, not tell” compared to traditional historical novels like Eryue He’s *Kangxi Emperor*. Most novels tend to emphasize “showing,” whether that be dialogue, interiority, actions, or scenery; this “showing” does exist in *Those Ming Things*, but the percentage is very small compared to that of outright commentary. Second, most novels or histories tend to avoid expressing explicit personal biases of the author; they believe that there should be space for the reader to draw their own analyses and conclusions. *Those Ming Things* eschews this completely, happily declaring outright the author’s personal opinions in commentaries that are some of the best moments of the text. Lastly and most uniquely, the author displays the modern Chinese language at its fullest extent, using all sorts of words: internet slang, specialized terminology, political rhetoric, and more.\(^{27}\) Indeed, Yesteryear’s Moon was at least partially right in his analysis of his own work: *Those Ming Things* is not a novel, nor a history. It is also different from historical novels and really any novel at all – its stands alone, unique.

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\(^{26}\) Zhao, “Haokan de mimi,” 135.

\(^{27}\) Li, “Lun wangluo xiaoshuo dui zhongguo dangdai wenxue zhi gongxian,” 41.
Commentary Tradition

While Those Ming Things may be unique among modern literary works, it owes a significant debt to the traditional commentary tradition in Chinese histories and vernacular fiction. Much of the author’s choices reflects certain aspects of earlier commentary traditions. For example, Yesteryear’s Moon’s commentary-style writing, where he freely expresses his own personal opinions in often fourth-wall breaking asides, inherits certain elements from the traditional commentary on the Records of the Grand Historian, namely using writing history as a vehicle for transmitting your thoughts and integrating the author’s judgment with the narration of events.28

In a similar vein, another key aspect of the work is its metanarrative commentary, where the narrator voice, who is assumed to be the author, also becomes both author and commentator. This is not so groundbreaking in modern literature, but that is because Chinese modern vernacular fiction has built upon a break with the traditional narrator voice of pre-modern Chinese vernacular fiction – the “simulated context of the oral storyteller.”29 This literary convention that reached its maturity in the late Ming was a way to naturalize the unfamiliar process of reading and writing fiction in vernacular Chinese by referencing the familiar situation of hearing stories told in the vernacular by professional storytellers.30 One of the more well-known breaks with this tradition is Li Yu, a late Ming and early Qing writer most famous for his erotic comedy Carnal Prayer Mat 肉蒲团. In his works, he replaces the voice of the simulated oral storyteller with his own voice. The narrator of Li Yu’s works

29 Ibid., 231.
30 Ibid., 232.
is presented as the author of the text and a projection of Li Yu himself. This combining of narrator-author-commentator is inherited by Those Ming Things. Yesteryear’s Moon frequently breaks the fourth wall in his various author’s notes and aside commentaries\(^{31}\); Li Yu does likewise in his works by talking directly to the reader when the narrator asks the reader to “rest his eyes” before beginning the last chapter\(^ {32}\) or gleefully gloats “When you [realize that you] can’t guess the answer, take up the next chapter and have a look,” confident that reader will be stumped by a particular detail.\(^ {33}\)

**Importance**

**Internet Product**

It can be said, without any shadow of a doubt, that without the internet, there would be no Those Ming Things. Although the author wrote it without a defined literary form in mind – “not a novel, not a history” – it can and should be considered a work of Internet literature because its writing, reading, and transmission, all aspects of this work relied on the power and reach of the open platform of the internet. The Internet is its entire means of production.

Zhao Yong argues in his article “BBS, Blog, Fans, and Bookdealer: the Elements of Production of Those Ming Things,” that the work’s origins on BBS Tianya Club and later transferal to a Sina blog were crucial to its rapid popularity. He likens BBS to the “rivers and lakes” (jianghu 江湖) of Chinese martial arts fiction: “suspicion, controversy, criticism, and fighting, etc. are all normal behavior on BBS.” This type of inherently chaotic environment

\(^{31}\) See Translator’s Notes for more detail

\(^{32}\) Rolston, *Traditional Chinese Fiction and Fiction Commentary*, 293.

\(^{33}\) Ibid., 299.
is perfect for the male writer who wants to become famous quickly, Zhao states, even agreeing with the slightly over-extreme viewpoint that “men play BBS, women play blogs.”

I find this last argument contradictory given that although BBS Tianya did indeed help Yesteryear’s Moon become famous, his move to a Sina blog was what cemented that fame. Zhao even argues this point, stating that Yesteryear’s Moon benefited from Sina’s victory over Sohu in the “battle of the blogs,” successfully attracting more celebrities and generating more media attention through newsworthy controversies.

An important detail to note here is that it was not the author, but a bookdealer Shen Haobo (沈浩波) who made the crucial decision of moving to Sina. A former poet himself, Shen realized the immense economic potential of Internet literature starting in 2003 and became known for finding “diamonds in the rough” on the internet to publish; Those Ming Things was one of these diamonds. “Sell books like you’d sell electronics” and “learn to sell books like shoes” – these bold statements of his illustrate the increasing commercialization and commodification of literature by book publishers in China. Zhao views Those Ming Things as just another one of Shen’s manufactured “brands” – a blueprint for commercial success upon which basis dozens of other similar literary works will be churned out to feed the appetite of the masses. It is true that both Yesteryear’s Moon and Shen Haobo have enjoyed enormous financial success with the publication of Those Ming Things: in 2009, the former’s yearly royalties reached 11 million yuan while the latter’s company’s revenues exceeded 5 billion yuan. However, it is wrong to consider this work solely a

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34 Zhao, “BBS, boke, fensi, yu shushang” 126.
35 Ibid., 129.
36 Zhao, “Haokan de mimi,” 134.
37 Zhao, “BBS, boke, fensi, yu shushang” 129.
commercialized product. Unlike the VIP model of completely commercial Internet literature websites like Qidian, *Those Ming Things* was and remains to this day accessible, all seven volumes of it, entirely for free on the author’s Sina blog. Even after the first print run, Yesteryear’s Moon still “insisted on publishing the unprinted sections for free,” remaining unfazed by the yearly loss of royalties totaling seven figures.\(^{38}\) Yesteryear’s Moon may have been forced to renege on his promise to continue writing on BBS Tianya unless “faced with acts of God like war, earthquakes, natural disasters, etc.”\(^{39}\) but he ultimately fulfilled it in another way. Without the internet, there would be no *Those Ming Things* – the author’s act of keeping his work free to read online, like it was when originally posted, holds true to the free spirit of the internet, appropriate for a work with a uniquely internet production.

**Impact**

*Those Ming Things* has had a widespread and significant impact in the PRC. With its incredible best-selling success of over 20 million copies to date, it has a substantial influence on the development of the Chinese popular history genre. It was not a pioneer in this genre – earlier works like *Five Thousand Years of Chinese Nation* 中国上下五千年 and *Yi Zhongtian’s Analysis of the Three Kingdoms* 易中天品三国 each had some elements of *Those Ming Things*.

*Five Thousand Years* focused on making both the entirety of Chinese history from the Xia Dynasty to the Republic of China and Chinese folklore and mythology accessible to readers of all ages, extracting key episodes from a vast historical corpus of texts and

\(^{38}\) Ibid., 128.

\(^{39}\) Ibid.
expressing them in a simple and succinct manner. *Analysis of the Three Kingdoms*, on the other hand, adopted a colloquial writing style, utilizing modern slang and expressions to entertain the reader and evoke a sense of connection to historical figures.\(^{40}\) *Those Ming Things* inherited the best aspects of both forerunners, both the function of educating the masses of *Five Thousand Years* and that of entertaining the masses of *Analysis of the Three Kingdoms*. What distinguishes Yesteryear’s Moon’s masterpiece is its deft handling of the historical figures’ complex interiority through frequent narration shifts and its fun and relaxed writing style. The work also builds on the “translation” of terms from obscure to common, from technical to general in *Analysis of the Three Kingdoms*, further bridging the language divide between the modern-day audience and the historical figures. The most important difference is that while *Those Ming Things* uses a similarly colloquial style as Yi Zhongtian, the author of the latter was truly writing history. While his creative goal remained a “relaxed and fun” history and his aesthetic style does live up to that, the actual content is historically sound – in other words, history expressed as a novel.

**Literary Merit**

It’s said that a youth publishing company in China once sent out letters to over a hundred scholars and experts, hoping that they would write some easy to understand Chinese history works for a young audience – no one responded.\(^{41}\) There may be many reasons as to why, but it is established fact that as popular as the popular history genre is, it

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\(^{41}\) Mo, “Cong Mingchao naxie shier de rexiao shuokaiqu,” 59.
is not currently accepted by academia. The same problem also occurs with the genre of Internet literature. Despite its acceptance a valid field of academic study in recent years, a notable work like *Those Ming Things* is still praised only as a “pop culture classic” and not a serious work of literary or scholarly merit.

Indeed, much of the problem with analyzing “literariness” or literary merit of Internet literature is inherent in the genre. From the birth of the genre, it has been torn between online and traditional print literature, between mainstream and fringe literature. Another fundamental problem is the disparity between the field and the scholarship of Internet literature. As a new online-based literary form, Internet literature has undergone rapid, drastic changes over the past decades with new subgenres, writers, websites, technology, and capital pushing forward wave after wave. And yet most of the academic scholarship remains focused on the earliest stages of development, on writers like Annie Baby (安妮宝贝), Xing Yusen (邢育森), Cai Zhiheng (蔡智恒), etc., almost all of whom predate 2000. The lack of scholarship on newer writers means that to a certain extent, the Internet literature currently being studied is imaginary and already far removed from the actual vibrant literary form itself. As a work popular and successful enough to inspire extensive study, *Those Ming Things* is significant for the future state of scholarship in both the popular history and Internet literature genres. I am hopeful as in the years since its publication and with the rapid growth in scholarship in these areas, former traditional viewpoints have been changing. Writing just last year in 2017, Li Li considered *Those Ming Things* to be a “rare commentary-style

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historical novel with innovative thoughts” and having made “important contributions to modern Chinese literature.”

**Societal Reflection**

*Youth audience*

On March 27, 2008, a survey was posted to a Baidu forum dedicated to Yesteryear’s Moon titled, “How old is everyone who likes Those Ming Things?” In the span of almost two years, it collected 600 responses. Of these, 366 were “post-90s” (under 18), 157 were “post-80s” (19-28), 47 were “post-70s” (29-38), 15 were “post-60s” (39-48), and only 3 were “post-50s” (49-58). This data is not in the least surprising; as a new literary form and genre of the digital era, Internet literature is the popular literature of the newer generation, meant almost singularly for entertainment. Yesteryear’s Moon admits himself that while his work is historical, it is not intended to be “heavy” or “academic.” “People nowadays are lazier,” he explained, they don’t want to learn Classical Chinese or even read the Twenty-Four Histories translated into modern Chinese, but “they want to understand the past in a pleasurable way.” With its “relaxed and fun” writing style and humorous commentary on history, Those Ming Things thoroughly satisfies both this wish and the more general entertainment needs of the target audience of Chinese youth, thereby contributing to the work’s massive success.

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43 Li, “Lun wangluo xiaoshuo dui zhongguo dangdai wenxue zhi gongxian,” 40.
On the opposite end, the older generations have voiced explicit concerns about the influence of Internet literature on the youth. In an article “Challenges Posed to University Students’ Ideology and Political Education by Internet Novels and Countermeasures,” Hu Jihong criticizes the genre for emphasizing romantic love, individualism, and material culture and calls on educators to counterbalance the “erosion of political education.”\textsuperscript{46} It is clear that the age disparity and divide is not only present in the field of scholarship on Internet literature but also in its audience as well – the target audience of Chinese youth enjoy the entertainment while the older generations dislike its promotion of non-traditional social values. However, unlike the genre of Internet literature, \textit{Those Ming Things} as a work has been praised by scholars for its promotion of positive moral values. Ma Wensheng, in his article “\textit{Those Ming Things} are the People’s Things” takes a “common people first” perspective and lauds the work for expressing the people’s pursuit and admiration of justice and for “adhering to the ideologies promoted by core socialist values.”\textsuperscript{47}

\textit{“Digital Orientalism”}

Even with the conflicted moral judgments of scholars and older generations, what is extremely important about \textit{Those Ming Things} as an example is that it gives us a true picture of how Chinese internet users are using the internet to do what they want to do. There is a prevailing Western scholarly overemphasis on revolving mainly around the one question of whether or not the internet can bring democratic change in China when researching China and the internet. This can and should be considered a form of “digital Orientalism” because

\textsuperscript{46} Jihong Hu, “Wangluo xiaoshuo dui daxuesheng sixiang zhengzhi jiaoyu de tiaozhan ji yingdui celue” [Challenges to University Students’ Thought and Political Education by Internet Novels and Countermeasures], \textit{Journal of Shandong Youth Administrative Cadres College}, no. 4 (2010): 70.
\textsuperscript{47} Ma, “Ming chao na xie shi er shi ren ming de shi er,” 33.
it is based on the quite likely mistaken assumption that what Chinese internet users want or should want from the internet is different than users in other countries.\textsuperscript{48} By operating with the pre-existing assumption that Chinese internet users want political change through the internet, the researcher is ignoring other worthwhile areas of study, like the incredibly vibrant and rapidly changing Internet literature scene and the evolution of the popular history genre.

As Hockx points out: “is politics and the pursuit of democracy \textit{really} the most important issue for Chinese internet users or is it just the most important issue for us researchers?” Based on analysis of Those Ming Things above, the pursuit of democracy is most definitely not the most important issue for the Chinese youth, who use the internet mainly for entertainment purposes. While Yesteryear’s Moon does cover politics (albeit 15\textsuperscript{th} century Ming politics) in his work, the extensive depth to which he dives into political intrigue and conspiracy has even netted criticism for focusing too much on the shadier aspects of history. There are those who would argue that strict internet censorship in the PRC is what causes Chinese internet users to be focused on entertainment and not political change. To this, I respond that while certainly a valid point, that kind of mindset – that the censorship of a foreign country is what stifles pursuit of democracy – is also part of this modern digital Orientalism. Proponents of this argument are completely dismissing the state of censorship in other non-democratic countries as well as, more importantly, the ingenuity and intelligence of Chinese internet users who have had to become savvy and smart enough to work around some heavy censorship laws. VPNs abound and many sensitive political

\textsuperscript{48} Hockx, \textit{Internet Literature in China}, 9.
terms have commonly-accepted clever puns to use in Internet parlance. For example, using “天朝” or “Heavenly Dynasty” to refer to the PRC and “河蟹” or “river crab” as a term for the censorship itself, referencing “harmonious society” (和谐社会) – former leader Hu Jintao’s key ideology and a common reason given by the Chinese government for internet censorship.

Thus, the enormous success of Those Ming Things in the PRC is very important. What it proves is that, in contrast to the digital Orientalist emphasis on pursuit of democracy, the most important issue for Chinese internet users is entertainment. Those Ming Things’ “relaxed and fun” writing style, coupled with humor, witty commentary, and pop culture references, is exactly what they want from the internet.
Translator’s Notes

In working on this translation, I have tried to adhere firmly to a few guiding principles. Firstly, the world the translator produces must be internally consistent. Secondly, the translation should not be workmanlike but also itself a work of literature. And last and most importantly, the translator should strive to try and render a work that is popular in the original into a text that also aims at being popular, which is especially critical for this particular work. The greatest challenge in translating Those Ming Things is its unique aesthetic nature, neither novel nor history. The chosen aim of Yesteryear’s Moon to write about history in a specifically “relaxed and fun” manner meant dealing with a highly colloquial version of modern Chinese, peppered with not only historical and pop culture references but also internet slang and specialized terminology.

For example, “Hooligan Turtle Fists style” as performed by Wang Hong (page 54) is not actually a real martial arts style but a humorous slang term referring to the disorganized brawling of an untrained average joe: wherever there are people fighting, there is turtle fists style. To get this purposely lofty sense of amusement across in translation was not easy. Pop culture references were also rather challenging. For almost all of the references, I chose to localize them rather than directly translate into English. For instance, when Esen is attacking Juyong Pass, in the original Chinese, the author makes a reference to a well-known song by Dao Lang (刀郎), “The First Snows of 2002” (2002 年的第一场雪), in order to wittily illustrate the coldness of the weather in that scene, but he changed the date in the quote from 2002 to 1449, to reflect the actual historical date of Esen’s attack. If this line was translated literally, all of the humor would be lost. I tried to find an English equivalent the
best I could, running through a gamut of winter and Christmas-themed songs before settling on a reference to Frank Loesser’s “Baby, It’s Cold Outside.” While the two songs are vastly different – Dao Lang’s is a rough, husky, Xinjiang-inspired ballad evoking the vast loneliness of the desert while Loesser’s is a sweet, playful, flirty duet used in romantic comedies – the titular line from each is very famous in their own right and express some sentiment about a cold winter. The playful tone of Loesser’s song was exactly what I needed to capture the author’s humor in that particular line (page 127).

While Those Ming Things is highly colloquial, at the same time however, it remains a history work. This means the author often quotes Classical Chinese directly from historical sources like the Mingshi, either in dialogue or in parenthesis after “translations” to modern Chinese. In such parenthetical cases, I have chosen not to translate the Classical Chinese quotation separately but rather incorporated both the modern and Classical into my English translation as their meanings do not differ enough to be significant. This mostly occurs in characters’ dialogue. For example, Yu Qian’s response to Esen’s request for negotiation with four specific high-ranking officials (page 106) in the original Chinese text has the modern Chinese translation followed by the Classical quote it’s translating: “我只知道手上有军队，其他的事情不知道！”（今日只知有军旅，他非所敢闻） I chose to combine both sentences in the English translation – “I only know that I have troops, I know nothing about anything else!” – as the modern Chinese is already a translation of the Classical and including the latter seems redundant. In the original Chinese text, the inclusion of the Classical version serves to highlight it as a quote from a historical source but that is not as important in my translated text. The extensive range of language displayed in Those Ming
Things, from extremely colloquial to strict Classical, was the greatest challenge in my translation process.

Several key stylistic choices were taken with the translation. The first and most important was how I selected my excerpt for translation. The full work of Those Ming Things is seven volumes (nine in the illustrated edition), far too long for any excerpt to appear cohesive. Given the author’s slightly meandering style and frequent shifts in narration, I chose to center my translation around the life of one specific historical figure from the work, Yu Qian, thus both giving focus to my final translated text and highlighting the Yesteryear’s Moon’s highly personal and commentary-slanted writing style.

The highly colloquial “relaxed and fun” writing style posed specific challenges beyond vocabulary choices. Much of the literary merit and some of the best moments of the work lay in the author’s bold, unabashed personal opinions and commentary. This often takes the form of an author’s note in parentheses that breaks the fourth wall by commentating on narrated events directly to the reader – sometimes even inserted right in the middle of a person’s dialogue! I have chosen to highlight this particular metanarrative aspect of the author’s writing style by explicitly marking them as author’s notes. For example, when Zhu Qizhen is being coerced to try and get the gates of Datong open, he says to Guo Deng (page 81): “I’m relatives with Guo Deng (Author’s Note: verification pending) – why are you rejecting me like this?” In the original Chinese text, the author specifically prefaced this particular aside with the character 注, which means “note or annotate,” and so I have taken the cue for my translation from that.
Another distinct aspect of the work is the author’s frequent changes in point of view. While the overarching voice remains clearly identified as Yesteryear’s Moon himself in a type of third-person omniscient narration, the actual text often switches between different people’s private thoughts and points of view. In Chinese, this is easily comprehensible but when translated to English, the frequent omission of names or pronouns in such sentences necessitated clarification as to who exactly was speaking. I have chosen to render this in a playscript-like style, by setting off these passages in italics with the point of view person’s name explicitly stated. This occurs most often in the sections discussing court sessions. For example, in the section (page 68) describing Zhu Qiyu’s reluctance to become Emperor, the point of view varies between the narrator-author, Zhu Qiyu, and Yu Qian, all in a single page. The two lines set off in playscript-style were chosen because of either ambiguity – “It’s too dangerous, man” could conceivably be either the narrator or Zhu Qiyu – or for emphasis – “Safety first, safety first. This Emperor thing? Not worth it” underlines Zhu Qiyu’s personal feelings on the matter and also conveniently marks an end to his point of view. This stylistic choice borrows from the performance art of traditional Chinese storytelling where the storyteller, much like a modern-day audiobook narrator, played all the parts in a story. I wanted the reader to read such passages in a different voice inside their heads.
Chapter 5: Turning the Tide

Let’s look at five keywords that describe the Empire of the Great Ming right now:

- crushed armies
- captured Emperor
- weakened capital
- mass hysteria
- “surrender” (aka flee) faction

Truly the end of days.

If this scene seems like déjà vu, you would be correct. That’s because three hundred and twenty-three years ago, there was another strikingly similar situation.

Tenth month of the first year of Jingkang (1126), Northern Song Dynasty

The Jurchen Jin army that had been encamped towards the north suddenly invaded the Northern Song; Taiyuan and Zhending quickly fell. In the middle of the eleventh month, the Jin troops crossed the Yellow River. Emperor Qinzong was panicked and clueless, his ministers all called for surrender.

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49 The Ming Dynasty (明朝) was known by various names, including Great Ming (大明) and Empire of the Great Ming (大明帝国).
50 Jingkang (靖康), the era name of the reign of Emperor Qinzong (宋钦宗) of the Northern Song Dynasty, from 1126-1127.
Under these circumstances, on the second day of the twelfth month, Emperor Qinzong officially surrendered to the Jurchen Jin dynasty.51

First day of the fourth month, second year of Jingkang (1127)

Jurchen general Wanyan Zongwang returned home with his spoils of war: lots of looted riches and some four hundred captives – Emperor Huizong, Emperor Qinzong, the imperial family, concubines, and palace women.52 The Northern Song dynasty was dead.

If you compare the two, you’ll notice that these two dynasties, separated by more than three centuries, have remarkably similar circumstances. Both had just suffered crushing military defeat; both capitals were weakened with spreading mass hysteria; and the voices of both “surrender” factions held sway. In fact, the Ming’s current situation was even worse than the Northern Song’s because their Emperor was sitting in the enemy hands. They waffled and hesitated for fear of hurting the Emperor.

But the Ming dynasty ultimately did not fall to the same fate as the Northern Song. Because, unlike the Northern Song, the Ming Empire had, at this moment, one person with an angry voice:

“All those who support retreating south should be executed!”

The speaker: Vice Minister of War, Yu Qian.

51 The Jin Dynasty 金朝 (1115-1234 CE) was founded by the Wanyan clan, who were Jurchen – a Tungusic people that inhabited Manchuria – that coexisted alongside the Song Dynasty and was eventually wiped out by the Mongols. It is also called the “Jurchen dynasty” or “Jurchen Jin” to distinguish it from the earlier Jin Dynasty 晋朝 (265-420 CE) founded by the Sima clan.

52 The Humiliation of Jingkang (靖康之耻), also known as the Jingkang Incident or the Disorders of the Jingkang Period is name usually given to this series of events that marked the end of the Northern Song dynasty.
Yu Qian

Thirty-first year of Hongwu (1398)

During this year, the Great Ming bid farewell to its founder, Zhu Yuanzhang. For the empire, this was no small loss.

Yet it was also this same year that, in a normal family in Qiantang Town of Zhejiang Province (present-day Hangzhou), a future savior of the empire was born. This, naturally, was our protagonist Yu Qian.

Of course, the Yu Qian at that time was no savior. As a baby, his most important mission and objective was to...suckle.

Since his family was well-off, Yu Qian had his own study. It was here that he spent most of his childhood. Like all the scholars of the time, he started his education with the Four Books and Five Classics.\(^53\)

To be honest, stuff like the Four Books and Five Classics had a tendency to produce pedantic nerds. But Yu Qian seemed to be an exception. He was very motivated and diligent in his studies yet was never constrained by his textbooks. Besides studying test materials, he also liked to read extracurricular books for fun (military strategy, etc.). As history tells us, kids who like to read extracurricular books usually are successful in the future.

Just like modern day groupies, Yu Qian had his own idol. He hung a portrait of this idol in his study (this is rather familiar) and worshipped it day and night.

---

One time, his teacher discovered that he often looked at that portrait and asked why.

Yu Qian immediately replied with a serious expression, “When I grow up, I want to be someone like him!”

The person in the portrait was Wen Tianxiang.\(^{54}\)

In addition, Yu Qian wrote down in his study an ode to Wen Tianxiang:

\[
\begin{align*}
Martyr for your country, life forfeit  
Sacrificing your life, seeking justice.  
You would rather die for righteousness  
than to live in shame! 
\end{align*}
\]

In my opinion, this was young Yu Qian’s personal vow for his future.

Over three decades later, he fulfilled that very vow with his life.

**Nineteenth year of Yongle (1421)**

Yu Qian was now 23 years old. He’d passed the provincial exam and was about to go to the capital to take the metropolitan examination.\(^{55}\)

From here on out, he would say goodbye to his home, to his homeland in the waters of the South, and go forth to the magnificent and eventful capital Beijing.

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\(^{54}\) Wen Tianxiang (文天祥 1236-1283), scholar-general in the last years of the Southern Song Dynasty. Famous for his resistance against Kublai Khan’s invasion of the Song and his refusal to yield to the Yuan Dynasty despite being captured and tortured. Popular symbol of patriotism and righteousness in China.

\(^{55}\) Civil service examinations (科举), system of tests in imperial China to select candidates for the state bureaucracy. Administered at 3 levels: district, provincial, and metropolitan.
The path ahead was arduous but Yu Qian was unfazed. He knew that a wider world was waiting for him and the time to realize his ambitions had arrived.

He packed his bags, said goodbye to his family, looked at the long winding road ahead, and took the first step of his journey reciting a poem:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Sword drawn dancing in the courtyard,} \\
\text{song loud shaking forests and hills!} \\
\text{A man should aspire to thus,} \\
\text{not pedantry or pedagogues!}
\end{align*}
\]

Yu Qian, the world is vast. Go forth from here and begin your grand and momentous life!

**Cool Breeze**

In the metropolitan examination in the capital that year, Yu Qian successfully passed, becoming a “presented scholar” and was eventually appointed as a censor.\(^{56}\)

During the later Revolt of Zhu Gaoxu in the first year of Xuande (1426), Yu Qian used his loud voice, harsh words, and impeccable skill in the art of the roast to teach an unforgettable lesson to this failed rebel of a prince, incidentally leaving a lasting impression on his top boss, Emperor Renzong.

From that moment on, Yu Qian began his meteoric rise to power.

*Fifth year of Xuande (1430)*

\(^{56}\) Censor (御史), the standard generic designation of central government officials principally responsible for maintaining disciplinary surveillance over officials and impeaching the wayward ones.
Emperor Xuanzong promoted Yu Qian to Left Vice Minister of War and appointed him as Grand Coordinator for Shanxi and Henan. As of this year, he was only 32 years old.

To be only 32 and already a Vice Minister of rank 3a was something of a miracle. Yu Qian quickly became an object of envy among his peers.⁵⁷

Of course, this particular miracle could not be separated from the support of those in high office. And those who especially took him under their wing were the “Three Yangs.”⁵⁸

People like Yang Shiqi and Yang Rong who’ve been in the trenches of politics for so long naturally knew what’s what – someone talented like Yu Qian did not go unnoticed. There were indeed people at the time that complained about the sheer speed of Yu Qian’s promotion but Yang Shiqi just laughed dismissively, “This man is an uncommon prodigy and will surely become one of the pillars of the empire! I’m just promoting him for the sake of the country.”

Prodigy or not, pillar or not, no one was gonna just take Yang Shiqi’s word for it. You have to produce results before people will acknowledge you, after all.

Thus, Yu Qian left the capital and began his life as a provincial official. However, even he probably couldn’t have predicted that it would be nineteen years before he would come back again.

In these nineteen years, Yu Qian was the Grand Coordinator for the areas of Shanxi and Henan. He did not let Yang Shiqi down, working both diligently and conscientiously. During his term, he was held in high esteem and the common people respected him

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⁵⁷ Here peers refers to tongnian (同年) literally “year-mate,” people that passed a civil service exam together in the same year
⁵⁸ “Three Yangs” (三杨), refers to three officials all with the same surname Yang – Yang Shiqi (杨士奇), Yang Rong (杨荣), Yang Pu (杨溥) – that were prominent at court from the reign of Emperor Renzong to Emperor Yingzong
immensely. What’s even more remarkable is that not only was he competent but also an honest man.

During the Zhengtong reign, Wang Zhen was already in power. This was a miser who’d pluck the feathers off a stray goose: when officials from the provinces reported back in Beijing, they’d usually bring some sort of gift with them – Wang Zhen welcomed it all, even if it was just household goods, leaving everyone awkwardly caught between laughing or crying. But Yu Qian was completely different. Although he was Grand Coordinator, a highly powerful position, he was capable of not embezzling a single dime or penny. Not only didn’t he, he also made sure others didn’t as well.

With one corrupt official, and the other not – bam, instant conflict arises.

So in the sixth year of Zhengtong (1441), Wang Zhen, who’d always viewed Yu Qian as a nuisance, made up an excuse and threw the Grand Coordinator into jail. The result we’ve already discussed before: Wang Zhen didn’t count on Yu Qian’s popularity being quite so high. If he executed this man, there might be serious repercussions.

So Wang Zhen gave in; he released Yu Qian.

This incident also made Wang Zhen realize that the man, Yu Qian, was not someone to be messed with. Later when Yu Qian was restored to his original position, Wang Zhen was too scared to even let out a fart in protest – see, a man like Wang Zhen only bullied the weak; he was a coward through and through.

Yu Qian – who insulted Wang Zhen even from his cell – held to his principles after being released and remained as honest and upright as before.

There were some who tried to persuade him to at least give a little something to curry favor. To this, Yu Qian replied with a poem.
He himself probably never could’ve imagined that this offhand response would become famous and passed down through the ages.

_Napkins, mushrooms, incense⁵⁹_ –
_goods for the people turned to misfortune._
_I go forth to the capital with my two sleeves full only of the cool breeze*, so that none in streets nor alleys may gossip or complain!_

* The idiom “two sleeves of cool breeze,”⁶⁰ trademark: Mr. Yu Qian, all rights reserved.

_Thirteenth year of Zhengtong (1448)_

Yu Qian was summoned back to Beijing and appointed Vice Minister of War. His direct boss happened to be Kuang Ye.

Now, Kuang Ye was one of the good guys; during his time in office, he and Yu Qian built a strong rapport, working seamlessly and establishing a strong bond.

If things continued like this, Yu Qian would’ve probably waited till Kuang Ye retired, taken his place, became a high-ranking 2a official, maybe managed a posthumous honorary title like Grand Preceptor of the Heir Apparent (rank 1b), and then left his few marks in Ming history: “Yu Qian, native of Qiantang, born this day this month this year, appointed this position, died this day this month this year, the end.”

Yeah, something just like that.

⁵⁹ These are all local specialties commonly used as bribes by provincial officials hoping to curry favor with Wang Zhen.
⁶⁰ Used now to mean a government official is honest and not corrupt. Also can mean someone is poor.
For Yu Qian and Kuang Ye themselves, a life like that seemed quite alright too. Unfortunately, there is no what-if in history. Kuang Ye wouldn’t retire and Yu Qian wouldn’t continue living an ordinary life – the earth-shattering, heaven-shaking fourteenth year of Zhengtong (1449) had finally and inexorably arrived.

The stuff that followed is something we’re already familiar with: trade disagreements, military losses on the border, a eunuch’s deluded fantasy, idiotic decisions, desperate appeals, stubborn ignorance, completely clueless commanding – and in the end, disaster.

Yu Qian watched all of this happen with his own eyes. But he was helpless to do anything; he grieved and suffered. Kuang Ye was a good mentor, good boss. He’d helped him out a lot, and in some sense, the one sacrificed in that faraway battle should have been Yu Qian.

Yu Qian, stop grieving. It’s time to do something about it.

**Hero**

When a country is struck with disaster, there will always be some who step forward to serve their country. We call these people - heroes.

Inside every person’s heart there is the wish to be a hero. Even Wang Zhen was no exception – his disastrous campaign was precisely because he wanted to achieve such a title.

But a hero is not something everyone can be. If it was that easy, then wouldn’t we all be heroes?!

Ordinarily, we think of a hero as the following types of people:

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61 Eunuchs served in Chinese imperial harems, where the virtue of the palace women was paramount. The tension between eunuchs and virtuous Confucian officials is a common theme in Chinese history. Castration in China involved the removal of the penis as well as the testicles.
Heroes are those who – dare to do what others dare not do, dare to be what others dare not be.

Heroes are those who – turn great tides before the brink, lift tall buildings before their fall.

Heroes are those who – are strong and steadfast, fail time and again, fight time and again.

Only someone like such can be called a hero!

But in my opinion, a true hero is not limited to just this.

Heroes are really just a group of people with fear in their hearts.

To become a hero, first you must learn to fear.

What does this mean? Let me explain:

We were all once innocent naïve children, ambitious aspiring teenagers, and dreamt of a future where we realized lofty ambitions and launched pioneering careers. The world is our oyster; all the pearls within reach!

But when you actually assimilate into this world, you’ll find that this is not just only your world. You’ll encounter many difficulties, many setbacks; things never go exactly the way you think they will.

So people start shrinking back, start fearing.

They begin to realize that it’s not that easy to survive in this world.
So some of them sink, others languish.

But, heroes are made precisely at these moments.

No one in this world is naturally born a hero; no one is born steadfast and resolute, strong and brave. When cradled in our mothers’ arms, we are all the same.

If your life is all smooth sailing, then great, congratulations!

Unfortunately, that’s impossible. In the course of growing up, you will inevitably face all sorts of obstacles.

And these obstacles will bring about all sorts of unpleasant experiences – doubt, pain, despair all come flooding in, leaving not a moment of peace.

You don’t understand pain till you’re hit! You don’t understand humiliation till you’re insulted!

It’s only when you suffer these pains and humiliations that you will realize how difficult it is to achieve your goal; you will start to fear, fear all of the obstacles in front of you blocking your way.

If you encounter these adversities, feel fear and pain, and reach the moment when you can hold on no longer, then you’ll realize that the time to decide your fate has arrived.

Because fear is not languishing, in fact, it’s the beginning – of one’s true strength, and of becoming a hero.

Someone who does not understand fear does not know what adversity is and can never overcome it.
Only someone who understands fear can awaken their own strength.

Only someone who understands fear can have the courage to overcome it.

Understanding the frightfulness of fear, yet surpassing it, conquering it, and finally becoming the master of it – that is a hero.

Therefore, the title of “hero” does not simply belong to those with distinguished careers and a place in the history books. In truth, all who understand fear and eventually triumph over fear are heroes.

Because even if you achieve nothing your whole life, your days ordinary and dull, when you’re old and gray and looking back on the past, you can still feel proud and accomplished:

In that moment of adversity, I made a brave decision – I am worthy of being a hero!

This is what I consider a true hero – one who fears and conquers fear.

The key is in that moment of fear: whether you choose to face it or to run away.

The dividing line of your life is right here. Step forward = hero! Step back = coward!

Yu Qian was not a born hero.

At least before the morning of the eighteenth day of the eighth month, fourteenth year of Zhengtong (1449), he had yet to become a true hero.

Even though he was an honest official, even though he was a high ranking official and held great power, those were not enough to prove he was a hero.
He still needed to demonstrate his fear and the strength to conquer that fear.

Yu Qian was ordinarily a forceful, domineering personality. From denouncing Zhu Gaoxu to defying Wang Zhen, he was always unyielding, as if there was nothing in the world he feared.

But this time was different. As the acting head of the Ministry of War, what he faced was the Oirat Mongol enemy troops and low morale within the city. His own life he could disregard, but now the burden of his country laid upon his shoulders. He had to be cautious; if anything went wrong, the result would be unthinkable.

Yu Qian was crystal-clear: fleeing would mean losing half the empire, so they could not flee.

Then…fight? It was easy to boast and brag but when the Oirats invaded, they wouldn’t be defeated by just words. If, by any chance, there was even the slightest mistake in commanding, the Empire of the Great Ming would be reduced to nothing.

To fight or not to fight, that was the question.

Faced with such a heavy burden, such an enormous responsibility, who could not hesitate, who would not be afraid!

Yu Qian was also human; he too felt fear. But the reason he was able to go down in history books, his memory never forgotten, was because he could conquer his fear.

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62 Oirat Mongols (瓦剌), the westernmost group of Mongols historically composed of four major tribes: Choros, Torghut, Dorbet, Khoid. After the fall of the Yuan Dynasty, Oirat and Eastern Mongols developed separate identities to the point where the Oirats called themselves "Four Oirats" and only called those under the Khagans in the east “Mongols.”
He wasn’t born a man of steel.

From his ambitions of childhood to endless exams of youth, then the decade-plus years of provincial assignment until being recalled and appointed Vice Minister of War, it wasn’t all smooth sailing. He once rocketed up in the world and once was excluded, imprisoned, almost killed. But no matter win or loss, all of these experiences had tempered him.

It was in this day after day of grinding, polishing, sharpening that he grew harder and harder, stronger and stronger.

Until he was strong enough to overcome the fear.

Kuang Ye’s expectant look as he departed still lingered before his eyes. At this point, he should step forward to save the day.

But with the Emperor held hostage in the enemy camp, the crack troops of Esen Taishi, the panicked commoners in the city, the fragile morale of the Ming troops, and with those selfish “flee faction” like Xu Cheng fanning the flames – all of this, all of this was reminding him:

This was a tangled mess, a hopeless checkmate.

Martyr for your country, life forfeit
Sacrificing your life, seeking justice.
You would rather die for righteousness

---

63 Esen 也先 (d. 1455), power Oirat Taishi and de facto ruler of Northern Yuan, briefly reunited the Mongols. The Four Oirats reached their peak under his rule.
64 Taishi (太师), a Northern Yuan title for a noble of non-Borjigit (surname of the imperial clan of Genghis Khan) descent who had his own fief.
than to live in shame!

Yu Qian ultimately still took this step.

The fate of the country, let me carry it!

Chapter 6: Decision!

“All those who support retreating south should be executed!”

Yu Qian rebuked Xu Cheng thus.

He continued:

“All Beijing is the foundation of the realm. If we moved the capital now, the empire is certainly as good as lost! Have you all forgotten the lesson of the Song Dynasty’s southern retreat?”

His heated outburst sobered those who had been waffling. The #1 in court, Wang Zhi, Minister of Personnel, openly declared his support for Yu Qian. Shang Lu, a “Triple First” scholar who would become a prominent official during Xianzong’s reign, also took his side. Under their influence, the “fight faction” finally convinced Zhu Qiyu and solidified his decision to fight to the bitter end.

Since Yu Qian was acting Minister of War and the head of the “fight faction,” Zhu Qiyu gave him the solemn task of defending Beijing.

65 Triple First (三元), quasi-official reference to the extremely rare person who ranked first on each of the 3 levels of civil service examinations
This was the greatest honor and the greatest burden in the world.

After court ended, Yu Qian walked out of the palace’s great hall. Looking up at the cloudy sky and thinking back on this not-so-peaceful morning, he could not help but feel shaken to the core.

But at this point, Yu Qian didn’t have time to ponder because that thin body of his was now carrying the heavy burden of the country’s survival.

On this morning of the eighteenth day of the eighth month, he made the most important decision and completed the most important change of his life.

His immortal legend also began on this very day.

_Nineteenth day of the eighth month, fourteenth year of Zhengtong (1449)_

Yu Qian convened his first war council. It must be noted that although this Vice Minister of War was an official who handled military matters, he had never commanded troops before – he was a scholar going into battle.

Be that as it may, a scholar was not necessarily useless on the battlefield: Yu Yunwen of the Southern Song Dynasty was precisely someone who organized a war as a scholar-official and ended up defeating Wanyan Liang’s ten thousand Jurchen troops at Caishi.66

Yu Qian might be a scholar-official, but he had also studied the art of war and had the know-how about troop placement and battle formations – a foundation built upon, I believe, his extracurricular reading as a child.

66 The Battle of Caishi (采石之战) – Nov 26-7, 1161 – was a major naval engagement of the Jin-Song wars in which Yu Yunwen (虞允文), a civil official, commanded the defending Song navy to a decisive victory over the Jurchen Jin fleet. It boosted Song morale and halted the southern advance of the Jurchen Jin army.
Like I said before, extracurricular reading really is quite vital.

But it was only when Yu Qian really got to understand the current situation of Beijing that he realized just how completely and utterly crappy the hand of cards he’d been dealt.

Setting aside the “flee faction” that still wanted to surrender, the sheer military pressure was almost too much to stand. The loss at Tumu Fortress had almost completely emptied their chips. You couldn’t even find a couple of decent horses in all of Beijing, and the number of troops barely reached 100,000 – and they were mostly the old, infirm, or retired.

As if that wasn’t enough, the worst part was that troop morale was worryingly low. The A-team had been sent out to battle but ended up completely wiped out. Those lucky few who managed to escape and return naturally over-exaggerated the might of the enemy in order to hide their incompetence.

The B-team left behind in the capital heard these rumors from their seniors and were of course, freaking terrified. In their eyes, Esen Taishi and his Oirat Mongol cavalry were basically alien monsters, each with three heads and six arms and unkillable no matter what.

That wasn’t all. The most important problem was that the highest authority in the Empire of the Great Ming, the (acting) Emperor himself, was not confident. Zhu Qiyu wasn’t really that much of a coward but in the face of such a powerful enemy, he was also out of ideas. Even though he agreed to fight now, if they suffered another defeat, Zhu Qiyu could very likely change his mind.

So the most pressing task currently was to stabilize the soldiers’ morale.

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67 Crisis of Tumu Fortress (土木堡之变), also called the Tumu Crisis or Battle of Tumu. A major defeat of a Ming army of 500,000 men by a much smaller Oirat Mongol force that led to the capture of the Zhengtong Emperor on Sept 1, 1449.
After listening to his minions’ reports, Yu Qian paused for a moment, lost in thought. Then, after carefully examining the map of their defenses, he gave his first command in a low but forceful voice:

“From this day forward, the following troops are requisitioned to defend Beijing as ordered:

1. Reserve training troops – those of Beijing, Nanjing, and Henan
2. Reserve anti-piracy troops – those of Nanjing and Shandong
3. Grain transport troops – all of those north of the Yangtze River
4. The Zhejiang troops led by the Ningyang Marquis Chen Mao (better combat capacity)

Those troops who receive this order are to mobilize immediately and arrive at the Beijing garrisons by the deadline. Those who disobey will be executed under martial law!”

The troops listed above were about a hundred thousand in number and, as you can see, they were not the main forces but mostly reserve or logistical troops instead.

Where were the main forces?

All buried under Tumu Fortress.

Desperate times called for desperate measures. The Three Great Training Divisions[^68] and the main forces from around Beijing had been almost completely wiped out with very few survivors. Those who managed to return were scared out of their wits and utterly useless. If anybody wanted to defend Beijing, the reserve and logistics troops were all they could rely on.

[^68]: Three Great Training Divisions (三大营), also called Capital Training Divisions. Guard garrison troops throughout the Ming empire were rotated to these divisions in Beijing for training and service as a kind of combat-ready reserve.
In addition to troops, another even more important thing was needed to defend Beijing – food.

Beijing was highly populated. To feed all of these mouths, vast amounts of grain needed to be moved and stored.

Although the city’s food supply was enough for the moment, if they were to be besieged, this would need to be recalculated. There was actually lots and lots of grain stored not far away in Tongzhou. How much? According to Ming History: “Millions of bushels.” This was enough to feed everyone in Beijing for a whole year; it was the largest granary at the time.

But the court officials didn’t seem to want to use this food. Quite the opposite in fact, they even advocated burning the Tongzhou granary.

That’s odd – why burn the perfectly good grain sitting right there?

The officials weren’t out of their minds. The problem was that you could see the grain but you couldn’t access it.

At the time, Tongzhou was not part of Beijing and it was actually quite some distance away from the capital. Although there was lots of grain stored in the Tongzhou granary, moving it to Beijing was a whole different matter. If they assigned workers to transport the food, not only would it be hugely labor-intensive but also dangerous.

Esen’s cavalry troops were already swaggering and strutting around brazenly just beyond the Pass near Beijing. Transporting grain took time – what if the enemy troops invaded in

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69 Tongzhou (通州), literally “a place for passing through,” named so because of its importance as the land and water approach to Beijing. Today a district and the second administrative seat of Beijing.
the middle of the process? As soon as Esen’s army broke through Zijing Pass,70 Tongzhou would be within reach and all that grain would turn into Esen’s provisions. So if they wanted to move the grain, they would need to send a military escort.

But right now, they barely had enough troops to protect Beijing itself – where were they supposed to find any extra to escort the food transport?

This was a hard nut to crack. It seemed that besides just torching the whole lot, there wasn’t any better solution.

But Yu Qian cracked it by using a rather clever method.

This was his second command:

“All those requisitioned troops are to travel to Beijing via Tongzhou; each soldier is to obtain their own provisions and convey it with them into the capital.”

The problem was solved. The grain in Tongzhou would be transported into Beijing by some hundred thousand troops.

See? That is competency.

Competency means doing things others can’t do, thinking of ways others can’t think of.

The foolhardiness of an ordinary person – everyone has this. But when faced with a problem, whether you can handle it well – that requires capability.

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70 Zijing Pass (紫荆关), built during the Warring States period. Along with Juyong Pass and Daoma Pass, it is one of the oldest and most important passes in the Great Wall.
Yu Qian was brave but he was also capable. In dealing with this particular matter, he very wisely connected the two questions of transferring troops and transporting food. No troops would be delayed, no worker fees needed to be paid, and the safety of the transported provisions would be guaranteed – one stone, three birds.

One who turns back the tide of defeat is most certainly not an ordinary person, they are a statesman.\footnote{Guoshi (国士), here translated as “statesman.” Means the bravest, strongest, or most talented person in a country.}

Possessing of both wisdom and courage, only then can you be called a statesman.

**Settling Scores**

Yu Qian had issued his orders. Starting on \textit{that nineteenth day of the eighth month}, all the usable deployable troops within the borders of the Empire of the Great Ming assembled one after another.

These troops came from such different regions as Shandong, Henan, Nanjing, Zhejiang, etc. They marched day and night with only one goal in mind – reach the capital ASAP.

This was a race against time. They didn’t know when Esen would attack, but they knew that Esen would eventually attack. Only by reaching Beijing before then would they have some chance of victory.

The Empire of the Great Ming began its first ever general mobilization since its inception in order to face its impeding formidable enemy.
Under Yu Qian’s efforts and organization, by early next month, each of the different divisions had arrived. The military strength of Beijing reached 220,000 troops, all with ample provisions, and public morale had stabilized.

Military preparations had begun and were proceeding methodically. On the other hand, a political hurricane was about to hit.

“Hack Wang Zhen to pieces!”

This was the inner cry of many court officials. The reason was simple: Wang Zhen was a complete and utter lowlife. Since gaining power, he turned framing people and making them suffer into a hobby; whoever didn’t obey, he eliminated them. Many a court official had been thrown into jail because of a simple disagreement. Moreover, he actively sought out bribes and whoever didn’t pay up inevitably met with a bad end. Such actions seemed to regard all of the court civil and military officials as toys.

He also colluded with the Embroidered Uniform Guard, turning this secret police force into his own personal guard dogs. Countless officials suffered under him.

But most importantly, it was precisely Wang Zhen’s incompetence and stupidity that ultimately resulted in the devastating loss at Tumu Fortress. The crème de la crème of the court and the military resources accumulated over many years were all destroyed in the hands of such a lowlife. Not even twenty years ago, the Empire of the Great Ming had swept through the world, unrivaled by anyone. Afterwards, there was the golden age of the Rule of Renzong and Xuanzong with peace throughout the realm. Such a powerful empire had almost died in the hands of a damn eunuch. Who could stomach this insult!

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72 Embroidered Uniform Guard (锦衣卫), the imperial secret police that served the Ming emperors. Originally founded by the Hongwu Emperor to serve as personal bodyguards, it became an imperial military body in 1369.

73 Reign of Ren and Xuan (仁宣之治), refers to the reigns of the Hongxi Emperor and Xuande Emperor, considered golden age of Ming Dynasty. See appendix for dates.
Of course, in the hearts of these scholar-officials, there was another reason to loathe Wang Zhen, but this one wasn’t quite appropriate to say out loud.

Since the scholar-officials didn’t want to say it out loud, I’ll do it for them: this hidden reason was one’s background.

Scholar-officials studied diligently, for years and years: going through dozens of exams, passing three major examinations (some of them only two), knocking out numerous gifted companions, all in exchange for the black gauze cap on their head and the seal in their hands. And even if you passed the exams, it didn’t mean that your future was bright. If you were lucky, you could swing a position in the Hanlin Academy. If you weren’t lucky, you couldn’t even become a censor; you could only start from the bottom as a tiny rank 7 or 8 official, spend dozens of years slowly climbing the ladder, and finally if you managed to reach rank 3b before retirement, you should thank the heavens and earth.

It really wasn’t easy.

But Wang Zhen, this damn eunuch: he had limited learning (a good-for-nothing school official), insufficient ability (Tumu Fortress was clear proof), a deformed body.

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74 Scholar-officials (shì dàfū 士大夫), also known as: literati, scholar-gentlemen, scholar-bureaucrats, scholar-gentry. Schooled in Confucian texts, these scholars were appointed by the emperor to serve in the state bureaucracy. As a class, they claimed to represent morality and virtue.

75 Juren (舉人) is the degree given to those who passed the triennial provincial exam (the 2nd of 3 levels). These men could technically be employed as officials by the central government but had a long waitlist and were usually only given lowly ranks.

76 Both were symbols of government office and power.

77 Hanlin Academy (翰林院), a loosely organized group of literati who did the drafting and editing work in preparing ceremonious imperial pronouncements and in compiling imperially sponsored historical and other works. In the Ming Dynasty, it was an unwritten rule that you could not enter the Grand Secretariat without having been in the Hanlin Academy.

78 Wang Zhen was originally a local school official; he entered the palace after self-castration. See Those Ming Things vol 3: 38-9.
(occupational hazard), and a severe lack of ethics (bribery and corruption). And yet he could all of a sudden hold sole power and command all of the realm!

**OFFICIALS:** Damn eunuch, why should you?!

Objectively speaking, the scholar-officials had a right to be angry. They not only toiled day and night handling government affairs but were also learned, erudite, and experienced. Yet they had to listen to the orders of this Eunuch Directorate of Ceremonial\(^79\) and watch him run amok and commit abuses and outrages – it really was rather unbearable.

And this idiot Eunuch Directorate of Ceremonial not only wrecked the court but had now caused the empire to almost cease to exist and caused widespread panic everywhere. Hundreds of thousands of soldiers along with civil and military officials had died because of him – that was the last straw.

It was time to settle the score!

But at the moment, Yu Qian couldn’t attend to such things because he simply had too many things to do. On the twenty-first day of the eighth month, Yu Qian had officially taken over Kuang Ye’s old position and become Minister of War, formally controlling all the power in the ministry.

Minister of War Yu Qian didn’t experience any joy at his promotion however, because once Esen invaded, how long he could even hold this seat was a question mark. The most important thing right now was to deal with the many matters at hand and protect both the safety of Beijing and the nation as a whole. In truth, Yu Qian in this moment had become, practically, the sole director of the government.

\(^{79}\) Directorate of Ceremonial (司禮監), rank 4a, unchallenged chief of the imperial palace staff, post from which eunuch dictators (like Wang Zhen) emerged.
But Master Yu Qian, occupied with numerous state affairs every day as he was, had yet to realize that he was sitting on top of a volcano – an active one.

_The twenty-third day of the eighth month_, the volcano erupted.

This morning, the officials prepared to go to court as usual. No one could have predicted that the most serious fistfight to have ever taken place in the imperial court in the whole 276 years of Ming Dynasty history was about to go down.

This was also the most chaotic day in court of the entire Ming Dynasty.

Court was presided over by Zhu Qiyu. He began by asking the gathered officials if there was anything to report to the throne.\(^80\)

He had barely finished speaking before someone stepped boldly forward and proclaimed loudly, “This subject has a memorial for the sovereign!”

The fuse was thus lit.

The speaker’s name was Chen Yi.

Chen Yi: native of Suzhou, Right Censor-in-chief of the Censorate, an honest and upright official who loathed Wang Zhen with a vengeance. The devastating loss at Tumu Fortress grieved him bitterly and he made up his mind to eradicate Wang Zhen’s cronies in one fell swoop.

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\(^80\) Officials submitted “memorials to the throne” (奏折) as official communications to the emperor. These were carefully crafted formal essays in Classical Chinese. Theoretically the right to petition/submit a memorial to the throne (上奏) was available to everyone.
He cried firmly, “Wang Zhen has brought great calamity to the empire and people, committed all kinds of crimes, and caused the Emperor to be taken hostage by enemy forces. Given such evil actions, if his entire family is not exterminated, it will not be enough to set the people’s hearts at ease nor quell their anger!"

Such harsh words gave even Zhu Qiyu, who was sitting high above, a fright.

Chen Yi grew more and more indignant and agitated as he continued ranting until, upon thinking of the innocent lives lost of both his colleagues and the common folk, he unexpectedly began to weep out loud.

It was as if a pebble thrown in a pond; the effects rippled outwards. Chen Yi’s crying stirred up the rage of the other officials. Throwing etiquette to the winds, they fell over each other in their eagerness to impeach Wang Zhen.

In an instant, the court was thrown into pandemonium. Sounds of petitioning, cursing, and sobbing all rose one after another – the level of chaos almost surpassing that of a wet market.

Zhu Qiyu had just ascended to the throne; he wasn’t even Emperor yet, merely functioning in an acting capacity. Seeing this disarray in front of him, he was very alarmed. But the officials down below were spitting out words left and right like bullets, not to mention the swearing and bawling, so it was impossible to hear what any of them were saying. Poor Zhu Qiyu simply could not react fast enough.

Then suddenly, the clamor in the court quieted down. All of the officials down below stared up at him with a very scary expression on their faces. It turned out all of the petitioning individuals had finished speaking and were waiting on him to make a judgment. There was just one singular opinion:

“Kill all of Wang Zhen’s cronies! Execute his entire clan!”
This was a big deal – how could he make the call? Zhu Qiyu thought it over and over, trembling, but still he didn’t dare to make a decision. So, he decreed:

“All officials are to leave the palace and await further orders; we shall discuss this at a later date.”

The events that followed made it clear that this was less an order and more an explosive, one designed for maximum impact.

Discuss later? When is later? And what happens after that? Discuss it yet again even later?

**OFFICIALS:** Who do you think you’re fooling?!

These seasoned veterans of the political thicket would not be dismissed by this one simple sentence. They knew that if they let today’s opportunity slip by, this matter would disappear without a trace, like a pebble dropped into the sea. Wang Zhen may be dead, but his cronies would continue to control the government. Those who spoke up today would surely suffer retaliation and that would be it for the nation.

For our country, for ourselves, we have to go all out! If we die, we die today, here and now!

The decree was relayed many times but the officials refused to budge.

They seemed to have come to an unspoken consensus: not one person moved, yet they continued to sob, swear, and stare unwaveringly at Zhu Qiyu seated above.

Zhu Qiyu’s face was pale with terror. To his side, the eunuch relaying the decrees, Jin Ying, was repeatedly mopping his brow; he’d never witnessed such a situation before either – it was truly frightening.
Zhu Qiyu began to realize that if he didn’t come to some sort of resolution today, he wasn’t going home.

The ruler’s silence thoroughly enraged the officials. Wang Zhen’s perverse actions, his bullying and abuses of power, appeared in their minds once more. Most of the officials had lost family and friends in the Battle of Tumu Fortress – old scores and new grievances piled one atop another. Such a reprehensibly guilty person and he wasn’t going to be punished? Where is the justice in that!

Just as the officials’ emotions reached their boiling point, an idiot appeared.

The Commander of the Embroidered Uniform Guard, Ma Shun, had always been one of Wang Zhen’s diehard followers and had helped him carry out all sorts of evil deeds. Academican Expositor-in-waiting\(^{81}\) Liu Qiu had been murdered on Ma’s orders – everyone knew this, but he was so powerful that no one had dared to touch him.

In this moment, this very Ma Shun took the field. Encouraged by the emperor’s decree, he had the nerve to rebuke the gathered officials and order them to leave at once.

Ma Shun’s actions can be summed up in four words:

Digging his own grave.

The stage was set. Chen Yi lighting the fuse, Zhu Qiyu adding the explosives, and Ma Shun pressing the detonator – all three parties worked together to produce the most exciting action-packed scene in the imperial court in the entire history of the Ming Dynasty.

\(^{81}\text{Academican Expositor-in-waiting (侍讲学士), rank 5b, eminent regular members of the Hanlin Academy.}\)
The officials had already reached the brink of anger, their sobs and curses getting louder and louder. Of all people, Wang Zhen’s crony Ma Shun chose this very moment to step forward and throw his weight around. Logically, they should be even more furious. But instead these angry men all sunk into a brief moment of silence.

A terrifying silence.

This silence was the calm before the storm.

Either die in silence or explode from silence!\(^{82}\)

All that humiliation, all that pain, that senseless oppression and degradation, those family and friends dead or captured – we’ve reached this point and you’re still lording over us?

Enough. Is. Enough.

No need to keep suppressing your anger! No need to keep enduring humiliation!

Fight!

**Brawl**

Ma Shun was still gleefully berating the gathered officials. He’d done so in the past and in his mind, today was no different.

Suddenly, someone ran out of the assembled rows of officials and right at him! Before he could react, his hair was violently grabbed and his face punched a few times.

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\(^{82}\) A quote from Lu Xun’s essay, “In Memory of Miss Liu Hezhen,”《纪念刘和珍君》which he wrote in 1926 after warlord forces opened fire on protestors in Beijing and killed one of his students, Liu Hezhen, who was only 22. It is a classic of Chinese literature.
Finally, it had begun.

The first to throw a punch was Supervising Secretary of the Office of Scrutiny for Revenue\textsuperscript{83} Wang Hong.

Wang Hong was a Speaking Official\textsuperscript{84} and his usual job was to investigate and remonstrate. He had an impatient temper and a stubborn, upright personality. He’d long been disgusted by Wang Zhen’s faction; the fact that the nation had fallen into such plights grieved him deeply and he loathed Wang Zhen and his cronies even more. Now seeing that even though Wang Zhen was dead, Ma Shun still dared to be so arrogant, he was overcome with rage.

Enough talking, time to get real!

\textbf{WANG HONG:} Ma Shun, don’t think I can’t kill you!

Wang rushed forward and grabbed Ma Shun’s hair. He grabbed the court tablet\textsuperscript{85} in his hands and whacked Ma Shun right in the face, so clouded with rage he was. Then, tossing aside all weaponry, he jumped into battle with only his bare fists. Pulling out his super secret Hooligan Turtle Fists martial arts style,\textsuperscript{86} he rained blow after blow upon Ma Shun – his fists swift as the coursing river and with all the strength of a raging typhoon – all the while yelling:

“We’ve reached this point and you \textit{still} dare be so arrogant?!”

\textsuperscript{83} Six Offices of Scrutiny (\textit{liuke} 六科), a cluster of major central government agencies who were responsible for maintaining censorial surveillance over the Six Ministries.

\textsuperscript{84} Speaking Official (\textit{yanguan} 言官), officials whose primary function was to monitor the making of policy decisions at court and to recommend or criticize policies.

\textsuperscript{85} Court tablet (\textit{chaohu} 朝笏), long tablets of jade, bamboo, or ivory held by officials when attending a session of court. Used for gesturing and note-taking.

\textsuperscript{86} Turtle Fists Style (王八拳), not actually a real style, slang for completely unorganized brawling, or the fighting of someone who doesn’t know how to fight.
He got angrier and angrier as he kept punching and punching until finally, his emotions having reached the extreme limit, he did something nobody could have imagined.

Wang Hong felt this wasn’t enough to vent his anger so he gave up on fisticuffs, grabbed Ma Shun, and *bit off a piece of his face*.

Crazy. Completely and utterly crazy.

Here, let us pause for a moment and critique Wang Hong’s series of actions in the fight from a technical perspective: he began with grabbing Ma Shun’s hair – grabbing the hair is a common move in fights. By starting with this move, it shows that he did have a certain level of brawling experience.

Consider that he was a civil official and his main job was to present memorials to the sovereign: putting aside the very remote possibility that he was a martial arts master, we can safely assume he was brawling in the Turtle Fist style – yet from the biting alone, we can see Wang Hong was indeed beyond furious. In fights among men, this move is generally looked down upon, so this move would never be used unless as an absolute last resort.

Wang Hong was at the height of fury.

At that moment, Ma Shun was in the height of pain but also fear. He never imagined that someone would dare to start a fight in the imperial court, in front of the emperor. The officials who were usually politely deferential and responded all to a single call had suddenly turned into ferocious wolves.

Ma Shun was already in a lot of pain, but there was yet more to come.
Wang Hong’s actions stunned the officials standing to one side. But in the blink of an eye, they all reacted – things had come to this point and Wang Zhen’s cronies still dared to tyrannize them? That was the last straw!

An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth – take action when action is called for!

And so, after Wang Hong struck the first blow, all the court officials swarmed his way. The quickest of them ran over and began beating up Ma Shun, who was quickly surrounded. Countless fists and feet wailed on him from all sides – in the blink of an eye, he was a black and blue mass of bruises.

Those who were quick at least got to get in a few punches; those who were slower weren’t as lucky. With the layers of people, the tardier officials could only hike up their official robes, lift their feet, and stomp furiously on the figure of Ma Shun, who was on his last dying breath, surrounded by the crowd.

These gentlemanly and urbane nerds who ordinarily buried themselves in their books completely threw away their usual refined manners and one by one rolled up their sleeves and leaped into the fray – regardless of previous fighting experience or whether they were a Hanlin Academian or a Senior Official, no matter their age or government rank.

You should know that the ceremonial dress for officials in the Ming Dynasty were (obviously) not made for fistfights. In fact, in order to emphasize the officials’ elevated position, their outer robes were much wider and looser – sometimes they even had to lift it up when they walked to avoid tripping.

Furthermore, these gentlemen also had to wear their official black gauze hats when attending court. How could they fight dressed in such a get-up?
None of that mattered at this very moment. Unable to hold back their rage, all of these gentlemen tossed their hats, picked up their uniforms, and crowded forward to get a piece of Ma Shun. Some really got into it and leapt into the fray with their sleeves rolled up and arms akimbo.

The once high and mighty Ma Shun could now only lay there and beg for mercy. But no one would pay him any attention. Because everyone remembered: this man was Wang Zhen’s accomplice. He caused the death of Liu Qiu and many other officials thrown into prison.

He deserved it.

Soon, the gathered officials stopped their fighting – because Ma Shun had been beaten to death.

But things couldn’t simply end like this. These bloodied figures turned their sights to Zhu Qiyu sitting up above.

Zhu Qiyu was dumbstruck.

He’d watched Wang Hong storm out, watched Wang Hong grab Ma Shun by the hair, watched Wang Hong bite Ma Shun in rage. Then he’d watched the rest of the officials rush forward as well and surround Ma Shun while kicking and punching.

Finally, he’d watched Ma Shun be literally beaten to death, right in front of him.

All of this was way beyond his comprehension: these refined, genteel officials suddenly turning into beasts. The Emperor reigning supreme over officials who were all blindly subservient yes-men not making a peep – that was the court he’d imagined.
But now, what was he looking at? Hats, robes, belts tossed all over the floor; a mob driven nearly to frenzy in the midst of brawling; and the eunuchs huddled in a corner, shivering. Not to mention the sounds: wailing, swearing, and the dull yet terrible thudding of fists hitting human flesh.

What was even more incomprehensible to Zhu Qiyu was that it wasn’t just the younger officials who were going all out, using both fists and feet. No, even some of the fifty or sixty-year-old elder statesmen were lifting their belts and slowly tottering over to get in a good kick at Ma Shun – there was no lack of high ranks like Ministers or Vice Ministers among them either.

_ZHU QIYU: …am I hallucinating?

This couldn’t be real. This was the imperial court, where the Emperor and imperial officials discussed matters of state, the very center of the Empire of the Great Ming. But now, this place had turned into a fighting ring. Into a battle arena. Into hell.

_ZHU QIYU: If this is a bad dream, please let me wake up!

But the evidence reminded him that no, this was not a dream. Because those officials that had just beaten Ma Shun to death now locked onto him as their next target. They all stood there, staring unblinkingly at him with bloodshot eyes, including that Wang Hong who still had a smear of human blood on one corner of his mouth.

What happened next went even more beyond Zhu Qiyu’s expectation: the gathered officials actually forgot the hierarchy of ruler and subject and pointed directly at his face, calling for him to give up the rest of Wang Zhen’s cronies!

Treason, this was treason! Government officials daring to threaten the (acting) Emperor!
But in that hair-raising, heart-stopping moment, Zhu Qiyu couldn’t bother with such formalities or etiquette. He was so terrified that he was trembling from head to toe and unable to string together a full sentence in face of the officials’ demand.

At this point, the eunuch-in-waiting, Jin Ying, realized the danger of the situation – if it continued like this, Zhu Qiyu himself could be in danger – and made the decision to send someone to fetch Mao Gui and Wang Changsui.

Mao Gui and Wang Changsui were cronies of Wang Zhen. Jin Ying looking for them at this particular moment – well, it certainly wasn’t with the best of intentions.

When the two men were dragged, pulling and tugging, in front of Jin Ying, they were completely clueless and bewildered. Jin Ying didn’t bother wasting his breath on them – he simply kicked both into the great hall.

Inside, the officials were still threatening Zhu Qiyu. Seeing these two suddenly appear before them, it was like a tiger that hadn’t eaten for three days seeing a fat sheep – they pounced.

Dazed and confused, Mao Gui and Wang Changsui had been kicked in the rear, landed in the middle of court, and before they had the chance to figure out what on earth was going on…

**MAO GUI/WANG CHANGSUI:** Why is there a horde of half-dressed, scary-looking people coming right at me??

The next thing they knew, they were swallowed up in a storm of punches and kicks.

Very quickly, the two were also beaten to death.
There were now three bodies strewn across the floor of the great hall and blood splattered everywhere. The gathered officials had completely lost control and gone beyond hysterical. Some were scurrying around like headless chickens but most went back to pressuring Zhu Qiyu for more Wang Zhen cronies.

Several officials weren’t completely satisfied with their vengeance, so they hung the three bodies publically on the walls outside the Gate of Eastern Peace.\(^{87}\) The common folk and soldiers of the city had also suffered enough under Wang Zhen and eagerly streamed forward one by one to flog the corpses.

They were having an even livelier time in court.

**ZHU QIYU:** [still speechless in fear]

**OFFICIALS:** Since he isn’t ordering the capture of Wang Zhen’s family and accomplices, we’ll do it ourselves!

The crowd of officials spontaneously and conscientiously sent someone to grab Wang Zhen’s nephew, Wang Shan. The dude who specifically sought out his uncle for wealth and power would finally end up learning a universal truth:

Everything has a price.

The reward: seven years of wealth and power. The price: his life.

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\(^{87}\) Gate of Eastern Peace (*Donganmen 东安门*), one of the gates to the Imperial City of Beijing – which refers to the gardens, shrines, and other service areas between the inner Forbidden City and the outer Inner City.
The officials were still in a state of chaos. They’d killed Ma Shun; they’d killed Mao Gui and Wang Changsui; what should they do next? Go around beating the rest of Wang Zhen’s cronies to death one by one?

Some were still caught up in their rage, cursing out Wang Zhen loud and long.

Others didn’t know what lay ahead, wondering if they would suffer reprisal for killing the three men – and simply sat blankly on the ground.

Most of them however, swarmed in front of Zhu Qiyu again, asking him for the rest of the accomplices, calling for him to give the order.

The officials had certainly vented their anger with their actions but what they didn’t realize was the danger that was looming towards them.

Because they had overlooked one crucial detail – Ma Shun’s identity.

Mao Gui and Wang Changsui were only eunuchs. But Ma Shun, he was the Commander of the Embroidered Uniform Guard. And as we’ve discussed before, the Embroidered Uniform Guard was not only the secret police force but also served as the Emperor’s bodyguards.

As such, there was a rather peculiar thing the officials had failed to notice: these officials had literally beaten the Commander of the Embroidered Uniform Guard to death in front of his men – and yet these guards didn’t blink an eye?

Well, this would be because there was still one particular person present – Zhu Qiyu.

Zhu Qiyu was the current Regent; the Embroidered Uniform Guard absolutely did not dare act recklessly without his orders. However, if he ended court here and now without saying a word, then the safety of the officials would be very hard to guarantee.
Because of the chaotic situation and the fact there were many Wang Zhen cronies in the Guard (Wang Shan himself was a Vice-Commander), the officials had spontaneously beaten Ma Shun to death. Yet, who could guarantee that some Wang Hong-like Guards wouldn’t step forward and, under the command of Wang Zhen’s cronies, beat a couple of officials to death? Why, it could almost be understood as spontaneous as well!

At this moment, Zhu Qiyu was preparing to do exactly what was described above: he’d recovered from his initial shock and comprehended what had happened in front of his eyes. Looking at these seemingly-mad officials and the blood and flesh covering the scene, he was afraid.

Zhu Qiyu decided to run away – he was going to flee into the Inner Palace.

This was a crucial moment. If Zhu Qiyu really left just like that, then the Embroidered Uniform Guard and other cronies of Wang Zhen’s would most certainly act. Ma Shun’s martial skills might have been rather lacking, but it would still be a piece of cake for the Guards under his (former) command to deal with these bureaucrats and paper-pushers.

But right now, the gathered officials didn’t seem to be aware of this problem; they were still wailing and swearing continuously, demanding that Zhu Qiyu convict Wang Zhen.

Only one person kept their head cool, remained calm amid the chaos, and recognized the impending danger.

This person was, once again, Yu Qian.

Yu Qian was a clearheaded person. He didn’t participate in the brawling; although he also hated Ma Shun and co., he would not resort to such methods. Throughout the course of events, he remained a bystander and a thinker.
He knew crystal-clear: since the victims were already dead, in order to truly solve the problem, Zhu Qiyu had to give an order. But this regent had been scared senseless and was currently getting ready to run away. If they let Wang Zhen’s group seize the opportunity and convict all those officials involved in the fight of murder (Ma Shun really was innocent in this aspect), things would get complicated.

Watching as Zhu Qiyu got ready to flee, Yu Qian was very anxious. Everything hung in the balance of this one moment yet everyone around him was totally ignorant, making an unnecessary racket all round.

**YU QIAN:** To hell with it!

Yu Qian took off towards Zhu Qiyu at once – he had to stop that man!

But the crowd of officials in front of him were packed together tightly. Yu Qian had no choice but to forcefully push the crowds apart and keep squeezing forward.

This was a rather arduous process. His sleeve was torn during the jostling but eventually, he managed to stop Zhu Qiyu before the latter left.

Yu Qian asked in a loud and clear voice: “Your Highness (Author’s Note: not Emperor yet), Ma Shun was one of Wang Zhen’s accomplices and his crimes were punishable by death. Please exonerate all the officials of the court (Author’s Note: almost everyone had participated…)!”

This sonorous sound finally jolted Zhu Qiyu awake. He realized that if he didn’t give these people an explanation now, then the situation would never stabilize. So, he followed Yu Qian’s advice and relayed such orders.
The officials finally regained some sense as well. Since Ma Shun and co. had been convicted, they were now safe.

With his emotions steadying, Zhu Qiyu finally returned to normal. He then ordered Wang Zhen’s nephew, Wang Shan, to be brought to the execution grounds and put to death by a thousand cuts!

The assembled officials rejoiced and thus, the storm of the twenty-third day of the eighth month finally subsided.

Three people literally beaten to death in the middle of court. Officials suddenly turning from pedants into gladiators, young and old alike leaping into the fray, thoroughly releasing their anger and turning the imperial court into a slaughterhouse, throwing everything into utter chaos, splattering blood everywhere. The acting Emperor Zhu Qiyu being truly and surely threatened, leaving him in a sorry plight.

Officials beaten to death, acting Emperor threatened, and all of this happening, incredibly, in the middle of discussions of matters of state – this level of chaos was unique and one of a kind in the history of the Ming Dynasty.

Therefore, when the gathered officials returned to normal – straightening out their attire, checking their wounds (most were accidental injuries) – and walked out of the great hall, they all felt as if a whole lifetime had passed.

**OFFICIALS:** That was one hell of a ride.

But there was one thing they all knew for sure: after Ma Shun’s death, the Embroidered Uniform Guard had been eagerly sharpening their knives. If Yu Qian hadn’t boldly stepped forward at that exact moment, stopped Zhu Qiyu, and managed to legitimize their actions, it was highly questionable whether or not any of them would have walked out of there alive.
Thank god for Yu Qian.

The moment Yu Qian walked out the left side door of the palace, everyone turned to him with respectful gazes of awe. If they had had any doubts about this vocally angry man five days ago, they had now all reached a new consensus:

This man would definitely be able to lift up these desperate straits and turn back the tide all on his own.

The Minister of Personnel, Wang Zhi, was one of those deeply moved. He grabbed Yu Qian’s hand in a fit of emotion and exclaimed, “The fate of this country is all up to you! A situation like today – even a hundred Wang Zhis wouldn’t be able to handle it!”

Wang Zhen’s crimes were finally all exposed and punished. His assets were seized, his relatives completely eliminated. Out of them, the worst end must go to Mr. Wang Shan: his flesh was gouged out over a thousands times before dying. This was because the officials had suggested that even though Wang Zhen was dead, there still needed to be a scapegoat to undergo his sentence for him – only then would it be an answer for his victims (properly ruthless, that is).

Thus, Wang Shan, who had come from thousands of leagues away to join Wang Zhen, experienced this sentence of execution in place of his dear relative. Seven years of wealth and power in exchange for death by a thousand cuts – definitely a bad trade.

Truthfully speaking, from a legal standpoint, Wang Shan and Ma Shun and co. weren’t guilty of any obvious offences so being literally beaten to death seemed a tad bit unreasonable. If going strictly by the book, the officials’ actions would be considered aggravated assault and voluntary manslaughter but definitely not reasonable self-defense.
But everyone present that day knew for a fact: these men were wicked beyond redemption. It was because of them that the rule of the imperial court was so lax, that the country was so chaotic, that hundreds of thousands of soldiers had died. So in my opinion, when the officials beat these Wang Zhen cronies to death out of righteous indignation – they were carrying out justice.

Because true justice lies in people’s hearts.

**The Last Bother**

The troops had arrived, the provisions were sufficient, Wang Zhen’s remaining cronies were totally cleaned out: under Yu Qian’s efforts, many of the thorniest issues had been resolved.

But he still had one last problem, and it was the biggest and most bothersome:

The Emperor was still in the enemy’s hands.

Clearly, Esen was treating Zhu Qizhen as a credit card and the Empire of the Great Ming as an ATM. As long as His Imperial Majesty was still in Esen’s hands, he would not stop swiping this wonderful, limitless card until the bank itself had shut down.

This couldn’t continue – something had to be done.

Yu Qian understood very clearly: the reason for Zhu Qizhen becoming Esen’s trump card was not because he was Zhu Qizhen, but because he was the Emperor.

Even if you sold him by the pound, Zhu Qizhen himself would barely fetch anything. But the status of Emperor? Now, *that* was priceless.

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88 Name of the Emperor captured by Esen, see appendix.
The solution was actually very simple – set up a new Emperor.

Since the status of “Emperor” didn’t belong to you, Zhu Qizhen, but to the Empire of the Great Ming, it could be given to you but it could also be given to someone else.

In other words, whether or not Zhu Qizhen was the Emperor was not determined by you, Zhu Qizhen, nor by you, Esen, but by us, the court. If we say the Emperor in your hand is fake, then fake it most certainly is.

(Even if it wasn’t fake, it was at least expired goods.)

The one and only “Imperial Authority Authentication Bureau” was right here with us. Trying to draw a regular paycheck? Keep on dreaming, Esen!

So the plan was set. The only question was: who?

The first option to be considered was Zhu Qizhen’s son, Zhu Jianshen. But this dude was only three years old at the time; he couldn’t even talk properly, let alone read, so putting him on the throne would be the blind leading the blind.

The only real possible option was Zhu Qiyu.

Thus, officials presented memorials one after another, all calling for Zhu Qiyu to ascend to the throne.

The Empress Dowager didn’t have any objections – Zhu Qiyu was also technically her son (not biological) – and agreed immediately.

Surprisingly however, Zhu Qiyu himself refused. He said he didn’t want the job.
We’ve all seen this song-and-dance countless times, but unlike before, what we can be certain about this particular time is this: Mr. Zhu Qiyu was not acting. He really didn’t want to be Emperor.

**ZHU QIYU:** It’s too dangerous, man.

Being the Emperor meant leading troops into battle. The journey was harsh and if you were unlucky, you could be captured by the enemy and not be able to come home for many years.

That scenario notwithstanding, the events of that day – *the twenty-third day of the eighth month* – still unnerved him. The guys under his command were disobedient, unruly, and worst of all, seemed to have a keen interest in brawling. If one day that all happened again, maybe he would end up as the punching bag.

Not to mention that enemy troops could currently invade at any moment. If by any chance the capital fell, well, this Emperor gig wouldn’t last too long anyways and he’d be saddled with the blame for the demise of the country.

**ZHU QIYU:** Safety first, safety first. This Emperor thing? Not worth it.

But things were already beyond his control.

Refusing was simply not an option!

Yu Qian could not allow him to refuse to become Emperor. The country had reached the lowest of points and it needed an Emperor. Whether you, Zhu Qiyu, wanted to become Emperor or not, it didn’t matter anymore – you must!
And Yu Qian’s reason was very good: “We humble subjects are sincerely concerned about the country; we are not doing this out of personal interests.”

What happened later on would prove this – he was indeed telling the truth.

Thus, under the insistence of Yu Qian and other officials, Zhu Qiyu finally “volunteered.”

*Sixth day of the ninth month, fourteenth year of Zhengtong (1449)*

Zhu Qiyu officially ascended to the throne as Emperor of the Great Ming, establishing the era name of Jingtai (“Exalted View”), the next year being the first year of Jingta.

Meanwhile, Mr. Zhu Qizhen’s status as Emperor expired, effective as of that day, and changed to Taishang Huang or “Emperor Emeritus.” Henceforth, in any and all cases of conflict between the new and old Emperors, the new Emperor shall prevail.

As for Zhu Qiyu, newly sitting on the throne, he was most likely still rather uneasy. By now, he had realized being Emperor did not mean he could do whatever he wanted – in fact, it was more of a “duty calls, you have to do it, no buts allowed.”

You had to deal with matters of state, shoulder risks, and assume responsibility for the Empire of the Great Ming. Thousands of things and loose ends in front of you and you couldn’t slack off, couldn’t relax. And even if you did everything right, as long as there was even just one tiny slip-up on one small issue, all your previous efforts would go to waste and you would go down in history in infamy.

Really not a job for everybody.

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89 Emperor Emeritus (太上皇), or retired emperor. Title commonly given to an abdicated Emperor during his remaining life, particularly during the reign of his son.
From Mr. Zhu Qiyu’s refusal of the position of Emperor, he seemed to have recognized this. However, at the same time, he also overlooked one fact – the allure of the throne.

If being Emperor was so unpleasant, then why have so many people, from ancient times till now, disregarded their own lives and thrown themselves into competition all for the sake of this one job?

Because even though being Emperor was hard work, it was also the most rewarding, most authoritative job in the world. Heaven is #1, and I’m #2; I rule over the entire realm, who dares to disobey!

It’s a proven fact that feudal monarchy is highly addictive and difficult to quit. Once you try it, it’s very easy to become medically dependent with no effective treatments and a high relapse rate.

The only way to get clean is by dying.

Zhu Qiyu, much like his elder brother, was also mild-mannered. The brothers had grown up together and were very close. If nothing unexpected happened, Zhu Qizhen would’ve kept being Big Brother Emperor and Zhu Qiyu would’ve happily stayed Little Brother Vassal Prince; during the holidays, the younger would call at the elder’s house and exchange season’s greetings.

But history’s twists of fate pushed the brothers to a crossroad.

While Zhu Qiyu took the throne with a sense of unease, he also got his first taste of imperial monarchical power.

A miracle didn’t occur. Sure enough, he become another addict.
From that point on, anyone who dared to touch his authority became his enemy – big brother Zhu Qizhen was no exception.

Regardless of how Zhu Qiyu turned out in the future, at least right now, Yu Qian had finally solved this last and thorniest problem. He could now spend all of his energy on the task of defending Beijing.

Under his efforts, the public morale in the capital finally calmed down and steadied; the quality of the troops’ gear, equipment, and fighting capacity rose dramatically.

At this moment, whether court official or common folk or soldier, all had the courage and determination to resist the strong enemy. They began to believe that the incoming enemy was not invincible and that winning this battle was not just a dream.

This confidence and bravery came from the person standing behind them all – Yu Qian.

From a scattered pile of sand to united we stand, Yu Qian’s reputation reached its all-time high. Everyone believed that this Minister of War had the ability to lead them into crushing any enemy.

**ALL:** Where Qian is, there is victory!

From *the eighth to the ninth month*, Yu Qian never stopped being busy. From things as important as rations storage and training troops to things as small as public order and repairing city walls, everything needed his handling and decision. In this span of a month, he had no rest days, no days off, because he understood clearly that he was in a race against time. The more work he did, the more time he bought, the greater their chance of victory.
By the end of the ninth month, Beijing’s defenses were essentially complete: each strategic point big or small, each fortification and stronghold had been assigned defenders. All the requisitioned troops had undergone intensive training and possessed the capacity to go head-to-head with Esen’s elite cavalry. Soldiers rubbed their hands together, itching to have a go as they waited for Esen to arrive.

The panicked, demoralized sights of before had disappeared completely; courage had returned to the soldiers in the capital. They had completed all preparations. Gripping the weapons in their hand, they eagerly awaited Esen’s arrival and the chance to avenge those who fell at Tumu Fortress.

Come on, Esen, I’m waiting for you!

Chapter 7: Belief

Esen had been rather irritated lately.

Recently, he often went for a stroll to his brother Bayan Temur’s tent. Not to visit his brother of course, but to visit that one particular hostage – Zhu Qizhen.

Every time he saw Zhu Qizhen, Esen would realize once again: here was a priceless treasure.

As long as he had this man, he could continuously get gold, silver, treasure, and jewels from the rich and overflowing national treasury of the Empire of the Great Ming. Because this man was the Emperor of the Great Ming and they would give away all their riches to ransom him back. But Esen had no plans to give Zhu Qizhen back to the Ming.

90 Mongolian names have been taken from Dictionary of Ming Biography.
With such a wonderful long-term meal ticket, why redeem it all at once? Wouldn’t withdrawing regular installments be even better? Wait till cash was running low then go ask the family for more; they didn’t dare to not pay him and so there would never be any more money troubles ever again!

Therefore, Esen would often make inspection visits of this man called Zhu Qizhen. Each time, he came away even happier than the last because he appreciated that what he was really touring was his very own treasure hoard. In his eyes, Zhu Qizhen wasn’t a person but a heap of shiny, sparkling gold and silver bars.

Regular payments, hundreds responding to his every call, totally set for life.

This was the happy fantasy of Esen’s dreams.

And of course, it only existed in dreams.

At first, life was good. He notified the hostage’s family with a ransom request; not long after, a large pile of money and treasure was delivered. After accepting it all with a smile, his response was not to release the hostage but to keep demanding more money.

In Esen’s mind, their Emperor was in his hands so the other side would meekly listen to his demands and obediently offer up the entire Ming national treasury on a silver platter.

But what happened next far exceeded his expectations.

The ransom requests were sent out again and again but nobody came. They did not see even the shadow of a paltry bronze cash coin, let alone gold and riches.
One day, two days, three days… Esen remained sitting next to the tree but that damn tree-bashing rabbit never appeared.\footnote{Referencing the Chinese idiom \textit{shouzhu daitu} (守株待兔), literally “waiting by the stump for the rabbit to run into it.” Equivalent to waiting for something to fall into your lap.}

Slowly, Esen became more and more frustrated. He wished he could haul Zhu Qizhen to a border town himself and yell: “Your Emperor is here! Bring money for ransom!”

As time passed day by day, Esen’s patience reached a breaking point – was it possible that they didn’t want their Emperor anymore?

Soon after, news came that the Great Ming had established another Emperor; the one on his hands had expired and been declared null and void. The ostensible Emperor Zhu Qizhen now had a new title – Emperor Emeritus.

\textbf{ESEN TAISHI:} Expired…? Void? Not usable anymore?

Esen didn’t know for sure what kind of position this so-called “Emperor Emeritus” was but from the attitude of the Ming, it was clear that Zhu Qizhen was now useless trash. His life was now irrelevant: if Zhu stayed here, he wasted precious food; if Esen killed Zhu, he reckoned the Ming would be even happier than him.

\textbf{THE MING:} You’re gonna kill Zhu Qizhen? Yes, please, (saves us the trouble) go right ahead! Sorry to inconvenience you – oh by the way, please get around to it soon, we’re all eagerly waiting for that day!

Okay, that might be \textit{slightly} exaggerated but it really was the situation at the time.
**Recycling Trash**

As a matter of fact, while Esen was sending out those ransom demands to the Ming Dynasty, he also attempted to use Zhu Qizhen to trick open city gates. The specific plan of operation was as follows:

- Surround the city.
- Don’t attack yet.
- Call for the officer in charge to come onto the city walls to talk.
- Bring out Zhu Qizhen for those in the city to see.
- Relay a supposed “order from the Emperor” to open the city gates.

Esen’s wishful thinking was to capture these cities without firing a single shot. In any case, the Emperor was in his hands, better to use him than to waste him.

This was a very nasty move.

You should know, these frontier officers had lots of regular contact with Esen and so naturally, would never surrender just like that. But now, His Imperial Majesty was right at the gates – should they obey or not? Opening the city gates was obviously out of the question, but if they didn’t comply with Zhu Qizhen’s request, it’s hard to say what would become of them. What if this POW dude returned in the future and continued being Emperor? Wouldn’t they end up guilty of lèse-majesté?

It was having precisely grasped this type of thinking that led Esen to bring Zhu Qizhen all around knocking on doors, trying to open up a path.

Here, I should clarify: it was not Esen himself who thought up this scheme but rather the traitorous eunuch named Xi Ning.\(^\text{92}\) Although Esen was rather cunning on the battlefield, all

\(^{92}\text{For more about Xi Ning (喜宁) see p. 75 and 79 of Those Ming Things vol 3.}\)
in all he still preferred to solve problems via violence. This type of scheming and intrigue was not his forte. Xi Ning’s appearance just happened to fill this gap.

You may consider this a time-honored tradition – no matter what dynasty, traitor has never been an endangered species.

Esen was greatly impressed with Xi Ning’s suggestion and prepared to use it on two targets he’d been eyeing for a long time.

These were Xuanfu and Datong.

By this point, some of our more perceptive readers may have noticed that there seems to be a rather unreasonable point in my earlier narration: Esen Taishi defeated 200,000 Ming troops at Tumu Fortress and this victory had essentially crushed the main force of the Ming military. That moment was then, possibly the best opportunity to invade because the Ming Empire could not, at least at such short notice, field another army large enough to oppose Esen.

But curiously enough, Esen did not continue attacking but rather packed up his bags and went home.

Why?

The answer is actually rather simple: although the main force of the Ming military had been crushed, the gateway leading to the capital of Beijing was still firmly closed – this was Xuanfu and Datong. As long as you held these two places, you held the outer defensive perimeter of Beijing.

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93 Xuanfu (宣府), one of the “Nine Garrisons” installed by the Hongwu Emperor along the Great Wall.
94 Datong (大同), today a prefecture-level city located in Shanxi Province. One of the “Nine Garrisons” installed by the Hongwu Emperor along the Great Wall.
Were there lots of troops in Xuanfu and Datong?

No, actually; these two places did not have many troops garrisoned there. But Esen did not press his victory and attack. One, his troops weren’t that numerous either and two, these two cities’ defenses were sturdy, strong, and not easily breached. But the most important reason was because each of these two places had a fierce commander guarding it.

These two people, who even Esen was a little scared of, were Guo Deng and Yang Hong.

1. Guardian of Datong, Guo Deng

Guo Deng: intelligent and courageous, cautious and shrewd; also a “princeling” – his ancestor was the famous Wuding Marquis, Guo Ying. Inheriting his family’s noble tradition, he continued in the dangerous job of military officer and proved to be no ordinary silver-spoon brat. Datong under his protection was an utterly insurmountable obstacle for Esen.

When the Tumu Crisis occurred, Guo Deng was not actually the Regional Commander yet. He earned this highest commission in the Datong Defense Command through his actions.

At the same time as the defeat at Tumu Fortress, Datong was under immense pressure as well. The situation was extremely chaotic – soldiers panicking within the city, a general state of anxiety, plus Esen’s troops constantly badgering them with small-scale attacks. Everyone thought that Datong would also not hold out much longer. The Regional Commander at the time, Liu An, didn’t have the leadership skills necessary to handle the defense and stabilize morale.

At that moment, Guo Deng stepped forward. He personally led troops in shoring up the defense, comforted the wounded, and encouraged them all to keep up the fight. However, the troop morale was so low that these acts of Guo Deng didn’t inspire much confidence.
but instead actually drew quite a lot of slander and gossip. Many thought that with such a privileged background, even if Esen captured Datong and all its soldiers died, Guo Deng would still manage to get home alive and continue being an official.

These rumors found their way into Guo Deng’s ears.

One day not long after, Guo Deng called all the troops together. He gazed at them all grimly before drawing his sword and swearing an oath:

“Rest assured everyone, I swear to live and die with this city – if we’re to die, I will die with all of you!”

Under the influence of his bravery, the soldiers banded together, their will as strong as the city walls, and held the city through its most difficult hour.

Afterwards, Guo Deng was officially appointed Regional Commander of the Datong Defense Command, guarding the most important gate of the Empire of the Great Ming.

2. Guardian of Xuanfu, Yang Hong

Yang Hong: called “the #1 Tactician General of the Zhengtong era,” cool and collected, prone to surprising stratagems; extremely cunning and crafty in battle, skilled in feint maneuvers, he often caused great turmoil and chaos among Esen’s army with just a few soldiers. In addition, he also specialized in city defense. Esen had attacked multiple times but was easily rebuffed each time. It reached the point that Esen got a headache at just hearing Yang Hong’s name and went out of his way to avoid the officer.

Now, Esen had finally found the perfect weapon to counter these two generals. He believed that as soon as Zhu Qizhen stood at the bottom of the walls and hollered, the two cities would be his without a fight.
Of course, this was simply Esen’s imagination.

*The twenty-first day of the eighth month*, Esen – with Zhu Qizhen dragged along under duress – began his “battering ram” plan.

The first place he went to was Xuanfu. This was a familiar spot for Esen; he used to come here quite often. Of course, all that welcomed him each time were either stone catapults or bows and arrows. Sometimes, Yang Hong would even stand on top of the walls, smiling pleasantly and very courteously sending Esen off with shots fired from a handgonne.⁹⁵

But this time would be different, because the Emperor of the Ming was in his hands.

**ESEN TAISHI:** Let’s see if you can smile now, Yang Hong!

Smug and confident, Esen forced Zhu Qizhen to order the commander of Xuanfu to open the city gates.

Opening them would obviously (and literally) be inviting the enemy into your house but the Emperor (which he still was at that time) had issued an order, so it seemed a bit wrong to not open the gates.

How would The Tactician Yang Hong handle this?

The answer from the garrisons (really Yang Hong) within the city was completely beyond Esen’s expectations:

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⁹⁵ *Handgonne* (⽕铳), also known as gonne or hand cannon. First true firearm and older type of small arms. Requires direct manual external ignition through a touch hole without any firing mechanism.
“It’s too late, we don’t dare open the gates!”

This was Yang Hong’s wisdom – classic diplomatic language.

No matter who’s at the door, just pretend you don’t know. Anyways, regulations say that the gates are not to be opened at night so if anybody have any complaints, feel free to escalate them higher up to the appropriate department (in this case, the Ministry of War).

This pissed off Esen so much smoke almost escaped from his ears; he continued to threaten Zhu Qizhen, this time ordering Yang Hong to personally come out and talk.

This was also a nasty move. No matter how audacious Yang Hong was, once he really saw the Emperor, even he wouldn’t dare to disobey a direct order.

But the response from inside the city nearly made Esen fall off his horse:

“Yang Hong’s away on business!”

I believe that, in that moment, Esen was feeling rather pained – not because he still hadn’t managed to capture Xuanfu but because he had, once again, been played by Yang Hong.

Was Yang Hong really away on business? Of course not. He was standing inside at that very minute, sword in hand, directing the soldiers on the walls on what to say while sternly barking an order at the troops: “Those who leave the city will be executed!”

Thus, Esen arrived in high spirits and left in low spirits.

You don’t want me here? Well, someone will want me elsewhere! Onwards, to Datong!

But Guo Deng was no pushover either.
After reaching Datong, Esen had learned his lesson and send Zhu Qizhen out directly to speak with Guo Deng. Under duress, Zhu Qizhen could only comply, relaying orders for Guo Deng to open the gates.

Guo Deng did not open the gates.

Back and forth, back and forth they went, getting nowhere. Zhu Qizhen was forced to pass along a new message: “I’m relatives with Guo Deng (Author’s Note: verification pending) – why are you rejecting me like this?”

Zhu Qizhen really couldn’t help it – there was probably a literal knife to his throat if he was desperate enough to say things like that.

Faced with this, could Guo Deng still give no response?

Guo Deng did indeed respond, but it was kind of a strong reaction:

“This subject is obeying orders to guard this city; I know nothing about anything else!”

Thus once again, Esen had been heartlessly rejected.

**ESEN TAISHI:** Ok, congrats, Guo Deng, you win this round. I’ll leave today, fine, but I’ll be back!

The ensuing days were tough on Esen. He continued on his scenic tour of the frontier accompanied by Zhu Qizhen but not one single place welcomed them. Any news about further ransom money evaporated and the Great Ming had even declared Zhu Qiyu the new Emperor so the one in his hands was now expired and worthless.
Was this it?

Not so fast! Esen decided that even though the Emperor in his hands wasn’t worth any money, Zhu Qizhen still had some prestige after all and posed a certain degree of deterrence to the border military commanders.

**ESEN TAISHI: Let’s keep knocking on doors with him!**

Esen didn’t dare go back to Guo Deng’s Datong; after all, that dude had completely thrown caution to the wind – the whole “I know nothing about anything else” remark still rang loudly in the Mongol’s ears. Going back would be just asking for more public humiliation.

Better it be Xuanfu then.

But reality proved that Yang Hong was equally unmovable. They made three successive trips and were driven away each time until finally, Esen forced Zhu Qizhen to write letters to Yang Hong, ordering the officer to open the gates.

But Yang Hong was even bolder. After receiving the letters, he didn’t even bother to look at them before slapping a stamp on and sending the whole lot to Zhu Qiyu in the capital. The answer he got back was: “These are all fake. From now on, don’t bother accepting them.”

If we say it’s fake, it’s fake. Fact is fiction.

**Attack! Attack!**

Esen had reached the end of his rope. This past month, he’d gotten barely any ransom money, Xi Ning’s plot had failed spectacularly, and he’d been chased from one point to another like an idiot. It was utterly humiliating.
He had completely lost any confidence in this Xi Ning person beside him; the facts showed that all of the eunuch’s suggested plans were completely useless.

**ESEN TAISHI:** *Since that didn’t work, I’ll do it my way!*

The thought of war sprung into Esen’s mind; his blood started pumping with excitement.

Wasn’t it just baring your blade?! Wasn’t it just charging enemy lines?!

He glanced scornfully at that traitor called Xi Ning; in his mind, that person was merely a despicable coward.

No more schemes or intrigues! No more betting on trickery or exploits!

To restore the empire of the Great Yuan, we must rely on ourselves!

Gather all the troops, pack the bags, mount the horses, draw your swords – charge!

Target: Beijing!

Esen was no fool. Wary of provoking the two heavyweights Guo Deng and Yang Hong, he didn’t lead his troops to attack Xuanfu and Datong but decided on a more roundabout route.

He had already chosen an opening. He believed that from here, he could open up the gateway to Beijing.

The opening that Esen had chosen was precisely the marching destination that Wang Zhen had abandoned – Zijing Pass.
First day of the tenth month, fourteenth year of Zhengtong (1449)

Of course, Esen didn’t forget to bring along Zhu Qizhen – he might not be the Emperor anymore, but he was still the Emperor Emeritus after all. At the very least, he could be a good human shield and block some swords and spears.

Esen’s army was very formidable; the cavalry thundered straight at Zijing Pass with the fierceness of a tiger pouncing on its prey. Under Xi Ning’s guidance (this is why traitors are the worst), Esen broke through this pass in only two days. Chief Censor Commandant Sun Xiang died in battle.

Here, I should interject with a side note. Normally, Sun Xiang should have been posthumously awarded; even if it wasn’t the highest decorations, he should have at least been honored for having died in the line of duty. But in fact he was hastily cremated and received nothing, no recognition. The reason why a hero met such a sad end was completely thanks to some old friends I’ve mentioned before. These old friends are: Speaking Officials.

After Sun Xiang died, some Speaking Officials – without any research or investigation – callously and casually slandered that Sun Xiang had abandoned his post. Therefore, after the battle, not only did they not hold a proper funeral for Sun Xiang, but instead they cremated his body straightway and that was that. Truly a greater injustice than even that of Dou E.96

A year later, Sun Xiang’s younger brother submitted a memorial to the throne defending his brother. Only then did Zhu Qiyu learn the truth and retroactively award his family reparations.

96 Dou E (窦娥), the female protagonist of the Yuan play The Injustice to Dou E 《窦娥冤》. She is wrongfully executed and swears her innocence will be proven after her death if three impossible things happen.
To interject with this small digression at this most critical moment for the Ming Dynasty is not to simply clear Sun Xiang’s name, but also to tell you that the famous Censors who fearlessly remonstrated their rulers and whose names have come down the annals of history were not representative of the group as a whole.

If I mention Censors, you’ll all probably think of those great figures, defiantly unbowed before corrupt authority and unafraid to speak their minds and the truth. In reality, there were many Speaking Officials in the Ming Dynasty who were odious in morals and behavior – purely reproaching for fame or just for the sake of reproaching.

These degenerate types of Speaking Officials were not uncommon. As we get further along in history, we will meet more of them and rip the masks off their faces, exposing their ugly true inner selves.

We’ll save the issue of Speaking Officials for later though. Let us return to the Empire of the Great Ming, precariously listing in the midst of a raging storm.

Zijing Pass was the gateway to Beijing and its loss rocked the entire capital. Everyone knew: Beijing no longer had any more defensive points to hold.

**Enemy at the Gates**

*Eleventh day of the tenth month, fourteenth year of Zhengtong (1449)*

The soldiers stationed on the walls of Beijing were in the middle of their patrol when suddenly, a tsunami of dust came howling through the air, followed by the pounding hoof beats of horses and punctuated by shouts.
Contrary to what you might have expected, the city guard soldiers weren’t alarmed. Instead, they felt a sense of relief – because they knew who had come and why they’d came.

What’s meant to happen, will always eventually happen.

*Oirat Main Camp, outside the city*

Esen’s mood was at an all-time high. A little over two months ago, he’d routed 200,000 Ming troops at Tumu Fortress, even capturing their Emperor, achieving immortal glory. Later he learned that those 200,000 were already the Ming’s crème de la crème.

Since he’d so easily crushed the strongest troops of the Ming military and the so-called Three Great Training Divisions had been completely wiped out, what did the Ming Dynasty have left to resist him with?

The progress of this expedition had emboldened him even further. This time, he’d pressed the offensive the whole time and made it to Beijing in only eleven days. Right now, this grand, magnificent center of the empire was completely bared before him.

In Esen’s opinion, entering the city was just a mere formality. He didn’t think that the Ming military, with its main forces destroyed, could muster up any real sort of resistance. All he had to do was shout a few times, intimidate them a bit, and those inside the city would be scared witless and come out meekly to present the transferal paperwork.

At the war council on the eve of the attack, Esen looked around confidently at the other leaders of the tribe before proclaiming to them loudly that the city in front of them would collapse at the first blow and then, all the majestic rivers and mountains of the Great Ming, all of its countless gold, riches, antiques, and treasures would belong to the Oirat Mongols. The mighty Empire of the Great Yuan would rise again!
**ESEN TAISHI:** The capital will surely fall, the Great Yuan will surely be restored, everything happens tomorrow!

It’s said that there once were some restaurants that would hang a sign on their doors with the three words: “Free food tomorrow.”

Of course, these restaurants definitely weren’t charities, because the date on that sign was always “tomorrow.” This tomorrow would never come and as such, this practice was nothing more than a joke at the expense of the poor.

History also proved that Esen’s tomorrow never came in the end either. He had been played yet again. This time however, it wasn’t by Yang Hong but by fate itself.

The Esen of six days later was probably confused. His military strength was stronger than it had been at Tumu Fortress many times over; morale was high; and his soldiers fierce. So why did he lose in the end?

Actually, Esen’s question didn’t need anybody else to answer it – his grandfather, Mr. Mahamu of Choros,\(^{97}\) knew the answer.

The ultimate factor in deciding victory or defeat in a battle is – people.

A month ago, this city before Esen’s eyes had been so weak, so ready to collapse at a single touch. Common folk and deserters were constantly fleeing the city. But in only a month, this place had regained the atmosphere of the capital of an empire. The garrisoned troops

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\(^{97}\) Mahamu of Choros (哈⽊), also spelled Mahamud, Esen’s grandfather and Oirat Taishi. Killed Öljei Temür Khan Bunyashiri, Northern Yuan leader, after a large Ming force under the Yongle Emperor forced Öljei Temür to flee west. Married to Samur Gunj, a Borjigin princess.
had been preparing for Esen’s arrival for a very, very long time. Their eyes revealed a lot: there was hatred, and excitement, and worry, and even fear.

But there was no hesitation.

The message revealed in their eyes could actually be summed up in one sentence:

We will not retreat.

In this month, there had been a lot of changes in Beijing: more troops, enough food, strengthened defenses, but the most fundamental change was none of these.

The true change was in the hearts of the people. They were walking out from the dark clouds of defeat, from their initial despair, and were beginning to believe that they would end up seizing victory in this war.

This was the power of willpower and belief.

This was the strongest weapon of those defenders of Beijing.

Of course, the Esen at the time couldn’t have realized any of this. After all, up till now he still had the greatest of confidence. He would’ve never have thought that his forward momentum and his dreams of restoring the Great Yuan would be stopped here, by one single man.

A man with courage.

* Eighth day of the tenth month, fourteenth year of Zhengtong (1449)
Minister of War Yu Qian gave the call to assemble.

**Fight to the End**

Upon learning that Esen was marching on Zijing Pass, Yu Qian astutely determined that Esen’s target this time was Beijing.

Although as of that moment the troops in the capital numbered almost 200,000, they were inexperienced in battle. To prevent the worst, he immediately ordered fifteen Censors sent out to other areas to draft soldiers to bolster the reserve troops. By the eighth day of the tenth month, all units had finished assembling, totaling 220,000 troops in all.

**Just Barely Enough**

Some of you might be wondering: Esen’s army numbered only in the tens of thousands and there were more than 200,000 troops within the city, so why was that just barely enough?

This was determined by the specific circumstances and was in no way indicative of Yu Qian’s ability. The reason why Zhu Wenzheng could hold off Chen Youliang’s 600,000 troops with his measly tens of thousands was because Hongdu City was not very big. Although Chen Youliang had a lot of men, he couldn’t deploy them all at the same time; with just a bare scrap of land, the actual offensive effect wasn’t all that great.

But what Yu Qian was defending right now was Beijing, the capital of the Great Ming Dynasty – this was a truly big city, not a slightly large one (like Tieling).

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98 Battle of Hongdu (洪都之战), 1363, an important battle between Zhu Wenzheng (Hongwu Emperor’s nephew) and Chen Youliang in their fight to be the one to topple the Yuan Dynasty. A famous example in Chinese military history of victory holding a city with a small amount of troops while being besieged by greater numbers.

99 Tieling (铁岭), city in modern-day Liaoning Province, site of a battle in 1619 during the Qing conquest of the Ming Dynasty, where the fortified town was lost when soldiers defected.
Esen’s invasion targets were the nine outer city gates of Beijing. These were:

1. Gate of Moral Triumph (Deshengmen)
2. Gate of Secured Peace (Andingmen)
3. Eastern Upright Gate (Dongzhimen)
4. Gate that Faces the Sun (Chaoyangmen)
5. Western Upright Gate (Xizhimen)
6. Gate of Abundant Success (Fuchengmen)
7. Gate of the Righteous Sun (Zhengyangmen)
8. Gate of Respectful Civility (Chongwenmen)
9. Gate of Advocated Martiality (Xuanwumen)

These nine gates were located approximately between the 2nd and 3rd Ring Roads of today’s Beijing. Although the Beijing of that time was nothing compared to its scale today, it was still pretty massive.

Do a simple division and you’ll realize that the number of troops available for each gate would only be around 20,000 or so. Thus, Esen would be at an advantage purely numbers-wise when solely attacking one of the gates. The bigger problem was in the fact that Esen’s troops were of a higher quality than the Ming ones and they were almost all cavalry. They were extremely mobile – once an opening was created, they could immediately concentrate their forces and focus their attack.

An army’s combat effectiveness is not determined only by the quantity of men but also their mobility.

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100 See appendix.
So even though the Ming troops might have the upper hand in numbers, when averaged over the defense of each gate they were at a complete and total disadvantage.

In this world, many things become clear as soon as they’re averaged.

This was the situation that Yu Qian faced. The enemy was very strong and while his own side had quite a lot of troops, they did not in fact have an advantage – things looked pretty grim. But at the same time, Yu Qian had found a capable assistant. This assistant would help him accomplish his mission of defending Beijing and become a close brother-in-arms while fighting alongside him.

Of course, what Yu Qian could’ve never imagined was that this assistant of his would also accomplish another earth-shattering feat eight years later – cause his death.

From brothers-in-arms to enemies, from friends to opponents, the close assistant that made this dramatic 180-degree turnaround was Shi Heng.

Shi Heng: born in the city of Weinan in Shaanxi Province, his father was a military officer and he followed in his dad’s footsteps and also joined the same profession. He was pugnacious, combative, extremely daring, and called “the #1 Warrior General of the Zhengtong era,” equal in name with Yang Hong.

Allegedly, when Shi Heng was young, he was playing in the streets one day when he was spotted by a fortune-teller. This fortune-teller grabbed Shi Heng and examined him closely before saying in a tone of incredulous disbelief:
“In this current time of peace and prosperity, why do you have the face reading\textsuperscript{101} of one who will achieve a noble rank?”

Leaving aside whether or not this story is true, the fortune-teller did not charge a fee but he did at least summarize an important rule:

Only troubled times produce heroes.

Be that as it may, the Shi Heng who was in Yanghe\textsuperscript{102} during the seventh month of the fourteenth year of Zhengtong (1449) certainly could not be considered a hero. Because in that very moment, he was running away.

Tens of thousands of troops completely destroyed; the Acting General dead; Esen’s cavalry troops brazenly trampling on the bodies of the fallen Ming soldiers: all of this, all of this was happening right in front of Shi Heng’s eyes yet he couldn’t do anything. Because he had a more pressing task – run for his life.

As a commanding officer, watching helplessly as his unit was slaughtered by the enemy, as soldiers were maimed and captured, but not being to do anything to help – for a military officer, this was the worst form of humiliation and torture.

Shameful, truly shameful.

The shamed Shi Heng made it back alive, but what awaited him was not comfort or consolation. Due to him being one of the commanding officers, according to military law

\textsuperscript{101} Face reading (面相算命) or physiognomy, derived from Daoist teachings, believed to provide insight into your hidden personality, past history, current situation and future development.

\textsuperscript{102} Yanghe (阳和), a battle of the larger Tumu Crisis occurred here on Aug 3, 1449, when Esen crushed a badly supplied Ming army at Yanghe just inside the Great Wall.
he had to take responsibility for leadership failures. As a result, he was relieved of his duties and demoted.

At the lowest point of his life, Yu Qian helped him.

In Yu Qian’s opinion, this defeated officer was not an incompetent man without ability. If only he was put to good use, he was capable of accomplishing great things.

History would prove Yu Qian’s judgment correct. Shi Heng would become a sharp blade of vengeance – piercing right into the heart of the Oirat.

Esen’s banners flapped in the wind outside the city. The Mongol cavalry galloped back and forth in front of the walls, making a show of force and strength to the Ming troops inside. More than eighty years had passed and they were finally back in this place. Many among them believed that very soon, they would become its owners once again.

At almost exactly the same time, inside the city, Yu Qian was convening his last war council before the start of battle.

The attendants of the council included the major officials of the imperial court and the defending military command of Beijing, like Shi Heng. There was a heavy weight hanging in the air; everyone present knew what they were about to face. Right now, the enemy was already at the gates. Only by triumphing over their enemies could they save the imperial capital, could they rescue the fate of the nation. Beyond that – there were no other options!

The meeting thus started in such a heavy atmosphere. The first item on the agenda was how to repel the enemy.

Shi Heng took the floor. He thought that given the current situation, with the actual strength of the enemy being indeed greater than the Ming troops, the best approach was to strengthen
their defenses, clear the surrounding fields, and wait it out. When the enemy got tired enough, they would naturally withdraw.

This was, undoubtedly, a very good solution. Esen’s troops weren’t robots; they needed to eat. So as long as the Ming could hold on to the city, the enemy would have to leave after they finished all their provisions.

Shi Heng was well-versed in the art of war and his proposal was practicable and feasible.

Most people were in favor.

Only one was against it.

By the law of majority rule, Shi Heng’s proposal should have passed. But this time, no matter how many people were in favor, it was no use – because the one person opposed held veto power in their hands.

That person was Yu Qian.

Yu Qian was the Minister of War and the organizer of this council. Although anyone present could talk, only his words really mattered.

He stood up and presented his own opinion:

“Esen has marched here with his army already arrogant and swaggering. If we simply hunker down, it will only feed their arrogance. It has been over a century since the founding of our Great Ming; in former times, our founding High Emperor came from rags and yet was able to sweep throughout the realm and wipe out the savage Yuan. How, then, can we fear these mere Oirats!”
He looked around at those present before pausing, then sternly issued his first order:

“The entire army is to march outside the Nine Gates, assemble into formation, and meet the enemy there!”

The gathered officials were dead silent.

To be honest, it was pointless for them to speak anymore. Whatever they said wouldn’t matter anyways.

**EVERYONE ELSE: You do whatever you see fit, sir.**

Yu Qian continued with his second order:

“The Embroidered Uniform Guard will patrol the city. If any soldier is discovered in possession of armor but not outside fighting, they will be executed on the spot—no exceptions!”

All those present were stunned. The civil officials never expected that the normally gentlemanly and urbane Yu Qian had such a steely core. The harshness of the military order was completely unprecedented—even Shi Heng, who was accustomed to killing people on the battlefield, felt rattled.

Before they could react, that deep and imposing voice of Yu Qian’s rang out again:

“The Nine Outer Gates are the doors to Beijing—I will now assign an officer to defend each one. If anyone loses their gate, they will be summarily executed!

“Gate of Secured Peace, Tao Jin!”
“Eastern Upright Gate, Liu An!”

“Gate that Faces the Sun, Zhu Ying!”

“Western Upright Gate, Liu Ju!”

“Gate of the Righteous Sun, Li Duan!”

“Gate of Respectful Civility, Liu Dexin!”

“Gate of Advocated Martiality, Yang Jie!”

“Gate of Abundant Success, Gu Xingzu!”

He stopped.

This was no normal pause. Everyone knew that there was one more gate he had not mentioned yet – that was the Gate of Moral Triumph.

The Gate of Moral Triumph was the most important of all the gates. Because it was on the north side of Beijing and directly faced Esen’s army, once the battle started, it would inevitably become the most heated and intense of the battlefields.

It really was not the best place to be.

All those gathered didn’t wait too long because Yu Qian very quickly announced the name of the assigned defender:

“Gate of Moral Triumph, Yu Qian!”
He gazed unwaveringly at each person. The look in his eyes told them – he was not joking.

The civil and military officials were all stunned once again. However, there was even more shocking news waiting for them because what Yu Qian announced next were military orders no one had ever heard of before:

“All defending officers must fight and kill the enemy with courage and valor. Once the battle begins, it will be a battle to the death!”

“On the battlefield, if an officer retreats first without his troops – execute him!”

“On the battlefield, if troops retreat first without their officer – the back ranks are to execute the front!”

“Anyone who dares to violate these orders will be executed on the spot!”

This would be known as the “Collective Punishment Fighting Method”103 famed in the history of the Ming Dynasty; many a notable Ming general would later adopt this strategy.

Listening to those words so full of ferocious killing intent, it was as if nobody recognized the Yu Qian who was talking. Just a month ago, he was still a scholar who’d never directed a battle, an erudite civil official, a mild-mannered man whose face never wavered in its calm, composed expression.

The Yu Qian now was still calm and composed but had seemingly changed into a different person – he had become an iron-willed, decisive, and stern commanding officer.

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103 Similar to Order No. 227 by Stalin: “Not one step back!”
On the cruel battlefield, the weak cannot survive. Only the strongest of the strong are capable of surviving and obtaining true victory.

Yu Qian was one of them.

At this point, it seemed all the issues on the agenda had been discussed and so the meeting would be adjourned. Just as everyone was secretly rejoicing their imminent escape from that suffocatingly terrifying military order, Yu Qian issued his final order.

**The Final Order**

Yu Qian pointed at Vice Minister of War Wu Ning and issued his final order:

“On the day of battle, after the officers have led their troops out of the city, immediately close the Nine Gates. If anyone dares let someone back inside – execute them!”

Even military officers like Shi Heng who killed without blinking an eye were stunned by this last order. This meant that for those who left the city, their only way out was fighting to the death and repelling the enemy – if they couldn’t win, certain death awaited!

This was really throwing it all in!

All those present gaped in shock at Yu Qian. At this moment, they finally realized: Yu Qian was betting his life this time – not just his own, but everyone else’s as well.

Staring back at the stunned crowd with not an ounce of fear, Yu Qian spoke up for the last time:
“Hundreds of thousands of men destroyed in an instant, the Emperor Emeritus taken captive, enemy troops at the gate – the country has reached this dire of a state, do you still have any hesitations?! If this battle ends in defeat, the Great Ming will surely fall to the same ruin as the Song. Gentlemen, how will you face the people of the realm then?!”

“Now is the time to fight to the death!”

Yu Qian was right: this was a battle they could not lose. If they lost, the northern half of the empire would surely be lost and the fate of the Great Ming would change forever after.

This fight – Yu Qian couldn’t afford to lose, and the Great Ming also couldn’t afford to lose.

Therefore, Yu Qian left only one choice for the city’s defenders and for himself:

Win or die!

Those present at the meeting finally dispersed; Yu Qian himself also returned to his house to prepare for battle. Those steely, unyielding words were in the past; what he had to do now was live up to his promises.

Throughout history, it’s always been easy to talk or give pretty speeches but actually accomplishing something? That’s harder than hard. Many people talk a big game, gushing with more boasts and claims than water in a river, seemingly able to talk the stars out of the sky and convince the sun to set in the east. But when they’re actually asked to walk the walk and do something – they’re completely useless, dithering and hesitant, without a single redeeming merit.

The Ancient Athenian orators were masters of eloquence, talented sophists who conjectured this and that, enjoying much fame and fortune. But one sweep of Alexander of Macedon’s spear was all that was needed to knock them down and send them packing.
Debates and speeches have never solved any problem because this world runs on actual strength.

It’s easy to give orders, but the ultimate goal was to defeat the enemy. If you can’t achieve this, then no matter what words you say – they’re all completely useless.

So for Yu Qian, the true challenge was just beginning.

Yu Qian looked at the fully readied armor in his room. He knew that very soon, he would take off his official’s robes, put on this armor that only soldiers wore, and step onto the battlefield for the first time in his life.

Yu Qian, are you truly not afraid?

No, I was afraid. I’m not a soldier. I’ve never commanded an army, never fought in battle, never killed someone by my own hand. In the past twenty years, my job was to sit at a desk and deal with official matters and government business.

Then why did you step forward to rescue the situation, to lead the war?

Because in my eyes, it was my duty.

Are you really ready? To step onto the battlefield, to lead a battle that you’ve never experienced?

Yes, I’m ready. When I was younger, I vowed to be someone like Wen Tianxiang. No matter rain or shine, I studied hard. After entering an official career, I advanced meteorically, and languished in unrealized hopes; I reached high office, and got thrown in prison. After decades of tempering and testing, I have finally reached this point.
I have nothing left to fear.

Chapter 8: Battle of Beijing

Yu Qian lived up to his decision – he put on that heavy set of armor, left his house, and walked towards the Gate of Moral Triumph.

There, he would achieve the greatest glory of his life.

_The eleventh day of the tenth month_, the prelude to the Battle of Beijing began.

Esen originally thought that Beijing was already a mere skeleton that would collapse without a fight as soon as he reached its gates. But when he actually arrived at the walls of Beijing, organized his troops, and began the invasion, he found that, to his surprise, those Ming troops that he thought unable to withstand even a single blow had already assembled in formation and were waiting for him outside the city.

Esen was a highly experienced military commander. Just from their general manner, he already recognized that those men guarding in front of the gates were here to fight with all their might – not to be trifled with in the slightest.

But since he was already here, he couldn’t just not fight. So he decided to feel out the situation first.

His chosen test site was the Western Upright Gate.

By his orders, several thousand Oirat troops – accompanied by captured Ming peasants – advanced on the Western Upright Gate in a probing attack.
The defending officer of the Western Upright Gate was Liu Ju, who reacted swiftly, sending out subordinate lieutenants Gao Li and Mao Fushou to meet the enemy.

The Oirat soldiers had yet to sober up from the victory at Tumu Fortress. They still believed that the Ming troops in front of them would be like those at Tumu Fortress – free for the Mongols to slaughter as they pleased.

In truth, the roles of wolf and sheep change quite often in war. This time, the leading role of wolf would be played by the Ming army.

In the Battle of Tumu Fortress, many of them had lost their friends and family, their resulting rage and hatred pent-up with nowhere to vent. Yet now these enemies who had killed their brothers-in-arms actually dared to arrogantly come knocking on their door? Outrageous!

If now was not the time for revenge, then when?

Thus, they drew their swords, opened wide their bloodshot eyes, cried out “kill them,” and charged at the Oirat troops with unstoppable force.

The Oirat soldiers were stupefied. In their minds, this was a cushy task – the great and mighty Esen Taishi had sent them here to accept the Ming’s surrender and they could get first dibs on looting and pillaging the city.

But only now did they realize that what welcomed them was an intensely murderous group of people and the sharp swords in their hands.

The Oirat troops collapsed at the first encounter, fleeing helter-skelter in every direction. Hundreds were killed. Furthermore, the captured peasants were rescued by the Ming army.
When Esen saw the sorry state of the survivors who made it back, he finally realized – the enemy in front of him was no meek sheep or cow but a fierce wolf or tiger.

Against an enemy like that, simple brute force would be dangerous. Just as he was pacing the floor, enter Super Traitor Xi Ning.

He suggested to Esen that they shouldn’t attack the Ming forces right now but instead retreat, because he had thought of a great plan that was sure to win them victory without a fight.

Xi Ning’s brilliant plan was this: set up camp outside the city, then send a messenger notifying the Ming officials that the Emperor Emeritus, Mr. Zhu Qizhen, was here, and ask them to send someone to formally receive His Imperial Majesty.

The sinister part of this plan was in presenting Zhu Qizhen so conspicuously and publically calling for the Ming to receive him. If they came, their side could negotiate terms and demand money and benefits; if they didn’t come, the Ming would be in the wrong and it would be a diplomatic embarrassment for them.

Traitors being so utterly loathed – it’s really not without good reason.

Thus, a difficult question was placed in front of Yu Qian. How would he handle it?

This problem, which seems difficult to us, was very easy for Yu Qian – he immediately sent out two people to take care of it.

One of them was called Wang Fu, the other was called Zhao Rong.

What is important to note here is their positions: Wang Fu was an Assistant Transmission Commissioner in the Office of Transmissions and Zhao Rong was a Secretariat Drafter. It was only right before they were sent out to negotiate that they were promoted respectively.
to Vice Commissioner of the Office of Transmissions and Vice Minister of the Court of Imperial Sacrifices.

This was a rather meaningful transfer of personnel and choice of delegation.

What was the meaning behind it?

It becomes clear as soon as you take a look at their official positions. What ranks were the positions of Assistant Transmission Commissioner and Secretariat Drafter? One was rank 6a, the other was rank 7b. This means that Wang Fu and Zhao Rong were both small potatoes, a dime a dozen among lower-ranking officials.

Then, how high was their position after being promoted? Vice Commissioner of the Office of Transmissions and Vice Minister of the Court of Imperial Sacrifices were both the same – rank 4a.

Rank 4a, that’s just a county commissioner.

Yu Qian’s meaning was very clear: he didn’t take any of Esen’s words seriously at all. Sending these two low-ranking officials out was no more than a perfunctory gesture: going through the motions if you will.

On the other hand, Comrade Esen was waiting doggedly outside the city for imperial court officials to come and hold talks with him, to come and beseech him for the release of Zhu Qizhen. Then he would receive cartloads of gold, silver, jewels, and treasure and bask in glory.

But what did he end up getting? Two insignificant rank 6/7 officials, promoted to rank 4 at the last minute, and sent out to negotiate with him.
This wasn’t a negotiation – it was mockery, it was humiliation.

Even more hilarious was the fact that Esen was kind of unclear on the bureaucratic system and personnel of the Ming Dynasty. He planned to negotiate in all seriousness with these two delegates because in his mind, they must be VIPs.

Meanwhile, Wang Fu and Zhao Rong were also very befuddled. They were completely unknown/obscure – not even high enough to qualify for court or face the Emperor, let alone represent their country in international diplomatic talks. In the capital city of Beijing so star-studded with high-ranking officials, even calling these two “government officials” was giving them too much credit.

These two dudes had probably been bored on duty in the great hall when in the blink of an eye, they were informed they’d been promoted to rank 4 and chosen as Representatives to the Oirat Mongols, departing immediately.

No toiling of their sinews and bones, no exposing their body to hunger, and definitely no subjecting themselves to extreme poverty. Great responsibility falling suddenly right out of the sky and into their laps.

The two parties of the talks: one clueless, one admitting no wrong – what kind of negotiations were they even negotiating?

Just when it seemed that Esen was going to become an infamous laughingstock in the history of diplomacy, enter once again that goddamn eunuch and traitor Mr. Xi Ning.

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He knew very well that the two supposed “Representatives” were nobodies and he advised Esen: respond to Wang Fu and Zhao Rong, refuse to negotiate with them, and declare that the Oirats would negotiate with and only with the following four people:

Yu Qian, Shi Heng, Hu Ying, Wang Zhi.\(^{105}\)

No one else besides those four, period.

Yu Qian’s answer to this was: no answer.

**YU QIAN:** *Think they’re too small? Well, I don’t feel like bothering with you!*

He threw down some fighting words, which seemingly passed for an answer.

“I only know that I have troops, I know nothing about anything else!”

Esen, stop wasting your breath – didn’t you want to fight? Come at me then! Let’s see what you’re made of!

**To Arms!**

Esen was really and truly furious now. He had naïvely assumed that there would be another delegation sent out of the city and had, filled with sincerity, stood on top a hill watching and waiting eagerly. But as time slowly passed – not even a *dog* came out, let alone a person.

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\(^{105}\) Yu Qian and Shi Heng need no introductions. Wang Zhi, as mentioned before, was the Minister of Personnel at the time and prominent in court. Hu Ying was the Minister of Rites and a venerable elder statesman. He’d served all four Emperors before Zhu Qizhen and was one of the five officials to whom Zhu Qizhen’s father, Emperor Xuanzong, entrusted the care of his young son on his deathbed.
Alas, his heart was cruelly wounded once more when he realized he’d been played, yet again.

Esen himself really should take some of the responsibility for being fooled so many times. I actually looked up Comrade Esen’s age: in *the fourteenth year of Zhengtong (1449)*, he was already forty-two years old. Confucius said: “At forty, I came to be free from doubts.” To be still so naïve at that age, Esen really had no right to complain.

When it came to fighting a war, Esen was pretty skilled. But when it came to politics and intrigue, he was still way below the level of the Ming Dynasty officials who were seasoned old hands.

By this point: you couldn’t beat their tricks and retreat was out of the question. There was only one remaining option.

Attack! Conquer them with military might!

The Battle of Beijing had officially begun.

In that moment, Yu Qian, fully decked out in armor, galloped out of the city on horseback and straightened up before the Ming troops.

Behind him, the doors of the Gate of Moral Triumph slowly closed.

Faced with the surprised stares of the soldiers, Yu Qian remained resolute:

“Just discussing loyalty and righteousness everyday, what good is that? Now is the time to prove it! Serve your country, kill the enemy, or die trying!”

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106 Confucius Analects 2.4, p. 9, trans. Edward Slingerland
The soldiers finally realized: the man in front of them, the highest defender of Beijing, His Excellency Mr. Minister of War, was going into battle expecting certain death – he never planned to make it back alive.

To the soldiers on the battlefield, the Yu Qian at this moment was no longer just a commanding officer; that thin figure symbolized courage and belief in certain victory.

An army with a belief is not afraid of any enemy, and cannot be defeated.

Esen’s fated loss was decided in that moment.

The Oirat troops finally began their attack. Their target was the Gate of Moral Triumph.

*It’s a Trap! The Last Firearms Division!* 

This was an opening everybody had predicted. The shortest route of attack is generally also the most effective. As the city’s northern gate, the Gate of Moral Triumph would naturally be the first point of attack.

Esen wasn’t a fool; he knew that the Gate of Moral Triumph was already prepared. So, he sent out a small unit ahead to scout the way. His plan was to get a clear picture of the situation first, and then if the gate was too heavily defended and difficult to take, switch targets to another gate. If a chance arose, he would then bring the army to full-scale attack.

Under this type of thinking, the scout unit departed. Much to their surprise, they ran into Ming cavalry troops before even reaching the Gate of Moral Triumph. These men were all panicked-looking and unequipped; after tailing them, the Oirats discovered that it was like this everywhere and so reported back to Esen immediately.
Upon learning this information, Esen immediately made his assessment: the Ming army was not prepared yet and was merely bluffing in an empty show of strength.

Under Esen’s wise tactical leadership and guidance, the Oirats sent out ten thousand troops to attack the Gate of Moral Triumph. The commanding officer was Esen’s younger brother Boro. It was also Esen’s elite division; sending this main force out was an expression of his determination to win.

The troops set out from Esen’s main camp, the mounted soldiers racing against each other. Dust and smoke billowed in their wake as they tore towards the Gate of Moral Triumph.

The smugly confident Boro could’ve never predicted that he wouldn’t even get to see a glimpse of the Gate of Moral Triumph.

Because ahead waiting for them was a unit hell-bent on revenge – the Firearms Division.

As early as a few days ago, Yu Qian had analyzed the battle situation with Shi Heng. They both agreed that if they were to fight head-on with the enemy, the Ming troops wouldn’t have any advantage. In order to have a chance of winning, they had to lay an ambush.

Who would be in charge of the ambush? They turned their gaze once more to the Firearms Division.

Just to clarify, the main forces of the Firearms Division had been completely wiped out earlier. Those left were the second string – the first string were all dead, so the second string were naturally promoted to the first.

As the strongest of the Three Great Training Divisions, the Firearms Division possessed extreme confidence and determination for victory. But it was such a battalion that had been
cut down so neatly and tidily like chopping vegetables at Tumu Fortress – all without firing a single bullet or cannonball.

The entire Firearms Division was destroyed just like that, under such dubious and unclear circumstances.

That shameful result was one this proud division could not accept. Thus, out of all the defending troops in Beijing, their thirst for battle was the strongest and their desire for revenge the deepest.

Giving this mission to them was the most appropriate choice.

The last of the Firearms Division was, at this moment, laying in ambush along the only route to the Gate of Moral Triumph, hidden in the village houses along the road. When the scouting Oirat troops passed by in an arrogant bluster, they remained quiet. Because they knew – that was merely bait, the real catch was still to come.

Not long after, a sky-darkening dust storm kicked up far up the road and the sound of hoof beats floated down on the breeze. The Firearms Division soldiers’ hands clenched involuntarily, their grips on their handgonnes tightening.

Here they come. Finally.

Boro flew along at the head of his troops. Since the Ming army was so weak, they should move along even faster; too late and there would be no glory to be had.

He could already vaguely see the Gate of Moral Triumph – as long as they got past the village houses ahead, Beijing was within their grasp!

The target was so close!
To be fair, his thinking was correct – his target was indeed very close, the final destination was just slightly different.

Not Beijing, but Hell.

Boro, let’s stop here – this will be your grave!

The Oirat troops charged into this empty village area, when, suddenly – troops appeared in front of them, flanking both sides and blocking the Oirats from advancing any further. At the same time, large groups of soldiers appeared behind them as well, blocking off all avenues of escape.

This type of scenario is called an encirclement attack in military strategy, an ambush colloquially, and wrapping dumplings in slang.

Oddly enough, the Ming soldiers didn’t attack straightaway but instead seemed to be waiting for something.

Boro didn’t know why they were waiting and he didn’t want to know. But he knew one thing for sure – if they didn’t break out soon, the only fate that awaited him and his thousands of men would be death.

He personally led a cavalry charge at the surrounding Ming troops, hoping to break through; Boro was confident that the shock of his cavalry troops was enough to beat back these ambushers. Of course, this would require some time.

It was a pity then that he never got that time.

Because what awaited him was the avenging guns of the Firearms Division.
After such a long period of waiting and suffering, the soldiers of the Firearms Division finally got their chance. They would use the guns in their hands to personally deal a devastating blow to these intruders, avenge their fallen comrades, and win back the honor of their proud elite force.

In a flash, a loud sound erupted from the previously quiet village houses – hundreds of guns firing as one. The men of the Firearms Division showed off tunnel warfare at its finest. With the houses as bases, they stuck to the rules of changing positions after each shot fired and no shots wasted, sniping at the Oirat from all sides.

The Oirat troops felt as if they’d fallen into the pits of hell. As they were mostly cavalry, they weren’t able to even move. Perched up on high, the Firearms Division simply treated them like movable practice targets, reloading, aiming, and firing at leisure. The Oirats went nuts. They swung their scimitars\textsuperscript{107} around madly but were unable to find their target and thus failed to mount a counterattack. Their horses were fast but they couldn’t climb walls, and thus many of the Oirats were killed on the spot. The smarter ones had already abandoned their mounts and were fleeing on foot.

Boro was completely stunned by this surprise attack. But not for long, because he was quickly killed by some random shot from the Firearms Division. He did not become the first to break through the gates of Beijing but did, however, receive the honor of being the first high-level Oirat commander to be killed in Beijing.

With their commanding officer dead, the ten thousand Oirat troops collapsed immediately, wiped out in almost an instant. Thus, the battle of the Gate of Moral Triumph came to an end – a complete defeat for Esen.

\textsuperscript{107} Scimitar \textit{(madao 马⼑)}, backsword with a curved blade. Used in horse warfare because of their relatively light weight.
Esen was waiting back at base camp for news of victory, but what he got instead was total annihilation.

He couldn’t believe his ears. Since succeeding his father as a youth, he’d fought everywhere, wiped out the Uriankhai\textsuperscript{108}, subjugated the Jurchens, united Mongolia, and swept through the realm: no one could match him!

And in the Battle of Tumu Fortress, he defeated his greatest enemy – the Ming. He even captured their Emperor. Such great military accomplishments that even his grandfather Mahamu couldn’t compare! He could almost see it: the magnificent capital city almost within his grasp, the dream of restoring the Great Yuan achieved, an empire built and realized in his hands. His name would go down in history alongside Genghis Khan and Kublai Khan!

And then Yu Qian delivered him a harsh wake up slap, as if screaming in his ear:

“Esen, wake up, get out of bed. The time for fighting is now.”

\textbf{Esen’s Rage}

I won’t lose, especially not here!

Esen had finally woken up. He began to realize that this city in front of him was not so easily conquered.

\footnotetext[108]{Uriankhai (兀良哈), Mongolian term applied to neighboring “forest” ethnic groups like Tuvans and Yakuts.}
But it was too late to turn back now. Ten thousand soldiers dead, his younger brother Boro killed – if he retreated now, how could he face the world!

One more gamble! I’ll do it myself!

Esen had lost his patience. He organized a general mobilization, ordering all cavalry to start their attack on the nine gates of Beijing at the same time. To be honest, by this point Esen had probably realized he didn’t have much of a chance of capturing this city.

But it was a matter of saving face.

Even if he had to leave, he wouldn’t leave without winning at least once!

Since time immemorial, countless gamblers have lost it all just like this.

Esen mounted his horse and personally ordered his cavalry to begin the final charge. He thought it over carefully before determining the target for this finale of his – the Gate of Secured Peace.

The defender of the Gate of Secured Peace was Tao Jin. This man wasn’t very famous and didn’t have any remarkable military exploits, yet the Gate of Secured Peace, like the Gate of Moral Triumph, was also a north-facing gate of Beijing. The distance was therefore shorter and suited to a direct assault. By choosing the Gate of Secured Peace as his target, Esen seemed to be purposely looking for a weak spot to exploit.

As his command rang out, the best of the Oirat cavalry turned out in full force, heading straight for the weakest gate, the Gate of Secured Peace.

Of course, just like before, the supposedly weak nature of the Gate of Secured Peace was only in Esen’s mind.
What he couldn’t predict was that an old friend was waiting outside the gate for him with an unexpected surprise.

Of course, this old friend was no pushover but rather an immovable wall.

Leading his main elite forces, Esen charged towards the Gate of Secured Peace, but he was much more careful than his brother. He proceeded along very cautiously, wary of ambushes.

But surprisingly, all the way right up till the Gate of Secured Peace, they didn’t run into any trouble and no ambushers appeared. This made him even more confident that this was where the weak spot of Beijing’s defenses lay.

But just as he prepared to begin the assault on the city gate, he found - to his complete astonishment - that the defending soldiers actually abandoned their defensive positions and rushed forward to attack of their own initiative!

What was going on?

Esen was kind of confused. Although he could see that the opposing soldiers were also cavalry, it was a truth universally acknowledged that the Ming cavalry was no match for the Oirat cavalry. But this cavalry group had actually abandoned their defense and attacked him on their own accord - the reason was baffling.

The reason wasn’t actually that hard to find. Let’s use that old saying I’ve quoted before:

There are always exceptions.
While the general quality of the Oirat cavalry was definitely stronger than that of the Ming, this was not without certain exceptions. An excellent commander plus an appropriate use of military strategy was more than enough to train a superb cavalry regiment.

Defending the Gate of Secured Peace was exactly such an excellent regiment and their commander was Esen’s old acquaintance - Shi Heng.

Shi Heng and Esen were pretty much old friends by now. When Shi Heng used to be on the frontier, he often had dealings with Esen. Of course, the stage for their dealings was the battlefield and their props were death and weapons.

In these dealings, each side won some and lost some. But in the later Battle of Yanghe, Shi Heng lost everything.

That moment left an indelible impression on Shi Heng: the army completely wiped out, bodies of his men strewn all around, fleeing away all alone with Oirat soldiers hot on his heels. The pain of failure and humiliation of being pursued burned in his heart. But Shi Heng had no time to ponder any of this, because his most important goal in that second was to run for his life.

The Shi Heng that successfully escaped with his life didn’t get any comfort but had his position stripped on top of living with the disdainful looks of all those around him. Because everybody knew: this man was a loser on the battlefield, he abandoned all of his men and ran away alone to save his own life. There was nothing glorious about it.

From then on, Shi Heng carved the name of his enemy deep into his heart – Esen. He repeated to himself over and over again, it was that man that had caused all his failure and shame, caused him to be unable to face the family of his deceased men, caused this terrible reputation of being a self-serving coward he had to carry.
He knew very well: the only way to erase his shame was to find Esen, completely crush him on the battlefield, and win back the glory that was rightfully his!

But the cruel reality in front of him was that he was not only a loser but also a fired official. Where would he even go to begin his revenge?

In that moment, Yu Qian appeared. Yu Qian didn’t care about any past crimes, promoting Shi Heng and giving him a chance.

A chance to prove himself.

Shi Heng carefully analyzed the characteristics of the Oirat Mongol cavalry. He used the only month he had remaining to step up the training of the men under his command, instructing them in combat methods and strategy. Very quickly, he had a cavalry regiment with rather substantial combat strength.

On the eve of battle, Shi Heng and Yu Qian agreed that Esen’s main points of attack would be the Gate of Moral Triumph and the Gate of Secured Peace. Thus, they divvied up the labor. The Gate of Moral Triumph would be defended by Yu Qian along with a planned ambush by the Firearms Division while Shi Heng would lead the cavalry and wait for the enemy outside the Gate of Secured Peace.

When he saw that familiar standard of Esen’s appear outside the Gate of Secured Peace, an overwhelming rush of adrenaline shot through Shi Heng. He realized instantly that his long-awaited chance at revenge had finally arrived.

The cavalry waiting outside drew their sabers and readied their attack on the invaders in front of them. But unexpectedly, before the order to attack was even given, one person went charging out all on his own. Even more comically, this person who ignored orders and charged out first was actually the vanguard commander of the regiment!
This rather energetic bro who led the charge was named Shi Biao.

Shi Biao was Shi Heng’s nephew. True to his name,\textsuperscript{109} he was a rather intrepid character even normally, rude and headstrong, the type to stir up shit when it got too peaceful and cause bar fights for fun. He didn’t have any hobbies but had an avid interest in war and killing. He would get extremely excited as soon as he got on the battlefield, often roaring battle cries as he led the charge and slaughtered enemies. In terms of valor and skill in battle, even Shi Heng paled in comparison.

In this moment, this dude was falling back into old habits: upon seeing the enemy, he forgot his current rank and status and charged recklessly, flailing his weapon.

Just a quick note, Mr. Shi Biao’s weapon was kind of unique. According to historical records, his weapon of choice was an axe – of course, having to wield it in battle, he didn’t just use a normal wood-chopping axe. Now, there’s no way to tell whether this particular battle axe was a dual axe like Li Kui’s\textsuperscript{110} or a spreading-flower axe like Cheng Yaojin’s,\textsuperscript{111} but given that he used such a heavy, unwieldy weapon for his personal sidearm, what we can be certain of is one thing – this was not someone to be messed with.

Watching the vanguard commander Shi Biao charge madly towards Esen’s army, the arrayed Ming troops all came to – their commander was already leading the attack, what were the grunts waiting for!

\textsuperscript{109} The character biao (彪) in Shi Biao’s (石彪) name in Chinese means “a young tiger” or “a strong, burly fellow.”

\textsuperscript{110} Li Kui (李逵), fictional character, one of the 108 Liangshan heroes from the Water Margin. Nickname “Black Whirlwind” and wielded a pair of axes.

\textsuperscript{111} Cheng Yaojin 程咬金 (589-665), famous Tang Dynasty general. The popular saying “Cheng Yaojin and his three axe strokes” (程咬金三板斧) is used to describe someone relying on their old tricks.
Shi Biao waved his enormous battle-axe as he barreled straight into the ranks of the Oirat army with the seemingly unstoppable force of ten thousand men. With a left slash there and a right swing here, he hacked his unstoppable way through the enemy soldiers. The Ming troops quickly arrived as back-up and joined him in charging and hacking their way left and right, throwing the Oirat army into utter chaos.

Esen never expected that he would be so utterly routed by the enemy before he even had a chance to do anything. He watched helplessly as Shi Biao and the Ming army cleaved through his troops like a hot knife through butter, mowing through his men like they were grass. He swung his scimitar around, trying to maintain his position but the opposing side was simply too ferocious. The Oirat vanguard and middle guard seemed to collapse at this single blow, fleeing pell-mell in every direction, completely unable to regroup and mount an effective defense.

Esen began to realize that his failure seemed to be inevitable. The Ming troops in front of him were nothing like those he’d vanquished at Tumu Fortress. They were so skilled in battle, so heedless of their own lives – what made them become as fierce as they were now? Why couldn’t his elite regiments stand against the attack of these second-string Ming troops?

In fact, the reason was very simple. On just combat strength alone, the defending Ming troops were definitely not a match for the Oirats. But they had something that these invaders did not.

This something was conviction, a conviction to protect their home and country.

People fighting to protect their home and country always have endless courage. Because they know – they are fighting to protect their fathers and mothers and family behind them, their effort and sacrifice are all worthwhile.
Whether or not Esen realized this point at the time, nobody knows, but what we can be sure of is that Esen realized very clearly that if he didn’t retreat and run now, his entire army would be destroyed.

Seeing as his main force was about to collapse, Esen had no choice but to order a full-scale withdrawal. Shi Biao followed in hot pursuit, getting in some good kicks to Esen’s rear. The Oirat army moaned incessantly, focusing solely on running away.

Esen in retreat cut a rather sorry figure, but what he didn’t expect was that his misfortunes were still not over – a real opponent was presently waiting for him on his escape route.

At present, Shi Heng had positioned his troops and was ready to welcome Esen’s arrival. Before the battle, he and Shi Biao had already hatched a plan: Shi Biao was to position his troops in front of the Gate of Secured Peace while Shi Heng would be hiding with his men behind Esen. When Esen’s army began their attack, the two of them would launch a pincer attack and catch the enemy by surprise.

But things surpassed Shi Heng’s predictions. To think that Shi Biao was so fierce as to be able to beat back Esen all by himself. This was good actually, it was always easier to kick an army when it was down.

So when Esen, huffing and puffing, finally managed to escape from Shi Biao’s pursuit, he didn’t even have a moment to celebrate before being pleasantly surprised by Shi Heng’s army’s warm reception.

Finally, my chance for revenge – Esen, your day has come!

Shi Heng wasted no time; he personally led the fiercest attack yet on Esen’s troops. This was a forgone battle. Esen’s army had zero inclination to fight, collapsing at a touch; the
powerful Oirat troops devoted all of their energy to fleeing. Meanwhile, the Ming army chased after them tirelessly, killing any Oirat soldiers they caught up to.

The profiteer Esen was completely in the red this time. While he hadn’t yet repaid all of his debts from Tumu Fortress and Yanghe, he had at least paid out a very large amount of interest.

**Sun Tang’s Predicament**

At the same time the Gate of Moral Triumph and the Gate of Secured Peace were repelling the Oirat troops, the defending officer of the Western Upright Gate, Sun Tang, was facing a rather awkward predicament.

Esen’s army was composed mainly of cavalry. Their mobility was very high – after suffering losses at the Gate of Moral Triumph and the Gate of Secured Peace, they swiftly changed directions for the Western Upright Gate on the western side of Beijing. This gave Commander-in-chief Sun Tang who was defending this gate a huge headache.

Although the Gate of Moral Triumph and the Gate of Secured Peace were northern gates of Beijing, directly facing the enemy, this also meant that they were strongly fortified. The Western Upright Gate did not have such benefits; both the quantity and quality of its assigned troops were limited. Esen’s army also discovered this fact and thus, one after another, the troops originally besieging the northern two gates changed directions. They seemed to have come to an unspoken consensus – the Western Upright Gate was easy pickings, everyone go, go!

The main battlefield in the Battle of Beijing shifted with them.
Sun Tang was a pretty capable general. Facing the enemy in front of the gate, he directed his defending troops to take the lead and charge the Oirat vanguard. He was skilled in martial arts, very bold and fierce, charging ahead of his men, leaping into the thick of the fray wielding his saber and personally slew many Oirat soldiers.

But his fierceness did not change the fact that the Western Upright Gate was currently being besieged on all sides. He gloomily discovered that the Oirat army grew bigger and their attacks fiercer with each soldier killed. The defending Ming troops didn’t seem to be able to hold out much longer. After some careful thinking, he made a decision – retreat.

Retreating in the midst of battle is always an embarrassment for a military commander, but just for Sun Tang himself, this act was quite understandable.

**SUN TANG:** *I’m human too, why should generals have to go die and not be allowed to run?*

Could you say he was wrong?

But military commander Sun Tang quickly found out, there was actually another even greater problem in front of him: escape...to *where*?

Outside, the Oirat troops were all over the place. He couldn’t run away from the city: that would be asking for death.

The best choice of course would be to retreat into the city. But the problem was that Mr. Yu Qian had issued that scary order; all the gates were shut tight.

Given the desperate situation, Sun Tang didn’t really have a choice but to fall back to just in front of the city gates and yell upwards:

“I can’t keep going, let my troops back in!”
The person on the top of the walls in that moment was Chen Xin.

Chen Xin was a civil official, more specifically a Supervising Secretary, which was considered a Speaking Official. In my opinion, this was a very interesting person.

He could see everything from the top of the walls and understood that Sun Tang wasn’t being a coward but really couldn’t hold out any longer. But he had his orders and he was also kind of a pedant or, more colloquially, a stick-in-the-mud. So therefore, he didn’t open the gates but rather stood on top of the walls and yelled back a rather long spiel.

The general idea of this spiel was as follows: look dude, I know you’re having a hard time, there’s lots of enemies, you really wanna come back inside, and I totally understand that, but I have orders from the higher-ups to not let you in the city so I can’t disobey orders and let you in but actually so long as you defeat the enemies you can come back inside so I hope you work super super hard and I’ll be cheering you on from up here!

This long string of words left Sun Tang dumbstruck.

**SUN TANG: If I could defeat the enemies, why the hell would I be bothering with you idiot?!!
You won’t let me in, fine, then just say you won’t let me in – what was all that frigging blathering for?!**

Making a Speaking Official the overseer of a military commander – this was a rather interesting combo, and often created a strong (albeit unintentional) comedic effect.

Sun Tang understood however, even though that official on the walls had babbled a bunch of nonsense, the central message was very clear:

Only two types of people were allowed back into the city: winners or corpses!
He tugged on his horse’s reins and turned back towards the fiercely raging battlefield.

Since I can’t get back in anyways, might as well die fighting here! Esen, I’m coming for you!

Sometimes, a man needs to throw away their survival instinct in order to find a way out.

With the determination of a man going to his death, Sun Tang brandished his saber and charged at Esen’s army. Inspired by his courage (which was actually more resignation), his men rallied bravely to fight to the death. The morale of the Ming army shot up and the situation stabilized.

Cheng Xin on top of the city walls was also true to his name. He lived up to his words – besides directing a cheerleading squad to cheer on Sun Tang, he also organized a ranged attack of the Oirats down below with handgonnes and bow and arrows, supporting Sun Tang’s efforts not just through words.

Just as the battle entered into a stalemate, Shi Heng finally arrived. He’d already utterly routed Esen before and was leading his men on a military exercise, marching around and sweeping up the tattered remains of the Oirat army. Hearing that the Western Upright Gate was under attack, he immediately came to the rescue. Under the command of this “#1 Warrior General,” the Ming army quickly took care of the attacking Oirats and sent them packing.

Pulling through by the skin of his teeth, Sun Tang was finally freed of his life’s predicament. To his credit, he held his position and he was thusly rewarded after the war. But his not-so-steadfast attitude and actions caused him to become a common target of ridicule among his

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112 Cheng Xin’s (程信) name in Chinese is a homophone of the word chengxin (诚信) meaning “honest and trustworthy.”
fellow officers; he also ended up leaving a not-so-honorable note – “Tang buckled under pressure and tried to enter the city” – in many a history book. From then on, he awkwardly continuing plying his trade as a military officer.

But Sun Tang did eventually regain his honor. On that chaotic night twelve years later, he used his actions to prove his courage and redeem his reputation.

Esen’s Plan B

The Esen in this moment was running along the road of escape. Behind him was a group of frenzied Ming troops, each of them brandishing a scimitar, screaming for his blood, and swearing never to rest until they’d torn his body into a thousand pieces.

He finally understood Shi Heng’s pain – being pursued really was not a pleasant experience.

They couldn’t stay here – best head back to the main camp.

Esen’s main camp was at the earthworks on the outskirts of the city, some ways away from the capital. It was also Esen’s well-entrenched base of operations– at least, it was.

When Esen returned again to this place, he ended up experiencing, very intimately, the very specific pain of having a leaky roof while suffering continuous thunderstorms. He was surprised to find that on his way back here, many residents along his flight path all climbed onto their rooftops and in their generosity, gifted him with many a brick. For the first time ever, Esen experienced the pain of being stoned.

They couldn’t stay here either; let’s hurry up and get out of here.
Esen was in a state of utter despair. He’d come here full of hopes and dreams and ended up with nothing – his younger brother shot dead, tens of thousands of men broken and scattered, himself beaten and pursued by his once-defeated opponent Shi Heng. What a loss of face.

From complacent smugness at first to the dire straits now. For Esen at least, the world moved too fast.

Truthfully, with things at this point, it was time to throw in the towel. The wisest choice in this moment for Esen would be to order a full-scale withdrawal.

But, our Comrade Esen was quite a character. Since he assumed command, he’d swept through the realm basically unmatched. To suffer such a loss here – if he just left like that, what of his face, how was he supposed to face his subjects at home?

So therefore he decided to wait five more days. If in these five days, they still hadn’t made any more progress, he would change his plans.

These five days were sheer torture for Esen. Using the hostage Mr. Zhu Qizhen in his hands, he tried to get those inside the city to negotiate. As a matter of fact, his demands weren’t that excessive: give him some money and a (face-saving) out, that’s all. But Yu Qian inside the city completely ignored him. So, Esen would launch a military attack, however, he always got beaten to a pulp and forced to flee.

Fighting didn’t work, talking wasn’t an option – just like this, poor Mr. Esen ended up squatting outside the city for five days. Beijing in the tenth month was very windy and dusty. Esen drank his fill of these winds for five days and had nothing to show for it. Driven to the end of his rope, he decided to go with Plan B.
Like before, Plan B focused on a military offensive, but this time, the target was no longer Beijing but rather Juyong Pass.\footnote{Juyong Pass (居庸关), one of the three greatest mountain passes in the Great Wall. Located in modern-day Changping District of Beijing, about 31 mi away from central Beijing.}

Juyong Pass was the gateway to Beijing; taking over Juyong Pass would be equivalent to a hand around Beijing’s throat. After so many days of probing and attacking, Esen knew at this point that taking over Beijing was an impossible pipe dream. Therefore, he decided to lower his expectations and target Juyong Pass instead. This way, if he advanced, he could attack and if he retreated, he could defend; free to advance or retreat – you had to admit, it was very sound logic, strategically-speaking.

Esen reorganized his troops, mounted all remaining forces (historical sources report around 50,000 men), and shifted gears to attack Juyong Pass.

It should be said that this decision of Esen’s was indeed correct: Juyong Pass was much shorter on men than the capital and not as well or heavily fortified. Esen’s army may have suffered a setback but their combat ability was still there. Under normal circumstances, Juyong Pass could not withstand Esen’s attacks.

However, what Esen could’ve never predicted was that the circumstances at the time just so happened to be \textit{not} normal.

The commander-in-charge of Juyong Pass was named Luo Tong. Just as Esen predicted, Luo Tong did not have enough men or heavy fortifications to withstand the Oirat army’s invasion. Yet, Heaven always leaves a door open. Just when it seemed all hope was lost, Luo Tong welcomed a helper – the weather.

Because on that day in 1449 – baby, it was cold outside.
In the tenth month of the fourteenth year of Zhengtong (1449), the weather was already very cold. And so, Luo Tong made full use of his general physics knowledge. Even with the amassed enemy forces bearing down on him, he remained cool as a cucumber, calmly and unhurriedly ordering the garrisoned troops to keep pouring water onto the city walls non-stop. Watching these defending troops’ actions from outside, Esen was at a total loss as to why they were acting this way. He just gave orders for an all-out assault the next day.

The next morning, Esen found the answer to the defending troops’ strange behavior – because overnight, what yesterday had still been a Juyong Pass made of mud and brick was now a giant ice cube. There wasn’t even the slightest place for a handhold, never mind actually scaling the city walls. Under these circumstances, Esen canceled the planned attack and camped his troops outside the city walls.

Esen’s willpower was almost at its breaking point. Reviewing his experiences this past month, he painfully realized that he was the naïve little baby who people like Yang Hong, Yu Qian, Shi Heng, and Luo Tong had kept making a fool of. These people were all very cunning, never directly facing him, but always manipulating him with all sorts of schemes and tricks. Yet, his brain kept failing him and he watched them take away his candy time and time again, to this awkward point where neither fighting nor retreating was an option.

The war having progressed to this point, Esen had long since abandoned his dreams of conquering Beijing and restoring the Great Yuan, reality having harshly crushed those very dreams. In my opinion, he needed no more than a chance for a dignified way out.

To fight or not to fight, that is a question of face.

Hanging onto this idea, he waited stubbornly outside Juyong Pass for seven days, hoping that this glacier in front of him would melt, hoping that someone would give him a chance
or an explanation, so as not to have this whole enormous military campaign of his become a colossal joke in everyone’s eyes.

But all he got from inside the city walls were shots fired from bows and handgonnes and the defending troops’ harsh ridicule.

**ESSEN TAISHI:** _We really can’t hold out any longer, let’s just pack up and go._

Esen give the order to withdraw; 50,000 Oirat troops began to pack up and prepare to go home.

But Luo Tong was such a good host that he seemed to feel a bit guilty about leaving his honored guest Esen high and dry outside for so many days. Thus, ignoring the other’s objections, he insisted on sending out fully armed troops to see Esen off. As a result, he defeated Esen’s troops three times, killing and capturing numerous enemy soldiers.

Esen didn’t have any energy to spare. He realized that he was in really deep trouble this time and he’d better escape or else his own life could be forfeit. Still keeping a firm hold of Zhu Qizhen, he prepared to retreat back to outside of the Pass.

On the march of defeat, Esen looked back one last time at Beijing city, so close yet so far away, before sighing and turning his back.

Seemingly in wistful mourning of his unfulfilled dreams, Esen set up camp in a spot not far away from Beijing, where he spent his last night near the capital.

I reckon Esen’s plans were probably nothing more than to get a good night’s sleep and some sweet dreams, then take off the next day. Yet, he never could’ve imagined that Yu Qian – another good host – had thoughtfully prepared a generous gift in order to wish him farewell.
Esen was an experienced military commander. He already predicted that the defending troops might attempt a surprise night raid so he stationed his troops some distance away from the city. In addition, since his army was primarily highly-mobile cavalry, even if the defenders did attack, he could easily react and sound a withdrawal.

But this time, the Heavens once again played a colossal prank on him. Having never studied science formally as a child, Comrade Esen was once again going to be disadvantaged by his lack of education.

He’d considered all possible options, but he forgot that Yu Qian had a type of weapon in his hands that did not need to get close to Esen’s camp to doom them. This terrifying weapon was – cannons.

The cannons of the Ming Dynasty had evolved from the earlier versions of the Song and Yuan dynasties. After centuries of improvement and innovation, by the time of the Yongle period, cannons already possessed a pretty far range and impressive firepower. Right now in this moment, Yu Qian had prepared several dozen cannons, all pointed directly at Esen’s camp, preparing to use this unexpected present to give Esen a warm sendoff in the night.

It was on that night that Esen gazed once more at Beijing, full of infinite regret and wistfulness. Later events would reveal that this was also the last time he ever looked upon the capital city. What he simply could not understand was this: his troops were strong and fierce, well-equipped, and with high morale while his enemies were weak and lacking their main forces, badly under-equipped, and at their lowest point in morale. Even their troops were reserve forces hastily mustered at the last minute, completely green and inexperienced. This level of disparity in their strengths, no matter how you calculate it – even if they were to go conduct a freaking census! – his side should not lose, no matter the situation.

And yet the reality was – he’d lost.
He might not have known what earth-shattering events had occurred in Beijing this past month, but what he could feel was that in that city shadowed by imminent danger, there was some kind of force sustaining the defending troops. What staunchly resisted him, what defeated him, and what created such miracles was precisely this force.

This kind of force, we call – courage.

As a loser, Esen was naturally filled with all sorts of feelings, but the winner, Yu Qian, did not have that kind of free time at that moment. He was busy assembling the cannons, pointing their large, hollow muzzles at Esen’s camp, preparing to put together a grand Farewell Bonfire Extravaganza for Esen that night.

At this point, some of you more observant readers may have noticed a contradiction. If Yu Qian had cannons, why did he not use them from the beginning but rather insist on waiting until Esen, on the verge of withdrawal, had set up camp for the night before bringing out the big guns?

There was a story behind this.

In our minds, Yu Qian was a brave and righteous soul. This was indeed true, but we often tend to forget something – Yu Qian was also a shrewd seasoned politician. The reason why he did not use the cannons at the beginning of the battle was because there was someone within Esen’s army with a very special identity – Zhu Qizhen.

While Zhu Qizhen was no longer Emperor, if he died just like that, in broad daylight and in front of everyone, it would probably have a somewhat bad effect. The pressure of public opinion was too great, so they could not act rashly. As we’ve discussed before, whether or not Zhu Qizhen himself lived or died didn’t really matter, what was important about him was only because people knew he was the Emperor Emeritus. And it was precisely for this reason why cannons were not widely used during the earlier part of battle.
But at the same time, Yu Qian would also never forgo using this weapon just for that reason. He once again fully utilized his flexible way of problem-solving to resolve the issue:

Since we can’t use the cannons in public with everybody watching, then we’ll just wait till you go farther away to use them – what the eye doesn’t see (your dead bodies), the heart (us) doesn’t grieve. Since we can’t use them in broad daylight, we’ll wait till nightfall to make our move. Cannons don’t have eyes – in the pitch dark, even if we “accidentally” injured or “accidentally” killed His Imperial Majesty the Emperor Emeritus, well that was understandable, wasn’t it?

Finally, if in the course of cleaning up the battlefield, we discovered Mr. Zhu Qizhen’s body, then we’ll just posthumously honor him after the fact. Write down in the history books something along the lines of “died for his country, a heroic martyr,” spread some propaganda about how Mr. Zhu Qizhen fought valiantly against overwhelming odds before being killed by the enemy, and use this exemplary example to inspire and enlighten future generations. At that point, everything will have come to their successful conclusion.

And so on that night, when Esen’s troops had gone off to dreamland and the campsite was still and silent, the far away Ming cannons began their fierce roars. Dozens of cannons fired as one; Esen’s camp was instantly engulfed in a sea of flames. Countless Oirat soldiers were shot dead in their sleep while the rest scattered to the winds. Esen started awake and ran out into the camp, brandishing his scimitar. He tried to organize a defense but was shocked to find no enemies in front of his eyes, only the deadly gifts of cannonballs raining down from the heavens.

While the Oirat camp sank into total chaos, the Ming army in the distance remained calm and unhurried. They treated the enemy soldiers like moving targets, leisurely aiming and firing at will in this session of “Artillery Target Practice 101.”
Fighting a war and ending up in this situation, there really wasn’t much more to say. The Oirat army camp was a sea of fire, losses were severe in the tens of thousands, and yet there wasn’t even the slightest hair of the enemy. Clutching his interrupted beauty sleep and unfinished dreams, Comrade Esen left this place of broken-heartedness that very night.

The Battle of Beijing was over. The Great Ming had won a resounding victory.

The Battle of Beijing was a very important battle in the history of China. If this battle had been lost, Chinese history would be rewritten. Because as soon as Beijing was lost, there would be no more strategic positions to hold in the north, half of the realm would be lost, and the fate of the Empire of the Great Ming would be changed. In this historically-deciding battle, even when faced with the circumstances of the main forces destroyed, Emperor Emeritus captured, insufficient troops and total lack of morale – the Ming Dynasty government was able to adopt the correct military and diplomatic policies. In the end, they defeated the invading Mongol army, saved the northern territories of the empire, and seized the final victory.

From a pile of loose sand to solid as a rock, from ready to crumble to united we stand, from dark clouds overcast to misty fogs dispersing, from enemy at the gates to expelling a thousand li – the Empire of the Great Ming was finally out of danger. The Battle of Beijing created a tide-turning miracle and the creator of this miracle was Yu Qian.

When everyone despaired at the situation, he bravely stepped forward, shouldered heavy responsibilities, and rescued the country from peril.

When circumstances were chaotic and seemingly hopeless, he took everything upon himself alone, painfully persevered, until victory was in sight.

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114 Li (里), also known as the Chinese mile, a traditional Chinese unit of distance. A third as long as English mile, half a kilometer.
No matter how difficult or complicated the situation, how dark the future seemed, he never once gave up hope, persisting in his efforts and resisting all along.

Thus, in my opinion, the Battle of Beijing is more than how the history books describe it: “in x month x day x year, x number of forces had such a battle,” and more than the win/lose relationships described in political science textbooks. Behind all that formulaic language lay the true radiance of human nature.

What this battle truly showed us was not the great achievements of princes and nobles and generals and ministers, but rather a story about courage and determination, a legend about remaining unwavering and true to your beliefs even in the darkest of times.

No matter how desperate the situation is, never give up hope, keep persevering – you will surely create a miracle.

Yu Qian used his actions to prove this very truth to us.

**Chapter 10: Going Home**

In our thoughts, Yu Qian who had performed this miraculous victory should now be showered in glory and adored by the masses. And indeed, things were like that but at the same time, his headaches were about to arrive.

It’s said that high winds blow on high hills – you always encounter many nuisances after becoming famous. The past was no exception.
After victory in the Battle of Beijing, Zhu Qiyu, grateful for Yu Qian’s extraordinary service for Emperor and country, gave him many awards, conferred upon him the title of Junior Guardian (rank 1b), and even planned to give his son a title of nobility.

Yu Qian had single-handedly held together the desperate situation and pushed back the tides. Everyone in the court knew the score – to confer such awards upon him was indeed fair, reasonable, and as a matter of course. But Yu Qian turned them down. He refused all of the awards, saying, “Letting the enemy get so far as to attack the capital is the great shame of us ministers. How then could we take credit and seek rewards for this?” But Zhu Qiyu insisted that he accept, so he had no choice but to accept the position of Junior Guardian yet still refused to accept the other awards.

Zhu Qiyu couldn’t do anything about it and had no choice but to yield to him. And thus, the form of address “Junior Guardian Yu” was thus handed down through the centuries, spread far and wide on people’s mouths.

It was not at all easy for Yu Qian to do what he did. Government official salaries were very low in the Ming Dynasty; even though Yu Qian was rank 1b, his salary alone was barely enough to eke out a living. He was honest and incorruptible, never accepted bribes or gifts, and so his family was pretty poor. Later when his house was seized and searched, those carrying out the order were shocked to find that this Yu Qian who had reached the highest rank possible was in fact actually a pauper.

Yet even for Yu Qian, this shining paragon of virtue and talent, there were people looking for excuses to condemn him, nitpicking and looking for nonexistent flaws, like picking out bones from a chicken egg.

115 Junior Guardian (shaobao 少保), rank 1b, a title of great prestige conferred on officials of the central government, one of the 3 posts collectively called the “Three Solitaries” (sāngū 三孤).
The first to come looking for trouble was the commanding officer of Juyong Pass, Luo Tong. He submitted a memorial to the Emperor, asserting that the Battle of Beijing was just so-so, and that someone had falsified the list of achievements and indiscriminately conferred official positions. There was also a very interesting sentence in the essay – “Those garbed today in jade pendants and sable fur are all people who frivolously guard their ranks and salaries their whole lives.”

This dude was very clearly just jealous. His goal was so obvious even later historians saw right through it – “He intended to slander people like Yu Qian and Shi Heng.”

Yu Qian never thought that there would be people who would attack him in this way. He thus petitioned the throne in rebuttal, stating that those who were awarded due to the Battle of Beijing all had open records of achievements, and besides, the number of people was fairly limited so from where did this talk of “indiscriminately conferring positions” come from? Furious, he declared that if Luo Tong thought these positions had been wrongly conferred, the government could go ahead and take back all of his positions and titles, he’d just go to work without them.

Luo Tong’s actions caused public indignation among the court officials. They all unanimously agreed that “Qian was truly deserving of his position,” which quelled a potential turmoil.

But not long after, Hanlin Academian Liu Dingzhi submitted another memorial to the throne attacking Yu Qian. The objective of this memorial was even more obvious and with even stronger language, excerpted here for your perusal:

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116 Just a note here that the “historians” mentioned here are 史官, more correctly known as “historiographers” but I kept the “historian” translation since it is much less confusing and better-known à la *Records of the Grand Historian*.
For example, “the battle at the Gate of Moral Triumph...it was nothing more than victory and defeat one after another and then killing and wounding each other. Although it does not warrant punishment, it also does not warrant reward.”

Or even harsher, “Yu Qian promoted from rank 2 to rank 1 – the realm has not heard of his deeds, but has seen his awards.”

Despite everything, this Liu Dingzhi was still dissatisfied with Mr. Yu Qian’s brave actions: stepping forward, pushing back the tide, upholding country and society all for Beijing’s survival and the safety of all the lives and property of both officials and common people, and not even accepting any reward beyond an honorary rank 1b title – to the point of making up such a conclusion like “the realm has not heard of his deeds, but has seen his awards.”

Mr. Liu Dingzhi – during war we did not see his deeds, but now during peace we did hear his lectures. Looking at the shared excerpts of this absurd text, we can conclude a universal law: you don’t need a reason to love someone, and you also don’t need an excuse to criticize someone.

But later historians saw these events even more clearly; they summed up the appearance of this phenomenon in just one sentence – “Qian had performed great services to the state. Again and again, those who were jealous repeatedly used obscure passages to impeach him.”

At first, Yu Qian was very agitated and submitted memorials in rebuttal. Later, he became indifferent.

Truthfully, Yu Qian had absolutely no need to be agitated or angry, because this kind of thing was unavoidable. “High winds blow on high hills” – thousands of years and never has this proverb changed, no exceptions, always effective.
No matter how much Yu Qian was attacked – even later framed and killed by his political enemies – his contributions and achievements could never be truly erased. In the end, history itself would finally prove his greatness.

Because justice lies in people’s hearts.

While Yu Qian was insulted because his renown was too great, the situation of another prominent official, Wang Zhi, was also not good – he’d also been rebuked. But the difference was that the person who rebuked him was not an official, but the Emperor. The reason? He was too naïve.

So, exactly what naïve thing did he do that pissed off the Emperor? The answer is very simple. He made a suggestion that Zhu Qiyu very much did not like – bring back Zhu Qizhen.

It turns out Esen, after being defeated, had sent emissaries many times to sue for peace. As Minister of Personnel, Wang Zhi was inclined to take this opportunity to retrieve Zhu Qizhen. His intent was not, in fact, to restore Zhu Qizhen to the throne, but just that it was quite embarrassing for their Emperor Emeritus to still be a hostage. If they could return Zhu Qizhen back home, it’d at least be a credit to the country.

Unfortunately, this suggestion was wholly not to Zhu Qiyu’s liking. This new Emperor had just barely warmed the seat of the throne. He got a headache every time he heard Zhu Qizhen’s name and just wanted his brother to go far away. Had it been possible, it would be best if he was sent off into another planet, never to return. And so, Zhu Qiyu completely ignored the matter.

But Wang Zhi just so happened to be one-track-minded. He mistakenly assumed that the Emperor was ignoring him because Zhu Qiyu himself hadn’t made up his mind yet and was still hesitating; and thus, Wang Zhi submitted a memorial publically expressing his opinion. The problem wasn’t in submitting a memorial to the throne. The problem was this one-
track-minded dude just so unfortunately wrote a rather taboo passage, which caused Zhu Qiyu to fly into a fit of rage and blew up the whole situation.

What exactly did he write? I’ve copied it as follows: “Your Majesty’s heavenly position is already confirmed. Yet, the Emperor Emeritus is still alive and no longer presides over the affairs of the realm. Your Majesty should be reverential towards him – truly this is a grand historic occasion.”

In truth, Wang Zhi only wrote this passage after some deliberate thought. He already sensed that the reason Zhu Qiyu did not want Zhu Qizhen to return was because of the throne. So therefore, he stated expressly that even if Zhu Qizhen comes back, your throne will be safe, Your Majesty, don’t worry!

From that perspective, this passage doesn’t seem to have any issues – why then did it piss Zhu Qiyu off so much?

Because even though Wang Zhi had considered almost everything, there was one thing he’d missed: although everyone may have been aware of this matter by now, it was still the deepest darkest thought in Zhu Qiyu’s heart. Not even ghosts and gods speak the heart of a monarch, yet Wang Zhi dared to say it right out loud – you actually thought you were being clever!

Sure enough, Zhu Qiyu was furious upon reading the memorial, considering it to be exposing his shortcomings, and actually wrote an essay to reply to Wang Zhi! In it, he stated that the reason why he didn’t go to bring back Zhu Qizhen was because Esen was too cunning and he feared that the Oirat leader would seize the chance to invade, and that’s why he remained silent. He hoped that the officials would consider the matter more carefully before taking it on.
This was clearly a stalling tactic. Zhu Qiyu quite obviously just did not want to deal with this matter. Interestingly enough, he also wrote a very curious section in his essay that probably counts as his defense statement:

“I’ve read your memorials and they were right. But I didn’t want this job in the first place. Heaven and earth, my ancestors, the imperial clan, you civil and military officials – it was all of you that forced me to take it.”

Wang Zhi was shocked. Only now did he realize he’d hit the Emperor’s sore spot. Resignedly, he had no choice but to shut up about the matter.

Things thus settled down. But merely a month later, Esen sent out another emissary to plead for peace, stating that he was willing to return Zhu Qizhen. Yet Zhu Qiyu’s attitude was cold and indifferent, paying absolutely no attention to the matter. This time though, the whole court was discussing it heatedly. Even the venerable Minister of Rites Hu Ying opined that if they could bring Zhu Qizhen back, why ever would they not?

Faced with such circumstances, Zhu Qiyu finally could not sit still any longer. He decided to convene a session of court and firmly rebuke these officials.

This was a public court session; Wang Zhi, Hu Ying, Yu Qian, etc., were all present. As soon as it started, Zhu Qiyu right away and very uncharacteristically rattled off a list of crimes committed by the Oirats in a very severe tone, and declared that there was no chance of peace between the two sides.

Before the gathered officials could react, he went straight for Wang Zhi, the tone of his words astonishingly harsh:

“Why do you people keep bringing this up – what on earth do you want‼️”
The fact that things had reached this point was far beyond Wang Zhi’s expectations. But this dauntless dude was no coward. Unbelievably, he actually talked back to the Emperor: “The Emperor Emeritus was taken hostage and should’ve been returned much earlier. If we don’t send someone now, we might not even have a chance to regret it in the future!”

To be fair, Wang Zhi was quite a character, even daring so far as to argue with the Emperor. But his actions not only didn’t help resolve the matter one bit but rather ended up completely enraging Zhu Qiyu, causing him to say even more extraordinary things.

Hearing Wang Zhi rebut him, Zhu Qiyu totally lost his temper and shouted: “I didn’t want this damn position anyways, weren’t you people the ones that forced me to be Emperor back then?! Why’re you spouting these things now!”

Wang Zhi was totally dumbfounded; he never thought that the Emperor would be so furious. All the gathered officials also didn’t dare to say anything else – the atmosphere was at once incredibly awkward.

At that moment, someone who’d been watching calmly from the sidelines broke the tension. This someone was – Yu Qian.

Truthfully, Yu Qian was a very shrewd and subtle person. He’d already discerned the situation earlier and also grasped Zhu Qiyu’s psychological change and reason for his fury. After careful deliberation, he stepped forward and resolved the impasse with just one sentence:

“The throne is decided, there will be no more changes!”

This sentence was even more timely than rainstorms in a drought; Zhu Qiyu’s expression instantly changed from cloudy to clear. Upon seeing this, Yu Qian quickly seized the chance
to suggest dispatching their own emissary – it was probably best to send someone, if only for the sake of the safety of the border and nothing else.

These words of Yu Qian soothed Zhu Qiyu and set his mind at ease. As long as the throne was still his, everything else wasn’t a problem.

Any remaining storminess on his face was swept away. Beaming with smiles, he repeatedly said to Yu Qian, “As you say, as you say.”

Every time I read this, I cannot help but admire Yu Qian from the bottom of my heart. Not only did he never hesitate to take up a task, he was also this proficient in grasping the heart of a monarch – truly remarkable.

Chapter 11: Prisoner Zhu Qizhen

8/18 – Someone Else’s Fate

Let us go back to four years ago – the *eighteenth day of the eighth month, fourteenth year of Zhengtong (1449)*. It was on that day that Yu Qian boldly stepped forward, assumed the heavy responsibility of saving the empire, became esteemed by millions, and henceforth began the most glorious journey of his life.

Yet on that very day, someone else’s fate also completely changed.

“But today the mandate of heaven has gone; only retreating south will prevent disaster.”

This was what was Xu Cheng’s statement that day. The response he got next I’m sure we’re all familiar with:

“All those who support retreating south should be executed!”
These two sentences decided the fates of Yu Qian and Xu Cheng. Yu Qian was chosen by unanimous consent to become the defender of Beijing, an incomparable honor.

What Xu Cheng received was eunuch Jin Ying’s reprimand: “Get out of here!”

And so, amid the crowd’s scorn and ridicule, he staggered out of the great hall. He simply could not understand – how did this one sentence cause him to be ridiculed by the gathered officials and branded as a cowardly lowlife who only thought about saving his own skin?

He knew very well that his political career was now over.

**XU CHENG:** *The truth was many people wanted to flee; all I did was say give voice to their inner thoughts. Why am I the only one being punished?*

Having been rebuked by Yu Qian and given the cold shoulder by the crowd, Xu Cheng stumbled in a senseless daze out of the palace and towards his house. Because only there could he get a moment’s peace.

What he did not know was that before reaching home, yet another misfortune would befall him.

Because when he got to the left side door of the palace, he ran into someone. That someone was called Jiang Yuan.

Jiang Yuan was Xu Cheng’s friend and co-worker, a fellow Hanlin Academian Expositor-in-waiting at the time. The two were quite close, so when Jiang Yuan saw Xu Cheng in such a sorry state, he concernedly asked if anything was wrong.
Deeply touched, Xu Cheng said with a long face, “I proposed retreating south. It wasn’t in line with the wishes of the higher-ups and so I ended up like this.”

Jiang Yuan kindly comforted Xu Cheng and told him to go home and get some rest. Things always could take a turn for the better and he would speak on his friend’s behalf as well.

Then, under Xu Cheng’s grateful gaze, Jiang Yuan walked into the great hall. After paying his respects to Zhu Qiyu, he boomed with stern righteousness: “A southern retreat is absolutely out of the question. The only choice is to tenaciously defend our position!”

A few months later, Jiang Yuan was appointed Vice Minister of Justice and Grand Secretary of the Hall of Literary Profundity,117 becoming one of Zhu Qiyu’s most trusted officials.

Such an exciting development.

Xu Cheng was in despair, not just about his career but also human nature. At the time, countless people had been discussing fleeing south and his own rhetoric had been very popular. But when he was rebuked, no one spoke up for him. Those people who were before cowards of the “flee faction” suddenly all flipped 180 degrees and now supported fighting, turning around to denounce him for cowardly thinking only of his own life and affecting morale.

This unexpected plot twist taught Xu Cheng a vivid lesson as well as making him realize the true meaning of the mercilessness of this cold world.

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117 Grand Secretary (内阁大学士), rank 5a, the six officials that staffed the Grand Secretariat (内阁): the most distinguished and influential body in the central government, like a collective prime ministership. The building name attached to their title was the designated building in the imperial palace they were assigned for duty.
From then on, each day in court, many officials would point at him behind his back and sneer, “Isn’t that the coward who suggest retreating south?” The more hot-tempered of them would mock him to his face.

To a highly learned intellectual who held honor above all else, these humiliations were worse than death.

Yet Xu Cheng kept going to work and court on time every day, through all the cold shoulders and humiliation. Because he wanted to survive. Life had to go on. Not going to work meant no pay and nothing to support his wife and kids.

Living worthlessly was at least better than dying tragically – that was Xu Cheng’s life motto.

The most unbearable thing in life is not enduring, but waiting.

Xu Cheng persevered because he believed that his ability and work results would eventually become accepted by people, that his fortunes would inevitably change. But reality let him down once again. His results were excellent but he kept getting passed over for promotion. With no other options, he had no choice but to go beg his enemy Yu Qian.

Yu Qian was indeed truly an honest and upright person. He didn’t ignore Xu Cheng just because the other had suggested retreating south but rather voluntarily recommended him to Zhu Qiyu. But as soon as he heard Xu Cheng’s name, Zhu Qiyu responded harshly: “Isn’t the Xu Cheng you’re speaking of the one who advocated retreating south? His moral conduct is too bad, don’t bother with him.”

Yu Qian had no choice but to drop the matter. Yet Xu Cheng didn’t know that - he wrongly assumed that it was Yu Qian who had interfered to his disadvantage. From that day on, a seed of revenge began growing in his heart.
Humiliated, ridiculed, working hard and getting nothing in return – all because he said the wrong sentence at the wrong time. For Xu Cheng, this was indeed truly unfair.

He wanted to change his difficult situation yet at the same time, no one would help him. After thinking long and hard, he came up with a brilliant idea – change his name.

Today, from our point of view, that seems incomprehensible. What, you create a new account and suddenly no one recognizes you anymore?

But in those times, that was actually the case. After all, His Imperial Majesty the Emperor attended to countless matters of state each day. Xu Cheng didn’t need to notify the throne to change his name, nor did he have to make a public notice or go to the police station at his registered address to make the change on his official record – all he actually needed to do was inform the Ministry of Personnel. When it came time for promotions, His Imperial Majesty the Emperor really only sort of skimmed over the list of names and certainly would never investigate if anyone changed names. Xu Cheng exploited this loophole and changed his name to Xu Youzhen.

Sure enough, after this successful deception, Xu Youzhen finally got his chance – he was reassigned to Shandong Province. Xu Youzhen was very capable and possessed very strong abilities in handling governmental affairs. He performed excellently in the few years as a regional administrator and was later promoted to Left Vice Censor-in-chief on his own merits.

I’ve actually always had a question about this: the Left Vice Censor-in-chief was the #3 of the Censorate, had the right to attend court, and was also someone the Emperor often had to see. So why did Zhu Qiyu not realize that the so-called “Xu Youzhen” was really Xu Cheng?

118 非常怀疑徐程这新名字是因为被刺激到了, 徐有贞=我有贞洁?
I’m not really clear on the specific reasons or details either – presumably His Imperial Majesty the Emperor was too busy and had long forgotten what Xu Cheng looked like?

Regardless, Xu Youzhen’s life had finally taken a turn for the better. But in his heart, he’d never forgotten even for a second all the humiliation and ridicule he had suffered. He was waiting, quietly.

Waiting for the chance for revenge.

**Crazed Zhu Qiyu**

*The sixth year of Jingtaï (1455)*

Zhu Qiyu was not originally a tyrant. Just a few years ago, he was still a cultured, mild-mannered young man on friendly and respectful terms with his older brother. But the allure of imperial power gradually pushed him step by step towards the dark side. He became selfish, callous, paranoid, and cruel. Imprisoning his brother, deposing his nephew, beating to death officials that opposed him – whoever got in his way, he would have their heads.

But these acts of his did not help him consolidate his power. There were those who constantly opposed his actions. His only son died, yet no one sympathized with him; those officials only cared about who their next boss was. His health was getting worse and worse; he wouldn’t last much longer. Zhu Qiyu knew very well that once he died, Zhu Jianshen would very likely succeed to the throne while Zhu Qizhen would again take up a leading position and make him answer for his actions. For the sake of power, he became unfeeling and arrogant, disowning his own family, committed many mistakes, and yet now things having reached this point, he was hopeless to turn the situation around, unable to stop himself. In the face of hidden danger and tense undercurrents, he could only use even crueler and more violent methods to suppress them.
In the end, power made him crazy.

Chapter 12: Seize the Gate

The hysterical Zhu Qiyu finally used brute force to win himself some peace and quiet. Yet this peace and quiet only lasted two years.

The first month, eighth year of Jingtai (1457)

According to customs, Zhu Qiyu was obligated to preside over the sacrifice on the outskirts of the capital. But he was deathly ill and clearly was not up to the task. What discouraged him even more was, seeing that he was ill, that the court officials not only did not ask after his health but instead took the opportunity to submit memorials asking him to preemptively appoint a successor.

No one was dead yet and they were already packing up and looking at coffins! Zhu Qiyu’s fury had reached the utmost boiling point. He suffered acute anxiety and anger and his illness worsened. Unable to do anything about it, he then summoned a person who would go preside over the sacrifice in his stead.

This was a mistake, because the person he summoned was Shi Heng.

By that point, Shi Heng had already become Yu Qian and Zhu Qiyu’s enemy. After serving with great distinction in the Battle of Bejing, he received the highest reward – being conferred the title of marquis – yet the one with the greatest contributions, Yu Qian, only received the empty title of Junior Guardian. Shi Heng felt uneasy, and so voluntarily submitted a memorial to the throne recommending Yu Qian’s son, Yu Mian, for office – a quid pro quo, if you will.
But he never would’ve thought that Yu Qian couldn’t have cared less about that, and so said this to Zhu Qiyu instead: “Shi Heng is a general yet he recommends his acquaintances for office; he should be punished!”

**SHI HENG:** *What the hell? I recommend your son for office yet not only do you not appreciate the favor, but you actually went so far as to tell on me!*

Shi Heng could not understand this honest and upright act of Yu Qian and he didn’t want to understand. All he knew was this: Yu Qian was someone who didn’t “get it,” someone who didn’t play by the rules of the politics game.

This kind of person could never become his friend.

But Yu Qian was not easy to deal with; he was backed by Zhu Qiyu himself. Shi Heng realized that in order to get rid of this opponent, he first had to get rid of Zhu Qiyu.

So when Zhu Qiyu, not long for this world, summoned Shi Heng and told him to preside over the sacrifice in place of him, Shi Heng realized that his chance had arrived.

It was the eleventh day of the first month. The conspiracy began on this day.

**Six Days of Terror**

*Night, the eleventh day of the first month*

Shi Heng found two co-conspirators for his scheme: one was named Cao Jixiang, the other was Zhang Yue.
These two were out of the ordinary. Cao Jixiang was a eunuch and had originally been Wang Zhen’s crony. Zhang Yue’s background was even more impressive; he was Zhang Yu’s son, Zhang Fu’s younger brother.\footnote{Zhang Yu 张⽟ (1343-1401), top general under Prince Yan, the future Yongle Emperor, during his bid for the throne in the Jingnan Campaign. Died trying to save Prince Yan from ambush. Zhang Fu 张辅 (1375-1449), Zhang Yu’s eldest son. Prominent general and court official, ennobled Duke Ying. Died in the Battle of Tumu Fortress.} Shi Heng was on very good terms with both and thus, huddled the two together planning to execute their secret conspiracy.

But after talking for a while, they discovered a serious problem – this whole conspiracy thing, where do you start?

I mean, conspiracies and rebellions isn’t wining and dining; there’s a very high bar of technical skill required. Yet of the three of them, Cao Jixiang was a eunuch – short-sighted, Zhang Yue was a princeling – can talk the talk but can’t walk the walk, and general Shi Heng was an unrefined thug. If these three were to discuss eating, drinking, and making merry, maybe they’d be of some use; but what they were deliberating now was a coup d’état. With their levels of IQ and political savviness, they’d probably have to go back to school for a few years to have a shot at accomplishing such a huge project.

Seeing as the whole project was about to come to nothing, Shi Heng went to go find his old pal Xu Bin, the Chief Minister of the Court of Imperial Sacrifices, for a lesson in “Political Coups For Dummies.”

Xu Bin told his friend that he was too old to be entering such a high-risk profession, but he could recommend someone to them; he emphasized to Shi Heng that as long as this person agreed to join, their success was guaranteed!

The person he recommended was Xu Youzhen.
Xu Youzhen finally got his chance for revenge. He had been waiting too long for this day to come. He possessed discerning judgment and expert competence yet just because of one wrong sentence, he had been spurned and ostracized by everyone. Although he now held a high position, the humiliation of that time still hung in the forefront of his mind – he wanted to take the justice that rightfully belonged to him.

Thus, the Conspiracy Gang welcomed its fourth and most important member.

As it turns out, intellectuals were much more skilled at intrigue and conspiracy after all. Xu Youzhen hit the nail on the head as soon as he attended the first meeting: currently the top priority was to get in contact with Zhu Qizhen in the Southern Palace before they could make their move – after all, even if you killed Zhu Qiyu, it’s not like you could become Emperor yourself.

The three stooges had a lightbulb go off their heads, and hurriedly sent someone to get in touch with Zhu Qizhen.

That day was the thirteenth day of the first month. The Conspiracy Gang was forged and the plan officially put into action.

*Morning, the sixteenth day of the first month*

After extensive discussion, Yu Qian, Hu Ying, and Wang Zhi decided to propose that Zhu Jianshen be reinstated as Crown Prince. They sought out Shang Luo and invited him to draft a memorial to be submitted to the Emperor for approval the next day in court.

This was a very important document. If this document was submitted, Xu Youzhen’s conspiracy would become completely useless. With no son and one foot in the grave, Zhu Qiyu was very likely to agree with this proposal. In that case, Zhu Qizhen could only fight over the throne with his own son.
Number One Scholar Shang Luo completed his masterpiece; Yu Qian and co. were very pleased with it after they read it over. They planned to submit it the very next day.

The next day was the seventeenth day of the first month.

Night, the sixteenth day of the first month – the final hour had arrived.

At this moment, inside Xu Youzhen’s house gathered all of the members of the Conspiracy Gang. They all knew that in a few hours, the sun would rise, court would convene, and a new Crown Prince would be selected. And no matter who was chosen as heir, they would no longer be able to benefit in the slightest.

There wasn’t much time left for them.

To do, or not to do?

Even the normally arrogant and overbearing Shi Heng and co. panicked in that moment. They turned their eye onto Xu Youzhen, because they understood, this man was the real heart and instigator of the conspiracy.

Faced with the others’ anxious gazes, Xu Youzhen grew silent. He paced back and forth in the room, pondering over every step and detail, calculating his chance of victory.

Then, he stopped, turned to his anxious partners, and calmly said, “I need to go observe the heavens.”

Everyone was dumbstruck. Don’t you know what time it is, what do you mean observe the heavens!? But it was this dude who was the one making decisions after all; since he insisted, just let him go.
Xu Youzhen climbed onto the roof of his house, quietly raised his head, and looked up at the starry night sky. That night nine years ago, he’d also stood in this very spot and accurately predicted the defeat at Tumu Fortress.

But that successful forecast brought him not good fortune, but all kinds of humiliation and ridicule, years of shunning and swallowing his anger.

He understood very clearly that these so-called celestial phenomena were nothing more than smoke and mirrors. If the disasters and happiness in life could be seen in heavenly phenomena, he would already have predicted the future and avoided these years of suffering.

Now, once again, he was standing at a crossroad. But this time, not only was he predicting the success or failure of the conspiracy but also his own life or death. Succeed, live! Lose, die!

Celestial phenomena couldn’t help him at all. He had to make the call alone, with only his own intelligence and courage to rely on.

The changes in life often happen in a split second decision.

Xu Youzhen finally made his choice.

“Greatness or not, it all happens tonight. There’s no time to lose – go!”

When Shi Heng and co. heard this ferocious assertion, they couldn’t help but shiver slightly. The final hour was at hand.
Xu Youzhen’s family already knew what was about to happen; they stood in the doorway, silently bidding farewell to their head of the family, their grief evident to all.

Xu Youzhen did not share such sentiments. He looked back at his home one last time by the moonlight outside his doorway and threw down one last parting sentence before striding away without hesitation:

“If I return, I’ll be a human; if I cannot return, I’ll be a ghost!”

**The Coup**

Under the intimidation and encouragement of the frail scholar Xu Youzhen, Shi Heng and co. arrived at their first objective – the Southern Palace.

The gates were tightly shut as expected; no one answered their calls either. This was the first misstep in the planned coup, but Xu Youzhen was well-prepared. He solved the problem with one sentence:

“No need to call to be let in, just ram open the wall!”

And thus, soldiers swarmed forward and rammed open the palace wall. The inmate who had been imprisoned in this place for seven years finally walked out.

He saw clearly the people who’d come here in the dark of night, and also saw clearly into their hearts – greed, speculation, anger, ambition. In any case, he only had one choice left.

“Come, let’s go to the Eastern Glory Gate.”

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120 Eastern Glory Gate (*Donghuamen* 东华门), southeastern gate of the Forbidden City.
The Eastern Glory Gate was a major entrance to the Forbidden City. So long as they entered it, reached the Hall of Heavenly Grace,\(^{121}\) sounded the bell and drum, and summoned all the court officials, the realm would once again be in the hands of that prisoner.

But it was when they arrived at the Eastern Glory Gate that they discovered the biggest hole in this plan – they couldn’t get in.

The guards of the gate wouldn’t open the doors and the Conspiracy Gang didn’t have the key. When they didn’t have the door key to the Southern Palace, they could bash the wall down. However, that was because the Southern Palace was remote: even if they demolished it no one would complain. But the Eastern Glory Gate was an important place in the Imperial Palace and specially guarded. There only had to be the slightest rustle of leaves in the wind for guards to coming running – and then these night owls would become ghosts.

His face long and anxious, Shi Heng turned to Xu Youzhen. He was all out of ideas and just waiting on the gang’s leader to give the word.

But this time, Xu Youzhen was silent too. Although he was smart, he was not Alibaba. Even if he yelled “open sesame” a million times at the gate, it would not open.

The members of the Conspiracy Gang thus found themselves in a bind: fighting was out, so was making a scene. They said every sweet word they could think of through the door, but the guards refused to even acknowledge them. The sun was about to come up; if they didn’t find a way in soon, everybody would be done for together!

In the most crucial of moments, the prisoner suddenly bellowed loudly:

\(^{121}\) Hall of Heavenly Grace (Fengtian Dian 奉天殿), largest hall in the Forbidden City. Ming emperors held court here to discuss affairs of state. The name was changed in 1562 to Huangji Dian, and then to the current Hall of Supreme Harmony (Taihe Dian 太和殿) in 1645.
“I am the Emperor Emeritus – open the gate!”

Seven years of humiliation, fear, and waiting, all in the end condensed into this one angry roar.

Everyone, including the gate guards, was stunned by this roar. The Eastern Glory Gate thus opened, thus clearing the path to the supreme imperial throne.

**ZHU QIZHEN:** Zhu Qiyu, I’m back, back to take everything that is mine!

He walked to the Hall of Heavenly Grace, sounded the bell and drum convening court. At the sound, the imperial city gates opened one after another, preparing to welcome the officials of the court.

Xu Youzhen had finally succeeded. With a tired body and smug smile, he stood alone in front of the gate, blocking the path to the upper great hall.

The senior officials of the Grand Secretariat, having heard the news, looked with surprise upon this formerly inconspicuous nobody, before getting ready to berate and order him aside.

However, Xu Youzhen very quickly declared the reason he dared to block the way so arrogantly:

“The Emperor Emeritus has been restored to the throne. Gentlemen, you ought to hurry and pay your congratulations!”

**XU YOZHEN:** In the end, I succeeded. My time has finally arrived!
Zhu Qiyu, in that moment, was hovering at death’s doorstep in his sleeping chambers, yet through his haziness, he still heard the sound of the bell and drum. He knew very well that this call for court hadn’t been sent out by him.

So he called his attendants and asked who had rung the bell and drum.

His attendants were already aware of the facts. These people who waited upon Zhu Qiyu were extremely worried; they were afraid that this Emperor who was deathly ill would, upon hearing the news, kick the bucket in an outburst of anger. But as things stood, they couldn’t not say anything. And so they told Zhu Qiyu apprehensively: it was that inmate he’d imprisoned, his older brother, who was convening the court officials.

Yet this dying Emperor’s next reaction was something they could never have dreamed of.

Hearing this news, Zhu Qiyu was quiet for a moment. Then he lifted his head and smiled.

He smiled very calmly and at last, spit out three words:

“Good, good, good!”

Big brother, I return the throne to you. I may have imprisoned you and snatched away everything from you, but I did not find happiness either. These eight years, I’ve lived in fear and loneliness all along.

I’m tired.

Zhu Qizhen sat upon his long-separated throne. Eight years ago, he left this place, was reduced to the captive of a foreign nation. After that, he went through countless trials and tribulations and untold hardships before finally coming back home to Beijing, yet was imprisoned again – this time by his own little brother.
Now, he was finally back to where he started. A whole new path was unfolding before his eyes. He would once again rule over this enormous empire.

Many things were about to begin, many fates were about to change.

**Chapter 13: Eye for an Eye, Tooth for a Tooth**

**Winds of Change**

The former prisoner Zhu Qizhen was finally back in his palace. Eight years ago, he left from here and was reduced to a hostage and captive; eight years later, he returned here and continued being Emperor.

Chinese histories are rather magical. No matter how sorry your plight or how embarrassing your troubles, historians could make it seem dignified and grandiloquent. Mr. Zhu Qizhen served successively as a captive, hostage, and prisoner, suffered the utmost hardships and experienced the hardest of times. Yet, the history books say he was “hunting in the north” and “convalescing.” In today’s words, you could say he went out on a grassroots mission: gauging public sentiment, transferring to the border to experience life, sharing joy with the people, and harmonizing ethnic relations.

Of course, you know your own losses best; Mr. Zhu Qizhen could only swallow back the hardships he’d experienced. But in any case, this coup for him was a statement of “Hello boys, I’m back.”

Currently however, the most important work for this Russel Casse was not passing major national policies but rather appeasing his “Home-Returning Gang.”
Zhu Qizhen really was a dude who repaid his debts. The day after ascending the throne, he gave the members of the “Home-Returning Gang” very liberal compensation:

- “Home-Returning Gang” Member #1 Xu Youzhen: Grand Secretary, Minister of War
- “Home-Returning Gang” Member #2 Shi Heng: ennobled Duke Zhongguo
- “Home-Returning Gang” Member #3 Zhang Fu: ennobled Taiping Marquis
- “Home-Returning Gang” Member #4 Cao Jixiang: Eunuch Directorate of Ceremonial, Supreme Eunuch Directorate of the Three Great Training Divisions

All things come to fruition, truly there is nothing greater than this.

Based on our past knowledge of “Home-Returning Gangs,”¹²² these men would definitely commit some atrocious acts like murder and arson and such. This couldn’t really be helped – after all, they weren’t a tourist group or a visiting-relatives group. And in fact, Xu Youzhen and co. did keep the mission of a “Home-Returning Gang” firmly in mind, swiftly and vigorously committing a number of evil deeds.

On the same day, Xu Youzhen ordered the arrest and imprisonment of Yu Qian, Wang Wen¹²³, and co. In Xu Youzhen’s opinion, he’d waited far too long; if he didn’t take revenge now, then when!

After that, the Grand Secretariat went through massive changes – Chen Xun, Jiang Yuan, Shang Luo, Xiao Zi were all subsequently fired and driven out. Xu Youzhen was also quite generous: worried that his opponents Chen Xun and Jiang Yuan would be unable to find work, he specially looked after them, arranging a new job for them that would allow them to continue serving the country (penal servitude in Liaodong).

¹²² Home-returning group (huanxiang tuan 还乡团), militia groups organized by the Nationalist Party during the Chinese Civil War. Reported to have committed many atrocities.
¹²³ Wang Wen (王文), Grand Secretary of the Hall of Circumspect Self as well as of the Eastern Hall at the time.
Of course, some of them deserved what they got, like that Lu Zhong in the “Case of the Golden Knife.” This dude who sold out his friend didn’t gain any benefits but instead now received his just desserts – execution.

And the one who suggested to Zhu Qiyu to cut down the trees and let Zhu Qizhen bake in the sun, Gao Ping. His spur of the moment decision at that time to make a fool of Zhu Qizhen ended up also costing him his head. To be honest, besides excessive deforestation, he hadn’t done much else.

It seems that those who destroy the environment really do meet bad ends.

After being swept through by the “Home-Returning Gang,” the Grand Secretariat only had Gao Gu remaining. So Xu Youzhen arranged for his trusted followers Xu Bin and Xue Xuan to join the Grand Secretariat, thereby holding complete power over the Grand Secretariat and the imperial court.

The Grand Secretariat in this moment had four members, including Xu Youzhen. Maybe he thought there was too few people; in the second month of that year, he admitted yet another “one of us” into the Grand Secretariat – Right Vice Minister of Personnel, Li Xian.

Yet Xu Youzhen never could’ve dreamed that this man named Li Xian was not actually one of his trusted followers. While Xu Youzhen, Shi Heng, and Cao Jixiang were arrogantly...

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124 “Case of the Golden Knife” (jin dao an 金刀案), incident that happened during Zhu Qizhen’s time under house arrest in the Southern Palace. He gave a present of a golden knife to Ruan Lang, an old eunuch who attended to him kindly. Another eunuch under Ruan Lang, Wang Yao, really liked the knife so Ruan Lang gave it to him. Wang Yao was friends with Lu Zhong, an Embroidered Uniform Guard. Lu found out about the knife and got greedy; he got Wang drink, stole the knife, and presented it to Zhu Qiyu, accusing Ruan and Wang of conspiring with Zhu Qizhen to retake the throne. Ruan and Wang died in prison after extensive torture but refused to falsely accuse Zhu Qizhen; Lu got scared and pretended to be crazy. After Zhu Qizhen retook the throne, Lu was sentenced to death by a thousand cuts and Ruan and Wang were posthumously rehabilitated.

125 The very same guy who had recommended Xu Youzhen to Shi Heng earlier.
throwing their weight around, he remained silent, patiently watching the “Home-Returning Gang” and their every move, looking for their weaknesses and conflicts, waiting for the time to come.

No matter what happened afterwards, at least in this moment Xu Youzhen and co. were indeed powerful and mighty, especially Xu Youzhen who left no stone unturned in his quest to attack and frame all who had ever opposed him. And the greatest case of injustice he orchestrated was the infamous case of Yu Qian.

Xu Youzhen had once thought that as long as he held power, it would be a piece of cake to kill Yu Qian. But it was only now that he realized, getting rid of Yu Qian was not an easy thing.

The problem being – he had no reason to kill Yu Qian.

Yu Qian was honest and upright, highly esteemed, and had no spots on his record. There honestly was no excuse: neither financial nor character issues (not that this mattered at the time). Eliminating him? Easier said than done!

But, in the end, his deep-seated hatred of Yu Qian allowed him to think of a way.

Yu Qian was one of the main officials who’d supported the ascension of Zhu Qiyu; he was also Zhu Qiyu’s trusted minister. Yet, the person Zhu Qizhen hated most was precisely his younger brother, Zhu Qiyu. Xu Youzhen decided to make use of this fact to deepen Zhu Qizhen’s dislike of Yu Qian. At the same time, Xu Youzhen also fabricated a lie saying that Yu Qian had been inclined to invite a regional vassal prince\textsuperscript{126} to the capital to take the throne and furthermore, staunchly opposed Zhu Qizhen’s son’s ascension.

\textsuperscript{126} Vassal prince (fanwang 藩王), princes of the Ming dynasty were titled and salaried members of the imperial bureaucracy with nominal lordship over their regional fiefs. They were not allowed to leave their fiefs without permission.
After finishing these preparations, he went to see Zhu Qizhen; in his mind, Zhu Qizhen would definitely agree to kill Yu Qian.

But things completely did not go as he expected.

Xu Youzhen stood in front of Zhu Qizhen impassionedly and fervently asserting that Yu Qian’s unwillingness to hold peace talks and support of a new monarch was an attempt to doom the Emperor Emeritus to death. This kind of person must be instantly executed and everyone would be happy, etc., etc., etc....

But Zhu Qizhen merely shook his head, smiling. He said to Xu Youzhen, “Yu Qian truly has performed a great service.”

Xu Youzhen was flabbergasted.

He’d thought too little of Zhu Qizhen. This Emperor Emeritus had weathered too many storms and hardships and as such possessed a thorough understanding of human nature; he was perfectly clear on Xu Youzhen’s motive. He knew that Xu Youzhen was doing this to avenge personal grudges, but planned on getting him to do Xu Youzhen’s dirty work and have him shoulder the bad reputation of killing a hero who had rendered outstanding service. Why would Zhu Qizhen agree to this type of losing deal?

Xu Youzhen become anxious. If Yu Qian was allowed to remain, once he rose back to power again, Xu Youzhen’s own life would most definitely be forfeit. In a moment of desperation, he thought of another reason to kill Yu Qian.

He believed that as long as he uttered this reason, Yu Qian would be certain to die!
Yu Qian, You Must Die!

His head held high, Xu Youzhen declared loudly: “If Yu Qian is not killed, this deed will not stand!”

Zhu Qizhen started. He suddenly realized with a shock – Xu Youzhen was right.

The so-called “gate-seizing coup” was a political coup d’état. It did not have a legitimate *casus belli*. And according to Xu Youzhen, Yu Qian and the other officials had all been planning to install a regional vassal prince as Emperor and were against him. Under these circumstances, if he did not kill Yu Qian to make an example of a conspirator, make clear to the entire nation how his hand was forced, and show his sense of justice – the whole legality of the whole “gate-seizing coup” would be called into question.

There was no choice. He would have to bear this black mark on his name whether he wanted to or not.

Yu Qian, you must die!

Xu Youzhen smiled. He knew that the Emperor now harbored an intent to kill. But what this Emperor would never know was that he had actually played right into Xu Youzhen’s hands. Because the whole “Yu Qian must die” was nothing more than a complicated logic trap; and the reason for this trap’s success was founded completely on that lie that Yu Qian planned to install a regional vassal prince on the throne.

This truly was a complex logic trap. It was not till two years later that another clever soul, Li Xian, would finally reveal its secrets to Zhu Qizhen.
Shortly after, Wang Wen and Yu Qian in prison learned the charges against them – inviting and installing a regional vassal prince as Emperor. This was a very serious crime; the punishment was not only execution but also extermination of the accused’s whole clan. As soon as he heard this, Wang Wen freaked out. He jumped up and prepared to defend himself.

Wang Wen was very confident that he had sufficient grounds to argue his case, because the alleged “inviting and installing a regional vassal prince as Emperor” first required using a gold tablet to summon the vassal prince into the capital. Neither he nor Yu Qian had even touched the gold plaque. Therefore, in his opinion, this charge should easily be refuted.

Yu Qian, however, remained unmoved. He only smiled and said to Wang Wen, “This was ordered by Shi Heng and them. What use is there in pleading your case!”

Indeed, things turned out exactly as Yu Qian had predicted. The chief judge presiding over this case ultimately could not find any hard evidence and had no choice but to ask Xu Youzhen for instructions on how to handle this difficult problem.

Xu Youzhen was truly an old political fox. Offhandedly and without hesitation, he threw out a sentence that solved this problem. Probably even he could never have imagined that this sentence of his would become an infamous line passed down through the ages, spat upon by all.

That sentence of his was this: “Though there is no hard evidence, there was intention.”

Officials concentrated his meaning and distilled it into two even more vivid words – “intent to” – and ultimately convicted the two men with these words.
In all of Chinese history, the level of notoriety of these two little words can only be matched by that sentence – “perhaps there is.”\textsuperscript{127}

“Perhaps there is” killed Yue Fei, “intent to” killed Yu Qian.

What a marvelous farce!

Thanks to this sentence, Xu Youzhen joined the rankings of History’s Most Depraved People, equal in name with Qin Hui, their names going down in history as bywords for infamy.

A Great Man

The twenty-third day of the first month

Yu Qian was escorted outside Chongwenmen. Here, in front of the very city he’d risked his life to defend, he received his final ending – beheading.

History recorded: “The whole realm cried injustice.”

After Yu Qian was executed, as a rule, his house should have been searched and all property seized. But when the officials carrying out this task arrived at Yu Qian’s house, they discovered that this was a very simple job to complete – because there was nothing inside Yu Qian’s house. Besides the necessities, there was simply no extra money at all.

\textsuperscript{127} Yue Fei 岳飞 (1103-1142), Southern Song military general who resisted the Jurchen Jin in the Jin-Song wars, widely seen as a patriot and national folk hero. He was executed on false charges arranged by Qin Hui 秦桧. “Perhaps there is” (莫须有) was Qin’s answer as to what supposed crime Yue had committed. The phrase has entered the dictionary to refer to fabricated charges.
None of the search and seizure officials had expected that the home of a high-ranking rank 1b official would be this destitute. Loath and reluctant, they rummaged through chests and ransacked cupboards, hoping to find any evidence of Yu Qian’s corruption.

At long last, they finally discovered a room inside Yu Qian’s house whose door was locked shut, with no one going in or out. Tremendously excited, firmly believing that this was the hidden location of the treasure, they opened the door.

Inside the room, there was no gold, no silver, no jewels, no treasure. There were only two things – a python-embroidered robe and a sword. These had been specially awarded to Yu Qian by Zhu Qiyu in honor of his outstanding deeds. Yu Qian accepted them as ordered but locked them away, never once showing them to others to display his glory.

In the end, those carrying out the search and seizure put away their arrogant attitudes and quietly left Yu Qian’s home. Everything they’d seen with their own eyes told them as clear as day, without a shadow of a doubt: this target of their search and seizure was a man of noble morals and character, an extraordinary man.

Not long after the fact, Zhu Qizhen was also very regretful – especially after Xu Youzhen’s scheme was brought to light. He questioned the other two parties involved, Shi Heng and Cao Jixiang, over and over again – why did they make up such a lie to frame Yu Qian? Without any better options, Shi Heng was forced to push all the blame onto Xu Youzhen, replying: “I don’t know either, Xu Youzhen told me to say all of this.”

Hearing this, Zhu Qizhen was dumbstruck. He could only continue sighing and shaking his head.

But Emperors can’t admit they’re wrong. And so, Zhu Qizhen passed this job onto his son. Eight years later (1464), Crown Prince Zhu Jianshen had barely succeeded to the throne before issuing an imperial edict, posthumously rehabilitating Yu Qian and recalling his son.
Yu Mian. During the *Wanli period*, even this famously exceptionally lazy Emperor Shenzong deeply venerated Yu Qian as well, awarding him the posthumous title of Zhongsu (literally “loyal and stern”) as affirmation of his life achievements.

To be honest, Yu Qian didn’t really need the supposed praise of an Emperor – because these so-called Sons of Heaven didn’t really seem to have the right to judge Yu Qian. There were countless Emperors before Emperor Yingzong and there would be many more Emperors after him. But Yu Qian was unique.

People would never forget: it was this man who bravely stepped forward in the face of danger, turned back the tide, defended Beijing and half of Empire of the Great Ming, and saved the lives of countless common ordinary people.

Ever since he was a child, he’d pledged to give his life for his country; after decades of tempering and testing, he’d grown from a student studying by candlelight to a pillar of the nation.

He held a high position, yet was honest and upright, never once being corrupt or accepting bribes in decades of his government career. Although life was not at all comfortable, he never once abused his power, holding fast to his integrity and virtue in the face of poverty from beginning to end.

He did not fear risk or hardship, stepping bravely forward in his country’s direst moment and assuming the fate of the empire.

He finished the path of his life honestly and honorably.

In this dirty world, someone who can walk through their life as clean as when they entered it – they are to be admired.
And if that person can yet still make some contributions, then we can say – this is a great man.

Yu Qian was such a man.

His greatness doesn’t need anyone to affirm it, nor does it require any proof. His whole life was like that one poem of his – magnanimous and noble, shining as bright as the sun and moon.

**Stone Ash Song**

*Thousand hammers hundred chisels mining from the mountain,*  
*raging infernos and fiery flames burn endlessly on.*  
*Smashed body powdered bones – no fear at all,*  
*so long as my innocence remains on this earth!*

This is the portrait of his life.

I once visited Hangzhou and made a special trip to pay my respects to this heroic figure. Yet when I arrived at the Yu Qian Memorial Shrine, the scene I encountered took me quite aback. It was during the time of Golden Week and the city was packed with tourists. But there were very few of them at the shrine, which was deserted and desolate. I did meet a few foreign exchange students bowing to the statue of Yu Qian. Surprised, I approached them. I learned that they greatly admired this hero when they studied this period of history in college and had come here specially to pay their respects.

After listening to them, I was left speechless.

Atop the altar, Mr. Yu Qian’s expression was still so calm and unhurried – I imagine he was exactly like this too just before execution.
Five hundred years had passed, but it seems that Yu Qian has never left. He remains standing there, always, overlooking this land he once imbued with his life and blood, overlooking the living beings he once risked his life to protect.

I was at ease. No matter if this place was deserted or of interest to anyone, and no matter if admirers came here to pay homage – all of this had nothing to do with the master of this memorial temple, Yu Qian.

Just as time flows, the character of a hero shows!\(^{128}\)

Even if five hundred more years pass and countless trivialities of life pass with it, Yu Qian will still be standing here, still be hailed through the ages for his honesty and selflessness, bravery and fearlessness.

Because he is a hero that will live on forever in our hearts, a true hero. And a true hero will never be forgotten.

This, I firmly believe.

The Ming Dynasty produced many notable figures – I once made a ranking list for all of them. And Yu Qian, in my opinion, should be ranked #2 on the list. Although the Ming had some people whose achievements were no lesser than, and indeed even greater than, those of Yu Qian’s, they still must be placed after him. This is because there are two judging criteria: integrity and ability. Although some of these luminaries were indeed more capable than Yu Qian, they had regrettable imperfections in their integrity – for example, Comrade Zhu Yuanzhang’s political issues and Comrade Zhang Juzheng’s financial issues.\(^{129}\)

\(^{128}\) A quote from author and poet Guo Moruo’s (郭沫若) *Man Jiang Hong* 《满江红》

\(^{129}\) Zhu Yuanzhang is infamous for killing his ministers and generals who’d founded the dynasty with him. Zhang Juzheng was known to take bribes.
Yet Yu Qian was not only remarkably talented but also of impeccable moral character – a person who combines integrity with ability, how many of those would we find through all of history?!

Without any exceptions, Yu Qian would’ve originally been ranked #1. Alas, another great man came out of the blue after him. Not only was this dude a master of the pen and the sword as well as intelligent and courageous, there was nothing in any trade or school of knowledge that he did not understand. Furthermore, he lived well from start to end, and can be said to have been a true genius among geniuses. When it comes this dude, even the title of hero doesn’t seem appropriate anymore, because in many peoples’ opinions, there is a much more fitting title for him – a sage.

This dude will also be our main protagonist later in the book, so I’ll hold off till then.

One last thing: after Yu Qian died, his son Yu Mian was sentenced to banishment and penal service. The place in the border regions where he was banished was called Longmen. The later Hong Kong wuxia film series “New Dragon Gate Inn” was based on his story. And the original model for the main eunuch villain of the series was our good friend Comrade Cao Jixiang.

Although we have good reason to believe that the film series is sheer fiction, making fun of Cao Jixiang and co. when there’s nothing better to do is a decent source of entertainment.

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130 Series of 3 wuxia movies: Dragon Gate Inn (1967) Taiwanese, directed by King Hu; New Dragon Gate Inn (1992) Hong Kong, directed by Raymond Lee; The Flying Swords of Dragon Gate (2011), directed by Tsui Hark
## Appendix

### Ming Dynasty Emperors

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Reign Years (CE)</th>
<th>Era name(s)</th>
<th>Temple Name(s)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Zhu Yuanzhang</td>
<td>1368-1398</td>
<td>Hongwu</td>
<td>Taizu</td>
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<td>朱元璋</td>
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<td>洪武</td>
<td>太祖</td>
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<td>Zhu Yunwen</td>
<td>1398-1402</td>
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<td>朱棣</td>
<td></td>
<td>永乐</td>
<td>太宗 &amp; Chengzhu</td>
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<tr>
<td>Zhu Gaochi</td>
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<td>Hongxi</td>
<td>Renzong</td>
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<td>正统 &amp; Tianshun</td>
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<tr>
<td>朱由检</td>
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<td>崇祯</td>
<td>思宗</td>
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Map of Beijing’s Nine Gates

The 9th Year to the 31st Year of the Jiajing Reign of the Ming Dynasty (1530-1552)


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