

Founding of the Ming Dynasty as an Event in Chinese Social History

ROMEYN TAYLOR

University of Minnesota

The concept of charisma is still sometimes explicitly used in explaining the social basis of imperial Chinese government.¹ It may also be implicit in the attribution of a special influence or prestige to certain groups or persons in the government and society.² A charismatic authority would be one that is accepted on the ground that the person exercising it possesses, or has a special access to, powers that are greater than merely human, or than ordinarily human. Is the concept of charisma relevant to an understanding of Chinese institutions? Two suggested loci of charisma have to be considered: one would be in the person of the ruler; the other would be in the possessors of the kind of learning generally thought requisite to governmental office, i.e., the scholars. To prove that the emperor's authority was essentially charismatic, one would have to show that his authority was accepted because he was revealed by certain signs to enjoy a special relationship to cosmic forces, rather than on grounds of his demonstrated ability to provide certain services. The question whether scholars as a class, because of their acknowledged attainment of the required learning, possessed charismatic authority, or something like it, could be answered negatively if it could be shown that their mere adherence to a regime in large numbers, or their opposition to it, did not cause it to stand or fall, irrespective of other factors. Their role in government would have to be explained in the more modest terms of their ability

to read and write fluently and to articulate and solve governmental problems in generally understood classical terms.

Periods of imperial breakdown may offer particular advantages for the investigation of such questions as this, because the recruitment procedure of imperial government, in Ming and Ch'ing, largely prevents the separation of the possible "charismatic" element from other factors. There were few civil officials, during most of this period, who were not scholars or who had not at least been granted some token of scholarly qualification. It is hard to say, therefore, whether the scholarly character lent authority to the office, or whether the official, whether scholar or not, derived his authority from his place in the government and from his conduct as an official.

A period appropriate to our purpose is that from 1351-1368, a time of competing claims to imperial authority and of partial breakdown of government. The Yüan Dynasty strove, with some success, to mobilize Chinese support against several Chinese rebel regimes, most of which claimed affiliation with the White Lotus Society. It was the leader of one of these, Chu Yüan-chang, who founded the Ming. During these years, no regime enjoyed a monopoly of imperial authority and normal recruitment methods were in abeyance. Each regime had to design its policies in such a way as to make the most effective possible claim to legitimacy. Did personal or scholarly charisma triumph here? Did the Ming founder win general acceptance by asserting a claim to a supernatural sanction unique to himself? Did scholars, by some power of legitimation that was theirs to grant or withhold, determine the outcome of the struggle?

By 1360, the rebel regime of Chu Yüan-chang was firmly established in the great Yangtze metropolis of Nanking, and during the following seven years, he destroyed his major rivals to the east and west of his state. In Chu's own writings and in statements attributed to him, one can see the large outlines of his leadership. Three factors are about equally prominent: 1) economic and administrative policies aimed at winning popular support; 2) sound military strategy and technique; 3) an apparently genuine piety toward spirits and the will of Heaven.

In so far as anything that might be called charisma entered

the picture, it is to be found in certain stories regarding Chu Yüan-chang, some of which were recorded before and some shortly after his death. It was said, for example, that there had been a red glow and an apparition of the Buddha over his monastery on the night he first entered it,² that a small dragon appeared on the tassel of his hat,⁴ and that a dragon was seen perched on a cloud above the field of battle during one of his victories.⁵ The presence of a supernatural factor is confirmed by Chu's own accounts of his use of divination in deciding to rebel against the Yüan,⁶ and in his successful intervention with a local spirit to end a drought.⁷ He was also reported to have made much use of experts in astrology and geomancy.⁸ To show that Chu was a charismatic leader, however, such evidence in itself would not be sufficient. It would also be necessary to show that well advertized accounts of such signs had been sufficient to cause him to be preferred over his rivals. Evidence against this conclusion may be found in the fact that Chu's own autobiographical writings provide a sketchy but plausible explanation of his success in terms of his policies and strategy. References to the supernatural intrude themselves occasionally, not as explanations of his success or as, in any way, relieving him of the necessity of meeting practical problems with appropriate action. Rather, they appear as heartening confirmation that he was on the right track in his pursuit of victory. This is borne out by the speech he made to his new subjects at Nanking.⁹ He offered no supernatural signs, promised no wonders, but simply imputed certain evils to the old regime, promised reforms and called on his hearers to join him in building a better government. In acting thus, he may have felt that he was working with cosmic forces (or the will of Heaven) that would assure his eventual success, but the critical factor for him, and for those evaluating him as a leader was still his adoption of the appropriate policy and not any unique and personal access to supernatural power.

If the case of Chu Yüan-chang argues against the operation, at this time, of personal charisma in imperial rule, what can be said of charisma in relation to scholars as a class? On the one hand, it may be pointed out that Chu Yüan-chang, even before he became emperor, brought scholars into his service, made a

point of rehabilitating public classical academies, and devoted some time and energy to his own study of classical literature, despite the pressures of active leadership in a rebellion still in progress. These facts suggest the possibility that a charismatic virtue was attributed to masters of classical learning. There is reason to believe, however, that they may be better explained as the kind of ambiguous appeal indulged in by our politicians when they protest their devotion to the principles of the founding fathers, an implied promise to conform simultaneously to various current notions of how government should be conducted. In the first place, Chu Yüan-chang had little respect for scholars in general, although he admired and sought counsel from some of them. This is reflected in certain disparaging remarks about scholars as ineffectual, venal and unmanly.¹⁰ It is reflected, too, in the way in which he employed them. It is clear that many served him under duress¹¹ and he showed his lack of trust in them by forbidding his generals to employ more than one each, owing to the danger of combinations against him.¹² Nor, it appears, did he feel that the visible presence of scholars in his regime was of overriding importance, for he awarded some of the highest civil office and a large majority of titles of nobility to his military men, most of whom were poorly educated. On the contrary, the most important principle in bestowal of high offices and honors would seem to have been length and intimacy of association with himself. Chu was well aware of the provincial character of his regime and was proud of it. After he became emperor, he boasted, with some exaggeration, that all his leading officials were old comrades from his native place.¹³ Apart from evidence found in Chu's relations with the scholars, it is also significant that the tendency of Chinese civil officials, most of them scholars, to support the Yüan loyally against the rebel regimes failed to prevent that dynasty's fall. Some of them, having reputedly served their communities well, had strong local support. Others, as evidenced by wholesale defections of Yüan militia, did not.

In conclusion, it would seem that charisma is not a useful concept in explaining either the nature or the distribution of governmental authority, at least in the period considered. Suc-

cessful rule may have been popularly attributed to cooperation with cosmic forces in a rationally ordered universe, but this cooperation was defined in terms of practical standards. This leads to the further conclusion that the attribution of a special prestige or influence to scholars as scholars or to the ruler as ruler may go far beyond the evidence. Careful study of the exchange of services and support (both material and immaterial) between the government and the rest of society may contribute more to our understanding of this relationship.¹⁴

NOTES

1. Professor Charles O. Hucker's *The Traditional Chinese State in Ming Times (1368-1644)* (Tucson, 1961), a pioneering and richly informative study, does full justice to the complexity of the subject and avoids simplistic explanations. At the same time, however, the author treats charisma as an element in the government's authority. He states that court ritual and the magnificence of the palace "invested the throne with a kind of charismatic aura" (p. 41). On page 65: "I suspect the Confucian bureaucrat was indispensable to rulers because the Chinese people at large would not contentedly be governed by others. Such was the charismatic prestige of Confucian learning!" Also, on page 76: "For good government was thought to depend, in the last resort, on the charismatic virtues of the ruling class." Perhaps the most familiar use of the concept of charisma in the study of Chinese society is that of Max Weber in his *The Religion of China*, translated by Hans Gerth (Glencoe, 1951). This, unlike Hucker's work, is out of date and based on Western materials of pre-1920 vintage. It is still at least indirectly influential, however, and should be mentioned here. On page 110: "Only the adept of scriptures and of tradition has been considered competent for correctly ordering the internal administration and the charismatically correct life conduct of the prince, ritually and politically." On page 135: "High mandarins were considered magically qualified. They could always become objects of a cult, after their death as well as during their lifetime, providing that their charisma was 'proved.' It should be noted here, however, that charisma, being a personal quality, is not thought of as an attribute of scholars or officials *as such*."

2. These concepts are so closely related, albeit carefully distinguished, in Weber as to suggest that even where charisma is not explicitly invoked, some such concept may underlie many other descriptions of Chinese institutions.

3. Anon., 天潢玉牒 *T'ien-huang yü-tieh*, (compiled in the Yung-lo period) p. 2a.

4. 明太祖實錄 *Ming t'ai-tzu shih-lu*, 1355, first month.

5. *Ibid.*, 1355, sixth month.

6. 朱元璋 *Chu Yüan-chang*. 御製皇陵碑 *Yü-chih huang-ling pei*, pp. 2a-2b.

7. *Shih-lu*, 1354, seventh month. Also, *Chu Yüan-chang*, 栢子潭神龍效靈記 *Po-tzu t'an shen-lung hsiao-ling chi*.

8. For his association with a Buddhist monk-astrologer, see Liu Ch'en, 劉辰 *Kuo-ch'u shih-chi*, 23a. 國初事蹟

9. *Shih-lu*, 4.2a.

10. For example, *Shih-lu*, 6.2a-2b; *Ming-shih*, 128.15a. Also, *Chu's* preface to his 皇陵碑 *Huang-ling pei*.

11. Liu Ch'en, *op. cit.*, 20b, 24a, asserts that *Chu* ordered that any scholar caught attempting to escape a city on the approach of his forces was to be cut down. The same author also recounts an incident in which a scholar "escaped" his entourage.

12. *Ibid.*, 20b.

13. *Shih-lu*, 21.1a.

14. An appeal for such an approach may be found in S. N. Eisenstadt's review article in the *Journal of Asian Studies*, XVII (May, 1958).