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Lesser elite in crisis: family strategies of divination (yinyang) school instructors in the Yuan–Ming transition

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Abstract

This article examines the intertwined history of local divination schools and divination instructors during the Yuan–Ming transition through a microhistory of the Zhu family—a diviner family who, as newcomers to Suzhou, carefully navigated the turbulent dynastic transition. Based on broader prosopographical research of Yuan and Ming divination school instructors, this study draws two main conclusions regarding social and institutional history during this crisis period. First, the Zhu family, representing lesser elites whose status depended on state institutions, survived the Yuan–Ming transition by building local networks, transforming their expertise, and manipulating narratives of their family history. Second, despite the Ming founder's order for the re-establishment of local divination schools, it was the diviner families, seeking to recover from the dynastic transition, who played a key role in restoring the local institution. This study extends our understanding of the scope of the fourteenth-century crisis, its diverse manifestations across social groups, and the manipulation of crisis narratives for various purposes. It also proposes a bottom-up approach to engage with the Yuan–Ming social and institutional continuity and rupture.

Keywords: divination; family strategies; Ming; school; Yuan

Introduction

Zhu Quan 朱权 (1310?–1401) grew up in the Wu 吳 county of Suzhou 蘇州 with his mother and two younger brothers. His father, a state divination school instructor, and an immigrant to Wu, had died when Zhu Quan was a little older than ten. Yet, he remembered with admiration the days on which his father's literati friends had frequented their house. Some of them even taught the young boy. Although Zhu Quan aspired to join the rank of the literati, he eventually followed his father's path, which was not bad at all. He married a daughter of a prosperous local family, who bore him a son. Celebrated scholars in Suzhou were drawn to him by his expertise in divination. In around the 1340s, Zhu Quan became the divination school instructor of Suzhou route (called Pingjiang 平江 in the Yuan) through local recommendation.¹

¹ The Zhu family's biographies are carved on their tombstones, excavated in 2010. For the archaeological report, see Ding Jinlong 丁金龍 et al., 'Jiangsu Suzhou xiejiafen yuanming zhushi jiazhu fajue baogao' 江蘇蘇州謝家墳元明朱氏家族墓發掘報告, *Dongnan wenhua* 東南文化 IV (2018), pp. 29–41. The texts of the tombstones were also published in Ding Yi 丁一, 'Jiangsu Suzhou shihu jingqu xiejiafen zhushi mudi chutu muzhide chubu

In a decade, the world that Zhu Quan knew started to fall apart.

In the second half of the fourteenth century, rebels roared through China and would eventually overthrow the Mongol state in East Asia known as the Yuan 元 Dynasty (1271–1368). Flood and famine plagued regions near Suzhou, pushing the rebel Zhang Ninety-four (Ch. Zhang Jiushi 張九四, later renamed Zhang Shicheng 張士誠, 1321–1367), a former canal boatman, to lead his army to Suzhou in 1356. Zhang ruled the prosperous region until 1367, when another rebel, Zhu Yuanzhang 朱元璋 (r. 1368–1398), incorporated the town into his fledgling state that would be known as the Ming 明 Dynasty (1368–1644).²

The Yuan–Ming dynastic transition in China resonates with the radical climate change, now known as the Little Ice Age, and a series of political and social crises across Eurasia.³ While rulers, military commanders, statesmen, and local elites coped with the crisis in a very dramatic manner, this article shifts attention to lesser local elites. It examines the family strategies of divination instructors during the Yuan–Ming transition and their intertwined history with the continuity and rupture of local divination schools. The focus of this article is a microhistory of the Zhu family of Suzhou, whose tombs were discovered in 2010 during the course of a construction project. Based on broader prosopographical research of Yuan and Ming divination school instructors, this article draws two conclusions regarding the social and institutional transformation during the crisis period. First, the Zhu family, representing many lesser local elites, survived the Yuan–Ming transition and restored their previous position by building local networks, transforming their expertise, and manipulating narratives of their family history. Second, despite the Ming founder's order for the re-establishment of local divination schools, it was the diviner families, seeking to recover from the dynastic transition, who played a key role in restoring the local institution.

Studies on the Yuan–Ming transition, and on periods of crisis and transitions in general, have predominantly focused on the political, military, social, and cultural elite.⁴ However, recent studies that use epigraphic sources of the Jin–Yuan periods provide a fuller picture of social transformation by considering rural societies and modest position holders during political transitions.⁵ In line with these studies, this article focuses on lesser local elites, who, unlike literati and well-established local elite families, had livelihoods and local status that were heavily dependent on the state institution of local divination schools. The Zhu family represents many of the instructors of local Confucian, medical, divination, and Mongolian schools. Their experience of the Yuan–Ming transition expands our understanding of the scope of the fourteenth-century crisis, and its manifestations and impacts in different regions and for different social groups.

kaozheng' 江苏苏州石湖景区谢家坟朱氏墓地出土墓志的初步考证, *Dongnan wenhua* IV (2014), pp. 93–99; and some complementary material on the Zhu family is included in Sun Mingli 孫明利, 'Shihu xiejiafen yuanming zhushi jiazhu muzhi buzheng' 石湖謝家墳元明朱氏家族墓誌補正, *Suzhou wenbo luncong* 蘇州文博論叢 I (2018), pp. 46–53. This article refers mainly to the archaeological report.

² Li Zhuoying 李卓穎, 'Yidai lishi shuxie yu mingzhongye suzhou zhangshicheng jiyi zhi fugui' 易代歷史書寫與明中葉蘇州張士誠記憶之復歸, *Mingdai yanjiu* 明代研究 XXXIII (2019), pp. 1–60.

³ See the introduction of this Special Issue.

⁴ See D. Robinson, *In the Shadow of the Mongol Empire: Ming China and Eurasia* (Cambridge, 2019); P. J. Smith, 'Impressions of the Song–Yuan–Ming transition: the evidence from *Biji* memoirs', in *The Song–Yuan–Ming Transition in Chinese History*, (eds.) P. J. Smith and R. von Glahn (Cambridge, MA, 2003), pp. 71–110; Zhang Yi 章毅, 'Yuanming yidai zhiji rushide zhengzhi xuanze: zhaofang zhusheng tangguifang zhi bijiao' 元明易代之際儒士的政治選擇：趙坊、朱升、唐桂芳之比較, *Zhongguo wenhua yanjiusuo xuebao* 中國文化研究所學報 LI (2010), pp. 51–66.

⁵ J. Wang, *In the Wake of the Mongols: The Making of A New Social Order in North China, 1200–1600* (Cambridge, MA, 2018); T. Iiyama, *Genealogy and Status: Hereditary Office Holding and Kinship in North China under Mongol Rule* (Cambridge, MA, 2023).

By waving institutional history together with social history, this article intertwines with the discourse on Yuan–Ming continuity and rupture in terms of institutions and society. At the macro level, historians have heatedly debated whether sociopolitical rupture or continuity primarily characterises the Yuan–Ming transition.⁶ At a micro level, historians have studied the Ming adoption of specific Yuan institutions, including the local divination school and the hereditary household system, which supposedly registered families according to their occupation and tied them to the same occupation generation after generation.⁷ Rather than arguing for or against a particular view on this topic, this article proposes the incorporation of a bottom-up approach in order to study the socio-institutional developments during the Yuan–Ming transition. Given the elaborate bureaucratic tradition of imperial China, many scholars have naturally focused on state regulations and official instructions regarding the foundation and operation of institutions. These sources, however, reflect the one-sided viewpoint of the state and, at best, tell how things worked on paper. By shifting the focus to the people who manned the institutions, the history of institutions and society is greatly enriched. Studies have shown that the development of the Ming community schools was shaped by actors from the court to the local level, and registered military families developed strategies to lower their costs in dealing with the Ming military institution.⁸ Similarly, this article demonstrates that the apparent continuity of the local divination school in the Ming entailed many significant changes in the position of the divination instructor, and it was made possible not by state policy alone, but also by the active participation of local experts.

By following the career and life trajectory of Zhu Quan's father, Zhu Daoning 朱道宁 (1263–1323), the first section reconstructs the Yuan restrictions on divination instructors and their family strategies for coping with these restrictions. The mobility and flexibility that were needed to develop a career as a divination instructor would play to the instructors' advantage during the unstable period of dynastic transition. The second section moves to Zhu An and his son's career during the Yuan–Ming transition period. It examines how, due to the changing political and social circumstances, divination instructor families transformed their expertise to take other positions. The third section reviews how Zhu An's grandson reassumed the family's old position in Suzhou through strengthening the family's local network and prestige. The fourth section explores how the Zhu family manipulated their family history to enhance their local status.

The divination school and the mobile instructor

Zhu Quan's father, Zhu Daoning, was born in Yuanzhou 袁州 (Jiangxi province) into a family of Song scholar-officials. When Zhu Daoning reached adulthood, the ruling dynasty had become the Yuan, which, unlike the Song, offered limited opportunities for Confucian scholars to enter the bureaucracy. Having a low prospect of becoming a scholar-official, Zhu Daoning chose an alternative career path. He practised geomancy and travelled to the prosperous Yangtze delta region to seek opportunities. After falling in love with

⁶ Li Xinfeng 李新峰, 'Lun yuanming zhijian biange' 論元明之間的變革, *Gudai wenming* 古代文明 IV.4 (2010), pp. 83–102; Li Zhi'an 李治安, 'Yuandai ji ming qianqi shehui biandong chutan' 元代及明前期社會變動初探, *Zhonggushi yanjiu* 中古史研究 Special Issue I (2005), pp. 83–98.

⁷ Chen Dehao 陳德好 and Zheng Weiming 鄭炜明, 'Cong beike kan mingdai guanfang yinyangxue jigou' 從碑刻看明代官方陰陽學機構, *Qishi xuekan* 求是學刊 IV (2018), pp. 141–147; Yin Minzhi 尹敏誌, 'Mingdai de yinyangsheng yu yinyang hu' 明代的陰陽生與陰陽戶, *Shixue yuekan* 史學月刊 III (2019), pp. 42–44. On the hereditary household system, see H. Serruys, 'Remains of Mongol customs in China during the early Ming period', *Monumenta Serica* XVI.1–2 (1957), pp. 143–148.

⁸ S. Schneewind, *Community Schools and the State in Ming China* (Stanford, 2006); M. Szonyi, *The Art of Being Governed: Everyday Politics in Late Imperial China* (Princeton, 2017).

the elegant city of Suzhou, Zhu Daoning bought a piece of land there and, at the age of 46, he married a local woman and settled down in Wu county. Literati—many of them local celebrities of their days—were drawn to Zhu Daoning’s geomancy knowledge. In 1320, probably through the networks of the Suzhou literati, Zhu Daoning was recommended to the Directorate of Astronomy (*sitianjian* 司天監), which in turn appointed him associate professor (*xuezheng* 學正) of the Suzhou divination school. Soon, he was promoted to professor at the divination school in Changzhou 常州 route, just east of Suzhou.⁹

The divination school was a new type of local school that was initiated by the Mongol rulers of the Yuan. In 1291, following the rebellion of the Mongol Prince Nayan, who allegedly had been incited by a diviner, Qubilai ordered the establishment of local divination schools in all the Yuan routes. Local divination schools, therefore, were aimed to manage local diviners—to have them registered and supervised, teach them topics assigned by the state, and organise them for local services. The topics taught at the divination schools were the ‘three fundamentals (*sanyuan* 三元)’—the divination of burial places, dwelling space, and marriage.¹⁰ The first two constitute the main concerns of the geomancy of the period. These three topics, as the name suggests, were fundamental to the everyday life of elites and commoners alike. At the same time, they were safe topics that formed almost no potential challenge to state authority. While Qubilai’s imperial order concerned only the routes, which were the largest administrative units of the Yuan, his successors expanded the new institution to lower administrative units of prefectures, subprefectures, and counties.¹¹

The structure of state divination schools resembled that of local Confucian schools and medical schools. By the book, a route divination school was led by a divination professor, who was assisted by an associate professor and an assistant professor (*xuelu* 學錄). A prefectural divination school was led by an associate professor, and a sub-prefectural school by an assistant professor.¹² Yet, the implementation of these imperial plans was not as ambitious as the top-down instructions. Not all routes and prefectures had a divination school, and not all the positions in the schools were filled. In the early 1320s, when Zhu Daoning was the divination professor of Changzhou, there were altogether 73 divination professors throughout Yuan China—a very moderate number compared with the 876 Confucian professors and 232 medicine professors.¹³

Imperial orders instructed that divination instructors were to be selected by means of local recommendation and examination on specific divination topics and texts. Other than

⁹ Ding et al., ‘Fajue baogao’, pp. 31–33. I follow Shinno’s translation of the Yuan medical school instructor titles in R. Shinno, *The Politics of Chinese Medicine under Mongol Rule* (London and New York, 2016).

¹⁰ *Yuan dianzhang* 元典章, annotated by Chen Gaohua 陳高華 et al. (Beijing, 2011), vol. 1, pp. 316–317 (hereafter YDZ). These topics were most likely taught in the Ming divination school as well. The Ming divination schools were also involved in astronomical observations and time-keeping activities; see Chen and Zheng, ‘Cong beike’, pp. 143–144.

¹¹ On Yuan local divination schools, see Chen Gaohua 陳高華, ‘Yuandai de difang guanxue’ 元代的地方官學, in *Yuanshi yanjiu xinlun* 元史研究新論, (ed.) Chen Gaohua (Shanghai, 2005), pp. 376–420; Ye Xinmin 葉新民, ‘Yuandai yinyangxue chutan’ 元代陰陽學初探, *Menggushi yanjiu* 蒙古史研究 VI (2000), pp. 49–57; Zhang Tongzhu 張同鑄, ‘Lun yuanchao zhiguan xitong zhongde yinyangxue jigou’ 論元朝職官系統中的陰陽學機構, *Lilun xuekan* 理論學刊 CCIL (2014), pp. 111–115; Zhao Xiaoming 趙小明, ‘Cong heishuicheng wenxian kan yuandaide yinyangxue jiaoyu’ 從黑水城文獻看元代的陰陽學教育, *Hengyang shifan xueyuan xuebao* 衡陽師範學院學報 I (2016), pp. 108–112.

¹² More precisely, divination schools of high-rank (*shangzhou* 上州) and middle-rank subprefectures (*zhongzhou* 中州) were headed by a professor; those of low rank (*xiazhou* 下州) were headed by an associate professor (YDZ, vol. 4, p. 2051). The dynastic history notes that, at the beginning of Ayurbarwada’s reign, a divination professor was appointed to routes, prefectures, and subprefectures, which is apparently a mistake. See Song Lian 宋濂, *Yuanshi* 元史 (Beijing, 1976), 81: 2034. On the elaboration of local medical schools, see Shinno, *Politics of Chinese Medicine*, pp. 52–56.

¹³ YDZ, vol. 1, pp. 227–228.

assigned texts on the ‘three fundamentals’, these included various prognostication methods, such as the *Book of Changes* divination, fate calculation (*sanming* 三命), planets divination (*wuxing* 五星), the six stems (*liuren* 六壬), which used a cosmic board composed of a celestial disk and a terrestrial disk, and the general calculation (*shuxue* 數學).¹⁴ However, as Zhu Daoning’s example shows, in practice, the local administration’s recommendation seemed to have played a much more important role than examination. Except for mastering the classical works of ‘the three fundamentals’, divination professors were expected to be skilled and experienced, which implied that they should be above a certain age, likely 50.¹⁵ Zhu Daoning, for instance, was in his late fifties when he was appointed the Changzhou divination professor. Despite holding a ranked position (9b) in the bureaucracy, divination professors, like medicine professors, were barred from the regular flow in the bureaucracy because, unlike generalist Confucian scholars, their expertise was specialised. Therefore, although promotion from associate professor to professor was commonplace, the divination professors had already met the glass ceiling of their career.

Other restrictions also fell on the divination professor (but only on the professor, not the positions below his rank). These details have not been systematically recorded in the official regulations, but can be reconstructed by piecing together individual cases and referring to similar positions such as the Confucian school professor. The first restriction was the rule of avoidance, which prevented divination professors from assuming a position in their hometown.¹⁶ This rule explains why Zhu Daoning took up the professor position in the neighbouring Changzhou route instead of in Suzhou, his place of residence. The second restriction was that a professor’s tenure was limited to three years and the third was that the post of divination professor could not be passed to a son—a rule that was spelled out by the state to ensure an expert’s competence.¹⁷ In summary, although it was at the bottom of the bureaucracy, the professor position involved many restrictions for the professors and their families to cope with.

Divination professors and their families responded to these challenges with mobility and flexibility. The professors were willing to leave their place of residence to take up a position elsewhere. After the three-year tenure, professors who were young enough would move to another place for a second or even third tenure.¹⁸ Zhu Daoning himself had once been the divination professor of Qingyuan 慶元 (nowadays Ningbo) route before he moved to Suzhou.¹⁹

To overcome the nonhereditary bar, sons of divination professors, who often continued the family trade of divination, would take up an instructor position in a place other than where their fathers had served. For example, a father professor taught in Jinning 晉寧 route (Shanxi province) in north China, while the son worked as a divination professor in Raozhou 饒州 route (Jiangxi province) in south China.²⁰ In tandem with physical

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 316–317. On the curriculum of the divination schools, see Li Yuanhua 李元華, ‘Yuandai yinyangxue jiaoxue neirong kaobian’ 元代陰陽學教學內容考辨, in *Jinian jiaoyushi yanjiu chuanguan ershi zhounian lunwenji* 紀念教育史研究創刊二十周年論文集 (Beijing, 2009), pp. 1410–1417.

¹⁵ Regulations on divination professors do not specify what age exactly, but Confucian school professors should be above age 50; see *ibid.*, pp. 302, 317.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 247.

¹⁷ YDZ, vol. 4, p. 2068. No regulation regarding divination professors’ tenure limitation is recorded. But a regulation in 1287 states that a Confucian professor’s tenure was three years, and they were allowed to have up to two tenures in principle. In fact, some people remained in the same position for five or even 10 years. This may also be true for some of the divination professors. See Chen, ‘Yuandai de difang’, p. 284.

¹⁸ A man named Yang Ju 楊琚 was divination professor in three prefectures; see *Chenghua chuzhou fuzhi* 成化處州府誌, 7: 56b, *Zhongguo fangzhi ku Database*, <http://server.wenzibase.com.009852wu04c5.erf.sbb.spk-berlin.de/spring/front/read> (accessed 25 November 2024) p. 898.

¹⁹ *Zhizheng siming xuzhi* 至正四明續誌, 2: 7b, *Zhongguo fangzhi ku Database*, p. 120.

²⁰ *Qianlong pingding zhoushi* 乾隆平定州誌, 8: 75b, *Zhongguo fangzhi ku Database*, p. 1331.

mobility, families of divination instructors also transformed their expertise to take up other positions. For instance, Peng Conglong 彭從龍, the associate professor of the Fuzhou 撫州 divination school in 1324, had two sons. One served as instructor of the local medical school in a prefecture that bordered Fuzhou. The other taught in a local private academy.²¹

Although divination professors and their families were burdened by the bureaucratic restrictions, in the long run, the strategies that they developed to cope with the restrictions would play to their advantage. By moving around for positions, they very likely learned how to effectively establish networks in a new place. As Zhu Daoning's example shows, a good diviner could draw local elite to him, and another efficient way to get local connections was through marriage. The strategy of sending sons to other professions increased the family's opportunities to remain in the same social group. The mobility and flexibility strategies would become especially useful in the dynastic transition period, when local divination schools stopped functioning and forced migration was commonplace.

Shortly after Zhu Daoning was appointed divination instructor in Changzhou, he had to leave the position because of his waning health. In 1323, feeling as though the end of his life was approaching, the professor dressed, called his family to his bed, and told them he still wanted to see a few old-time friends. Before the messengers had reached these friends, Zhu Daoning died, survived by his wife, his eldest son Zhu Quan, another two sons whom we only know by name, and a daughter who was married by this time.²² However good a prognosticator he might have been, as a previous subject of the Song, Zhu Daoning would never have foreseen that his son Zhu Quan would witness the fall of the Yuan.

Dynastic transition and expertise transformation

In the turbulent years of natural disasters and social upheavals of the late Yuan period, Suzhou was a stable oasis. Under Zhang's rule, the town sheltered many scholars. The divination instructor stayed in the town, but literati still associated with Zhu Quan and appreciated his divination ability. The diviner managed to marry his two daughters to literati.²³ Zhou Boqi 周伯琦 (1298–1369)—a previous Hanlin Academy (*Hanlin yuan* 翰林院) scholar and a celebrated calligrapher, who was either detained or sponsored by Zhang Shicheng in Suzhou (from 1357)—was especially close to the divination instructor. As a present, he gave Zhu Quan his calligraphy of the two characters 'cloudy mountain' (*yunxiu* 雲岫), which Zhu Quan joyfully adopted as his title.²⁴ This was no doubt networking practice by both sides.

The bubble in which Zhu Quan and his friends lived exploded when Zhu Yuanzhang took Suzhou after a 10-month siege in 1367. The future Ming emperor purged Zhang's followers and protégés, including many of the Suzhou scholars. He also relocated much of the population of the Yangtze delta region—more than 160,000 households according to some modern scholars—to the less-developed regions to the north. The forced migration was primarily aimed to repopulate regions in China that had suffered heavily from natural disasters and warfare. It also specifically targeted the wealthy families of Suzhou who had cooperated with Zhang Shicheng.²⁵

²¹ See R. Hymes, 'Not quite a gentleman? Doctors in Sung and Yuan', *Chinese Science* VIII (1987), p. 19.

²² Ding et al., 'Fajue baogao', pp. 31–33.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 34.

²⁴ Wang Xing 王行, 'Yunzhou ci' 雲岫辭, in *Banxuan ji* 半軒集 (Siku quanshu edition), 1: 13a–14a.

²⁵ Wu Bihu 吳必虎, 'Mingchu suzhou xiang subei de yimin jiqi yingxiang' 明初蘇州向蘇北的移民及其影響, *Dongnan wenhua* 東南文化 II (1987), pp. 47–52.

Zhu Quan's family was spared the persecution, probably thanks to their being not very prominent. Yet, they left Suzhou for Chengdu 成都, some 1,200 miles to the west, where Zhu Quan's only son Zhu Huan 朱煥 was put in charge of the public granary. It is difficult to tell the circumstances under which the Zhu family took the position. Although an overseer of a public granary was higher in rank than a divination professor, and certainly of more strategic importance to the state, the promotion did not come without a price. Zhu Huan had to leave behind the land that his family owned and his family's networks in Suzhou. Zhu Quan also accompanied his son to Chengdu, which may indicate that the family felt safer by leaving unsettled Suzhou for the time being.

Immediately upon the founding of his state, the Ming Emperor Zhu Yuanzhang called for the systematic establishment of public granaries down to the county level. The nascent state's need to feed its people and guarantee social stability is obvious. What might be less obvious is the connection between divination and granary management. A governmental granary overseer needed to have complicated mathematical skills. His responsibilities included selling, lending, or giving away grain in the spring and purchasing, collecting loans, and soliciting contributions in the autumn. He also needed to calculate the market price, and the conversion between the weight and nutritional value of different kinds of grains.²⁶ The association between granary supervision and mathematics is also well reflected in the earliest Chinese mathematical writings, which contain many problems about grain management.²⁷ Diviners, as experts in the 'art of calculation' (*shushu* 數術), were credited with calculation abilities. The 'six stem' divination, for example, concerned complex numerological calculation.²⁸ Another reason for the diviner's advantage in managing granaries might be their geomancy knowledge. Whether for the living or the dead, diviners observed and manipulated the natural environment, paying close attention to the quality of the earth and water, the degree of humidity, and the amount of sunlight.²⁹ This knowledge of the flow of *qi* was important for managing granaries in both physical and spiritual terms. The transformation of Zhu Huan's divination expertise into managing grains is hardly an isolated example—the Yuan has its own record of employing diviners in grain management during the dynastic transition. After Qubilai accomplished the conquest of the Song in 1276, 40 households of diviners, probably from the Yangtze delta region too, were selected and relocated to the civilian agricultural colonies in Chengdu to handle grain taxation.³⁰

Divination ability was also transformable to a cluster of other fields of expertise—accounting, scribal work, and medicine. Amid the turmoil of the Yuan–Ming transition, when local divination schools stopped functioning until Ming local divination and medical schools started to be established in 1384, divination instructors naturally turned to other professions to make a living, or even to improve their situation. For example, a man named Wang Qianfu 王乾福 had been the divination instructor of Ningling 寧陵 county

²⁶ For a brief review of the history of grain storage, see R. B. Wong, 'Chinese traditions of grain storage', in *Nourish the People: The State Civilian Granary System In China, 1650–1850*, (eds.) P. E. Will and R. B. Wong (Ann Arbor, MI, 1991), pp. 1–16. The overseer's function in governmental granaries during the early Qing era likely applied to the early Ming era as well; see R. B. Wong, 'Introduction', in *Nourish the People*, (eds.) Will and Wong, pp. 19–20.

²⁷ K. Chemla and B. Ma, 'How do the earliest known mathematical writings highlight the state's management of grains in early imperial China?', *Archive for History of Exact Sciences* LXIX.1 (2015), pp. 1–53. P. E. Will discusses the accounting difficulties that contemporary scholars encountered in accessing Qing granary registers; see P. E. Will, 'Statistical difficulties and accounting methods', in *Nourish the People*, (eds.) Will and Wong, pp. 233–289.

²⁸ Ho Peng Yoke, *Chinese Mathematica Astrology* (London and New York, 2003), pp. 113–138.

²⁹ R. Smith, *Fortune-Tellers and Philosophers: Divination in Traditional Chinese Society* (Boulder, CO, 1991), pp. 131–148.

³⁰ Song Lian 宋濂 et al., *Yuanshi* 元史 (Beijing, 1995), vol. 100, p. 2572. Tristan Brown also mentioned to me in a conversation that similar cases existed in the Qing.

(nowadays Henan province). In the late Yuan, when the ‘Red Turban’ rebels took control of the region, they appointed Wang Qianfu as their registrar (*jingli* 經歷)—a position that involved handling documents, and possibly money as well. Later, Wang settled in Lanyang 蘭陽 county, not far from Ningling. In 1384, when the local county medical school was established in Lanyang, Wang became its instructor.³¹

Another family, the Zhangs of Jiangyin, even produced a Hanlin Imperial Academy scholar, Zhang Xuan 張宣. Zhang Xuan’s grandfather was a local divination instructor and his father served in the provincial Commission of Military Affairs in the late Yuan period. Similarly to what Wang Qianfu did for the rebels, Zhang Xuan’s father handled documents. But he was also a man of letters and brought up his son Zhang Xuan to be a polished writer. Zhang Xuan was handpicked by Zhu Yuanzhang for the Hanlin Academy to participate in the composition of the Yuan dynastic history. However, in 1373, not long after his promotion and for reasons unknown to us, Zhang Xuan was exiled to Henan and died on the way there, at the age of 33.³²

Zhang Xuan’s tragic end can also be seen as the family’s failure to climb up the social ladder. Although the reasons for both Zhang Xuan’s exile and his death might be contingent, the family probably lacked a strong network to support them in the central bureaucracy, which is the reason for the failure of their social mobility. The example of the Zhangs serves as a reminder of the social dimension of expertise. A divination instructor could be successfully transformed into a granary overseer, a scribe, a medicine instructor, or a private academy teacher, not only because he was capable of reading, writing, calculating, and understanding the macrocosm and microcosm (the human body), but also because these professions shared similar social status.

During the Yuan period, divination instructors probably chose to move and transform their expertise as a family strategy. However, during the dynastic transition, these actions became necessary for their survival. Although sources do not detail how they built networks in new locations, their ability to network must have been crucial in obtaining various positions. For example, Wang Qianfu managed to secure recommendations for a medical school instructor position despite being new to Lanyang.³³ Many diviner families obtained new positions with ranks that were similar to that of local divination instructors. This can be seen in two ways: as a sign of the structural stability of bureaucratic rankings across the Yuan and Ming Dynasties, especially given the Ming state’s well-known efforts to control its subjects’ expertise and status; and as evidence of the diviner families’ active and strategic pursuit of similar or identical positions in the Ming Dynasty.

The return

In 1384, the Ming Emperor Zhu Yuanzhang ordered for local divination and medical schools to be established throughout his empire. The Ming divination schools largely followed the structure of the Yuan period, despite the changes in the state’s administrative organisation. A professor (*zhengshu* 正術), still ranked 9b, headed a prefecture divination school. An associate professor (*dianshu* 典術) headed a subprefecture school, and an assistant professor (*xunshu* 訓術) a county school.³⁴ The implementation of the imperial order was as complex as it was in the Yuan. While some places had already resumed their local divination schools before 1384, others delayed the task, probably due to the lack of qualified instructors or funding. Places that used to have divination schools in the Yuan

³¹ Li Xicheng 李希程, *Lanyang xianzhi* 蘭陽縣誌 (Shanghai, 1982), p. 355.

³² Song Lian 宋濂, ‘Zhangshi putu xu’ 張氏譜圖序, in *Wenxian ji* 文憲集 (Siku quanshu edition), 7: 51a–54a.

³³ Li, *Lanyang xianzhi*, p. 355.

³⁴ Dong Lun 董倫, *Ming taizu shilu* 明太祖實錄 (Taipei, 1961–1966), 162: 5a (p. 2519). The routes were abolished in the Ming.

normally re-established the institution in the same buildings. The school building of the Changzhou divination school, where Zhu Daoning had worked for a short while, continued to function as the divination school in the Ming period.³⁵ The divination school of Suzhou, located east of the town's watch tower, was also reactivated following the imperial edict.³⁶

The Zhu family was not in Suzhou in 1384 to witness the re-establishment of the local divination school. They stayed in Chengdu until Zhu Huan retired from his position sometime before 1393. After being away from Suzhou for more than two decades, the family returned to the town, probably more esteemed than before. The Zhu's networks in Suzhou were further strengthened by marriage. The retired granary overseer married his son Zhu An 朱安 to a young woman from a prominent Suzhou family—her great-grandfather was the paramount administrator of the Yuan Hangzhou route; her grandfather was a Yuan Hanlin scholar; and her father, who served the Ming, was the magistrate of Ruijin 瑞金 county in Jiangxi province.³⁷

In 1403, the divination school building of Suzhou, which had stood for more than a century, was rebuilt.³⁸ In the same year, Zhu An, at the age of 33, assumed the position of professor at the school.³⁹ The two events may well have been related. As the emperor only issued edicts, but left the construction of school buildings to the local administration and local society, sometimes the divination instructor took the initiative to sponsor the construction or renovation of school buildings. This applied to both the Yuan and the Ming. For example, in the Yuan Qingyuan route where Zhu An's great-grandfather Zhu Daoning first took a professor position, a divination professor who came after him renovated the old school buildings in 1340–1341.⁴⁰ Sponsoring the school building very likely helped Zhu An to resume the family profession in Suzhou.

What did not play an important role in Zhu An's appointment, however, was the household occupation registration. Although the Yuan and Ming Dynasties are well known for their household registration system based on hereditary occupations, and it is widely believed that divination instructors belonged to registered diviner households, there is no evidence that the Zhu family was registered as a diviner household. At least, this was not something the family deemed worth noting in their history. The Zhu family did not seem to be tied to the occupation by state policy. Instead, the continuity of the family's expertise and official posts resulted from their strategy of establishing marriage ties with privileged local families and participating in local projects.

Although scholars generally see the Ming divination school as a continuation of its Yuan predecessor,⁴¹ their bureaucratic management differed significantly. Two such differences can be perceived straight away from Zhu An's case. First, Zhu An was appointed divination professor at the age of 33, which was much younger than the age of Yuan divination professors. Second, he assumed the position in his hometown, which suggests that the Yuan rule of avoidance did not apply to divination professors in the Ming. The tombstones of Zhu An's descendants have not come down to us, so their careers are unknown. But other Ming examples of divination instructors indicate that, in contrast to the Yuan period, the position of divination professor was inheritable in the Ming. Wu Shangwen 武尚文 of the Daming 大名 prefecture (nowadays where Shandong, Hebei, and Henan meet), whose great-grandfather had been a divination professor in Chizhou 池州 (present-day Anhui) in the Yuan, became the divination professor of Daming at approximately the

³⁵ *Chongxiu piling zhi* 重修毗陵志, 6: 5b, *Zhongguo fangzhiku Database*, p. 378.

³⁶ *Suzhou fuzhi* 蘇州府誌, 8: 20a, *Zhongguo fangzhiku Database*, p. 361.

³⁷ Ding et al., 'Fajue baogao', p. 37.

³⁸ *Changzhou xianzhi* 長洲縣誌, 5: 31b, *Zhongguo fangzhiku Database*, p. 148.

³⁹ Ding et al., 'Fajue baogao', p. 37.

⁴⁰ *Zhizheng siming xuzhi* 至正四明續志, 2: 7b, *Zhongguo fangzhi ku Database*, p. 120.

⁴¹ Yi, 'Mingdai', pp. 42–44; Chen and Zheng, 'Cong beike', p. 143.

same time as Zhu An had his appointment. When Wu Shangwen died of disease in office, his son inherited the position and held it until he died of advanced age, when the position was passed to his own son.⁴² The Wu family's experience also reveals the fourth difference between the Yuan and Ming divination professors—that is, the professor position in the Ming was not limited to a three-year tenure.

These bureaucratic changes in the Ming divination professor position had a significant impact on the position holders and their families. In contrast to the Yuan, now the instructors could start a position at an early age, in their hometown, hold it for a seemingly unlimited time, and eventually pass it to their descendants. The Ming divination schools offered their instructors much more physical and professional stability, which allowed them to foster stronger local connections.

Local connections indeed featured prominently in Zhu An's career. After assuming the position of Suzhou divination professor, Zhu An was called to Beijing to assist with the construction of Emperor Yongle's (r. 1402–1424) tomb. He stayed in Beijing for three years to fulfil his duties before returning to Suzhou. While still holding the professor position, Zhu An also assisted with scribal work in prefectural and county offices. His tombstone also notes his involvement in local welfare such as supporting families in need,⁴³ which, besides serving as evidence of his virtue, also indicates his status in the local society. It appears that the Zhu family, though originally newcomers, had become well rooted and well connected in Suzhou, establishing themselves as part of the lesser local elite, or even the local elite.

Manipulating family history

Scholars have emphasised the social function of family histories and genealogy compositions in both north and south China in late imperial periods. Iiyama, in his research on epigraphic family histories and genealogies in north China, shows that tombstones not only commemorated ancestors and recorded family history; they were also part of family strategies. Families used tombstones to demonstrate social prestige, express loyalty to the imperial household, enhance connections with officials, or avoid tax.⁴⁴ Szonyi's study on genealogies in Fujian from the Ming onward also points out the role of genealogies in raising a family's social prestige and stabilising social order.⁴⁵ Similarly, accounts on the Zhu family's tombstones not only convey the family history, but also reveal how the family manipulated the account of their history in response to changing political and social circumstances.

One of the primary functions of family history was to establish local prestige. To this end, the Zhu family strategically omitted experiences that occurred outside Suzhou. For example, the biography of the forefather Zhu Daoning did not mention his previous position as a divination professor in Qingyuan, although this was apparently the first official position that he gained. Similarly, Zhu Huan's more than two decades of experience in Chengdu were never elaborated upon, likely because that would have detracted from the prestige that the family aimed to establish in Suzhou.

Another strategy that was employed in the Zhu family's historical writing is maintaining silence about the Yuan–Ming transition. Zhu Quan's biography discloses no information about where he was and what he did during a period of more than five decades—from his appointment as the associate professor of Pingjiang divination school

⁴² *Zhengtong daming fuzhi* 正統大名府誌, 6: 29a, *Zhongguo fangzhiku Database*, p. 348.

⁴³ Ding et al., 'Fajue baogao', p. 35.

⁴⁴ Iiyama, *Genealogy*, pp. 43–95, 123–146.

⁴⁵ M. Szonyi, *Practicing Kinship: Lineage and Descent in Late Imperial China* (Stanford, 2002).

in the 1340s until his death in 1401. To further blur the timeline, his biography records his appointment, which was certainly the highlight of his life, without specifying when this took place.⁴⁶ When composing Zhu Quan's biography in the early Ming period, the family probably tried to smooth over sensitive topics, such as his serving the Mongols or Suzhou under the Ming founder's foe, Zhang Shicheng.

To enhance their local prestige in general, and their connection to the divination professor position in particular, the Zhu family also carefully rewrote their history. It happens that there are two different accounts about the forefather Zhu Daoning's migration to Suzhou, both drafted by his son Zhu Quan. The first account appears on Zhu Daoning's tombstone and was composed shortly after 1323, at around the same time as Zhu Quan buried his father. According to this account, which has been adopted above in this article, Zhu Daoning moved to Suzhou and settled there. Two characters before the phrase 'settle' have been corrupted beyond recognition. They may have related to his changing his household registration to Suzhou after marrying a local woman. As we recall, after Zhu Daoning had lived in Suzhou for some time and had built a network with literati and others, he was recommended for the associate professor position in Suzhou, and was later promoted to divination professor in Changzhou.

The second account of Zhu Daoning's migration appears in Zhu Quan's biography, which was drafted by none other than Zhu Quan himself, apparently during his final years, after he had returned from Chengdu. As Zhu Quan lived an extraordinarily long life (some 91 years), the second account was probably composed more than six decades after the first. The second account has the sequence of events almost reversed. Zhu Daoning ostensibly travelled in the Suzhou region and its surroundings, took the position of Changzhou divination professor, and then was 'promoted' to the associate professor position in Suzhou. Only then did he settle down in the town and change his household registration accordingly.⁴⁷

The passage of time alone does not explain why the second account differs significantly from the first. The second account was drafted at around the same time as the family returned to Suzhou but Zhu An had not yet assumed the divination professor position. It kills two birds with one stone by tying the family's migration to Suzhou with their forefather's appointment to the local divination school. First, it presents the forefather's migration to Suzhou not as a personal choice, but as a commitment to state service, thus establishing a stronger connection with the place and more local prestige. Such connection and prestige were ever more important for the Zhu family, who had been away for more than two decades. Second, as he was a previous divination instructor in Suzhou, Zhu Quan implicitly argued for a family connection to the post, which he apparently wished to obtain for his grandson.

Conclusion

The experiences of local divination school instructors during the Yuan–Ming transition illustrate the geographical and social breadth of the fourteenth-century crisis. This crisis affected both north and south China, although the causes varied by region, including natural disasters, military and social turmoil, and the Ming founder's regional policies. For the Zhu family, the most significant impact was not from natural disasters or the military control of the rebel Zhang Shicheng, but from the Ming emperor's retaliation toward Suzhou. As the Zhu case demonstrates, the crisis affected not only cultural elites and wealthy families, but also lower social strata. A common challenge for divination

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 35–36.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 35.

instructors and other local school instructors, whose livelihood and status depended on these schools, was the dysfunction of these local institutions at the end of the Yuan period and the beginning of the Ming.

The Zhu family, representing lesser local elites, employed various strategies to survive the Yuan–Ming transition and seek new opportunities in the Ming. First, they forged local networks. They associated with literati, who had a great interest in divination. They married into local families, which proved beneficial for the Zhu family. They also participated in local affairs, such as supporting the reconstruction of the divination school building, which also paid off well.

The second strategy that was employed by divination instructors in the transition period as well as in the Yuan was to transform their expertise. While historians who study the Yuan and the Ming often view expertise in terms of social obligation to the state—the institutional position that one held or household registration category⁴⁸—a bottom-up perspective reveals that expertise was a cluster of transformative skills. The examples of divination instructors have shown that the expertise of divination was a combination of knowledge of the cosmos, literacy, and calculation ability. We may go a step further to speculate that a divination professor, in managing the local school, performed scribal and accounting tasks and, in his spare time, not only offered geomancy consulting, but also healed people, whether by applying prognostication or through medical knowledge. Expertise also had its social dimension. Divination instructors could be transformed into granary managers, scribes, medical instructors, and primary academy teachers, not only because these positions involved a related set of skills such as reading, writing, and calculating, but also because these professions shared a similar social status.

Lastly, the Zhu family's case illustrates how lesser elites, who were newcomers to a place, strategically narrated their family history to claim local privileges and secure certain positions. By inscribing selective narratives on tombstones, they emphasised specific events while omitting others, silenced uncomfortable periods, or altered facts despite obvious contradictions. This genre of family history was not merely a record, but also a deliberate strategy to enhance their social standing and influence.

Although the strategies of network building, expertise transformation, and family history writing were not unique to periods of crisis, they significantly contributed to the social continuity of lesser local elites during the Yuan–Ming transition. The resilience and rapid recovery of divination instructors during the fourteenth-century crisis are particularly notable. Zhu An, for instance, held almost the same position as his great-grandfather and grandfather. Similarly, the Yuan county divination instructor Wang Qianfu, despite the upheavals with the Red Turbans, ultimately became a county medical instructor in the Ming, holding the same rank as his previous Yuan position. Additionally, the divination professor Wu Shangwen had a great-grandfather who was a professor and produced a son and grandson who also held professorial positions.⁴⁹

The institution of the local divination school, however, underwent significant changes in the Ming, particularly regarding the professor's age of appointment, tenure period, avoidance rule, and the inheritable nature of the position. As the restrictions on divination instructors loosened in the early Ming period, so too was their mobility reduced. Although Chinese divination instructors differed from the Uighur pilgrims discussed by Márton Vér in almost every aspect possible, the similarity in their reduced mobility may suggest that, following the fourteenth-century crisis, the local became more

⁴⁸ Thus, modern scholars usually take it for granted that divination school instructors belonged to registered divination households, or divination households worked in divination; see Ye, 'Yuandai', pp. 50–54; Yi, 'Mingdai', pp. 39–48.

⁴⁹ See note 42.

prominent than the transregional in East and Central Eurasia.⁵⁰ The reduced mobility of Ming divination instructors allowed them to root themselves more firmly in one place and develop stronger local connections compared with those in the Yuan period. As a result, their families became more invested in local divination schools. This increased participation of diviner families, such as the Zhu, partially explains the continuity of local divination schools into the Ming period and their wider establishment compared with the Yuan period.

Discussions on Yuan–Ming social continuity and rupture typically underscore the profound influence of state policies on society. While the Ming’s adoption of numerous Yuan institutions, particularly the occupation household system, is often cited as a factor in maintaining occupational continuity among families,⁵¹ a closer examination of lesser elite families unveils a different narrative. These families adeptly manoeuvred within the confines of state policies and social circumstances, employing various strategies that influenced the institutional landscapes of both dynasties. By combining institutional history with social history, this bottom-up perspective not only offers a more nuanced comprehension of the Yuan–Ming transition, but also illuminates the experiences of often-overlooked groups.

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⁵⁰ See Márton Vér in this Special Issue.

⁵¹ Li Zhi’an, ‘Yuandai ji ming’, pp. 88–89. Li Xinfeng, while agreeing with the continuity of occupation household registration, points out that the Ming exercised stricter control over the populace through household organisation and registration; Li, ‘Lun yuanming’, pp. 97–98.

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