The soldier as a sage: Qi Jiguang (1528-1588) and the neo-confucianization of the military in sixteenth-century China
Noordam, B.

Citation
Noordam, B. (2018, October 18). *The soldier as a sage: Qi Jiguang (1528-1588) and the neo-confucianization of the military in sixteenth-century China*. Retrieved from https://hdl.handle.net/1887/66264

Version:	Not Applicable (or Unknown)
License:	[Licence agreement concerning inclusion of doctoral thesis in the Institutional Repository of the University of Leiden](#)
Downloaded from:	[https://hdl.handle.net/1887/66264](#)

Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

Cover Page

Universiteit Leiden

The handle http://hdl.handle.net/1887/66264 holds various files of this Leiden University dissertation.

Author: Noordam, B.
Title: The soldier as a sage: Qi Jiguang (1528-1588) and the neo-confucianization of the military in sixteenth-century China
Issue Date: 2018-10-18

Chapter 3 – The Emergence of a Problem: The Crises of the Mid-Ming

Chronological Overview

Ming history is often divided into three main periods (early Ming, mid Ming, and late Ming respectively) by modern scholars. Although the exact demarcation might vary by a few decades between scholars, these periods roughly equate to the first, second, and third centuries of Ming rule. Timothy Brook, for example, demarcated these periods based on socio-economic developments, resulting in a tripartite division of 1368-1450, 1450-1550, and 1550-1644. What characterises these periods is the move away from a self-sufficient agricultural order, with a minimal state levying modest taxes in kind and corvee labour, to an increasingly commercialized, monetized and diverse economy, giving rise to an increasingly differentiated and dynamic society, featuring tremendous demographic expansion and incidences of social inequality.[221] What I propose is to couple the socio-economic tripartite division closely to a tripartite military division of Ming history, leading to a slight shifting of the internal demarcations of Ming history suggested by Brook. I will thereupon argue that the early Ming military system successfully reproduced the institutional stability of the Song army by using a similar panoply of checks and balances, whilst institutionalizing the manpower supply by adopting the Yuan's hereditary solution. However, the Ming inherited a severely economically damaged empire, and therefore never developed the same resource extraction capability as the Song, as we will see below. And although the early Ming probably extracted more taxes in the shape of agricultural produce than the Yuan empire, it still chose to make its military self-sufficient, which meant that the army was burdened with the additional task of supporting itself.[222] Once Ming society and economy started to grow again in the mid-Ming period, in combination with an overstretched army beset by structural weaknesses, this military system entered a crisis during the mid-Ming period. Especially in the south of the empire, where the hereditary military presence had been thin on the ground in comparison to the Song, this would lead to a situation in which the declining military was increasingly unable to deal

---

[221] Timothy Brook, *The Confucions of Pleasure: Commerce and Culture in Ming China* (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1998), 1-13.
[222] Timothy Brook, *The Troubled Empire: China in the Yuan and Ming Dynasties* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2010), 107-108. Arthur Waldron notes that the Yuan could extract enough resources to pay their hereditary military forces, which therefore did not have to engage in self-supporting farming, unlike their Ming counterparts. See: Waldron, *The Great Wall of China*, 81-82.

with the disruptions caused by socio-economic dynamics and demographic changes. Whereas in the north this crisis led to accrual of power by increasing the bargaining position of local military commanders vis-à-vis the dynasty, in the south the domestic nature of the problem and sparse presence of hereditary military forces led to the initiative shifting to civil officials and non-commissioned literati to provide leadership in finding a solution to both the civil and military aspects of this crisis of governance.

In chapter four, I will argue that the personal example of the famous Ming philosopher Wang Yangming embodied the most comprehensive integrated approach to the solution of this problem, which would have an exemplary influence on the renewed southern crisis presented by the Wokou pirates during the 1550s. The Wang Yangming-inspired solutions of the southern military crisis would then be exported to the north to help bolster the northern frontier during the 1570s. It was the stability that owed a great deal to these solutions which then, I posit, inaugurated the late phase of the Ming empire. This phase was thus certainly partly built on the foundations of the military revival detected by Kenneth Swope, but I argue that this revival had its ideological and socio-cultural origins already during the mid-Ming southern campaigns of Wang Yangming and the southern anti-Wokou activity of the first half of the sixteenth century. Before turning to these matters, in this chapter I first will give a brief overview of early Ming military history, and then proceed to a thematic treatment of those issues which contributed to the military crisis of the mid-Ming as it infolded after the middle of the fifteenth century.

The imperial blueprint and military system Zhu Yuanzhang had created would continue to function relatively well during the first third of the dynasty. In a sense, it continued the models of the Song and Yuan dynasties, not those of the Han and Tang (despite rhetoric to the contrary[223]). Like the Yuan military, the Ming soldiery was recruited from hereditary households and led by hereditary officers. A strong force would be maintained at the northern frontier to face the Mongol threat, but this did not mean the centre was neglected. Possibly to prevent a repeat of the Han and Tang debacles, which witnessed the emergence of strong frontier militarization, a strong army was kept near the capital at all times, consisting of units from all over the empire, which rotated there

---

[223] Dardess, *Confucianism and Autocracy: Professional Elites in the Founding of the Ming Dynasty* (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1983), 194-196.

in turn for training purposes.[224] In addition, as we will see below, the Song tactic of keeping unified military power out of the hand of any one official was replicated during the Ming. Despite this. the military side of government seems to have had the upper hand during the early phase of the dynasty. On top of the hereditary military officials-pyramid was a so-called nobility of merit. This mostly consisted of the earliest military companions and fellow-leaders of the original Ming rebel armies, although there was at least one who joined the rank on the basis of non-military accomplishments. This nobility of merit, together with the highest echelons of the normal hereditary military officers, were, however, not tied to the imperial dynastic house through marriage ties, a situation diverging of that existing during the Northern Song.[225] Instead, these ties were mostly established with middle-, and lower ranked hereditary officer families stationed around the capital.[226] Even during the military activist early phase of the dynasty,[227] then, the Ming emperors tried to prevent creating a powerful group of in-laws belonging to a *de facto* military aristocracy. In that sense, the military elites of the empire were in a more distant position vis-à-vis the throne than those of earlier dynasties had been, a fact that might explain their later relatively rapid marginalization in imperial politics during the fifteenth century.

The early Ming military activist order was, perhaps surprisingly, built on the foundations of a minimalist state, which required the compulsory collaboration of local elites in matters of governance. The Yuan-Ming transition had been devastating for the economies of the southeast and north of the empire, and perhaps for this reason Zhu Yuanzhang opted for a small-state solution that rested on commodified resource extraction from a predominantly agricultural economy with a strong obligatory participation of the local elites in the processes of governance. Peter Bol suggests that Zhu Yuanzhang, influenced by his Neo-Confucian advisors from Zhejiang, heirs to

---

[224] Foon Ming Liew, *The Treatises on Military Affairs of the Ming Dynastic History (1368-1644): An Annotated Translation of the Treatises on Military Affairs Chapter 89 and Chapter 90, Part One* (Hamburg: Gesellschaft für Natur-, und Volkenkunde Ostasiens e.V., 1998), 50-55.

[225] Thomas P. Massey, "The Lan Yu Case and Early-Ming Military and Society as Revealed in the *Yuzhi Nichen Lu* (Imperial Record of Rebellious Ministers) of 1393," *Ming Studies* 1998:1 (1998): 53-54. However, Romeyn Taylor contends that the early Ming military nobility was possibly consciously modelled on the Mongol Yuan nobility. See: Romeyn Taylor, "Social Origins of the Ming Dynasty, 1351-1360," *Monumenta Serica* 22.1 (1963): 61.

[226] David M. Robinson, "The Ming Court," in *Culture, Courtiers, and Competition: The Ming Court (1368-1644)*, edited by David M. Robinson (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2008), 22.

[227] As pointed out by Timothy Brooke, Edward Dreyer, and, recently, David Robinson, the early Ming emperors behaved more like activist Central Asian rulers with strong martial proclivities, instead of according to Neo-Confucian ideals of a Chinese ruler who sought peace and stability through virtuous civil rule. See Brook, *The Troubled Empire*, 79-81, 86; Edward L. Dreyer, *Early Ming China: A Political History, 1355-1435* (Stanford, California: California University Press, 1982); Robinson, *Martial Spectacles*.

Zhu Xi's thought, sought to make the Neo-Confucianism local voluntarist leadership program into legislation for the entire empire. This would oblige local communities to self-supervising rule in areas of moral inculcation of the youth through schooling, the management of relief granaries, the collection of taxes for the central government, and even juridical authority, all under the nominally non-intrusive supervision of a small official bureaucracy.[228] Military concerns seem not to have been a part of these self-rule obligations yet, the military sphere of government was to be left to the self-supporting military.[229] In this sense, the arrangements of Zhu Yuanzhang were a top-down realization of a Neo-Confucian utopia, which also freed the literati from getting their hands dirty with military and martial activities. Only local magistrates, the lowest ranks of the local official civil bureaucracy, were sometimes obliged to maintain a band of armed militia in areas known for recurring banditry and piracy.[230] I would even dare to posit that the founding emperor arranged this autarky of the military realm exactly to free him and his successors from the traditional Confucian criticism that activist military rulership harmed the people's livelihoods. How would this be a concern, if the military was self-sufficient anyway?

This blueprint of Zhu Yuanzhang's empire probably never fully worked as intended, but it seems that the hereditary military was at least able to handle the majority of empire's military activities until the mid-fifteenth century, when the mid-Ming period is usually posited to start. The mid-Ming is bookended by two periods of intense military crises, which both shared a northern and simultaneous southern component. While the early Ming dynasty could still be characterized as having strong martial inclinations with a strong, politically influential and esteemed military, this changed after 1450. Especially during the reign of the ambitious Yongle (r. 1402-1424) emperor, the Ming would launch expeditions against the Mongols in the north, support large-scale maritime expeditions to south- and southeast Asia and invade Vietnam. Foon Ming Liew argues that these activities undermined and exhausted the military means of the empire.[231] This might have contributed to the combined north-south military crisis of 1448-1449, when attempts to deal with a new unified Mongol threat led to the destruction of much of the original hereditary army

---

[228] Bol, *Neo-Confucianism in History*, 258-259.

[229] Romeyn Taylor already noted in 1963 that Zhu Yuanzhong separated civil and military populations and provided the latter with economic means of self-sustenance. This meshes well with my idea – building on Peter Bol's notions – that the founder of the Ming was creating a Neo-Confucian demilitarized utopia. See: Taylor, "Social Origins of the Ming Dynasty," 1-5.

[230] Thomas Griggs Nimick, "The County, the Magistrate, and the Yamen in Late Ming China," (PhD diss., Princeton University, 1993), 146-147.

[231] Liew, *The Treatises on Military Affairs*, 83-84.

and the capture of the reigning emperor.[232] At the same time, internal revolts in the south revealed the shortcomings of the original military system in place there. Around 1550 a similar situation of simultaneous north-south threats would emerge, which would be subdued around 1570. In this mid-Ming period, which I therefore place between 1450 and 1570, a solution would have to be conceived to revamp the military in both north and south. As we shall see below, in the north the crisis was solved for a century after 1450 by resorting to a defensive posture featuring the building of the Great Wall, which was no doubt facilitated by the internal collapse of the unified Mongol threat itself.[233] In the south the problem was more persistent due to its internal nature and would manifest itself in repeated internal uprisings and turmoil. Two climactic periods of military crises in the south would be 1516-1525 and 1556-1565[234] and I will argue in later chapters that the solutions conceived during these two crises were interlinked and later exported to the north.

Hence, the origin for the late Ming revitalization of the Ming military after 1570 posited by Kenneth Swope should be sought, I argue, in the military developments of the second half of the mid-Ming period. Below I will argue that, because the conflicts in the south were internal in nature, we should look at the socio-economic changes that distinguish the early Ming from the mid-Ming as posited by Brook, and integrate an analysis of the military consequences of these changes with a consideration of the quest for its solution, which after 1570 contributed to the stability buttressing late Ming efflorescence until a renewed combination of internal and external military crises ended the dynasty in 1644.

Therefore, I propose then to look at the interplay of long-term socio-economic developments, structural weaknesses of the military itself, and the disruptive policies of some of the early military activist emperors, which conspired to render the original military arrangements insufficient by the start of the mid-Ming. These developments undermined the demilitarized Neo-Confucian social utopia and necessitated the engagement of Neo-Confucian inculcated literati and civil officials with military affairs. This latter phenomenon, I will argue, in combination with socio-economic changes also prompted a widely felt need for a reinterpretation of Neo-Confucianism, so that it fit the social reality of the mid-Ming better. I will touch upon this point at

---

[232] Waldron, *The Great Wall of China*, 87-90.
[233] Idem, 93-94, 102-107.
[234] Kai Filipiak, ""Saving Lives" - Lü Kun's Manual on City Defense," *Journal of Chinese Military History* 1 (2012): 139-140.

the end of this chapter, however, I will first turn to the long-term socio-economic changes causing the mid-Ming crisis of the military.

Socio-Economic Changes

One of the most notable socio-economic changes affecting the Ming dynasty was its demographic growth. There is a lot of disagreement amongst scholars on the probable population size of the empire, especially during its last two centuries, but it is certainly possible that in the almost three centuries of the dynasty's existence it grew from approximately 75 million subjects in 1368 to 175 million in 1644.[235] Although cities increased in absolute size during this period, relatively speaking urbanization did not increase and did not reach the levels witnessed during the Song dynasty.[236] Parallel to the growth of the population, the economy started to grow and diversify. From the 1450s onwards the initial idea of the Ming empire as an agricultural polity with small government became obsolete with the development of commerce and the attendant rise of merchant and artisanal classes.[237] Hu Juren 胡居仁 (1434-1484), a Jiangxi-based Neo-Confucian scholar living during this shift from the early Ming to the mid-Ming period, noted during his lifetime that peasants were leaving the fields to shift their occupations to merchants and artisans.[238] With it came a shifting of social identities; the old landholding elite which produced most of the examination candidates, now had to compete with new socio-economically successful groups in society who also wanted to be part of the elite and began to copy the behaviour of the older elite. This created the "anxiety" about social fluidity, which Kathleen Ryor has noted, caused by rising social inequalities, shifts in social identities and competition for elite status. Taste and cultural refinement now became contested areas where one could prove one's membership of the proper elite.[239] This was a

---

[235] Martin Heijdra, "The Socio-Economic Development of Rural China during the Ming," in *The Cambridge History of China. Volume 8: The Ming Dynasty, 1368-1644, Part 2*, edited by Denis Twitchet and Frederick W. Mote (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 437-438.

[236] Yi Xu, Bas van Leeuwen, and Jan Luiten van Zanden, "Urbanization in China, ca. 1100-1900," *Centre for Global Economic History*, *CGEH Working Paper Series*, *Working Paper No. 63* (2015) http://www.cgeh.nl/urbanization-china-ca-1100%E2%80%931900 (accessed July 13, 2017): 14-15.

[237] Harriet T. Zurndorfer, "Review Essay: Old and New Visions of Ming Society and Culture," *T'oung Pao* 88 (2002): 152-154.

[238] I-fan Ch'eng, "Development and Frustrations of Statecraft in Mid-Ming China: As Reflected in the Experiences of the Gu Family of Jiangnan during the Sixteenth Century," (Berkeley, California: University of California, 1988), 123.

[239] Craig Clunas, *Superfluous Things: Material Culture and Social Status in Early Modern China* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991), 147-148.

development that in the future had to be reconciled with the Neo-Confucian ideology, which reflected the mores of an agricultural society, buttressed by a landowning gentry who were steeped in its learning. Neo-Confucian intellectuals were distressed by the tendency of a commercializing economy to promote selfish desires.[240]

These socio-economic changes affected the military security of the empire in a number of ways. One of these was the subversion of the traditional social order, leading to the rise of social inequities and the attendant danger of local disorder. This can be illustrated by reference to the functioning of the commodity-based taxation system of the early Ming and its increasing problematic operation in the mid-Ming and beyond. The implementation of taxation was devolved to the local communities themselves, according to the minimalist state ideal described above. This was the so-called *lijia* (里甲) system, which had been envisaged by the founder Zhu Yuanzhang as a way to keep to central bureaucracy lightweight and non-intrusive in local society. It entailed the local self-governance and tax administration by units of 110 families. The ten wealthiest of these would rotate leadership among them and were responsible for the collection and the transferring of the entire *lijia*'s taxes in kind to the local magistrate, which was the lowest level of the state bureaucracy.

This arrangement started to suffer under the strains of social inequities arising during the mid-Ming. According to Martin Heijdra, especially the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries were characterized by economic stabilization and population growth. This development owed a lot to the implementation of better agricultural techniques and the relative absence of major internal rebellions and external wars. Land was a commodity that could be freely traded and its possession was concentrated in fewer hands. As more and more agricultural land came in the hands of large landowners, the farmers on their lands were often reduced to a kind of serfdom. As these landowners were often wealthy and influential members of community, they were able to shirk their fiscal responsibilities owing to their ability to bribe officials. Many also managed to attain degrees through the examination system, granting them tax exemptions.[241] The remaining farmer households had to deal with increased taxation (paid in kind) and demands of corvee labour services whilst at the same time experiencing an increase in population numbers and a reduction in available land. Many farmers fled their lands to escape taxation, adding their numbers to a

---

[240] Ch'eng, "Development and Frustrations," 122-124.
[241] Heijdra, "The Socio-Economic Development, 554-564.

mobile population which was outside the state's purview and prone to rebellions or acts of organized violence.[242]

Of course, patterns differed amongst geographical areas, but a common theme is that in the "south", by which I mean all Chinese areas south of the Yangzi river, including the south-eastern provinces affected by piracy, socio-economic tensions tended to be higher than elsewhere and more often explode into violence. A survey done by James Tong poignantly makes this clear, and it should come as no surprise considering that the bulk of the population and population growth took place there.[243] The discovery of two periods of intense collective violence in the south noted above, 1516-1525 and 1556-1565, are a result of his statistic research. In the meantime, the south was also economically much more significant than the "north" and produced the most literati and other influential thinkers. So how did this connection between violence and socio-economic importance come about during the mid-Ming?

An answer can be found in the climatic and topographic natures of both the north and the south, and the ways in which these shaped labour relations and power structures in the long-term. According to Mark Edward Lewis, in the north, along and around the Yellow River, agriculture tended to be the domain of small-scale family holdings and landlords had a relatively small role as owners of land. In addition, the southern organization of families into lineages owning large estates collectively was mostly absent here. In addition, rainfall tended to follow an uneven pattern, and therefore floods and droughts (and therefore famines) were common occurrences. The climatic conditions allowed the cultivation of wheat, millet, sorghum, and soybeans. [244] The south, in contrast, had a more predictable supply of water and therefore suffered much fewer famines. Production focused on rice, but also more commercial products like silk, tea, and oils. An important difference in terms of labour relations and political power was the fact that in the south land ownership was in the hands of great lineages, which rented out land to tenant farmers. The power of the local land-owning elite over the landless tenants tended to increase further in the south, because of its leading role in constructing and maintaining water management techniques for sake of facilitating agricultural activities. Whereas in the north along the flow of the Yellow

---

[242] Kai Filipiak, *Krieg, Staat und Militär in der Ming-Zeit (1368-1644): Auswirkungen militärischer und bewaffneter Konflikte auf Machtpolitik und Herrschaftsapparat der Ming-Dynastie* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2008), 202-203, 213.
[243] James W. Tong, *Disorder under Heaven: Collective Violence in the Ming Dynasty* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1991).
[244] Lewis, *China between Empires*, 7.

River, only the state was able to muster the resources to build large water-control measures like dikes, in the south agriculture would develop in the hilly and valley-straddled broken terrain of the south. Here, the local elite would take the lead in draining swamps, extending cultivatable land in others ways, and building and maintaining irrigation and other water management structures providing the socio-economic base of the south.[245] Lewis concludes: "By playing a key role in the technologies of land reclamation and agriculture, southern landlords built up more extensive estates and dominated local society to a higher degree than did great families in the north. This regional difference continued to the very end of imperial China."[246]

Lewis describes a long-term trend starting with the beginning of Chinese migration to the south in the chaotic waning years of the Han empire. The devastation of the Yuan-Ming transition had turned back the clock a little, by causing the massive depopulation of areas in the southeast and north of the empire.[247] Perhaps this allowed Zhu Yuanzhang to implement his *lijia*-system, in lieu of the Song system featuring heavy commercial taxation. As the socio-economic fabric of the Ming recovered, however, especially in the south the solidarity buttressing the *lijia*-system came under pressure and social inequities came to the fore, as seen above. In addition, new actors in the economy arose, like artisans and merchants, whose accommodation to the rigid early Ming mode of governance would increasingly pose a challenge, also in military terms.

A significant flash-point between state interests and the emerging interest groups of the mid-Ming socio-economic transformation was the former's strict management of maritime trade. Ever since the Han empire, this trade had had to be accommodated in the so-called "tributary system", which ritually confirmed the Chinese emperor's superior position in the world order by obliging tributary states to send embassies with gifts for the emperor, who would then bestow gifts of equal or greater value on the envoys. As Harriet Zurndorfer notes, during the Song and Yuan empires extensive international maritime trade had been allowed parallel to this formal tributary system, but the Ming founder took the step of restricting it to an exclusively state-managed institution. In addition, merchants from tributary states were allowed, via a license, to trade goods in certain locations, but were not allowed to settle permanently.[248] In all other cases, a "maritime

---

[245] Idem, 7-14.
[246] Idem, 13.
[247] Bol, *Neo-Confucianism in History*, 257.
[248] Harriet T. Zurndorfer, "State of the Field. Oceans of History, Seas of Change: Recent Revisionist Writing in Western Languages about China and East Asian Maritime History during the Period 1500-1630," *International Journal of Asian Studies* 13.1 (2016): 63-65.

prohibition" (*haijin* 海禁) was in place, and this was intended to be a permanent fixture of Ming maritime policy, an unprecedented development. The reason of this strict attitude towards foreign maritime trade is not exactly known. It might be because Zhu Yuanzhang wished to contain the development of a maritime-oriented economy and population. Ivy Maria Lim posits that it served a "[…] a dual purpose - the achievement of coastal security by limiting private Sino-foreign contact, and the creation of a state monopoly over foreign imports such as spices, aromatics, silver and other exotica under the tribute trade system."[249] This system was not always as strictly enforced, however. Local officials saw in extra-tributary trade opportunities for additional taxation, and some emperors were more inclined towards relaxing trade regulations than others.[250] The Zhengde (r. 1505-1521) emperor was an example of the former, his successor the Jiajing (r. 1521-1567) an example of the latter.[251]

The feasibility of the enforcement of *haijin* would be increasingly undermined by the socio-economic changes described above, although emperors like Jiajing were unwilling to waver from long-standing imperial maritime policy. This would come into conflict with the burgeoning population of south-eastern coastal provinces like that of Fujian, where an already strong tradition of dependence on trade and fishery-based livelihood was strengthened during the mid-Ming period by a lack of arable land and land-based occupational opportunities.[252] A consequence would be the Wokou piracy crisis of the mid-sixteenth century, which I will describe in more detail in the chapters six and seven. Another factor that would lead to increasing challenges for civil and military governance was a by-product of these socio-economic developments: interethnic conflict in the south.

Interethnic Conflicts in the South

---

[249] Ivy Maria Lim, "From *Haijin* to *Kaihai*: The Jiajing Court's Search for a *Modus Operandi* along the South-eastern Coast (1522-1567)," *Journal of the British Association for Chinese Studies* 2 (2013): 5.
[250] Lim, "From *Haijin* to *Kaihai*," 5-10.
[251] James Geiss, "The Chia-ching Reign, 1522-1566," in *The Cambridge History of China, Volume 7: The Ming Dynasty, 1368-1644, Part 1*, edited by Frederick W. Mote and Denis Twitchett (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 471, 490-493; John E. Wills, Jr., "Maritime Europe and the Ming," in *China and Maritime Europe, 1500-1800: Trade, Settlement, Diplomacy, and Missions*, edited by John E. Wills, Jr. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 24-25.
[252] Chang Pin-tsun, "Maritime Trade and Local Economy in Late Ming Fukien," in *Development and Decline of Fukien Province in the 17th and 18th Centuries*, edited by E.B. Vermeer (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1990), 63-65.

Whereas a pro-active military policy against the northern frontier nomads ended after the Tumu debacle, the Ming state would expand further in the south and southwest of the empire, both by military and bureaucratic means, and by demographic growth which forced Han Chinese settlers to move further and further south and southwest. In this process, they would come into increasing contact with non-Han ethnic groups and encroach upon their territories. Non-Han ethnic groups already present within the frontiers of the empire, often referred to as "aboriginals" in modern literature, also increasingly competed with Han Chinese over resources and land. Inevitably, this would have consequences for military developments as well. Aboriginal groups were both an opportunity and a challenge for the military of the Ming empire. Some aboriginal groups would be utilized for their military prowess, whereas others resisted Han domination by military means. A related problem was that of acculturation: could and should these aboriginal groups be assimilated as Han Chinese, or should they be allowed a coexistence?

As already briefly touched upon above, most aboriginal groups in the empire's south and southwest were organized according to the *tusi* 土司 and *tuguan* 土官 systems. Generally speaking, the aboriginals were granted a certain degree of autonomy under chiefs invested by the Ming court, in exchange for loyalty and tranquillity. In the case of the Miao 苗 aboriginals (a group which lived in southwestern provinces like Guizhou), by the 1500s a distinction had emerged between "raw" or "uncooked" *sheng* 生 aboriginals on the one hand, and "cooked" or "ripe" *shu* 熟 on the other. Although the raw Miao still outnumbered their cooked counterparts and were headed by their native Aboriginal Officials (*tuguan*) directly subordinated to the Ministry of War, the Ming empire had been able to strengthen its grip on the population and extended a mixed Han and Miao bureaucracy in the shape of the Aboriginal Office (*tusi*) system, which was subordinated to the Ministry of Personnel. Their subjects had been assimilated to the point of them having been entered into the population registers, obliging them to pay taxes and perform corvee labour. Hence, at the one imperial frontier which shifted decisively in favour of the dynasty it was possible to detect a process of cultural and political assimilation taking place.[253] The *tusi* system was intended as an intermediate solution between aboriginal autonomous governance and eventual full integration into the empire, and it required the chieftains to pay taxes, maintain civil order, and supply military

---

[253] Bian Li 卞利, *Hu Zongxian chuan* 胡宗宪传 (Hefei: Anhui daxue chubanshe, 2011), 57; Hucker, *A Dictionary of Official Titles*, 547.

levies when so required by the empire.[254] A famous southwestern minority from Guangxi province, the Lang 狼, were from the mid-fifteenth century onwards increasingly requested by Chinese officials to serve as troops in campaigns. The Lang, which means "wolf", would gain a fearsome reputation as the *lang bing*, or "wolf troops".[255] Yet, this was also a process of give-and-take: the imperial centre needed these chieftains for the maintenance of local order, and the chieftains could bolster their position vis-à-vis local challengers by relying on imperial endorsement.[256]

These aboriginals could be a military challenge as well. Leo Shin notes that in Guangxi, the competing interests between local chieftains, Han settlers, and civil officials desiring to extend central state control "[…] meant that warfare was seldom a distant concern."[257] However, wars between aboriginals and the Ming empire could also be a result of internecine squabbling amongst the former as a result of the extension of imperial influence of the latter. In the mid-fifteenth century, for example, wars broke out between different factions of the Yao 瑤 ethnicity in Guangxi province who vied for the hereditary chieftain titles handed out by the court. In the end the imperial state got involved, when one side of the Yao supported a losing side in a throne succession crisis in 1457, for which they were subjected to a punitive expedition instigated by the winning side of said crisis in 1465.[258]

Related to the increased encroachment on the aboriginals by the Han population and the Ming state, was the question of ethnic barriers and whether they could be overcome. In other words, could aboriginals be assimilated as Han Chinese and how should this shape civil and military policy? In theory, barbarians would be attracted to superior Chinese civilization and the moral virtue of the emperor and therefore willingly submit and adopt Chinese ways. Cultural chauvinism could thus work to leave the empire open for the inclusion of barbarians, even if under the expectation of eventual sinicization.[259] But to what extent was there an imperative to sinicize? It seems that theoretically it was just assumed that acculturation was inevitable because Chinese

---

[254] Jeffrey G. Barlow, "The Zhuang Minority in the Ming Era," *Ming Studies* 1989.1 (1989): 19.
[255] Leo Shin, *The Making of the Chinese State: Ethnicity and Expansion on the Ming Borderlands* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 148.
[256] Shin, *The Making of the Chinese State*, 74.
[257] Idem, 12.
[258] Faure, David. "The Yao Wars in the Mid-Ming and Their Impact on Yao Ethnicity," in *Empire at the Margins: Culture, Ethnicity, and Frontier in Early Modern China*, edited by Pamela Kyle Crossley, Helen F. Siu, and Donald S. Sutton (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 2006), 177, 180-181.
[259] John K. Fairbank, "A Preliminary Framework," in: John King Fairbank (ed), *The Chinese World Order: Traditional China's Foreign Relations* (Cambridge, MA 1968), 2-3, 11.

civilization was self-evidently superior. It also implied that it was possible to "become Chinese", indicating a certain fluidity in ethnic categorization in Chinese thought.[260] Perhaps unsurprisingly, Chinese literati held different views on the matter. One school of thought held that barbarians could become Chinese, and could be transformed into civilized people. "Civilized" was hereby mostly defined in terms of lifestyle, including the adoption of social and ritual practices associated with the Chinese population and the adoption of a settled agricultural mode of living. The opposing view held that transformation was not possible for certain barbarians (especially Mongols and other nomads), and assigned them the same status as birds and animals in the natural order. This bias against nomadic peoples was strengthened by a pragmatic disdain for mobile populations, which, in the words of Peter Perdue, could not be "[…] counted, taxed or drafted for military and public works."[261] Perhaps the southern and southwestern aboriginals were viewed in a slightly different light, because they were at least not nomads. And, as we have seen, the *tusi* system was set up in part with a long-term view towards assimilation. However, in the wake of the Tumu debacle, the court's rhetoric stressing a unitary and universal empire had changed. In its stead blew a new wind stressing the need to separate and segregate Chinese and barbarian from each other. Whereas in the north this would ultimately lead to the building of the Great Wall, in the south it seems to have manifested more in the increased reinforcement of ethnic boundaries by differentiating and segregating the groups from each other.[262] A famous scholar of the late fifteenth century, Qiu Jun 丘濬 (1420-1495), wrote an important work on statecraft proposing appointing more native chieftains in lieu of direct governance by imperial officials, and he in general suggested limiting contact between Han and non-Han.[263] As we have seen in the previous chapter, during the Song attitudes towards non-Chinese hardened, but remained ambivalent about their potential to become Chinese. Zhu Xi's thought, the hegemonic voice from that preceding dynasty, however held rather rigid views. According to him, the *qi* of the barbarians was such that it was hardly possible for them to morally improve.[264] In light of the demographic and bureaucratic expansion of the Chinese state, the question rises whether such a rigid segregating ideology would be viable in the sixteenth century, a matter I will return to in the following chapters.

---

[260] Richard J. Smith, "The Emploment of Foreign Military Talent: Chinese Tradition and Late Ch'ing Practice," *Journal of the Hong Kong Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 1975 (15), 113-138.
[261] Peter C. Perdue, "Nature and Nurture on Imperial China's Frontiers," *Modern Asian Studies* 2009 (43), 252.
[262] Shin, *The Making of the Chinese State*, 160, 165.
[263] Idem, 164.
[264] Yang, "Reinventing the Barbarian," 377.

The Crisis of Military Organization

The larger socio-economic changes sweeping the empire did not fail to affect the military branch of government as the early Ming went over into the mid-Ming period during the fifteenth century. This would manifest itself in a military crisis around 1450, most notably in the areas of manpower shortages and a related decline of the authority of the military leadership. The institutional structure this authority was based on started to buckle under both the weight of its structural shortcomings and the increased pressure exerted on it by external and internal threats to the dynasty. To further highlight this process, I will divide this section in four, dealing with the crisis of military labour, the crisis of military leadership, the military crisis of the north, and the military crisis of the south respectively.

The Crisis of Military Labour

As we have seen previously, when the first Ming emperor successfully established his empire in 1368, he settled his victorious armies down in the military garrison-colonies, with their families enrolled in the military household registers to support this system of recruitment in perpetuity.[265] The first generation of these soldiers and officers had actually joined Zhu Yuanzhang in four different ways which cannot but have influenced their social status and motivation to serve after the establishment of the dynasty, although research about this is sorely lacking. The first way in which military personnel had joined the founder was voluntarily as a member of Zhu's rebel army from the 1350s onwards. Qi Jiguang's ancestor had joined in this way.[266] The second major pathway was constituted by enemy soldiers (usually belonging to rival non-Mongol Yuan warlords) surrendering and being integrated in the rebel army, with the amount of coercion applied in each case probably varying significantly. The members of the third and fourth groups can be assumed to have been the least motivated soldiers, considering they were instituted by sentencing criminals

---

[265] The hereditary military households and the *weisuo* have received much attention by Chinese scholars in recent years. For more information about these institutions, see: Liang Zhisheng 梁志胜, *Mingdai weisuo wuguan shixi zhidu yanjiu* 明代卫所武官世袭制度研究 (Beijing: Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe, 2012); Zhang Jinkui 张金奎, *Mingdai weisuo junhu yanjiu* 明代卫所军户研究 (Beijing: Xianzhuang shuju, 2007). In Taiwan, there is the large volume of articles and books published by Yu Chih-chia. As a starting point, see: Yu Chih-chia 于志嘉, *Mingdai junhu shixi zhidu* 明代軍戶世襲制度 (Taipei: Taiwan xuesheng, 1987).
[266] Millinger, "Ch'i Chi-kuang," 5.

to military service and gang pressing a certain percentage of eligible males of a certain territory into the army ranks.[267]

These men were the settled in military colonies often far from home, which were, in theory at least, supposed to be self-sufficient. Through the practice of agriculture, they would provide for their own upkeep, ensuring that the state would not have to burden the population with heavy taxes to keep a large military establishment in existence. The organization followed Mongolian Yuan precedents, and was enshrined in the so-called *weisuo* 衛所 ("Guards and Battalions") system of local garrisons posted at strategic positions throughout the realm. The heaviest concentration of these was along the northern border, where the Mongolian threat was deemed to be the most serious one for the continued existence of the empire. Within the hierarchy of ranks, only the lower ones were inheritable. Higher ranks were only assigned to a person on a temporary basis and were thus circulating amongst the military elite. In this way, the state attempted to prevent the emergence of personal bonds between officers and their troops and thus the rise of powerful military potentates who could be a threat to the dynasty.[268] The highest military rank was the defence circuit commander, who were mostly appointed at the places with the highest security risk for the dynasty, which mostly meant the northern frontier. They had wide-ranging authority, including unlimited command, military justice and the training of border troops.[269]

In this way, the Ming empire tried to freeze part of the *wu* potential in service of the state, but the system fell into decline during the fifteenth century. Already during the reign of the first Ming emperor the theoretically self-sufficient and self-replicating army, as David Robinson characterized it, started suffering from problems that belied its social structure and certain abuses of officer authority, which started to undermine the viability of the system. First of all, desertion quickly became a problem as many soldiers were not motivated enough to serve under the sometimes-harsh conditions that existed in the military colonies, where an estimated 70% of the available manpower pool had to till the land to keep themselves and the combat-ready remaining 30% nourished and equipped, a condition that was not shared by the preceding Song and Yuan armies. Officers were often willing to turn a blind eye as well to soldiers willing to shirk their

---

[267] Robinson, "Military Labor in China," 44.
[268] Filipiak, *Krieg, Staat und Militär in der Ming-Zeit*, 76-77.
[269] Idem, 60.

duties in return for the payment of bribes.[270] The first problem was further exacerbated when the officers, whose ranks were to a large extent hereditary as well, seem to have started asserting undue authority over their rank-and-file. The rank-and-file for example was forced to do agricultural work activities on the colony land assigned to the officers. The latter also profited from the system by systematically underpaying their troops. As noted in the previous chapter, these abuses and systemic failures were probably part of the reason why so many civil bureaucrats and scholar-literati heaped a lot of scorn and disdain on the military, and this was probably partly justified. The factors behind the later decline of the *wu*-branch of government should therefore not be strictly seen in extra-military terms as unwanted encroachment by the civil bureaucracy, but perhaps more as an internal structural problem. Of course, there were extra-military factors at work as well: the court and the central government were wont to use the army soldiers as a labour force for grand defence and infrastructure projects, like imperial palaces, city walls and the famous Great Wall, as well as for the sake of transporting large amounts of rice from south China to the capital and its surroundings.[271]

Further social inequities arose after the middle of the fifteenth century as the mid-Ming period started, when the military started to be influenced by the same long-term socio-economic and demographic developments the rest of the Ming empire was experiencing around this time. In the words of David Robinson: "As one of the largest and most important imperial institutions in Ming China, the military was sensitive to developments in many quarters, from demographic trends (including not only population size but migration and family structure), economic transformation (including the growing size of regional markets and the spreading use of silver), shifting labor supplies, bureaucratic imperatives (such as commuting corvée labor and tax obligations into silver payments), and logistics needs (such as supplying large numbers of men far from economic centers for extended periods of time)."[272] In this sense, the military households were part of a continuum of developments that also affected other non-military households with hereditary labour obligations.[273] Robinson points in the correct direction by reminding us that

---

[270] According to Cheng Wei-chung, by the mid-sixteenth century most of Fujian's *weisuo* had declined in strength to just 20% of the prescribed number of soldiers. See: Cheng Wei-chung, "War, Trade and Piracy in the China Seas (1622-1683)" (PhD diss., Leiden University, 2012), 3-4.

[271] Filipiak, *Krieg, Staat und Militär in der Ming-Zeit*, 44-57.

[272] Idem, 53.

[273] Heinz Friese, for example, points out that other kinds of hereditary households increasingly bought out their labour obligations in exchange for cash. See: Heinz Friese, *Das Dienstleistungs-System der Ming-Zeit (1368-1644)* (Hamburg: Kommissionsverlag Otto Harrassowitz, 1959), 90-116.

armies can never fully be understood outside if the context of the society from which they sprang and the polity they are associated with. Hence, to some extent these changes affecting wider society probably also held true for the military households and their agricultural activities, as Filipiak has suggested.[274] Some officers in charge of military colonies changed these into private estates and the soldiers assigned to them became their workforce, who could be employed for construction activities, agriculture and other menial tasks. Thus, even more deserted, and the effective combat strengths of the military households declined further.[275]

In addition to these regular forces, the early Ming availed itself of other sources of military labour. They were recruited by way of the already narrated aboriginal chieftaincies, *tusi*. Some of these were recognized as "martial" groups, not unlike the discourse of European colonial powers describing some of the ethnic groups in their conquered territories from the eighteenth century onwards. These martial minorities were then often hired as military forces under their own leaders and deployed across the empire.[276] As the empire would look for replacement sources of military labour, the importance of these aboriginal military units would increase during the mid-Ming period, a phenomenon I will return to in the next chapters. The increasing scope of the Ming military labour market, as the original hereditary elements of it contracted, also meant that the original military leadership of the dynasty, which based their authority on their command of this labour force, was increasingly undermined. This, in turn, strengthened a trend towards marginalization that had already begun during the early Ming as a result of deliberate purges by the early emperors, to which I will now turn.

The Crisis of Military Leadership

The military leadership was never during any period of the dynasty a unified coercive force-wielding institution within the empire. At the beginning of the dynasty there was actually a division of military power between two separate forces, which were meant to operate as checks on each other. In addition to the regular army officers and the merit nobility, this other force was actually led by the members of the imperial family. The founder Zhu Yuanzhang enfeoffed his sons with

---

[274] Filipiak, *Krieg, Staat und Militär in der Ming-Zeit*, 223.
[275] Idem, 213, 222-223; Albert Chan, *The Glory and Fall of the Ming Dynasty* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1982), 48.
[276] Kenneth M. Swope, "All Men Are Not Brothers: Ethnic Identity and Dynastic Loyalty in the Ningxia Mutiny of 1592," *Late Imperial China* 24.1 (2003): 86.

areas bordering on the northern frontiers, where the bulk of the regular army was also stationed guarding against possible Mongol attacks. They were meant to support the regular army in the event of invasions from the north, but obviously also had a balancing function towards the power of the generals and their troops.[277] The strong military leadership that could potentially have been provided during the entire dynasty by both the imperial in-laws and the merit nobility would be undermined, however, already during the early Ming as a result of the agency of the emperors. The merit nobility, of whom 66 had been ennobled by Zhu Yuanzhang, were also the subject of purges during his reign, and 39 were executed before 1398. Further purges would follow under the Yongle emperor, reducing the surviving number to three. The founder feared coup d'états from his successful subordinates, military and civil official alike, and these men were executed, probably based on trumped up charges. Moreover, Zhu Yuanzhang, in a bid to protect his own power, had also enacted policies to keep the military and civil officials physically separated.[278] Although both civil and military officials would suffer slanderous indignities with often lethal consequences, the mostly military merit nobility would not recover in number, whereas the civil bureaucrats lost their Prime Minister position for the remainder of the dynasty. This function would be abolished by Zhu Yuanzhang: he in the end chose to be his own Prime Minister. However, the remaining vacated positions in the civil bureaucracy would be filled up again with new literati, whilst the merit nobility would not be replaced.[279] The trimming of the civil and military bureaucratic pyramids thus, in my view, affected the latter one most. The imperial princes' political function would be curtailed in the beginning of the fifteenth century during the reign of the Yongle emperor. Yongle himself had been a prince entrusted with a military command along the northern frontier, but as a son of the founder he probably felt put aside by the choice for his nephew, the Jianwen (r. 1398-1402) emperor (the son of the founder's already deceased first son), as the successor of Zhu Yuanzhang. He was able to use his military authority to wage a civil war which resulted in a coup d'état and bloody purge. Yongle would enfeoff some hereditary military officers as his new merit nobility, but they no longer commanded their own troops, but were assigned troops from the *weisuo* in case of a campaign. Furthermore, positions in the military merit nobility were

---

[277] Richard G. Wang, *The Ming Prince and Daoism: Institutional Patronage of an Elite* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 4-9.

[278] Romeyn Taylor, "Ming T'ai-tsu and the Nobility of Merit." *Ming Studies* 2 (1976): 59.

[279] John D. Langlois, Jr, "The Hung-wu Reign, 1368-1398," in *The Cambridge History of China, Volume 7: The Ming Dynasty, 1368-1644, Part 1*, edited by Denis Twitchett and Frederick W. Mote (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 139-149, 169-181; Taylor, "Ming T'ai-tsu," 61.

increasingly supplanted by the imperial princes. In addition, Yongle would employ eunuchs in various military command and surveillance functions as a check on disloyal elements. During and after the reign of the Yongle emperor, the princes were stripped of their military power as well, and were *kaltgestellt* (sidelined) on their fiefdoms.[280] As such, two important groups were removed from the military leadership equation during the early Ming. In the meantime, the ability of the emperors themselves to provide effective military leadership declined as well.

This process could be perhaps partly be ascribed to the civil bureaucratic elite, who were able to assert more influence over the less headstrong and often less able emperors which followed Xuande (r. 1425-1435), possibly the last Ming ruler who possessed real military talent and had experience in the field.[281] While conquerors like the Hongwu and Yongle (who practically reconquered the dynasty by usurping power) emperors could dictate policy basically on their own terms, their successors were increasingly indoctrinated by civil official-run institutions like the Hanlin Academy. This academy, while technically an extra-bureaucratic institution meant to provide the dynastic family with a private group of elite Confucian scholars to lecture them in the meaning of the classics and other writings, it was also drawn from the same pool of manpower as the regular civil bureaucracy and probably shared the same basic ideological outlooks and political interests.[282]

Meanwhile, the "normal" hereditary military officials did not enjoy the same degree of institutional political leverage as their civil equivalents and could not match the bureaucrats in literary refinement.[283] In addition, their authority was gradually eroded by the military labour crisis narrated above. The lack of literary attainments presumably invited increasing civil official meddling in military affairs requiring a certain degree of literacy. The *wu*-branch seems to have only been able to recover some of their prestige when later emperors expressly empowered the branch out of martial interest or as a counterweight to the civil bureaucracy, like the Zhengde and

---

[280] Hok-lam Chan, "The Chien-wen, Yung-lo, Hung-his, and Hsüan-te Reigns, 1399-1435", in *The Cambridge History of China. Volume 7: The Ming Dynasty, 1368-1644, Part 1*, edited by Frederick W. Mote and Denis Twitchett (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 206-214; Robert B. Crawford, "Eunuch Power in the Ming Dynasty," *T'oung Pao* 49 (1961): 127-128; Charles O. Hucker, "Ming Government," in *The Cambridge History of China, Volume 8: The Ming Dynasty, 1368-1644, Part 2*, edited by: Denis Twitchett and Frederick W. Mote (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 26; Wang, *The Ming Prince*, 10-11.
[281] Chan, "The Chien-wen, Yung-lo, Hung-his, and Hsüan-te Reigns," 285.
[282] Robinson, "The Ming Court," 23-24.
[283] Kenneth M. Swope, "A Few Good Men," 3.

Wanli (r. 1572-1620) emperors respectively.[284] In the absence of this sort of leadership, the military fate of the empire would fall more and more in the hands of the civil bureaucracy.

In institutional terms, the military and civil bureaucracies as the highest level of government, and the regional and local levels of governance below it, were parcelled out between three different institutions, which were each replicated on these subsequent lower levels of the administrative hierarchy, namely that of the province, prefecture, sub-prefecture and county. The three institutions were the civil bureaucracy, the censorate (concerned with investigating the functioning of bureaucracy and army) and the military. Both the civil bureaucracy and the censorate were staffed by civil officials, who were mostly recruited through the much-vaunted civil service examinations system, whilst the military men – both officers and common soldiers - were recruited through a system of hereditary military households.[285] As can be seen, the system was rigged in favour of the civil bureaucrats, an interest group which monopolised two of the three main branches of government. The dichotomy fits better when describing the social identity of the persons involved in the three different branches, with the civil bureaucrats and censors out of the necessity of passing the civil service examinations automatically having achieved literary merit, whilst the military men were predominantly illiterate but – in theory at least - in possession of martial skills.[286]

However, by the mid-Ming, the military had become a legitimate sphere of interest and activity for a civil bureaucrat (and by extension also for the literati in general they were drawn from), owing to structural weaknesses in the original military institutions. These literati no doubt had to reconcile this military interest with the dominant Neo-Confucian orthodoxy. The founder of the Ming dynasty, Zhu Yuanzhang, had already formalized the civil bureaucracy's involvement in military affairs in 1380 by dividing responsibilities between an army-staffed Military Commission and a civilian-staffed Ministry of War, one of six ministries of the outer court civil

---

[284] Filipiak, "The Effects of Civil Officials Handling Military Affairs," 1-15; David Robinson, *Bandits, Eunuchs and the Son of Heaven: Rebellion and the Economy of Violence in Mid-Ming China* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2001); Robinson, "The Ming Court"; Kenneth M. Swope, "Bestowing the Double-Edged Sword: Wanli as Supreme Military Commander," in *Culture, Courtiers, and Competition: The Ming Court (1368-1644)*, edited by David M. Robinson (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Asia Center, 2008), 61-115; Swope, "The Three Great Campaigns."

[285] Charles O. Hucker, "Governmental Organization of the Ming Dynasty," *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 21 (1958): 12-16, 19-20.

[286] The Ming founder did intend to select military officials through military examinations as well, and he stressed that this examination should test knowledge of strategy and planning, which implies literacy. See Elman, "'Where Is King Ch'eng?'," 31-32.

bureaucratic institutions. The military commission was solely involved in tactical command and training of the troops, whilst the Ministry of War handled everything from logistics, weapons production, promotion and demotions and grand strategy. This division of labour was partly rational in that the tasks the Ministry of War handled required a certain degree of literacy, which was as a rule not found amongst the military labour pool. On the other hand, it fit the founder's almost fanatical preoccupation with preventing any organized group of civil and military dignitaries uniting against the throne and overthrowing Ming rule. The whole system of Ming governance as it appeared at the end of Zhu Yuanzhang's reign was an intricate system of checks and balances, characterised by overlapping institutional jurisdictions and a lack of concentration of authority in central functions. All ministries, for example, were headed by two officials of the same rank instead of just one, and the post of Prime Minister, the highest bureaucrat and official supervising and coordinating all six ministries, was also abolished in 1380. Undoubtedly the result of Zhu Yuanzhang's paranoia and his desire to concentrate all executive power in the hands of the emperor himself, the result was a sluggish but extremely reliable and resilient system of government that never once rose in rebellion against the throne and dynasty.[287] It also cemented the intrusion of civil bureaucrats in army affairs, and necessitated the involvement of these same bureaucrats in the *wu* sphere of state activity. In addition to the outer court civil bureaucrats, the inner court group of servants the eunuchs at some point during the dynasty also formed a military unit and increasingly got involved with army affairs as time went on.[288]

The Military Crisis in the North

Matters came to a head in the north, when an emperor unaccustomed to military leadership was captured by the Mongols and his army destroyed at Tumu in 1449. To stave off this crisis in the north, the empire shifted to a defensive stance vis-à-vis the Mongols and eventually would start the construction of the Great Wall. The defeat did not mean the end of the hereditary military officer corps, which was able to hold on to power in the north by changing the military labour relations to a new reality, partly by exploiting good connections to the imperial family. Fully congruous with developments in landownership and tenancy in the wider non-military part of society, the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries saw a concentration of former military colony land

---

[287] Hucker, "Ming Government," 74-76.
[288] Filipiak, *Krieg, Staat und Militär*, 78-79.

into the hands of a number of hereditary officers. This especially seems to have happened along the northern frontier, where officers (along with eunuchs and relatives and favourites of the imperial family) were able to turn the lands originally assigned to the military garrisons for revenue generating purposes into their own private landed estates.

Thus, mirroring social changes in the rest of the empire, the hereditary officer class also seems to have stratified in different groups. The social divisions within the military seem to have become more significant during the mid-Ming, as the military wound down in a defensive posture and relinquished some administrative functions to the civil branch. Although in terms of geographical area, the pattern of social changes probably differed greatly across the Ming empire, it seems that a group of officers were able to transform the military colony system to their advantage in certain parts of the realm during the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, for example across certain northern defence zones along the steppe. Especially in the north officers recruited by way of the hereditary household system managed to turn the lands assigned to the garrisons for agricultural production purposes into a form of private landholdings and, in addition, some of the hereditary soldiers – supplemented with men recruited from outside of the system - were turned into household retainers not entire unlike Medieval West-European developments.[289] The Ming founder had intended for the (higher) officers to be rotated between different commands to prevent the emergence of personal bonds of loyalty between officers and men, but in the high-risk north with the Mongols an ever-present threat, it was often deemed inadvisable to disrupt unit efficiency and cohesion for the sake of political reliability.[290]

The landed officers for their part did not entirely shirk their military duties and used their wealth to hire so-called "housemen" or "housesoldiers", *jiading* 家丁 or *jiabing* 家兵, essentially those parts of the landless labour force that were willing to perform military service for the sake of a hereditary military officer-*cum*-patron. They fit into the context of larger changing socio-economic patterns that could be pin-pointed across Ming society characterized by an expanding landless labour force from the fifteenth century onwards as noted above, combined with a slowly but steadily monetizing economy which increasingly facilitated the exchange of (military) labour for currency encouraging the emergence of mercenaries. These housemen quickly became some

---

[289] John A. Lynn, "The Evolution of Army Style in the Modern West, 800-2000," *The International History Review* 18.3 (1996): 515-516; Robinson, "Military Labor in China, 50-53.
[290] Swope, "A Few Good Men," 9-10.

of the most effective military groups at the disposal of the dynasty, which had already come to rely more and more on local militias and mercenaries as well after the decline of hereditary military garrison system as a fighting force. The court even handed out subsidies to these officers for the sake of sustaining these *jiading* forces. Even so, Robinson posits that the shrunk hereditary military did continue to operate, but increasingly as a labour force for non-military purposes, a development which was not entirely surprising considering that original division of labour entailed that less than a third of a given garrison was on military duty and therefore presumably well trained for martial endeavours.[291]

Furthermore, in order to deal with the decline in combat readiness of the hereditary military households, the Ming empire was forced to rely more and more on mercenaries and local militia. In contrast with the hereditary households, they were not self-sufficient and had to be paid a salary by other means. Although many details of financing the mercenary armies are still unknown, this mostly seems to have been done by directly paying them from the empire's coffers, or relying on a contribution system, which demanded of local communities to raise funds.[292] On a grassroots level, the officials on the lowest level of the bureaucracy – the county magistrates – were expected to encourage militarization of the local population. This grassroots militarization was also intended to produce militias capable of defending their localities during uprisings and periods of bandit activity.[293]

With these new measures, tapping new segments within a developing military labour market, coupled with a defensive posture, the northern military was able to hold the line against the Mongol threat for another century until 1550. The situation in the south would prove to be more precarious.

The Military Crisis in the South

Meanwhile, contemporaneous to the Tumu defeat, a large-scale internal uprising broke out in the south. It brought to light the decline of the Guards and Battalions system and its limitations in dealing with large scale unrest and rebellions. Kai Filipiak analyses this peasant rebellion led by Deng Maoqi 鄧茂七 (d. 1449) in 1448-1449 in Fujian province. One of the benefits of his article

---

[291] Robinson, "Military Labor in China," 47-53.
[292] Filipiak, *Krieg, Staat und Militär in der Ming-Zeit*, 228-230.
[293] Filipiak, "" Saving Lives"," 158-161.

is that it sheds light on the socio-economic changes that were affecting the southern part of the empire in this century.

As part of the "south", Fujian was actually one of the poorer, but also one of the most socio-economically dynamic provinces because of its maritime trade and mining activities.[294] Fujian in the course of the fifteenth century was also affected by the now familiar concentration of landed estates in the hands of fewer wealthy landowners at the expense of a now increasingly landless mass of tenants. Many of these landowners were also able to convert their holdings from taxed state lands (官田, *guantian*) into taxfree land (民田, *mintian*) owing to influential connections within the bureaucracy or imperial favour. Many of the beneficiaries of this massive private land accumulation were, according to Filipiak, local landowners, officials, eunuchs, members of the nobility, and the imperial clan, including the emperor himself. The tax responsibilities now became increasingly burdensome on the remaining free peasants, a process that was strengthened by the parallel evasion of many wealthy landowning families of the *lijia* (里甲) mutual responsibility system.[295]

In the course of time many of these wealthy families were able to shirk their tax duties and shift the burden further on the poorer families.[296] The result was that many poor farmers chose to become tenants, artisans, workers for wages, or took refuge into audacity and became bandits or illegal mine exploiters in the mountains. Fujian was furthermore a special case, because there existed a combination of landowners long native to the area, wealthy farmers and merchants, who amongst themselves often sold the rights to the rent of certain pieces of land without selling the ownership itself, a practice which was often subject to abuses leading to even heavier financial burdens for the tenants.[297]

The resulting economic tensions led in 1448 to an outbreak of tenant farmer-initiated violence led by Deng Maoqi, which quickly spread across many parts of the province and even briefly linked up with a contemporaneous mineworker's rebellion in neighbouring Zhejiang province. It is possible to discern a response in three phases to the rebellion. At first local *weisuo*

---

[294] Eduard B. Vermeer, "Introduction," in *Development and Decline of Fukien Province in the 17th and 18th Centuries*, edited by E.B. Vermeer (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1990), 5-7.
[295] Kai Filipiak, "Der Bauernaufstand des Deng Maoqi 1448/1449 als Ausdrück einer Zäsur in der Geschichte der Ming-Dynastie," *Monumenta Serica* 54 (2006): 121.
[296] Benjamin Elman, *Classicism, Politics, and Kinship: The Ch'ang-chou School of New Text Confucianism in Late Imperial China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 16-17.
[297] Filipiak, "Der Bauernaufstand des Deng Maoqi," 122-124.

were mobilized under their officers to deal with the crisis. These were not able to quell the rebellion and three separate units numbering 300, 2,000 and 4,000 respectively were defeated and annihilated by the rebels.[298] Thereafter the government responded by appointing and sending high-ranking hereditary officers from the capital to take charge of local *weisuo* troops in Fujian. Significant in the course of the conflict was the inadequacy of the local troops to contain and defeat the rebellion. The Fujian *weisuo* forces were painfully defeated by the rebels on several occasions, according to contemporaneous reports owing to lack of discipline on the parts of the troops and authority on the part of the officers. By way of a third phase, the court was prompted to tap into a new source of troops, namely the garrison troops defending the second capital Nanjing (the Yongle emperor had made Beijing the primary capital in 1421). These were augmented by troops that were normally deployed for transport duties (probably along the Grand Canal), bringing the force up to a strength of 47,000 men. These were commanded, not only by hereditary officers and members of the merit nobility, but also by members of the censorate. Already during this campaign, it is therefore possible to detect the increasing encroachment of *wen* officials and even eunuchs on matters that should normally have been merely *wu* affairs. Censors were not only tagging along to check on the progress of the armed forces and write up reports, but were also leading some contingents of troops. In addition, eunuchs were known to be dispatched to take charge of the firearms division in the capital.[299] Eunuchs had been in charge of the firearms divisions in the capital, and their inclusion in this campaign in this function should not be considered unusual.[300]

The decline of the hereditary military system was thus noticeable in these mid-fifteenth century campaigns. In my own view this decline seems most noticeable in the usurpation of military prerogatives by civil officials and eunuchs, and not so much in the state of the *weisuo* itself. Local Fujian forces showed deficiencies in actual operations, but the solution for their defeat was the deployment of additional *weisuo* units from elsewhere in the empire's "south", in this case Nanjing. No large-scale recourse had to be taken yet to tapping into new military labour pools. However, in my view it does show that the local *weisuo* forces were not numerous enough anymore to deal with internal uprisings. Kai Filipiak seems to agree with contemporary assessments that the Fujian garrison troops were undisciplined and their commanders lacking in command authority.

---

[298] Filipiak, *Krieg, Staat und Militär in der Ming-Zeit*, 191-193.
[299] Robinson, *Bandits, Eunuchs, and the Son of Heaven*, 102.
[300] Filipiak, "Der Bauernaufstand des Deng Maoqi," 127-131, 134-138.

I, on the other hand, see the failure of the local *weisuo* also as a systemic failure of the military organizational structure itself. The fragmentation of authority and jurisdiction of the military officers, which had been a deliberate policy of Zhu Yuanzhang, meant that they were only able to get into action in a piecemeal fashion, with detachments not larger than 4,000 soldiers (and often smaller) fighting a numerically much stronger rebellion which spread across the jurisdiction of several garrisons and even spilled over into other neighbouring provinces. This brings into memory the shortcomings of the Song local military organization in Jiangxi we saw in the previous chapter, an organization which was unable to defeat bandits willing to cross administrative borders because of a lack of authority to do so. In my view, population growth and the dissociation between labour and land possession meant that conflicts in the south of the empire quickly overpowered the strictly segmented and compartmentalized military hierarchy and authority in the provinces. Added to that was the shift of many military forces from the south to the north during and after the Yongle reign, which left a comparative lacuna of military security in the southern and inner reaches of the empire, as Filipiak argued.[301]

An attempt to compensate for this relative military lacunae in the south was sought in the formation of local militia, recruited by the local magistrates. One problem of this solution was that it devolved power into the hands of local strongmen and martial arts experts, who could also use their militia organizations as a launching pad for rebellion. Deng Maoqi's rebellion itself had started out like this. There was thus fear that arming the local population for local security could help undermine this security even further. Moreover, the cost of funding these organizations added another burden to the local population. Another solution was to leave the formation of militia to the local elites,[302] which put the southern Ming literati in the same position as Lu Xiangshan had been in during the Song dynasty, only on a grander scale. As I will argue in the next chapters, the heartland of the literati and the majority of the civil bureaucrats in the south was increasingly under threat, and out of sheer necessity they would have to militarize their lifestyles in order not to lose control of the situation. They would also have to find a solution for funding the new military organizations which would have to augment and replace the old self-supporting hereditary military.

Financial Aspects of the Military System

---

[301] Filipiak, *Krieg, Staat und Militär*, 189.
[302] Filipiak, "" Saving Lives"," 157-160.

The organizational changes in the fifteenth century as the early Ming gave way to the mid-Ming, which were to a great extend stimulated around 1450 by the disastrous Tumu defeat, would in turn strain the finances of the Ming empire. As already noted in the previous chapter, the Ming was much less a resource extractor than the Song had been, with the former mostly relying on agricultural taxes, whilst the latter was able to extract nine times the amount of non-agricultural taxes in comparison with its Ming successor, on top of its comparable agricultural resource extraction.[303] Notably, the annual revenue of the Ming that is being measured for this comparison belongs to the year 1578, a period when the financial reforms of Grand Secretary Zhang Juzheng 張居正 (1525-1582) where in full swing.[304] According to Ray Huang, the Ming empire's taxation system was inferior to that of the Tang, Song, and Yuan dynasties in many respects, and this could have been a result of the Neo-Confucian "small government" ideology which Zhu Yuanzhang embraced to organize his polity, as Peter Bol contends.[305] According to Huang, the Song dynasty was more flexible in taxing developing sectors of the economy in lieu of predominantly relying on agricultural taxes paid in kind. In addition, the Ming only minted coins during forty years of its existence, whereas the Song did during the majority of its existence. Even the Yuan was known to demand its taxes in grain, but based on assessments of the grain's value in copper coins, which demonstrated the continued relevance of applied monetary exchange standards by the empire's bureaucracy. A related issue was that of professionalism, which Huang posits was increasing during the Tang and Song eras, but declined during the Ming when civil officials would increasingly leave it to non-commissioned hired functionaries below the formal bureaucratic hierarchy.[306]

This weaker resource extraction capability was not a problem as long as the military remained a self-sufficient part of the governmental apparatus. Zhu Yuanzhang, as noted, had intended for the hereditary military to provide its own upkeep and for this reason every individual soldier was assigned a plot of agricultural land. Half of its produce would go towards supporting the immediate family-dependents of the soldier, and half would be handed over to the state as tax.

---

[303] Hartman, "Sung Government and Politics," 23.
[304] Ray Huang, *Taxation and Governmental Finance in Sixteenth-Century Ming China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1974), 267.
[305] Bol, *Neo-Confucianism in History*, 258-261.
[306] Huang, *Taxation and Governmental Finance*, 316.

Although Robinson does not state this very clearly, it seems that this latter half was meant for the remaining military costs incurred by the empire. The fragmentary data that is available on account of modern research indicates a a sharp decrease between 1403 and 1424 (which coincides with Yongle's military activist reign), an incomplete recovery during the less adventurous Hongxi (1424-1425) emperor, followed by another radical decrease by the end of the activist Xuande (1425-1435) emperor. Robinson paraphrases Japanese research in this context: "One Japanese scholar has documented a dramatic drop from approximately 20 million *shi* (62 million bushels or 1.3 million tons) to 5 million *shi* (325,000 tons) in the two decades between 1403 and 1424. After a brief rise to 9 million *shi*, by 1434, the figure seems to have dropped to 2 million."[307] Robinson does note that it is not entirely clear if these numbers refer to merely the half received by the central administration, or whether it also includes the half meant to be redistributed locally within the garrisons themselves to support the soldiers. Surprisingly, Robinson does not draw any conclusions from the timing of the fluctuation in tax revenue income. To me it would seem that more militarily activist rulership equated to less tax income, perhaps because military campaigns kept the soldiers from their agricultural duties.[308]

In line with the initial non-monetized nature of the taxation system, the wages of the soldiers were set in amounts of rice. However, this did not account of regional variations. Rice thrived well in the south, whereas beans and grains were cultivated in the north. Plots of land assigned to soldiers also varied in size across the geographical reach of the Ming empire: in the south where lands were much more productive, soldiers generally received less land than in the north were good agricultural land was scarcer. Some kind of conversion system was in place to reckon northern soldier's wages in the local produce. It seems that even the half cultivated by soldiers for the benefit of their own consumption, was first collected in local state-controlled granaries and store houses. Robinson does not explain why, but by the early fifteenth century the wages were already not entirely paid in agricultural produce. Parts of it were commuted into paper money, spices, and cotton textiles, although paper money never really caught on during the Ming dynasty and was discarded later as a means of payment. Instead, silver became increasingly common from the mid-sixteenth century onwards. The payment of wages in commodities was not always a practical system, especially in the case of long-term deployment of units away from their

---

[307] Robinson, "Military Labor in China," 59.
[308] Idem, 59-60.

own granaries and storehouses. Transport of perishable goods like grain and rice was not always feasible over long distances. To solve this conundrum, a patchwork of solutions was adopted. On the short term, "guest" units could receive travel wages from other garrison's granaries and store houses, but for long term deployments resort had to made to constructing new granaries and store houses, which then sometimes had to be supplied from the original ones far away, or from the capital region. Sometimes a lack of resources could also be compensated by relying more on commercial taxes in areas with a well-developed mercantile economy, especially in the south of the empire.[309]

The increasing problems with desertion, the erosion of landed property in the hands of the hereditary military garrisons and the partial replacement of the hereditary military by militia, mercenaries, housemen, and non-Chinese forces during the fifteenth century would mean that the financial pressure on the dynasty to support its military operations would increase. Next to that, the system of granaries and store houses, so intimately connected to a wage payment system in kind, would also face problems with the relative decline of the theoretically self-supporting military. At the core of the problem, this self-supporting military was increasingly replaced by military units that did not contribute towards their own upkeep at all, but had to be funded in new ways. The empire in the sixteenth century thus faced the problem of how to finance and organize the delivery of wages to its military. A last problem the dynasty faced at the end of the fifteenth century was a failure of its ideology, buttressed by the examination system, to provide for guidance in the troubling times caused by all the changes enumerated above.

A Crisis of Ideology

The socio-economic changes also had significant effects on the literati stratum of society, the segment the civil bureaucrats were drawn from. As Benjamin Elman has pointed out, by the institution of the civil service examination system the government in essence created its own labour pool of potential civil bureaucrats.[310] When the examinations therefore became the main entrance into civil government service in lieu of hereditary privileges and aristocratic descent during the Song dynasty, it could be said that succeeding empires defined and shaped the *wen-*

---

[309] Idem, 59-62.
[310] Elman, *A Cultural History*, 69-70.

labour market to an extent that they could not shape its *wu* counterpart, even though the Ming founder's adoption of the hereditary household system was probably an attempt at imperial control of this volatile labour pool. By instituting the civil service examinations as the main entrance to the bureaucracy, successive dynasties were able to dictate the terms of entrance and thus the sections of society the manpower would be drawn from. Conversely, through a process of socio-cultural reproduction, the resulting labour market would bring itself into being through voluntary socio-cultural reproduction of its members seeking employment in the imperial bureaucracy.[311] As we have seen, Zhu Yuanzhang again adopted an innovation that was in effect derived from Mongolian Yuan dynasty precedents, namely the institution of the Neo-Confucianism according to the Cheng-Zhu orthodoxy as the main content of the examinations. Whereas the succeeding Mongol Yuan dynasty had decided to keep the ex-Song southern Han Chinese out of government, instead relying on northern Chinese, Jürchen and other groups of Central Asian and Western Asian origin, by 1315 the examination system was instituted again for the first time based on this orthodoxy in order to draw Han Chinese into government service once again. The curriculum that had to be studied included the Five Classics, Four Books, certain dynastic histories and the interpretations of the Five Classics and Four Books by the three abovementioned Song Neo-Confucians, the interpretation of which had been touched upon in their commentaries.[312]

The Ming founder had only reluctantly co-opted the literati in his government, realizing that without them he lacked adequate personnel to run the bureaucracy his empire required. Nevertheless, coming from a humble peasant background he apparently distrusted and felt at unease with the high-class literati from elite backgrounds. For him, the Cheng-Zhu orthodoxy and its associated curriculum was a means with which to control the ideological conformity of his literati-*cum*-officials. He even went so far as to censor bits of the philosophical work of Mencius, especially those parts that emphasized the inherent goodness of human moral character, which he disagreed with.[313] Another reason might have been Mencius' position that the people could legitimately overthrow the rule of a morally corrupt ruler, the inherent goodness of human beings enabling them to make a sound judgment on this matter.[314] The tendencies towards strict

[311] Benjamin A. Elman, "Political, Social, and Cultural Reproduction via Civil Service Examinations in Late Imperial China," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 50.1 (1991): 15-16.
[312] Idem, 37.
[313] Daniel Bryant, *The Great Recreation: Ho Ching-ming (1483-1521) and His World* (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 33-34.
[314] *Mengzi* 孟子 (Changsha: Hunan renmin chubanshe, 1999), 207-213.

ideological control by the emperor were reinforced by his usurping son, the Yongle emperor. He had deposed the intended successor of Zhu Yuangzhang, his grandson Zhu Yunwen the Jianwen (r. 1398-1402) emperor, who had tried to curb the military power of his uncles at the northern frontier and had actually sought more rapprochement with the civil literati-*cum*-officials as well. Many of these civil officials and scholars were killed after the Yongle emperor conquered the then-capital Nanjing. The usurping emperor took measures to further systematize and standardize the curriculum that formed the core materials to be studied for the civil service examination system. In order to do this, he authorized the compilation of two digests which contained approved commentaries on the Confucian classics as well as Cheng-Zhu Neo-Confucian learning. Furthermore, the Yongle emperor was notorious for his crackdown on literati who swayed too far from the ideological orthodoxy which was instituted by the court.[315]

All of this enforced ideological conformism created a barren intellectual climate during the early Ming. Literati had two choices: either conform to the stipulated Confucian orthodoxy to have a chance to enter the bureaucracy, or renounce ambitions towards a bureaucratic career altogether and engage in private scholarship and other *wen*-pursuits outside of state service. In the course of time this strict intellectual straightjacket started to cause resentments and these combined with socio-economic changes caused some literati to re-examine the dynasty-imposed orthodoxy. It also induced an intellectual climate in which pragmatic learning for examination success trumped the quest for personal moral improvement and sagehood, the original aim of Cheng-Zhu Neo-Confucianism. The founding emperor had stipulated that no changes could be made to the institutional structure of his empire, which included for example the size of the civil bureaucracy. As the population increased, so did the number of people who wanted to acquire a position within this bureaucracy, with as an obvious consequence the enlargement of the labour pool of graduates who had successfully negotiated the first level of examination system. The members of this labour pool had an increasingly small chance to actually succeed in the higher levels which gave access to positions within the bureaucracy.[316] Consequently, while the absolute numbers of highly trained literati increased, so did the frustration with the inflexible ideological contents of the examinations they had to pass with a very slim margin of success. I contend that an ideology like (Neo)-

---

[315] Bryant, *The Great Recreation*, 88. See also: Peter Ditmanson, "Venerating the Martyrs of the 1402 Usurpation: History and Memory in the Mid and Late Ming Dynasty," *T'oung Pao* 93 (2007): 110-158.
[316] Bol, *Neo-Confucianism in History*, 97-99.

Confucianism was not always merely a convenient layer of outwardly professed conformism to its thought adopted for pragmatic reasons, but in many cases was genuinely adhered to and actively shaped a person's moral imperative. Undoubtedly already right after Zhu Xi's time many of the literati-*cum*-scholars conforming to Neo-Confucianism did so for pragmatic reasons, for example for the cultural and political capital it could bestow on the local level. Others doubted the validity of external investigations and book learning, and proposed a more inward turn for moral cultivation, like Lu Jiuyuan. Nevertheless, during the Ming, when Cheng-Zhu learning had become orthodoxy, many were probably genuinely attracted to the Neo-Confucian message and their numbers must have multiplied considerably with the increase of civil service examination candidates during the mid-to-late Ming. Neo-Confucianism actively encourages its adherents to engage with society and order it according to the moral principles it advocates, including the strict sense of hierarchy and notions of righteousness. For many thousands of first level-examination graduates, as well as many other groups who sympathized with the Neo-Confucian program, but did not even have a chance at realizing their ambitions to be part of the governmental apparatus for various reasons, there was therefore a lack of a legitimate outlet to satisfy their urge to realize their moral imperatives in the society around them. How could one then realize one's moral imperative in these circumstances?

I would argue the result was a "second crisis of classicist learning", which would develop along surprisingly similar lines to the first one during the Song. Again, debate centred around what constituted the correct Confucian or classicist learning and what role the transmitted classics had within this process. Similar to Ancient Style proponents of the Song, around the turn of the fifteenth century Archaist and other movements took shape with adherents advocating a return to the writing styles of the ancients in order to appropriate and imitate their way of thinking. Others would seek to continue the Neo-Confucian project of "learning to be a sage", a mission now corrupted by the examination system, which stimulated Cheng-Zhu learning for utilitarian examination success in lieu of moral improvement.[317]

By the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, therefore, especially the southern parts of the Ming empire were undergoing a process of complex socio-economical changes, which led to a more violence-prone and instable southern inland and maritime zone. At the same time, weaknesses within the military institutions set up during the dynasty's foundation had eroded its

---

[317] Miaw-fen Lu, "Practice as Knowledge: Yang-ming Learning and Chiang-hui in Sixteenth-Century China" (PhD diss., University of California, 1997), 30-31.

manpower base in exactly these areas of the empire. Finally, the examination system's limitations failed to accommodate the demographic growth and ideological leanings of an increasing number literati (most in the south), some of whom were looking for alternatives to satisfy their quest for leadership roles within society. Moreover, these southern literati would have to reconcile their ideology with martial and military activities after centuries of being able to lead demilitarized lifestyles. In addition, new groups rose to the top of society, which were looking for a moral sanction and moral guidance vis-à-vis the hegemonic Cheng-Zhu Neo-Confucianism. One of these was constituted by the merchants. Their dilemma was concisely summarized by Richard Lufrano: "They also hoped to remain upstanding members of a society dominated by a governmental and educational elite whose notions of respectability - transmitted through edicts, lectures, and morality books—lagged behind the rapid economic changes and whose values conflicted with the reality of their lives. This establishment urged them from birth to quash their ambitions and to accept their lot in life."[318] But other groups also sought this moral sanction, and in the next chapter it will become clear that the hereditary military were among them. It is against this southern backdrop that a new Neo-Confucian interpretation emerged entangled with solutions to civil and military governance problems. In the next two chapters I will look at the career and thought of a man who played an instrumental role in solving the first of the two greatest periods of military crises of the south (1516-1525) during the mid-Ming. He was a civil bureaucrat and Neo-Confucian philosopher who crossed the *wen-wu* divide to become a successful military commander during the first crisis. In the process, he redefined Neo-Confucian learning and socio-cultural identity to such an extent that it became possible for the second figure, a hereditary military man, to cross the *wen-wu* divide in the opposite direction during the second crisis (1556-1565). These two men were Wang Yangming and Qi Jiguang. In the next chapters I will turn to their stories.

---

[318] Richard John Lufrano, *Honorable Merchants: Commerce and Self-Cultivation in Late Imperial China* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1997), 1.