Dreaming and Self-search during the Ming Collapse: The Xue Xiemeng Biji, 1642-1646

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When the Ming dynasty fell in mid-seventeenth-century China, literati and scholar-officials took the tonsure and became monks on a scale unprecedented in any previous dynastic transition.1 Despairing at the state of the world and not wishing to shave off most of their hair, cultivate the queue, or alter the cut of their robes in symbolic submission to the conquering “barbarian” Manchu-Qing regime, they opted to avoid political confrontation and perhaps achieve some peace of mind by entering clerical Buddhism. Besides, having often lost their lands, homes, and families, many Ming loyalists had few options but to reside in abbeys and monasteries—or so the common view goes.2

1) My thanks to Prof. Stephen Bokenkamp and to an anonymous reviewer for helpful comments on drafts of this article.

2) In Praying for Power: Buddhism and the Formation of Gentry Society in Late-Ming China (Cambridge, Mass.: Council on East Asian Studies of Harvard University, 1993), Timothy Brook points out that despite their strong intellectual and cultural interest in Buddhism the literati showed little inclination to join Buddhist orders prior to the Qing conquest. He then reviews the political and practical reasons why large numbers from the gentry secluded themselves in monasteries, many actually taking the tonsure, during the Ming-Qing transition (122-24). Liao Zhaoheng examines the patterns and motivations of this phenomenon in greater depth, positing four general categories of yimin literati monks (“Mingmo Qingchu yimin tao Chan zhi feng yanjiu,” chap. 2).
Relatively seldom does one encounter men who took physical and mental refuge in Daoist communities, even though clerical Daoists were not required to shave their heads and even though, under conditions of renewed alien subjugation, many intellectuals viewed Daoism as more acceptably Chinese than the “foreign” religion of Buddhism.

On the face of things, it may well seem that the explanation for this contrast lies simply in the healthier condition of the Buddhist establishment, compared to the Daoist, at the end of the Ming. While both Buddhism and Daoism had suffered from increased governmental control and from withdrawal of court patronage after periods of especially egregious political influence during certain reigns, imperial disfavor toward Daoism (especially the Quanzhen school, compared to the Zhengyi school) had been more severe and consistent.

3) In his "Lun Mingmo Qingchu Quanzhen jiao 'zhongxing' de chengyin" (Zongjiao xue yanjiu 1995 no. 3), Wang Zhizhong cites 23 men listed in the "Ming yimin lu" (33-34). To give a sense of proportion here: according to Xie Zhengguang, Ming yimin zhuanji suoyin (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1992), 11, the Ming yimin lu compiled by Huang Shu in the early Qing period lists 537 persons and provides 418 biographies, while the Ming yimin lu compiled by Sun Jinging in the early Republican period treats over 500 persons. Regarding yimin literati who became Buddhist monks, by adding a few names to those listed in Xie Zhengguang’s index, Liao Zhaoheng has found well over 160 figures (“Mingmo Qingchu yimin tao Chan zhi feng yanjiu,” 10).

4) Daoists continued to wear their hair knotted on top under the traditional black cap, held in place by a single transverse hairpin (hence the general name zanguan). The Qing court early on sought strictly to confine this to the registered members of officially approved Daoist orders, just as it sought to control the tonsure among Buddhists. See Da-Qing huidian 大清會典, comp. Isangga et al. (1690; reprint in Jindai Zhongguo shiliao congkan sanbian, vols. 711-30 [Yonghe, Taiwan: Wenhai chubanshe, 1993]), 71.8b-10a, 161.26b. On criticism of Buddhism as foreign during the Ming-Qing transition, see He Guanbiao (Ho Koon Piu), "Lun Ming yimin zhi chuchu" 論明末民之出廟, in Minguo Qingchu xueshu xiziang yanjiu 明末清初學術思想研究 (Taipei: Taiwan xuexheng shuju, 1991), 73-77.

5) Brook, in Praying for Power, states at one point (114, without source citation) that Daoist monasteries numbered “less than a tenth of Buddhist monasteries” in the late Ming. In the chapter that focuses on Zhucheng 諸城, Shandong, he finds that in the seventeenth century this county had five Daoist and twenty-one Buddhist religious institutions (238), making a ratio of less than one to four in that locale.

6) The worst case of religionists’ involvement in Ming imperial rule occurred during the reign of Shizong 世宗, the Jiajing 嘉靖 emperor (r. 1522-1567). Known as “the Daoist