The Hunt for the Dragon

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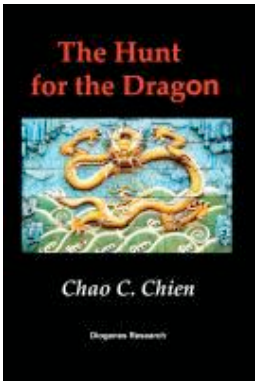

At the end of the Ming civil war at the beginning of the 15th century, the emperor vanished. His status has since become one of the most celebrated mysteries of Chinese history. At that time, the victor, the emperor's uncle, launched the greatest maritime exercise the world had seen. Led by Admiral Zheng He, the fleets roamed the seas for twenty seven years. Less than half a century later, Europeans went to sea. Were these events related?

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ISBN: 978-1-62646-435-3

First published by Diogenes Research December 15, 2012

Published by BookLocker.com, Inc., Bradenton, Florida.

Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper.

BookLocker.com, Inc.
2012

Second Edition

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Preface

This book is a work of speculation, not history. Neither is it a novel, despite its title. I want to make that clear right from the get go.

Speculation implies guesswork; in other words, trying to figure out what something might be or might have been. For sure, not all speculations are equal. Indeed, there are different shades of speculations; different degrees of seriousness and sincerity in the "guesstimation," if you will, and it all boils down to the amount of factual basis upon which they are constructed, and the amount of personal bias applied. Thus, speculations are fact-based imaginations with varying mixes of facts and make-belief. Daydreaming one flying among the clouds like a bird without the aid of machinery is no speculation, as it enjoys no scientific foundation indicating that such is possible. These kind of pure imaginations without the support of factual foundations are not speculation, but mere fantasizing.

A speculation must be based on facts. It is just that the facts do not warrant a definitive conclusion, and some artful gyration of the brain is required to help the supposition along. The more facts there are, the better the speculation, because even though an uncontestable conclusion may not be warranted, the speculation gets close to the truth. In contrast, the less facts upon which the speculation is based the less believable is its inference. However, in either case speculations

can be interesting and exciting, and both are indeed scientific processes.

In the predecessor to this book, *The Chinese Origin of the Age of Discovery*, I laid out the evidence leading to the conclusion that the European Age of Discovery was instigated by the acquisition of Chinese seafaring knowledge. It was not a speculation but a solid historical investigation, because it entailed logical analyses and reasoning based on verifiable support evidence that guaranteed a specific outcome without having to resort to a single act of speculating. For example, a map of the American continents drawn before European explorers went to sea attests to the fact that Europeans learned of the New World before they had set foot on it, in turn implying that someone had charted the place before the European explorers. That is not speculation but fact. Yet, in that research not all pertinent evidence was utilized. There exists a lot more evidence than what was offered in the book. The truth is that which was not conclusive per se had been excluded from use. However, such "indefinite" evidence, discarded at the time, is not entirely useless. Though it did not irrefutably point to certain conclusions, it nonetheless *suggested* something. Those evidentiary factoids are used in the present work to help frame a theory. Because the evidence's implications are equivocal, the resultant theory is speculation, even though the support evidence is factual.

At any rate, its speculative nature does not render the theory in any way drab or boring. On the contrary, what it intimates at is highly controversial, provocative, and above all, entertaining, and it may even be true.

To aid the serious researchers I have provided corresponding Chinese text and originals for reference wherever appropriate. However, this should not interfere with the English-only readers' reading pleasure.

Prelude

In 1492 Christopher Columbus (Christoffa Corombo in Genoese where he grew up; Cristoforo Colombo in Italian, his ethnicity; Cristóvão Colombo in Portuguese as he lived in Portugal once; Cristóbal Colón in Spanish because ultimately it was the Spanish catholic monarchs that financed his voyages west across the Atlantic Ocean, called Mare Occidentale at the time, in an alleged attempt to reach China, Cathay; and ultimately Christophorus Columbus in Latin when he was lionized) set sail from the Spanish port of Palos for an adventure west. His story of discovery is now standard fare in school studies the world over. Yet the land he allegedly discovered was named not for him, but for a minor Italian adventurer, though more an opportunist than an explorer, of questionable importance. How did that come to be? What makes Columbus such a genius to propose sailing west to reach China when everybody else was flocking eastward? History furnishes no satisfactory answers to these conundrums.

As it is, some of these questions now have been answered. We now know definitively that Columbus, as all other European adventurers of the Age of Discovery, had gone to sea inspired by a Chinese precedence. Indeed, it is beyond question that the Chinese had by the time of the Yuan Dynasty (1271–1368) explored the entire world, and this assertion is drawn from Age of Discovery European records. The research that led to these conclusions is fully documented in the book *The Chinese Origin of the Age of Discovery*.

Virtually unknown in the West but well-versed by almost all Chinese, a Chinese maritime exploration program took place just slightly more than half a century before Columbus at the beginning of the Ming Dynasty. Led by the legendary "Admiral" Zheng He,[1] the program ran for twenty seven to twenty eight years between 1405 and 1433. The expeditions involved hundreds of ocean-going wooden vessels, some of which as long as half the length of a modern QEII. Yet, for such an unprecedented undertaking, awfully little about it has been recorded by history—Chinese or European. As a result, the hero of the saga is often referred to as "legendary," as "the legendary Admiral Zheng He." To be sure, there is nothing legendary about this man. However, it must be admitted that the events have fallen into the realm of mythology. What is accepted as "history" is often actually the interpretations of semi-historical events by later scholars. For example, it is almost universally believed that the naval enterprise was in fact missions designed to spread the grandeur of Ming Dynasty civilization. Some even go as far as claiming that the voyages were missions of peace, unabashedly propounding a political view without the slimmest of factual support. However, Ming Shi,[2] the History of Ming, although written during the ensuing Qing Dynasty some two hundred and fifty to three hundred years later, clearly states that one of the enterprise's aims was to search for the whereabouts of the deposed emperor Jian Wen Di or the Jianwen Emperor (which we will examine in some detail in this volume).

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[1]鄭和 in American English is pronounced "jung huh." It also has been alternately Romanized as Cheng Ho.

[2] 明史.

There is no reason for us to favor the opinions of modern writers five hundred years removed from the historical events over those who wrote about it officially two hundred and fifty years earlier. In other words, one should believe that the Ming naval mission was at least in part launched to search for the deposed emperor over a tenuously argued mission of peace. After all, the expeditions were manned by some thirty thousand troops, thus the enterprise could hardly be described as peace-promoting, especially when it is well documented that the troops had engaged in skirmishes with foreign forces. Thus, there is credence in the official Qing Dynasty account.

On the personal side, the early life of Admiral Zheng He was virtually unknown, and his adult, professional life was shrouded in mystery as with Columbus, with much of his exploits fabricated, romanticized, and exaggerated.

What is generally accepted is that Zheng He was of Muslim heritage and was castrated at an early age to be conscripted as a eunuch into the household of the Prince of Yan who later usurped the throne and became the highly successful Emperor Chengzu (Yongle Di).[3] Technically, regardless of how most people believe it, we do not know for sure that Zheng He was of the Muslim faith, especially in light of his tolerance of diverse religions evinced by his actions during his twenty plus years at sea. We do not even know if he was ethnically Han Chinese, Middle Eastern, or Central Eastern Asian, although many scholars believe that he was of Arabic stock. We do know that he spoke Arabic, which was one of the reasons for his having been chosen to lead the naval squadrons. However,

[3] 明成祖，永樂帝.

Zheng He was an army man who had never seen water until this assignment—yet another contradiction in the mysterious story. Otherwise, there is no doubt that he was Emperor Chengzu's confidante, and the emperor clearly placed much importance on the mission.

The truth is we know little about the man Zheng He, regardless of how orthodoxy gives the impression that we do. The fact is, what is accepted as fact is full of inconsistencies, leading one to suspect that over the years an idealized image has emerged and taken hold for whatever expedient reason there was.

Just as we know not how Columbus looked like nor his physicality, what we have been led to believe as how Zheng He looked like is not a sure thing. For a eunuch, one that had been castrated in pre-puberty, he is habitually portrayed as tall and stocky. A man castrated, deprived of the nourishment of testosterone, simply cannot grow tall, unless he was either really diminutive but deliberately depicted in a heroic mold, or he had not been cut at all. Further, if we are to believe his portraits and sculptures, Zheng He was surely an ethnic Chinese.

The same can be said of Columbus. Nobody knows what he looked like; there is no credible portrait of him. Was Columbus really Italian, or was he Jewish as some claim? Simon Wiesenthal, the Nazi hunter, even formulated a theory that Columbus was out looking for a homeland for the Jews who were expelled from Spain in 1492.[4]

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[4] *Sails of Hope: The Secret Mission of Christopher Columbus*. 1973, Macmillan Publishing Company.

Where history fails, one fills in the gaps with guesswork. Whereas when the conjectures are baseless they are considered fantasies deserving no credit, if a theory is indeed based on facts and is able to answer outstanding questions—even if just some questions—it may be recognized as speculation, or even speculative history. This work is one of speculation, and is intended to provide answers to some of the puzzles of the Age of Discovery.

The Ming Civil War

By the end of the fourteenth century China was once again firmly under the rule of native Chinese, known as the *Han*, a name taken from the Han Dynasty that lasted some four hundred years from about the third century BCE to the third century CE. The "illegitimate" Mongol pretenders had been driven out of China by 1368 when Zhu Yuanzhang[5] proclaimed the founding of the new Ming Dynasty. Within thirty years, under the able but absolute rule of the autocratic ruler China rose sharply in world prestige and might, with all indications that it was to be a brilliant (indeed, Ming means "brilliance") dynasty to surpass those that had gone before. The imperial coffer was plentifully endowed, and emissaries of friendly nations from anear and afar had come to *pay tribute* to the "Heavenly Court."

To be sure, the world was far from being at peace. The Mongols were driven out of China but they continued to hold sway over the rest of the known world. Russia only freed herself from the so-called Mongol Yoke in 1480, still a good century away. In far away Europe petty princelings were ravaging and waging incessant wars against each others with names such as the Hundred Years War.

[5] Pronounced "yuen-jahng." "Zhu" is the family name, which according to Chinese custom is placed first.

Although expelled from China, the Mongol Yuan Empire was very much alive. It might have lost China, but it continued to be a threat to the budding Ming. Emperor Taizu Zhu Yuanzhang (last name Zhu), the Ming Dynasty founder, was very much aware of this and implemented appropriate policies to safeguard China's northern frontier. He placed his able war-hardened sons at key frontiers posts each commanding legions. His fourth son, Zhu Di, was given the important post of the general-commander of Beiping (today's Beijing) garrison, the erstwhile Mongol capital in China.

Zhu Yuanzhang was an extremely capable and self-assured man. He had to be in order to survive the numerous battles that took place following the debaucherous Yuan Mongols' spectacular fall. Emperor Taizu, Taizu meaning "the Supreme Dynasty Founder," with the reign title The Hongwu Emperor, meaning "The Great," rose from the lowest of lowly stations. He had been a cowherd, a vagrant, a monk, not for religious inclinations but because the temples were just about the only places in the country that still might have seemingly a reliable supply of food. He joined subversive organizations where he undoubtedly honed his cunning, if he was not born cunning to begin with. But above all he was ruthless; he never hesitated to kill.

In an incident involving his prime minister, perhaps a simple case of graft, he found this official, second highest officeholder of the land ranking just below the emperor himself, guilty of treason in league with the Japanese envoy and executed the lord's entire blood clans, remote as well as immediate, and associates numbering some 30,000 victims. Thereafter he abolished the office of prime minister for good.

Once the empire had settled down and his political rivals annihilated, Taizu began expunging his most trusted generals. One general suffered the same fate as the vanquished prime minister with his clans eradicated from the face of the Earth.

Taizu did all these for the security of his bloodline and the longevity of his dynasty. Of his twenty-six sons he favored his first born whom he designated heir apparent. Well-educated and skilled in the art of government, unfortunately the crown prince died prematurely.

His fourth son, Zhu Di, the Prince of Yan,[6] the commander of the Beiping (Beijing) garrison, was the obvious choice to succeed his elder brother. However, Taizu made the decision to go with the royal grandson, son of the deceased crown prince. History indicates that Taizu did this to uphold his earlier decision designed to maintain orderly transitions for his successors. One, however, can never be sure if Taizu in fact had been wary of his fourth son with his exceptional abilities.

It has been told that when he eliminated his generals, his comrades in arms, Taizu told his grandson, the now crown prince, that he was helping him "de-thorn his royal staff." Taizu was not impressed with his grandson. He considered him somewhat of a weakling. He had to debur the royal scepter for him because he did not think the youngster could do it himself. It is clear that when he made the decision to go with his grandson he had by then regarded his own sons as thorns too, with the biggest bur being that of the Prince of Yan.

Taizu died in 1398, and the royal grandson ascended the throne as scripted. He was known in history as Wei Di, or the

[6] Yan, 燕, being the ancient name for the area around Beijing.

Jianwen[7] Emperor, "Emperor of the Reign of the Jianwen Period." With the new emperor being of immature age and inexperienced, it is understandable that the running of the state was largely relegated to the dominant court ministers, his royal mentors.

Whether Taizu had prepared this arrangement personally we do not know. Nonetheless, a policy to "debur the imperial scepter" was set in motion. These ministers impressed upon the young master of an incident which happened some fifteen hundred years ago. At that time the great Chinese Han Dynasty had suffered a debilitating blow by the *Rebellion of the Seven Princes*.[8] The Ming ministers were attempting to show the young emperor the perils he would face if he were indecisive in taking action against his powerful princely uncles. They were spurring the new emperor on to take drastic steps to curtail their influences. This is really nothing more than an attempt to consolidate imperial power, a standard procedure for all new regimes. As a result, within a year five princely uncles were removed. They were either jailed on minor or trumped up offenses or driven to suicide.

With 20-20 historical hindsight one must wonder why the new emperor did not take out the Prince of Yan, the most menacing of the thorny threats. Historians generally argued that the Prince, the commander of the most important and powerful legions, was simply too strong to be taken on at the outset. Had the new administration tried to confront him head on, it most likely would have provoked him into action instead,

[7] 建文.
[8] 七國之亂.

and the lesser princes might even have rallied behind him. That certainly would not have been the desired outcome. Instead, the young emperor and his advisors most likely had decided to pare down his power gradually by drafting a scenario whereby the Prince would first be placed in a position of disadvantage before they took the decisive step. Thus they took away the Prince's three best legions, numbering about fifteen thousand troops, under the pretext that the troops were needed for special assignments at some remote locations. The court also surrounded Beiping with imperial armies, and infiltrated the city with spies.

Now, it could hardly be credible that the Prince of Yan would have been completely oblivious to what was going on. Thus, a match of wits was set afoot.

To allay suspicion, the Prince of Yan feigned madness, wandering in tattered clothing around the alleys of Beiping acting up like a tramp, all in a guise designed to slacken the court's vigilance. Of course the Prince of Yan was not mad. While play-acting he actually was paying keen attention on the goings-on at the royal court. He had his spies too—eunuchs that were loyal to him from the days of the old emperor and his sojourns in the northern desert battling the Mongol remnants. Of these trusted eunuchs was Zheng He, who was his de facto aide de camp.

Ultimately, it was the young emperor that struck the first blow. On the pretext of extraditing criminals he placed Beiping under siege.

At that fateful moment the Prince struck back, and he struck hard. In a blitzkrieg he breached the siege and marched straight for the capital, Nanjing. Not only did the Prince wage a

military war, he waged a propaganda war at the same time. Thus he proclaimed to the country that in this war not only was he not a rebel, he was the righteous campaigner. He told the nation that the young emperor had been misguided by the court ministers who attempted to poison the relationship between nephew and uncles in order to enhance their own power. Thus he was waging war to "champion the emperor" and to "cleanse the court of evil counsel." In this way the great Ming Civil War commenced.[9]

In retrospect it had been a foolhardy thing for the young emperor to be engaged in, provoking his mighty uncle thus. Army after army he sent to neutralize the threat of the advancing Yan troops to no avail. Even old comrades of Taizu the dynasty founder proved no match against the Prince of Yan's military prowess. Despite having to fight with troops of inferior numbers the Prince prevailed in all the crucial contests. As it became clear to the young emperor that the moment had been lost he sued for truce, but the confident and crafty uncle saw no profit in such a proposal.

The Ming Civil War lasted four years, with the final breakthrough provided by a group of eunuchs seeking refuge from the young emperor on criminal charges. They sought asylum with the Prince of Yan and presented him with secret information on the layout of the capital and royal palace compound. With this intelligence the Prince of Yan was able to breach the imperial defenses and to capture the capital city. The Prince declared victory and took the throne, changing the

[9] 靖難之役.

imperial calendar to the Period of *Yongle*,[10] meaning "Eternal Bliss."

Like his father, the Prince of Yan was capable and ruthless. He summarily executed the clans of the royal mentors and all those who had connived with the "pretender," the young emperor, his nephew. For one minister who insisted on calling him traitor the Prince executed not only his "nine clans," the traditional Chinese maximum threshold of capital punishment for sedition, but ten clans.[11] Anyone who had ever associated with this minister at one time or another was executed. The willingness to kill was a trademark of Ming imperial power.

While the Prince of Yan was victorious in his quest and now he was the emperor, with an eventual historical throne title of Chengzu, [12] meaning "The Achiever" or "The One Who Accomplished," he failed in the ultimate victory he sought—he had failed to personally execute his nephew who had plotted against his life. This nephew, the erstwhile emperor, the Jianwen Emperor, either had committed suicide or simply disappeared. To date, the alleged disappearance of the Jianwen Emperor remains one of the greatest mysteries of Chinese history.

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[10] Pronounced in American English "yone (as in lone) luh."

[11]方孝孺被誅十族。

[12] 成祖

The Emperor Has Gone Missing

Per written history, when the Prince of Yan, who was to become Emperor Chengzu, entered Nanjing, the palace complex erupted into flames. The Jianwen Emperor allegedly had set himself on fire. Yet there were suspicions. The Prince of Yan thought that the vanquished young emperor had set the scene up with a substitute corpse while he himself had gone on the lam.

The disappearance of the Jianwen Emperor is one of China's most celebrated historical mysteries and also one of the most complicated. It is complex not just because we have no solid clue on where he might have disappeared to, but because the very assumption of his disappearance is itself questionable. It is uncertain that the Jianwen Emperor survived the Ming Civil War. We know not for sure that that indeed occurred. For our research to be taken even half-way seriously we need to address this issue.

According to a passage in *The History of Ming* (*Ming Shi)*, the palace erupted into a fiery conflagration, and the Jianwen Emperor was not to be found. The Prince of Yan dispatched his aide to retrieve the bodies of the royal couple from the ashes and eight days later they were interred.[13]

A passage in the *Records of Emperor Chengzu*, written during the emperor's lifetime (and revised several times to suit

[13] 都城陷。宮中火起，帝不知所終。燕王遣中使出帝后屍於火中，越八日壬申葬之。

Emperor Chengzu's predilection) states that when the Prince of Yan saw the palace going up in flame he bade his aide to help, but it was to no avail. All the aide could do was to retrieve the nephew emperor's body. Upon seeing this, the Prince of Yan wept and said to the corpse: "How can you be so obtuse? I have come in goodwill, to help you right the wrongs that had been done to you, yet you fail to appreciate it, and instead you end up like this." He then arranged for the official burial of the ex-king, with rituals lasting three days.[14] Was the new emperor shedding crocodile tears? Was Emperor Chengzu acting in a scene designed to conceal the fact that the Jianwen Emperor had escaped? If we harbor such interpretations; if we suspect that Emperor Chengzu had reason to cover up the fact that the Jianwen Emperor had survived, we have no basis upon which to make such an allegation.

Therefore, according to these segments of writing it appears the Jianwen Emperor died in the fire. Yet there is a major problem with this version of the story. If the ex-emperor was indeed entombed as befitting a king, where is his mausoleum? The Ming imperial mausoleums are famous for their grandeur, and are today favorite tourist destinations, but there is no tomb for the Jianwen Emperor. For this, we have reason to doubt the veracity of the claim that the Jianwen Emperor had died in the palace fire on that fateful day. Furthermore, Emperor Chengzu's own behavior afterward bolsters this supposition.

As unofficial histories tell it, when the Prince of Yan entered the Nanjing imperial compounds in triumph, he was informed

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[14] 《明太宗實錄》：上望見宮中煙起，急遣中使往救助。至已不及，中使出其屍於火，還白上。上哭曰：'果然若是癡騃耶。吾來，為扶翼爾為善，爾竟不諒，而遽至此乎！'備禮葬建文君，遣官致祭，輟朝三日。

that his nephew Emperor Wei Di, the Jianwen Emperor, had committed suicide. It is said that to elude suffering the indignity of being captured the young emperor had set the palace, therefore himself and his family, ablaze. The entire royal family was thus burned beyond recognition, and this was what aroused the suspicion of the old warrior. The Prince was wary. Had the scene been staged? He sensed that something was amiss. The Prince of Yan instinctively felt that the corpse of the "dead emperor" was "not quite right." Perhaps he thought it was not of the correct height. Simply put, he suspected that the young emperor had taken off, and his subsequent actions plainly manifested that this was indeed the case.

The Prince of Yan, now the Emperor of the Yongle Period or the Yongle Emperor, temple title Chengzu, had to be sure of his nephew's status. Thus he sent his officers after his nephew the deposed emperor, either to capture him so he could kill him or confirm that he was indeed dead. It is known that he had dispatched his internal security chief[15] to scour the country for any information on his nephew. The officer spent his entire career doing this. Emperor Chengzu believed that his nephew had survived.

For this we may accept that the Jianwen Emperor's escape was a likely fact. In any case, rumors of his escape persisted for centuries until the present day. Even members of the imperial family indulged in such speculations; that is how unrelenting the rumors were. For example, more than a hundred years later in 1574 the Wanli Emperor, Emperor Shenzhong, broached the very topic of the vanished Jianwen Emperor with his Chief of

[15] 戶科給事中胡濙.

Staff. According to the *Records of Ming*, The Chief of Staff said that official history had no record of the alleged event, and that the facts could no longer be ascertained.[16] However, he also pointed out that "tradition" suggested that the ex-emperor had fled under disguise. Such episodes give you an idea about the strength of the rumors.

So, what did these rumors—speculations—say about the Jianwen Emperor's demise? First, there is the vivid and convoluted story of the deceptive escape from the palace fire.

It is said that when the Yan troops breached the capital city Nanjing, the Jianwen Emperor became quite agitated and began pacing the floor at a loss for what to do. A court eunuch approached the emperor at this time to inform him that his grandfather, the founder of the Ming Dynasty, Emperor Taizu, had prepared something for him to be used in an occasion such as this, and this "something" was stashed in a secret place in the Fengxian Palace. The old emperor had made clear that it was not to be opened until the critical moment. The ministers quickly retrieved the item from its hiding place and it turned out to be a metal box painted in red. Inside the box they found three sets of Buddhist identity papers (passports). In the box were also cassocks, shaving knives, and assortments of money, and instructions for escape. It suggested that the Jianwen Emperor should go through the "gate of spirits" (that is, the back door) while the rest should go through the "gate of waters." They should then regroup at Shenle Taoist Temple at dusk. At Shenle Temple they found a boat mooring in wait. The shipwright was a Taoist. He informed the young emperor that

[16] 萬曆皇帝問建文帝出亡事。張居正說"此事國史（《實錄》）無考".

the night before he had been visited upon in a dream by the old emperor Taizu, who bid him to await the Jianwen Emperor's arrival. The Jianwen Emperor was thus able to flee.

That is quite an elaborate, convoluted, and detailed story with a lot of specifics, to say the least. Is there any meaning to the color of the secret case? What is the significance of the routes taken by the escapees? Why should the emperor and the retinue take different routes? Why were the escapees specifically named in the prepared documents as if Emperor Taizu knew they would be there? In short, how credible is the story? We know stories of this type are often embellished with hidden messages. For that, some of the story elements probably should not be taken too seriously. We probably should ask instead, how believable it is overall, and why was the Jianwen Emperor in such panic during that moment of disaster when the enemy troops were quickly approaching? Before we comment on these issues let us take a step back and take a look at the general scheme of the Ming Civil War.

The Ming Civil War began in 1399, the very first year of the Jianwen Emperor's reign. What this means is that it took the court no time at all to spring into action with intent to take out the princely condottieri. It came so swiftly that one may legitimately reason that the seeds of the turmoil might even have been sown by Emperor Taizu, although we have no historical indication that he had already set the purge in motion or was preparing to do so.

It must be pointed out at the onset that although history gives an impression that the imperial court was the weaker participant in this contest (because it eventually lost), in fact the reverse is true. Records show that the largest princely legions

numbered no more than nineteen thousand soldiers, with the smallest regiment numbering only three thousand, although the Prince of Yan, because of his special status as the defender of the northern borders at Beiping (Beijing), could summon up to a hundred thousand active combatants at times of war. The advantage, however, was decidedly with the emperor, who could dispatch armies numbering in the hundreds of thousands.

Also, in this conflict the first blow had come from the emperor, not the princes. Upon assuming his reign the Jianwen Emperor immediately took out five of his princely uncles.[17] If the Prince of Yan had had designs on the imperial throne for himself, he had plenty of reasons to initiate actions at this time, yet he had not done so. The Jianwen Emperor then ordered the Prince of Yan to be placed under surveillance, with intent to arrest. In response the Prince of Yan arrested and executed the imperial commissary and finally rose up in revolt. Thus one can argue that the Prince of Yan was technically provoked into action.

To secure his rear the Prince of Yan first consolidated the control of the territories north of Beiping (Beijing), especially the ramparts of the Great Wall. Remember that the Prince had been battling the Mongols.

Because of Taizu's purge, most of the revolutionary combat generals were gone. Thus the Jianwen Emperor sent old General Di to lead an army of one hundred thirty thousand to invade Beiping. Taking advantage of the imperial army being

[17] 周王，齊王，湘王，代王，岷王.

unprepared, the Prince of Yan inflicted a devastating blow on the imperial vanguard, and then annihilated the army proper.

The Jianwen Emperor replaced General Di with General Li, the scion of an aristocratic family who had never seen real battle. Leading an army of five hundred thousand General Li again headed north. The Prince of Yan had his eldest son hold the fort of Beiping and bade him to resist any urge to engage the enemy—his job was to buy time. The Prince then personally led his troops to rescue the town of Shuiping, in the meantime withdrawing the soldiers guarding the bridgehead from the south to set a trap. General Li fell for it. He took this army across the bridge and headed straight for Beiping and was stalled by its defense. This bought time for the Prince of Yan to consolidate the forces of Inner Mongolia, consisting primarily of sharp Mongol cavalries, under his command. With this reinforcement the Prince of Yan attacked General Li's forces from the rear, routing them completely. General Li fled, but surprisingly was cited by the Emperor for valor.

Early next year (the second year of Jianwen's reign) six hundred thousand imperial troops went north with intent to wipe out the Prince of Yan and end the conflict once and for all. Again the imperial army was routed. This time General Li was relieved of duty, which was reassigned to General Sheng.

Initially General Sheng also encountered difficulties. However, the Yan troops became overconfident and suffered their first defeat. The Prince of Yan himself was surrounded by enemy soldiers, but was eventually saved, learning a great lesson dearly.

The next year the Yan forces resumed their winning ways. At this time a cadre of defecting eunuch supplied the Prince of

Yan with valuable information on the layout of the capital Nanjing, and also informed the Prince of the dire situation there. The Prince of Yan thus decided to take his forces straight south for the capital.

By the fourth year of Jianwen's reign the Yan forces had entered the province of Shandong (to the southeast of Beiping) and were approaching the capital city. In Anhui on the eastern seacoast the Yan forces again suffered a major defeat, but fortunately they were able to turn the tide. The Yan forces thus advanced to the Yangtze River, across from Nanjing.

This time the Jianwen Emperor sued for peace, offering his uncle half of the kingdom. The Prince of Yan summarily rejected the offer. Soon the Yan troops crossed the river and advanced toward the very gates of the capital. The defending General Li and the Prince of Gu opened the gates and surrendered, allowing the Prince of Yan and his victorious troops to enter the city.

In summary, since sparking the war with his uncle, the Jianwen Emperor had not had a good day, despite winning a few battles. For four years he heard nothing but news of setbacks from the front. Do we have reason to believe that the imminent breaching of his capital city would come to him as a shock? Remember that he sued for peace; he was not on the winning side. Pacing the floor in anxiety paints a person in sudden despair. Are we to believe that he was really caught by surprise? On the contrary, the Jianwen Emperor was likely to have been agonizing over his ultimate demise for days or months, unless he was a complete idiot and that his image as a benevolent ruler as portrayed by traditional scholars was a total sham.

The likely truth is, he had been anticipating his end for some time, and he should have been planning his retreat and eventual escape, not panicking at the last minute. This makes the rumor of his escape likely, but not the version of the secret red metal case with its travel-in-disguise paraphernalia.

Not only is the Jianwen Emperor's escape likely, it should have been well-planned. Therefore, in a more plausible scenario the young emperor had not escaped as a disheveled individual, but as a part of an orderly retreating party with a protective entourage, perhaps even an army, under the guidance of a plan that had long been hashed out.

I should mention at this point—and I think it is important—that as a part of the rumor repertoire is a famous romance novel written during Ming time called *Sanbao Eunuch's Travel to the Western Ocean*.[18] In this fantasy the cause of the Ming expeditions to the "Western Ocean" led by Admiral Zheng He, nicknamed San Bao, was attributed to the Ming administration attempting to recover an imperial seal, a symbol of the imperial house's legitimate rule, which had been made off by the fleeing Mongols after their collapse. Are we to believe that a mere seal possessed the power to determine the legitimacy of the emperor of China, and that it justified the usurping emperor needing to send the most powerful fleet the world had seen after it? Could this "royal seal" have been a veiled reference to the Jianwen Emperor, a real symbol of legitimacy, a subject the author could not spell out because of political sensitivity? It would certainly be a most strange plot element if it were not. Thus we reason, can this be interpreted as the author

[18] 羅懋登著《三寶太監西洋記通俗演義》.

intimating that the Jianwen Emperor's flight benefited from the assistance of the Mongols? We must admit, though, that at this time such suspicions can be nothing more than idle speculations, and enjoy no basis in direct evidentiary support.

In any case, the concern of legitimate rule is a possible reason for the subsequent actions of Emperor Chengzu, the erstwhile Prince of Yan. As a matter of fact, as part of the scheme to "invalidate" Jianwen's reign Emperor Chengzu refused to recognize his predecessor's reign title; refused to assign him the traditional posthumous temple title; and regarded the last year of Jianwen's rule as the thirty-fifth year of the reign of his father, Emperor Hongwu, instead of the fourth year of Jianwen's reign, thus in effect rendering the reign of the Jianwen Emperor null and void. This is a very important clue to the history of early Ming that has been generally overlooked by historians. Emperor Chengzu went to great extents to eradicate the historicity of the Jianwen Emperor, and he maintained his vigilance for the remainder of his life. And that is the reason why we know so little of Zheng He's voyages. He would not have people talking about the ex-emperor, so he suppressed all information about him.

Historians have long asserted that legitimacy was one of the new emperor's main concerns upon ascending the throne. Remember that Chengzu, the erstwhile Prince of Yan, was not the anointed heir to the throne. The court ministers continued to regard him as a usurper long after he had become emperor, and as long as the "legitimate" emperor remained alive, he ruled with less than the full mandate of the office. To legitimize and shore up his reign he must prove that the previous emperor, and a rightful one at that, no longer commanded the

allegiance of his subjects. If the young emperor had indeed escaped, he must be captured and be done with. Indeed, many scholars hold on to the notion that Emperor Chengzu dispatched his grand fleets to announce his legitimacy to the neighboring nations. It is a strange notion, though, because it is inconceivable that the emperor of the most powerful nation on Earth needed to do this PR work continuously for twenty seven years.

Regardless, there are indeed enough facts to support the notion that the Jianwen Emperor had taken flight. The question then becomes one of not so much whether he could have escaped, but one of where he might have gone.

Basically there are only two possibilities and that is no speculation, because the conclusion is one of those obvious situations. The Jianwen Emperor could either have remained within the borders of China or he could have gone overseas (is there a third possibility?), although most accounts maintain that he never left China, and a quick survey shows that such speculations have him settling in primarily three areas: the southwest of China in the Yunnan and Sichuan provinces, the great lakes districts in south-central China, or the east coast about the Fujian Province areas. Almost all of these conjectures would have him becoming a monk, and some even have him returning home to the palace at the end.

Having an ex-emperor become a monk is a popular motif in Chinese romance, and not unaided by several real emperors having traded in the throne for a life of religious devotion. A

typical story of such a scenario is documented in the *History of Ming* in the biography of a person named Yao.[19]

It says that Yao, a confidant of Emperor Chengzu, was the advisor who urged the erstwhile Prince of Yan to take up arms. In 1418 Yao was eighty-four years old. At this advanced age he confided in Emperor Chengzu that the Jianwen Emperor had indeed survived. However, his whereabouts could not be confirmed.

Now, why would someone like Yao, who encouraged the Prince of Yan on to revolt, then knew of and concealed the whereabouts of the vanished emperor, and then divulged it in old age? Was there some higher moral mechanism at play here? If there was, it was not explained. The story just inherently does not make sense. If this were true, there hid a great yarn that is yearning to be told.

We will revisit this strange tale in due course.

In another story the Jianwen Emperor reappeared in the year 1441 as a ninety years old man. An old monk had come to the statehouse of the Province of Guangxi in the south of China from Yunnan and proclaimed himself the ex-emperor. Unable to deal with a matter of such significance the local officials sent him on to Beijing. Interrogations there exposed him to be a fake, as the ex-emperor should have been only about sixty four years old, not ninety. The imposter was executed for the fraud.

However, there was an extension to the story. If this man was an imposter, was there a real ex-emperor after whom the imposter was modeled? Well, it turned out, according to this story version anyway, that the real ex-emperor was indeed still

[19] 《明史•姚廣孝傳》.

in Guangxi, and longed to return home. So the officials sent the real ex-emperor to Beijing as well. There he was recognized by an old servant; thus his identity was confirmed. This story ended with the ex-emperor living out his final years in the imperial palace.

There are many twists and turns to the vanished emperor stories, with most bordering on the outlandish. One even questioned the history of the civil war. According to this theory the Jianwen Emperor in fact had not been defeated in battle, but had abdicated in favor of his uncle, ostensibly to avoid bloodshed and to spare the citizens the carnage. Such a story was certainly concocted by supporters who wanted to cast the young emperor in good light. In recent years the controversy of the disappearance of the Jianwen Emperor was revived when in 2004 a retired engineer from Nanjing claimed to be the direct descendent of the Jianwen Emperor. According to his family genealogy, formalized in 1945, the ex-emperor escaped from the palace and changed his name to Rang, which, conveniently, means "abdicate," and settled in the Chinese Great Lakes area (Central China), eventually dying there. Unfortunately such stories all suffer from the same illness: they all lack substantive evidentiary support.

Stories of this kind proliferated through the centuries, with people making up sightings and even "evidence" such as poetry purportedly written by the ex-emperor on tavern or temple walls to "prove" that the ex-emperor had been there.

A famous book written at the end of the Ming Dynasty, about the middle of the seventeenth century, listed no less than twenty-three different stories about the Jianwen Emperor's

escape.[20] The author refused to consider even one as plausible. All this shows how rampant the rumors had been and how much interest there was for speculations.

It is important to note that virtually all the stories have the ex-emperor going to places outside of Emperor Chengzu's immediate control; namely, the west, the south, and the southeast of China. This reflects the story conjurers' own zones of comfort. The remoteness of the stories' settings, therefore the authors themselves, also suggests that they lacked direct access to historical facts, which took place close to the center of power; that is, Nanjing and Beijing in the north.

It is equally important to note that almost all the speculations precipitate toward the scenario in which the ex-emperor remained in China. Except for the romance fantasy novel cited above (*Sanbao Eunuch's Travel to the Western Ocean*) and one scholar believing that the ex-emperor had left the country,[21] few scholars looked in that direction. Those that did believe so tended to think that the Jianwen Emperor had left China for some island about the South China Sea; some even identified the eastern coast of Sumatra as the destination. Those who had the opposite view explicitly stated that such a scenario was unlikely.[22] They, however, did not make clear the rationale that persuaded them to think that way. Interestingly, the Jianwen Emperor leaving the country is the only speculation that enjoys the most substantive factual support. The most powerful, most persuasive of the "factual support"

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[20] 查繼佐著《罪惟錄》.

[21] 徐嘉炎《明史•恭閔帝本紀》認為建文帝遜國外逃。

[22] "說鄭和下西洋就是為了找建文帝，這種說法是不可信的。"

comes from Emperor Chengzu's actions. He dispatched search teams to scour both the country and the world.

Ming Shi mentions Emperor Chengzu dispatching a minister during the eighth year of his reign (1410) to Annan (Vietnam) and then Yunnan where the minister met up with the Jianwen Emperor. Out of loyalty the minister committed suicide to avoid having to take in the ex-emperor. However, *Ming Shi* also refutes the story,[23] thus the truthfulness of the account is uncertain.

Ultimately, whether the ex-emperor in fact had bolted is immaterial. What is important is that the new emperor thought that that was so, and his subsequent actions attested to it.[24]

In 1405, the third year of Emperor Chengzu's reign, the Ming launched a series of naval expeditions unprecedented in scale. Because of the scant historical records on them the history (or lack) of these outings have regressed into legends. As a result, for hundreds of years scholars have debated over the events, from their causes to their demise, holding opinions as diverse as their being activities of commerce to missions to spread religions. However, the true purpose was to search for the whereabouts of the ex-emperor, and this also in part explains why we have so little documented about these fabulous voyages, which were clearly political in character.

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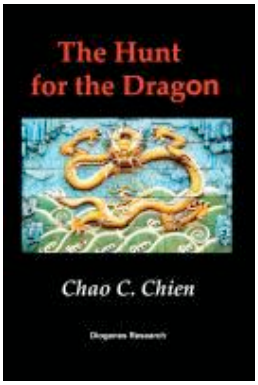
[23] 《明史紀事本末》：工部尚書嚴震直出使交阯，在雲南在路遇建文帝後自殺。《明史》（卷 151）：“世傳燕師入京，紈即自經死；嚴震直奉使至雲南，遇建文君悲愴吞金死。考諸國史，非其實也。”

[24]《明史》卷 169“胡濙”：“惠帝之崩於火，或言遁去，諸舊臣多從者，帝疑之”。“成祖疑惠帝亡海外，欲踪蹟之，且欲耀兵異域，示中國富強”。



At the end of the Ming civil war at the beginning of the 15th century, the emperor vanished. His status has since become one of the most celebrated mysteries of Chinese history. At that time, the victor, the emperor's uncle, launched the greatest maritime exercise the world had seen. Led by Admiral Zheng He, the fleets roamed the seas for twenty seven years. Less than half a century later, Europeans went to sea. Were these events related?

The Hunt for the Dragon