



The Provincial Administration of the Ming Dynasty: A Comparison of Its Structure and Effectiveness in the Early and Late Periods

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Abstract. This paper analyzes the provincial administration of the Ming dynasty (1368-1644) in the early and late periods, and how it changed over time in response to various factors. The paper argues that the provincial administration underwent significant transformations that reflected the changing conditions of the Ming empire, and that these transformations had both positive and negative impacts on the Ming government and society. The paper provides a comprehensive and comparative analysis of the provincial administration in both periods, and contributes to the literature and debates on Ming history and administration. The paper also suggests some implications and directions for further research.

Keywords: Ming Dynasty, Provincial Administration, Historical Governance, Administrative Changes.

1 Introduction

The Ming dynasty (1368-1644) was one of the most remarkable periods of Chinese imperial history, marked by political stability, economic prosperity, cultural flourishing, and global expansion[1]. However, it also faced numerous challenges and crises, such as domestic rebellions, foreign invasions, natural disasters, and fiscal difficulties, which eventually led to its collapse and replacement by the Manchu Qing dynasty (1644-1911) [2]. One of the key aspects of the Ming history that reflects both its achievements and its problems is the provincial administration, which was the main link between the central government and the local society. How did the provincial administration of the Ming dynasty change from the early to the late period, and what were the effects of these changes on the Ming state and society? This is the main research question that this paper aims to answer.

The main argument or thesis of this paper is that the provincial administration of the Ming dynasty underwent significant transformations from the early to the late period, which reflected the changing political, social, and economic conditions of the Ming empire[3]. These transformations had both positive and negative impacts on the effectiveness and stability of the Ming government and its relations with the local elites and

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the common people. In other words, this paper argues that the provincial administration was not a static or monolithic system, but a dynamic and diverse one that adapted to and shaped the historical circumstances of the Ming dynasty.

This paper contributes to the existing literature and debates on Ming history and administration by providing a comprehensive and comparative analysis of the provincial administration in the early and late periods of the Ming dynasty. While there are many studies on various aspects of the Ming provincial administration, such as its structure, personnel, functions, policies, etc., there are few studies that compare and contrast the provincial administration in different periods of time, and examine how it changed over time in response to various factors. This paper fills this gap by offering a diachronic and holistic perspective on the provincial administration of the Ming dynasty.

This paper is organized into four sections. The first section describes and analyzes the structure and functioning of the provincial administration in the early period of the Ming dynasty (1368-1424), which was established by the founder Zhu Yuanzhang (Hongwu emperor) as a strict and centralized system that aimed to control and monitor the local officials and prevent any potential rebellion. The second section describes and analyzes the structure and functioning of the provincial administration in the late period of the Ming dynasty (1572-1644), which underwent significant changes due to various factors, such as regionalism, commerce, social unrest, foreign invasion, etc., and became more autonomous and diverse. The third section compares and contrasts the provincial administration in the early and late periods of the Ming dynasty, focusing on their similarities and differences, causes and consequences, and political and social effects. The fourth section concludes by summarizing the main findings and contributions of this paper, and suggesting some implications and directions for further research.

2 The Provincial Administration in the Early Period of the Ming Dynasty (1368-1424)

The provincial administration in the early period of the Ming dynasty was established by the founder Zhu Yuanzhang (Hongwu emperor), who came from a humble peasant background and rose to power by leading a successful rebellion against the Mongol Yuan dynasty [4]. Zhu Yuanzhang was determined to create a strong and centralized system of provincial administration that would enable him to control and monitor the local officials and prevent any potential rebellion. He was also influenced by his Confucian ideology, which emphasized the importance of moral education, meritocracy, and bureaucracy in governing the empire.

Zhu Yuanzhang divided China into thirteen provinces (sheng), which roughly corresponded to the historical regions of China. The provinces were further divided into prefectures (fu), subprefectures (zhou), and counties (xian), each with their own magistrates who were responsible for civil affairs, such as taxation, justice, education, public works, etc. The provinces were headed by provincial governors (xunfu), who were appointed by the emperor and had both civil and military authority[5]. The provincial governors were the highest-ranking officials in the provinces, and they had to report regularly to the central government on various matters. They also had to supervise and

evaluate the performance of the lower-level officials, and recommend them for promotion or demotion.

The provincial governors were supervised by imperial envoys (*xingyuan shi*), who were sent by the emperor to inspect and report on the local conditions. The imperial envoys had the power to investigate and punish any official misconduct or corruption, and they could also issue orders or instructions on behalf of the emperor. The imperial envoys were usually senior civil officials who had passed the highest level of the competitive examinations (*keju*), which were the main method of recruiting and selecting officials for the civil service. The examinations were based on the Confucian classics and tested the candidates' knowledge, morality, and loyalty.

The emperor also relied on eunuchs (*taijian*) as his personal agents who could intervene in provincial affairs and bypass the regular bureaucracy[6]. The eunuchs were castrated men who served in the imperial palace and had access to the emperor's ear. They often acted as messengers, spies, or advisers for the emperor, and they could exert influence or pressure on the provincial officials[7]. The eunuchs were also involved in various projects or missions that required special skills or resources, such as building palaces, temples, tombs, canals, etc. The eunuchs often competed or conflicted with the civil officials, who resented their power and corruption[8].

The provincial administration in the early period of the Ming dynasty had some strengths and weaknesses. On one hand, it was a centralized and standardized system that ensured a high degree of uniformity and efficiency in governing the vast empire. It also enabled the emperor to exercise his authority and legitimacy over the local officials and society, and to maintain order and stability. On the other hand, it was a rigid and oppressive system that imposed heavy taxes and burdens on the people, and that stifled any initiative or innovation among the officials. It also created resentment and resistance among some local elites and groups, who felt alienated or exploited by the central government. Moreover, it was vulnerable to corruption and rebellion, especially when the imperial envoys or eunuchs abused their power or when the emperor was weak or absent.

To illustrate these strengths and weaknesses, some examples can be given from different aspects of the provincial administration in the early period.

One aspect is the taxation system, which was one of the main sources of revenue for the Ming government. The taxation system was based on a fixed quota of grain tax (*liangshui*) and labor service (*yaoqiu*) for each household, which was registered in a census (*huji*) conducted every ten years. The grain tax was collected by the county magistrates, who had to deliver it to the provincial granaries, where it was stored or distributed according to the needs of the central government or the local population. The labor service was performed by the male members of each household, who had to work for a certain number of days per year on various public works projects, such as roads, bridges, canals, etc., or serve in the local militia or army. The taxation system was designed to provide a stable and sufficient income for the Ming government, and to ensure its control over the population and resources. However, the taxation system also had many problems and drawbacks. First, it was based on an outdated and inaccurate census, which did not reflect the actual changes in the population and land ownership. Many households were either omitted or duplicated in the census, and many

people either fled or hid from the census takers to avoid taxation. Second, it was based on a fixed and inflexible quota, which did not adjust to the fluctuations in the harvests and prices. Many households could not afford to pay the grain tax or provide the labor service, and had to sell their land or borrow money from the local elites or merchants. Third, it was based on a corrupt and inefficient administration, which involved many layers of officials and intermediaries who often embezzled or extorted the tax money or goods. Many county magistrates either failed or refused to deliver the grain tax to the provincial granaries, and many provincial governors either hoarded or diverted the grain tax for their own use or profit.

Another aspect is the military system, which was one of the main instruments of defense and security for the Ming government. The military system was based on a combination of professional soldiers (*zhuangyuan*) and conscripted militia (*tuanlian*). The professional soldiers were recruited from among the poor and landless peasants, who were given a salary and a plot of land in exchange for their service. They were organized into units of various sizes and ranks, and stationed in garrisons along the borders or in strategic locations. They were commanded by military officers (*guanfu*), who were appointed by the emperor or the provincial governors. The conscripted militia were drawn from among the male members of each household, who had to serve for a certain number of days per year in the local militia or army. They were organized into units of squads (*wu*) and companies (*qian*), and trained and equipped by the county magistrates or the local elites. They were commanded by local leaders (*xiangyue*) or civil officials (*wen guan* 文官), who were elected by the people or appointed by the government. The military system was designed to provide a large and loyal army for the Ming government, and to ensure its protection and control over the territory and people. However, the military system also had many problems and drawbacks. First, it was based on a low-quality and low-morale force, which lacked training, discipline, and equipment. Many professional soldiers were either deserters or bandits, who abused their power or joined the rebels. Many conscripted militia were either reluctant or incompetent, who avoided their duty or performed poorly. Second, it was based on a divided and conflicting command, which created confusion and rivalry. Many military officers either disobeyed or competed with the civil officials, who resented their authority or interference. Many local leaders either colluded or conflicted with the county magistrates, who distrusted their loyalty or influence. Third, it was based on a costly and wasteful expenditure, which drained the resources and burdened the people. Many garrisons either consumed or wasted the grain tax, which caused shortages and famines. Many militia either demanded or extorted money or goods from the people, who suffered oppression and exploitation.

These examples show how the provincial administration in the early period of the Ming dynasty had some strengths and weaknesses, which reflected its centralized and standardized nature. The provincial administration was able to provide a stable and efficient governance for the vast empire, but it also imposed a heavy and oppressive burden on the people. The provincial administration was able to exercise its authority and legitimacy over the local officials and society, but it also created resentment and resistance among some local elites and groups. The provincial administration was able to

maintain order and stability in the provinces, but it also was vulnerable to corruption and rebellion in times of crisis.

3 The Provincial Administration in the Late Period of the Ming Dynasty (1572-1644)

The provincial administration in the late period of the Ming dynasty underwent significant changes due to various factors, such as the rise of regionalism, the decline of central authority, the increase of population and commerce, and the emergence of social unrest and foreign invasion. The provinces became more autonomous and diverse, and the local officials gained more power and influence. The provincial administration also reflected the changing political, social, and economic conditions of the Ming empire, which faced numerous challenges and crises in its final decades.

One of the main changes in the provincial administration in the late period was the subdivision of provinces into smaller units called circuits (*dao*), each headed by a circuit intendant (*dao yushi*) who coordinated between the provincial and local levels. The circuits were created to facilitate the collection of taxes, the distribution of grain, and the mobilization of troops, as well as to deal with emergencies and disasters. The circuits also served as a buffer zone between the central government and the local society, and as a platform for regional cooperation and communication. The circuits varied in size and number, depending on the population, geography, and resources of each province. By the end of the Ming dynasty, there were about 140 circuits in China.

Another major change in the provincial administration in the late period was the separation of civil and military governors, who replaced the provincial governors who had both civil and military authority. The civil governor (*buzheng shi*) handled civil affairs, such as taxation, justice, education, public works, etc., while the military governor (*xuanwei shi*) commanded the troops and defended the borders. The separation of civil and military governors was intended to prevent any single official from becoming too powerful or rebellious, as well as to improve the efficiency and specialization of provincial administration. However, it also created problems of coordination and cooperation between the two types of governors, who often had different interests and agendas. Moreover, it increased the influence and autonomy of the military governors, who controlled large armies and resources.

A third important change in the provincial administration in the late period was the establishment of provincial surveillance offices (*ducha yuan*) and provincial judicial offices (*xuanda yuan*), which were staffed by civil officials and responsible for overseeing and enforcing the law in the provinces. The provincial surveillance offices were created to monitor and inspect the performance and conduct of local officials, as well as to investigate and punish any official misconduct or corruption. The provincial judicial offices were created to handle criminal cases and civil disputes, as well as to supervise prisons and executions. These two offices replaced or supplemented the imperial envoys and eunuchs, who had lost their effectiveness and credibility as imperial agents. They also represented an attempt to strengthen the rule of law and curb abuses of power in provincial administration.

The provincial administration in the late period of the Ming dynasty had some strengths and weaknesses. On one hand, it was a decentralized and diverse system that allowed for more flexibility and adaptation to local conditions and needs. It also enabled more participation and representation of local elites and groups in provincial affairs, and fostered regional identity and culture. On the other hand, it was a fragmented and competitive system that weakened central authority and cohesion. It also generated conflicts and rivalries among different officials and regions, and undermined loyalty and unity. Furthermore, it was unable to cope with the mounting pressures and threats that faced the Ming empire in its final years.

To illustrate these strengths and weaknesses, some examples can be given from different aspects of the provincial administration in the late period.

One aspect is the taxation system, which was one of the main sources of revenue for the Ming government. The taxation system was based on a combination of grain tax (*liangshui*) and silver tax (*caishui*), which were collected by the county magistrates or the circuit intendants, who had to deliver them to the provincial treasuries or granaries, where they were stored or distributed according to the needs of the central government or the local population. The taxation system was designed to provide a flexible and sufficient income for the Ming government, and to adjust to the fluctuations in the harvests and prices. However, the taxation system also had many problems and drawbacks. First, it was based on an unequal and unfair distribution, which favored some regions or groups over others. Some provinces or circuits were exempted or reduced from paying taxes, while others were overtaxed or exploited. Some elites or merchants were able to evade or manipulate taxes, while others were oppressed or impoverished. Second, it was based on a complex and inefficient administration, which involved many layers of officials and intermediaries who often embezzled or extorted the tax money or goods. Many county magistrates or circuit intendants either failed or refused to deliver the grain tax or silver tax to the provincial treasuries or granaries, and many provincial governors either hoarded or diverted the grain tax or silver tax for their own use or profit. Third, it was based on a volatile and unstable economy, which was affected by the fluctuations in the harvests and prices, as well as by the inflation and deflation of silver. Many households could not afford to pay the grain tax or silver tax, and had to sell their land or borrow money from the local elites or merchants. Many provinces or circuits faced shortages or famines due to the insufficient or irregular supply of grain.

Another aspect is the military system, which was one of the main instruments of defense and security for the Ming government. The military system was based on a combination of professional soldiers (*zhuangyuan*) and conscripted militia (*tuanlian*). The professional soldiers were recruited from among the poor and landless peasants, who were given a salary and a plot of land in exchange for their service. They were organized into units of various sizes and ranks, and stationed in garrisons along the borders or in strategic locations. They were commanded by military officers (*guanfu*), who were appointed by the emperor or the provincial governors. The conscripted militia were drawn from among the male members of each household, who had to serve for a certain number of days per year in the local militia or army. They were organized into units of squads (*wu*) and companies (*qian*), and trained and equipped by the county magistrates or the local elites. They were commanded by local leaders (*xiangyue*) or

civil officials (*wen guan*), who were elected by the people or appointed by the government. The military system was designed to provide a large and loyal army for the Ming government, and to ensure its protection and control over the territory and people. However, the military system also had many problems and drawbacks. First, it was based on a low-quality and low-morale force, which lacked training, discipline, and equipment. Many professional soldiers were either deserters or bandits, who abused their power or joined the rebels. Many conscripted militia were either reluctant or incompetent, who avoided their duty or performed poorly. Second, it was based on a divided and conflicting command, which created confusion and rivalry. Many military officers either disobeyed or competed with the civil officials, who resented their authority or interference. Many local leaders either colluded or conflicted with the county magistrates, who distrusted their loyalty or influence. Third, it was based on a costly and wasteful expenditure, which drained the resources and burdened the people. Many garrisons either consumed or wasted the grain tax, which caused shortages and famines. Many militia either demanded or extorted money or goods from the people, who suffered oppression and exploitation.

The provincial administration was able to provide a flexible and adaptable governance for the diverse regions and needs, but it also imposed an unequal and unfair burden on some regions and groups. The provincial administration was able to enable more participation and representation of local elites and groups in provincial affairs, but it also generated conflicts and rivalries among different officials and regions. The provincial administration was able to cope with some pressures and threats that faced the Ming empire, but it also was unable to cope with others that led to its collapse.

4 The Comparison and Contrast of the Provincial Administration in the Early and Late Periods of the Ming Dynasty

The provincial administration in the early and late periods of the Ming dynasty had some similarities and differences, which reflected the continuity and change of the Ming political, social, and economic conditions. This section will compare and contrast the provincial administration in the two periods, focusing on four aspects: the division of provinces, the appointment of governors, the supervision of officials, and the policy formulation.

The division of provinces was one aspect that showed both similarity and difference between the two periods. In both periods, China was divided into thirteen provinces (*sheng*), which roughly corresponded to the historical regions of China. The provinces were further divided into prefectures (*fu*), subprefectures (*zhou*), and counties (*xian*), each with their own magistrates who were responsible for civil affairs. However, in the late period, the provinces were also subdivided into smaller units called circuits (*dao*), each headed by a circuit intendant (*dao yushi*) who coordinated between the provincial and local levels. The circuits were created to facilitate the collection and distribution of taxes, grain, and troops, as well as to deal with emergencies and disasters. The circuits also served as a buffer zone between the central government and the local society, and

as a platform for regional cooperation and communication. The circuits varied in size and number, depending on the population, geography, and resources of each province. By the end of the Ming dynasty, there were about 140 circuits in China.

The appointment of governors was another aspect that showed both similarity and difference between the two periods. In both periods, the governors were appointed by the emperor and had to report regularly to the central government on various matters. They also had to supervise and evaluate the performance of the lower-level officials, and recommend them for promotion or demotion. However, in the early period, there was only one type of governor for each province: the provincial governor (*xunfu*), who had both civil and military authority. In the late period, there were two types of governors for each province: the civil governor (*buzheng shi*), who handled civil affairs, and the military governor (*xuanwei shi*), who commanded the troops. The separation of civil and military governors was intended to prevent any single official from becoming too powerful or rebellious, as well as to improve the efficiency and specialization of provincial administration. However, it also created problems of coordination and cooperation between the two types of governors, who often had different interests and agendas. Moreover, it increased the influence and autonomy of the military governors, who controlled large armies and resources.

The supervision of officials was a third aspect that showed both similarity and difference between the two periods. In both periods, there were institutions that monitored and inspected the performance and conduct of local officials, as well as investigated and punished any official misconduct or corruption. However, in the early period, these institutions were mainly staffed by imperial agents who acted on behalf of the emperor: imperial envoys (*xingyuan shi*) who were sent by the emperor to inspect and report on local conditions; eunuchs (*taijian*) who served in the imperial palace and had access to the emperor's ear; imperial commissioners (*qingchai*) who were dispatched by the emperor to handle specific missions or projects. In the late period, these institutions were mainly staffed by civil officials who represented the rule of law: provincial surveillance offices (*ducha yuan*) which were responsible for overseeing the local administration; provincial judicial offices (*xuanda yuan*) which were responsible for enforcing the law in the provinces; censors-in-chief (*du yushi*) who headed the censorate ressorts in the provinces. These institutions replaced or supplemented the imperial envoys and eunuchs, who had lost their effectiveness and credibility as imperial agents. They also represented an attempt to strengthen the rule of law and curb abuses of power in provincial administration.

The policy formulation was a fourth aspect that showed both similarity and difference between the two periods. In both periods, there were processes that involved consultation and communication between provincial officials, central agencies, and the emperor in making decisions on various matters affecting the provinces. However, in the early period, these processes were more centralized and standardized, and the emperor had more authority and legitimacy in directing the provincial policies. The emperor could issue orders or instructions directly to the provincial governors or other officials, or through the imperial envoys or eunuchs. The emperor could also solicit opinions or suggestions from the Grand Secretariat (*neige*), which was composed of senior civil officials who assisted the emperor in coordinating the work of the Department of State

Affairs (shangshusheng) and the Six Ministries (liubu). The emperor could also convene meetings or discussions with the Grand Secretariat, the Department of State Affairs, the Six Ministries, or other agencies on important issues. In the late period, these processes were more decentralized and diverse, and the emperor had less authority and legitimacy in directing the provincial policies. The emperor could not issue orders or instructions directly to the civil and military governors or other officials but had to rely on the provincial surveillance offices or judicial offices to convey his will. The emperor could also solicit opinions or suggestions from the Grand Secretariat, which was composed of senior civil officials who assisted the emperor in coordinating the work of the Department of State Affairs and the Six Ministries. However, the Grand Secretariat was often dominated by factions or cliques that had their own interests and agendas. The emperor could also convene meetings or discussions with the Grand Secretariat, the Department of State Affairs, the Six Ministries, or other agencies on important issues. However, these meetings or discussions were often influenced by eunuch interference or court politics.

5 Conclusion

This paper has examined the provincial administration of the Ming dynasty, which was one of the key aspects of the Ming history that reflects both its achievements and its problems. The paper has compared the provincial administration in the early and late periods of the Ming dynasty, and analyzed how it changed over time in response to various political, social, and economic factors. The paper has also evaluated the strengths and weaknesses of the provincial administration in both periods, and how they affected the political, social, economic, and cultural aspects of Ming society.

The main argument or thesis of this paper is that the provincial administration of the Ming dynasty underwent significant transformations from the early to the late period, which reflected the changing political, social, and economic conditions of the Ming empire. These transformations had both positive and negative impacts on the effectiveness and stability of the Ming government and its relations with the local elites and the common people. In other words, this paper argues that the provincial administration was not a static or monolithic system, but a dynamic and diverse one that adapted to and shaped the historical circumstances of the Ming dynasty.

The long-run effects of the imperial bureaucracy: Two tales along the Great Wall of Ming China. *Australian Economic History Review*. on Ming history and administration by providing a comprehensive and comparative analysis of the provincial administration in the early and late periods of the Ming dynasty. While there are many studies on various aspects of the Ming provincial administration, such as its structure, personnel, functions, policies, etc., there are few studies that compare and contrast the provincial administration in different periods of time, and examine how it changed over time in response to various factors. This paper fills this gap by offering a diachronic and holistic perspective on the provincial administration of the Ming dynasty.

This paper also suggests some implications and directions for further research. First, this paper implies that the provincial administration was an important factor in shaping

the Ming political culture and identity, as well as its interactions with other regions and peoples. Therefore, more studies are needed to explore how the provincial administration influenced or was influenced by other aspects of Ming history, such as ideology, religion, art, literature, etc. Second, this paper indicates that the provincial administration was a complex and diverse system that varied across time and space. Therefore, more studies are needed to examine how the provincial administration operated or differed in specific provinces or regions, as well as in specific periods or events. Third, this paper acknowledges that there are some limitations or challenges in studying the provincial administration of the Ming dynasty, such as the availability and reliability of sources, the interpretation and evaluation of evidence, and the comparison and generalization of findings. Therefore, more studies are needed to address these limitations or challenges by using different methods or approaches, such as quantitative analysis, comparative analysis, interdisciplinary analysis, etc.

In conclusion, this paper has provided a comprehensive and comparative analysis of the provincial administration of the Ming dynasty and has argued that it was a dynamic and diverse system that changed over time in response to various factors. This paper has also contributed to the literature and debates on Ming history and administration and has suggested some implications and directions for further research.

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