The Prince and the Sage

As of early 1519 Wang Yangming was still residing in southern Jiangxi. As grand coordinator and vice-censor in chief, he was the highest official in this region, responsible for effecting measures to maintain peace and security after nearly two years of campaigning. He was, however, petitioning to leave office, for he suffered from chronic illness and wished to visit his aging father. But his requests were repeatedly denied, for his ardent supporter at the head of the Ministry of War—Wang Qiong—wanted him to stay put. Having long suspected that a much more serious threat loomed over the Ming dynasty, he needed Wang Yangming to counter it. Indeed, this unsettling issue was very likely the real reason the minister had helped Wang Yangming gain broader discretionary powers—and the title of superintendent of military affairs—in the first place, something Wang Yangming was well aware of. This threat was the Prince of Ning Zhu Chenhao 宁王朱宸濠 (1478–1521), the great-great-grandson of the Ming dynasty’s founding emperor’s seventeenth son, Prince Xian of Ning.

Though the prince lived during roughly the same period as Wang Yangming, he led a very different life: as imperial nobility, he would have been allowed to reside in (and was largely confined to) one of the many princely establishments granted to senior lines descended from the founding emperor’s children. However, not unlike certain other princes in the history of the Ming, the Prince of Ning harbored high aspirations. But being already a prince, what higher status could he achieve?

1 Huang, “Shi de ji,” 38:1416.
3 The exemplar for rebellious Ming princes who believed they had a claim to the throne was the Yongle 永乐 emperor Zhu Di 朱棣. With the assistance of the Prince of Ning, Zhu Di usurped the throne from his nephew Zhu Yunwen 朱允炆 in 1399. For a biography see the Dictionary of Ming Biography, ed. L. Carrington Goodrich and Chaoying Fang (New York: Columbia University Press, 1976), 1:355. Also notable is that as recently as 1510 the Prince of Anhua had led an uprising in the northwestern corner of the empire. For a thorough study, see David Robinson, “Princes of the Polity: The Anhua Prince’s Uprising of 1510,” Ming Studies 65 (May 2012): 1–12. No doubt, these rebellions conditioned the perception of officials throughout the empire, including Wang Yangming, although he does not refer to this particular rebellion in his communications. In general, scholarship on Ming princes and imperial clansmen has exploded since an earlier version of this chapter appeared in 2008. For an overview see
However, Zhu Chenhao’s attempt to displace the Zhengde emperor from the throne would fail clamorously. As the great Ming literatus Feng Menglong explained in his semi-fictional account of Wang Yangming’s life, “From the day he raised the rebellion . . . to the day he was captured . . . the total was a mere forty-two days. From the day Wang Yangming departed Ji’an . . . to the day he succeeded at defeating the prince . . . the total was only fourteen days. Since ancient times never has there been a case of such marvelously swift suppression of a rebellion as this.”4 As we shall see, for the prince this must have been a rather humiliating conclusion to years of grandiose designs and preparation. But as for Wang Yangming, his victory became the fodder for a great deal of celebratory writing, beginning with the earliest biographical accounts of his life. The enigmatic late-Ming scholar and student of Wang Yangming’s philosophy Li Zhi 李贄 (1527–1602) claimed, “Those who performed exceptionally meritorious services in ancient times were indeed many. However, never has there been a case of [someone], even prior to requesting troops or provisions, capturing a rebel within ten days. This only our master could have achieved.”5

Much scholarship addresses the relationship between Wang Yangming’s experiences during this time and the further development of his thought. Zuo Dongling believes that “if [we] should wish to answer the question as to just why Wang Yangming proposed, around the fifteenth year of the reign of the Zhengde emperor [1520], the ‘extension of the innate knowledge of the good’ then we must understand the relation between Sir Yangming’s bitter experiences and his state of mind.”6 In this regard, Zuo is less focused on the campaign itself than he is with the ensuing course of events. For after Wang captured the prince, the emperor, at the behest of his circle of close confidantes, chose personally to lead a campaign, and following their advice ordered the release of the prince around a lake in northern Jiangxi (Lake Poyang 鄱陽湖) so that he could reenact the prince’s victorious capture, the glory for which would redound to him and his courtiers. Because Wang Yangming refused to obey, his life was at stake for months, and not least because some of

4 Feng, “Huang Ming da ru Wang Yangming,” 176.
6 Zuo Dongling 左東嶺, *Wang xue yu zhong wan ming shi ren xintai* 王學與中晚明士人心態 [The Relationship between Wang’s Learning and the State of Mind of Mid- to Late-Ming Scholars] (Beijing: Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 2006), 211.