

International Conference:

“*Ming* 命 as life-conditioning force and as malleable fate:  
Perspectives from old(er) age.”



Calligraphy by Duan Xi 段曦

Ghent University, 16-18 December 2024

*Ming* 命, often translated as ‘command’, ‘allotment’, ‘fate’, and more generally ‘life’, has up till today deeply pervaded Chinese societies. Within its continuous development in the three teachings (Confucianism, Daoism, Buddhism), *ming* has seen most of its intellectual debate in Confucian and later Neo-Confucian thought. In folk belief, *ming* knows many interpretations and related practices, such as geomancy (*fengshui* 风水), fortune telling (*suanming* 算命), and face and palm reading (*mianxiang* 面相; *shouxiang* 首相).

The dynamics of *ming* as both a metaphysical life force and as a kind of malleable fate rooted in the three teachings is well documented in the following expression attributed to late Qing literatus Wen Kang: “一命二运三风水四积阴德五读书六名七相八敬神九交贵人十养生”. This expression literally sums up ten factors that are part of or influence one’s *ming*, containing both practical and spiritual elements: 1. *Ming* 命 (which is unchangeable, inborn); 2. Luck (*yun*) 运 (which fluctuates); 3. Geomancy 风水; 4. Accumulating hidden merits through virtue 积阴德; 5. Study 读书; 6. Fortune-telling based on one’s name 名; 7. Hand and face reading 相; 8. Praying 敬神; 9. Knowing important people 交贵人; 10. Nourishing life practices 养生. What this saying reflects, is the assertion that life events are preset by external forces, but that there are ways for people to foretell and influence the negative impact of these forces. In other words, from the perspective of the spiritual legacy inherent in cosmology, folk practices, everyday rituals, and ethical code of the three teachings, *ming* can be perceived as a dynamic concept. It entails both agency through self-development (*xiushen* 修身) and fate management practices to influence one’s malleable fate (*mingyun* 命运), alongside self-transcendence through knowing, accepting, and surrendering to one’s innate calling (*tianming* 天命).

In this process, *ming* related concepts and understandings also appear to be age, experience, and maturity related. Famous in this respect is the saying by Confucius in which he admits to “understand (and accept) *tianming* 知天命” only at the age of 50 (*Analects* 2/4, 五十而知天命), and to be able to follow it without going astray only at the age of 60. The saying not only illustrates how *ming* remains important throughout one’s life, but also how “knowing *tianming*” implies a state of moral maturity and wisdom that can only be acquired through years of conscious self-cultivation.

This conference will focus on perspectives from old(er) age on the notion of *ming*, discussing literary, philosophical, religious, medical, and popular writings and folk practices that reflect ways of thinking about and dealing with *ming* in the process of ageing.

The goal of this interdisciplinary workshop is to bring together scholars from diverse fields including (intellectual) history; philosophy; literary studies; social, linguistic, and cultural anthropology; Chinese medicine; cultural psychology; and religion, to reflect on ageing and *ming*, both as a life-conditioning force and as malleable fate from their areas of expertise.

Possible topics for discussion include, but are not limited to, the following:

- Philosophical treatises of *ming* related to age(ing) and processes of self-cultivation;
- Literary depictions and reflections in the Classics and other literary sources on *ming* and later life, e.g. related to retirement, illness, death...;
- Insights from anthropology into older people's relation to their *ming*, e.g. in relation to disease, lived fortunate and unfortunate events, fate management practices...;
- Well-known proverbs and sayings that reflect the relation of ageing/older life/death and *ming*, e.g. 生死有命，富贵在天 (*Analects* 12/5);
- Investigation into the use of *ming* in popular sources on older age or by aged people, e.g. how is *ming* discursively deployed in common parlance about and by elderly;
- Medical perspectives, e.g. the concept of 补命 and age.

#### Organizers

Prof. Bart Dessein (Ghent University)

Dr. Mieke Matthyssen (Ghent University)

Dr. Leslie De Vries (KU Leuven)

#### Scientific Committee

Prof. Bart Dessein (Ghent University)

Prof. Kerstin Storm (University of Münster)

Dr. Mieke Matthyssen (Ghent University)

Dr. Vytis Silius (Vilnius University)

Dr. Leslie De Vries (KU Leuven)

#### Practical information

Speakers will be given 30', with 15' for group discussion and exchange.

Conference fee will be 80 Euro. Instructions for payment will follow upon paper acceptance.

Please note that participants are responsible for their own travel and accommodation arrangements and payment.

For all questions, please contact [mieke.matthyssen@ugent.be](mailto:mieke.matthyssen@ugent.be)

#### Abstract submission

Abstract submissions of no more than 300 words should be sent to [mieke.matthyssen@ugent.be](mailto:mieke.matthyssen@ugent.be).

Please add the following information: name, affiliation, email, professional address, title of your talk.

The deadline for submission is **20 June 2024**. Participants will be notified by 15 July 2024.

#### Venue

De Abt, Lange Kruisstraat 4, 9000 Gent

("The Abbot", a picturesque building at the historic centre of Ghent, conveniently located at 2' walking from the Ibis Sint-Baafs Hotel).