THE PROBLEM OF THE PRINCES AS FACED BY THE MING EMPEROR HUI (1399-1402)

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INTRODUCTION

On the night of the twenty-eighth day of the seventh month of the first year of Hung-wu 洪武 (September 10, 1368), Toghan Temur, known also as Shun-ti 順帝 (1333-1368), fled from his capital at Peking never to return. Mongol rule over the Chinese empire was at its end. Chu Yüan-chang 朱元璋, the former humble Buddhist monk, and now victorious opponent of the Mongols made his triumphal entry into the Mongol capital where he was proclaimed emperor by his army. Chu founded a new dynasty, the Ming 明 (1368-1644), and he made Nanking his capital.

Among the problems that confronted the emperor of every new dynasty in China was that of placing his sons in positions that would maintain the prestige of the ruling house. The new emperor of the Ming dynasty was no exception, for he had twenty-four sons in addition to his eldest son, who was designated the heir apparent. To these sons, he gave the title of Prince, and he placed them with principalities at various parts of China. This measure had precedents in Chinese history, but it differed with the others in one respect: these princes were given military powers because of the fear that the Mongols might attempt another invasion of China. And because these princes were armed, they became a problem especially to the second emperor of the dynasty, who was aware that they could bring forth their armies to challenge his authority at Nanking. The purpose of this paper is to discuss how and why these princes became a problem. Also, this paper will serve as a preliminary background study of an important episode in the internal political history of China: the usurpation of the Prince of Yen 燕王, who
ascended the throne in 1403 to become one of the important emperors of the Ming dynasty.

Although Chu Yüan-chang, the later Ming T'ai Tsu 明太祖 (1368-1398), and his generals drove the Mongols out of China by 1368, the Mongol threat to the Chinese Empire remained a constant one. The remnants of the Yuan Dynasty 元朝 (1280-1368) still dreamed of recapturing the Chinese Empire, and often sent raiding expeditions into China Proper. These expeditions were successful to the extent that the Mongols were able to kill some Ming soldiers and officials near the frontier. Even though Nanking, the Ming capital, was far from the northern frontier, T'ai Tsu still feared that the imperial armies might not be able to cope with these raiding missions. Therefore, he “enfeoffed” all his sons with principalties, backed with military power, which were located at various places throughout the Empire.

In the fourth month of the second year of Hung-wu (May, 1369), the rules and regulations pertaining to the “enfeoffment” of the imperial princes were completed; and in the third year (1370), the rites pertaining to the role of the princes were also completed, all of which was announced at the ancestral temple (MCS, pp. 12-14; and MSCSPM, ch. 15, p. 1).

The seats of government of principalities were located in large cities. Each principality was permitted to maintain three heavily-armed auxiliary guard units (Hu-wei 護衛), the number of soldiers in each ranging from 3,000 to 19,000.

Theoretically, all of these auxiliary guard units were under the supervision of the Board of War. Each principality also had an Admini-

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2 Teng Chih-ch’eng 鄧之誠, Ming Ch’ing shih 明清史 (cited hereafter as MCS). Privately published, undated, pp. 12-13, and 15; and MSCSPM, ch. 15, p. 1.