

The Legend of the “Hongwu Dispersal” in the Early Ming and the Construction of Ancestral-Origin Memory among Lineages in Northern Jiangsu

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Abstract: The “Hongwu Dispersal” of the early Ming dynasty is a well-known migration legend in northern Jiangsu. It serves as a shared narrative for numerous local clans that trace their ancestral origins to it and shapes the ancestral memory of “Changmen Gate in Suzhou.” By analyzing the core elements of this Changmen narrative and integrating theories of collective and historical memory, we can better understand how Changmen evolved from a physical geographical site into a symbolic spiritual homeland for these clans. The Changmen narrative offers a unified vision of ancestry to diverse local populations, reinforces regional group identity, establishes cultural legitimacy through the cultural heritage of southern Jiangnan, and provides a locus for displaced communities to express nostalgia while maintaining local social organization. Examining this case deepens our understanding of how local clan identities form.

Keywords: Hongwu Dispersal; Changmen, Suzhou; Ancestral-Origin Memory; Collective Memory.

1. Introduction

Across the northern Jiangsu region—today’s Yancheng, Huai’an, Lianyungang, and Taizhou—there survives a widespread lineage memory of the early Ming “Hongwu Dispersal” (洪武赶散). Local people commonly believe that their ancestors migrated from Changmen in Suzhou to northern Jiangsu during the Hongwu reign of the Ming dynasty. This account survives both in oral tradition and in a large number of genealogies. Changmen, the gate of Suzhou, has thus become a spiritual symbol through which the people of northern Jiangsu trace their origins and affirm their ancestry, and it constitutes an important vehicle for studying regional identity and lineage memory in northern Jiangsu.

The authenticity of the “Hongwu Dispersal” has long been debated among scholars and local historians. One approach treats it as a verifiable historical event and seeks documentary and material evidence to substantiate it; another emphasizes its character as folk memory and cultural construct. In recent years, Cao Shengwen and other scholars, having systematically reexamined the textual sources of the legend, have argued that it should be understood against the actual historical background of Jiangnan migration in the early Ming, neither exaggerating nor denying its historical basis [1]. Considerable scholarship has already accumulated on the question of the Suzhou Changmen migration, spanning lineage history, migration history, and local history: on lineage formation and historical memory, see [2]–[4]; on migration history, see [5]–[8]; on local historical studies, see [9]. However, existing research tends either to focus on verifying the historical facts of migration or on compiling variant versions of the legend, and studies that specifically analyze the ancestral-origin narrative of northern Jiangsu’s founding lineages from the perspective of lineage construction and historical memory remain rare. Accordingly, this paper reviews the content of the Changmen narrative, compares it with the historical facts of early Ming migration, and, drawing on the development of lineages and the transmission of genealogies, examines the process by which

Changmen became a symbol, its cultural characteristics, and the underlying reasons for the identification of northern Jiangsu lineages with this ancestral-origin memory.

2. The Content and Spread of the Dispersal Legend

The central plot of the “Hongwu Dispersal” legend may be summarized as follows: At the end of the Yuan and the beginning of the Ming, Zhang Shicheng occupied Pingjiang—present-day Suzhou—and competed with Zhu Yuanzhang for supremacy. After Zhu Yuanzhang pacified Jiangnan, he allegedly redirected his anger toward the people of the Suzhou–Songjiang region who had once supported Zhang Shicheng. He therefore ordered their large-scale Dispersal and dispersal to the sparsely populated Jianghuai region in order to strengthen the frontier and reclaim wasteland[1].

During the period of military rivalry among regional powers at the end of the Yuan, Zhang Shicheng, who came from a salt-trading background, launched an uprising in Taizhou and later occupied Pingjiang, proclaiming himself King of Wu. He controlled Suzhou, Songjiang, Changzhou, and parts of northern Jiangsu. In the twenty-seventh year of the Zhizheng era, Zhu Yuanzhang’s army captured Pingjiang, and Zhang Shicheng was defeated and taken prisoner. The legend subsequently interpreted the population movements that followed as Zhu Yuanzhang’s purge and retaliation against the people of the Suzhou–Songjiang region who had “rebelled” by supporting Zhang Shicheng. Whether such retaliation actually occurred, Zhang Shicheng’s occupation of Wu provided the narrative of the “Dispersal” with an emotional and logical foundation[1]. It enabled people to attribute the suffering of their ancestors’ migration to a tangible and narratable dynastic conflict, thereby obtaining a certain degree of psychological explanation and consolation.

Within the dispersal narrative, “the Changmen Gate in Suzhou” is repeatedly identified as the common point of departure for the migrants. Changmen was the northwestern gate of Suzhou and, during the Ming and Qing dynasties, one

of the most prosperous commercial and water-land transportation hubs in Jiangnan. Canal grain ships and goods and passengers traveling between north and south were frequently assembled and redistributed there, leading contemporaries to call it “the foremost wharf under Heaven.” During the Ming–Qing transition, shops lined Shantang Street and the Shantang River outside Changmen, while boats crowded the waterways. The area served as an important distribution port for goods transported northward from Jiangnan. Given its special position as a transportation hub, groups migrating north may indeed have gathered there, boarded boats, and begun their journeys. This likely allowed the impression of Changmen as a “place of departure” to survive, intensify, and become magnified in collective memory.

Over time, regardless of whether their ancestors actually came from Suzhou, Songjiang, Changzhou, or Jiaxing, later generations tended to attribute their origins collectively to “Changmen” when tracing their ancestry[12]. Scholars examining this phenomenon have observed that the movement from the “Hongwu Dispersal” to “root-seeking at Changmen” reflects the psychological need of people in northern Jiangsu to use a concrete place to accommodate collective nostalgia and a sense of identity[13]. Thus, Changmen gradually evolved from a specific city gate into an ancestral-origin symbol encompassing a broad sense of Jiangnan origins; it was even referred to simply as “the root of the migrants of northern Jiangsu.”

This identification of ancestral origins has left traces in the genealogical writings of northern Jiangsu lineages. A systematic reading of genealogies from the region shows that numerous families—including the Shi lineage of Xinghua, the Huang lineage of Hanjiang, the Yang lineage of Gaoyou, and the Zhu lineage of Baoying—explicitly record that their ancestors migrated from Suzhou in the early Ming[9]. For example, the *Genealogy of the Wei Lineage of Yancheng* states that the founding ancestor, Wei Lean, “moved from Gusu to Yancheng in the early Hongwu era,” [14] while the *Genealogy of the Ling Lineage of Yancheng* records that its founding ancestor, Ling Zisu, was a Ming-period figure who came from Suzhou[15]. The repeated application of this narrative framework in genealogies produced by different surnames, counties, and periods demonstrates that the memory of Changmen as an ancestral homeland had become highly formulaic at the level of lineage writing.

In terms of spatial distribution, the memory of Changmen as an ancestral origin covers almost the entirety of northern Jiangsu. Numerous surnames in Funing, Jianhu, Baoying, Xinghua, and other areas claim to have originated at Changmen. The repeated identification of the same point of origin by different counties and lineages has enabled Changmen to transcend the private memory of any individual family and become a shared collective origin for an entire region[1].

This phenomenon is not unique. Across the landscape of Chinese migration history and popular memory, similar ancestral-origin symbols are common: the Great Pagoda Tree of Hongdong in Shanxi on the North China Plain, Waxieba in Jiangxi in the Jianghuai region, Zhuji Lane in Nanxiong in the Pearl River Delta, and Xiaogan Township in Macheng in the Bashu region. Each uses a specific place to crystallize a population’s imagination of a common origin. The relationship between Suzhou’s Changmen and northern Jiangsu is thus comparable to that between Hongdong’s Great

Pagoda Tree and North China. Such legends both preserve memories of migration and population-distribution points and serve as cultural symbols through which later generations express ancestral memory and identification with a homeland[2]. This observation applies equally to the Changmen narrative.

3. Distinguishing between Legend and Historical Reality

3.1. Early Ming Migration between Jiangnan and Jianghuai

It must be acknowledged that the “Hongwu Dispersal” legend rests upon actual historical circumstances of migration in the early Ming. At the end of the Yuan, warfare was frequent in the Jianghuai region, leading to a sharp decline in population and the abandonment of large areas of farmland. By contrast, the Suzhou–Songjiang region was densely populated, short of land, and burdened by heavy taxation and corvée obligations. In the early Ming, the government did in fact implement various population-transfer policies in order to restore production, rebalance the population, and consolidate its rule. Historical studies of population movement in the early Ming indicate that substantial migration from Jiangnan to the Jianghuai region did occur. In this sense, a considerable proportion of the population of northern Jiangsu can indeed be traced back to Jiangnan migrants of the early Ming[16].

More specifically, the relevant migrations of the early Ming may be broadly divided into two categories. The first involved transferring wealthy households from Suzhou, Songjiang, and other areas to populate the capital at Nanjing and the central capital at Fengyang. This policy weakened the powerful families of Jiangnan while strengthening the metropolitan region. The second involved encouraging, and in some cases coercing, people to move to the war-ravaged and devastated Jianghuai region in order to reclaim wasteland, restore livelihoods, revive production, and expand the tax base. Since the Suzhou–Songjiang region had been controlled by Zhang Shicheng at the end of the Yuan and subsequently suffered from heavy taxation for an extended period in the early Ming, it is entirely plausible that some of its population moved northward as a result. Migration historians estimate that the number of people who moved from the lower Yangtze region to the Jianghuai region during the early Ming was considerable and constituted an important component of the population of northern Jiangsu[5]. These real population movements provided the social and historical conditions upon which the legend of the “Hongwu Dispersal” could take root and develop.

3.2. Legend and Official History

Nevertheless, certain differences exist between historical reality and the legend. A comprehensive examination of official sources such as the *Veritable Records of the Ming* and the *History of the Ming* reveals no specific record of a large-scale forced Dispersal of the people of Suzhou and Songjiang from Changmen under the name of the “Dispersal.” Large-scale population transfers did occur in the early Ming, but it is difficult to confirm the claim that Zhu Yuanzhang deliberately retaliated against the people of Suzhou because they had supported Zhang Shicheng. This claim appears more frequently in later miscellanies, notebooks, and oral accounts, and contains strong elements of narrative embellishment. It

cannot be directly equated with institutionalized migration policies[17].

At the same time, the compression of migrations that had diverse origins and extended over a considerable period into a single event occurring during the Hongwu reign and originating at Changmen is itself the result of simplification and reconstruction in collective memory. Migration as a general phenomenon is therefore historically credible, whereas the designation “Dispersal,” the exclusive emphasis on Changmen, and the idea of punitive intent may well have been accumulative narrative constructions produced by later generations. Later narratives are often superimposed upon earlier memories, becoming increasingly rich and definite over time.

Accordingly, migration legends of this kind should neither be wholly dismissed because some of their details are historically inaccurate nor accepted uncritically as reliable history. Rather, the complex relationship between their historical core and their narrative construction must be carefully analyzed[2].

It is particularly important to recognize that population movement from Jiangnan to the Jianghuai region was not concentrated in a single Dispersal during one particular year of the Hongwu reign. Instead, it was a gradual process that extended from the end of the Yuan through the early Ming and perhaps beyond. Nor was Changmen the only point of departure. Migrants originated from numerous towns, villages, and settlements across the prefectures of Suzhou, Songjiang, Changzhou, and Zhenjiang. Later memory, however, continuously simplified and focused this complex process, eventually solidifying it into an “event” with a clearly defined time, a single location, and a complete plot. This transformation from complexity to simplicity and from dispersion to concentration is precisely what distinguishes legend from reliable history and represents one of the most active dimensions of memory construction.

4. The Symbolic Construction of Changmen

4.1. Symbol of Homeland

The French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs observed that collective memory always depends on a concrete spatial framework: groups anchor their shared past through locatable places, and memory can be transmitted across generations only when it attaches itself to a stable material site [18]. Changmen offered precisely such a “site of memory”: it was concrete and locatable, widely known, and, by virtue of its status as a commercial hub, naturally suited to serve as a “point of departure.” As countless lineages came to tie their ancestral origins to this gate, Changmen was transformed from an actual city gate into a “symbol of homeland” carrying nostalgia and identity, becoming a shared coordinate of displaced memory. Once a space is selected by memory, it ceases to exist merely in a geographical sense and acquires an emotional and identitarian depth. Groups typically define the boundaries of “us” through the tracing of common ancestry; memory of origin serves both as an internal bond of cohesion and as a yardstick distinguishing outsiders [4]. For the people of northern Jiangsu, who live in Jianghuai yet regard themselves as originating in Jiangnan, Changmen is exactly such a link connecting present circumstance to an idealized origin: it marks their difference from the local indigenous population while also connecting them to Jiangnan, the

economic and cultural highland. Through Changmen, scattered lineages obtained a shared origin, and also a sense of common descent that transcended concrete geographic ties.

4.2. The Consolidation of Memory

If oral tradition represents the fluid form of memory, genealogical compilation represents its stabilization and authorization. During the Ming and Qing dynasties, particularly from the middle and late Qing onward, genealogy compilation became increasingly popular. Lineages commonly attached great importance to tracing their founding ancestors and ancestral origins. In this process, phrases such as “the Hongwu Dispersal” and “migrated from the Changmen Gate in Suzhou” were extensively incorporated into genealogies as standardized opening formulas. They came to constitute a recurring convention in the genealogical writing of northern Jiangsu.

This process of stabilization was inseparable from the flourishing genealogy-compilation movement of the Qing dynasty. During the Ming–Qing transition, and especially after the mid-Qing period, the development of lineage organizations and the spread of elite culture to broader social groups made genealogy compilation increasingly widespread. Activities such as the consolidation of lineages, the unification of ancestral lines, and the compilation of comprehensive genealogies linked people of the same surname—although they might not actually have shared a common origin—into imagined communities.

When tracing founding ancestors and ancestral origins, “originating from the Changmen Gate in Suzhou” was a convenient and attractive choice. It was therefore repeatedly adopted and copied. Associating a lineage with prestigious Jiangnan families and tracing its origins to an eminent Changmen lineage could also enhance its social prestige. Through successive layers of genealogical transcription, memory was continually confirmed and standardized. Origins that may originally have differed from one another were ultimately “revised” into a uniform lineage descending from Changmen.

Genealogical writing reinforced the memory of Changmen in two ways. On the one hand, it transformed originally vague and multi-sourced oral memories into a written “reliable history,” granting them the authority and sacredness of family documentation. On the other hand, later genealogies often inherited and cited established accounts from earlier genealogies, and sometimes even from genealogies of other surnames. Through repeated transcription and mutual corroboration, the Changmen narrative became increasingly unified and standardized. Studies of the Great Pagoda Tree legend demonstrate that this accumulation of memory through textual production is a typical way in which regional societies construct a common ancestry. Over several centuries, the claim of Changmen ancestry was repeatedly confirmed and mutually validated, eventually becoming an unshakable family consensus and, ultimately, a regional consensus[2].

5. Ancestral-Origin Symbols from a Comparative Perspective

Placing the Changmen narrative within the broader landscape of national migration memory throws its nature into sharper relief. Since the Ming and Qing, most major regions of China have developed their own ancestral-origin symbols and narratives: people of North China commonly trace their

ancestors to the Big Locust Tree of Hongtong, Shanxi; those on the Anhui–Hubei–Jiangxi border often claim descent from Wa Xie Ba in Poyang, Jiangxi; lineages of the Pearl River Delta widely circulate the story of Zhuji Lane at Nanxiong; and families in the Sichuan–Chongqing region frequently trace their origin to Xiaogan Township of Macheng in Huguang. Changmen of Suzhou, in its relationship to northern Jiangsu, is yet another typical case within this same genealogy.

These ancestral-origin symbols share similar structural features. Each takes as its point of origin a specific and well-known place, one that is easy for memory to attach to and for successive generations to identify with; each is usually linked to early-dynasty migration policy, drawing on the great population reshuffling of a dynasty's founding years to provide a historical framework for the narrative; each generally becomes fixed and disseminated through genealogical writing, and shares similar motifs in the course of transmission [2]; and each carries the social function of consolidating a sense of common origin and of claiming a share in cultural orthodoxy. Such a high degree of similarity is difficult to explain by historical coincidence alone, and is better understood as the replication and reproduction of a single pattern of memory construction across different regions. This conclusion applies equally to the Changmen narrative. Yet the Changmen narrative also has its own distinctive features. Suzhou's Changmen was not only an important point of migrant convergence and dispersal but also, at the time, the economic and cultural center of Jiangnan; for a population long settled in Jianghuai and often categorized regionally as "northern Jiangsu," claiming descent from Changmen was not merely a matter of tracing origin but also a form of cultural self-identification. It links the reality of "northern Jiangsu" to the imagined ideal of "Jiangnan," maintaining a delicate balance between differentiation and identification. For this reason, the emotions carried by Changmen memory may be more complex still.

6. Memory, Folklore, and Identity

5.1. Oral Tradition and Folklore as Vehicles of Memory

The transmission of Changmen memory has never been limited to written texts. Local customs and folk arts have also served as important vehicles of memory. In their study of yangge traditions in Jinhu, Jiangsu, Wang Xiaolong and Ji Yaling point out that the vocabulary, melodies, and Jiangnan-related cultural elements preserved in traditional music can provide important evidence for the study of migration history. Yangge, work chants, and folk songs have preserved the accents and emotions of early migrants through generations of performance[19]. They have therefore become memory media that are more enduring and emotionally evocative than written texts.

Dialect and customs provide relevant examples. The pronunciation and vocabulary of some parts of northern Jiangsu retain elements that can be compared with Wu dialects, and local people often regard these elements as corroborative evidence that their ancestors came from Jiangnan. Certain Jiangnan customs preserved in seasonal festivals, marriage and funeral rituals, and dietary preferences have likewise been intentionally or unintentionally incorporated by later generations into the explanatory framework of the "Changmen origin." These cultural elements, dispersed throughout everyday life, may not

originally have been directly connected with migration in the early Ming. Under the influence of the Changmen narrative, however, they have been rearranged and endowed with new meanings, becoming evidence that confirms ancestral-origin memory[20].

Local gazetteers, illustrations, and other media have also participated in the reproduction and contemporary reconstruction of memory. Illustrated materials such as The Hongwu Dispersal Map, published in recent years in the Jiangsu Local Gazetteers, retell the migration narrative in visual form, enabling the old legend to gain renewed vitality through contemporary media. Changmen memory is therefore an open process that continues to be written, performed, and reproduced, rather than a fixed remnant of the past.

5.2. Ancestral-Origin Memory and Cultural Exchange

The enduring vitality of the Changmen narrative ultimately rests on its capacity to satisfy multiple present-day social needs. The first is its role in consolidating identity. A shared imagination of ancestral origin binds together people of diverse backgrounds into a group with a shared sense of descent as "descendants of Jiangnan migrants," reinforcing internal regional identity and cohesion. Since Jiangnan has long been an economic and cultural center, claiming descent from Changmen has become a conscious choice for many lineages. The second is its role in settling nostalgia: for people who have lived in Jianghuai for generations, the distant yet concrete Changmen provides a spiritual homeland in which to place their longing, easing the tension between displacement and rootedness [12].

Beyond this, ancestral-origin memory also serves to organize and regulate local society. A shared origin narrative provides legitimacy for lineages joining together and compiling unified genealogies, and for mutual assistance among them, while also lending historical grounding to interpersonal relations and hierarchical order within local society. In other words, Changmen is not merely an emotional attachment but also an organizational resource, weaving scattered households into a relational network under the name of "common descent from Changmen," and turning an abstract notion of shared origin into an operative social bond. It is precisely these practical functions that fundamentally sustain the vitality of Changmen memory. Memory here is not a passive preservation of the past but an active narrative construction through which present-day society expresses identity, organizes relationships, and settles emotion. Understanding this makes it easier to understand why the Changmen narrative has continued to flourish among the people, passed down from generation to generation, and why it occupies such an important place in lineage memory. In the contemporary era, Changmen memory has not faded with changes in social structure; instead, it has found continuation and renewal through new media and institutional forms. In recent years, the Changmen area of Suzhou has developed "root-seeking" themed sites, establishing commemorative structures and exhibition spaces to receive root-seekers, self-identified as "descendants of Changmen," from northern Jiangsu and beyond. Local government and cultural authorities have likewise incorporated the Changmen narrative into the building of local cultural brands, giving the ancestral-origin memory that had previously circulated only

through oral tradition and genealogies further support from public space and local cultural practice, and completing its transformation from folk memory into a public cultural resource.

At the same time, the spread of the internet and new media has provided new channels for the transmission of Changmen memory. Associations of clan members and surname-culture research societies use online platforms to contact members of the same surname who are scattered across different regions. They organize, compile, and compare records of migration from Changmen found in different branches of genealogies, attempting to outline a relatively unified migration lineage from texts that are otherwise diverse and contradictory.

This process represents, in effect, the continuation of the memory-stabilizing mechanisms of the genealogical age in the digital era. Whereas memory integration was previously achieved through the copying of printed texts and intergenerational transmission, it can now be conducted more rapidly through electronic documents, online databases, and social networks. This has also enabled more family memories that were formerly vague or interrupted to be reincorporated into the broader framework of the Changmen narrative.

It is important to note that the contemporary Changmen narrative no longer serves solely to confirm identity within lineages. It increasingly also performs practical functions related to the integration of local cultural tourism and the promotion of cultural exchange among regions. Changmen memory is therefore not a relic sealed within historical texts. It remains an active resource in contemporary cultural production, whose meanings and functions continue to adjust and expand in response to changing times.

7. Conclusion

Ultimately, the legend of the “Hongwu Dispersal” and the ancestral-origin memory centered on Suzhou’s Changmen represent a historical process through which lineages in northern Jiangsu constructed and recognized themselves through narratives of ancestral origins. The historical background of migration from Jiangnan to the Jianghuai region in the early Ming provided the realistic foundation upon which the narrative could take shape. The designation “Dispersal,” the exclusive association with Changmen, and the notion of punitive intent, however, were accumulated through the efforts of lineages to trace their founding ancestors and compile genealogies from the Ming–Qing period onward.

The stabilization and dissemination of Changmen memory fundamentally depended on genealogical writing and practices of lineage consolidation and genealogical cooperation. The claim that one “migrated from the Changmen Gate in Suzhou” was thereby transformed from a fluid oral tradition into a written family “reliable history.” It also provided migrant communities that had lived in the Jianghuai region for generations with a basis for developing a conscious sense of identity. This memory has survived for centuries because it effectively satisfies the multiple needs of lineages: consolidating their members, accommodating nostalgia, and organizing local society. It transforms an abstract imagination of common descent into a practical social connection articulated through the claim that all members “originated from Changmen.”

Viewed from this perspective, the formation of the ancestral-origin memory of “Suzhou’s Changmen” in

northern Jiangsu demonstrates how traditional lineages reconstruct their ancestors, establish identity, and organize social life through narratives of ancestral origins. Through Changmen, dispersed families acquired not only a shared origin but also a set of identity resources through which they could consolidate lineages, compile genealogies, and organize their members. Memory here is not a passive preservation of the past; it is an active narrative through which lineages construct themselves in the present.

More broadly, the interpretation of the Changmen case invites us to reconsider the various ancestral-origin symbols and legends found throughout China. Although such narratives may not provide precise historical evidence for population migration, they do accurately record how ordinary lineages imagine their origins, confirm their belonging, and maintain their organizations. Situated between historical reality and cultural construction, the Changmen narrative reflects the enduring power of lineages to shape themselves through historical memory. At the same time, distinguishing the layered relationship between historical fact and legendary narrative reveals the profound connection between ancestral-origin memory and lineage identity—an issue of central importance to historical research.

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