

# Introduction

This book studies the construction of local identity in Ming China (1368–1644). Its setting in time, roughly the second half of the Ming dynasty, was an era of vast changes in society, economy, gender practice, and intellectual and religious culture. Its setting in space, Huizhou, a single prefecture in the southeast, was a place of great significance in the late Ming empire that in many ways exemplified the concurrent changes. Huizhou became a stronghold of the lineage (kinship settlement based on the principle of patrilineal descent) and the homeland of arguably the empire's most powerful regional mercantile group, the Huizhou merchants (Huishang). It also produced a disproportionately large number of scholar-officials out of higher civil service exam degree holders. This social cohort, collectively termed the gentry in Anglophone scholarship, largely subscribed to a set of religio-philosophical precepts known as neo-Confucianism. Huizhou, claimed as the ancestral place of Confucian culture hero Zhu Xi (1130–1200), was hailed as a bastion of neo-Confucianism, and went on to become a center of the female chastity cult, while at the same time being marked by robust worship of popular local deities. How all of these developments came to be linked to one another and negotiated to form the Huizhou identity as a land of gentrified “prominent lineages” is the subject of this study.

The mid-Ming, which began about one hundred years after the establishment of the dynasty, was an embryonic moment for change. The economy accelerated, shifting from the founding emperor's ideal of self-governing village life to one interwoven with and animated by the forces of regional, and even empire-wide, markets. The rotational system of the *lijia* (“hundreds-and-tithings”) that relied on the heads of local leading families to handle tax collection and delivery had been ineffective and in disarray for quite some time. The decay gradually ushered in the piecemeal fiscal rebuilding later known as the Single Whip reforms, which combined corvée and land taxes into one single cash payment, and in the end virtually

waved the tax obligations of the gentry, as they enjoyed the privilege of being exempted from labor service. This long era of peace also nourished commercial landlordism, thereby promoting a monetized economy and the value of markets.

Toward the late fifteenth century, a top scholar-official, Qiu Jun (1420–1495), began to deliberate on a new state-market relationship in a chapter in his *Supplement to “Expositions on the Great Learning.”* Believing that merchants did a better job of marketing goods than the state, he proposed an open market for traders, although as a devoted Confucian he still acknowledged the possible negative impacts of commercial activity on the moral fiber of the people. The *Supplement* was a significant set of policy deliberations that Qiu Jun presented to the newly ascended Hongzhi emperor in 1487, but it was also commercially published and widely circulated, anticipating the great wave of commercialization that was to sweep China in the sixteenth century.<sup>1</sup>

Huizhou, consisting of the six counties of Shexian, Xiuning, Wuyuan, Qimen, Yixian, and Jixi, emerged as a great beneficiary of sixteenth-century commercialization. This was partially because the lineages of this mountainous region fully supported their kinsmen’s mercantile adventures. Indeed, in mid-Ming Huizhou a new social development, perhaps more notable than commercialization, was the strengthening of kinship associations. This took place through the compilation of lineage genealogies and by perfecting ancestral rites. Kinship solidarity and merchant success supported and enhanced each other.<sup>2</sup> The region became a stronghold of what I have elsewhere called “mercantile lineages,” who built up massive kinship institutions that combined gentry leadership with merchant capital.<sup>3</sup> Paralleling all of these changes, as Timothy Brook has noted, was another mid-Ming trend—the retreat of the state from society and increased activism by local gentry.<sup>4</sup> It is against this spatial and temporal backdrop that my narrative begins.

This study of Ming Huizhou makes a signature contribution to the study of late imperial China by revisiting longstanding questions about Chinese lineage formation and practice as analyzed through new interpretive lenses and new sources. It advances the emerging body of work in English-language scholarship on the study of Huizhou (a well-developed subfield in Mainland Chinese scholarship); it historicizes the discursive development of lineage in one of the renowned strongholds of kinship settlements in late imperial China; and it sheds important new light on what has been termed the “localist turn” in the mid- to late Ming. Most importantly, perhaps, it weaves together intellectual, social, gender, and religious history, to offer a new and deep reading of the construction of Huizhou identity over the course of the Ming dynasty.

Scholarship on late imperial Huizhou can be largely grouped into two camps: an empirically robust but undertheorized Sinophone literature and a much smaller cluster of Anglophone studies. The richness of source materials combined with its distinctive social features has made the study of Huizhou central to post-Mao scholarship of Ming-Qing history in the People’s Republic of China.

Indeed, Huizhou studies have developed into a historical subspecialty in China, called Huixue (Huizhou scholarship). Huixue may be defined as a special branch of regionally focused studies. It covers almost every aspect of Huizhou, but the greatest attention has been trained on Huizhou lineages and Huizhou merchants. As a whole, this scholarly literature tends to document and catalog without engaging the debates on late imperial society in Anglophone China scholarship.

Although a handful of English-language monographs have addressed the region of Huizhou, much of this work has been based on published collections or reprints of Ming-Qing documents, with the notable exception of Joseph McDermott's two-volume study of the development of Huizhou lineage in the sixteenth century, *The Making of a New Rural Order in South China*, which makes extensive use of the Huizhou *wenshu* (lineage imprints and manuscripts).<sup>5</sup> Most of these studies can be characterized as socioeconomic in focus, again culminating to date in McDermott's paired monographs, which chart the ascendance of the lineage and trace the ways in which lineage ancestral halls served as a kind of banking mechanism undergirding the financial ventures of Huizhou merchants.

My prior work shifted focus to popular cultural facets of Huizhou mercantile lineages.<sup>6</sup> What remains virtually unexamined is the discursive practices of local elites—whether in Huizhou or any other locality in Ming China—in developing their regional identity via the institution of the lineage. That is the work undertaken in this study.

As McDermott has noted, the lineage has over the past half-century “rightly come to occupy a central place in standard accounts of the social history of late imperial China.”<sup>7</sup> Indeed, in the China history field, this trend can be traced back to Philip Kuhn's groundbreaking study *Rebellion and Its Enemies in Late Imperial China*, which was deeply influenced by approaches in structural anthropology and helped to mark the field's turn to regional history.<sup>8</sup> The role of lineage in state-society relations has been an enduring problem for the English-language field of late imperial China ever since.

More recently, the scholarship of Michael Szonyi has adopted a more dynamic approach to lineage as practice (rather than structure). His studies of kinship organization in northern Fujian have presented genealogical construction as a competitive practice in which interaction with the imperial state became a factor in evolving lineage form and function, and in which increasing social inclusiveness became a feature of kinship developed in an era that seemed to require ever greater efforts at social control. For Szonyi, lineage competition is manifest in the everyday politics of religious worship, as well as marriage strategies and tactics for avoiding military-service obligations.<sup>9</sup> Unlike the Fujian lineages that Szonyi studied, the Huizhou lineages that I analyze here were prominent and wealthy. Nevertheless, I share his approach of treating the representations of local kinship society as a key practice of lineage strategy. My study further mobilizes the toolkit of the new cultural history—with its attention to local rhetorical strategies, gender

analysis, and religious symbolism—to themes first raised by the older anthropological and historical studies of lineage.

This study of mid- to late Ming Huizhou further engages with what Peter Bol has called the “localist turn,” as shown in the case of Jinhua, Zhejiang (not far away from Huizhou), where literati elites started to conceptualize the locality through compiling local anthologies and gazetteers and making the home place a vital part of their identity.<sup>10</sup> Bol’s work builds upon that of earlier economic and social historians such as Robert Hartwell and Robert Hymes, who have famously argued that the mid-Song turn away from national service to local strategies of engagement meant that the Southern Song elite was essentially the same group as the gentry of the Ming and Qing dynasties.<sup>11</sup> This continuity of local elites has contributed to viewing the Song-Yuan-Ming era as a discrete historical unit.<sup>12</sup> Peter Bol, in contrast, also argues for a localist turn for each major dynasty; for the Ming dynasty, the statist policies of the early Ming was followed by an era of government withdrawal from society and the rise of local elites. His emphasis is on the local initiatives, although for Bol, “a localist turn need not be anti-state per se” on the grounds that greater decentralization and elite autonomy could benefit everyone, “including the dynasty.”<sup>13</sup>

This is where my inquiry into Huizhou cultural history fits in. We see an apparently similar localist turn in the region over the second half of the Ming dynasty—what I call the rise of Huizhou consciousness—as embodied most focally in a series of literati anthologies and gazetteers that glorified Huizhou history and cultural tradition. The glorification of the locality paved the way for the formation, around the mid-sixteenth century, of the Huizhou identity as a land of “prominent lineages.” I show how vast changes in the intellectual, social, economic, religious, and gender realms during the second half of the Ming dynasty coalesced into the making of this Huizhou identity. Unlike Jinhua, Huizhou identity was not just local but also lineage bound. Hence, we see not only that localist manifestation varied in different regions, but also that the Huizhou story moves significantly beyond the localist-turn paradigm.

The projection of Huizhou identity constitutes the first half of this study; the second half addresses the development of the mercantile lineage culture upon which Huizhou identity was partially predicated. Over the course of the sixteenth century, local lineages became increasingly engaged in commerce, turning themselves into mercantile lineages. And yet, given the debasing of merchants in Confucian ideology and the deeply gentrified culture of Huizhou, mercantile activities were never considered fully honorable or culturally accepted in the collective discourse of Huizhou lineages. Partially, too, as a strategy to deflect outside criticism of the dominance of Huizhou merchants, mercantile interests were veiled behind the publicly projected image of Huizhou identity. This public erasure of merchant identity conveyed enormous meaning. It suggests that the merchants of Huizhou were dependent on home lineages as much in local discourse as they were in

real life in terms of logistic and sociocultural support. As such, the projection of Huizhou self-identification was partly a move to consolidate local kinship society in an age of accelerating commercialization and the perceived loosening of established moral norms. This mercantile lineage culture, furthermore, was manifested in, and supported by, the local gender regime to make Huizhou the “Confucian heartland of women.” It was further negotiated via religious symbolism with the popular God of Wealth being controlled by the patron deity of Huizhou lineages.

The book is structured in two parts. Part 1 covers the two chapters on the making of Huizhou consciousness and Huizhou identity. Part 2, in three chapters, addresses the reification of mercantile lineage culture, its engendered performance, and its symbolic representation in the local religious realm. Together, the two parts demonstrate the historical development of Huizhou from the mid- to the late Ming, while also revealing a discrepancy between name and substance. The success of Huizhou was predicated in large part upon this discrepancy.

Chapter 1 highlights the localist endeavors of Cheng Minzheng (1444–1499), a prominent official working at the imperial center who, in 1478, self-identified with his ancestral fatherland of Huizhou (also known as Xin’an), thereby devoting his life to raising the status of both the region and his Cheng lineage.<sup>14</sup> He compiled two important genealogies, one for his home branch in Xiuning County and the other covering all of the Huizhou Chengs in his *Composite Genealogy of the Xin’an Chengs* (Xin’an Chengshi tongzong shipu), a new genre at the time. He was also in charge of compiling the gazetteer of Xiuning. His most important Huizhou-focused work was the massive *Anthology of Xin’an Documents* (Xin’an wenxian zhi), consisting of one hundred *juan*, which highlights Huizhou’s natural beauty, historical glory, and kinship solidarity. Fundamentally shaping the contours of Huizhou history, the *Anthology* is at least as important as any local gazetteer with regard to its role in shaping regional consciousness in the mid-Ming.<sup>15</sup>

Cheng Minzheng showed no conflict between commitment to locally focused endeavors and serving at the dynastic center. This dual outlook resonated with his philosophical predilections. He was an important thinker who helped transition from Zhu Xi’s Learning of the Way to the populist moral-leveling thought of Wang Yangming (1472–1529), which tended on a metaphysical level to erase the distinctions between the imperial center and local society and between elites and commoners. Cheng Minzheng was not born in Huizhou, but he anchored himself there after his father moved back to the family’s ancestral home in retirement.<sup>16</sup> As Minzheng often used his empire-wide connections to promote his localist endeavors, his identification with Huizhou had the potential to enhance his position in the central government. When he was dismissed from his central post, from 1488 to 1492, he stayed in his Huizhou home where he completed the compilation of some of his most important works, including *Anthology of Xin’an Documents* and two neo-Confucian philosophical collections. These works were partly motivated by his desire for political rehabilitation, in which he succeeded.<sup>17</sup> Indeed, Cheng

Minzheng's "localist turn" by no means suggests the separation of state and local society, but rather gave Huizhou a larger role in influencing the entire realm as a model Confucian society. Cheng Minzheng helped to enhance the Confucian characteristics of Huizhou by, among other activities, alleging kinship ties between the leading Song dynasty neo-Confucians—the two Cheng brothers—and his Huizhou Cheng descent line.

The foremost embodiment of regional consciousness in Huizhou was the lineage institution. Chapter 2 focuses on the 1551 edition of *Prominent Lineages in Xin'an* (Xin'an mingzu zhi), a massive genealogical gazetteer and a unique Ming genre that encompassed all of the acknowledged elite lineages in the prefecture. First, by contextualizing the composite genealogical gazetteer both textually and socially, this chapter demonstrates how Cheng Minzheng's influence played into its ultimate compilation and publication (of the Cheng-led sequence of prominent lineages). But the process also shows the evolution from one individual vision to a shared regional entity, as the genealogical gazetteer was collectively compiled by representatives of the local gentry and endorsed by all of the participating lineages.

More importantly, *Prominent Lineages in Xin'an* reflected the concurrent commercialization and development of kinship institutions. Drawing upon about eight hundred single-surnamed genealogies out of ninety Huizhou surnames (including many composite genealogies of the leading surnames inspired by Cheng Minzheng), *Prominent Lineages in Xin'an* marked the formation of a new Huizhou identity that was rooted in both regional and kinship ties, presenting the prefecture to the entire realm as a land of prominent—and Confucianized or gentrified—lineages (which was further confirmed in the 1626 *Prominent Lineages in Xiuning*, an expanded version of the 1551 genealogical gazetteer based on one county). Huizhou lineages claimed eminent ancestry, primarily defined as noted statesmen and scholar-officials (and even claiming descent from the royal families of ancient dynasties), making them socially privileged, morally worthy, and culturally admirable. And yet, *Prominent Lineages in Xin'an* actually covers both "famous" and "not-so-famous" lineages. This moral leveling resonated with the thinking of Cheng Minzheng and the popular Ming School of the Mind (also known as Wang Yangmingism), but also may be attributed to the editors' desire to make everyone happy by boasting about a region full of prominent lineages. Moreover, these Huizhou lineages now also embraced Confucian commoners, most notably "righteous" merchants and devoted kinswomen.

The new identity of Huizhou embodied in *Prominent Lineages* was multifaceted. Its public face was a land of prominent lineages, but its inner core was increasingly composed of what might now be called "mercantile lineages"—that is, it was gentry led and merchant based. This sublimating of merchant interests within the Huizhou identity was meaningful on several fronts: merchants were attached to their home lineages in terms of both kinship and finance; their business endeavors were often supported by the home lineages (in return, they gave back in order

to enhance lineage institutions); and identification was kinship based rather than class based. In other words, Huizhou merchants, while dominant in markets and often viewed by outsiders in negative terms (as vividly narrated in popular tales), were morally elevated at home and yet never formed an independent class identity.

The three chapters of part 2 offer close readings of three manifestations of the now-matured mercantile lineage culture and Huizhou identity. Chapter 3 turns to the merchant biographies written by Wang Daokun (1523–1593), a prominent scholar-official from Huizhou. These biographies further reflect the subtle positioning of merchants within lineage discourse. Wang Daokun was both a product and producer of local mercantile lineage culture. He has received some scholarly attention, mostly in China and Japan, largely because of his literary reputation and his compilation of numerous merchant biographies. But a proper understanding of his contribution to Huizhou culture during the second half of the sixteenth century requires a balanced inquiry into all of his writings, especially his lineage documents, merchant biographies, and accounts of Confucian women. He elevated the status of merchants, helped Confucianize a mercantile ethical code, and further promoted the Huizhou social metamorphosis strategy widely practiced among local elite lineages of alternating learning and trade between generations or among brothers.

Wang never directly identified Huizhou tradesmen as “merchants,” but instead used the term *chushi* (scholarly gentrymen without an exam degree), as many of them engaged in trade only after failing in the examination hall. And he actively promoted the virtues of merchants and women in the context of the lineage. He was first among late Ming scholar-officials to compile a new version of the *Biographies of Exemplary Women* (Lienü zhuan). Some of the leading entries on women and merchants were also printed in the genealogy he compiled for his own lineage, which he claimed was descended from the ancient Zhou royal house. At the same time, in keeping with the now wildly popular Wang Yangmingism, Wang Daokun held commoners in higher esteem than his famous Huizhou predecessor Cheng Minzheng. He equated family genealogies with official history and linked his home lineage to the symbolic center of dynastic power. In the end, if *Prominent Lineages in Xin'an* marked the emergence of a new Huizhou identity, Wang Daokun perfected Huizhou mercantile lineage culture, which ensured the prefecture's success both in commerce and in the placement of scholar-officials throughout the realm.

Gender also played an important role in Huizhou's mercantile lineage history. In the late Ming, the region became known for its virtuous women and devoted widows. Chapter 4 presents a new interpretation of the growing cult of female chastity in sixteenth-century Huizhou. Using the copious demographic data drawn from one massive genealogy of a leading Huizhou mercantile lineage, I show that the most important underlying factor in the formation of the female fidelity cult was the changing family-lineage structure, which was brought about by a high incidence of sojourning tradesmen in the region. Since the majority of



young men in Huizhou left home for business and returned only “once in every three years,” the age at which couples had their first child tended to be advanced. This demographic trend combined with a moderate average life span to make the nuclear family the norm. Situated in single-couple households, wives of sojourning husbands tended to be relatively free from the patriarchal monitoring of their sexuality. One effective way to ensure the fidelity of these abandoned women was to appeal to the larger lineage. This in part explains why Huizhou merchants were so eager to make contributions to consolidating home kinship institutions. In doing so, however, Huizhou merchants helped perpetuate the mercantile lineage regime that was subsumed within Huizhou self-identification, inhibiting development of an independent social identity.

This mercantile lineage culture was also embodied in the local religious order. Chapter 5 uses newly discovered archival materials, especially the late Ming ritual handbook, *Model Prayers to the Deities* (Qishen zouge), to examine the making of the Huizhou pantheon. *Model Prayers*, in six volumes, contains almost encyclopedic data about Huizhou’s local cults, but its most notable feature lies in a regional pantheon that was headed by Wang Hua, a seventh-century Huizhou hero who had since accrued three facets of symbolic significance: he was the apical ancestor of the prominent and most populous descent line in the region; he was the patron deity of Huizhou; and, ultimately, he served as a link between local society and the dynastic center. This “ritual code” of Huizhou was a localized transformation of the Ming state religious system. Wang Hua emerged as the local proxy of the official City God, and his pantheon—as illustrated in some rare Ming dynasty Huizhou Wang genealogies—incorporated a large number of powerful deities from Buddhism and Daoism, as well as a number of locally worshipped spirits.

Interestingly, the ritual handbook was attributed to Cheng Minzheng, whose name was used to legitimate the hierarchical religious order of the Huizhou pantheon that fixed Minzheng’s own sixth-century ancestor as an attendant of Wang Hua. Here we see local competition for symbolic capital, which nevertheless had the effect of achieving a power balance among local prominent lineages: the godly power of Wang Hua was balanced against the genealogical pedigree of the Chengs.

More importantly, as the Wang Hua pantheon was hierarchically structured, it served to control the power of many popular deities that were incorporated into its symbolic network, including the Wuchang pentad spirit, the locally worshipped God of Wealth, which channeled the power of money to good use while averting its potential harmful impacts. This lowly but popular patron deity of Huizhou merchants also played a key role in policing gender relations, helping to oversee kinswomen’s sexuality and assure safe childbirth, both of which were critically important for sojourning merchants and their home lineages. Furthermore, as Wang Hua was also worshipped as the apical ancestor of all of the Huizhou Wangs, this tutelary deity of the region was turned into a generic patron deity of all Huizhou lineages. In this sense, the Wang Hua pantheon was virtually an extension



of Confucian ancestral worship. Indeed, the local pantheon best exemplified the rise of Huizhou consciousness, but also became a religious representation of local mercantile lineage culture, reflecting and reinforcing the Huizhou identity.

Huizhou identity, I argue, was at once imagined and real, straightforward and multilayered. The historical roots of Huizhou prominent lineages were partly apocryphal, and yet by the sixteenth century had become real, as their mythic origins had been repeatedly asserted in the lineage genealogies and thus firmly established as local knowledge. These prominent lineages were further collectively enhanced by their outstanding achievements in official placements from Song-Yuan times onward and, later, over the course of the sixteenth century, in marketplaces. Huizhou identity was locally and lineage bound, but its core evolved historically. Huizhou had been self-claimed as a model Confucian society (as the so-called ancestral place of the three most important Song dynasty neo-Confucians—the Cheng brothers and Zhu Xi), and the lineage was supposed to be the best social embodiment of Song neo-Confucianism in local society. What came to be embodied in local kinship institutions and mercantile lineage culture, however, was mainly the moral leveling more associated with Cheng Minzheng (which to a certain degree also echoed the popular Ming School of the Mind). In practicing kinship, Huizhou kinspeople developed a variety of strategies that clearly broke the kinship guidelines set up by Song neo-Confucians in their construction of independent, large-scale ancestral halls worshipping apical ancestors; in co-opting merchant interests; in building and worshipping the local pantheon, which was syncretic and embraced both official and popular cults; and even in their public boasting of being a land of “prominent lineages.” Most importantly, Huizhou lineages came to be increasingly composed of merchant interests, and yet such interests were elided in the representation of the regional self-identification. This development had much to do with the Huizhou social metamorphosis strategy of alternating between learning and trade, in which the merchants of Huizhou were overshadowed by the scholar-official gentry both socially and culturally. The gentry-led lineage also worked with sojourning merchants to tighten control over kinswomen, which had the effect of turning the region into a center of the female chastity cult. Indeed, devoted womanhood was key to the making and maintaining of mercantile lineages and Huizhou identity. All of this was also ritualized in the local religious order, as evidenced by the Huizhou pantheon that worked to protect and promote local mercantile lineages and their gender regime.

This study also adds a new dimension of internal competition to the mid-Ming rise of regional consciousness and shows that the consolidation of local elite lineages was not necessarily at odds with state interests. Not only were central alliances used to secure local preeminence, but local competition for cultural capital also strengthened the “harmonious” functioning of gentry kin communities. This enabled the region to successfully reproduce its power in the political and commercial realms of the state and provide key service to the center throughout late

imperial times. As we learn from the Huizhou experience, the more locally rooted a society was, the more prepared it was to reach out to other regions and up to the center.

The distinction between Huizhou self-identification and its sublimated core of mercantile lineage culture ultimately suggests a manifest decoupling between the economy and sociocultural discourses: the more active the economy became, the more those central to the intensification of commerce—that is, merchants and mercantile lineages—embraced conservative social and cultural norms (a message that has implications for present-day China as well). While some western scholars of late imperial China have gravitated to the loosening, or “liberalization,” of social mores in the late Ming, my study addresses the equally important conservative response to commercialization.<sup>18</sup> This focus recognizes that, perhaps ironically, home lineages embraced neo-Confucian orthodoxy even as they provided the financial, cultural, and logistical support to assure the success of Huizhou merchants. Huizhou, arguably the most commercialized region of the late Ming empire, did not prepare the social conditions that could have nurtured “capitalism” but built up gentrified mercantile lineage culture with Chinese—or Huizhou—characteristics.

This study focuses on elite discourses, but as I show there was interplay between discourse and social practice and between high and popular cultures. This emphasis is partly an intended shift away from my own previous work on popular culture.<sup>19</sup> But it is also an attempt to balance the use of various types of source materials. Here, I draw upon both the rich trove of newly uncovered Huizhou lineage imprints and manuscripts and so-called classical documents (*dianji wenxian*). Cheng Minzheng’s philosophical treatises and Wang Daokun’s genealogy nestle cheek by jowl with many *wenshu* documents. This includes the newly found ritual handbook *Model Prayers to the Deities*, handwritten labor and land contracts, as well as the many Huizhou genealogies stored in a variety of archives.<sup>20</sup> Over two dozen invaluable, pre-Qing Huizhou genealogies (along with seven from the Qing) are closely examined herein, many of which are massive in content and have never been studied. The result is a balanced exploration of all kinds of source materials that reveal the discrepancy between the projection of Huizhou identity and the actual workings of local mercantile lineage culture. Indeed, it is the richness of Huizhou sources that makes possible the reexamination of lineage matters through the lens of cultural history.