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INTRODUCTION

# A Father Loses Three Sons to the Army

EVERYDAY POLITICS IN MING CHINA

*If it is true that the grid of “discipline” is everywhere becoming clearer and more extensive, it is all the more urgent to discover how an entire society resists being reduced to it, what popular procedures (also “miniscule” and quotidian) manipulate the mechanisms of discipline and conform to them only in order to evade them, and finally, what “ways of operating” form the counterpart . . . of the mute processes that organize the establishment of socioeconomic order.*

—DE CERTEAU, *THE PRACTICE OF EVERYDAY LIFE*, XIV.

THAT EVERY STATE MUST HAVE AN ARMY—to defend its territory against invaders from without and rebels within—is, sadly, a historical rule with few exceptions.<sup>1</sup> This near universality of the military institution makes it a productive site to study not just how states operate, how they mobilize and deploy resources, but also how states and their subjects interact. For if a state must have an army, then it follows that a state must have soldiers. The need to mobilize manpower for military service is among the most common challenges that a state must address. In almost every state in history there are some people who willingly or not supply labor to the state in the form of military service. *How* a state chooses to meet this fundamental challenge of mobilizing its soldiery has enormous implications for every aspect of its military, from command structure and strategy to financing and logistics.<sup>2</sup> Its choices also have profound consequences for those who serve.

This book is about the consequences of choices about military mobilization in one place and time: China's southeast coast under the Ming dynasty (1368–1644). The focus is not on military or logistical or fiscal consequences but on social consequences, that is, how military institutions shaped the lives of ordinary people. In this book I tell the stories of ordinary Ming families' interaction with state institutions and how this interaction affected other kinds of social relations. At the heart of the book are two simple questions. How did ordinary people in the Ming deal with their obligations to provide manpower to the army? What were the broader consequences of their behavior?

Yan Kuimei, who lived near the city of Quanzhou in the late sixteenth century, has left us a detailed account of how his own family answered these questions. "Alas," he begins,

the cruelty of conscription is more fierce than a tiger. Our ancestor Guangtian had six sons. Three died [in military service]. Younger brother died; elder brother succeeded him. Elder brother expired; younger brother replaced him.

Kuimei's grievous story stemmed from the status his family held in the Ming system of household registration. The Yan were registered by the Ming state as a military household (*junhu*). For much of the dynasty, this special category of the population provided the core of the Ming army. We will explore this institution in much greater detail below; for the moment it is enough to know that military households had a permanent, hereditary responsibility to supply manpower for military service. This did not mean that everyone in a military household, or even every male, served as a soldier. Rather, being registered as a military household carried an obligation to provide a certain number of men—typically one soldier per household—to the army. The Yan's situation was more complicated. They shared the obligation with another local family, the Zhu. That is, the two families were responsible between them for providing a single soldier, with the Yan family having the primary responsibility. Together they made up what is known as a composite military household.<sup>3</sup> When the two families were first registered as a military household in 1376, the patriarch of the Yan family, Yan Guangtian, took the lead in ensuring that they met their service responsibility. He chose his fourth son, Yingzu, to fulfill the military service obligation. Yingzu was a child of only fourteen *sui*, probably twelve or thirteen years old, when he was sent off to distant Nanjing to serve in the army. He did not serve long; he died soon after he arrived in the dynastic capital. Yan Guangtian then dispatched another young son

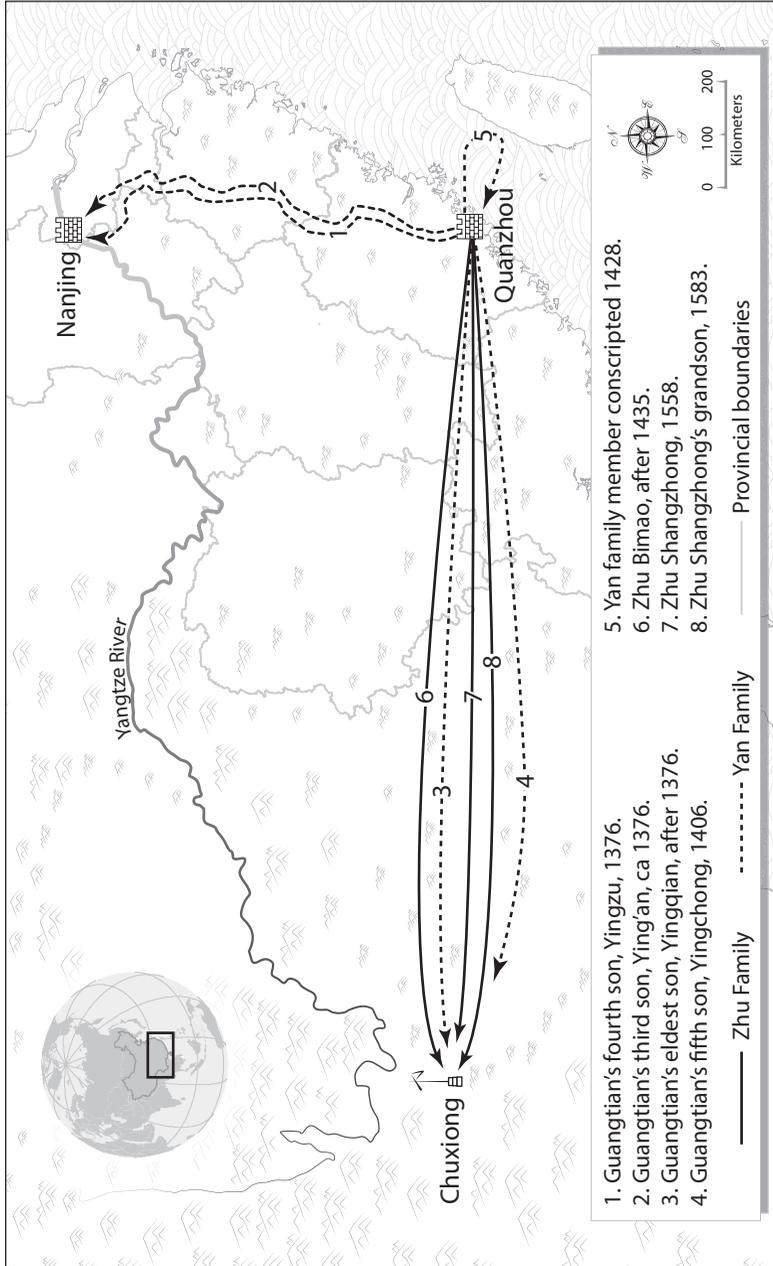
to replace Yingzu. This boy too served for only a short time; he deserted his post and disappeared. Again Yan Guangtian had no choice but to find a replacement. He now shifted his approach, ordering the eldest of his six sons to become a soldier.

In 1381, Yan's eldest son was transferred to distant Yunnan in southwestern China. He served there for the rest of his life, never once returning home. When he died in 1410, the hereditary obligation kicked in for a fourth time. In his dotage, poor Guangtian had to choose yet another son to serve in the army. This son never even made it to his post. He died somewhere along the long journey across the Ming empire. By the time of Yan Guangtian's own death, four of his six sons had served in the army. Three had died or disappeared soon after being conscripted; the only one of the four to survive had lived out his days in a garrison in the distant jungles of the southwest (figure I.1).

For more than a decade the household's slot in the army remained empty, quite possibly because the clerks in charge of the relevant paperwork had lost track of them. But in 1428, facing a serious shortage of manpower, Ming officials renewed their efforts to make up shortfalls in the ranks. Some officials believed that assigning soldiers to posts that were far from their ancestral homes was partly to blame for the shortfall in soldiers. New soldiers were falling ill or dying while en route to their post, as happened to two of Yan Guangtian's sons; others, like a third son, deserted rather than be separated forever from their families. The army responded with a policy that we might call a voluntary disclosure program. If a man liable for military service came forward willingly, the conscription authorities assured that he would not be sent far away but stationed close to home.<sup>4</sup> One of Yan Guangtian's younger kin took advantage of the policy, presented himself to the authorities, and was duly assigned to duty in nearby Quanzhou. By the time this man died a decade later, the Yan family had been fulfilling their military obligations for more than sixty years.

At the time of his death, there were no Yan sons of an age to serve. So the responsibility now devolved to the other half of the composite military household, the Zhu family. Over the course of the next century, four members of the Zhu family served one after the other.

The need for soldiers on the borders eventually grew too great and the voluntary disclosure policy lapsed. The next soldier conscripted from the Zhu family was sent back to the household's original assignment in the jungles of the southwest. Both the Yan and Zhu families were keen that he stay on the job. Desertion was a serious problem for the Ming army, but it was equally a problem for the military households who would have to



I.1. The journeys of the Yan and Zhu families

replace the deserter. To discourage further desertion, the Zhu and the Yan worked out an arrangement to give each new conscript a payment of silver and cloth. Ostensibly this was to cover his expenses; really it was all about persuading him to stay in the army. It did not work. Again and again the man serving in the army deserted. Again and again officials must have descended on the two families to demand a replacement.

By 1527, more than a century and a half after they were initially given the obligation to serve in the military, the two families had grown tired of the uncertainty. They wanted a more long-term solution. Together they drew up a simple contract, the terms of which survive in the Yan's genealogy. The current soldier, a man named Zhu Shangzhong, agreed to remain in the army for the rest of his life (the contract literally reads, "It is his duty to die in the ranks" [*wuyao zaiwu shenggu*]). The Yan agreed to pay him for the security of knowing that he was fulfilling their shared obligation.

But this solution was less permanent than they had hoped. In 1558, soldier Zhu Shangzhong came back from Yunnan with a new proposal. He had now been serving in the army for more than sixty years and he wanted out. But he had a deal to offer. He would commit his immediate family and his direct descendants to take on the burden of providing a conscript, in perpetuity, in exchange for regular payments. Shangzhong's eldest son would replace him and then his grandson after him. The effect would be to free the Yan of their hereditary service responsibility, converting a labor obligation into a monetary one. So long as they kept up the payments, the Yan would never again have to fear the arrival of a conscription official seeking to drag one of them off to the wars.

The new contract that the families prepared was more elaborate than the previous version. Its terms—also recorded in the genealogy—covered not only the arrangement between the two families but also the Yan family's internal arrangements for how they would raise the money to pay Zhu Shangzhong and his descendants. Almost two centuries had now passed since Yan Guangtian's family was first registered as a military household. The descendants of the fourteenth-century patriarch probably now numbered in the hundreds. They formed what we would call a lineage. The contract specified that each man in the lineage would make a small annual contribution to a general fund—technically a capitation charge—that would be paid at regular intervals to the soldier off in the far southwest.

The family members must have felt relief at finally resolving this long-standing concern. But the story was still not over. Twenty-five years after the contract was made, Shangzhong's grandson returned to the ancestral

home, complaining that the payments were inadequate and demanding the contract be renegotiated. The Yan thought they had no choice but to agree; they raised the capitation charge to cover the new, higher costs.

Yan Kuimei, the author of our account, ends his story in 1593, with an exhortation to his kin to be reasonable and to meet any future demands from the Zhu family. If the serving soldier should ever come back demanding more money, “he must be received with courtesy and treated with generosity, that there be no disaster in the future.”<sup>5</sup> His appeal may never have been tested, for half a century later the Ming would fall, replaced by a new ruling house with a very different approach to questions of military mobilization.

Yan Kuimei was an educated man, a successful graduate of the examination system and a state official.<sup>6</sup> But his text was not written from the perspective of a scholar or a bureaucrat; it is neither philosophical rumination nor policy analysis. It is an internal family document, included in the Yan genealogy and intended primarily for internal consumption (although as I will discuss below, Yan was mindful of the prospect that it might one day be read by a judge). It explains and justifies the arrangements that the family developed over the course of more than two centuries, almost as long as the dynasty whose demands they sought to accommodate.

### *Military Households and Everyday Politics*

Documents like Yan Kuimei’s account, written by members of families for their own reasons and reproduced in their genealogies, can provide answers to the two core questions of this book. These texts, written by ordinary people to deal with and comment on everyday problems, are perhaps our best source to study the history of the common people in Ming times. They may well be the closest we can get to the voice of the ordinary Ming subject. These texts reveal the mobilization of manpower for the Ming army from the perspective not of the mobilizing state but of the people mobilized. They show how people dealt with the challenges posed and seized the opportunities offered by living with the Ming state. A major inspiration for me in writing this book has been the goal of conveying their ingenuity and creativity. Their strategies, practices, and discourses constitute a pattern of political interaction that I will argue was not unique to soldiers but was distributed more broadly across Ming society, and was not unique to the Ming but can be identified in other times in Chinese history, and perhaps beyond.

To label this type of interaction state-society relations would not be wrong, but it would be simplistic, anachronistic, and anthropomorphic. Society is made up of social actors—individuals and families—but social actors make their own choices. Most of the time they do not act on behalf of or for the sake of society, or even think in such terms, but in the pursuit of their own interests as they understand them. Nor is the state a conscious or even a coherent unified actor. States do not interact with people. Or rather, people rarely experience this interaction as such. They interact with the state's agents—with functionaries and bureaucrats. They follow procedures; they fill out forms and hand over their money. Our own experience tells us that people can behave in different ways in such interactions. I can follow the instructions of state officials to the letter and fill out forms meticulously, precisely, conscientiously, and honestly. Or I can refuse to conform to the process. If pushed, I might even flee the state or take up arms against it. But the vast majority of interactions with the state take place somewhere between these two extremes, and this is as true of people in the past as it is for me in the present.

Moreover, although not all politics involves direct interaction with state institutions or state agents, this does not mean the state is irrelevant to them. The state can matter even when its agents are not even present. Institutional and regulatory structures of the state are part of the context in which people operate. Military officers and conscription officials never once appear in Yan Kuimei's account. But it would be naive to think the state was absent from the negotiations within and between the two families. The conscription system underlay their entire interaction. The state may not have intervened directly in the negotiations between the two families, but it was certainly a stakeholder in them. This sort of negotiation does not fit easily into familiar categories of political behavior, but it would be a mistake not to recognize it as political.

Much political behavior much of the time actually belongs to one sort or the other of this mundane quotidian interaction: it lies somewhere between compliance and active resistance and it does not directly involve the state or its agents. In this middle ground, people interact with state structures and regulatory regimes and their representatives indirectly rather than directly, and by manipulating them, by appropriating them, by turning them to their own purposes. How can we describe the strategies people develop to manage these interactions? We cannot simply follow the official archive and label them as insubordination or misconduct. To move beyond the thin set of choices offered by the binary of compliance versus resistance, I use instead the term "everyday politics."<sup>7</sup> "Everyday politics,"

writes Ben Kerkvliet, “is people embracing, complying with, adjusting, and contesting norms and rules regarding authority over, production of, or allocation of resources and doing so in quiet, mundane, and subtle expressions and acts.”<sup>8</sup>

To speak of everyday political *strategies* is to suggest skills and competencies that can be acquired and transmitted or, in other words, an art of *being governed*. This phrase is obviously inspired both by Foucault’s concept of the art of government and Scott’s elaboration of the art of *not* being governed. Just as Foucault traces shifts in emphasis in the arts of *governing*, it should be possible to trace histories of the art of *being governed*.<sup>9</sup> I hope that readers will not find my choice for the title of this book, which varies only by one small word from the title of Scott’s influential book, to be glib. It is intended to make a serious point. The subjects of the Ming, and of other Chinese states, differed in a fundamental way from the inhabitants of Scott’s upland *zomia*. Their art of being governed did *not* consist of a basic choice between being governed or not being governed. Rather, it involved decisions about when to be governed, about how best to be governed, about how to maximize the benefits and minimize the costs of being governed. Everyday politics for Ming subjects meant innumerable calibrations, calculating the consequences of conformity or non-conformity and evaluating those costs in relation to the possible benefits.<sup>10</sup> Taking these calibrations seriously does not mean reducing people in Ming times to automatons driven by rational choice but rather treating them as purposive, thoughtful agents who made self-conscious efforts to pursue what they saw as their best interests. Nor does it mean dismissing their efforts as simply instances of “working the system . . . to their minimum disadvantage.”<sup>11</sup> Working the system is probably universal in human societies—but how and why people work the system, the resources they bring to bear to do so, and the way that working the system reshapes their social relations, are meaningful, even pressing, subjects for historical enquiry. To study these questions is to credit ordinary people with the capacity to perceive their relationship with the state and to respond to it, in other words to make their own history.

This book explores everyday politics in Ming through the stories of several military households. We will meet the Zheng family, who solved the problem of choosing which member of the family to serve in the army by revising their patriarch’s will; the Ye family, who fended off pressure from local bullies by maintaining ties to kinsmen serving on a distant frontier; the Jiang family, who took advantage of their military rank to engage in smuggling and piracy, and many others.

**Table I.1.** The art of being governed: a typology of strategies for interaction with the state

Degree of formalization	Degree of perceived compliance/resistance	
	Not perceived as resistance	Perceived as resistance
Formalized	<i>Everyday politics</i>	<i>Rebellion/coup</i>
Ad hoc	<i>Everyday resistance</i>	<i>Mutiny/desertion</i>

The set of strategies that these families had for dealing with the state can be classified along several axes, as shown in table I.1. I have already mentioned the continuum from compliance to resistance. (These are relative terms; what they really mean is compliant or resistant from the perspective of the state.) A second continuum relates to the degree of deliberation in the strategy, from ad hoc expediency on one side to deliberate, formal strategizing in advance on the other.

The ultimate expressions of resistance in the military are desertion and mutiny. I do not discuss strategies like these in any detail here, not because they were not part of Ming everyday politics, not because Ming soldiers never mutinied or deserted, but because for obvious reasons Ming soldiers rarely wrote down such strategies. Desertion was hugely consequential for the Ming dynasty. In order to deal with high levels of desertion, the dynasty gradually shifted to reliance on hired mercenaries, and the resulting fiscal burden has often been blamed for the eventual fall of the Ming.<sup>12</sup> But there are almost no sources that convey desertion from the perspective of the soldiers themselves.

Military households must also have had many other strategies that involved responding flexibly and expediently to challenges as they arose. Pilfering, foot-dragging, desertion, and mockery are among the “everyday forms of resistance” through which people everywhere defend their interests as best they can against claims by superordinate groups and states.<sup>13</sup> Practitioners tend not to record these sorts of ad hoc strategies either; to understand them from the perspective of their practitioners is easier for ethnographers and anthropologists than it is for historians. So I will not consider such strategies in detail here either.

The tools of history lend themselves best to the study of the everyday political strategies in the upper left quadrant: strategies that are both formal and perceived as being compliant or at least not opposed to the

state. They are strategies that tend to be recorded in writing by the people who used them, and indeed, the fact of their being recorded is often part of what makes them work. This is the subset of strategies I focus on here.

### *Institutions, Deterritorialization, and Social Legacies*

Military institutions move people around. The army transfers soldiers from one place to another—to attack, to defend, to communicate a signal, or for a host of other reasons. When it moves soldiers, the army dislocates them from the social settings they know and from their existing social relations. It decontextualizes them or, to use language popularized by Deleuze and Guattari, it deterritorializes them (Deleuze and Guattari might say that the army is a deterritorializing machine).<sup>14</sup> But transfers of troops simultaneously generate counterforces for their reterritorialization. Even as commanders seek to facilitate one type of mobility, deployment, they impose mechanisms to limit another type, desertion. Soldiers themselves produce other counterforces for reterritorialization. When soldiers and their families are sent to a garrison far from home, their existing social networks are weakened. But they soon begin to form new social ties with the people around them, both their fellow soldiers and others living around them in their new assignment.<sup>15</sup> So the military is actually also an institution that creates new social relations. These new social relations—unintended consequences of state mobilization policies and popular responses—are the second main theme of this book. They constitute a second kind of everyday politics, less obviously strategic but potentially equally important.

The institution I am concerned with here, the Ming system of military households, came to an end with the fall of the dynasty that established it. But we will see that many of the social relations that arose as unintended consequences of Ming military policies endured even after the fall of the institution that produced them. They survived the fall of the dynasty that created the institution (in 1644), the fall of the entire dynastic system (in 1911), and even the fall of the succeeding republic (in 1949). So while the institution itself died multiple deaths, the social relations that it spawned remained, and remain, alive. The history of the institution can thus illuminate historical processes behind social networks that are still active today. A brief visit to the town of Pinghai will show what I mean.

Every year the townspeople of Pinghai, a former garrison just north of Quanzhou, perform a grand ritual to commemorate the Lunar New



1.2. Temple of the God of the Wall, Pinghai

Year. They carry their God of the Wall in a procession around the town on the ninth day of the new year. (The Chinese term *Chenghuang* is usually rendered in English as the City God; but Pinghai is not a city, so in this case the more faithful translation is also the more accurate.) The festival is a riot of sensation—firecrackers and handheld cannons fill the air with flame and smoke; the colorful costumes of the god's bearers and hundreds of accompanying horsemen come in and out of view through the thick incense smoke; the women of the village chant prayers as they sweep the road in front of the procession and take lit sticks from the god's heavy incense burner (figures I.2–I.4). The walls of Pinghai have long been destroyed, but the procession stays within the area that used to be demarcated by those walls and does not enter the surrounding villages. Every year as he tours the precincts of the town to receive offerings from his devotees and to expel evil influences and ensure good fortune in the coming year, the God of the Wall thus also marks Pinghai residents off from the villages of the surrounding area, even centuries after the military base at Pinghai itself was disbanded.

In many places in China, the God of the Wall is anonymous. No one knows his name or how he came to hold his position as tutelary deity. But in Pinghai, the god is a familiar if forbidding figure. He is the apotheosis of a real historical person named Zhou Dexing. Zhou Dexing,



1.3. The God of the Wall, Pinghai

the Marquis of Jiangxia, was one of the oldest and closest supporters of the founding emperor of the Ming. When the emperor needed a reliable lieutenant to set up defenses on the southeast coast of his empire, it was Zhou to whom he turned. In the 1370s, Zhou Dexing marched his forces to Fujian. They uprooted tens of thousands of men from their home villages, conscripted them, registered their families as military households, and forced them to labor building the walled forts where they would ultimately serve. Pinghai was one such fort, built by the ancestors of the very people who live there today. When the fort was first established, a temple to the God of the Wall was built and an image of the god installed in it. At some point in the succeeding centuries, the people of Pinghai came to the realization that the God of the Wall of their own town was none other than the spirit of Zhou Dexing. So when the people of Pinghai today parade their god in the hopes of ensuring good fortune in the year to come, they are not simply repeating a timeless expression of Chinese culture. They are also commemorating a historical moment, the foundation of their community centuries ago. Their commemoration in the twenty-first century speaks both to the formation of local identity and to remarkable historical continuity. History has produced this ritual. The procession is—among other things—a story of the ancestors' interaction with the Ming state.



1.4. Pinghai procession festival

### *On Ming History*

The Ming was founded by a strongman who arose in the chaotic waning years of the Mongol Yuan dynasty. After eliminating his rivals and establishing the new dynasty, Zhu Yuanzhang (r. 1368–98) set about implementing an ambitious agenda to rebuild Chinese society after decades of foreign domination and internal turmoil. Zhu and his advisers invoked ancient Chinese models in order to draw a clear line between the Ming and its Mongol predecessor. But in reality they also relied extensively on Yuan precedents, including some parts of the system of hereditary military household registration.<sup>16</sup>

A second major distinctive feature of the Ming was Zhu's personal imprint. Zhu Yuanzhang, unusual among dynastic founders in Chinese history, came to power with a social policy, "a grand design for the establishment and maintenance of the social order."<sup>17</sup> Zhu's vision involved more than just creating or reviving the right government institutions. He also wanted to create (or recreate) a utopian rural order in which most of his subjects would live contented lives in self-sufficient villages, supervised not by state officials but by their own kin and neighbors.

Like all leaders, Zhu worried about his legacy, and he ordered that the rules and principles of government that he and his ministers had

devised—what we might call the Ming constitution—were to remain in force, inviolate, for all eternity. Historians have often described this commitment as a third distinctive feature of the Ming and invoked it to explain the Ming's supposed inability to respond to changing circumstances. But the principle of the inviolability of the constitution was not unique to the Ming.<sup>18</sup> The principle may have been especially strong in the Ming, but the system still had various ways of adapting to changing times. How else could the dynasty have endured for almost three centuries? In its actual operation, the inertia or path dependency of the Ming state may not have been fundamentally different from other polities or even modern states—though of course the rationale and institutional structure that created the inertia was very different. Zhu Yuanzhang's constitution matters to the history of the Ming, to be sure, but we cannot simply take it at face value.

Though in Zhu's bucolic ideal of society the rural communities would mostly govern themselves, realizing his vision actually required a program that was highly interventionist. In its ambition, if not in the technological capacities available to realize that ambition, his regime has often been compared to that of Mao Zedong many hundreds of years later. For much of the twentieth century the Ming was seen as the height of Chinese autocracy, and this view still persists among some scholars.<sup>19</sup> But the prevailing view has changed as we have learned more about the burgeoning economy and vibrant society of the mid-Ming. The commercialization of the economy, spurred by highly productive agriculture and a massive influx of silver caused by global demand for Chinese products, had a transformative effect on social, cultural, and political life. Today many scholars see late Ming society, especially in wealthy urban areas, as having been basically unconstrained by the state. Some even describe it as liberal.<sup>20</sup> The dominant narrative arc of the Ming has thus become one of a shift from the state at the center to the market at the center.<sup>21</sup>

Here I want to suggest a history of the Ming in which neither the state nor the market, neither emperor nor silver, is the principal agent. This book argues that both the earlier autocracy thesis and its liberal society antithesis are overstated. The history of state-society relations in the Ming is better told as a story of changing roles for the state and changing consequences of state presence, not the disappearance of the state.

### *About This Book*

Librarians will probably shelve this book under the classification of Ming dynasty military history, but this is not quite what it is about. Though this

book is about the Ming army, it describes no battles and has little to say about the classic themes of military history such as strategy, logistics, or weapons. Much of the huge literature on these topics concentrates either on the rise of the dynasty or its fall. That is, military historians are primarily interested in how the first Ming emperor won the empire or in how his descendants lost it.<sup>22</sup> Military weakness is central to many narratives of Ming decline—as an emblem of decadence, misplaced priorities, political factionalism, or crushing fiscal burden.<sup>23</sup> But like other scholars of the Ming military who have gone beyond narrowly military concerns to examine foreign policy, strategic culture, ethnicity, or violence, I study the military institution not for its own sake, but in order to shed light on something else, the everyday politics of ordinary Ming subjects.<sup>24</sup>

This book is about a particular institution, the Ming military, but my goal is not to elucidate the formal rules of the institution and their operation over time. It builds on and differs from a substantial literature on the military household system by scholars such as Zhang Jinkui, the leading expert on the field in the People's Republic of China (PRC), because I treat the military institution primarily as a topic of social history. It builds on and differs from the work of Yu Zhijia, Zhang's counterpart in Taiwan, because I attempt to situate the topic within a specific local ecology (though to be fair, it is often only with the help of her more general work that I was able to make sense of the local case, and some of her more recent work is set in a specific locality).<sup>25</sup> I explore the system not as it was devised by the central state—though this is necessary background—but rather as it shaped and was reshaped by the people who interacted with it, how they inhabited, appropriated, manipulated, and deformed it. In other words, this book traces both the everyday politics of the institution and the role of the institution in everyday politics more broadly. It considers some of the ways in which the institution as it was experienced changed over time, the degree to which it was and was not self-reinforcing, and the factors endogenous and exogenous that affected the degree to which it was self-reinforcing.

This book is a work of local history, but it is not the history of a locality. Rather, it explores historical phenomena in relation to a specific local microecology. Clifford Geertz famously wrote that anthropologists do not study villages, they study in villages.<sup>26</sup> This work likewise is not the history of a place in China; it is a history of everyday politics in China using evidence drawn from one place. My “village” lies far from the northern and western frontiers, the focus of Ming military priorities and most previous scholarship. Strategic importance does not necessarily signify for social

history. My “village” is also rather larger than what Geertz had in mind: the geographic scope of the book, encompassing coastal Fujian but also extending north to southern Zhejiang and south to northeastern Guangdong, follows from my goal of considering institutions in the political, social, and ecological context within which they are experienced.<sup>27</sup>

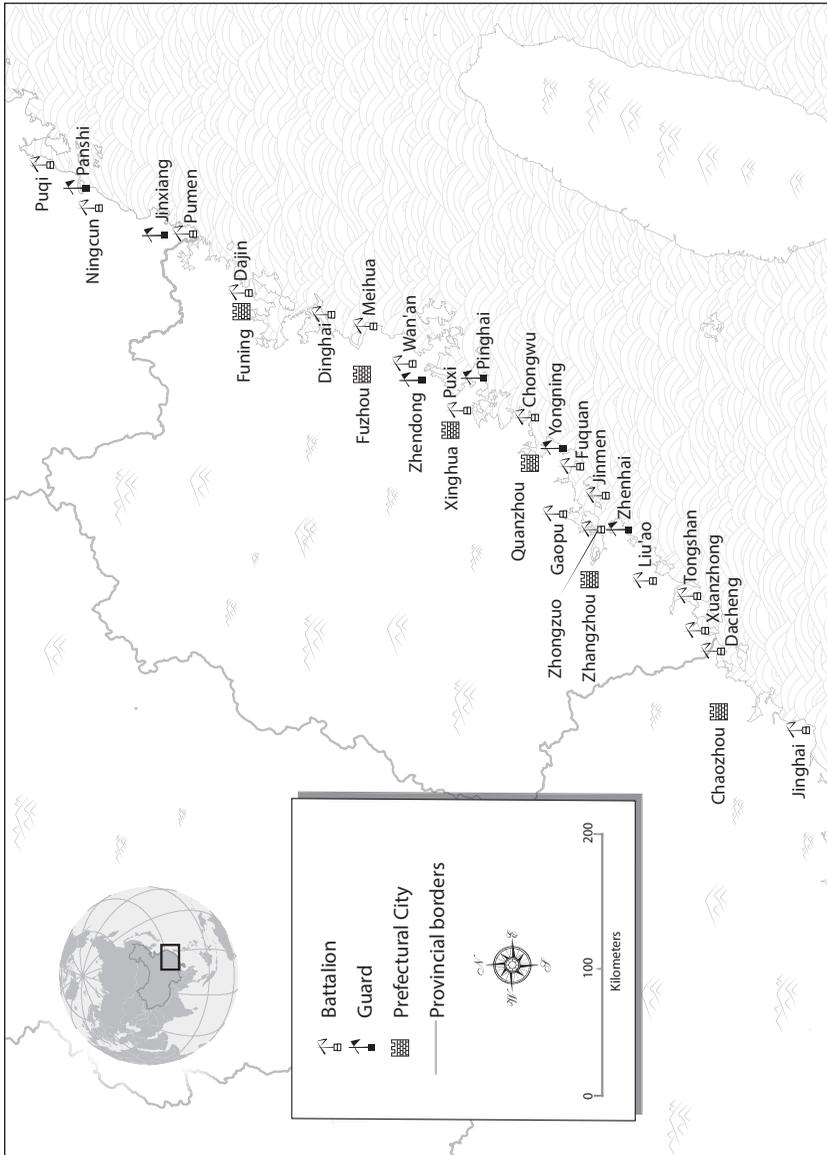
The key distinguishing feature of the southeast coast’s ecology is the presence of the sea. The sea was the source of livelihood for many of the region’s residents, who fished on it, cultivated shellfish in its shallows, and traded and smuggled across it. They crossed it to reach Taiwan, Okinawa, Japan, and Southeast Asia. Like other frontiers, the sea offered possibilities for flight when circumstances grew too dire. Residents of the coast, soldier and civilian alike, could and sometimes did flee to Taiwan or simply to one of the many offshore islands.

The sea was a source of danger as well as opportunity; the region was ravaged many times by attacks from the sea, and the main military function of the families discussed in this book was to defend against such attacks and keep peace on the seas. But the coast was a relatively peaceable frontier. Unlike in the north and northwest of the empire, army units along the coast did not face constant, immediate, and pressing military threats over the entire course of the Ming. Being less central to the chief military priorities of the empire, they were also not a constant focus of attention by the court.

A second distinguishing element of the region is the relationship between the coast and the inland periphery. Linked by navigable rivers to the coastal plains, upland regions were the main breadbasket for the military bases by the sea. Commercialization driven by maritime trade penetrated these areas, and they were more prosperous and more commercially oriented than the far more isolated counties further in the interior.

The local history of this region has been told by other scholars; just as the major influence for the institutional part of my story is the work of institutional historians of the Ming military, the major influence for the regional part of the story is the recent flowering of local history. I integrate these two bodies of literature, institutional history and local history, to yield a local institutional history, one that reveals how everyday politics in the military institution was conditioned by and in turn conditioned the local physical and social microecology and its legacies.<sup>28</sup>

Most of the research for this book is drawn from about twenty Ming garrisons, or guards, along the Fujian coast, though at times I venture further up or down the coast (figure I.5). One can still see many physical legacies



1.5. Garrisons of the southeast coast

of the Ming period on the sites of some of these garrisons, even those that have subsequently been completely surrounded by larger settlements. The Ming layout of Yongning Guard, for example, with its long narrow lane of old paving stones extending almost a mile from one former gate to another, still survives though today the guard is just a small corner of the vibrant city of Shishi. Other former bases, such as Zhenhai, situated on a remote peninsula and atop steep cliffs, have largely been bypassed by recent prosperity. Zhenhai's temples were most recently rebuilt in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and these reconstructions are still intact.

For practical and intellectual reasons, most of the guards discussed here are rural. There were also guards in major cities such as the provincial capital of Fuzhou. The reason that these guards don't appear much in this book has to do with my sources. As I discuss in further detail below, the genealogies of former military households like the Yan family are one of the main sources for this book. The best way to gather such genealogies is simply to go to the former garrisons and look for the descendants of these households. In many rural guards, much of the population still consists of the descendants of Ming soldiers. Such an approach could never work in Fujian's major cities, whose population now numbers in the millions. Moreover, guards located in urban centers never dominated local social, economic, and political life in the way they did in rural areas—though this of course is not to say that the guards did not have an impact on urban society.<sup>29</sup> So for the purposes of isolating the consequences of the institution, the rural guards are a better choice. If we think of the military households as a kind of natural experiment in how people interact with state institutions, the experimental conditions are better where the guards were relatively isolated from the noise of urban life.

This book is also a work of local history because it relies heavily on fieldwork—not the ethnographic fieldwork of an anthropologist who spends a long period of time living in a single community, but fieldwork in the sense that it uses sources collected in the field and interpreted in the local context. In spite of the considerable efforts by more than one state, the historical archive in China has never been fully nationalized. Vast quantities of historical texts are only accessible to the researcher who takes the time to visit the places where these texts were created and used, and where they survive today.<sup>30</sup> Most of the sources used here were not found in libraries or government archives, but in private hands or otherwise in situ. Collecting such sources is one of the great pleasures of this method; it means finding people, often elderly, who are interested in talking about and sharing their history; typically the only cost to the researcher is to

be the guest of honor at a meal. Fieldwork literally created the historical archive that I use in this book.

Second, fieldwork means reading the newly created archive in its local context, with particular attention to the local conditions that produced it, and taking advantage of local knowledge that people today, often the descendants of the authors of the text, can bring to bear on it. This can be as simple as locating the plots of land listed on a land deed so as to learn about the work of the farmers who bought and sold them, or clarifying the local terms used in a tax register so as to better understand the actual burden of the tax. Or it can mean cross-referencing a stone inscription at a village temple against local genealogies to understand the kinship connections between the temple's patrons. Or, as we shall see in chapters 6 and 7, it can mean following the procession festival of a local deity as a means of tracing out the boundaries of a community.

With its small scale and focus on local experience, the methodology of this book in some ways resembles the microhistory practiced by scholars such as Robert Darnton and Carlo Ginzburg. Microhistory was intended as a challenge to social-science approaches to history that seemed to efface human agency and human experience. Like microhistorians, my goal here is to trace human agency "beyond, but not outside" the constraints of larger structures, to ask "large questions in small places."<sup>31</sup> While the scale of the stories here is certainly "micro," unlike microhistories of the West few of the sources I use are the product of people's unwilling encounters with agents of the state or other institutional powers. There are few depositions, arrest records, or inquisition reports here. The local documents here were produced for the most part willingly and with more obvious strategic intent. This means they can be more easily used for social than cultural history. The stories here tend to be revealing of behavior rather than *mentalité*, of action more than interpretive framework. They favor narrative over structure. They help us understand political strategies more than political culture.

This book, to summarize, is a social history of a Ming military institution in a local context, based on sources gathered and explored through fieldwork. It proposes a typology of everyday political strategies within a particular microecology, on the basis of which it builds a more general argument about everyday politics in Ming and in Chinese history.

The body of the book consists of four parts, each set in a different place and time. Part 1 is set in the late fourteenth century, when the Ming system of military households was first established, and in the native villages of the soldiers who served in the Ming army. The second and third parts

deal with the operation of Ming military institutions in their maturity, mainly in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Part 2 is set in the military bases to which the soldiers in part 1 had been assigned, part 3 in the agricultural colonies where others of them were stationed. Part 4 returns to the garrisons after the fall of the Ming.

Part 1 explores the recruitment and conscription system itself. Chapter 1 opens with the story of the Zheng family, whose creative solutions to the challenge of choosing a family member to serve in the army introduce us to the sophisticated strategies through which families in the military system addressed their obligations to provide labor to the army. Their regulatory position was straightforward—they had to provide one soldier for military duties—but their actual situation could be complex. They developed elaborate strategies to manage the difference between the two, to make their obligations more predictable, to reduce their risks, and to distribute the benefits of their registration as widely as possible while minimizing the costs.

Registration as a military household entailed more than simply providing soldiers to serve in the army. It carried valuable tax exemptions. It exposed the household to potential threats and blackmail from their neighbors. So households had strong incentives to maintain ties to their relatives serving in the army, who could confirm that they were in compliance with the rules of the system. One such family is the Ye of Fuqing, whose most famous member, Grand Secretary Ye Xianggao, has left us an account of how his family tried to restore contact with their soldier-kin on the northern frontier.

Parts 2 and 3 shift the focus from the native villages of the military households to the garrisons in which they were stationed, and from the early years of the dynasty to the middle and later periods. In chapter 3 we meet the Jiang family, hereditary commanders of the garrison at Fuquan. At least one of their members was both an officer and also a smuggler and pirate. His story shows how families took advantage of their special position in the military system to gain advantage in illicit commerce. Their proximity to the state and their ability to negotiate the differences between the military and commercial realms using their special position gave them a competitive advantage in overseas trade. Soldiers stationed in the garrison had to adapt to the new contexts in which they found themselves and build new communities. Chapter 4 explores soldiers' marriage practices, the temples at which they worshipped, and the Confucian schools at which some of them studied to show how soldiers and their families became integrated into the societies where they were garrisoned.

Part 3 moves from the military garrisons to the military colonies that supported them. In these colonies, groups of military households worked the land to feed their colleagues in the garrisons. The tragic story of the Yan family of Linyang illustrates how soldiers of the colony became highly adept at turning the differences between their land and ordinary land to their own benefit. Commercialization of the economy generated complex patterns of landownership and usage, and households in the colonies tried to draw on these patterns for their own purposes. But everyday politics in the colonies involved more than manipulating the land regime. Just like their counterparts in the guard, households stationed there also had to integrate with the communities around them. Chapter 6 explores this process. Some tried to move between different regulatory systems. Others tried to enter into and even take over existing social organizations. A small temple in the village of Hutou provides an illustration of how these new social relations could endure.

In chapter 7, I return to the garrisons after the fall of the Ming. Even after the Ming military institution no longer existed, it continued to matter to the people who had lived in it. Some refused to let the institution die, seeking to maintain the prerogatives they had enjoyed under it. Others found they had inherited obligations that survived the change in dynasty and had to find ways to manage those obligations. Still others tried to adapt elements of the Ming institution to suit the new context. They found ways to make themselves legible to the Qing state, and they did so using language that Qing officials could accept, even though the language described social institutions that were actually very different from what they seemed.

Together the episodes in the four parts suggest some of the ways Ming families dealt with their obligations to provide labor service to the state. On the basis of the discussion, I propose in the conclusion some broader ways of thinking about the art of being governed in late imperial China and beyond.

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