1 Ming Taizu, hanging scroll, 14th century, ink and colours on silk, 268.8 × 163.8 cm, artist unknown.
The most successful act of transcultural communication by the Italian Jesuit missionary to Ming China, Matteo Ricci (1552–1610), was perhaps the composition in 1595 of his essay ‘On Friendship’ (Jiao you lun). Ricci had been living in China from 1583 and had acquired an impressive degree of both linguistic and cultural fluency in pursuit of his project to bring the Christian mission to the Ming empire (1368–1644), then into its third century of rule. ‘On Friendship’ combined the allure of the exotic, being 100 maxims drawn from the European classics, with another theme of interest to Ming elites, for whom the topic of how right friendship was to be established and maintained against the tug of family, faction and region was of consuming importance. This text has long been known and discussed, although only recently made available outside the Chinese language in a new translation.1 What has been perhaps underestimated in the past is the significance of the text’s dedication, and Ricci’s account of how that dedication came into being. For the dedicatee, and hence by implication the ‘friend’ for whom this account of friendship was written, was not a member of the type of Chinese elite with whom we are most familiar: he was not a ‘scholar-official’ or ‘member of the literati’ or ‘mandarin’, with status deriving from mastery of the classical textual tradition and from success in the imperial examination system. He was an aristocrat.

His personal name was Zhu Duojie, ‘a figure about whom we know frustratingly little except that he was enfeoffed in 1573 and died in 1601’.2 He held a title which Ricci’s modern translator renders as ‘Prince of Jian’an Commandery’ (Jian’an wang). The sufficiency of that translation will be addressed shortly, but for now it is only necessary to acknowledge that it identifies him as a member of the imperial clan (zongshi), the large number of men and women who by Ricci’s day could prove their descent from Zhu Yuanzhang (1328–1398), ‘Grand Progenitor’ (Taizu) and founder of the Ming dynasty (illus. 1). In a decisive break with the practice of previous dynasties, the
26 sons of this man (with the exception of the eldest, installed as Crown Prince) were established in great state in centres across the empire, and in a culture which allowed polygamy some 100,000 people could by 1600 be identified as their descendants, or as the descendants of later imperial sons. It is they, or at least some of them, who form the matter of this book.

They have not received a good press from history. One striking index of this is perhaps the way in which their title is generally translated by modern authors writing in English, as ‘prince’. This is done in defiance of the fact that early modern European observers such as Ricci, more familiar with complex hierarchies of rank than we are, were generally happy to call a wang a ‘king’. It is done despite the fact that the character wang, which certainly goes back to the earliest forms of Chinese script in oracle bone inscriptions, is in most other contexts translated as ‘king’. Thus, if in the classic text Mencius students come across Liang Hui wang, they are expected to translate it as ‘King Hui of Liang’, but an exactly similar locution in a Ming text, for example Liang Zhuang wang, is rendered as ‘Prince Zhuang of Liang’. This loses at once the echo of what is in Ming terms one of the most important features of the Ming system of establishments for imperial sons other than the Crown Prince, and that is its deliberate aura of antiquity, its invocation of the Golden Age of the Zhou dynasty (c. 1050–221 BCE), source of so many political and moral exemplars for the men of the Ming. The term wang was from the very beginning one of great sacral power, and it would be rash to suggest that this aura had utterly ceased to have meaning by the Ming period, some 2,000 years later. For the Han dynasty philosopher Dong Zhongshu (179–104 BCE), as for the earliest dictionaries of the Chinese language (still consulted in the Ming), the very character wang, 王, with its three horizontal lines joined by a single vertical, was an index of the fact that the king is what links and unites the three cosmic levels of Heaven, Earth and Man. The wang dao, or ‘kingly way’, spoke of rulership with a cosmic resonance of benevolence, as a term of moral weight which implied more than force and the power to be obeyed. In later centuries, when supreme rulers invariably used the grander titles of huang, di or huangdi (‘emperor’), the ideal of the ‘king’ as a moral lord still invoked a purer and better relationship between ruler and ruled, as well as the specific past when kings who were kin were ‘enfeoffed’ by the Zhou in a system known as feng jian. By the twentieth century feng jian had come to be used to translate the Western political concept of ‘feudal’, with predictably negative effects on its connotations, connotations of backwardness and repression which it has continued to hold to the present day. Whether the political order of the Zhou period was ‘feudal’ or not is
a topic for specialists; what is not disputed is that, at least for part of its near millennium of existence, the Zhou polity was imagined as an ‘exemplary centre’ occupied by an emperor bearing the title ‘Son of Heaven’ (Tian zi), who was surrounded by a multitude of lords, some of them related to him by blood, the most senior of which bore the title of wang. This ideal of a surrounded and protected centre is manifested in one of the most ancient of the canonical Confucian texts, which would echo through all Ming discussions of the topic:

> With the honest people as a fence (fan), the great armies as a bulwark, the great territorial states as a screen (bing), the Major Lineage as a support, love of virtue as a source of peace, and the sons of your lineage as a fortress, nothing will let that fortress fall into decay, and there is nothing to fear about loneliness.6

It was as ‘a fence and a screen’ (fan bing) that the role of the sons of Ming Taizu was imagined; collectively they were zong fan, ‘fence of the [imperial] lineage’. It was as fan wang, literally ‘fence kings’, that they were established in what here will be called, using an anachronistic term consciously but warily drawn from European history, their ‘appanages’.7 Throughout this book they will be referred to as ‘kings’; if the effect is a jarring one then that is deliberate, and a way of recalling to our attention the prominence and centrality of these figures on the Ming social landscape.

A screen can do two things. It can hide things from our view, but it can also act as a surface on which images can appear.8 And something of this twin aspect of rendering visible and at the same time unseen attaches to the kings of Ming China. So prominent in their own day, as their presence in well-known primary sources attests, their relative oblivion in the account we hold of the Ming today says much about what we wish to see or not see about the past, and arguably masks from us some of that past’s most significant features. So this account of Ming China will be a deliberately revisionist one, and revisionist not least of some of the things the present author has put into print about the period before now. An attempt to put kings at the centre of the story is by definition an attempt to rethink in some quite fundamental ways what we have agreed matters about Ming China. And those perceptions matter in their turn quite a lot because so many of those ideas are constitutive of the very idea of the ‘Western world’. The Ming period of China’s history was precisely when, through the agency of men such as Matteo Ricci, sufficient information on ‘what China was like’ was laid before readers and thinkers in Europe for them to form a series of perceptions of its nature. The importance of those early perceptions, not least in the formation of the very idea of ‘the
West’ cannot be overestimated, and continue
to act upon notions of ‘what China is like’
today. But what if those perceptions were
wrong in some quite fundamental ways?

To construct a revisionist account in this
way will not simply be to put the kings of
Ming China into the place previously occupied
by other elites who have been better studied
and celebrated. If a case is made here for their
necessary prominence in a fuller account of
the period, it was still, unarguably, a prominence
which was in inverse proportion to their
importance in the running of the machinery
of the state. Barred from the examination
system until late in the dynasty, in 1595, and
progressively stripped of any control they had
once had over military forces, Ming imperial
relatives have been seen by most writers as the
inhabitants of ‘lacquered and gilded prisons’,
consumers of vast amounts of the state’s
resources, who nevertheless lived lives of point-
less banality. Typical perhaps would be the
view of Frederic Wakeman, whose magisterial
history of the fall of the Ming characterizes
the late Ming aristocracy thus: ‘Even higher-
ranking kinsmen lived in a state of genteel
poverty, letting their palaces run down, or
frittering away their lives in debauchery and
drink.’ While not wishing to argue for the
stone-cold sobriety of every last member of the
imperial clan, it should be stated from the outset
that this is a caricature, which owes its tenacity
to several different strands of historiography
with an interest in denigrating the imperial
aristocracy. The contemporary historical
record, that written in the Ming dynasty itself,
is dominated (although not totally, as we shall
see), by the degree-holding elite. It is not only
socially limited, but geographically limited as
well, in that most of the written record exploited
up to now by scholarship emanates from the
Jiangnan region, the economically and culturally
most highly developed part of the empire on
the lower course of the Yangtze river, and the
site of the dynasty’s original capital. The
Ming founder had located none of his sons in
this sensitive area, on which the state’s political
economy rested; there were no appanages in
Jiangnan. So the holders of these appanages
were unfamiliar to many of the canonical figures
of what we think of today as ‘Ming culture’.
They either ignored them, or were vaguely
hostile to them. After the protracted death
agony of the dynasty in the middle decades of
the seventeenth century, Chinese commentators
looking for the causes of that fall, and of the
Manchu conquest which precipitated it, lighted
on the role, a role seen as less than glorious,
of the successive Ming kings who tried to
keep the dynasty alive in the south after 1644,
and whose weakness and cupidity were seen
as contributory factors to the debacle. They
lighted too on the drain of state resources
to keep up the imperial clan, in the form of
the great estates they received (and on which
no land tax was paid), as well as the stipends
in grain, silver and other gifts which they received. Such views remained normative throughout the Qing dynasty (1644–1911) and down into the Republican period in the early twentieth century. They were then augmented by Marxist or Marx-influenced Chinese and Japanese historians, for whom the imperial aristocracy were the most vile part of a bloated feudal ruling class, mentioned if at all as the appropriators of the fruits of peasant toil, and as the objects of the righteous wrath of those same peasants, the motive force of Chinese and world history.

What this means is that the hereditary aristocracy are generally either invisible in the literature on the Ming, or else are mere footnotes to the story of some other more interesting object of study. In the standard dynastic history, the Ming shi, compiled in 1736 and hence in no strict sense a contemporary source but one which reflects a number of Ming priorities, the kings still occupy the fourth to eighth chapters of the biographies which take up the bulk of this massive work, preceded only by the empresses. There are over 70 main biographies listed there, with many more supplementary entries. However, in the principle modern reference work, the Dictionary of Ming Biography (1976) edited by L. Carrington Goodrich and Chaoying Fang, only six members of the Zhu family who did not themselves reign as emperors are afforded entries of their own. The consensus seems to be, in the words of the doyen of Ming historians in the West, Charles Hucker, that ‘the nobility in general was an ornament on the Ming social scene, not a factor in government’. This opposition between ‘the social scene’ and ‘government’ is one to which we will return, but which will be signalled here as considered to be generally unsafe as a tool for understanding Ming China.

In China too, in contemporary synthetic accounts of the Ming, its kings and their culture are generally invisible, or at best peripheral. Although recent years have seen a much raised level of interest in the imperial court itself, the courts of regional kings are only now beginning to receive more focussed attention by scholars, both within and outside China. There has as yet been no full overview of their role in Ming culture or society, of the kind called for by David Robinson, who draws attention to the fact that although the princes (as he prefers) ‘were denied political and military control over the areas where they were invested’, their ritual primacy and range of connections to the emperor made them highly significant figures; he argues, “Thus, although the central node of the Ming court was in Beijing, the secondary court in Nanjing and princely establishments in the provinces meant that the greater court extended throughout much of the empire.” This notion of the ‘greater court’ is one this book attempts to engage with. Although it is far from being the complete account which we
need of the kingly role in the Ming, it will attempt, from the viewpoint of art history and material culture studies, to draw attention to some of the material as well as some of the textual evidence. It will argue that we ought to take Ming kings seriously. The subsequent historical fame of Matteo Ricci and the relative oblivion of Zhu Duojie, King of Jian’an (for so he shall now be named), reverses absolutely their prominence on the Ming landscape, and if as historians we wish to understand that landscape we have to try and imagine a set of priorities very different from our own.

The stated priority of the Ming founder, victor in the series of wars which expelled the Mongol Yuan dynasty and then established him as the sole contender to inherit the Mandate of Heaven from them, was for security. This is what comes across most strongly in his pronouncements, as recorded in the standard historical sources, and is the reason that he entrusted them with the command of major military forces. Taizu saw one of the causes of the fall of the Song and the Yuan dynasties in a situation where ‘the ruler was weak and the officials strong’, where the ruler lacked the ‘fence and screen’ (fan bing) of his family. Hence the first establishment of nine of his sons as kings in the third year of his reign (1370). 17 He is quoted as saying, ‘In the Way of ruling the world, you must establish a fence and a screen.’ 18 Another issue which all historically literate members of the elite will have been very conscious of was that of how to deal with the large numbers of sons which a polygamous regime of marriage generated. More than once in the Han (206 BCE–220 CE) and Tang (618–906) dynasties rulers had been challenged from within their own families, and a variety of solutions had been attempted in recent centuries to forestall this. 19 In the Song dynasty (960–1279) the solution was to keep all members of the imperial clan close at hand in the imperial centre, sequestered in their own palaces. At the same time, the Song broke with Han and Tang precedent by greatly expanding the definition of that clan to include all patrilineal descendants of the brothers who were the Song dynastic founders. 20 The Yuan, and the Mongols in the wider Eurasian context, had certainly employed a system of appanage provision for younger sons. 21 The extent to which the Ming polity was an actual heir of Mongol practice, while at the same time rejecting it rhetorically with considerable vehemence, is currently a topic of great interest to historians, and the focus of a forthcoming study by David Robinson. But the stated precedents of the appanage system in the Ming were certainly not located in the Yuan period, or in the Song or the Tang, but much further back in antiquity, in the Han period (when wang were sent out to territories across the empire), and even more in the Zhou, most venerated source of social, political and cultural models. By the
The sixteenth century saw this connection taken as a truism, for example in a statement by one high official, to the effect that ‘The kings of the blood of today are the feudal lords of antiquity; the commandery kings of today, are the secondary sons of antiquity.’ It was in the restoration of the order of antiquity that the importance of Ming kings lay; there is no evidence that the principle of this was challenged at the time.

The institutional framework of the system was laid down in a number of imperial pronouncements at the very beginning of the dynasty. The key text governing the imperial clan was the thirteen-section Huang Ming zu xun lu, or ‘August Ming Ancestral Instruction’, first presented to the throne in 1373 and revised finally in 1397. It regulates a broad range of aspects of the life of the imperial family, both the descendants of the founder and those families who provided them with wives, as well as other nobles rewarded for meritorious service (chiefly in war), and the eunuchs, bodyguards and personnel who served them. It lays down a hierarchy of titles, serving to mark the degree of distance from the imperial body. Thus, sons of emperors (other than his heir) were titled qin wang or just wang, here rendered as ‘king’. The first son of a king retained that title. Other sons were titled jun wang, here rendered as ‘commandery king’, using an archaic title for a territorial division. His eldest son and heir maintained the same title as his father, as happened throughout the ranks. The titles of younger sons of subsequent generations were then as follows; the younger sons of a commandery king were titled as:

- Defender-general of the State: (Zhen guo jiang jun), his sons were titled;
- Bulwark-general of the State: (Fu guo jiang jun), his sons were titled;
- Supporter-general of the State: (Feng guo jiang jun), his sons were titled;
- Defender-commandant of the State: (Zhen guo zhong wei), his sons were titled;
- Bulwark-commandant of the State: (Fu guo zhong wei), his sons were titled;
- Supporter-commandant of the State: (Feng guo zhong wei).

A parallel system of titles existed for daughters. An emperor’s daughters were all Imperial Princesses (Gong zhu), their husbands were Commandant-escorts (Fu ma du wei), while a king’s daughters were Commandery Princesses (Jun zhu), and the daughters of a commandery king in turn were District Princesses (Xian zhu). And so on down through the ranks of Commandery Mistresses, District Mistresses and Township Mistresses (Jun jun, Xian jun, Xiang jun). The niceties of titling and precedence take up a great deal of space in Ming records, and while few would have the patience to take a close interest.
in these tedious-seeming matters now, we would be unwise to assume that they were not matters of compelling interest, at least to those most directly affected. A ‘Supporter-commandant of the State’ or a ‘Township Mistress’ may seem to us today to be figures of very little import, whose role in the great currents of Ming history is of no account, but they may have looked very different to their neighbours, perhaps far from a major city. The blood of the Son of Heaven was also their blood, and the stipends in grain which they received (even at the lowest ranks) marked them as privileged well beyond the peasant mass.

A king was established in a ‘state’ (guo). These states took their names from those of the Zhou dynasty, in the remote Bronze Age, and it was this continuity which gave some of the lustre of that idealized society to present arrangements. These ancient names remained meaningful in Ming China (and continue to do so today) as elegant-sounding variations, rather like the way the names of vanished ancient kingdoms might be used in contemporary Britain (‘Caledonia’, ‘Wessex’, ‘Dalriada’). Thus for example Zhu Gang, third son of the Ming founder, was established at the city of Taiyuan, and became ‘King of Jin’ (jìn wáng). Jin had been one of the greatest of kingdoms in the Bronze Age Spring and Autumn Annals period, created by Tang Shu Yu, son of the Zhou founder, King Wu (d. 1043 BCE), and roughly contiguous with modern Shanxi province. Known in his lifetime only by the title ‘King of Jin’, on his decease Zhu Gang received the posthumous ‘temple name’ Gong, meaning something like ‘reverent’, and so appears in the historical record as Jin Gong wang; such titles will be rendered here as ‘King Gong of Jin’. All of the kings of the blood, whether descended from the Ming founder or from creations for the sons of subsequent emperors, had both states and temple names of a single Chinese character. Commandery kings had titles of two characters (the name of a county, xian, where they had their putative seat), and posthumous names to match; for example, a son of King Gong of Jin could be King Zhuanghui of Qingcheng. This is how we know that Ricci’s patron, Jian’an wang or King of Jian’an, was a holder of this slightly lower rank.

Naming was one of the key practices which tied the wider imperial clan to the ritual and political centre of the emperor’s court. Each member of the clan received at birth a personal name from the Court of the Imperial Clan (Zong ren fu), and was entered in its records. Each ‘state’, as it was established, was given a twenty-character phrase in the form of a moral maxim; this determined the first character of a man’s personal name (making it easy now to spot members of the same generation). The second character of a name was defined by the cosmic sequence of the ‘Five Phases’ (wu xing), in the order wood/fire/earth/metal/water. As
the number of members of the clan increased it became more and more difficult to find character combinations which had not been used before, and the names of Ming imperial relatives become more and more arcane throughout the dynasty, to the point where they employ extremely rare characters or variants of characters scarcely found in dictionaries, and well beyond the character sets of modern Chinese language software.

On reaching maturity (usually in his early teens), an imperial son established with the rank of king ‘went to his state’ (zhì guó). At least at the very beginning of the dynasty, it was anticipated that they should also leave it frequently, to visit the imperial capital and do reverence to the emperor. There are elaborate regulations for this preserved in the ‘Ancestral Instructions’. But Shen Defu, a late Ming writer deeply interested in the imperial clan, talks of how this custom gradually fell into disuse, to the point where after the mid-fifteenth century, ‘no prince of the blood came to court for nearly forty years . . .’.30

A king could be spoken of as having ‘passed away in his state’ (yu guó zhòng xià shì).31 This was therefore a physical location, usually a major provincial city, but it was also a conceptual one. A king’s guó had a centre but no boundaries, or at least there are no maps showing such boundaries, and in Ming cartography the ‘State of Jin’ (Jìn guó) has no sharply delineated edges in the way that ‘Shanxi’ does. For most of their lives kings were located in and associated with their ‘states’. As Shen puts it later in the same passage, ‘The precedent is that kings of the blood, save for meeting an imperial progress or the sweeping of graves, are not permitted to depart one pace outside their cities.’32 And in fact it was the walled city (illus. 2) rather than the arable land beyond it which was the core meaning of guó, 國, as the form of the character, with its rectangular enceinte, makes visible. As Tracy Miller has written of the Bronze Age paradigms, ‘This scheme has been understood as making the state capital city a ritual centre, thereby linking the whole country within both a ritual and a familial network that would function on temporal and supernatural levels.’33

This language of ‘centres’ perhaps seems to invoke the now deeply rooted model of ‘central-places theory’, which has been so persuasive, but more recently so challenged, in all sorts of contexts, including those of art history and the history of culture. It is the growing influence of anthropology within the humanities more broadly which has been identified as increasing the importance of cultural factors (over objectively quantifiable indicators such as those of trade and commerce) in defining exactly what are the core and the peripheries in any given context.34 One of the most influential transfers from anthropology on this issue has been the often-cited work of Clifford Geertz, and his notion of an ‘exemplary
centre’, as applied to the multiple royal courts of Bali, where:

By the mere act of providing a model, a paragon, a faultless image of civilized existence, the court shapes the world around it into at least a rough approximation of its own excellence. The ritual of the court, and in fact the life of the court, is thus paradigmatic, not merely reflective, of social order.35

Certainly the Ming imperial court has been seen as such a centre, but what is only perhaps beginning to be appreciated (and it is the argument of this book, still not to a sufficient degree), is that the Ming empire had many such centres. Any educated person would be familiar with passages like that from the canonical Zhou li, ‘Rites of Zhou’:

The king alone constitutes the kingdom. He determines the four corners and fixes the principal position. He plans the capital and the countryside. He creates the ministries and separates their functions, thus offering norms for the people.36

While those educated people were well aware that the kings they saw around them did not ‘determine’ very much, that is not the same as saying that the ideal of ‘norms for the people’ was utterly without force. The obvious example (before the eyes of a British author, at any rate), is of an elderly monarch in a splendid crown solemnly reading out annually the managerialist platitudes of what ‘my government’ will achieve. We would perhaps see her as one of the most powerless of people, for the words she reads out are not even her own, and monarchy in twenty-first-century Britain can thus easily be identified as, in Charles Hucker’s words, ‘an ornament on the social scene, not a factor in government’. But does that mean that Elizabeth II does not matter, does not occupy a place in the imagination of many, is not thought about and resented and cared about by many? An account of modern Britain which left her (and her family) out would be an insufficient one. The same is true for Ming China. And yet that king-less account of the Ming is what we largely have. Why should this be so?

It is certainly not because we lack sources on them. They are a prominent feature of writing by the educated elite. The most prestigious and official forms of historiography afford them a large degree of notice.37 In this regard, they are rather like another group of significant figures who are arguably very visible in the historical record globally, but little regarded until recently by historians of a number of contexts, namely royal and imperial women. For example, Ruby Lal, in her insightful study of the women of the imperial courts of Mughal India, has deployed the concept (derived from subaltern studies screen of kings...
scholarship) of ‘hidden in plain sight’ to elucidate sources which are long known but long neglected, in a way which does not simply reinsert women into the power structures of the imperial centre but challenges what mattered as power at that centre. If we want to do something of the same for Ming China, then perhaps we have to start by taking seriously its attachment to a world which certainly had a centre (the imperial court), but which did not see that centre as absolute. For it to be exemplary, there had to be something for it to be an example to.

We might start therefore by recognizing the plurality of centres implied by the very term ‘king’. The title wang was not restricted in the Ming to its holders among the imperial family, and was variously meaningful to the

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2 Heavily restored walls of the city of Taiyuan, Shanxi province, seat of the Kings of Jin, originally built in the late 14th century.
educated and illiterate alike. It was, for example, part of the title of many deities.39 One wonders how much confusion there sometimes was in the minds of the humble about some of the various figures, all grand and for much of the time unseen, who peopled their world. Among the better educated, the idea of the sage Confucius as an ‘uncrowned king’ (su wang) had deep roots in the exegetical tradition about him, and from 1308 he actually bore a royal title, conferred by the Mongol emperors.40 This title was removed during the Ming in 1530, significantly by an emperor who had once borne a kingly title himself, and who was presumably extremely sensitive to its nuances.41 There were also in the early Ming eight major religious figures of Tibetan Buddhism who were so titled by the imperial court, and the higher appellation of ‘dharma king’ (fa wang) was allowed to three of these.42 Numerous Mongol leaders throughout the dynasty, ‘foreigners who had remained abroad but had recognized themselves to be vassals of the empire’, were given the rank of ‘king’, sometimes with titles that alluded to territories over which they ruled and sometimes with titles suggesting their moral qualities, such as Zhongyong wang, ‘Loyal and Courageous King’.43 And there may well have been an awareness of ‘kings’ in the far reaches of the world, in Korea, in Borneo, in Samarkand.

This very multiplicity may have something quite fundamental to do with the reasons that the kings of Ming China, despite their visibility in a wide range of contemporary sources, are so strangely absent from synthetic accounts of the period constructed in more recent times. For the Ming has long been firmly fixed in the historiographical mind in both the West and in China itself (at least from the early twentieth century) as the textbook case of ‘despotism’, the high point of imperial dominance over the whole of society, when no one else counted. This idea was prominent in some of the earliest European writing about China, its certainty in inverse proportion to the writer’s actual experience of going there. This was the framework on which Giovanni Botero (1544–1617) composed his survey of the world, Relationi universali, in Rome in 1591–6, developing the idea of ‘governo despotico’.44 His idea that ‘in the whole of China there is no other lord but the king’ (or emperor), and the non-existence, or at least the invisibility, of the hereditary aristocracy, is thus central from the very beginning to the theory of ‘oriental despotism’.45

On through the Enlightenment and into the nineteenth century, the growing literature on Chinese history in European countries painted the Ming founder as the creator of one of the most despotic of oriental despotisms, a picture into which the ‘many kings’ of the primary sources could not be made to fit. There was no room for ‘other lords’. The contrary fascination on the part of European intellectuals with a society ruled by meritocrats, the literati or
mandarins (and the continuing fascination of this model of a society for their heirs, the modern ‘academic’) served still further to render quaint any interest in those whose status came from the hereditary principle.

But European contemporaries of the Ming, people who lived in a society where heredity mattered a lot, and power was not simply a matter of tax receipts, may well have seen things differently. Those few Europeans who did see a Ming regional king (and who may not have been as schooled in Aristotle as a Ricci or a Botero) had no difficulty fitting them into an aristocratic world view, where power and pomp were unproblematically hereditary. Unlike Botero, the Portuguese Galeote Pereira (active c. 1545–1565) had actually been in China, and had seen (and been well treated by) the King of Jingjiang, in the southwestern city of Guilin. His account was published in Italian in 1565 and available in English by 1577. He gives this account of the imperial relatives who were such a prominent feature of that city’s social landscape:

They give themselves to eating and drinking, and be for the most part burly men of body, insomuch that espying any one of them whom we had not seen before, we might know him to be the king his cousin. They be nevertheless very pleasant, courteous, and fair conditioned; neither did we find, all the time we were in the city, so much honour and good entertainment anywhere, as at their hands.46

‘Courtesy’, ‘honour’ and ‘good entertainment’ are, it could be argued, at the centre of early modern understandings of power and authority, in China as much as in Europe. The non-clerical Pereira well understood that the aristocracy lived under a degree of imperial suspicion, and that their freedom of movement was constrained, but he also understood their ritual precedence over the degree-holding bureaucratic elite: “The king . . . letteth not one in all his country to be called lord, except he be of the blood’, adding, ‘Their festival days, new moons, and full moons, the magistrates go there to make him reverence . . .’. Who bowed to whom mattered to contemporaries more than it perhaps matters to us, who are more inclined to ‘follow the money’. But is our understanding thereby increased? One highly influential account which would offer a resounding ‘no’ to that proposition would again be the work of the anthropologist Clifford Geertz. As well as showing how, in the case of Bali, the influence of an ‘oriental despotism’ model served to mask understanding of the complex interactions between many lordships, he has in a much-quoted passage insisted that we may have unwittingly inverted the correct relationship between what we have taken in that context to be the forms and the substances of rule:
Court ceremonialism was the driving force of court politics; and mass ritual was not a device for shoring up the state, but rather the state, even in its final gasp, was a device for the enactment of mass ritual. Power served pomp, not pomp power.

He goes on to develop an idea which has already been alluded to, that of the court as the ‘exemplary centre’, in words that certainly have a ring of truth with regard to the activities of Ming kings to be studied in the rest of this book: ‘By the mere act of providing a model, a paragon, a faultless model of civilized existence, the court shapes the world around it into at least a rough approximation of its own excellence.’

Part of the historiographical problem may lie in the fact that aristocracy and heredity came to be seen after the Enlightenment as the opposite of that desirable but ineluctable quality we still keep calling ‘modernity’. But more recently, and probably under the impact of anthropologists like Geertz, historians of Europe (and of other parts of Asia) in the centuries contemporary with the Ming have begun to re-evaluate the older teleological accounts which see the aristocratic principle as being ‘in crisis’, and doomed to terminal decline during these centuries. In one thorough analysis of the role of the aristocracy in Europe, Hamish M. Scott has asserted that at this time,

As the great historical drama of the ‘rise of the nation state’ no longer seems to be sufficient in a world of multiple and overlapping sovereignties, of states with seemingly very little power and ‘non-state actors’ with seemingly a great deal of agency, a re-evaluation is taking place of the many contexts where power was dispersed and multiplicity was prized. James Hevia has shown how in the late eighteenth-century Manchu empire, the notion of a ‘multitude of lords’ was crucial to the constitution of an imperial centre; it was the presence (not the absence, as the theory of ‘despotism’ would have us believe) of many sovereignties which made the Qianlong emperor great in his own eyes. And Timon Screech has insisted, almost shockingly, on taking the plural rhetoric of Edo period political culture seriously in his study not of ‘Japan’ but of ‘the Japanese states’ at the same period. In the case of China, we are still absorbing the implications of Lothar Ledderose’s wide-ranging study of the ‘ten thousand things’. But it seems safe to say at the very least that it is a philosophical position which underpins valuing the many in
terms of understanding a broad range of aspects of the world; put simply, ‘more is more’.51

As part of the process whereby an Enlightenment (and emotionally republican, whether French or u.s.) historiography was consigning the aristocracy to the dustbin of history, the settings for these Others of modernity, reified in the notion of ‘the court’, became equally looked down on and neglected as objects of study by ‘real’ historians, fit instead ‘only for reactionaries and eccentrics’.52 As one scholar has succinctly written:

In many places around the globe during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the court was conceived as the epitome of all that was backward, corrupt, effete and debased about the ancien régime.53

It was the work of the émigré German sociologist Norbert Elias (1897–1990), whose volume The Court Society (conceived as far back as the 1930s) was published in English only in 1983, which did more than anything to bring courts and court culture back into the fold of respectable historical discourse.54 Elias took the Versailles of Louis xiv as the paradigmatic court, a site and an institution where the monarch disciplined previously unruly aristocratic elites, a ‘gilded cage’ where they were designed to ‘ruin themselves by conspicuous consumption, to engage in ceremonial squabbles with their rivals at court, and thus to gradually dissolve into insignificance under his wary eye’.55 Assailed on both empirical and theoretical grounds, Elias’s model has more recently given way among historians of Europe to more detailed case studies, and ones which are more mistrustful of what are seen as its biases towards the study of culture, of ‘ritual’ and of discourse. The literature on European courts is now vast, and the conclusion to this book will return to some of the implications of what value a comparative approach can have in the study of the ‘greater court’ of Ming China. Such an approach is (in the words of one historian of pre-modern India’s culture) in fact ‘imperative’, given that if historians do not consciously direct attention to the European cases then what happens in practice is:

The cultural and political theory designed to make sense of the European nation-state is often, and too facilely, applied to the pre-modern world outside of Europe, distorting thinking about language and identity, and identity and politics, and thereby occluding the specificity of the Indian case and its misfit with models designed to explain the European.56

In other words, to grasp the specificity of the kings of Ming China, it is a good idea to have a conscious sense of where that specificity was like and unlike other specificities. It is less problematic to borrow a word like ‘appanage’
from medieval Europe consciously, than to use one like ‘nobility’ without thinking it through.

This awareness of comparison is all the more necessary in that this is a study which treats as central areas of art and culture. We need to be alert to the fact that, just as scholars of European history seem to turn away from the ‘strong cultural bias’ of Elias and the many who followed him, here the turn will still be towards the field of culture, which for reasons to do with the entirely independent historiographical traditions of China in the twentieth century has been vastly undervalued in what thinking has been done on the world of the kings in the Ming dynasty. There is a risk (probably several risks) here, and again the example of work done on pre-modern India is instructive, at least in pointing out what such a turn is not meant to do: ‘To foreground aesthetics, however, is not to argue with Weber (or Clifford Geertz) that culture is all that constituted polity in the non-modern non-West and that other core issues of power were never addressed.’ If aesthetics, or what elsewhere I have called ‘visual and material culture’, are prominent here too, then it is hoped that this is not totally at the expense of how aesthetics and power acted to make a world, a world in which both could have meaning and force. Arguably the kings of the Ming dynasty have been so undervalued that attention paid to any aspect of their presence on the Ming scene represents a necessary rebalancing of our understanding.

Undervalued perhaps, but not totally unnoticed. I would want to stress the extent to which this book draws on the work that has been done in a variety of fields already. While still arguing that the Ming aristocracy has been a neglected part of the total picture, it would be grossly unfair to suggest that absolutely no attention has been paid at all to this social group, and particularly in certain of their cultural aspects. As far back as 1954, in the introductory volume to *Science and Civilisation in China*, Joseph Needham noted that in the Ming, ‘As in the Han, imperial princes took part in the flowing tide of learning.’ And Ming imperial clan members variously have roles in the volumes on botany, alchemy, geography, physics and printing. Histories of drama also give due weight to kingly creators. The ‘prince and dramatist’ Zhu Youdun (1379–1439), one of those who does enjoy an entry of his own in the *Dictionary of Ming Biography*, is described by another standard reference book as ‘the most important dramatist of the first half of the fifteenth century’ and has been the subject of monographs in Chinese and English by Ren Zunshi and Wilt Idema. Another figure well known to historians of drama is Zhu Quan (1378–1448), who has been further noticed by several scholars as a writer on various subjects including famine crops, Daoism and music. He is one of several Ming kings cited by Robert van Gulik in his classic monograph on the lore of the *guqin*,...
the Chinese zither or lute, an elite instrument with which a number of members of the imperial clan were associated as players or theorists. Zhu Zaiyu (1536–1611) is an important figure in the intersecting histories of both music and mathematics, for his work on pitch. And there has been attention by more than one scholar to the role of the kingly households as important centres of book publishing in the Ming. But what has not been attempted so far is a ‘joining of the dots’; work on Ming dynasty kings remains largely specialized and compartmentalized. What will be argued here is that there is a picture to be discerned if some of the work done already by scholars in their own areas is connected, or at the very least assembled into some sort of a pattern. Here it will be a pattern in which what we now call ‘art’ and ‘culture’ are most prominent. There is certainly no claim that the present account is final or definitive. No one (and certainly not the present author) possesses the full range of competencies and grasp of sources to produce a full account. But any such full account of the Ming aristocracy will have to take account of their importance as creators and sustainers of cultural projects, a term which is here cast very wide to encompass work in the field of calligraphy and painting, as well as things like the building projects they sponsored and the vast assemblages of material culture which went into their tombs. This study will also choose to focus on two geographical areas: the modern provinces of Shanxi and Hubei (see map on page 197). The former is northern, and not one of China’s richest areas (though rich in mineral resources); the latter is south of the Yangtze and now, as in the Ming, is a region of considerable prosperity. Both were in the Ming period the site of several kingly establishments; indeed, Hubei has a claim to be the most ‘kingly’ of provinces, with seven lineages of kings of the blood (qin wang) sited there in the course of the dynasty. Shanxi by contrast had three. They therefore make a valuable pair of case studies, and so this book will return to these very different landscapes at a number of points. Very different from each other, each is equally different from Jiangnan, the focus of so much attention up to now. It would be tempting to see Jiangnan as the ‘core’ of the Ming empire, to which Shanxi and Hubei were in their different ways ‘peripheries’, neglected until now but interesting in their own right. But in doing so, one would merely seem to direct attention away from Suzhou and Nanjing, in ways that ended up re-inscribing their centrality even more firmly. What is attempted here instead is a ‘devolution’ in the sense that this charged word is employed by John Kerrigan: ‘To devolve is to shift power in politics or scholarly analysis from a locus that has been disproportionately endowed with influence and documentation to sites that are more dispersed and more
skeletally understood.¹⁶⁵ In devolving our understanding of Ming China’s art and culture from (for example) the literati painters of Jiangnan to the palaces and tombs of Shanxi and Hubei, it will be necessary to draw not only on textual documentation but on the evidence of a range of kinds of material culture, some of it familiar (such as calligraphy in chapter Three and painting in chapter Four) but some of it perhaps less often investigated, such as jewellery (in chapter Five) or bronzes in an archaic style produced in a kingly milieu (chapter Six). We need to start by considering the landscapes in which kingly culture was situated, and the places where it might have been encountered.