

# The School Management of the Ming Dynasty as Seen by the *Imperial Regulations Tablet*

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## Abstract

In the early Ming Dynasty, Zhu Yuanzhang championed education and emphasized the importance of teaching, which laid the foundation for the educational system and institutional framework of the Ming Dynasty. Each emperor during the late Ming Dynasty established distinct school regulations tailored to the specific educational circumstances of the time. The imperial educational plan was inscribed on a stone tablet known as the Imperial Regulations Tablet. This tablet served a unique dual purpose of promoting educational standards and enforcing prohibitions. The dissemination of the Imperial Regulations Tablet across all levels of schools throughout the country established the framework for school governance during the Ming Dynasty.

## Keywords

Imperial Regulations Tablet, Legal Prohibition, School Management

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## 1. Introduction

As a distinctive form of legal documentation, the Imperial Regulations Tablet outlines the rules and regulations governing school management. The document attribute of legal inscription lies in the objectivity and authenticity of the legal information conveyed by its content, while the cultural relic attribute and system attribute lies in the publicity and procedure of its inscription (Li, 2017). Currently, academic circles pay relatively little attention to the Imperial Regulations Tablet from the Ming Dynasty, overlooking its inherent value. This paper examines the school management system of the Ming Dynasty through the lens of the Imperial Regulations Tablet, offering critique and suggestions for

improvement.

## 2. Basic Information of Imperial Regulations Tablet

### 2.1. Space-Time Characteristics

At present, this article has compiled 38 Imperial Regulations Tablets from the Ming Dynasty, spanning from the Hongwu period to the Wanli period. These tablets are distributed from the northeast to the southwest regions.

The spatial distribution of Imperial Regulations Tablets during the Ming Dynasty is as follows:

From a regional perspective, the distribution of the Imperial Regulations Tablets across the country includes 16 in northern Zhili, 6 in southern Zhili, 5 in Shanxi, 3 in Hubei, 2 each in Shaanxi and Guangdong, 1 in Yunnan, 1 in Dusi in Liaodong, and the specific location of 1 remains unknown. These tablets cover various regions, including North China, the Central Plains, Northeast China, and the Southwest. In terms of educational institutions, the distribution of the Imperial Regulations Tablets is as follows: 7 are located in government schools, 1 in a state school, 27 in county schools, 1 in an imperial school, and 2 are of unknown affiliation. The tablets demonstrate a broad spatial distribution, ranging from Zhili to Guangdong and from the Northeast to the Southwest, encompassing both central state colleges and local county schools.

Among the 38 Imperial Regulations Tablet, 22 of them were concentrated in Zhili, accounting for 59.4% of the total. Due to the limitation of data, no Imperial Regulations Tablet has been found in northwest China, which shows the imbalance of spatial distribution. The content of the Imperial Regulations Tablet in Zhengde period is mainly based on the imperial officer's imperial decree on the promotion of Shanxi school administration, so 4 of the 5 Imperial Regulations Tablet in Shanxi are related to it, and also show the regional spatial distribution.

The carving of Imperial Regulations Tablet was ordered by the central government, passed layer by layer, and finally reached the local society. The Ming Dynasty had a vast territory, and remote areas received instructions relatively late. The carving time of the same Imperial Regulations Tablet may be divided into sooner and later, investigating the carving time of the Imperial Regulations Tablet in Ming Dynasty: "Imperial School Tablet" in Shuntian Prefectural School in North Zhili and "Hongwu Two Imperial Tablet" in Guangzhou Prefectural School in Guangdong Province show that the time is "Hongwu two November 18". However, according to the inscription records, November 18 should be the time for the stele to issue, not the time for carving the stele, and the first cloud of the stele in the Second Year of Hongwu in the Guangzhou Fuxue "Guangzhou Palace accepts the imperial decree" can be known that "November 18" should be the content of the official document, and the specific month of carving the stele is unknown. Compared with Northern Zhili, Guangdong is a remote place, and it received official documents and inscriptions later than Northern Zhili. According to the above analysis, there

was a phenomenon that the carving time of Imperial Regulations Tablet of Ming Dynasty appeared sooner or later due to geographical factors.

As the political center of the Ming Dynasty, Northern and Southern Zhili accepted imperial decrees earlier and were required to assume greater political responsibilities, resulting in a higher number of carved steles. While political factors played a significant role in the establishment and distribution of Imperial Regulations Tablets, other influences such as population density, cultural development, and the natural environment also contributed. The northeast and southwest regions, characterized by smaller populations and relatively lower education levels, have fewer Imperial Regulations Tablets. Additionally, the arid climate in Northwest China, the inadequate preservation conditions for steles, and the limited number of steles collected locally are further reasons why no Imperial Regulations Tablets have been discovered in that region.

At present, a total of 38 Imperial Regulations Tablet in Ming Dynasty have been collected, except for 2 whose time is unknown, the rest have the time of carving tablets. Hongwu period 23. Among them, 3 passes in the second year of Hongwu, 4 passes in the eighth year of Hongwu, 4 passes in the twelfth year of Hongwu, 10 passes in the fifteenth year of Hongwu, 1 pass in the sixteenth year of Hongwu, and the time is unknown. The content of the inscriptions shows that Hongwu Dynasty is divided into two kinds: Hongwu Second year and Hongwu 15<sup>th</sup> year, that is, the Imperial Regulations Tablet before Hongwu 15<sup>th</sup> year are all the Imperial Regulations Tablet of Hongwu second year. Hongwu 15 years after carving the Imperial Regulations Tablet content is consistent, the same lying tablet.

Since then, Chenghua period 3, Zhengde period 4. After the establishment of the scholastic officer in the Zhengtong, the scholastic system was constantly improved. Until the Zhengde period, most of the inscriptions on the imperial scholastic monument were imperial edicts issued by the emperor to the scholastic officer, which included the provisions for teachers and students of the school, so more steles were carved. Wanli period 3, Emperor Wanli ordered the learning officer to engrave an inscription. Most of the imperial school stele in the reign of Emperor Yingzong and Jiajing were reinscribed in the fifteenth year of Hongwu, reaffirming the old system.

## **2.2. Characteristics of Shape and System**

First, two forms of stele. One is the vertical tablet, the other is the recumbent tablet. Among the 38 tablets, there are 18 recumbent steles, of which 11 are in Hong Wu Dynasty and 7 are in other dynasties. Other Imperial Regulations Tablet are common forms of vertical tablet.

Second, the format of the document is obvious. Examining the entire Imperial Regulations Tablet of Ming Dynasty, we can find that most of the stele are engraved with official documents, including the proclamation issued by the Ministry of Rites to the whole country, and the imperial edicts and rescripts. Imperial Regulations Tablet with official documents, its engraved shape in accordance with the

original document format, the phenomenon of air lifting is more prominent, some stone tablets also engraved seals.

Third, the shape is different. From the Hongwu Period to the Wanli period, the size and shape of the stone tablet were not exactly the same. Because the Imperial Regulations Tablet is not a single content, different times different school rules, different words, different stone, so there are differences.

In the Ming Dynasty, Xuegui stele was widely carved, and Imperial Regulations Tablet gradually developed into a systematic category of steles. In the Ming Dynasty, the government issued school regulations many times, although not all school regulations were carved into stone tablets, but those who carved their distribution were very wide, and the time span was relatively large. The distribution ranges from central Chinese studies to local Confucianism, from the government to the state, from the state to the county, almost all over the country; Carved time from the Hongwu period continued to Wanli period.

### 3. The Rules of Imperial Regulations Tablet Designation

As one of the decrees of imperial school, although the inscriptions are the same, the names of the inscriptions are different. At present, there are five kinds of Imperial Regulations Tablet: the “Qinding School Format Tablet” in the 2<sup>nd</sup> year of Hongwu’s reign, “Li bu bang yu sheng yuan Tablet” in the 15<sup>th</sup> year of Hongwu’s reign, and “Wu chao chi yu Tablet” in the 2<sup>nd</sup> year of Chenghua’s reign, “Chi yu ti xue jiao tiao Tablet” in the 5<sup>th</sup> year of Zhengde’s reign, “Chi yu ru xue Tablet” in the 6<sup>th</sup> year of Wanli’s reign.

#### 3.1. Analysis of the Phenomenon of “Multiple Names in One Monument”

There are 38 Imperial Regulations Tablet, a relatively considerable number of existence, but handed down the literature and the name of the present people are different. In fact, there are 11 Imperial Regulations Tablet named “Qinding School Format tablet” in Hongwu’s second year. In the 15 years of Hongwu’s reign, there are 20 Imperial Regulations Tablet named Li bu bang yu sheng yuan tablet. “Wu chao chi yu tablet” only 1; There are 4 Imperial Regulations Tablet, which are named “Chi yu ti xue jiao tiao tablet” in Zhengde five years. There are two kinds of tablets named “Chi yu ru xue tablet”.

Among them, the inscriptions named after “Qinding School Format Tablet” are all in Hongwu Dynasty. There are 6 kinds of inscriptions, and there is a phenomenon of multiple tablets. In Hongwu’s 15<sup>th</sup> year, the imperial scholastic Rule tablet was named as “Li bu bang yu sheng yuan Tablet”, which lasted from Hongwu Dynasty to Jiajing Dynasty. There were 20 kinds of tablet names. The inscriptions named after Chi yu ti xue jiao tiao Tablet were all in Zhengde Dynasty, and there were three kinds of inscriptions. The imperial Scholastic tablet, named as the “Chi yu ru xue Tablet” in the sixth year of Wanli, was established in the Wanli Dynasty, and there are two kinds of tablet names.

### 3.2. Traditional Naming Basis

Common sense inferred that the content of the Imperial Regulations Tablet is the emperor's imperial edicts or official proverbs, and its name should be serious and unified, but the actual situation is quite the opposite. So what is the basis for the name of the Imperial Regulations Tablet?

The forehead, body and Yin of the general inscription are related, especially the legal inscription (Li, 2015). First of all, investigate the relationship between the inscription and the name of the tablet, among the 38 Imperial Regulations Tablet, there are 9 tablets with the inscription, only 3 are named after the inscription, and other stone tablets have different names even if they have the inscription. In addition, those whose inscriptions and headstones are the same are not exactly the same: there are 11 Imperial Regulations Tablet uniformly called "Qinding School Format Tablet", of which 5 are "imperial edicts". It can be seen that the name of the Imperial Regulations Tablet is related to the inscription, but not entirely according to the inscription.

Secondly, the relationship between the body of the tablet and the name of the tablet, named "li bu qin yi chu bang xiao shi sheng yuan tablet" 2, its content is Hongwu 15 years of the list. The first cloud of the list text tablet "li bu qin yi chu bang xiao shi sheng yuan tablet", it can be seen that the naming of the two tablets directly comes from the tablet head.

Thirdly, by examining the relationship between the content of inscriptions and the name of inscriptions, we find that most inscriptions are closely related to inscriptions, and we can roughly know the content of inscriptions from the name of inscriptions.

In addition, the naming of stone tablets also has a certain relationship with the chronicler. "*Xincheng County Annals*" volume 16 in the "xue xiao ge shi tablet" in the postscript: "This tablet... The original text and the big book "holy" word in the middle of the top, so it is also known as the imperial decree tablet (Wang, 1968). That is, the author added personal understanding to the postings. This shows that the naming of the stele is largely related to the person who recorded it. Due to the reasons of The Times and the difference in personal understanding of the recorders, to a certain extent, it also caused the phenomenon of different names of tablets.

In addition, according to the names of several steles, such as "xue gong tablet" and "yu zhi tablet", the naming of steles is also influenced by the government and the people. When carving the stele of Hongwu 15<sup>th</sup> year, Zhu Yuanzhang called it lying stele, and the folk also called it in the form of "lying stele" directly observed.

At the same time, the name of the stone tablet is also related to the form of the inscription. The recumbent stele of Hongwu 15 years was issued in the form of tabular text, so it was named "da ming li bu bang wen tablet" and "long qing zhou xue bang shi tablet". The inscriptions of Zhengde and Wanli periods were issued in the form of imperial edicts, so they were named "Chi yu ru xue tablet".

To sum up, the naming of the Imperial Regulations Tablet in Ming Dynasty was

determined by many factors, and the inscription, the head of the tablet and even the personal understanding of the writer would have some influence on the naming of the Imperial Regulations Tablet. Of course, the imperial Imperial Regulations Tablet's prohibition effect does not lie in whether its name has a deterrent effect, but in the content of its statute prohibition color, that is, the practicality of the Imperial Regulations Tablet.

#### **4. "Official Documents" and "Articles" on the Imperial Regulations Tablet**

According to the above analysis, it does not affect the legal attribute and practical value of the Imperial Regulations Tablet. This section focuses on the analysis of the legal sources of the role of Imperial Regulations Tablet prohibition. According to the issuing form of academic regulations and the style of stone stele, the Imperial Regulations Tablet can be roughly divided into two types: ban wen tablet and chi yu tablet. Regardless of the form, its inscriptions all contain official documents and academic rules, and official documents and academic rules are the origin of its legal effect.

##### **4.1. Study the Utility of Official Documents on the Tablet**

Official documents, short for official documents, refer to documents with public power. Imperial edicts, rescripts, and letters between local officials can all be considered official documents. Among the 38 Imperial Regulations Tablet collected in this paper, each tablet is engraved with official documents. Before the Ming Dynasty, it was rare to highlight the admonitions and edicts to the scholars in the inscriptions. After the Ming Dynasty, the imperial rescript prohibition tablets represented by the Academy began to increase in number.

The "Qinding School Format Tablet" in the 2<sup>nd</sup> year of Hongwu's reign carved more places, Zhu Yuanzhang ordered the libu to develop school related systems, and required all over the country carved stone. The tablet is divided into two parts, and the related documents of the tablet are inscribed on the top. The contents include the reasons for the inscription, the process of the libu to formulate academic regulations, and the imperial decree requiring the national inscription of stone tablets. The official documents contained both imperial edicts and announcements issued by the Ministry of Rites.

Other Imperial Regulations Tablet unified by the "Qinding School Format Tablet" in the 2<sup>nd</sup> year of Hongwu's reign also have different official documents, roughly accounting for the process of enacting the will to carve stone tablets. Such as "Hongwu two years imperial tablet" (Shi, 1967) and "school format tablet" (Cui & Shang, 1967). Among these documents are the words "qinfeng", "zafu" and "zicheng", indicating that the opinions of the superiors have been conveyed layer by layer and finally reached the place, indicating that there are certain procedures for the issuance of inscription documents and the erecting of tablets.

"Li bu bang yu sheng yuan tablet" in the 15<sup>th</sup> year of Hongwu's reign is one of

the bangwen Tablet. Lines 1 - 14 of the inscription explain the reason and background of the formulation of the inscription in the form of official documents, paragraphs 15 - 59 describe the specific provisions of the inscription, and lines 60 - 64 require all places to set up stone monuments in accordance with the style in the form of official documents.

“Wu chao chi yu Tablet” in the 2<sup>nd</sup> year of Chenghua’s reign is one kind of chi yu tablets, in which seven rescript tablets of the five emperors are engraved together. As the imperial imperial edicts belong to one kind of official documents, it can be said that the tablets are all official documents and are typical imperial tablets.

“Chi yu ti xue jiao tiao tablet” in the 5<sup>th</sup> year of Zhengde’s reign, “Chi yu ru xue Tablet” in the 6<sup>th</sup> year of Wanli’s reign also belongs to the chi yu tablet. The two official documents were also imperial edicts, but only one person was ordered. The first line of “Chi yu ti xue jiao tiao Tablet” was inscribed with “Chen Fengwu, the chief inspector”, and the first line of Chi yu ru xue Tablet” in the 6<sup>th</sup> year of Wanli’s reign was inscribed with “Li Weizhen, the deputy envoy of the Shanxi Provincial Chief Inspector”. At the same time, “Chi yu ti xue jiao tiao Tablet” in the 5<sup>th</sup> year of Zhengde’s reign also engraved with “the treasure of Imperial name” several characters, the official document features more prominent. The contents of the documents explain the reasons for the imperial decree and the orders to the recipients.

Official documents are the documents of the operation of public power, and the provisions of official documents are engraved on the stone tablet, which gives the legal effect of Imperial Regulations Tablet.

#### **4.2. The “Prohibitive” Clause in the Tablet**

The terms refer to the specific terms of the school regulations in the Imperial Regulations Tablet. The provisions of the school regulations engraved in the Imperial Regulations Tablet of Ming Dynasty were mainly for teachers and students and officials, and the content showed certain injunctions and punishments.

“Qinding School Format Tablet” stipulated the number of school students and the different duties of instructors. Zhu Yuanzhang stipulated that the school’s teaching should be based on six subjects of “li yue she lv shu suan”, and set up four instructors to be responsible for each subject’s learning. When the guard checks the student’s learning, the student’s performance will be recorded. If a member of a scientific industry is not fine for a month, first remember in the paper; If there is no improvement in three months, then the discipline will be punished with half a month of salary. The inscription also requires the imperial history supervision and inspection department to be responsible for testing teachers, students and instructors during local visits, and if students do not study well, the instructors and students will be punished.

“Li bu bang yu sheng yuan Tablet” engraved by the original format, the content is mostly prohibition. Among the bans: Students were asked not to Sue easily, not

to give advice, and students were asked to respect teachers. In the ban facing the society: the requirement that there is a grievance can't be sued, and is not allowed to Sue for others. It can be seen that the content of "Li bu bang yu sheng yuan Tablet" is mainly prohibition, which stipulates the things that different people should and should not do. These provisions are engraved on stone tablets and engraved across the country. If they are not complied with, they will be dealt with in accordance with the law, which has a strong prohibition color.

Among the seven imperial edicts inscribed in the "Wu chao chi yu Tablet", the Hongwu period was the most punishing, the Xuande and Zhengtong Dynasties were the second, and the Jingtai and Chenghua dynasties were mainly exhortation. The imperial decree of the Hongwu period stipulated that anyone who disrupted the normal order of the school would be punished. If a student does not abide by the school regulations and is reported to the school, the student's whole family will be punished, or be deported to the army, or charged with officials. The punishment measures are serious and more authoritative.

The imperial edicts of the Xuande Dynasty made corresponding punishment provisions for instructors such as wine offering and department industry. Emperor Xuande demanded that teachers and others must carefully manage the school, and if the abuses did not change, they would be punished according to the specific circumstances. Emperor Zhengde required that the supervision regulations of the Hongwu and Yongle periods should not be destroyed, and the calendar system must be carried out according to the seniority of the students, and if the officials were found to work privately, they would be punished. "Chi yu ti xue jiao tiao tablet" in the 5<sup>th</sup> year of Zhengde's reign, and "Chi yu ru xue Tablet" in the 6<sup>th</sup> year of Wanli's reign were written to the officials of the imperial Imperial edicts. Although there were no specific punitive measures, the rules and regulations still showed a strong color of prohibition.

It can be seen that most of the provisions of Imperial Regulations Tablet in the Ming Dynasty have partial prohibition provisions, showing a certain color of prohibition and punishment.

## 5. Conclusion

In the Ming Dynasty, schools began to change from serving the imperial examinations to the grassroots literacy popularization work of instilling orthodox ideas and spreading knowledge, and the state began to pay attention to strengthening the influence of education on local society (Sun, 2023). The school is the entrance to realize the effective control of the state over the local, so the rules and regulations of the school are more strictly restricted, and the Imperial Regulations Tablet carved by the school regulations acts as a similar role.

The official documents on the stone explain the reason and background of the regulation and issuance, which is the source of the legal effect of the imperial school. The provisions of the school regulations on the stone tablet have the characteristics of prohibition and punishment, which highlight the legal characteristics

of the Tablet. At the same time, it is worth noting that the prohibitive provisions of the Imperial Regulations Tablet are also connected with the law, to be sure, the Daming Law is connected with the Imperial Regulations Tablet, and the legal application of the Daming Law gives the Imperial Regulations Tablet the same legal effect.

Imperial Regulations Tablet is the symbol and representative of national law and imperial power, and the Tablet is in the law. Its content includes not only the exhortation to the students, but also the punishment law for the students to regulate the ban. In general, the moral self-restraint of students is put in the first place, and it is hoped that legal prohibition can ensure the moral consciousness of students. Whether it is in the form of an inscription or an imperial inscription, it represents the official and national importance of school education and the expectation of students and scholars.

In short, the procedural and legal nature of Imperial Regulations Tablet, with a unique form of historical writing, improved the Ming Dynasty state's management of schools from top to bottom. At the same time, with its publicity and objectivity, the Imperial Regulations Tablet completed the interaction between the school and the state management system from bottom to top.

### Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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