

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Toward a Nation Defined by State: Tattooed Loyalty and the Evolution of Yue Fei's (1103–1142) Image from the Song to the Present

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Abstract

This article discusses how the legendary general Yue Fei (1103–1142) and his legacy have been perceived and appropriated in Chinese history. Twentieth-century historians approached Yue's career by highlighting the tension between his dedication to the nation (*baoguo*) and his personal loyalty (*jinzhong*) to Emperor Gaozong (1107–1187) of the Song. I argue that for Yue Fei himself and those who wrote about him in late imperial China, Yue's *guo*, from which he derived his political identity and toward which he devoted his service, meant first and foremost the Song dynastic state. The pushing and pulling of multivalent themes of loyalty and state service in the “historic assessment” of Yue Fei since the turn of the twentieth century speak to the complexities embedded in different Chinese governments' navigation of ethnic and class politics in their pursuit of a new national identity for China.

Keywords: Yue Fei; patriotism; nationalism; statism; political symbols

The military signal has arisen, and the rivers and mountains of our country are facing the North.

The dragon flags are fluttering; the horses are neighing; and the swords are cold and white like frost. ...

How many of our loyal brothers have been buried in alien lands?

How can I refrain from sacrificing my life for one hundred times for my family-state?

狼烟起 江山北望

龙旗卷 马长嘶 剑气如霜 ...

多少手足忠魂埋骨它乡

何惜百死报家国

This song, written in 1999 and originally performed by the singing star, Tu Honggang 屠洪刚 (1967–), is titled “Requite the Country with Perfect Loyalty,” (精忠報國). Drawing inspiration from the twelfth-century general Yue Fei 岳飛 (1103–1142), who defended the Southern Song dynasty in face of Jurchen invasions, this song is

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frequently staged at events and entertainment programs infused with patriotic messages in contemporary China.¹ It celebrates the loyalty, dedication, and patriotism which Yue came to symbolize in most historical periods since his death.

Yue Fei was a real historical figure living in the Southern Song dynasty (1127–1279). He was later made into a “patriotic myth” figuring prominently in official canonization, scholarly discourse, and popular culture. Born into a tenant farmer’s family in 1103 under the Northern Song dynasty (960–1127), Yue joined the Song army in 1122 as a soldier. He rose in the ranks and became one of the leading military men of his time by serving with distinction in fighting the Jurchen invaders, who in 1127 occupied the Song capital Kaifeng and captured the Song emperors Huizong (r. 1100–1126) and Qinzong (r. 1126–1127). Most of Yue’s army was built in the process of suppressing domestic rebellions and recruiting “bandit forces” to serve the Song court that re-established itself in southern China under the leadership of Huizong’s son, Gaozong (r. 1127–1162). Yue gained a reputation for loyalty and competence, but he also drew suspicion from the Southern Song court. Emperor Gaozong, in coalition with his prime minister Qin Gui 秦檜 (1090–1115), ordered Yue to withdraw his army after the army had won several major victories against the invaders. Yue was falsely accused of treason, and was murdered in prison, while the Southern Song made a humiliating peace with the Jurchens. Yue’s name was later cleared under the reigns of Gaozong’s successors.² Honorary titles were bestowed upon him and memorial temples were built in his honor during the Southern Song dynasty, in subsequent imperial dynasties that ruled China, and in the twentieth century. He was presented as an emblem of loyalty in late imperial literature and popular culture. In modern China, he came to be treated as a national hero and a role model for youth in plays, films, and patriotic songs. The above-cited “Requite the Country with Perfect Loyalty” is but one contemporary example. As Leo Shin’s recent research on the compilation, transmission, and influence of Yue Fei’s biographical materials shows, the life story of Yue Fei should be studied “not as a collection of clearly verifiable traits but as the constantly evolving product of a textual (and visual) tradition that can be traced—but not limited—to the Song dynasty records.”³

Being “perfect in loyalty” in popular culture and in patriotic education, Yue Fei and his image have received critical assessment from modern scholars who often highlight cleavages in his career and portrayals. For example, the late James T.C. Liu points out:

¹For a recent performance, see CCTV, “Kai Jiangle,” March 11, 2018, video, <http://tv.cntv.cn/video/VSET100173543987/21ff5a26a4594959953e79456d93e784>.

²For recent book-length scholarly biographies of Yue Fei, see Wang Zengyu 王曾瑜, *Jinzhong baoguo: Yue Fei xinzhuan* (Shijiazhuang: Hebei renmin chubanshe, 2001) and Gong Yanming 龔延明, *Yue Fei pingzhuan* (Nanjing: Nanjing daxue chubanshe, 2001). For a full treatment of Yue’s career in English, see Edward Harold Kaplan, “Yueh Fei and the Founding of the Southern Sung,” PhD diss. University of Iowa, 1970.

³Leo K. Shin, “Recollecting Yue Fei: Yue Ke, *Jintuo cuibian*, and the Making of a Chinese Hero,” in *Representing Lives in China: Forms of Biography in the Ming-Qing Period, 1368–1911*, edited by Ihor Pidhainy, Roger V. Des Forges, and Grace S. Fong (Ithaca: Cornell University East Asia Program, 2019), 229–51, here 249. For other English language discussions of the problems in sources on Yue Fei’s life, see Hellmut Wilhelm, “From Myth to Myth: The Case of Yueh Fei’s Biography,” in *Confucian Personalities*, edited by Arthur F. Wright and Denis Twitchett (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1962), 146–61; also see Annetta Fotopoulos, “Sites of Media of Memory: A Cultural Memory Approach to Heritage Sites in Contemporary China,” PhD. diss. Cornell University, 2016, 187–89.

The most fundamental question is to whom [Yue Fei] was loyal. Or to what? Was it loyalty to the ruler, meaning loyalty to the leader, to the ruling group? Or was it loyalty to the country, the nation?⁴

His answer is: In imperial China, loyalty was first and foremost understood in terms of loyalty to the ruler. Loyalty to the people, to the cultural-ethnic group, and to what one understood to be the best interest of the state came secondary to personal loyalty to the emperor.⁵ Here, Yue's dedication to his country (報國) is viewed as separate from, if not opposite to, his fierce loyalty to the head of the dynastic state (盡忠), even though personal loyalty to the ruler is acknowledged by Liu as the prerequisite to one's ability to gain resources and legitimacy to serve his *guo*. This kind of dichotomy, as proposed in Liu's assessment of Yue's loyalty, is also reflected in what S. Goncharov defines as one of the most prominent points of contestation in studies of Yue Fei in mainland China during the second half of the twentieth century: was he "a feudal servant wholeheartedly loyal to the emperor" or "a patriot for whom there is nothing loftier than love of his motherland."⁶ This point was most intensively contested during the Maoist era. But the debate survived 1977 and lasts into the twenty-first century, albeit with different focuses. The tension is visible not only in the ways Yue Fei was analyzed by academics, but also in his portrayals on TV, in oral storytelling, and in other forms of mass culture.

The assumption underlying this "either-or" question regarding Yue is that Yue's loyalty to the dynastic state and its ruler and his dedication to the "nation"—the Chinese people and the state supposedly representing their interest—were essentially distinct issues that can be addressed separately. Furthermore, these two aspects of Yue's loyalty, if not mutually exclusive, should at least involve a hierarchy: Loyalty to the dynastic state and its ruler should be secondary to or even a mere means to expressing his dedication to the Chinese nation. Yue Fei and Yue Fei stories were assessed by how much they adhered to this criterion. In the following pages, I will break away from this dichotomic assumption by discussing how this tension between loyalty and patriotism in the Yue Fei legend came to become a "problem" in the first place. To contrast the modern handling of Yue Fei with pre-modern treatment of him, this article draws sources from official edicts, temple inscriptions, poetry, drama, and scholarly treatises from imperial China, and it uses as primary sources both fictional renderings of Yue Fei and academic writings on him produced in modern times. In other words, this research is not about Yue Fei as a historical figure, but about how his image evolved in history and what it tells us about loyalty and state service in China.

This article starts with the Song, Yuan, Ming, and Qing periods within which Yue Fei's status as a paragon of loyalty arose and developed. Under the minority-ruled Yuan and Qing dynasties as well as the Han-dominated Southern Song and Ming dynasties, there were two complementary pillars that constituted Yue's aspiration and appeal: fighting Jurchen invaders and domestic rebels, both enemies of the Southern Song state; and submitting himself to the emperor and the court, both representing the Southern Song state. Little tension between loyalty and patriotism can be found

⁴James T.C. Liu, "Yue Fei: cong shixue shi he sixiang shi lai kan," in his *Liang Song shi yanjiu huibian* (Taipei: Lianjing, 1987), 185–207, here 185.

⁵James T.C. Liu, "Yueh Fei (1103–41) and China's Heritage of Loyalty," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 33.2 (1972), 291–97.

⁶S. Goncharov, "Yue Fei as a Historical Personality and the Struggle of Ideas in China," *Far Eastern Affairs* 1 (1984), 80–93, especially 86–89.

in late imperial narratives of and comments on Yue. Moving forward to the turn of the twentieth century, anti-foreign nationalism came to occupy the center of intellectual discussion of Yue Fei, with the Jurchens initially defined as foreign. After anti-Manchu-ism was dropped in favor of a multi-ethnic Republic striving to maintain Qing territories, Yue Fei was praised as faithful in carrying out commands and passionately against “foreigners” that were equated to the then enemy of the Republic of China—the Japanese. After 1949, ethnicity and class became two points that were mostly hotly debated about Yue Fei. Yue’s fight against the Jurchens was treated by his supporters as a resistance against oppression by Jurchen nobles in defense of the interest of common people of all ethnicities. Yue’s suppression of Han peasant rebellions was downplayed in positive artistic portraits of him while it was used to attack his legacy within a more class-dominated framework of interpretation.

Yue Fei’s country *guo* 國—the ultimate source of his political identity and the ultimate object of his political loyalty—was the Great Song. His loyalty to the dynasty and its ruler and his dedication to the state and its people were a single cause for him, a cause of the orthodox dynastic state holding the Mandate of Heaven, not of the modern nation-state or class-state. Ironically, the Nationalists and the Communists, when reevaluating Yue’s image in the twentieth century, adopted a logic determining the relationship between the Chinese polity and its people that was not so different from the logic used in imperial times. The orthodox state in power, instead of representing the national body, determined the composition of the Chinese people and defined their political loyalty. When the Chinese nation was conceived as something that resembled the *guo* Yue Fei had fought for, Yue Fei’s image became highly valuable in state propaganda and elite discourse. His reputation suffered when the state defined the nation with a set of criteria vastly different from those used in Yue Fei’s time. By discussing historic assessments of Yue Fei’s “exhausting one’s loyalty to requite the *guo*,” this article aims to deepen our understanding of the evolution of the Chinese *guo*—from a dynastic state to a nation defined by the state—and of the ways in which history was chopped and lopped to serve those who controlled this *guo*.⁷

“Resisting Strong Barbarians and Pacifying Various Bandits”

In the nineteenth episode of the 2013 Chinese television series the *Patriot Yue Fei* (精忠岳飛, literally “Yue Fei, the perfectly loyal”), a scene that has been ubiquitous in late imperial and modern popular narratives of Yue Fei was played out as follows: Yue Fei’s mother tattooed four Chinese characters on the general’s back: *Jin Zhong Bao Guo* 盡忠報國 (exhaust one’s loyalty to requite the country). She asked Yue Fei a question: “Have you ever considered why I am talking about these four characters now?” She stated that the characters of “loyalty” and “country” particularly called for deep reflection:

Loyalty, as commonly understood, is loyalty to ruler and father. I am thinking: Why couldn’t we expand the meaning of this character beyond loyalty to the emperor, to the thoughts of benevolence and righteousness [仁義], the deeds of benevolence and righteousness, the achievements of benevolence and

⁷ John Fitzgerald defines modern China as a nationless state; Fitzgerald, “The Nationless State: The Search for a Nation in Modern Chinese Nationalism,” *The Australian Journal of Chinese Affairs* 33 (1995), 75–104. Since the turn of the twentieth century, there has been a conceptual difference between the sovereign people and the state that supposedly represents and serves the people, even though, as this article shows, the composition of the nation was and is defined by the government in power.

righteousness, and the wars of benevolence and righteousness ... Regarding “country” in “requite the country,” it means not just the Great Song, but also the state that promotes brotherhood within all four seas and the country that allows harmonious coexistence of all people ... Your loyalty and your country might be lying before your eyes, but they might exist only in the future.⁸

Why did the production team take great pains to clarify what “loyalty” and “country” meant, or what they ought to mean to the audience, in the context of Yue dedicating himself to state service in military struggles against the Jurchens? The two points raised here echoed major scholarly concerns over Yue’s image in the second half of the twentieth century: how loyalty should be interpreted and whether Yue’s loyalty to the ruler was consistent with Yue’s service to the country. In the television series, loyalty was first and foremost directed toward lofty ideals of “benevolence” and “righteousness,” backbones of Confucian ethics that mostly survived twentieth-century iconoclasm and are still celebrated as part of national essence in post-Mao China.⁹ What stood out more conspicuously, however, was how *guo*, Yue Fei’s country, was defined in the TV series: His mother told him that the country he was supposed to defend was something that, though based on the Song dynastic state, could not be confined by it. The new country “should,” in theory, embrace the Jurchens Yue was going to fight against.¹⁰ In other words, struggling against the Jurchens was ultimately meant to make them part of a great unity that was yet to exist. The production team did not even try to hide their efforts to approach middle-period Chinese history with historical hindsight. The audience were expected to understand what that “country” should look like, and to feel proud that they had the good fortune of living in such a great country.

This kind of artistic handling of controversial aspects of Yue Fei’s career was a continuation of the strategy adopted by earlier writers and performers who managed to reestablish Yue’s “national hero” status among a general audience after the catastrophe of the Chinese Cultural Revolution (1966–1976). In the 1980s, “The Biography of Yue Fei,” delivered by the famous *pingshu* performer Liu Lanfang 劉蘭芳, was broadcasted nationwide via radio. Liu’s rendering of the Yue Fei story has had great influence over generations of Chinese audiences ever since. Based on Yue Fei stories passed on from the “old times,” Liu’s *Yue Fei* nonetheless discarded many “dregs” (糟粕) in traditional Yue Fei narratives:

This book has made necessary revision and deletion of paragraphs and expressions in the original narratives that promoted feudal superstition and karmic retribution, that insulted peasant uprisings, that valorized polygamy, that pursued vulgarity, and that affected ethnic solidarity. Yue Fei’s resistance to the Jin and his struggle with the nefarious ministers are highlighted ... Conditioned by history and class, Yue Fei had his weaknesses and mistakes. He participated in the suppression of the

⁸Youyou dubu ju, “The Patriot Yue Fei, 19,” September 26, 2021, video, 30:35–32:30, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ujwaITpewuE>.

⁹Jiawen Ai, “Two Sides of One Coin: The Party’s Attitude toward Confucianism in Contemporary China,” *Journal of Contemporary China* 18.61 (2009), 689–701; Fenggang Yang and Joseph Tamney, eds., *Confucianism and Spiritual Traditions in Modern China and Beyond* (Leiden: Brill, 2011). Christopher A. Ford, “The Party and the Sage: Communist China’s Use of Quasi-Confucian Rationalizations for One-Party Dictatorship and Imperial Ambition,” *Journal of Contemporary China* 24.96 (2015), 1032–47.

¹⁰“People who live within four seas are all brothers” (四海之内皆兄弟) is from Chapter 12 of the *Analects*. See Arthur Waley, trans., *The Analects of Confucius* (New York: Vintage Books, 1989), 163–64.

uprising led by Yang Yao. He held strong loyalty toward the corrupt and cowardly ruler of the Southern Song dynasty, which eventually led to the tragedies suffered by him, his son, and his subordinates. But *pingshu* storytelling is not academic biography. It focuses on Yue's achievements in the anti-Jin struggle, and omits some of his weaknesses and mistakes.¹¹

Here, "insulting" ethnic minorities was obviously regarded as in need of correction even though Yue Fei's "anti-Jin achievements" were supposed to be highlighted. Equally importantly, Yue's suppression of peasant rebellions, together with his loyalty to the ruler, were defined as his "weaknesses and mistakes" that had to be downplayed or omitted altogether if Yue's status as a hero and role model was to be upheld.

In post-Mao China, Yue Fei's story had to be delivered through a narrative framework in which a national hero should direct his loyalty (忠) toward the nation (國) that embraces the Jurchens and the peasants, with the Southern Song ruler and his court occupying a position of insignificance if not straight illegitimacy. But appropriating and partly jettisoning elements in Yue's career to fit the political imperative of the PRC proved to be challenging, as Yue Fei's image as the "perfectly loyal" came into existence during a period when ethnicity or class were not major issues of controversy in cultural discourse or artistic treatment of him.

Both Liu Lanfang's *pingshu* and the 2013 TV series owed much inspiration to the dramas and novels on Yue Fei produced in the Yuan (1279–1368), Ming (1368–1644), and Qing (1644–1911) periods. Traditional narratives celebrated Yue Fei's suppression of peasant rebellions, especially that led by Zhong Xiang 鍾相 and Yang Yao 楊么 in the Dongting Lake region, as one of his greatest military achievements. The number of chapters and subplots on the Dongting Lake campaign as well as the degree of fictionalization varied: from three chapters in the Ming novel *A Vernacular Romance of the Restoration of the Great Song* (大宋中興通俗演義) and the Qing play *Winning the Autumn Prize* (奪秋魁), to six chapters in the most widely received Qing novel on Yue Fei—Qian Cai's 錢彩 *Romance of the Perfectly Loyal: the Storytelling Script of the Complete Biography of Prince Yue* (精忠演義說本岳王全傳, hereafter *Shuoyue*)—for a few examples.¹² These narratives used Yue Fei's actions in the Dongting Lake campaign to demonstrate both his civility and his martial prowess—two of the most important attributes of late imperial masculinity.¹³ The campaign itself was displayed in traditional narratives within a dichotomic framework that distinguished "bandits" (匪, 盜 or 賊) (whom the state was obliged to eliminate) from "good commoners" (良民) (whom the state was obliged to protect), which was difficult to reconcile with the PRC categorization of peasant rebels as courageous leaders of the people's resistance to feudal oppression. Not surprisingly, in the 2013 TV series, *Patriot Yue Fei*, Yue Fei's fight against the peasant rebellion in the Dongting Lake region was only marginally mentioned in the forty-third episode, and Yue was portrayed as reluctant to carry out the task which was commissioned by the emperor himself.

In contrast, Yue's role in fighting the bandits, together with his defense of the Song against the Jurchens, was commemorated even during his lifetime by people who had

¹¹Liu Lanfang 劉蘭芳 and Wang Yinquan 王印全, *Yue Fei zhuan* (Shenyang: Chunfeng wenyi, 1981), Preface, 2–3.

¹²Jin Chenghan 金成翰, "Yue Fei xiaoshuo yanjiu," PhD diss., Fudan University, 2006, 67–68.

¹³For the *wen* (cultural attainment) and *wu* (martial valor) dichotomy in Chinese masculinity, see Kam Louie, *Theorising Chinese Masculinity: Society and Gender in China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

no means to know that nearly a millennium later they would be lumped together with their deadly enemies by the Chinese government and academics. In a piece written to record the building of “living shrine” (生祠) for Yue Fei in Yixing County, Yue Fei was praised for his “high ideal of upholding the country and protecting the people” (捍國保民為志) as follows:

At the time, aliens and bandits took turns to disturb our territory [夷狄盜賊交寇四境]. The people in the county were rescued back to life from near death several times, all owing to the Lord [Yue Fei]’s deeds [皆公之造]. Whose merits can match that?! Everyone is saying: “It is easy for parents to give birth to me, but it is difficult for the Lord to protect me!”¹⁴

For those in Yixing County who were first-handedly affected by the Song–Jin conflicts and the domestic chaos accompanying the inter-state war, Yue was revered as a hero or even a demigod because he “upheld the country,” that was the Great Song, and protected the people who embraced neither the “bandits” nor the foot soldiers in the Jurchen army as their own.

The above-cited expression from the local people, albeit mediated by literate elites, mirrored the ways in which Southern Song literati wrote about Yue Fei after Yue was posthumously rehabilitated in 1162. For example, the well-known poet Liu Guo 劉過 (1154–1206) wrote a *ci* lyric when passing Yue Fei’s temple in E Prefecture. “Among the generals of the Restoration, who was the leading figure among myriads? ... pacifying Xiang and Han, opening up Guo and Luo, wiping clear Dongting Lake, [and] facing north toward the Capital ...” Liu lamented Yue Fei’s tragic death by mentioning the tears shed by the local people regarding “their late general” even decades after Yue’s death. Known for his “heroic” (豪放) style in *ci* writing, Liu implied criticism of Emperor Gaozong by imagining Yue Fei’s “self-expression”: “I have committed crimes. Your majesty is wise. You should be able to judge my heart!”¹⁵ Despite his disagreement with the decision made by Emperor Gaozong, Liu nonetheless never questioned whether Yue’s suppression of the Dongting Lake bandits and his pacification of the middle Yangtze region (“pacifying Xiang and Han”) should be juxtaposed with his major victories over the Jurchens (“opening up Guo and Luo”). Liu’s position was echoed by the literati who reprinted Yue’s family biography, *The Essential Compilation of the Prince of E* (鄂國金佗粹編), in the Ming period. Zhang Ao 張鏊, in his preface to the reprint, summarized Yue’s major military achievements as “resisting strong barbarians and pacifying various bandits” (攘強胡，獮群盜), which embodied Yue’s “perfect loyalty and ultimate fidelity” (精忠盡節).¹⁶

In late imperial China, fighting the Jurchens and fighting domestic rebellions were both regarded as part of Yue’s achievements which allowed Yue’s image as “perfectly loyal” to be constructed and reinforced even after 1276 when the dynastic state that Yue was trying to defend eventually fell. Interestingly, the ethnic issues involved in Yue Fei’s military struggle against the Jurchens did not generate much tension in comments on and narratives of Yue Fei in the Yuan and Qing periods. This was presumably due to the fact that, in those periods, the ruling ideology and dominating political logic

¹⁴Qian Chen 錢謙, “Yixing xian shengci xu,” in *Eguo jintuo cuibian*, edited by Wang Zengyu (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1989), vol.2, 1650.

¹⁵Jin Chenghan, “Yue Fei xiaoshuo yanjiu,” 8.

¹⁶Zhang Ao 張鏊, “Chongke Jintuo cuibian xu,” in *Eguo jintuo cuibian*, edited by Wang Zengyu, vol.1, 1.

were shared by rulers and the ruled despite their ethnic backgrounds. Yue, through his words and actions, ideally embodied what this political system required of a subject. This “match” made him the “banner of perfect loyalty” for both the Han and the non-Han.

The Banner of Perfect Loyalty

Yue’s loyalty (忠) was honored publicly from the time his name was rehabilitated. According to Yue’s biography in the official Song history compiled under the Mongols, He Zhu 何鑄, the high court judge originally assigned to handle Yue’s “treason” case, was persuaded of Yue Fei’s innocence after Yue Fei showed him the four-character loyalist tattoo on his back. He Zhu declined to try the case.¹⁷ Loyalist tattoos such as “requite the country with a sincere heart; swear to kill Jin bandits” (赤心報國, 誓殺金賊) or “kill the enemies to requite the country” (殺敵報國) were common among soldiers during the period of the Song–Jin wars. Yet, as Elad Alyagon has observed, “Far from being reassuring signs of popular support, loyalist tattoos were a symptom of the disintegration of the Song state.” These tattoos often marked personal dependence of soldiers toward their generals, who tattooed them, reminding the court and the literati of the military men’s power despite the suspicion and contempt they received from the civil administration.¹⁸ Regardless of the negative connotations of tattoos, Yue’s loyalist tattoo, combined with the lack of evidence in his treason case, successfully dramatized the injustice he suffered by highlighting the sincere loyalty that was not properly understood or rewarded by the ruler. The tattoo that signified his loyalty eventually became an indispensable narrative device. It was adopted in nearly all Yue Fei hagiographies, fictional and non-fictional alike, as the association between loyalist tattoos and warlordism faded over time.

That said, there was a visible change of focus in late imperial Yue Fei narratives. It was the sincerity manifested in the tattoo on his back, “exhaust one’s loyalty,” that was underlined in his official biography and in the private biography compiled by his grandson during the Southern Song.¹⁹ But in one of the two most popular fictional adaptations about Yue in the Yuan period, the *zaju* play the *Song General Yue Fei, the Perfectly Loyal* (宋大將岳飛精忠), Yue started to be referred to not as the one who “exhausted his loyalty,” but the “perfectly loyal.”²⁰ This title of Yue Fei as the “perfectly loyal” was carried on in Ming fictional writings. Even in plays that presented the tattoo on Yue’s

¹⁷For an English treatment of the trial Yue Fei and his subordinates received, see Kaplan, “Yueh Fei and the Founding of the Southern Sung,” 495–526, especially 512. Tuotuo, *Songshi* (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1985), vol.33, 11394 and 11708.

¹⁸Elad Alyagon, “Loyalist Tattoos and Tattooed Generals in the Song Dynasty,” *Frontiers of History in China* 11.2 (2016), 247–78, here 270.

¹⁹For the compilation of *Eguo jintuo cuibian* (Essential compilation of the Prince of E), a source collection on Yue Fei edited by his grandson, Yue Ke 岳珂 (1183–1234), from which almost all Yue Fei’s biographies derived, see Shin, “Recollecting Yue Fei,” and Ari Levine, “Stages of Decline: Cultural Memory, Urban Nostalgia and Political Indignation as Imaginaries of Resistance in Yue Ke’s *Pillar Histories* (Ting shi),” *The Medieval History Journal* 17.2 (2014), 337–78, especially 342–50. For how the tattoo on Yue Fei’s back was transformed from “exhaust one’s loyalty to requite the country” to “requite the country with perfect loyalty” in vernacular literature, see Jin Chenghan, “Yue Fei xiaoshuo yanjiu,” 60–63.

²⁰The author of *Song Dajiang Yue Fei jingzhong* is unknown. See Wang Jilie 王季烈, ed, *Guben Yuanming zaju*, vol.25 (in Book 4) (Hong Kong: Shangwu yinshuguan, 1941). For a brief discussion of *zaju* plays in the Yuan on Yue Fei, see Yu Zhang, *Interfamily Tanci Writing in Nineteenth-Century China: Bonds and Boundaries* (Washington DC: Lexington Books, 2017), 120n10.

back as the original four characters, the most prominent characteristic of Yue was given as “perfect loyalty” (精忠), as in the *Banner of Perfect Loyalty* (精忠旗), a play written by one of the most well-known playwrights and novelists of the Ming period, Feng Menglong 馮夢龍 (1574–1646).²¹ In Qing fictional writings, the tattoo on Yue’s back eventually evolved from “exhaust one’s loyalty to requite the country” to “requite the country with perfect loyalty,” with the Chinese character “jin” (exhaust) replaced by “jing” (perfect). While departing from historical records, this change strengthened the sentimental power of the tattoo by eliminating the difference between Yue’s aspiration—“dedicating oneself to the country with sincere loyalty”—and what Yue managed to achieve in many people’s eyes—“perfect loyalty.” In addition, the most famous Qing fictional writings on Yue Fei—*Winning the Autumn Prize, An Appropriate View* (如是觀), and *Shuoyue*—all made Yue Fei’s mother the person who tattooed his back, combining loyalty and filiality, the two most treasured values in the Confucian political-familial order.²² Yue Fei’s image as “perfectly loyal” became so well-known among the general audience that when the 2013 TV series showed the tattoo in its original form as recorded in historical sources, a controversy about the “accuracy” of the scene forced the production team to publicly clarify why they made the decision to “change” the tattoo.²³

In addition to the revised emphasis on loyalty, the Yue Fei legend also underwent significant development and popularization during the Mongol Yuan period. As Yu Zhang has noted, the two most popular themes in the Yue Fei legend—Yue’s military talents and the karmic punishment that his opponent Qin Gui received in the underworld—emerged during the Yuan in two *zaju* operas—*The Song General Yue Fei, the Perfectly Loyal* (宋大將岳飛精忠) and *Ksitigarbha Discloses the Conspiracy under the East Window* (地藏王證東窗事犯).²⁴ James T.C. Liu observed the thriving of plays on Yue Fei during the Yuan period, and insightfully attributed it to the Mongols’ lack of systematic surveillance of vernacular literature and ideology among the commoners.²⁵ That theory cannot explain, however, why vernacular writings on Yue Fei flourished and further spread during the Qing period, considering that the Qing’s Manchu rulers were notorious for censorship and literary inquisition, especially where ethnic issues were concerned.²⁶ The high Qing novel *Shuoyue* synthesized all previous Yue Fei stories, serving as the departure point for nearly all Yue Fei narratives produced after it. It was written during a period when Qing censorship was at its height.

In the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, early Manchu rulers showed signs of uneasiness toward the Yue Fei legend. In the end, Yue gained his fame in the war between the Southern Song dynasty, ruled by the Han, and the Jin dynasty in the North, ruled by the Manchus’ own proclaimed ancestors. The Kangxi emperor (r. 1661–1722) refrained from directly commenting on Yue Fei. But he did stress that it was unlikely that the Southern Song could have recovered the lost northern territories, insisting that it was wise for Emperor Gaozong of the Southern Song to seek peace with the Jurchens rather than pursuing military advancement as proposed

²¹Feng Qiyong 馮其庸, *Jingzhong qi jianzheng gao* (Qingdao: Qingdao chubanshe, 2014); on Yue Fei’s loyalist tattoo, see 10.

²²Jin Chenghan, “Yue Fei xiaoshuo yanjiu,” 60–63.

²³Pu Xiqian, “Jingzhong Yue Fei juqing yin Zhengyi,” chinanews.com.cn, China News Service, June 19, 2013, <https://www.chinanews.com.cn/yl/2013/06-19/4945739.shtml>.

²⁴Yu Zhang, *Interfamily Tanci Writing*, 95–96.

²⁵James T.C. Liu, “Yue Fei: cong shixue shi he sixiang shi lai kan,” 189.

²⁶For the Qing literary inquisition, see L.C. Goodrich, *The Literary Inquisition of Ch’ien-Lung* (Baltimore: Waverly Press, 1935) and Jonathan Spence, *Treason by the Book* (Westminster: Penguin Books, 2002).

by Yue Fei.²⁷ The Yongzheng emperor (r. 1722–1735) moved Yue Fei out of the temple of martial virtue (武廟) in Beijing in 1726. But local temples for Yue Fei continued to operate. The largest temple of Yue Fei in Hangzhou was renovated under Yongzheng's reign.²⁸ The lack of state-sponsored, high-profile veneration of Yue Fei changed dramatically under the Qianlong emperor (r. 1735–1796). The Qianlong emperor personally visited Yue's temple and tomb in Hangzhou three times during his "southern tours," and visited Yue's temple in his birthplace, Tangyin, once. The Qianlong emperor also commissioned imperial envoys, sometimes his own sons, to offer sacrifices at the temples.²⁹ He left behind a considerable number of writings on Yue Fei—not only essays and poems, ten in total, composed during his temple trips, but also historical comments on other people's assessments of Yue Fei. In his "On Yue Wumu" (論岳武穆), the Qianlong emperor stated:

Regarding the fall of the Northern Song, the loss of the North China plain, the failure of the Song to revive, and the failure of China proper to be recovered, most people blamed [Emperors] Huizong and Qinzong. But Gaozong also cannot escape blame [然高宗實難道其責焉] ... Regarding Yue Fei's military talents ... even legendary ancient generals could not match such qualities. He knew only the ruler but not himself, and he cared about only the ruler's orders but not his own life. He knew that if he withdrew the army he would be framed by Qin Gui. But he had received the emperor's order, and dared not stay in the field under his own authority. Alas! With his perfect sincerity, even though he died at the hands of Qin Gui, he was revered by all under Heaven in posterity. His exemplary morality and martyrdom matched the light of sun and moon. [風烈實可與日月爭光] I really cannot understand what kind of heart Gaozong harbored [in murdering Yue Fei]! [獨不知為高宗者何心哉]³⁰

Modern scholars such as Sun Jiang and Huang Donglan have asserted that the Qianlong emperor was trying to establish an image of Yue Fei that was "completely different from historical facts," which unfortunately became the "guiding principle in propaganda" (宣傳大綱) and the "basic tone of narratives" (敘述的基調) concerning Yue in the Qing. For them, the Qianlong emperor tried to build up a myth of Yue's "blind loyalty" (愚忠), so that "this completely distorted image" (根本的篡改) could serve the Qing state's purpose of "blurring the boundary between the Manchu and the Han."³¹ Even those who approach the Qing's management of Yue's image as an effective strategy of empire building insist that the Qing had to first "transform Yue Fei into a hero of the empire who could be worshiped by each and every subject of the Qing, regardless of ethnic, cultural or racial background," by "taking Yue Fei out of his original historic context."³²

²⁷For the Kangxi emperor's assessment of Song Gaozong and Yue Fei, see Wang Zengyu, "Cong Kangxi de yilun tan Zong Ze, Yue Fei deng kang Jin," *Shixue yuekan* 4 (2004), 120–23.

²⁸Li Huimin 李慧敏 and Shen Lixin 沈立新, eds., *Hangzhou Xihu Yuewangmiao zhi* (Hangzhou: Hangzhou chubanshe, 2012), 73.

²⁹For details about the Qianlong emperor's visits to Yue Fei's temples, see Feng Pei 馮培, ed. *Yue Miao zhilue* (*Zhongguo cimuzhi congkan*, vol.53) (Yangzhou: Guangling shushe, 2004 [1879]), 29–37.

³⁰Aisin-Gioro Hongli 愛新覺羅弘曆, "Lun Yue Wumu," in *Yue Miao zhilue*, 29–31.

³¹Sun Jiang 孫江 and Huang Donglan 黃東蘭, "Yue Fei xushu, gonggong jiyi, yu guozu rentong," *Ershiyi shiji* 86 (2004), 91 and 94–95.

³²Marc Andre Matten, "The Worship of General Yue Fei and His Problematic Creation as a National Hero in Twentieth Century China," *Frontiers of History in China* 6.1 (2011), 90.

I argue that the Qianlong emperor's assessment of Yue Fei was neither distorting historical facts nor taking Yue Fei out of his original historic context. The Qianlong emperor praised Yue Fei and promoted the possibility of the Southern Song recovering the North because the Qianlong emperor had the confidence that the Qing occupied a position within Chinese history that was equivalent to that of the Southern Song dynasty—a legitimate orthodox (正統, *zhengtong*) dynasty exclusively holding the “Mandate of Heaven” at a given moment in the historical transmission of the true lineage of rule.³³ In this sense, the Jurchen Jin dynasty, from which the Manchus claimed descent, was the opponent of the true holder of the “Mandate of Heaven” in the context of the traditional political discourse of succession of orthodox dynasties ruling over all under Heaven.

For the Qianlong emperor, whether the ruling house belonged to the Han or the non-Han did not determine whether or not the dynasty had *zhengtong* legitimacy. The Mongol Yuan dynasty had the “Mandate of Heaven” after conquering the Southern Song. The Mandate was in turn passed on to the Ming and then to the Qing. The Qianlong emperor insisted that once the Mandate of Heaven was granted to a specific dynasty, this dynasty would not lose the Mandate until it was completely crushed by domestic rebels or outside invaders, even when a once-united dynasty was reduced to a rump state. The Southern dynasties lost their legitimacy only when the last in the sequence, the Chen dynasty (557–589), was conquered by the Sui dynasty (581–618) from the North in 589. The Northern dynasties, either the ones under non-Han rule, or the Sui dynasty whose ruling house was Han along the patriline, could not be regarded as holding the Mandate until 589. The same was true when the Southern Song dynasty was fighting Jurchen invasions in the twelfth century.³⁴ In an imperial edict issued in 1781, the Qianlong emperor explained:

There are academic officials [working on the *Siku quanshu* project] who revised and deleted some of Yang Weizhen's *On the Orthodox Transmission of Rule* due to their misunderstanding about the Manchu's descent from the Jin. They tried to twist things so that the Jin could inherit orthodox legitimacy from the Khitan Liao. They do not understand that the Liao and Jin dynasties rose from the North and had no basis for succeeding to orthodox rulership [無所承統]. It is different from the Song and Yuan dynasties that succeeded one after the other to be [orthodox] rulers of China [中華之主].³⁵

Here, the Qianlong emperor ridiculed the officials who tried to change the Yuan scholar Yang Weizhen's 楊維禎 (1296–1370) *On the Orthodox Transmission of Rule* (正統辨) in order to please the Manchu ruler. The Qianlong emperor stated on different occasions that the Song, even after losing its northern territories to the Jurchens, was still the holder of the Mandate, which it eventually lost to the Mongols; the Liao and the Jin under the Khitans and the Jurchens in the North were “regional regimes” (偏安) even though their rulers claimed themselves to be emperors.³⁶ For him, the Qing rulers'

³³Mark Elliott, *Emperor Qianlong: Son of Heaven, Man of the World* (Upper Saddle River: Pearson Longman, 2009), 86.

³⁴Liu Pujiang 劉浦江, “Daocuo de yixia guan: Qianjia shidai sixiangshi de ling yizhong mianxiang,” in his *Zhengtong yu huayi: Zhongguo chuantong zhengzhi wenhua yanjiu* (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2017), 172–203.

³⁵*Gaozongchun huangdi shilu* vol.15 (*Qing shilu*, vol.23) (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1985), 308a–309b; citation is from 309a.

³⁶Liu Pujiang, “Daocuo de yixia guan,” 191.

non-Han origin did not prevent them from succeeding the Ming as the orthodox dynasty that ruled over China. But non-Han origins did not automatically grant a regime orthodox status either. The Yuan and Qing dynasties were part of the historical succession of the Mandate of Heaven, but the Khitans and the Jurchens were not. The Qianlong emperor's sense of Manchu superiority over the Han within the framework of universal rulership and the "virtuous rule over all under Heaven" did not conflict with his association of the Qing with any previous orthodox dynasties, Han or non-Han.³⁷

In light of this, it is not difficult to understand why the Qianlong emperor lamented the Southern Song's failure in recovering the North, particularly manifested in his poems on Yue Fei. For example, he praised Yue Fei: "In every battle he surprised Northern calvaries, and he defended the North China plain (中原) without losing one inch of land."³⁸ He imagined Yue Fei's anger and regret: "During the night, his indignation over settling in the South raged; facing [the temporary capital] Hangzhou, he could not calm himself."³⁹ And the Qianlong emperor criticized Emperor Gaozong of the Southern Song: "He destroyed his own Great Wall of ten thousand *li*; the anger and regret still linger today where the tombs and trees lie."⁴⁰ The Qianlong emperor did not confine his veneration of Yue Fei to "propaganda shows," such as his visits to Yue's tomb. He expressed similar ideas about Yue and the Southern Song when he refuted the Ming scholar Qiu Jun 丘濬 (1421–1495):

Qiu Jun said that Yue Fei might not have been able to recover [the North even if he had been given an opportunity]. Though it is not an appropriate assessment, at least it can be understood as he (Qiu Jun) was making his judgement from the balance of power at the time of the Song withdrawing to the South ... Regarding Qin Gui's crime in wronging the country (誤國之罪), even women and children all know it. But [Qiu Jun] suddenly attributed the restoration [of the Song in the South] to him. It is reversing right and wrong (顛倒是非), absolutely shocking to anyone who hears of it.⁴¹

How the Qianlong emperor assessed the military situation of Yue Fei's time best reveals the emperor's self-appointed position as the representative of the legitimate rule over All Under Heaven. His criticism of Song Gaozong should be analyzed together with his idea about the proper roles for both the ruler and the officials in the operation of imperial governance. As Hellmut Wilhelm points out, Yue Fei's image of Gaozong was highly idealized. What he revered and devoted himself to was a model emperor, "an image that had been built up by successive generations of Chinese political philosophers."⁴² To some extent, the Confucian concept of rulership functioned based on the assumption that the ruler had the potential, if not always the reality, of being virtuous. As Peter Zarrow notes, "If the emperor was not virtuous, he could be criticized, but it

³⁷Yang Hongwei 楊紅偉, "Qianlong de shenfen rentong jiangou de yishi xingtai xing," *Lanzhou xuekan* 2 (2018), 26–37.

³⁸Aisin-Gioro Hongli, "Yue Wumu ci," in *Yue Miao zhilue*, 33.

³⁹Aisin-Gioro Hongli, "Yue Wumu ci," in *Yue Miao zhilue*, 31.

⁴⁰Aisin-Gioro Hongli, "Yue Wumu ci," in *Yue Miao zhilue*, 33.

⁴¹Aisin Gioro Hongli, *Pingjian chanyao* 評鑑綱要, *juan* 11, in vol. 694 of *Yingyin wenyuange Siku quanshu* (Taipei: Shangwu yinshuguan, 1986), 568.

⁴²Wilhelm, "From Myth to Myth," 156.

was literally impossible to imagine a legitimate system not headed by a virtuous emperor.”⁴³

Yue Fei himself became an exemplar for imperial subjects within the Confucian framework of political loyalty, as he served his *guo* with dedication and competency. He became a model for military men within the context of imperial governance, as he withdrew the army under his control when ordered to do so by the court of his *guo* and its emperor. His “perfect loyalty” was devoted to not just Emperor Gaozong as a person, but first and foremost to the throne as a position that was entitled to issue legitimate orders on behalf of the dynastic state. If Yue Fei disagreed with the judgement made by the court, he was allowed to express his opinions via memorials, which he did many times in his career. But he was not in a position to challenge orders that were clearly issued, unless he either considered abandoning his loyalty to the Southern Song dynastic state or creating an innovative political system to replace the one dominated by imperial Confucianism. Without the possibility of a new set of political principles, which was beyond anyone’s capacity or even imagination in Yue Fei’s time and in subsequent dynasties, obeying orders from the legitimate government of his country was the only option barring a defection.

While the emperor’s order always stood regardless of whether the emperor best served the interest of the dynastic state, imperial political ideology did not exempt the emperor from criticism if his actions deviated from what was regarded as “virtuous.” The Qianlong emperor, while applauding Yue Fei for his behavior as a model general in every aspect, questioned the poor decisions made by Gaozong and his motivation (“heart”). In “On Yue Wumu,” the Qianlong emperor described Gaozong as a “mediocre and cowardly ruler” (庸懦之主) who failed his father and elder brother, by leaving them in captivity, and who failed his people, by abandoning them to invaders. Gaozong also put Yue Fei in an impossible position, leaving him with no choice but to withdraw his army. It was Gaozong who should take the blame for the Song’s failure to achieve a full restoration.⁴⁴ Yue Fei was celebrated for his fulfilling his duty as a loyal general by carrying out imperial orders even though the orders were unwise. Song Gaozong was criticized by the Qianlong emperor for failing to live up to what was expected of him as “son of Heaven.”

The Qianlong emperor’s opinion resonated with the stance adopted in the official history of the Song composed under the sponsorship of the Yuan imperial government: the official biography ranked Yue Fei over legendary generals in previous dynasties due to his martial valor, civility, and virtues.⁴⁵ The official biography of Gaozong questioned Gaozong’s motivation and foregrounded his failure: “Yue Fei and his son died on the verge of success ... The emperor was satisfied with peace and tolerant of humiliation. He hid his own regret and forgot about his parents. How sad it is that he eventually could not avoid being ridiculed by future generations.”⁴⁶ There was no need for the Qianlong emperor to “completely distort” the image of Yue Fei or take Yue out of his original context for the purpose of ideological indoctrination. The Qianlong emperor merely continued and extended a well-established tradition of assessing Yue Fei’s character and achievements at the intersection of Yue Fei’s own deeds and the

⁴³Peter Zarrow, *After Empire: The Conceptual Transformation of the Chinese State, 1885–1924* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012), 10.

⁴⁴Aisin-Gioro Hongli, “Lun Yue Wumu,” in *Yue Miao zhilue*, 29–30.

⁴⁵Tuotuo, *Songshi*, vol. 33, 11375–98, especially 11396–97.

⁴⁶Tuotuo, *Songshi*, vol. 2, 612.

Chinese concepts of rulership and subjecthood. “Exhausting one’s loyalty to requite the *guo*” was a virtue critical to the function of the Chinese imperial system, for Han and non-Han dynasties alike. And it was Yue’s manifestation of this virtue that allowed him to be widely worshiped even among the Manchu banner population of the Qing.⁴⁷

Yue Fei’s “loyalty” was continuously celebrated by the imperial government in the Song, Yuan, Ming, and Qing periods as his single most important attribute. The Southern Song dynasty granted him a series of posthumous honorary titles (諡號) after Yue was rehabilitated: Wumu 武穆 (martial and virtuous) in 1179, Zhongwu 忠武 (loyal and martial) in 1225, and Zhongwen 忠文 (loyal and civil) in 1261.⁴⁸ The last one in the sequence even omitted the “martial” part, pairing “loyalty” with “civility” to elevate Yue’s status among the literati.⁴⁹ Yue’s commemorative temple in Hangzhou was first granted the title of “reward loyalty and spread blessings” (褒忠衍福) during the Southern Song. After being renovated under the Mongols, the imperial government added two characters—“protect righteousness” (保義)—to the original temple title.⁵⁰ During the Ming, the major offering halls in Yue’s Hangzhou temple were named as the Shrine to Inspire Loyalty (啟忠祠), the Shrine to the Successors of the Loyal (繼忠祠), the Shrine of Loyal Assistants (翊忠祠), and the Shrine for Posterity (流芳祠). These names were carried on to the present.⁵¹ Emphasizing “loyalty” as the defining character of Yue was certainly not a Qing creation.

Such continuity in Yue Fei’s image, concentrating on his status as an emblem of loyalty ever since his death, was not confined to imperial commemoration or elite discourse. The first vernacular writing that particularly promoted Yue Fei’s image as the “unconditionally loyal” was the play *Record of the Perfectly Loyal* (精忠記). The *Record* was produced in the mid-Ming, a period characterized by high tensions between the Ming dynasty and the Mongols in the north.⁵² Yue’s “blind loyalty” (愚忠), in Feng Qiyong’s words, was so central that “his blind loyalty outshined his anti-Jin spirit” in this play.⁵³ Upon receiving the imperial order to withdraw, Yue not only planned to obey immediately, but he also induced his son and most loyal subordinate into a trap and put them in chains so that they would not be able to avenge the wrongs he suffered.⁵⁴

⁴⁷Pamela Crossley, *Orphan Warriors: Three Manchu Generations and the End of the Qing World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 3–12.

⁴⁸*Shihao* was a posthumous title conferred to an important person that functioned as the state’s final judgment on him/her. Gong Yanming, *Yue Fei pingzhuan*, 416–417; Wang Zengyu, ed., *Eguo jintuo cui-bian*, vol. 2, 823.

⁴⁹According to Kam Louie, the *wen* (civility) type of masculinity was preferred in late imperial China even though both *wen* and *wu* masculinities were regarded as desirable. Kam Louie, *Theorising Chinese Masculinity*. The martial type of masculinity received particular low esteem during the Song period due to the dynasty’s policy of prioritizing civil governance over the military and the low status of soldiers. See Elad Alyagon, “Inked: Song Soldiers, Military Tattoos, and the Remaking of the Chinese Lower Class, 960–1279,” PhD diss., University of California, Davis, 2016.

⁵⁰Wang Zengyu, *Yue Fei yu Nan Song qianqi zhengzhi yu junshi yanjiu* (Zhengzhou: Henan daxue chubanshe, 2002), 251–52. Tao Zongyi 陶宗儀, *Nancun chuogeng lu* (Beijing: Zhonghushuju, 1959), *juan* 3, 40–41.

⁵¹Huang Donglan, “Yue Fei Miao: Chuangzao gonggong jiyi de chang,” in *Shijian, jiyi, xushu*, edited by Sun Jiang (Hangzhou: Zhejiang renmin chubanshe, 2004), 163.

⁵²Timothy Brook, *The Troubled Empire: China in the Yuan and Ming Dynasties* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2013), 95–97.

⁵³Feng Qiyong, “Dui Yuan Ming jige Yue Fei ju de fenxi pipan,” *Guangming ribao*, September 21, 1964.

⁵⁴Yao Maoliang 姚茂良, *Jingzhongji*, in *Xuxiu siku quanshu*, vol. 1769 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1995), 45–96, especially 73–76.

In the late Ming play, *Banner of Perfect Loyalty* by the Ming loyalist Feng Menglong, Yue Fei struggled with the court's orders to withdraw, and even went out to fight the Jurchens once more after he already received the imperial edicts. But Yue's initial challenge of the court order was narrated in a framework highlighting his unwillingness to compromise on his loyalty: If he continued to fight, he would be disloyal to "the court, who is the lord" (朝廷也是主上); if he withdrew, he would be disloyal to "the [captured] two emperors who are also lords" (二帝也是主上). Eventually, he chose to prioritize his loyalty to the person currently representing the Song state.⁵⁵

Without upholding the dynastic state, Yue Fei's loyalty and dedication would be rootless and aimless: what criteria would enable him to determine the group of people he was fighting for and the territories he was fighting to recover? Should he aim to recover the people and territories that had been controlled by previous dynasties in China but had been lost to northern and northwestern regimes even before the founding of the Northern Song dynasty in 960? Yue Fei, as the "banner of perfect loyalty," devoted his efforts to protect both the people and the territory, but always under the control of a specific dynastic state. In this sense, Yue's loyalty to the ruler (盡忠) and his dedication to the country (報國) could not be separated, at least not in imperial China with a dominant political ideology and governing logic that would not be toppled until the early twentieth century.

Treating the loyal subjects of the orthodox ruling regime as the people worthy of protection, and treating the enemies of that regime as bandits that should be killed or turned, regardless of their ethnic or social backgrounds, were what was expected of a loyal general. Moreover, submitting oneself to imperial orders and surrendering military command when ordered to, despite one's own judgement, was necessary for the maintenance of the imperial power structure. Rather than ethnic conflict, "loyalty" had always been the central theme in Yue Fei narratives under Han and non-Han dynasties in late imperial China—in official commemoration, in elite discourse, and in popular culture. It was no wonder that historians and writers in twentieth-century China faced great difficulties in transforming "the banner of perfect loyalty" into a national hero that served the interest of a nation that did not exist in Yue Fei's own day.

Making a National Hero Out of a Loyal General

The late Ming and early Qing intellectual Gu Yanwu 顧炎武 (1613–1682) defined the perishing of a *guo* (亡國, *wangguo*) as follows: "It is said that a change in the family name of the emperor and in the reign period constitutes loss of the *guo*."⁵⁶ For him, the ruler and his officials were the ones to concern themselves about the protection of the *guo* (保國); conversely, every single man had the responsibility to protect universal values "under Heaven" (天下), defined by Gu as "benevolence and righteousness" (仁義).⁵⁷ The *guo* as understood by Yue Fei was the Southern Song dynastic state

⁵⁵Feng Qiyong, *Jingzhong qi jianzheng gao*, 150–51.

⁵⁶Gu Yanwu 顧炎武, *Records of Daily Knowledge and Collected Poems and Essays*, translated by Ian Johnston (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017), 103. Johnston's translation uses "kingdom" as the equivalent to *guo*. Since *guo* was and is used as a generic term for foreign countries and for dynasties in Chinese history, I keep the term *guo* here.

⁵⁷Leigh Jenco, *Making the Political: Founding and Action in the Political Theory of Zhang Shizhao* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 109–10. As the Republican intellectual Zhang Shizhao 章士釗 (1881–1973) explained, "Mr. Gu did not distinguish the state from the ruler; and what he called

with a ruling house whose surname was Zhao. Historic assessments of and popular representation of Yue Fei prior to the late nineteenth century were produced within an ideological context similar to that of Yue Fei's lifetime. Even visionary thinkers such as Gu Yanwu, who did highlight the distinction between the interest of the *guo* and universal human order, did not deviate significantly from the long-established definition of *guo*.⁵⁸ It was only in China's empire-to-nation transformation that the sovereign of China was redefined from the person of the ruler to a national people, which was accompanied by the meaning of *guo* being transformed from a dynastic state to a nation with the state supposedly representing the nation.⁵⁹ As a result of this conceptual transformation, the newly acknowledged tension between Yue Fei's ultimate loyalty and his service to the *guo* emerged as an issue to be resolved, excused, or made sense of even for modern scholars who admired Yue Fei. It opened the door for Yue Fei to be taken out of his original historical context by modern scholars who assumed a teleological development of China after Yue's death that left behind "a country that advocated a strict cultural distinction between Han Chinese and barbarians" and achieved the "goal of the Yuan, Ming, and Qing dynastic states and the modern Republic of China and the People's Republic of China to construct a multi-ethnic polity."⁶⁰

Yue Fei was first redefined as a national hero at the turn of the twentieth century by anti-Qing revolutionaries. The "nation" for the anti-Manchu activists was exclusively Han, and "aliens" were first and foremost Northern nomadic peoples. The focus of Yue Fei narratives shifted from his loyalty to the Southern Song dynasty to his supposed anti-foreignness. Scholars have long recognized the importance of "The Biography of Yue Fei: The Chief of Chinese Nationalism" (中國民族主義第一人岳飛傳) in promoting Yue Fei as an emblem of Han-centric nationalism.⁶¹ But this essay in itself only offered sketches of Yue Fei's background and deeds. The main body of it was on the periodization of Chinese history into four stages, with the supremacy of the "Chinese" over "foreigners" gradually declining: China was weakened during the second stage (the Song), and was eventually lost during the third stage (the Yuan). Chinese people even treated foreigners as their ancestors during the fourth stage (the Qing).⁶² Yue Fei, who lived at the conjunction of the second and third stages, deserved to be worshipped as "soul of the race" (種魂), "soul of the nation" (國魂), and even "heavenly god" (天神) because he symbolized the spirit of resistance of the Han against "alien races" that was otherwise deemed lacking in Chinese history given the history of

all under Heaven, we now call the country (*guo*"); Zhang Shizhao, *Zhang Shizhao quanji* (Shanghai: wenhui chubanshe, 2000), vol. 3, 128.

⁵⁸For the multiple meanings of *guo* in classical Chinese that centered on the dynastic state, see Yue Du, "Sun Yat-sen as *Guofu*: Competition over Nationalist Party Orthodoxy in the Second Sino-Japanese War," *Modern China* 45.4 (2019), 212.

⁵⁹Timothy Brook, Michael van Walt van Praeg, and Miek Boltjes, eds. *Sacred Mandates: Asian International Relations Since Chinggis Khan* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018), 15–16; Yue Du, "From Dynastic State to Imperial Nation: International Law, Diplomacy, and the Conceptual Decentralization of China, 1860s–1900s," *Late Imperial China* 42.1 (2021), 177–220.

⁶⁰Citations are from Huang Donglan, "Shrines of Yue Fei: Spaces for Creation of Public Memory," *Chinese Sociology & Anthropology* 37.2–3 (2005), 77; and Sun Jiang and Huang Donglan, "Yue Fei xushu," 89.

⁶¹Shen Songqiao 沈松橋, "Zhen da Han zhi tiansheng: Minzu yingxiong xipu yu wan Qing de guozu xiangxiang," *Zhongyang yanjiuyuan jindaishi yanjiusuo jikan* 33 (2000), 115.

⁶²Anonymous, "Zhongguo minzu zhuyi diyiren Yue Fei zhuan," *Hubei xueshengjie* 4 (1903), 63–67; 5 (1903), 55–62.

foreigners being accepted as legitimate rulers of China.⁶³ Yue Fei's image in the anti-Qing context was not about what he achieved, which the author insisted not to be used as a criterion for evaluation (不能以成敗論), but about Yue's hatred for the ancestors of the Manchus.

Yue Fei became a god-like figure in rituals performed by members of anti-Manchu organizations such as the Prince Yue Society (岳王會) and the Restoration Society (光復會). These societies later merged into the Revolutionary Alliance (同盟會) which would play an important role in the overthrow of the Qing in 1911.⁶⁴ Ironically, Yue Fei—a devoted Confucian who vehemently defended the Southern Song dynasty—and the Taiping leader Hong Xiuquan 洪秀全 (1814–1864)—an anti-Confucian rebel who theorized the Qing's Manchu rulers as demons in his Sinicized version of Christianity, were grouped together in a newly created lineage of “national heroes” due to their resistance to “foreign” invaders.⁶⁵ In the late Qing, a poem attributed to the Taiping general Shi Dakai 石達開 (1831–1863) was widely circulated among radical reformers and revolutionaries. The poem reads as follows.

How can I bear to see robes and regalia of the Superior Country fall to the
barbarians?
Let us lead the heroes of the Central Plain to win back our rivers and
mountains.

忍令上國衣冠淪於夷狄
相率中原豪傑還我河山⁶⁶

Those who referred to this poem clearly expected their readers to make the connection between the cause of restoring Han clothing to the Han people and the aspiration of “recovering our rivers and mountains (from invaders)” (還我河山) attributed to Yue Fei. In July, 1902, Liang Qichao 梁啟超 (1873–1929) discussed it in his *New Citizen Series Newspaper* (新民叢報) to praise Shi Dakai whose possession of both military and literary talents made him comparable to Yue Fei.⁶⁷ In May 1903, Zou Rong 鄒榮 (1885–1905) cited it in his *Revolutionary Army* (革命軍) to ask whether his compatriots (同胞) had the determination to follow Shi Dakai and Yue Fei in restoring China for the Han Chinese.⁶⁸ And in late 1904, it appeared in the calendar printed by the revolutionary newspaper *Thoe Lam Jit Poh* (圖南日報), published in Singapore, to call for the overthrow of the Manchu Qing Guangxu (滿清光緒) who “temporarily occupied the position of emperor that belonged to the majestic Han” (暫理皇漢帝位).⁶⁹

⁶³ Anonymous, “Zhongguo minzu zhuyi diyiren,” especially 66, 61–62.

⁶⁴ Matten, “The Worship of General Yue Fei,” 83–84; Shen Ji 沈寂, “Xinhai geming shiqi de Yuewanghui,” *Lishi yanjiu* 10 (1979), 37–45; Kauko Laitinen, *Chinese Nationalism in the Late Qing Dynasty: Zhang Binglin as an Anti-Manchu Propagandist* (London: Curzon Press, 1990), especially 140–44.

⁶⁵ Shen Songqiao, “Zhen da Han zhi tiansheng,” 125.

⁶⁶ Tsou Jung 鄒容, *The Revolutionary Army: A Chinese Nationalist Tract of 1903*, translated by John Lust (Paris: Mouton & Co., 1968), 82.

⁶⁷ *Xinmin Congbao* (Taipei: Yiwen yinshuguan, 1966 [1902–1907]), vol. 2, no.12 (1902), 98–99.

⁶⁸ Tsou Jung, *The Revolutionary Army*, 82.

⁶⁹ Gallery 1, Sun Yat-sen Nanyang Memorial Hall (www.sysnmh.org.sg/en/education/-/media/SYS/Education/Documents/Permanent%20Galleries%20%20Gallery%201%20English.pdf), reproduced from Teo Eng Hock 張永福, *Nanyang yu chuangli minguo* (Singapore: Wan qing yuan Sun Zhongshan

Yue Fei was not the only historical figure who was reimagined at the turn of the twentieth century due to the transformation of *guo* from a dynastic state holding the Mandate of Heaven to a nation that was defined along Han-centric ethno-nationalist lines. Zheng Chenggong's 鄭成功 (1624–1662) anti-Dutch endeavors in Taiwan were celebrated, while what drove his actions—establishing a loyalist base to continue the Southern Ming rump state—was downplayed if not omitted.⁷⁰ The “remnant subjects” (遺民) who kept their loyalty to the fallen Song and Ming dynastic states were praised as national heroes, while remnant subjects of the Mongol Yuan dynasty, many of whom were Han, were ignored.⁷¹ As the traditional virtue of loyalty to the orthodox dynastic state one had served—fidelity (節)—was dismissed by the revolutionaries who conceptually separated the nation from the ruling Qing regime, Yue Fei was celebrated not because of, but despite, his loyalty that could not “obscure” (掩) his nationalism.⁷²

In “On the Psychological Basis of the Chinese People’s Worship of Yue Fei” (論中國人崇拜岳飛之心理), the constitutionalist Jiang Zhiyou 蔣智由 (1865–1929) adopted a line of reasoning not so different from the above-analyzed “Biography of Yue Fei: The Chief of Chinese Nationalism” penned by a revolutionary. Unlike the Qianlong emperor, Jiang dismissed the possibility of a recovery of China proper under Yue Fei during the Southern Song. But he insisted that Yue, alongside Zheng Chenggong, deserved to be worshipped by the Chinese because he represented a determination (志氣) and sentiment (感情) of loving *guo* and loving race that was essential for the spirit of self-determination (自主之心) in resistance to foreign encroachment.⁷³ Equally anti-foreign in their aspirations and similarly defining the Jurchens as aliens, the reformers nonetheless differentiated themselves from the 1911 revolutionaries by adopting a definition of the Chinese race (種) and the Chinese nation (國) that was inclusive and adaptative to historical development. Facing the prospect of the Qing territory disintegrating amidst a successful anti-Manchu revolution, reformers such as Liang Qichao proposed a “broader nationalism” (大民族主義) that would enable the fusion of all ethnicities currently living under the Qing into a politically and territorially, rather than an ethnically, defined Chinese nation. While recognizing ethnic groups such as the Manchus and the Mongols as part of the Chinese nation at the turn of the twentieth century, this state-centric and present-oriented nationalism was ambivalent about northern invaders such as Jurchens and Mongols prior to the Qing.⁷⁴

The Republic of China carried on this more inclusive interpretation of the Chinese nation, together with a version of historical narratives that focused on national heroes’

Nanyang ji nian guan, 2013 [1933]). Notably, “fall to the barbarians” was printed as “fall to dust and ashes” (淪於塗炭), and “win back our rivers and mountains” was printed as “win back our mountains and rivers” (還我山河) in *Thoe Lam Jit Poh*.

⁷⁰For Zheng Chenggong’s Ming loyalism, see Xing Hang, *Conflict and Commerce in Maritime East Asia: The Zheng Family and the Shaping of the Modern World, C.1620–1720* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 78–87. For Zheng Chenggong in late Qing Nationalist imaginary, see Shen Songqiao, “Zhen da Han zhi tiansheng,” 120–21.

⁷¹Shen Songqiao, “Zhen da Han zhi tiansheng,” 117–19; Liu Pujiang, “Yuanming geming de minzuzhuyi xiangxiang,” 146–47. For Yuan loyalists in the early Ming, many of whom were Han, see Zhang Jia 張佳, “Ming chu de Hanzu Yuan yimin,” *Gudai wenming* 8.1 (2014), 58–67.

⁷²Anonymous, “Zhongguo minzu zhuyi diyiren,” 65.

⁷³Guanyun 觀雲 (Jiang Zhiyou), “Lun Zhongguoren chongbai Yue Fei zhi xinli,” *Xinmin congbao*, vol. 3, no.24 (1905), 82–100, especially 83, 92–93, 95.

⁷⁴Huang Xingtao 黃興濤, *Chongsu Zhonghua: Jindai Zhongguo “Zhonghua minzu” guannian yanjiu* (Beijing: Beijing shifan daxue chubanshe, 2017), 60–70.

universal patriotic “spirit” rather than their animosity against specific “alien” groups. State builders, both former revolutionaries and their more conservative collaborators, adopted an essentially Han-centric but also multi-ethnic conceptualization of the Chinese nation in their efforts to hold the old Qing territories together after overthrowing the Qing’s Manchu rulers. The supposedly anti-Jurchen-ness of Yue Fei, which made him such a central figure in the anti-Qing revolution, was downplayed, while Yue’s “perfect loyalty toward his country” continued to be honored. Facing the Japanese menace in the 1930s and 1940s, the Nationalists, who traced the origin of their organization to the anti-Manchu Revolutionary Alliance, fashioned Yue Fei into a model for national resistance in their textbooks by foregrounding his anti-foreign valor. But these textbooks avoided explicitly denigrating the Jurchens of the Southern Song period, and interestingly, largely refrained from denouncing Emperor Gaozong himself.⁷⁵ The solicited article, “Yue Fei: a Loyal Minister of the Song Dynasty” (岳飛：宋朝的忠臣) published in the biweekly periodical *New Citizen* (新民) in 1935, reflected this new focus of Yue Fei narratives. At the top of Yue’s personal qualities, the author particularly praised Yue Fei’s determination to fight foreigners and his willingness to carry out orders of which he disapproved.⁷⁶ The author used the term “loss of the country” (亡國), which traditionally meant dynastic fall, to describe the danger faced by both the Southern Song and the Republic of China, collapsing the distinction between the dynastic state and the modern nation-state so as to use a “loyal minister of the Song dynasty” to inspire anti-Japanese nationalism.⁷⁷ More conspicuously, absolute obedience to orders and absolute loyalty toward the existing state were highlighted when the Nationalists, no longer challengers to established power, undertook the unpopular action of suppressing domestic contenders while preparing for a war against foreign invasion.

Enemy of the People or Protector of the People?

In 1949, the Chinese Communists, once labeled by the Nationalists as “bandits” (共匪), ascended to national power. Resistance by oppressed classes to exploitative classes became glorified as a major driving force of historical progress, and Han-centric ethnic policies of the Nationalists were replaced by a new emphasis on the common fate of all ethnicities. Today, China remains a nominal socialist power adhering to the doctrine of Marxism–Leninism, albeit with “Chinese characteristics.” Regional ethnic autonomy is still honored in name despite the increasing emphasis on ethnic solidarity and assimilation. The real question persists, however, of how the Chinese people and the Chinese nation should be defined. A revolutionary coalition led by the Proletariat and based on the alliance between workers and peasants? A multi-ethnic Chinese nation (中華民族) consisting of 56 ethnic groups who have their own histories and cultures but who are unified by a common political cause? Or a political community of which all Chinese citizens are members regardless of their background or political allegiance? The

⁷⁵Wai-Keung Chan, “Contending Memories of the Nation: History Education in Wartime China, 1937–1945,” in *The Politics of Historical Production in Late Qing and Republican China*, edited by Tze-ki Hon and Robert Culp (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 169–210, especially 193–95.

⁷⁶Huanlin 煥林, “Yue Fei: Songchao de zhongchen,” *Xinmin* 91 (1935), 5–6.

⁷⁷For the traditional meaning of *wangguo* as dynastic fall, see Rebecca Karl, *Staging the World: Chinese Nationalism at the Turn of the Twentieth Century* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002), especially 1–26 and 27–49.

meaning of Yue Fei, a symbol of patriotism and nationalism created through centuries of mystification, was inevitably contested, as the very nature of “loyalty” and “nation” went through redefinition under new power holders.

According to Wang Zengyu, the leading expert on Yue Fei in China today, Yue, despite his hatred toward the Jurchens in his immature youth, later “corrected his own statement and adopted a sincere welcoming attitude toward the Jin army, including Jurchens among them, who would surrender.”⁷⁸ Yue even allowed senior Jurchen military commanders to surrender and join his army.⁷⁹ As Elad Alyagon’s research shows, during the Song–Jin wars, switching sides was not uncommon for soldiers from either the Song or the Jin. As an attempt to prevent soldiers from switching sides, both the Song and the Jin states tattooed conscripted soldiers in border zones, many of whom were not from the ethnic groups to which the ruling classes belonged.⁸⁰ In this context, Yue’s “welcoming attitude” toward Jurchen soldiers was hardly exceptional. The reference to his “correcting his (previously presumably incorrect) statement (about killing all alien people)” is necessary, however, in a biography that portrays Yue Fei in an overall positive light in contemporary China. The Jurchens were not the only group of people who received clemency from Yue Fei, in Wang’s account. The peasant rebels that Yue actively suppressed in his service of the Southern Song state were also treated with benevolence. In his discussion of Yue’s handling of bandits in Jizhou and Qianzhou, Wang emphasizes that Yue “gave a large number of captured bandits extraordinarily lenient treatment, which gained him great popularity among the people.”⁸¹ Late imperial Yue Fei narratives foregrounded the effective tactic Yue adopted in his suppression of the peasant rebellion led by Zhong Xiang and Yang Yao—“depriving [the chief] of his major assistants, and alienating from him his closest aides” (夺其手足之助, 离其腹心之援).⁸² Based on the same historical sources from the state-sponsored Song dynastic history, Wang Zengyu summarizes Yue’s strategy as “first and foremost persuading them (the rebels) to surrender and fighting them militarily only supplementarily.”⁸³

Wang Zengyu’s expressions on Yue Fei concerning ethnicity and class, while based on empirical evidence, must be understood in the broader context of Chinese academia. Underneath is a central question: Did Yue Fei dedicate himself to the national body? A national hero’s loyalty should be directed toward the nation and the people who constitute the nation. Yue’s fight against the Jurchens could be explained away by the involuntary nature of the Jurchen common people’s participation in the war. This is the reasoning adopted also in high school textbooks used in China: “Yue Fei insisted on fighting the Jin, which served the common people’s interest of resisting exploitation from Jurchen nobles. This earned him admiration from the people.”⁸⁴ But Yue’s defense of the Song dynastic state against domestic rebellions, which could be equated to suppression of the people’s organized resistance to feudal oppression, became an extremely tough issue for anyone who attempted to defend Yue’s position as a national hero within the Marxist framework of historical analysis that dominated academic historical

⁷⁸Wang Zengyu, *Jinzhong baoguo*, 77.

⁷⁹Wang Zengyu, *Jinzhong baoguo*, 316.

⁸⁰Alyagon, “Loyalist Tattoos,” especially 255–56.

⁸¹Wang Zengyu, *Jinzhong baoguo*, 128.

⁸²Jin Chenghan, “Yue Fei xiaoshuo yanjiu,” 67–68.

⁸³Wang Zengyu, *Jinzhong baoguo*, 173.

⁸⁴Renmin jiaoyu chubanshe, *Zhongguo gudaishi* (xuanxiu), 157. Cited in *Beijing Qingnian bao*, December 10, 2002.

research in China until the 1990s and that still dominates history education in primary and secondary schools in China today.

According to Deng Guangming 鄧廣銘 (1907–1998), Wang Zengyu's former advisor at Peking University and one of the most renowned scholars of Song history in the PRC, Yue Fei's "exhausting one's loyalty to requite the country" materialized in three aspects in his military career: (1) putting down bandits roaming within the Southern Song territory; (2) suppressing peasant rebellions that challenged the Southern Song regime; and (3) resisting the Jurchen army that repeatedly invaded the South, recovering some of the lost territories, and "avenging and clearing the wrongs and humiliation suffered by the country" (報國仇, 雪國恥). "Among the three, only the third was Yue Fei's true mission and aspiration, which was also the exact meaning of his 'exhausting loyalty to requite the country.'" Deng stated that he was obliged to discuss the former two, however, only because "Yue Fei had indeed done each of them."⁸⁵ Deng's unease was palpable in this transitional paragraph:

If Yue Fei's military career ended with his crushing the uprising led by Yang Yao, Yue Fei would have only been regarded as a personality who bore great criminal responsibilities in our history; fortunately, within five to six years of crushing Yang Yao's uprising, Yue Fei took the mission of resisting Jurchen armies with great courageousness and decisiveness, which was a significant historical event that concerned the development and fate of the entire Chinese nation (including the Jurchen ethnicity).⁸⁶

For Deng, Yue's suppression of peasant rebellions was a mere blemish and a moment of weakness in an otherwise significant life characterized by patriotism. Deng's handling of the delicate issue of Yue Fei's quashing of peasant rebels—unquestionably part of the "Chinese people"—set the tone for Chinese studies on Yue Fei published since the 1980s.

In the decades prior to the publication of Deng Guangming's revised biography of Yue Fei in 1985, it was not always clear whether Yue's struggles against the Jurchens or his suppression of peasant rebellions should be regarded as the "main aspect" of his career. The controversy over the "historic assessment" of Yue Fei primarily focused on class issues during the period between the early 1950s and the end of the Maoist era, a period during which ethnic minorities were frequently treated as non-Chinese others or even as "foreigners" despite the official ideology of a multi-ethnic Chinese nation.⁸⁷ Yue's crushing of peasant rebellions on behalf of a Southern Song state that was understood to represent the interests of "feudal" landlord classes, not only drew criticism from scholars who approached history mainly from the perspective of class struggle, but also led to the destruction of his temples and tomb during the Cultural Revolution.

In his *Philosophy for the Broad Masses of the People*, the Marxist philosopher Ai Siqi 艾思奇 (1910–1966) noted that Yue Fei's "loyalty to the ruler," which obliged him to retreat, rivaled his "dedication to the country," which obliged him to fight. This unsolvable contradiction inevitably caused his tragic death.⁸⁸ In 1951, Ai no longer limited his

⁸⁵Deng Guangming, *Yue Fei Zhuan* (1985), 399.

⁸⁶Deng Guangming, *Yue Fei Zhuan* (1985), 402.

⁸⁷Nimrod Baranovitch, "Others No More: The Changing Representation of Non-Han Peoples in Chinese History Textbooks, 1951–2003," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 69.1 (2010), 85–122.

⁸⁸Ai Siqi, *Dazhong zhexue* (revised version, 1950–1953), in *Ai Siqi quanshu* (Beijing: Renmin chubanshe, 2006), 561–792, especially "Yue Fei shi zenme si de," 712–18.

critical assessment of Yue Fei to the issue of the contradictory nature of Yue's loyalty. Ai started to use "reactionary" (反動) to describe some of Yue Fei's thoughts and actions, which, he claimed, were clearly manifested in Yue's quashing of peasant uprisings. Ai Siqi conceded, however, that these limitations and reactionary aspects of Yue's ideas and actions were historically conditioned, and should not affect Yue's assessment as a patriot and a national hero.⁸⁹ Emboldened by Marxist analysis that had by then become prominent, many others were less generous toward Yue Fei. Some denied that he was a hero, not to mention a national hero. Qin Wenxi 秦文兮, who, like Ai, participated in the debate over Yue Fei hosted by two issues of the journal *History Teaching* (歷史教學) in 1951, insisted that only the leaders of peasant uprisings could be considered national heroes as they were the ones that resisted "feudal oppression." "Yue Fei's feudal servile thoughts reduced his views and spirit to such a pitiful level that he became a mediocre personality in feudal society." Notably, while asserting that Yue should not be revered as a national hero at all, Qin did acknowledge what Yue had achieved in the anti-Jurchen struggles.⁹⁰ Eye-grabbing titles such as "Yue Fei Committed Crimes against the People" (岳飛, 他對人民是有罪的), appeared in newspapers during this period.⁹¹ Even historians who supported Yue as a national hero, such as Zhang Chuanxi 張傳璽 (1927–2021), had to concede that Yue's slaughtering of peasant rebels prior to his participation in the anti-Jin wars was indeed a "crime" (罪惡). Yue changed his attitude toward the common people and allied with them to resist the Jurchens only because Yue, who represented enlightened small landlords, realized that the Song court, which represented large landlords, betrayed their interests by following defeatist policies. Yue Fei, despite his dubious history and his class origin, died as "a friend of the people."⁹²

As the theory of class struggle became increasingly dominant in the 1950s and the 1960s, voices defending Yue Fei became weakened or even muted: a member from the landlord class did not seem to be capable of making positive contributions to history. Deng Guangming, who first published his biography of Yue Fei in 1946, refrained from referring to Yue as "national hero" in the 1955 revised edition of his work. Rather, "outstanding strategist" is used to describe Yue. Deng concluded: "We have no choice but to admit guilt on behalf of Yue Fei."⁹³ During the Cultural Revolution, Yue Fei's memorial temple in Hangzhou, like other symbols of "four olds," was stormed. It was transformed into a "rent collection courtyard" (收租院) that served as an educational site to denounce "feudal exploitation."⁹⁴ Yue's statue was destroyed and his son's tombs were disturbed. It was said that Yue's bones were not exposed—a miracle given that the team commissioned to renovate the temple after the Cultural Revolution had great difficulty in locating the tombs. The temple was destroyed so thoroughly that it had to be rebuilt from scratch in 1979 based on old images and records in gazetteers.⁹⁵

Rebuilt together with Yue Fei's memorial temple was his prestigious position in the Chinese pantheon of national heroes. One year after the end of the Cultural Revolution, in 1978, an academic conference was held in Hangzhou on Yue Fei's "historic assessment."

⁸⁹ Ai Siqi, "Yue Fei shibushi yige aiguo zhe?" *Lishi jiaoxue* (Tianjin) 1.6 (1951), 30.

⁹⁰ Qin Wenxi, "Yue Fei daodi suanbusuan minzu yingxiang," *Lishi Jiaoxue* (Tianjin) 1.5 (1951), 17–18.

⁹¹ Shifu 石夫, "Yue Fei: Ta dui renmin shi youzui de," *Xinwen ribao*, January 10, 1951.

⁹² Zhang Chuanxi, "Weishenme Yue Fei shi minzu yingxiang?" *Guangming ribao*, September 22, 1951.

⁹³ Deng Guangming, *Yue Fei Zhuan* (Beijing: Sanlian shudian, 1955), 261.

⁹⁴ Huang Donglan, "Yue Fei miao," 162–63.

⁹⁵ Sun Jiang and Huang Donglan, "Yue Fei xushu," 97–98. Li Bailin 李柏霖, "Huiyi Hangzhou Yue Fei miao ji mu de yici chongxiu," *Dongfang wenwu* 3 (2009), 72–74.

Among the participants, who, for their own protection, were all anonymous in the newspaper coverage, some insisted that Yue Fei should not be regarded as a national hero because he suppressed peasant rebellions. But the majority agreed that Yue's resistance to the Jurchens was the "major aspect" of his career, and thus he should indeed be treated as a national hero, especially considering that class struggle materialized in Yue's time as military struggles between Jurchen nobles and the common people of all ethnicities.⁹⁶ In the 1985 revised edition of Deng Guangming's biography of Yue Fei, he concluded:

Yue Fei made great contributions to the protection of the well-developed feudalist production and feudal non-material culture. He served the interest of the Han people, but he did not harm the interest of the Jurchen people (not to mention other ethnic groups) if we take their long-term interest into consideration. In other words, he provided many positive factors in the development and advancement of the Chinese nation, and thus he deserved to be called a national hero of the entire Chinese nation.⁹⁷

While the significance of class struggle gradually faded after the end of the Cultural Revolution, its lingering effect can be found in academic and artistic works on Yue Fei produced in the twenty-first century, such as Wang Zengyu's biography and the 2013 TV series. At the same time, ethnic minorities in China that in the Republic and the early People's Republic were once referred to as "foreigners" have been in theory fully incorporated into the Chinese historical self since the 1980s through a new official narrative claiming that they have always been Chinese.⁹⁸ This shift made it more imperative for scholars and cultural workers to carefully handle the anti-Jurchen aspect of Yue Fei's career. It is likely that the tortuous handling of the "ethnic minority question" in defining the *guo* in *Patriot Yue Fei* was adopted by the production team as a precaution to fend off potential attacks. A decade before *Patriot Yue Fei* was aired, there was a nation-wide controversy over Yue Fei's "standing in history" (歷史地位) originating from some expressions in a teacher's manual for high school textbooks that denied Yue Fei the status of national hero.⁹⁹ When the news broke, many became furious at the possibility that Yue would not be treated as a national hero. As Zhidong Hao and Marc Andre Matten have insightfully observed, at the core of the textbook controversy in 2002 was the issue of whether Yue was a hero of the entire Chinese nation, which is supposed to embrace all ethnic groups currently living within the PRC's borders, or a hero of the Han ethnic group alone. The guideline received nearly universal criticism in media and on the Internet, as it was contradictory to what many people believed to be an indisputable truth. This unexpected popular uproar led to a change of course.¹⁰⁰ The Ministry of Education eventually clarified at a press conference that the "historic judgement" (歷史評價) of Yue as a national hero would not be changed. "Yue Fei and Wen Tianxiang have always been regarded as national heroes in Chinese history. But

⁹⁶Hangzhou daxue zhexue shehui kexue taolun hui shang zuotan Yue Fei de pingjia wenti," *Guangming ribao*, June 15, 1978.

⁹⁷Deng Guangming, *Yue Fei Zhuan* (Beijing: Renmin chubanshe, 1985), 398.

⁹⁸Baranovitch, "Others No More."

⁹⁹Matten, "The Worship of General Yue Fei," 91.

¹⁰⁰For a detailed treatment of the 2002 textbook controversy over Yue Fei's "historic assessment," see Zhidong Hao, *Whither Taiwan and Mainland China: National Identity, the State and Intellectuals* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2010), 75–77; Matten, "The Worship of General Yue Fei," 90–92.

there are indeed different opinions in academia.” The Ministry of Education promised that pure academic discussions would not be brought into secondary education.¹⁰¹

In recent decades, emperors and court politics have made a “triumphant return” in popular culture.¹⁰² With the current Chinese government’s connivance, if not straightforward encouragement, the rhetoric of class struggle has been gradually replaced by the discourse of development, accompanied by a “re-Sinicization of political narratives” that justifies state-led capitalism as a means to recover China’s historical glory.¹⁰³ China’s imperial past, including selected parts of Confucian thought and historical figures symbolizing traditional virtues, serves as powerful sources of legitimation. With the rise of official and popular nationalism, both China’s ethnic policies and popular perception of “Chineseness” have seen a turn toward Han-centrism, making ethnic minorities’ unique historical and cultural identities increasingly irrelevant in public discourse.¹⁰⁴ The Yue Fei legend has made a full-fledged comeback within the context of this intense nationalism, with the ruling regime being the “country” he was loyal to and foreign powers, especially the United States, being the equivalent to the alien enemy. China’s leader Xi Jinping refers to Yue Fei as his childhood role model. Xi’s mother, who told him about Yue’s story of “requiting the country with perfect loyalty,” supposedly inspired Xi’s dream of being a true patriot: “The goal of my whole life is ‘requiting the country with perfect loyalty’” (精忠報國是我一生的目標). Xi’s words of admiration for Yue Fei have been transformed into educational posters, and they continue to feed into patriotic programs today.¹⁰⁵

Concluding Remarks

I have admired the fidelity of [Yue Fei from] Tangyin since childhood.
Searching for unofficial history [about him] day and night.
I passed the tomb [of Yue Fei] in Hangzhou as an adult.
Watching over water of the [West] lake with indignation.

幼慕湯陰節
日夜搜稗史
壯過臨安墳
憤慨看湖水¹⁰⁶

¹⁰¹Liu Wanyong, “Yue Fei, Wen Tianxiang lilai shi minzu yingxiong, gaozhong lishi jiaocai congwei chongxin dingwei,” *Beijing Qingnian bao*, December 10, 2002. <http://www.ewen.co/books/bkview.asp?bkid=29193&cid=50444> (accessed February 14, 2023).

¹⁰²Xueping Zhong, “Re-collecting ‘History’ on Television: ‘Emperor Dramas,’ National Identity, and the Question of Historical Consciousness,” in her *Mainstream Culture Refocused: Television Drama, Society, and the Production of Meaning in Reform-Era China* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2010), 47–72.

¹⁰³Christopher A. Ford, “The Party and the Sage.”

¹⁰⁴For the rising Han-centric nationalism, see Kevin Carrico, *The Great Han: Race, Nationalism, and Tradition in China Today* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2017); and John M. Friend and Bradley A. Thayer, “The Rise of Han-Centrism and What It Means for International Politics,” *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism* 17.1 (2017), 91–114.

¹⁰⁵“Xi Jinping Zongshuji de wenxue qingyuan,” *People’s Daily*, October 24, 2016; <http://cpc.people.com.cn/xuexi/n1/2018/0522/c385474-30006190.html>.

¹⁰⁶Zheng Xiaoxu, “Ti Yue Fei Mingyin,” in his *Haicanglou shiji* (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2013), vol. 1, *juan* 7, 217.

The poet Zheng Xiaoxu 鄭孝胥 (1860–1938) was neither an admirer of Yue Fei in imperial times nor a nationalist revolutionary in the twentieth century. He was best known for the instrumental role he played in the establishment of Manchukuo, where he served as prime minister from 1932 to 1935. A Han Chinese who joined official service during the Qing, Zheng claimed that “the Republic of China is my enemy country” (民國乃敵國也) and strove to restore Qing rule after its fall.¹⁰⁷ Paradoxically, Zheng, a “traitor to the Chinese nation” who collaborated with the Japanese during China’s national crisis, was deeply inspired by Yue Fei. What Zheng admired was Yue Fei’s fidelity (節)—a word used to describe both the unwavering chastity of a woman and the steadfast loyalty of a minister regardless of whether the object of devotion was alive or gone. It was the same value that drove Zheng to dedicate himself to “recovering the capital” (收京) of the Qing from the Manchu homeland.¹⁰⁸ The cause of Zheng and other “Qing remnant subjects” (清遺民) was not dissimilar to that of Yue Fei, or to those of Wen Tianxiang 文天祥 (1236–1283), Shi Kefa 史可法 (1601–1645), and Zheng Chenggong, loyalist officials of the Southern Song and Ming dynasties who defended the rump states that were shadows of their *guo*’s former selves against their enemies. Song and Ming loyalists were refashioned into “national heroes” in resistance to alien oppressions in the twentieth century, while Yuan and Qing loyalists were either obscured in modern historiography or represented as traitors to the nation. Such a divergence in historic assessment of loyalist officials of Han-dominated dynasties and those of non-Han dynasties was a result of modern deviation from the original meaning of *guo* in classical Chinese—a compound concept that centered on a dynastic regime with its territory and people as an extension of its core. Even after the meaning of *guo* was re-oriented toward the nation-state in modern times, it was still possible to use Yue Fei’s loyalty (忠) and fidelity (節) to support the cause of the “dynastic state” broadly defined. The patriotic song “River Washed in Red” (滿江紅, *Manjianghong*), composed by Lin Sheng-shih 林聲翁 (1914–1991) in 1932 to lyrics allegedly written by Yue Fei, was both extraordinarily popular in patriotic events during the Second Sino-Japanese War and after 1949 in Taiwan where the Nationalist government was relocated after being defeated in mainland China by the Communists.¹⁰⁹ On the one hand, the newly coined meaning of Yue Fei as a patriot of the Chinese nation allowed him to serve as a symbol of resistance to Japanese invasion. On the other hand, Yue’s exemplary loyalty to the regime he served made “win back our rivers and mountains” (還我河山) from *Manjianghong* a fitting vehicle to promote the Nationalist cause of “recovering the Chinese mainland” (反攻大陸) from the rump state of the Republic of China on Taiwan.

Across the centuries, and particularly with the end of dynastic rule, Yue Fei remained a potent symbol, in spite of the general incommensurability between his own actions and modern understandings of them. To qualify Yue as a modern national

¹⁰⁷Lin Zhihong 林志宏, *Minguo nai diguo ye: zhengzhi wenhua zhuanxing xia de Qing yimin* (Taipei: Lianjing, 2009), especially 330–41.

¹⁰⁸Lin Zhihong, *Minguo nai diguo ye*, 340. Zheng Xiaoxu, “Shi’eryue nianliu ri tian weiming,” in his *Haicanglou shiji* (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2003), vol. 2, *juan* 12, 401.

¹⁰⁹Liu Ching-chih, *A Critical History of New Music in China*, translated by Caroline Mason (Hong Kong: Chinese University of Hong Kong Press, 2010), 277–82; the music and lyrics of *Manjianghong* are on 281. Wang Gungwu recalled in his memoir that the poem and song *Manjianghong* were introduced to him during his childhood by his father after he watched the movie *Yue Fei* in Ipoh in 1940 or 1941; see his *Home Is Not Here* (Singapore: Ridge Books, 2018), 41. For the Nationalists’ use of Yue Fei and *Manjianghong* in post-war Taiwan to promote the cause of reclaiming mainland China, see Sun Jiang and Huang Donglan, “Yue Fei xushu,” 97.

hero, parts of his aspirations and career had to be ignored or reinterpreted. But the continuity is stunning with respect to the logic dominating the relationship between the ruling polity in China and its people despite all the shifts and turns. Imperial dynasties in China and the People's Republic of China shared the same conviction that who counted as the people, and by extension who were excluded from the ranks of the people, should be determined not primarily by ethnicity or culture, but by the constituencies of the orthodox state in power. Those who supported the ruling regime were the people worthy of protection and benevolence regardless of their ethnicity or culture; those who threatened or harmed the ruling regime were the enemies every subject/citizen was obliged to fight even if they were of the same ethnicity and culture with the "people." Under this overarching logic, Han literati could praise Yue Fei's crushing of Han "bandits" during the Southern Song and the Ming; a Manchu emperor could celebrate Yue Fei's military victories over the Jurchens. Under the same logic, Yue's loyalty toward his ruler and the Southern Song dynastic state, which had been commemorated for centuries as his major attribute, was denounced during the second half of the twentieth century as "feudal servile thought;" Yue's victories over the rebels and the Jurchens could be viewed as his crimes rather than his achievements. It was this logic that underlay both the 2013 TV series on Yue Fei and Deng Guangming's 1955 and 1985 biographies of Yue Fei. Despite the different frameworks they adopted, they agreed that Yue was worthy of being a "national hero" only because Yue served a specific nation—a group of people that were the constituents of the People's Republic of China.

Guo in China was first a dynastic state, and then became a nation defined by a state. The posthumous career of a loyal general saw ups and downs, as *guo* was defined by the ruling polity in some periods as closer to Yue's *guo*, but in other periods as opposite to Yue's *guo*. With Yue Fei's image so intimately intertwined with loyalty to the orthodox state and so prominent in promoting passionate anti-foreign nationalist spirit in the past, the Yue Fei legend may become anything foreseen or unforeseen. The last two lines from the lyric of the popular song "Requite the Country with Perfect Loyalty" indicate, but do not exhaust, the potentialities:

I will defend our land and expand our territory.
All four quarters of the world will be made to congratulate our dignified China!

我愿守土复开疆
堂堂中国要让四方来贺

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