

Chen Xianzhang: Inside and Outside of the Record of Emperor Xianzong's Reign of Ming Dynasty

By Zhao Yutian

Chen Xianzhang (1428-1500 AD), also called Gongpu, was born at Baisha Town, Xinhui County, Guangdong Province. Because of his birthplace, he was also called Mr. Baisha. Chen Xianzhang was an important person in the development of philosophy of Song Dynasty and Ming Dynasty. He took teaching as his life-long career and established a new school of philosophy, the Jiangmen School. This new school of thought ended the monopoly of the idealist philosophy developed by Cheng and Zhu, and revitalized the academic activities of Ming Dynasty. However, the first record of Chen Xianzhang in the official history, the Record of Emperor Xianzong's Reign not only denied his academic achievements but also depicted him as a mean person. The reason behind this calls for careful research.

The Jiawu entry of September 1484 recorded as follows:

Xianzhang was born in Xinhui County of Guangdong Province. After enrolled in the Royal College, he failed to pass exams for several times. He went to the Ministry of Personnel several times but failed to get a position. Then he ceased to take exams and went back to his hometown to teach students. Later, Mr. Peng Shao, Governor of Guangdong Province, and Mr. Zhu Shiyong, Inspector to Guangdong Province, both reported that Chen Xianzhang had rich knowledge and good conduct and petitioned the government to call on him to work for the government. The Ministry of Personnel said that Chen Xianzhang was a listed candidate for governmental positions instead of a hermit so it was inappropriate to call on him as a knowledgeable hermit. Instead, the Ministry of Personnel issued an order to request Chen Xianzhang to come to the Capital, so that the government could test his abilities and confer him a position accordingly. Chen Xianzhang said he was ill and refused to come. After a long delay, Chen Xianzhang reported: "I could not come to the Capital to take the exam because I have not recovered from an illness. As my mother is 79 years old, I beg the Emperor to allow me to accompany her and receive medical treatment for my disease. After my mother passes away and I recover from disease, I will then come to the Ministry of Personnel to hear your orders." Because Chen Xianzhang was repeatedly recommended by several high officials and there was the tradition to allow students of the Royal College to take care of their parents, the Emperor conferred him a position in the Imperial Academy and allowed him to work after he came back to the Capital. Chen Xianzhang appeared to be polite and modest. He might be good at writing poems and articles but he was definitely not good at philosophy. After he was enrolled in the Royal College, Chen Xianzhang pretended to be modest to get a good name. As he came back home after he failed exams repeatedly, some people blindly respected him as a philosopher, followed him, recited his writings, and respectfully called him Mr. Baisha after the name of his hometown. Although some renowned scholars of his hometown suspected his knowledge and said he was just so-so, they are far outnumbered by those who blindly followed him. In one word, they just respected Chen Xianzhang because of his undeserved reputation instead of the truth. After being offered a position, he refused to work on the excuse of illness and left the Capital pretentiously and pompously. All people heard of this laughed at him.

As the official records of political affairs and history of that time, the Record of Emperor Xianzong's Reign was far more authoritative than any other sources. The comments on persons were regarded as final. Obviously, Chen Xianzhang was described in the Record of Xianzong's Reign as a person good at writing poems and articles but not so good at philosophy, good at winning undeserved high reputation but in fact a mean person.

In Volume 8 of his notebook, Lu Rong (1436-1494), a contemporary official, recorded how the mayor of Nan'an County derided Chen Xianzhang:

During Xianzong's Reign, Chen Xianzong got the reputation of philosopher. The Ministry of Personnel gave him a position in the Imperial Academy according to the recommendation of certain governmental officials and the order of the Emperor. Zhang Bi derided him as follows: "The Emperor is kind, the officials have high honors. Isn't it better not to be an official instead of obtaining a position without any achievements? Chen Xianzhang could not answer and left shortly afterwards to go back home.

Tan Qian (1594-1657), a famous historian during the end of Ming Dynasty and the beginning of Qing Dynasty, also recorded some information: "Chen Xianzhang ceased to be modest as in the past and acted pompously". All people saw this, so this was not false. Now, we have to think whether the description in the Records of Emperor Xianzong's Reign a true record or a slander. To answer this question, we need to consider the actual situation of that time.

After a relatively stable period of more than one hundred years, China was quite prosperous during Emperor Xianzong's Reign (1465-1487). People in cities and towns amassed quite a fortune, the commodity economy gradually became active, a nation-wide market network appeared, and regional urban commercialization intensified. Particularly, more and more prosperous towns developed around Beijing, in the lower and middle reaches of Yangtze River, along the Great Canal, and in some places of Southern China. With the development of commodity economy, the society also gradually commercialized, and conspicuous consumption became more and more serious. For example, an official reported in 1482 that people in big cities such as Beijing and Nanjing were extravagant in clothing and drinking utensils and their marriage and funeral ceremonies were beyond the limits. (Records of Emperor Xianzong's Reign, Volume 214) The social trend of extravagancy quickly changed people's social values. The moral standards and social norms of the beginning of Ming Dynasty were regarded as outdated. Only those regarded as timid and losers followed them. Those who did not follow the regular rules made a fortune and were lucky persons of the time. People just wanted to make money, social values were corrupted, and the whole society was in disorder.

Although the country was in a troublesome condition, the Emperor spent all his time for women and entertainment, and was indulged in supernatural beings, monks, maternal relatives, nuns, money, and strange tricks. (History of Ming Dynasty: Biography of Wang Kui) Looked at the people lost in the pursuit of financial gains, as a scholar, Chen Xianzhang exclaimed: "The contemporary people are indulged in the knowledge of how to make money for a long time". For this reason, he advocated the introspective philosophy for the salvation of people (The Collection of Chen Xianzhang's Writings, Zhonghua Book Company, 1987, p. 829.), and hoped to reestablish moral standards gradually lost in the quickly commercialized society. Unlike Chen Xianzhang, his contemporary scholars hoped to reestablish social order with the help of idealist philosophy developed by Cheng and Zhu. For instance, a great scholar named Qiu Rui (associate editor-in-chief of the Records of Emperor Xianzong's Reign) wrote that the idealist

philosophy developed by Cheng and Zhu was in line with the Confucius teaching while the introspective philosophy developed by Lu Jiuyuan was against the Confucius teaching. (Volume 71 of the Supplementary Annotations of Daxue) For this reason, those following the idealist philosophy disliked those following the introspective philosophy. In another word, the dispute between the school of thought advocating idealist philosophy and the school of thought advocating introspective philosophy gradually developed. As most compliers of the Records of Emperor Xianzhong's Reign were followers of the idealist philosophy, it is quite understandable that he was strongly criticized in this book, as his teaching of finding inner self by still meditation was not in line with the idealist philosophy.

However, Chen Xianzhang indeed had some pretentious conduct. One of his followers wrote: "When Chen Xianzhang arrived at the capital, more than one hundred high officials visited him every day. They all said he was a saintly scholar. A Mr. Lin discussed every day with him on studies." (The Collection of Chen Xianzhang's Writings, p. 829) It is unimaginable that he was not ill when he talked with many high officials but immediately fell ill and could not write answers when he arrived at the examination room of the Ministry of Personnel. Why he did not feel ill when he received the Emperor's Order conferring him a position and could leave in a pretentious and pompous procession. For this reason, half of Chen Xianzhang's illness was "political illness".

The reason for Chen Xianzhang to fall ill was that he was a very filial person instead of a person just seeking for personal gains. He was loyal to the royal court, hoped to make achievements, and hoped to realize his dream of making contributions to the society. However, he could not leave his mother, who was then quite old and weak, to work as a governmental official all around the country. Just as he wrote to Emperor Xianzhong (The Collection of Chen Xianzhang's Writings, pp. 2-3):

I began to read books when I was young. Though I may not be learned, I still know the obligation of a subject to his Emperor. I owe you very much because the government provided education for me and Your Majesty accepted me. I should work diligently to pay back your great favor. It is exactly because of this reason that I took examinations and showed respect to you. However, my father Chen Cong died at the age of 27, my mother widowed at the age of 24, and I was born after my father's death. When I was a baby, I fell ill every year and still had to drink milk at the age of nine. Without my mother's kindness, I would have died much earlier. Now I am fifty-six years old and my mother is seventy-nine years old. She still treats me like a child. All mothers in the world are kind to their children but no other mother is as kind as my mother. She falls ill because she feels worried about me, then she feels more worried as she falls ill. Now my illness makes her more worried. Although I want to work for Your Majesty, I am really not in a position to do so.

Chen Xianzhang's writing is so touching that the Emperor read it three times. (The Collection of Chen Xianzhang's Writings, p. 871) Perhaps the Emperor recalled that his father was taken away by a barbarous tribe and himself was deposed of the position of the prince by his uncle, and had sympathy with Chen Xianzhang, or perhaps because he was moved by Chen Xianzhang's great filial piety, or perhaps because high officials of Guangdong Province recommended Chen Xianzhang. Anyway, Emperor Xianzhong ordered: "Since Chen Xianzhang is recommended by several high officials, now I give him a position in the Imperial Academy and allow him to go home to take care of his mother until her death and receive medical treatment for his illness. After his mother passes away and he recovers from illness, he should come back to work."

(The Collection of Chen Xianzhang's Writings, pp. 3-4) In this way, Chen Xianzhang could justify himself to the royal court and those officials who recommended him. More importantly, he finally could come home to take care of his mother.

The truth of Chen Xianzhang's study was to be candid, honest, self-contented. He once wrote in a poem: "Get rid of barriers between different schools of thoughts and study freely all writings. Leisured and free from all bad ideas, truthful and free from any pretention, we play music and enjoy ourselves. The breeze is soft, just like our mind wonders. This is really the ultimate self-contentedness." (The Collection of Chen Xianzhang's Writings, p. 275) This short writing vividly expressed Chen Xianzhang's essence of philosophy: to be candid, honest, self-contented, and free from pretention. This is also the principle of his conduct. During such a time of pretentiousness, ever-changing, and unenlightened political environment, it was impossible to feel the meaning of life, the sense of respect, and the sense of glory. However, Chen Xianzhang was quite different. He behaved naturally and advocated introspection. Huang Zongxi once said: "Chen Xianzhang followed the nature and followed the principle of self-contentedness. He is resourceful and free as a bird or fish, and understands the change of the world. His philosophy is unique and better than others." (The Collection of Chen Xianzhang's Writings, p. 864). However, such a scholar could not make a good politician. As he was candid and honest, he could not avoid being belittled by many people.

After Emperor Xiangzong's Reign, Chen Xianzhang's image gradually was glorified. Of course, this glorification is ultimately because he made an irreplaceable contribution to the introspective philosophy. After having the mysterious experience of integrating the outer and inner world through still meditation, Chen Xianzhang once said: "The Heaven and the Earth both come out of me. The entire world is inside me. If we can get this, what is outside of ourselves? From the ancient times to now, from the farthest place to here, all are taken care of at the same time." (The Collection of Chen Xianzhang's Writings, p. 217) Undoubtedly, Chen Xianzhang's mysterious experience was the state of mind reached through the still meditation and introspection he advocated, that is to say, a depiction of the actual real world. Chen Xianzhang and the Jiangmen School of thought developed by him activated the more and more rigid idealist philosophy and the society controlled by such philosophy, and made people have more self-awareness. This contribution should not be neglected.

It should be noted that the intentional idolization of his followers was also a reason for his gradually glorified image. For example, one of his followers named Zhang Xu wrote: "At first a fortune-teller once said that an extraordinary person would be born among the yellow mountains and purple rivers of Xinhui. Another fortune-teller also predicted that a great person would be born here. Chen Xianzhang was tall, had sharp eyes, had seven spots on the left face just like the Big Dipper, had strong voice, and looked like an immortal being." (The Collection of Chen Xianzhang's Writings, p. 868) Zhan Ruoshui, a principal follower of Chen Xianzhang, took the spreading of Chen Xianzhang's teaching as his life-long career. Chen Xianzhang's followers all helped to make a high image of him in one way or another.

Huang Zongxi also continuously promoted Chen Xianzhang. His promotion of Chen Xianzhang was in fact a promotion of the introspective philosophy. Liu Zongzhou, Huang Zongxi's teacher, was a great follower of the introspective philosophy. After Liu Zongzhou committed suicide when the Ming Dynasty ended, Huang Zongxi took it as his task to spread his teacher's thought and to preserve the academic tradition of the Ming Dynasty, and wrote two books, *Jishan Academic Writings* and the *Academic Writings of Ming Dynasty*. To

spread his teacher's thought, Huang Zongxi also promoted that introspective philosophy. He promoted Wang Yangming because he wanted to promote Liu Zongzhou, and he promoted Chen Xianzhang because he wanted to promote Wang Yangming. He was quite careful and did not neglect any opportunity to promote the introspective philosophy and change his contemporary situation. Interestingly, Huang Zongxi might be too enchanted in Chen Xianzhang's introspective philosophy and mistook the exact position of the black spots on his face. Huang Zongxi wrote: "Chen Xianzhang was quite tall, had sharp eyes, and had seven black spots on his right face, just like the Big Dippers. He was very clever as a child and could remember everything he read after reading it just one time."

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