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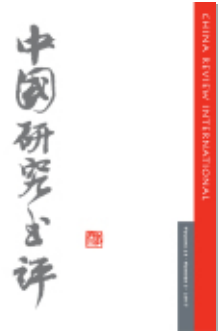
*The Art of Being Governed: Everyday Politics in Late
Imperial China* by Michael Szonyi (review)

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NOTES

1. On the reevaluation of Jiaqing's reforms see, among others, Daniel McMahon, "Dynastic Decline, Heshen, and the Ideology of the Xianyu Reforms," *Tsing Hua Journal of Chinese Studies, New Series*, 38 (June 2008): 231–255, and Wensheng Wang, *White Lotus Rebels and South China Pirates: Crisis and Reform in the Qing Empire* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014).

2. McMahon, "Dynastic Decline, Heshen, and the Ideology of the Xianyu Reforms"; Wang, *White Lotus Rebels and South China Pirates*.

3. Man-houng Lin, *China Upside Down: Currency, Society, and Ideologies, 1808–1856* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Asia Center, 2006).



Michael Szonyi. *The Art of Being Governed: Everyday Politics in Late Imperial China*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017. xv, 303 pp. Hardcover \$35.00, ISBN 978-0-691-17451-8.

Michael Szonyi's *The Art of Being Governed* is an engaging and thought-provoking study of how ordinary Chinese families devised strategies in order to manage obligations and pressure imposed by state institutions in the Ming period. It also explores how the legacies of such strategies outlived the Ming state and manifested themselves in the subsequent centuries. The "dramatis familiae" of the book are twenty-seven Ming military households living or assigned to garrisons in southeast coastal China (pp. xiii–xv). Under the household registration system established in the early Ming, each of the registered military households bore the hereditary obligation of providing a soldier for military service and in return was granted tax exemptions. An early Ming source indicates that one in five households were military households (p. 28), although the proportion varied considerably according to the region. While the Ming military forms the main subject of this book, Szonyi's concerns are distinctively social and local. Its main sources are materials such as family genealogies that Szonyi collected, primarily in coastal Fujian province, by "finding people, often elderly, who are interested in talking about and sharing their history" (p. 18). In Szonyi's own words, this book is "a social history of a Ming military institution in a local context, based on sources gathered and explored through fieldwork" (p. 19). Illuminated in those sources is the pervasive presence of military institutions in everyday life under the Ming, and this study's analytical scope reaches far beyond China's southeast coast.

As explained in the introduction, the title of this book is a nod both to Michel Foucault's notion of the art of governing and to James Scott's

influential book, *The Art of Not Being Governed*. The title succinctly encapsulates Szonyi's central arguments that Ming subjects developed "patterns of negotiation" (p. 231) with the state and that their political behavior—which he calls "everyday politics" (p. 7)—was by no means shaped by the binary choice between compliance and resistance but rather by "decisions about when to be governed, about how best to be governed, about how to maximize the benefits and minimize the costs of being governed" (p. 8). While Scott saw the loss of literacy among Southeast Asian hill peoples as a deliberate strategy to distance themselves from state control, Szonyi's actors in this study embraced and employed "state language" (p. 220) in their maneuvering of different regulatory systems. Often expressed through text, their calculations, negotiations, and decisions constituted a "pattern of political interaction" that, according to Szonyi, "was not unique to soldiers but was distributed more broadly across Ming society, and was not unique to the Ming but can be identified in other times in Chinese history, and perhaps beyond" (p. 6).

The Art of Being Governed is divided into four parts, each exploring everyday political strategies of Ming military households in a different space and temporality. Part one, titled "In the Village," focuses on the native villages of conscripted Ming soldiers and opens with the story of the Zheng family of Zhangpu in coastal Fujian, which was registered as a military household in 1374. Drawing on their family genealogy, Szonyi traces how they negotiated within the family and allocated their resources, such as inheritance and ritual privileges, in order to reduce uncertainty, while ensuring that they fulfilled their military service obligation to the Ming state. In the case of the Ye family of Fuqing near Fuzhou, we meet a military household that received threats from local tax collectors in the mid-Ming due to their tax-exempt status and was able to fend off the threats only after they reestablished contact with the long-lost relative serving as a soldier in the north and were able to produce a document showing that the family's obligation to provide military service was being met. Afterwards, the Ye warmly welcomed the family of the serving soldier with gifts of silver whenever they visited their ancestral home in Fuqing, which continued until the mid-sixteenth century, when the family's fortune was severely depleted by piracy ravaging through China's southeast coast. To keep ties between serving soldiers and family members and maintain their tax-exempt status, other families relied on more formal means, such as contract-based subsidies, in order to incentivize the serving soldiers to remain in their posts and eliminate the risk of conscription and harassment for those back in their native villages.

Titled "In the Guard," part two takes the reader to the military garrison, which became "home to the soldier as well as to his immediate family, and eventually to his descendants" (p. 94). Contrasting officially compiled records with family genealogies, Szonyi shows that serving soldiers and commanders in

garrisons were also devising strategies to maximize their benefits and establish social standing in the communities. For example, the genealogy of the Jiang family in southeast Fujian, which was first compiled in the seventeenth century and transmitted only in handwritten form, demonstrates the blurring boundaries between soldiers and traders and between sanctioned commerce and piracy. The Jiang were hereditary commanders assigned to a coastal garrison and utilized their position in the military to cultivate “a complex relationship” (p. 102) with those who often appear in official sources as bandits or pirates, which yielded handsome financial gains. In the social sphere, marriages, temples, and schools were also areas where Ming soldiers and their families in garrisons engaged in “community formation” (p. 110) after being uprooted from their ancestral villages under the Ming military household system.

Part three, “In the Military Colony,” explores one important but often underemphasized aspect of the Ming military system: approximately three quarters of all the Ming soldiers were not combat soldiers but rather “farmer-soldiers” (p. 135). Their obligation was to work the land and provide for their counterparts stationed in garrisons based on the principle of self-sufficiency put forward by the Ming founder Zhu Yuanzhang. In practice, however, many farmer-soldier households became landlords and paid taxes out of rent collected from tenants. The plots of land farmed by farmer-soldiers were called *tuntian*, or military colonies, and often located in the countryside away from the fortified garrisons. As illustrated in figure 5.2 (p. 141), in the case of Fujian this meant that coastal garrisons were supplied by military colonies established inland. The farmer-soldiers assigned to those fields lived side by side with civilians and “developed their own strategies to maximize their interests within the microecology of the colony and its surroundings” (p. 135). For example, the Hu family of Hutou in inland Fujian, first registered as a military household in 1376, formed a composite military household with the Wang and the Lin, sharing and fulfilling their obligations in rotation. By the early sixteenth century, they had essentially become landlords, and their assigned fields were rented out to tenants. Their genealogy contains a copied form (*tie*) dated 1584, recording acquisition—under the name of a member of the Wang—of military colony land formally assigned to dead soldiers. With the land came the responsibility of paying roughly 10% of the annual yields as taxes. But the three families likely saw acquiring additional land as an advantage rather than a burden and continued to honor the tax obligation as a composite military household. At Houshan Temple in Hutou, whose annual new year procession Szonyi vividly recounts in chapter 6, the arrival of colony soldier families such as the Hu and their subsequent co-existence with civilian families in the community are manifested in the housing in the temple of two major deities, Supreme Emperor of the Dark Heavens and Venerated King of

Heroic Martiality, and in the divergent and conflicting accounts of the temple's origins recorded in local genealogies and stele inscriptions.

In part four, titled "After the Ming," Szonyi takes the story forward to the Qing period following the collapse of the Ming dynasty. In Fujian, the Ming military institutions, such as garrisons and military colonies, were gradually disbanded and dissolved in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. But the Qing did not completely overhaul the tax system, and the tax obligations of Ming military households assigned to military colonies were carried over to the civilian system of tax collection under the Qing. Thus, former Ming military households, including the Hu of Hutou, continued to honor their tax obligations. When in the mid-eighteenth century a dispute arose over tax arrears on the land recorded in the aforementioned form dated 1584, the Hu produced the document in a successful attempt to demonstrate that the land was registered under the Wang's name and that they were not liable for the unpaid taxes. In the former garrison of Tongshan in southern Fujian, on the other hand, a temple stele inscription dated 1713 shows that over forty signatories belonging to former Ming military households lost their tax-exempt status in the Ming-Qing transition and came together to form a "multisurname tax-paying fictive lineage" (p. 210). As Szonyi points out, such an inscription served both as an internal contract among the signatories to collectively manage their new tax obligations and as a statement to reestablish relations with the Qing state on their own terms.

This book makes an important contribution to studies of Ming society and complicates the "prevailing narrative arc of Ming history" (p. 228), a story of gradual transformation from an autocratic state to a more open and fluid society characterized by the diminishing presence of the state. Szonyi demonstrates that Ming military institutions continued to structure people's choices and decisions at the local level even after the Qing came to power in the mid-seventeenth century. Texts such as genealogies, contracts, and stele inscriptions played a crucial role in their strategizing about how best to engage with the state. Many of the texts examined in this study can be consulted as photographic images on the author's webpage indicated on page 269. While Szonyi makes a compelling case for the importance of studying the art of being governed in Ming society, this book also raises new questions. For example, if everyday political strategies require "skills and competencies that can be acquired and transmitted" (p. 8), as suggested in the introduction, we are still left to wonder how the Ming military households examined in this book came to possess such knowledge in the first place. If their strategies were "widespread because they worked" (p. 226), what accounts for the circulation and transmission of those successful strategies even within the microecology of the southeast coast of China? Did each of the families or kinship groups arrive at optimal strategies individually? Or, if they so wished, could they draw on

external help, such as handbooks or litigation masters? Answers to these questions may well not be easily found. But *The Art of Being Governed* shows considerable potential for further research by masterfully weaving together official documents, family records, and oral histories. It situates one particular locality of southeast coastal China in Ming times in a broader spatial and temporal context. As Szonyi observed in Hutou during the annual temple festival, if we look closely, Ming history remains alive, tangible, and relevant in our century.

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Jinping Wang. *In the Wake of the Mongols: The Making of a New Social Order in North China, 1200–1600*. Harvard University Press, 2018. xxii, 336 pp. Hardcover \$49.95, ISBN 978-0-674-98715-9.

This book tells a story that brings us into the aftermath of the devastating Mongol conquest of China. With an emphasis on the social elites of the Shanxi province, the objective is to illustrate “how northern Chinese men and women resiliently adapted . . . and created a radically new social order under the leadership of Daoists and Buddhists” (p. 4). While traditional historiography of social elites in China concentrates more on a Southern based narrative, underlying the dominant role of the Confucian literati culture, the author argues that this interpretative model does not apply to the Northern distinctive society in which “elite families had to rely on powerful religious institutions to help create and strengthen community solidarity” (p. 20). The author draws on unpublished and rarely or never studied stele inscriptions to better grasp the social transformations of the time revealed by interactions among rural communities. Aside from these steles which “were the most common way for northern individuals and institutions to express their social power” (p. 25), the author also relies on other sources like local gazetteers and literary anthologies. With a strong focus on the elites and on the institutions that dominated local society, the book reveals how religious institutions and clergy members all played important roles in social reorganization caused by dynastic transition, political reform, and natural disasters.