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**John W. Dardess/Blood and History in China**

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# Introduction



IN SEVENTEENTH-century China, the name “Donglin” meant three different but partly overlapping things. It stood for an ethical revitalization movement; it referred to a national Confucian moral fellowship; and it also labeled a Beijing political faction, whose activities are the main focus of this book. The name comes from the Donglin (“East Forest”) academy of Wuxi county, located about fifty miles west of Shanghai, in what is now Jiangsu province. The heyday of the Donglin in all of its dimensions were the early decades of the seventeenth century.

The Donglin academy, from its refounding in 1604, disseminated through its widely attended lecture sessions, open to officials and students from all over China, an ethically intense and militant Confucianism, according to which, in the words of Heinrich Busch, everyone was “urged to form convictions on the basis of truth and adhere to them uncompromisingly without regard to the consequences.”<sup>1</sup> Important for our story is the fact that the Donglin leaders also labored to place their adherents and sympathizers in key offices of the central government and, through them, to achieve nothing less than the remaking of a troubled Ming China starved, they believed, of morally right-guided leadership.

In 1620 and 1621, after the death of the Wanli emperor, who had long been hostile to the Donglin, it appeared that the movement had triumphed at last. But over the next several years its pretensions were challenged and its power curtailed, and from 1625 to 1627 the young Tianqi emperor and his favorite eunuch, Wei Zhongxian, purged and destroyed the Donglin movement in one of the most spectacularly gruesome political repressions perpetrated in the history of China to that point.

It all makes for gripping drama. Normally the story finds its place as an episode in the longer history of late Ming partisan struggle and dynastic decline and collapse.<sup>2</sup> Long ago, Charles O. Hucker published an excellent chapter-length study of the Donglin movement, the conclusions of which still strike me as valid. But when I first read that paper in the

early 1960s, I was left puzzled and bewildered by the affair, and I found it inexplicable why so many should have sacrificed even their lives for what seemed to be no important or useful or even definable purpose.<sup>3</sup>

Until 1989, that is. The Tiananmen demonstrations of spring 1989 offered several compelling clues to a satisfactory rereading of the events of the 1620s, which also had their epicenter in Beijing. Whatever it was that kept so many of us who were not in China in 1989 glued to our television sets while the demonstrations were under way, it had something to do with loving good and hating evil; with vilifying the corrupt and cheering for the selfless and the brave; with the play of hope against despair; and, in the end, with the smashing of beautiful, fragile ideals on the ugly rocks of entrenched power. And all those things were searing and memorable because they were visceral, and it all ended, appropriately enough, awash in blood and martyrdom.

From what happened in 1989 it became evident that, in China, a political-moral confrontation was not necessarily aimed at achieving practical reforms or concrete results. The point was not to achieve victory in the usual sense. Rather, the intention was to communicate sincere moral feelings to the rulers and to the public at large. The agenda was imprecise, symbolic, unrealistic. The protesters did not venture beyond spontaneous or ad hoc organization as a matter of principle rather than oversight. Their mood became so vehement as to be intolerant of negotiation and compromise. In the end, the protesters (both the Donglin and the students in 1989) did achieve something through their elitist storm of absolute self-righteousness: glorious commemoration for the dead and imprisoned participants, and eternal infamy for those who unleashed the dogs of repression upon them. Repression and memory; blood and history. Hence the title of this book.

With perhaps very few exceptions, the protesters of 1989 were not knowledgeable about China's past or aware of what had taken place in the 1620s on the same ground now occupied by Tiananmen Square.<sup>4</sup> Even so, scholarly commentary has called attention to the place of China's national self-obsession and persistent traditionalism in the story of Tiananmen in 1989. It has been said that Tiananmen was "ritual or 'ritualized' political theater" in which an educated elite, articulating ideals on behalf of the entire nation, demanded "a greater voice" in the affairs of government.<sup>5</sup> It has also been said that, like the students and scholar-officials (*shi*) of imperial times, the intellectuals and students who protested in

1989 were an “achievement-based elite—or at least an aspiring elite” who had proved themselves, or were in the process of proving themselves, through academic competition.<sup>6</sup>

At center stage, then, ready for suffering and death, converged the nation’s brightest and best. By a display of total sincerity, they hoped to “move” (*gandong*) the holders of power. Compelling public statements were composed. On May 18, 1989, a dozen student leaders actually gained the opportunity to meet with Premier Li Peng in a moral showdown, a meeting of feverish emotional intensity of which excerpts were later televised. As is usual in such cases, authority proved resistant to the ethical reawakening that the protesters demanded of it.

Meanwhile, confined as always to the sides of the stage, the common people enlarged the unfolding drama by offering from the sidelines their sympathy and moral support. In 1625, there had been crowds of tradesmen and commoners who wept and offered sacrifices and donated cash to the Donglin hero Yang Lian as imperial police escorted him north to Beijing. There were shopkeepers and laborers and commoners who surged in riot in the rain-soaked streets of Suzhou in 1626 when the police came to arrest Zhou Shunchang. There was also an outpouring of public support for the Beijing protesters of 1989, when, thanks to television, the sideline chorus swelled to include the whole globe. The last act of 1989 was a crackdown, as authority in the end retaliated against the protesters with spectacular cruelty.

There seems to be something psychologically askew about the idea that political authority should somehow yield to collective displays of selfless sincerity. Government, Ming and modern, assumes and acts upon the assumption that protesters have hidden agendas, that what they are demanding is not what they really have in mind. The effort to “move” authority fails, and everything ends in bloody retaliation. Given their constant talk of blood, the protesters themselves half expect this. One suspects it all ends this way because, in part, the more radical of the protesters underestimate the force of their rhetoric and fail to gauge the effect their unlimited and unconditional claims to moral righteousness may have upon those in power whom they are addressing. Grand Secretary Ye Xianggao, as a man caught in the middle, noted this phenomenon at work in 1624. In 1989, foreign television viewers could see for themselves how effectively the protesters managed to transform Deng Xiaoping from a hero of liberalization into a vicious, corrupt autocrat, or Li Peng from

a faceless party functionary into a personification of evil, a kind of latter-day Wei Zhongxian.

Bloody crackdown, evidently, is a requirement of the script. The protesters are the nation's moral and intellectual elite. They cannot be maneuvered or finessed or bought off, and so it all ends in blood and beatings and arrests and torture-murders and machine guns. Blood and history. As student leader Chai Ling suggested, it is through the periodic re-enactment of this compelling public drama that China seems to reaffirm its moral and spiritual oneness as a civilization and as a nation.

In the speeches and placards and protest literature of 1989, "blood" and "history" are two words that stand out through constant repetition. By "history," the protesters sometimes meant history-as-past, and in that (for them) negative sense of the word, they construed the current regime as a recrudescence of the oppressive imperial dragon of olden times. But, more often, the protesters meant by "history" not past but future history, because their actions would ensure remembrance by future generations of what the protesters were doing now. As exhausted but ecstatic student demonstrators returned to their campuses on April 27, "history wept and history also smiled."<sup>7</sup> "Let the son call you once more, 'Mama!' You will not understand your son, but history will," read a big-character poster of April 23.<sup>8</sup> "History will remember this historic time, these historic lives, these historic heroes!" read another, in mid-May.<sup>9</sup> "With the spirit of the sacrifice of our lives," said student leader Chai Ling in an emotional mid-May interview, "we fight for life. Death is not what we seek but we contemplate death knowing that the eternal, broad echoes [of our cries] and the cause that we write with our lives will float in the air of the Republic."<sup>10</sup>

Blood, of course, was the ink of this future history. "Even if ahead lies the end of our lives / Our blood and our unconquerable souls, / shall forever be in the annals of our nation!" stated a small-character poster of the week of April 20.<sup>11</sup> "My students, history's heavy burden rests heavy on your shoulders. . . . [And] if there are people who force us to shed blood, then let our blood flow!" cried intellectual Ren Wanding in a speech of late April.<sup>12</sup> In the words of Chai Ling, late in May, "only when the government descends to the depths of depravity and decides to deal with us by slaughtering us, only when rivers of blood flow in the Square, will the eyes of our country's people truly be opened, and only then will they unite. . . ."<sup>13</sup> And when the end came, on June 3, she said: "Everybody sat there quietly, awaiting with calm expressions the butcher knives

of the slaughterers. We were carrying out a war of love and hate, not a battle of military force. . . . The students just sat there quietly, lying down to await [the moment of] sacrifice.”<sup>14</sup>

Here, one striking difference between the Tiananmen affair and the Donglin protests of the 1620s can be noted. The Donglin radicals were themselves central government officials, men of mature age, who voluntarily surrendered themselves to the very authority whose moral credentials they had challenged, and then suffered martyrdoms of a most cruel and gruesome kind. By contrast, the Tiananmen radicals were young students who, for all their rhetoric of blood and sacrifice, escaped the regime’s violent crackdown, the brunt of which fell on workers and others.<sup>15</sup>

In one essential respect, however, the Donglin hero-martyrs of the 1620s beg to be understood in the same light as the leaders in Tiananmen in 1989—that is, not as insurrectionaries, but as uncompromising champions of a moral point of view, a national ethical vanguard proposing to use its very blood to write that point of view in such a way as to seize the attention of present and future generations.

The available sources for the events of 1620–1627 are many and rich, and they have not been much used by modern researchers. There are personal letters that participants wrote describing their thoughts and feelings to friends and family; there are personal diaries and autobiographical accounts; there are prison letters of victims, some of them written in blood; and there are eyewitness records, like that of the pseudonymous “Beijing guest” who worked under cover as an orderly in the Decree Prison in Beijing and left a detailed description of the sufferings inflicted on six of the Donglin heroes in 1625. There are publications of private copies of imperial edicts and rescripts, and of extracts from memorials that came out in the so-called “Beijing Gazette” (*Dibao*). There are original memorials to the throne, unedited by official court historians and bearing the original dates of submission and rescript. Beginning right after the suicide of eunuch Wei Zhongxian in 1628, there began to be published compilations of personal accounts and official documents, such as the *Bixue lu* (Jade blood record), as well as topical histories written to satisfy an evident public appetite for reading material devoted to recent events. Probably no earlier event in China’s long history has available for modern retelling anything like the archive available for the Donglin affair.

The seventeenth century in China was in many ways an age that licensed the unleashing of romantic passions. It was a time when many

people, in literature and in drama as well as in real life, felt somehow compelled to pursue emotional commitments to their often lethal conclusions. The protean term for such passionate commitment was *qing*, which usually attached itself to sensual impulses, such as love affairs, but could as well be harnessed to the pursuit of moral ideals. And suffering and death in pursuit of one's moral ideals, far from being invalidated, might actually be "authenticated" by the failure of one's efforts to affect and move the object of one's moral struggle.<sup>16</sup> The Donglin martyrs failed in their stated purpose, which was to encourage the Tianqi emperor, inadequate figure as he was, to step forward and behave as an ideal Confucian ruler should; yet although they failed, they died in the attempt, and so won eternal remembrance from an understanding public for their heroism and steadfastness.

Seventeenth-century China was also a society suffering from chronic and worrisome crises, particularly its inability to stop the steady advancement of Nurhaci's Jurchens (after 1635, Manchus) upon what official circles considered to be Ming ancestral territory in Liaodong, just a few hundred miles northeast of Beijing. A catastrophic collapse of Ming armies there in 1619 was followed by further major reverses in 1621 and again in 1622.<sup>17</sup> Somehow the dynasty had to be rallied to reverse that situation. Moderates among the Donglin argued that it was time for everyone to put other concerns aside and work together to solve the crisis. However, radicals among the Donglin insisted that the crisis could not be solved unless Ming China first undertook national moral rearmament under the personal auspices of its ultimate authority, the Tianqi emperor. The radicals relentlessly pushed their agenda. Deceptively trivial issues, especially the so-called Three Cases, were elevated by them into centerpieces of life-and-death political struggle. The radicals lost this battle. Donglin opponents rallied behind Palace eunuch Wei Zhongxian and in 1626 managed, temporarily at least, to impose a first-ever military defeat upon Nurhaci's Jurchens. Unfortunately, the Donglin opposition fatally degraded the quality of Ming political life with their frightening arrests and horrible tortures of the leading Donglin partisans, and their purge of the rest, a process that raged through two years, 1625 and 1626, and indeed was still going on when the Tianqi emperor died in September 1627 and the whole effort collapsed. The aftereffects of that partisan violence were more than the last Ming emperor, Chongzhen, could cope with, though he tried. Internal rebellions broke out and soon grew uncon-

tainable. Seventeen years later, in 1644, the Manchus seized Beijing and commenced the conquest of all the rest of China.<sup>18</sup>

Many people in the Manchu Qing dynasty looked back with fear and horror at the Donglin encounter with “blood and history” because, as will be noted in Chapter 6, they believed the Ming collapse to have been brought about in some major way by the political provocations of the Donglin heroes’ moral extremism. The Manchu rulers worked, with better success than the Chongzhen emperor was able to achieve, to ensure that weak imperial leadership and other conditions favorable to a renewal of all-out factional confrontation should never arise again.

But something of a cultural predilection for political-moral “struggles to the death” (*sizheng*) lived on to resurface in times of crisis in the modern era. Tang Tsou has noted a spirit of “final confrontation” and “settlement of accounts” in which not just Tiananmen but much of twentieth-century politics in China has been enacted.<sup>19</sup> It is evident from what happened in the 1620s, and again in 1989, that the absolute moral certitude the radicals espoused marginalized as corrupt all efforts toward negotiation and compromise. And, in both cases, the extreme personalization of the issues of engagement so demonized the opposition that it was left with little alternative other than to agree to do battle on the protesters’ terms and crush them in the same high spirit of rectitude that they themselves had been forced to confront.

The Donglin affair was no harbinger of some possible future parliamentary democracy.<sup>20</sup> Donglin Confucian thought was monarchical and authoritarian to the core.<sup>21</sup> However, the arrangement of political institutions in Beijing in the 1620s was already in some ways closer to a parliamentary system than the party-driven regime of 1989, at least insofar as the Ming state included a corps of some 170 “speaking officials,” that is, members of the Censorate and Offices of Scrutiny (often jointly referred to as the *kedao*), whose duties included criticism of mistaken or inappropriate imperial acts.<sup>22</sup> The Donglin martyrs were mainly, though not exclusively, *kedao* who conducted their protests against the imperial government both as a political duty formally required by their offices and as an ethical obligation stemming from their extracurricular understanding of Confucian doctrine.

But that is about as far as parliamentarism went. The whole tragedy and pathos of the Donglin protests was a function of the protesters’ unshakable belief in the ultimate decision-making power of the emperor. Not

one of them entertained even for a moment the thought of challenging that power. Even as they were unjustly arrested and abused and tortured, even when they could have joined the rioters in the streets of their home cities of Suzhou, or De'anfu, or Tongcheng, or Jiangyin, or Changzhou, and opposed Tianqi's grotesque tyranny with popular force, the Donglin martyrs resolutely refused to seize the opportunity. They obeyed the imperial orders. They voluntarily delivered themselves into the hands of murderers, and their blood made history.