Military labor markets have a long history in China. In fact, as Mark Lewis has shown, policy debates over such issues as conscription, professional standing armies, recruitment, and rewards predated the emergence of the first imperial dynasty, the Qin, in 221 BC. Given this background, modern scholars’ relative indifference to this cluster of issues is striking. This chapter briefly reviews a few key works and debates related to military labor in China c. 1500, most especially recruitment, then moves to consideration of the Chinese example in the light of our common comparative axes and taxonomies, and finally concludes with an effort to assess the causal factors that accounted for the particular forms of military labor in China c. 1500.

A review of the field

In 1937, a pioneering scholar of the Ming period (1368-1644), Wu Han, wrote the first major scholarly essay on the Ming military. His central concern was the transition from what he described as a hereditary conscription military, tightly controlled by the central government, to a system of hired soldiers that ultimately gave greater power to leading generals than to the dynasty. Wu described the transformation in the following terms:

From a garrison system that supported 3 million men at the cost of not a single penny to the state to a mercenary system whose costs fell entirely to the people and dynastic coffers; from garrison troops with fixed levels of men to mercenaries with no fixed numbers; from hereditary garrison troops to hired mercenaries: this sea change was central to the rise and fall of the Ming period and was the largest shift in modern history.²

Before examining Wu Han’s arguments, a thumbnail sketch of the Ming military system is useful here. Borrowing a model developed by his predecessors (the Mongol rulers of the Yuan dynasty, who had controlled China

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2 Wu, “Mingdai de jun bing”, p. 149.
for much of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries), the Ming founder, Zhu Yuanzhang (1328-1398), had assigned hereditary obligations to the state to individual households. He divided the population into dozens of categories—saltern households, mining households, and farming households, to name just a few. Military households were among the largest of such categories. The Ming founder drew upon four major sources of troops for his dynastic army: (a) men who had joined him when he had been a rebel leader during the 1350s and early 1360s, (b) surrendering troops of rival warlords who were integrated into his army, (c) criminals sentenced to military service, and finally (d) forced conscripts, usually assessed as a given percentage of the local population and used to fill out the ranks of the early Ming army.

The imperial army in general and military households in particular were intended to be self-replicating and self-supporting. Each household was responsible for providing one active service member to the state at all times instead of the standard corvée and/or tax obligations rendered by other subjects. Further they were to supply one, two, or three other males whose labor and/or income was to support the active-service soldier. If through death, accident, desertion, or dismissal, the active-service soldier was no longer able to fulfill his responsibilities to the state, the family was to supply a replacement, beginning with the nuclear family and extending out to brothers, cousins, and beyond. By the late fourteenth century, active-service soldiers were stationed in more than three hundred garrisons spread across the empire. The economic foundation of this hereditary garrison system, like the foundation for the dynasty as a whole, was agriculture.

During the early decades of the Ming, the central government seized huge swathes of territory that were turned over to garrisons, which were responsible for opening and working agricultural lands. The primary duty of approximately 70 per cent of the entire 1.2 million-man Ming army (but rising briefly to a reputed 3 million in the early fifteenth century) was raising grains, half of which were to be used by the farmer-soldiers and half to be turned over to the local garrison to cover expenses for active-service

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3 Taylor, “Yuan Origins of the Wei-so System”.
4 Wang, “Some Salient Features of the Ming Labor Service System”.
5 For a recent review, see Zhang, Mingdai weisuo junhu yanjiu, pp. 20-50. Another essential set of essays by a leading scholar of the social and institutional histories of the Ming garrisons is Yu, Weisuo, junhu, yu junyi.
6 Yu, Mingdai junhu shixi zhida.
troops such as wages, equipment, medical costs, and clothing. This was Wu Han’s self-sufficient and well-controlled garrison system.

For Wu and many later scholars, the shift to hired troops grew out of official corruption and exploitation. Underpaid and exploited by their officers, by early in the fifteenth century garrison soldiers began to desert in large numbers. Desertion undermined not only troop strength but also the economic foundation of the system, as fewer and fewer men were available to farm the garrison fields. Other soldiers offered gifts and monthly fees to their superiors to avoid military duties. Efforts to track down deserters or replace them with family members, who might live corvée-free and far away, led to further opportunities for graft. Bribes were demanded to turn a blind eye. Authorities responsible for filling the ranks were not above arbitrarily registering unrelated or unqualified men to serve as replacements. From the early decades of the dynasty, the central government responded with orders for local authorities to compile more accurate registers, eliminate fraud, and locate replacements from the families of soldiers who deserted.

In his famous “Placards to Instruct the People” issued in 1398, the Ming founder repeatedly urged members of rural communities to turn in deserting soldiers who sought to hide from imperial authority. The results were mixed at best.

Another complaint heard with increasing frequency over the fifteenth century was the misuse of military personnel. Officers often treated soldiers in their units as private labor gangs: they tilled officers’ fields, tended livestock, felled trees for lumber, gathered valuable roots such as ginseng (along the northeastern border), conducted trade, and acted as personal servants. In fact, the central government and its agents also used the army for nonmilitary purposes but on a much grander scale. Garrison soldiers provided the labor for many if not most large-scale construction

7 Wang, Mingdai de juntian; Ming, “Tuntian Farming of the Ming Dynasty”.
8 Even during the early years of the dynasty, the military system had never been economically self-sufficient but instead relied on regular infusions of “gifts” from the throne. See Huang, “Military Expenditures in Sixteenth-Century Ming China”.
9 For a fairly recent essay that ascribes manpower shortages – and the dynasty’s ultimate collapse – primarily to corruption among military officers and other administrators, see Liu, “Mingdai weisuo quewu de yuanyin tanxi”. Liu explicitly argues that the dangers of corruption in the Ming have lessons for contemporary leaders in China. The same line of argumentation of course was true for Wu Han writing in the 1930s; he was criticizing the practices of the Guomintang (or Nationalist) government under Chiang Kai-shek.
10 Ma, “Mingdai de jiading”. For an early example of desertion, see Ming Taizu shilu, 193.8a-b.
11 Zhu, “The Placards of the People’s Instructions”.
projects sponsored by the state, including palaces, city walls, dikes, border fortifications, and even stupas for Tibetan monks resident in the capital.\textsuperscript{12}

The Ming was the first Chinese dynasty to institutionalize the use of military personnel as transport workers on a permanent and wide-scale basis. During the late fourteenth century, more than 80,000 soldiers were used to transport grain to the distant but strategically vital northeast border region of Liaodong.\textsuperscript{13} Early in the fifteenth century, the principal dynastic capital was relocated northward from Nanjing to Beijing. From this time onward, an even greater number of men moved tax grain along the Grand Canal to the capital in Beijing from agricultural centres in the southeast. Figures from the first half of the fifteenth century suggest that each year more than 100,000 men drawn from approximately 170 garrisons moved 3 million piculs of rice in 3,000 barges along the Grand Canal system from Ningbo to the capital, a distance of approximately 2,300 km.\textsuperscript{14} However, the military labor pool that supported the arrangement on occasion proved too tempting to the court. For instance, in 1448 nearly 20,000 grain-shipment soldiers were deployed elsewhere to suppress a major insurrection, severely disrupting the delivery of the grain to the capital. This in turn strained dynastic logistics – the approximately 700,000 imperial troops stationed in Beijing and its environs depended on the timely arrival of tax grain from the productive southern provinces.

The disruption catalyzed reform in the late fifteenth century that resulted, on paper at least, in an even more ambitious program to ship grain along the Grand Canal: 121,500 soldiers moving grain on 11,775 transport barges. The state permitted each grain-shipment soldier to carry items to engage in a limited amount of customs-free trade. The state also built and maintained a series of hostels and pharmacies along the Grand Canal for transport soldiers. The result was a stable and expanded flow of grain. By 1500 or so, approximately 4 million piculs of grain arrived in the capital each year.\textsuperscript{15} Court officials congratulated themselves on their success, putting in the mouths of a foreign envoy who traveled the Grand Canal to the capital the following testimony: “The rudders of the Central State are more numerous than the soldiers of this small barbarian kingdom. Would we dare harbor traitorous aspirations?”\textsuperscript{16}

\textsuperscript{12} For the staggering costs of building of the Ming’s northern fortifications, see Waldron, \textit{The Great Wall of China}, pp. 91-164.
\textsuperscript{13} \textit{Ming Taizu shilu}, 193-5a-b.
\textsuperscript{14} Lin, “Mingdai caojunzhi chutan”, p. 183.
\textsuperscript{15} Ibid., pp. 183-187.
For Wu Han and others, however, the state’s use of military personnel in major infrastructure projects and for other purposes not only drove many to desertion but also undermined military training. The young and the strong were favored for such labor gangs. The old and infirm were most available but least likely to benefit from regular military drill. According to this line of analysis, by no later than the 1430s, the armies of the Ming dynasty were in steep decline. A disastrous defeat in 1449 at the hands of the Mongol leader Esen at Tumu Fort (north of the capital at Beijing) is often offered as evidence for this collapse.\textsuperscript{17}

The debacle at Tumu represented a major crisis for the Ming dynasty. The reigning emperor was taken captive; his half-brother was hurriedly put on the throne in his place; the survival of the dynasty, especially the capital in Beijing, seemed uncertain. To revitalize the military, the Ming court enacted several reforms, two of which are most critical to our interests. The first was the augmentation of garrison troops through local militias. The second was the first large-scale effort to hire troops. In 1449 the central government instructed local officials to conscript between one and four men from each administrative community (which putatively contained 110 families). These men were to drill several weeks each fall and spring during lulls in the farming calendar. These local militias (literally “people’s stalwarts”) were intended for short-term defense of their localities. When called up for service, each man was to be provided with “travel grain”, i.e., a wage to feed him while on campaign.

The second effort to augment the garrison system during the fifteenth century was the initial and limited use of hired troops. The Ming imperial state employed a range of recruiting methods: it recruited men from within the ranks of garrison soldiers, that is, men from hereditary military households who were already legally bound to fulfill their family’s obligations to the state; it recruited members of hereditary military households who were not actively serving as soldiers but who were supposed to provide income to support their active-service relative; and it recruited those with no military obligations to the state. In each case, recruits generally received signing bonuses and monthly salaries. Later, during the widespread coastal piracy of the mid-sixteenth century, many generals actively recruited hired troops, offering competitive wages and intensive training in weapons and group combat.

Hired troops were especially numerous along the northern border. Already by 1500 or so, nearly 20,000 hired troops augmented dynastic defense

\textsuperscript{17} Mote, “The T’u-mu Incident of 1449”.
in the single northwestern region of Yansui.18 By 1550, officials were recruiting on a large scale. In the wake of destructive raiding in the capital region by the Mongol leader Altan in 1550, recruiting in several northern provinces yielded as many as 40,000 men in the single year of 1550. Wu Han argued that, by this point, hired troops had become the principal fighting forces of the Ming military – not in terms of numbers but in terms of efficacy. Garrison troops were not abolished but neither did they contribute greatly to the defense of the dynasty.19 As noted above, however, the state put them to use in a variety of ways.

For Wu Han and others, corruption again eroded whatever military advantages the hired troops offered. Part of the problem was that men signed up, received their bonuses, and fled as soon as possible. Officials at the time claimed that some men did this on a serial basis. At the same time, hired troops expected to be paid on time and did not hesitate to riot when the state failed to fulfill its obligations. As the dynasty’s fiscal conditions worsened in the early seventeenth century, wages were frequently in arrears. Wu Han estimated that, between 1610 and 1627, wages to hired troops were in arrears by nearly 10 million tael of silver (although it is not clear if they were being paid in grain, silver, or a mix of the two).20 To put this figure in perspective, the average annual income of the central government was somewhere in the neighborhood of 30 million tael of silver.

Overall, the system of hiring troops contributed to higher costs for military defense, especially along the northern border. In the mid-fifteenth century, the central government began to provide “annual subsidies” to garrisons to support the growing expenses of the northern border. By the early sixteenth century, such subsidies reached 430,000 tael and continued to rise steadily until the end of the dynasty. To cover the higher costs, court and local government levied surtaxes, sometimes years or even decades in advance, which according to Wu Han and others, in turn increased land flight, social discontent, and support for the rebels who eventually toppled the dynasty. During the last reign of the dynasty (1628-1644), these surtaxes amounted to nearly 30 million tael of silver.21

Finally, on the political and social fronts, a common perception at the time and in much modern scholarship is that, by the early seventeenth century, hired soldiers felt greater loyalty to their individual commanders

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18 Li, “Mingdai mubingzhi jianlun”, p. 64.
19 Wu, “Mingdai de jun bing”, p. 188.
20 Ibid., p. 197.
21 Li, “Mingdai mubingzhi jianlun”, p. 68.
than they did to the court or central government. In a similar vein, the most powerful generals, who considered their troops as a source of personal power, were loath to waste them in combat with the court’s enemies. Wu Han argued that during the dynasty’s last decades, these generals were unwilling to fully engage with rebel forces, which led directly to the fall of the Ming.22

Other, less well-known scholars have characterized the growth in hired soldiers in different ways. In 1940, the Japanese scholar Suzuki Tadashi examined the emergence and significance of “people’s stalwarts” and hired soldiers during the Ming.23 Like Wu, Suzuki contextualized the appearance of the people’s stalwarts as a response to the decline of the garrison system, a decline thrown into clear relief with the 1449 Tumu debacle. Suzuki, however, pointed to the great regional variation in the size and function of people’s stalwarts. He also viewed the people’s stalwarts as a facet of longstanding traditions of local self-governance, a characterization fully congruent with Japanese Sinology of the first half of the twentieth century.24 Thus, where Wu Han had written chiefly from the perspective of the central government’s efforts to revive the dynasty’s military, Suzuki more fully acknowledged the role of local government and local elites.

Suzuki’s understanding of mercenaries, too, differed from that of Wu Han. Although both argued that the widespread use of hired soldiers dated from the piracy crises of the mid-sixteenth century, Suzuki held that hired soldiers, particularly jia bing and jia ding, which might be translated as “house soldiers” and “housemen”, respectively, not only bolstered imperial military strength but also enjoyed considerable appeal among the general populace. He offered numerous examples of where contemporary observers portrayed carefully selected housemen as the key to success in battle. Enjoying preferential economic treatment and holding some level of personal loyalty to an individual commander, housemen were thought most effective as shock troops or as vanguard forces. Whereas duty as a people’s stalwart was an onerous obligation, to be evaded if at all possible, service as a houseman was an opportunity to earn cash and a means of escape from a village economy that had suffered considerable damage as
a result of piracy and efforts to suppress it. Thus, large numbers of young men were willing to fight for pay.\textsuperscript{25} Although Suzuki too acknowledged that their growing ranks imposed a serious fiscal strain on the dynasty in the long term, he argued that hired soldiers were militarily effective.

Finally, Suzuki disagreed with Wu about the challenge that late Ming commanders posed to the central government. He acknowledged that border generals did have the potential to become “minor warlords”, but he maintained that fighting with the Manchus prevented them from developing into a serious threat to Beijing. If the Qing had failed and these Ming border commanders had continued to grow in power, however, they would have emerged as warlords and brought “a revolution” similar to those that had ended many previous dynasties, Suzuki speculated.\textsuperscript{26}

In 1952, Suzuki published an additional study that focused more squarely on the socioeconomic conditions that gave rise to the “housemen”.\textsuperscript{27} Suzuki saw the housemen as part of a widespread desire for social advancement that predated the sixteenth century. Its background was the monetization of the economy, including the payment of some taxes in silver, improved standards of living, and changed attitudes toward the acquisition of wealth.\textsuperscript{28} Self-castration in the hope of securing employment in the imperial palace and “placing oneself in the care of the powerful” (\textit{tou chong}) were simply different manifestations of this same desire to advance, he wrote. He characterized housemen as sharing certain similarities with the long-term tenants of landlords in that they were sometimes cast as sharing fictive kin ties with their patrons. Suzuki described the housemen as simultaneously “trusted intimates, claws and teeth, and hawks and hounds”. He emphasized, however, that the sources for military housemen were by no means restricted to household servants.

Suzuki stressed not only the push/pull factor of the new opportunities. He also maintained that the supply of potential housemen had its roots in the intersection of land tenure patterns and strong state influence prevalent in North China, especially in the borderlands. During the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, military commanders, palace eunuchs, and imperial affines used their influence to encroach upon relatively plentiful farmlands that enjoyed tax-free status (whether because they were garrison fields, imperial horse pasturages, or acreage opened up under special government

\textsuperscript{25} Ibid., pp. 17-22, 25.
\textsuperscript{26} Ibid., pp. 23-24.
\textsuperscript{27} Suzuki, “Mindai katei kō”.
\textsuperscript{28} Ibid., p. 27.
incentives). As a result, the tax burden for the village or county as a whole fell heavily on those who remained in the rolls. In response, many placed themselves under the protection of powerful patrons. Farming households provided the labor to work the fields and tend livestock; they also paid rent to their patrons. The patrons in turn used their political connections to shield them from tax and labor obligations to the state and, perhaps even more importantly, from extra-legal levies that local officials imposed with great frequency. Later scholars, such as Ray Huang and Wang Yuquan, would debate whether this arrangement represented a form of political and economic exploitation by elites that reduced hapless peasants to the status of serfs or an economically beneficial accord that allowed farmers to keep more of the harvest for themselves and avoid arbitrary exactions from local officials. In any case, for Suzuki the basic equation was clear – the more land that military commanders controlled, the greater their ability to support housemen, which in turn increased their ability to extract rewards, honors, and special privileges from the court.

Although it is common to date the widespread use of housemen to the mid-sixteenth century, Suzuki pointed out that, by no later than the mid-fifteenth century, some military commanders maintained housemen on whose behalf they tried to secure rewards from the throne for battlefield exploits. By the mid-sixteenth century, the central government was issuing orders for commanders to recruit housemen (again along the northern border). During the late sixteenth and mid-seventeenth centuries, housemen grew even more prominent in contemporary consciousness.

Many writers at the time felt that housemen demonstrated superior valor on the battlefield. Border commanders were often careful to cultivate personal ties with their housemen, “sharing equally their joys and hardships”. Some housemen adopted the surname of their commander. In other cases, the housemen were bound through adoption or marriage ties to their commanders. Thus, it was felt, housemen soldiers were uniquely

29 Ibid., pp. 27-32.
30 Huang, Taxation and Government Finance in Sixteenth-Century China, pp. 107, 325-326; Wang, “Mingdai xungui dizhu de dianhu”. For a summary of the question and references to related Chinese and Japanese scholarship, see Robinson, Bandits, Eunuchs, and the Son of Heaven, pp. 36-37.
32 Ibid., pp. 222-223.
33 These familial ties are especially stressed by Zhao ("Lun Mingdai jundui zhong jiading de tedian yu diwei", p. 146), who argues that the prevalence of adoption within the ranks of the military surpassed that of any earlier period in Chinese history.
cohesive as units and willing to endure great suffering on behalf of their commanders. Commanders used units of housemen that might number in the hundreds to anchor much larger and less committed forces. Such bands of housemen sometimes appear in contemporary records as “death soldiers” (si shi) or “dare-to-die soldiers” (gan si shi) because of their reputed willingness to sacrifice their lives on behalf of their commander. Despite these strong ties of personal loyalty, as noted above, Suzuki maintained that both commanders and housemen remained under state control and did not pose a serious threat to the dynasty.34

For a variety of reasons, research on housemen all but stopped until the mid-1980s when scholars revisited the topic, often using new materials and offering new perspectives. In 1984, the Chinese scholar Xiao Xu examined housemen with particular attention to their development in Liaodong (sometimes referred to as southern Manchuria), a strategic region that bordered Korea, Jurchen lands (i.e., whose inhabitants would become the Manchus), and the eastern edge of Mongolia.35 Like Wu Han and most Chinese scholars, Xiao attributed the rise of housemen to the collapse of the garrison system and dated it to early in the fifteenth century, when a portion of housemen was recruited from among the ranks of garrison soldiers – a practice that was not officially recognized until late in the century. Xiao argued, however, that the primary source of housemen was hired soldiers, that is, men not registered in hereditary military households who voluntarily undertook military service for a limited term in exchange for money.

Perhaps Xiao’s greatest contribution was his attention to shifting patterns of funding for housemen. Early housemen were privately recruited and privately funded by commanders. One early source of funding was the income derived from lands seized by military commanders, as Suzuki had noted. Some commanders squeezed funds allocated for garrison troops under their commander to support their housemen. Others resorted to criminal activities. Late Ming commanders such as the famed Li Chengliang supported themselves through war booty, horse rustling in the borderlands, and coercive manipulation of prices in border markets.36

As the number of housemen grew and their importance to dynastic defenses became clearer, the central government took a more prominent role in financing their upkeep. Xiao observed that, during the mid-sixteenth

35 Xiao, “Mingdai jiangshuai jiading de xingshuai ji qi yingxiang”.
36 Ibid., pp. 110-111; Ma, “Mingdai de jiading”, pp. 234-235.
century, the central government gradually made explicit its commitment to supplying funds for food, arms, rewards, and mounts for the housemen. The process accelerated during the last quarter of the century until the costs for housemen were being figured into the annual subsidies supplied by the central government to cover border defenses.\(^{37}\)

Although scholarly literature generally casts any deviation from the founding Ming emperor’s policies as decline or collapse, a far better approach is to understand such changes as flexible responses to evolving challenges. 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 also 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 centres for extended periods of time).

As already noted, such annual subsidies posed an increasingly heavy burden on the finances of the central government. By 1590, efforts were afoot to cut costs by thinning the ranks of housemen, either by removing their weakest members or imposing strict caps on the number of housemen allowed for commanders of different ranks – ranging from ten to sixty. The most important commanders in Liaodong, including members of the Li family, however, ignored the new measures. The court did not push the issue for fear of alienating the generals in a time of dynastic crisis, and the restrictions became an empty writ.\(^{38}\)

Xiao also offered several interesting observations on the changing nature of the patronage system surrounding the housemen. Xiao argued that state funding for the housemen often undermined the strong personal tie established between housemen and patrons when recruiting and support had been private. In some cases, personal bonds suffered from the very success of housemen. Xiao offered the examples of the housemen of Li Chengliang (all “surrendered barbarians”), who were rewarded for their battlefield exploits with high positions and independent commands, which in time, weakened


\(^{38}\) Xiao, “Mingdai jiangshuai jiading de xingshuai ji qi yingxiang”, pp. 113-114; Zhao, “Lun Mingdai junshi jiading zhidu xingcheng de shehui jingji tiaojian ji qi fazhan”, pp. 88-89.
their ties to their patron.\footnote{Xiao, “Mingdai jiangshuai jiading de xingshuai ji qi yingxiang”, pp. 114-116.} He also noted the distinction between “in-garrison” and “accompanying” housemen. The former were recruited to serve for a designed term in a particular garrison, regardless of the comings or goings of individual commanders. The latter, in contrast, followed their patron, even into retirement when they would continue to serve and be supported by their commander despite his no longer holding a command.\footnote{Ibid., p. 115. See also Ma, “Mingdai de jingding”, pp. 229-231.} Housemen who followed their patron in retirement might become indistinguishable from the servants or long-term tenants of local elites. In other cases, they comprised a latent pool of manpower that local and central officials attempted to mobilize in times of crisis.\footnote{Zhao, “Lun Mingdai jundui zhong jiading de tidian yu diwei”, p. 147.} For the most part, Zhao Zhongnan (see below) highlighted the durability of the personal ties between housemen and their patrons in contrast to Xiao who emphasized their provisional nature.\footnote{Ibid., pp. 147-148.}

Critics during the Ming period objected that the growth in the numbers of housemen ultimately did not serve dynastic interests. Drawing able men from the garrison troops only hastened the garrison system’s collapse. The housemen’s military successes brought their commanders dangerous power and ambition. The privileges housemen enjoyed eroded morale within the ranks of ordinary soldiers. Qi Jiguang (1528-1588), a prominent general who had made skilled use of housemen and mercenaries, wrote:

> Garrison soldiers’ horses are given to housemen to ride; garrison soldiers themselves are given to housemen as servants; garrison soldiers’ grain is given to housemen for their support. In this way, we secure the hearts of 200 or 300 men but completely lose the hearts of 3,000 garrison soldiers under our command.\footnote{Qi Jiguang, “Deng tan kou shou”, in Qi Jiguang, Lian bing shiji, juan 4, cited in Xiao, “Mingdai jiangshuai jiading”, p. 117.}

Other officials of the late sixteenth century characterized the housemen as essentially parasitic, siphoning off food, labor, horses, and money from garrison and civilian populations. One popular jingle of the time held, “If you meet up with the Mongols, you’ll still have your life. If you meet up with the housemen, you’ll have nothing left.” Xiao thus concluded, “The housemen system not only held within itself the dependency and abuses inherent in the garrison system, which was a tool that exploited the classes and oppressed the people”, it added entirely new abuses. Among these he
included a shameless pursuit of self-interest over loyalty to commander or dynasty and a sharp decline in the quality of housemen by the early seventeenth century as men signed on for wages and commanders padded the rolls in order to extract more resources from the state.

The last major essay on Ming housemen appeared nearly two decades ago. In 1991, Zhao Zhongnan examined the socioeconomic conditions that undergirded the emergence of the housemen. Building on the much earlier work of Suzuki Tadashi and Wang Yuquan, Zhao Zhongnan emphasized the centrality of shifting patterns in land tenure. The concentration of lands in the hands of powerful landlords during the fifteenth and especially sixteenth century is taken as granted by many Chinese and Japanese scholars. Zhao, like Suzuki, believed that military commanders used their influence to privatize garrison lands on a large scale, creating a revenue stream sufficient to support housemen and withdrawing the lands from tax registers. At the same time, garrison soldiers and civilian farmers lost their lands in large numbers, producing a pool of men in need of employment and protection. The result, maintained Zhao, was multiple layers of dependence that bound the housemen to their commanders/patrons.44 Again following Suzuki, Zhao noted that the shift to mercenaries in general and housemen in particular depended on the partial monetization of tax and labor obligations to the state.45 Finally, perhaps Zhao's most important contribution was the explicit discussion of regional variation or specificity in the growth of housemen. In this, he drew on the work of previous scholars interested in Liaodong.46

In addition to garrison regulars drawn from Chinese households and the use of hired soldiers, the Ming state drew soldiers from non-Chinese sources in the wider eastern Eurasian military labor market.47 Through a variety of institutional mechanisms and personal connections, the Ming state actively recruited Mongols, Jurchens, Tibetans, Yao, Zhuang, and others into its military. The Ming valued such men for their specialized skills in riding, mounted archery, and mountaineering, their temperament (fierceness and indifference to cold, heat, and hunger) as “martial races”, and the fear they inspired among others.48

46 Ibi d., pp. 88-89.
47 For preliminary discussion of Ming efforts to integrate non-Chinese personnel into the garrison system, see Sŏ, “Eijo to eijogun – gunshi no senjū hōhō o chūshin ni”.
48 A small number of Japanese laborers and warriors who fled the harsh conditions of Hideyoshi’s campaigns in Korea in the 1590s were also impressed into Ming military service (Swope, A Dragon’s Head and a Serpent’s Tail, p. 215).
For the most part, such non-Chinese in the employ of the Ming state were settled on the northern frontier. Their leaders generally received military titles within the imperial Ming government commensurate with their previous local status. On one end of the spectrum, those settled within Ming borders received lands, salaries, and periodic gifts from the throne. They were also expected to fight in imperial campaigns, usually against relatively nearby foes. They could expect promotions and further rewards for valor and success on the battlefield. Although recognized as distinct from regular garrison troops, these men and their families were subject to supervision by Ming military authorities (both local and central). Thus, while Mongol men might fight as a Mongol unit under a Mongol commander perhaps against other Mongols (but equally likely against Chinese rebels or aboriginal revolts), overall command remained in the hands of Chinese generals. Chinese bureaucrats vetted battlefield exploits, processed paperwork for promotions or permission to relocate, maintained household registration in military garrisons, and adjudicated criminal and civil legal matters.  

At the other end of the spectrum, Ming control was largely nominal. The Ming state recognized certain Jurchen leaders, granted them nominal titles in the Ming military, designated their polities as garrisons, and permitted them access to the Chinese economy through horse markets on the border and gift exchanges (and opportunities for private trade) during “tribute” missions to the capital in Beijing. Through appeals to their sense of obligation, gratitude, and self-interest, the Ming state attempted to influence the behavior of Jurchen groups. Such efforts ranged from trying to ensure the safe passage of Korean envoys through Jurchen lands to allying with certain Jurchen leaders against others to prevent unification in Manchuria. During the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, many of the leading commanders in Liaodong maintained as many as several hundred Mongol and Jurchen warriors as housemen. Contemporary writings stressed their ferocity in battle, their skill in scouting, and their importance to their commanders’ success. Mongol and Jurchen leaders, however, also recruited Ming personnel, including military men; the rise of the Manchus (who would eventually conquer the Ming and establish the Qing dynasty, which

49  Henry Serruys wrote the foundational work on the Ming Mongols. For more recent work (and full citation to Serruys), see Robinson, “Images of Subject Mongols under the Ming Dynasty”, “Politics, Force, and Ethnicity”.
50  Xiao, “Mingdaijianghuaijiading”, pp. 108-109; Zhao, “Lun Mingdai jundui zhong jiading de tidian yu diweil”, pp. 144-145. Like Wu Han, Ma Chujian noted that the practice of recruiting Mongols and Jurchen as mercenaries dated back to the early fifteenth century: “Mingdai de jiading”, pp. 223-225. For the Jurchens, see Rossabi, *The Jurchens in the Yuan and Ming*. 
is discussed in the chapter by Christine Moll-Murata and Ulrich Theobald) is inseparable from this phenomenon.\textsuperscript{51} Thus, at least on the northern border, the Ming state (and individual commanders) had to compete on an international military labor market with other prospective employers.

Somewhere in the middle were communities of non-Chinese that were loosely integrated into the Ming polity and that were expected to contribute military forces only upon request. On the southwestern and northwestern peripheries, the Ming state recognized local leaders from families that had often held power for centuries. Recognition from the Ming throne, access to Chinese economic resources, and occasional recourse to Ming military support strengthened the position of these local leaders. However, the administration of regions under their control was staffed by local men rather than officials dispatched by the central government.\textsuperscript{52} Local populations were not rigorously integrated into the household registration system. One scholar has characterized the result as “dual sovereignty”.\textsuperscript{53} During the periodic struggles among local elites, incumbents and challengers might call upon Ming support. The Ming state, however, had a poor record of exercising effective control. Many officials argued against becoming entangled in violent struggles that were imperfectly understood and seldom essential to critical strategic interests of the dynasty.\textsuperscript{54} However, local leaders regularly contributed units of men to bolster Ming imperial forces in campaigns throughout most of China.

Finally, before turning to our common comparative axes and taxonomies, some discussion of the changing composition of wages is in order. Early in the dynasty, active-service men from hereditary military households – from senior officers to humble soldiers – picked up salaries in kind each month from imperial granaries. Dynastic regulations stipulated that each month a garrison commander was to receive 12\textit{shì} (each \textit{shì} was equivalent to 3.1 bushels or about 130 pounds), an assistant commander 8.5\textit{shì}, a chiliarch (that is, a commander of roughly 1,000 troops) 5.4\textit{shì}, a battalion commander 1.5\textit{shì}, and a common soldier 1\textit{shì}. Married soldiers with dependants generally received approximately 20 per cent to 30 per cent more than single soldiers without dependants. However, due to a variety of factors, all ranks generally received only between half and two-thirds of their

\textsuperscript{51} Iwai, “China’s Frontier Society in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries”; Wei, “Mingdai Menggu zhubu dui guishun Hanren de renyong ji\ ji\ junshi yingxiang”.
\textsuperscript{52} There was periodic debate about the relative advantages of staffing by local men or those dispatched from the central government.
\textsuperscript{53} Herman, Amid the Clouds and Mists, pp. 105-117.
\textsuperscript{54} Shin, The Making of the Chinese State, pp. 56-105.
official salaries (see below).\textsuperscript{55} Even taking into account the loss of wages to individual soldiers, the financial burden to the state was considerable. In 1373 for instance, the state distributed more than 3 million \textit{shi} of grain just to troops in the capital at Nanjing.\textsuperscript{56} Finally in the early decades of the dynasty, the state provided monthly stipends of 0.5 \textit{shi} to the widows of soldiers, provided they did not remarry.\textsuperscript{57}

Before I address the considerable temporal and spatial variations behind these figures, however, a broader picture of wages and prices provides some perspective on the position of military labor. As an overarching generality, garrison soldiers earned approximately the same wages as an average urban laborer, while officers received more. According to Ray Huang, rural men specially recruited by the famous general Qi Jiguang during the mid-sixteenth century were also “paid at the rate of day laborers”\textsuperscript{58}. Both garrison regulars and hired soldiers enjoyed the possibility of rewards for action on the battlefield such as taking enemy heads or particularly valorous acts.

During the waning decades of the sixteenth century, servants in the county offices of Wanping (in Beijing) earned on average 4.2 ounces of silver each year, wages in rice having largely been converted to payments in silver. Porters, water carriers, and day laborers in the capital earned about the same. During the last half of the sixteenth century, 1 \textit{shi} of rice was normally worth a bit more than half a tael of silver (but subject to market fluctuations especially in times of harvest failures). Clerks in the government offices in Wanping earned 6 \textit{dou} (one \textit{dou} was equivalent to 9.9 quarts) each month but also received accommodation and furnishings. The income of most of the working urban population in Beijing fell between 4 and 6 ounces of silver a year.

Given the relatively modest wages of Ming soldiers, rewards and bonuses could constitute a significant addition to their routine revenue. The variety and scale of “gifts” from the throne are discussed below. Killing an enemy in battle could earn bonuses of between 10 and 30 ounces of silver – provided that a state official verified the circumstances of the kill and the identity

\textsuperscript{55} Kawagoe, “\textit{Dai Min kai ten} ni mieru Mindai eijokan no getsuryōgaku o megutte”, pp. 39-40.
\textsuperscript{56} Okuyama, “Kōbuchō no men ma no shikyū ni tsuite”, p. 12.
\textsuperscript{57} Okuyama, “Minsho ni okeru gunshi no kazoku to yūkyū ni tsuite”. Okuyama suggests that as a result of government stipend incentives, the early Ming capital in Nanjing was home to a large number of military widows.
\textsuperscript{58} Huang, 1587, \textit{A Year of No Significance}, p. 172. Qi’s men, who were recruited in southern China, received 10 ounces of silver a year. When they were deployed near the Great Wall in the north, wages increased to 18 ounces a year (ibid., p. 251 n. 67). These are prescriptive figures that do not take into account possible losses through corruption or administrative inefficiency.
of the corpse. Even amounts that might seem trivial on first glance in fact were proportionally large. For instance, in 1510 as part of its effort to mollify soldiers from the northwestern garrisons of Ningxia, the court awarded each soldier 1 ounce of silver, a bonus amounting to approximately one month’s wages.\(^{59}\)

In terms of purchasing power, in the capital during the late sixteenth century, 1.3 pounds of wheat flour cost 0.008 ounces of silver; a pound of pork was 0.02 ounces of silver; a pound of either mutton and beef was 0.015 ounces of silver; a pound of pears was 0.05 ounces of silver, and eggplants cost 0.004 ounces of silver each.\(^{60}\) During the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, a painting from the previous Song or Yuan dynasties might fetch anywhere from 5 to 10 ounces of silver to the astronomical figure of 1,000 ounces.\(^{61}\)

As noted above, the Ming founder hoped that military units would be largely self-supporting. To that end, each active-service soldier was to receive 50 mou (1 mou was approximately 0.14 acre; 50 mou was about 7 acres) of land, which he shared with other male immediate family members of the original military household who had traveled with him. The active-service soldier was to keep half of the harvest to support himself and his family; the rest was to be turned over to garrison authorities. In reality, variation in the quality and availability of land ensured that soldiers received plots of different sizes. On the northern border, where soil was relatively poor and the population relatively sparse, and where this arrangement was intended as a way to stimulate agricultural development, a soldier might farm 70 or 80 mou (approximately 10 and 11 acres, respectively), whereas in places like the southeast with more productive lands and less land available, he might receive only 20 mou (less than 3 acres).

During the first half of the fifteenth century, the amount of grain that the state derived from these lands (nominally half the production) fluctuated sharply. 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. Thus within the space of thirty years, the revenue from farmlands available

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59 Ming Wuzong shilu, 62.10a-12a; 67.1b. However, to put this into perspective, one senior court minister received 100 ounces of silver for his contribution to putting down the same abortive princely revolt. See Li, “Zou wei ci mian en ming shi”, II, pp. 518-519.

60 These figures come from Geiss, “Peking under the Ming (1368-1644)”, pp. 156, 177-189.

61 Clunas, Appendix II, “Selected Prices for Works of Art and Antique Artifacts c. 1560-1620”.
for soldiers' salaries dropped by 90 per cent.\(^{62}\) It is unclear, however, whether this was merely the amount transported to the capital or if it included the amount received locally by the garrison administration. After all, there had to be sufficient grain available locally for the garrisons to feed the troops.

The government responded in several ways, depending on the nature of the local economy and the particular needs of the moment. In economically developed regions, commercial taxes were used to pay military salaries. For instance, in affluent Jiading, a portion of commercial taxes civil authorities assessed on shop fronts went to salaries in nearby Taicang and Zhenjiang Garrisons. As noted above, salaries for soldiers on the northern border were often subsidized by generous annual payments from the central government.

A related question is the nature of wages. The Ming founder set salaries in rice. Rice does not grow equally well in all places (and not at all along the northern border mentioned above), is expensive to transport overland because of its weight, and is subject to rotting if not properly stored. Thus, some kind of conversion, if only into other grains or beans, had always been in place. By the early fifteenth century, the Ming state began to commute a portion of monthly wages into paper currency. Thus for example, a garrison commander who drew a monthly salary of 10 shi might receive 80 per cent in rice; the state would then convert the value of the remaining 2 shi of rice into paper money. During the Ming (unlike the Yuan period), however, paper money never really caught on. In fact, it rapidly and consistently lost value. Hence, even partial commutation of wages into paper currency was not popular among military families for obvious reasons. During the 1430s, one source of resentment against Mongol officers stationed in Beijing was that they received their entire salary in rice.

In response to these complaints, by the mid-fifteenth century, the Ming state often commuted a portion of military salaries into items such as cotton textiles, black pepper, and other spices. By the mid-sixteenth century, the commutation of salaries into silver became increasingly common.

Shifting military challenges shaped wages. Okuyama Norio has shown that the Ming state’s deployment of large numbers of troops to the northern border for an extended period of time in the wake of the Tumu defeat of 1449 deeply influenced soldiers’ wages. As noted above, soldiers normally received their salaries, whether in grain, cash, or otherwise, from the granaries of the garrisons in which they served. During short-term deployments, to the northern border for instance, local border garrisons would pay them “travel wages” until they returned home. Dependents, who did not accompany

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\(^{62}\) Kawagoe Yasuhiro, "Dai Min kai ten ni mieru Mindai eijokan no getsuryōgaku o megutte", pp. 39-40.
soldiers on such tours, continued to draw the monthly salary at the home garrison granaries. When, in an effort to meet the Mongol challenge, the Ming state deployed tens of thousands of soldiers from hinterland garrisons to the north for years at a time, several problems emerged.

Particularly serious was the question of dependants. Soldiers often returned home to visit their families, with or without permission. To ameliorate such a problem, the state experimented with having family dependants accompany soldiers and officers to their new posts rather than remain in their original garrison unit. Another problem was that the men's regular salaries were still disbursed at their original garrisons. Traveling back and forth to pick up their wages was time-consuming and expensive. Some who returned home to pick up their wages did not return to their new assignments. Commanders along the northern border (and in the southern theater where Ming armies were periodically deployed to suppress aboriginal uprisings) successfully petitioned the throne to allow men to receive their monthly wages from granaries wherever they were currently deployed. For this measure to work, border garrisons (and smaller forts) needed to build and then fill new granaries. The construction of granaries was the easy part; securing sufficient grain on an ongoing basis proved more challenging. Administrative measures were also needed to ensure that wages were not paid twice.

As noted above, transporting grain overland was expensive and time-consuming, so garrisons experimented with a number of alternate strategies. One was more extensive use of commutation into items that could be easily transported – yet families still needed to eat. Another was for garrisons to dispatch officers to travel to the major granaries and storehouses of the capital and elsewhere to pick up grain on behalf of the entire garrison; sell it locally in order to purchase things like salt, pepper, etc.; and finally transport these goods back to the local garrison. There, soldiers would receive the goods as salary and sell them in order to purchase the goods they needed. For most soldiers, the various commutations undermined their economic positions. In still other cases, a mixed approach was adopted. For instance, soldiers from one garrison on the border received 80 per cent of their salaries in grain. The remaining 20 per cent was commuted to cash, which during the first six months of the year, they could pick up at local government offices. During the second half of the year, 20 per cent of their salary was commuted to pepper and other spices, which they had to get in specialized storehouses in the capital.63

63 This section is drawn from Okuyama, “Mingun no kyūyo shikyū ni tsuite”, pp. 133-143.
At the same time that the Ming military responded to shifting economic, demographic, and administrative needs, it also transformed China. Economic historians have pointed out that the network required to supply northern frontier garrisons with goods from the south was one of the central factors shaping the entire Ming economy, including its banking and monetization.

Sixteenth-century officials were acutely aware that commuting soldiers’ salaries into silver subjected them to fluctuations in the price of grain. Many reported to the throne that 1 shi of grain was commonly converted into 0.7 taels of silver, sufficient to purchase only 0.6 or 0.7 shi of rice on the market. In some cases, the rate was as low as 0.2 shi, a loss of 80% of the nominative value of soldiers’ salaries. Officials debated how to best address this vulnerability to price variation and impoverishment of military families. In 1538, the court approved plans to adjust rates of commutation according to grain prices. However, throughout the rest of the sixteenth century, the problem persisted. Either adjustments lagged too far behind market changes or local officials were reluctant to break from established conversion rates. Another solution was a partial return to payment in kind, most commonly with soldiers receiving rice for three months of the year and silver for the remaining nine months.

Local officials, individual military commanders and court ministers worked to address questions as they arose and showed considerable flexibility in their approach to the economic and military challenges posed by changes in determining, funding, and distributing soldiers’ wages. As one might expect given the larger socioeconomic changes transforming China, however, there was no simple solution that perfectly matched the demands of the state with the needs of its military personnel. Throughout the sixteenth century, soldiers (and their officers) periodically organized protests, especially in garrisons along the northern border, almost always in response to state actions that undercut their economic interests. These ranged from short-term and poorly coordinated cases, where violence was limited to screaming in the night and the threat of more, to military uprisings that lasted for months and required large-scale responses from the central government.

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64 Okuyama, “Mindai no hokuhen ni okeru gunji no getsuryō ni tsuite”, pp. 155-162.
65 In 1509-1510, riots and at least one mutiny greeted the court’s efforts to reassess tax rates on military farmlands (Robinson, “Princely Revolts and the Ming Polity”). For discussion of mutinies in Liaodong in 1535, see Morohoshi, “Mindai Ryōtō no gunton ni kansuru ichi kōsatsu”, “Ryōtō heihen to Ro Kei”. On the mid-century mutinies in Datong, see Hagiwara, “Mindai Kaseki ni Daitō kei no Hanran to Mongoria”. On the 1592-1593 Ningxia mutiny, see Okano, “Banreki nijūnen Neiha heihen”; Swope, “All Men Are Not Brothers”.

Variables, axes, taxonomies, and hypothesis

Zhao Zhongnan has been among the few scholars to discuss the legal status of housemen. He argues that although they may have enjoyed a superior social status as measured in terms of their salaries and privileges granted by their patrons, they possessed the same legal status as garrison troops. The Ming Code, the imperial legal code of the Ming dynasty, distinguished between those registered in civilian households and men registered in hereditary military households, most especially active-service soldiers. Zhao points to a regulation in the Collected Administrative Statutes of the Great Ming Dynasty, which stipulates that housemen were subject to the same Grand Reviews conducted by senior officials in the Chief Military Commission and Ministry of War that tested skills in riding and archery. He also notes that when their patrons were demoted, exiled, or suffered punitive beatings, housemen were subject to similar punishments.66 This is a promising line of inquiry but Zhao’s evidence here is far from compelling in terms of legal status. The Great Ming Code did not make garrison soldiers culpable for the transgressions of their commanding officers. Nor did it demand troops to follow their commander into exile.

The legal status of those registered in hereditary military households, in contrast, was clearer. They had an obligation to provide lifetime (or at least from the mid- to late teens to around 60) military service to the state, which in turn entitled them to regular wages (however inadequate), the use of government lands for farming for their own or accompanying families (though the probability of securing such lands diminished over the course of the dynasty), some tax and corvée breaks, and the possibility of medical care and economic assistance if they fell ill or were injured.67 Maintaining the massive garrison system, including its affiliated operations such as garrison schools, military examinations, training, benefits for widowed wives and/or orphaned children, etc., registration, and the voluminous paperwork required to keep things functioning, was difficult and costly.

The Ming state, like the previous Yuan dynasty, consciously followed a policy that kept large numbers of men formally registered in military house-

67 Regional variation marked the availability of medicine and quality of doctors for garrisons, as an official from the northwestern frontier of the empire complained in 1438 (Ming Yingzong shilu, 37.8a). Nonetheless, the state was expected to provide such resources even for distant border units.
holds. As noted above, this was done to maintain a broad and stable labor pool that could be used not only for defending the dynasty (e.g., guarding frontier borders, maintaining internal security, and suppressing revolts) but also for maintaining its infrastructure (e.g., transporting tax grain, constructing city walls, repairing dikes and other water works, etc.). This vast dynastic labor reservoir also served a prophylactic function; it absorbed men who might otherwise contribute to rival labor pools, such as criminal bands, rebel groups, or transnational communities, which challenged the Ming state.

Few contemporary observers, however, viewed these arrangements as either foolproof or static. In their discussions of the military, Ming commentators regularly invoked the phrase “In terms of soldiers, quality is more precious than quantity.” Writing in the late sixteenth century, the historian Lang Ying complained:

Today the military is no fewer than 1 million men and there are more than 200,000 in the capital. This can be said to be ample. Yet, when a region has a crisis, then troops are deployed from the Capital Garrisons, Datong, and Yulin [border regions]. Each time they are killed in great numbers. High ministers devote themselves to papering things over. When compared to the ancients who with several thousand men would decimate the enemy and with several tens of thousands were unbeatable wherever they turned, they were really no match. Today we can say that we have no military.

Elsewhere, Lang turned his attention to the comparative efficacy of hired soldiers and imperial regulars. He wrote that in antiquity the establishment of an army was to prevent disaster, but that in his day the establishment of the army was a disaster. He argued that garrison troops contributed nothing to the defense of the dynasty or the people. In cases of conflict, those who actually engaged the enemy were either local commoners or hired soldiers from other provinces. Similarly, those who died at the hands of the enemy were either male and female subjects from the area or those recruited

68 Although the even earlier Song dynasty (960-1279) did not employ the hereditary military household system, it did maintain extremely large armies at great expense in an effort to impose effective control over portions of the population that might otherwise challenge state authority or at least local government. The state also frequently turned to its armies as a general source of labor for infrastructure projects.

69 Lang, “San wu”, p. 154; Ming edn held at Zhongshan Library, 13.10b-11a; reprinted in Siku quan shu cun mu cong shu, zi 102, p. 545. The entry was entitled “Three Nones”, referring to no music, no history, and no military.
from elsewhere. Thus, the dynasty shouldered the burden of supporting garrison troops without gaining any defense for the people. Lang proposed that the state hold Grand Reviews, where garrison troops would compete with hired soldiers in archery and other events. If the garrison troops won, they would receive half the money used to pay hired soldiers. If the hired soldiers won, half the grain used to pay garrison troops would be used to hire more soldiers. Lang’s views suggest that in addition to socioeconomic changes, shifting elite attitudes toward the worth of the hereditary military household system may have facilitated the growing use of hired soldiers.

**Taxonomy of armies**

The Ming military does not fit easily into our taxonomy of feudal army, aggregate contract army, state commission army, conscript army, and modern volunteer army (or John Lynn’s slightly wider taxonomy from which I draw). Some elements of the Ming case resemble the state commission army. These include raising the army from among the ruler’s subjects and in the case of hired troops, the role of officers in recruiting troops, and enlisting voluntarily as individuals. Yet, the core of the Ming army at least through 1500 was the hereditary military households and its garrisons. These units were not recruited by officers but served on a compulsory basis by specially designated households that legally owed the state military labor.

In other ways, the garrison system might be seen as a sort of mass reserve army in that most of the time most soldiers spent their time farming rather than drilling or fighting. During a time of war, armies were assembled from the ranks of garrison troops and augmented through hired soldiers and/or aboriginal forces. Yet, garrison troops generally lived in or near garrison forts and cities, received wages and benefits from the imperial government, and were subject to bureaucratic and legal treatment distinctive to hereditary military households.

At the risk of sounding a discordant note in our common enterprise, I would suggest that assigning the Ming a place within a taxonomy explicitly derived from the historical particulars of western Europe (and its projections) probably obscures more than it illuminates. Large central states emerged early in China: they developed fully articulated bureaucracies, demonstrated the ability to extract considerable resources (labor, material,

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and money) from enormous populations that pursued diversified economic and social strategies, and possessed advanced technological and logistical (including military) capabilities. They predated the rise of “nation-states” in Europe by many centuries. The lack of anything comparable to the European aristocracy (after the tenth century), the early and sustained dominance of the imperial throne in the political and ideological realms, and the lack of contending paradigmatic armies (which is not the same as the disinclination or inability to adapt new technologies or methods) meant that many of the critical causal factors implicit in our taxonomy are less germane than they are in the case of western Europe. This is not to argue for a distinctive Oriental warfare per se but to acknowledge that the development of the Chinese military followed a different trajectory or at least a different chronology (certainly prior to 1800) than the one Lynn identified (and which he explicitly described as “a cultural and geographical pattern unique to the West”).\(^{72}\) Given that we are attempting to provide a global perspective on military labor, we should not reduce the rich diversity of historical experience of places such as China, Russia, or India to schemata derived from the recent “West”. The more pressing task would seem to be to reformulate our ideas in the light of new research and a wider body of empirical information.\(^{73}\) Even allowing for such caveats, some of our other terms of comparison have clear applicability for the Chinese case.

**Free/unfree labor**

On first blush, soldiers registered in hereditary military households would seem in most ways to fall into the category of unfree labor. They spent the vast majority of their time as tenant farmers on government-allocated lands and were subject to life service in the ranks of the imperial military. They did not enter into this service voluntarily; it was a hereditary responsibility of the household into which they were born. To abandon their lands, leave their posts, or avoid their burdens was to invite harsh disciplinary retribution by the Ming state.

\(^{72}\) Ibid., p. 506. Different trajectories do not preclude comparisons. For a systematic comparative study of the “military revolution” in Asia, see Lorge, *The Asian Military Revolution*. Lorge argues that European military systems and possibly governmental institutions needed “to become more Chinese before they could take full advantage of guns” (p. 21).

\(^{73}\) For calls to integrate greater historical depth and geographical variety into understandings of labor and migration, see Van der Linden, *Workers of the World*, pp. 1-6; Hoerder, *Cultures in Contact*, pp. 8-14; Lucassen, et al., *Migration History in World History*, pp. 7-17.
However, when we use terms such as “free” and “unfree” labor, we must remember that from its earliest days, the hereditary household system was porous. Escape was possible through illegal means such as bribes, false registration, self-maiming, and desertion. More importantly, the natural growth in the size of families meant that, over time, the relative burden of military service for the entire family diminished. It might pose a debilitating burden for an individual man or even his immediate family, but most members of the extended family would not feel the pinch at all, especially if they were located hundreds of miles apart. In fact, through success in business, the civil service examination, or crime, they could put substantial distance between themselves and relatives who served in military garrisons or in military agricultural colonies. Further complicating the situation was the fact that many soldiers simultaneously pursued other forms of employment, which ranged from the sale of their military skills and equipment to private patrons, to menial labor in roadside eateries. It is tempting then to see them as what Marcel van der Linden has termed “subaltern workers”.

Hired soldiers during the Ming should be considered free labor. These included both men who served in militias organized by county magistrates or local elites and those who offered their services as military retainers or housemen for imperial generals or civil officials. Men who fought for illicit groups such as bandits, pirates, and rebels might include both free and unfree labor, depending on the degree and variety of coercion involved in recruitment and retention.

Commodified/noncommodified labor

As many scholars have shown, conceptions of labor and wages have varied significantly according to time and place. Although at one level, commodified labor may be understood as a purely financial transaction whereby one party remunerates another party for his or her time, skill, and productive labor, such relations are embedded in larger social, cultural, and religious structures. Thus, it is not surprising to read in contemporary Ming sources that the imperial throne periodically “bestowed gifts” of gold, silver, paper

74 For insightful comments on the assumptions implicit in common notions of social classes, see Van der Linden, *Workers of the World*, pp. 28-32. Van der Linden stresses the grey areas between social classes, that most subaltern worker households combined several modes of labor, and that individual subaltern workers often “combined different modes of labor, both synchronically and diachronically” (p. 32).
currency, bolts of cotton, winter gowns, shoes, or even pepper upon its soldiers. The scale of the payments was frequently enormous and represented a sizeable if to date poorly analyzed portion of soldiers’ remuneration from the state. As an illustrative if randomly selected example, let us consider the summer of 1388 during the early days of the dynasty. In June the emperor gave more than 209,300 soldiers and officers from Suzhou and other southern garrisons in excess of 109,900 taels of gold and silver, 30,000 taels in paper currency, and 307,600 bolts of cloth.\footnote{Ming Taizu shilu, 190.4a.} Little more than two weeks later, the court announced rewards of 46,000 in cash, 255,000 bolts of cotton textiles, and 174,300 pounds of cotton fabric for approximately 153,000 troops from the northern garrisons of Beiping, Jizhou, and elsewhere.\footnote{Ibid., 190.5b.} In July, the throne again announced gifts for nearly 200,000 soldiers in the Fuzhou garrisons and almost 160,000 troops in the Fujian garrisons.\footnote{Ibid., 191.3b.}

Such gifts from the throne represented a considerable transfer of wealth to military personnel. One study has calculated that between 1369 and 1374 the throne issued 1 million taels of silver in gifts. Between 1368 and 1391, Hongwu ordered the distribution of more than 12 million bolts of cotton textiles, 3 million pounds of cotton, and 1.7 million sets of clothing as gifts. Approximately 80 per cent of such gifts went to the military.\footnote{Okuyama, “Kōbuchō no men ma no shikyū ni tsuite”, pp. 1-3.}

This rhetoric of imperial munificence owed something to Hongwu’s consistent efforts to establish authority and control in all facets of Ming life. He adopted the pose of a generous patriarch who cared for his people, including his warriors. Imperial mercy and munificence were to be reciprocated with gratitude, loyalty, and the desire to “repay the dynasty” (bao guo, bao xiao). The rhetoric of reciprocal obligations was not restricted to the ruler and his military but formed a pervasive element of contemporary conceptions of social life, religious practice, and political behavior. It is worth remembering that the army was of crucial importance to the fledgling regime. To the degree that we are interested in Van der Linden’s question of “which perceptions do the actors on the stage of history have of the reality that surrounds them, of themselves, and [of] each other”, it is important not to dismiss gifts from our consideration of military labor relations.\footnote{Van der Linden, Workers of the World, p. 371.} Occasional gifts from the emperor, in contrast to regular wages in cash and kind distributed by garrison authorities, were intended to forge
a direct tie between the Son of Heaven and humble soldiers, regardless of how tenuous that bond may have been in reality.

At the same time, Hongwu was fully aware that many officers treated their troops poorly and repeatedly reminded his commanders that they owed their success to the efforts of the common soldier.\(^{80}\) Battles were won not through the individual heroics of generals but through soldiers’ loyalty to their commanders and their willingness to risk their lives in combat. To win such loyalty, commanders had to care for the material needs of their men on a regular basis.\(^{81}\) Even in a political system as efficient and centralized as Ming China, and even with his exceptional power, Hongwu had no choice but to rely on many intermediate levels of administration to collect and distribute wages, supplies, and even his gifts to the dynasty’s soldiers. For this reason, he tried again and again to convince the officer corps that good treatment of the troops, including the fair and timely distribution of wages, was integral to advancing their own self-interest.\(^{82}\)

For later Ming rulers who lacked the charisma of the dynastic founder, such demonstrations of imperial munificence could be even more critical. Midway through the dynasty in 1521, the newly enthroned Jiajing emperor, eager to secure the loyalty of his military, announced his intention to bestow 2 taels of silver on each border soldier in recognition of their hardships. After consultation with the Ministry of War and commanding officers from the border, the court disbursed 743,812 taels of silver to 371,906 men.\(^{83}\) In April 1521, his cousin and predecessor the Zhengde emperor had died without an heir or a designated successor. Desperate consultations between senior court ministers and the Empress Dowager led to the choice of Jiajing, a complete outsider to the capital and court politics. The new emperor and his advisors purged the court of many prominent military generals who had enjoyed privileged access to the late emperor. Some of these military men had originally hailed from border garrisons such as Liaodong, Datong, and Xuanfu. Thus, Jiajing no doubt considered the massive sum of nearly 750,000 taels of silver a smart investment in his future.

Remuneration as gift-giving was not restricted to emperors. As Arthur Waldron has noted, nearly one-third of one early sixteenth-century official’s

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80 Two of eight injunctions issued on one occasion in August 1388 by Hongwu to his military commanders related directly to treating their men with benevolence and not inflicting injury on them (Ming Taizu shilu, 193.5a).
81 Ibid., 191.3b-4b.
82 Ibid., 192.2b-3a.
83 Ming Shizong shilu, 3.2a-b.
budget for wall-building was dedicated to gifts for troops. Magistrates and men of local standing similarly appealed to the rhetoric of gift-giving in the context of securing military labor. In times of crisis when men of either governmental or social authority needed to quickly raise levies of men for local militias, they held large banquets for which they would slaughter cows and provide liquor to recruits. The hope was that by showing their social inferiors such honor and respect, elites would secure the men’s gratitude and obedience, at least long enough to ride out the crisis. Accounts of banquet-giving are often accompanied by efforts to raise funds to pay for the recruits. Scattered accounts indicate that the magistrate or man of local standing might sell off a portion of his personal assets to generate cash to be used as wages. The nitty-gritty details of exactly how the men arranged such transactions and with whom are rarely available.

The use of banquets to secure the allegiance of men able and willing to provide military service was not restricted to men employed by or supporting the state. Rebels, brigands, and other men of violence used exactly the same methods to create bonds of patron and client or, in terms more recognizable to men of the day, older and younger brother, lord and follower. The enormously popular sixteenth-century vernacular novel *Heroes of the Water Marsh* (*Shui hu zhuan*) describes scores of greater and lesser such banquets. In addition to the obvious social dimensions of these banquets, they also served as an economic marker. Only a patron of some economic resources could hold a sufficiently generous banquet that would allow conspicuous consumption of meat and drink. It was also understood that the host, whether magistrate, man of local standing, or aspiring brigand chief, would retain the services of his men only so long as he continued to pay them.

In addition to regular wages paid in money and/or grain and periodic gifts of cash, clothing, or food items, soldiers received special rewards for their exploits on the battlefield. Ming troops who killed enemy soldiers were eligible for rewards in silver or promotion. To prove their claims, Ming troops were required to present the decapitated head of the enemy to civil officials, who were responsible both for verifying that the head belonged to an enemy combatant rather than, say, a civilian and for submitting the paperwork. Early in the sixteenth century, the posted reward for an enemy head along the northern border was 50 taels of silver. Private markets in places such as Liaodong, however, sold decapitated enemy heads, a practice

that the imperial government tried without success to eliminate. Rates for decapitated heads taken from the hinterlands or from the southern border were generally lower. The thinking was that they were taken from less fearsome foes.

To summarize, the Ming military labor market might be characterized as flexible and segmented. A portion of military labor, those registered in hereditary military households, was unfree insofar as such men were legally bound to offer military service to the state for their entire adult life, barring incapacitating injury, premature death, or dismissal for misbehavior or incompetence. However, it should be remembered that, even within hereditary military households, only a small proportion of men were called upon to render military (or other) labor to the state. Furthermore, in exchange for their labor, they received wages in goods and cash.

Hired soldiers, whether engaged for short or long terms, should be considered free labor and commodified labor. They were paid primarily in cash by the imperial government, local officials, or private influential elites. However, part of their “compensation package” regularly included additional “gifts” such as food, wine, and/or clothing. These gifts were essential in the formation of bonds of loyalty and reciprocal obligation. As incentives, the state also offered cash bonuses and promotions to both garrison regulars and hired soldiers.

Remuneration for the third variety of Ming military labor, aboriginal troops, is less clear but perhaps best understood as a variant of Lynn’s feudal or aggregate contract army in the following sense. Aboriginal warriors might owe military service to tribal leaders, who in turn owed military service to the Ming state. Thus, the Ming state in effect contracted entire contingents of aboriginal warriors rather than recruiting individual members. Aboriginal leaders, of course, expected remuneration from the Ming state. Higher titles, gifts (in cash and kind) from the throne, and field provisions were clearly part of the arrangement between the Ming state and aboriginal leaders. Scattered evidence suggests that aboriginal forces too were subject to the trend to commute supplies and wages to silver. In the mid-sixteenth century, aboriginal troops from the southwest deployed to fight piracy along the affluent eastern coastal regions received 80 percent of the value of their allocation of rice, fresh vegetables, and fuel for cooking in silver. Far less clear is whether the Ming state offered additional

85 Ming Shizong shilu, 3.11a.
86 Xu Jie, “Bi bian shi yi tiao”, in Xu, Shijing tangji, 23.23b (Wanli edn held at Beijing University Library; reprinted in Si ku quan shu can mu cong shu, ji bu, LXXX, p. 103).
cash payments. The nature of labor relations and compensation between tribal leaders and aboriginal warriors is perhaps the most opaque part of the equation. Thus, on the questions of free/unfree and commodified/noncommodified labor, further research is needed.

Deciding factors in Ming military labor relations

With the exceptions of Suzuki Tadashi and Zhao Zhongnan, scholars have shown limited interest in relating the rise of housemen (or any other developments in the military) to wider socioeconomic developments. By the mid-fifteenth century, the Ming economy, including the assessment and collection of taxes, had become partially monetized. Labor obligations to the state could often be met through the payment of silver. Changes within the garrison system ultimately resulted from wider social developments. Although Wu Han, Xiao Xu, and others were no doubt correct to draw attention to widespread corruption within the garrison system, the entire hereditary household system – whether military, saltern, mining, craftsmen, etc. – came to exercise a less direct influence on individual families. People moved, families diversified their economic activities and raised their social aspirations. This was less dynastic decline than a natural sloughing off of administrative institutions inherited from the Mongol empire, institutions that better reflected the interests and perspectives of the Mongol elite than the realities of China’s society or economy. The growth of housemen and mercenaries of all kinds should be seen as part and parcel of the overall trend toward the monetization of the economy, particularly service and labor.

However, obligations imposed by the Ming state never vanished altogether. Indeed, hereditary obligations linked to household registration during the early Ming could exercise a profound influence on household and lineage strategies. In an excellent case study based on the particulars of the southeastern province of Fujian, Michael Szonyi has observed, “informally,

87 For another exception, see Qiu, “Mingdai zhongqianqi junfei gongji tedian de xingcheng yu yanbian”.
88 Heijdra, “The Socio-Economic Development of Rural China during the Ming”.
89 Of course, private retainers and mercenaries were a longstanding feature of Chinese history, dating back to the earliest imperial dynasties of the classical period (second century BC). See Ma, “Mingdai de jiading”, pp. 193-194. Monetization frequently undermined accepted social hierarchies, which produced considerable unease among some Ming elite men. For a broad treatment, see Brook, The Confusions of Pleasure.
military-registered households hired mercenaries themselves to fulfill their obligations. He argues that “the Ming state’s military and taxation systems drove groups of kin to organize themselves”. 90

Contemporary observers were fully aware that the dynastic military system was inextricably tied to wider socioeconomic developments. Proposals were floated to monetize elements of military obligation to the state. For instance, the “purification of troops”, that is, tracking down and/or replacement of missing soldiers, was laborious, expensive, and inefficient. Some officials argued that a more effective policy would be to collect a fee in silver from households who “owed” an active-service soldier to the state – in the same way that households or communities that owed labor to the state could commute the responsibility into silver payments (a transformation nearly complete by the 1460s for some categories of service). 91 Deep concern about the importance of the hereditary garrison system to the political, economic, and military foundations of the dynasty, however, stymied any fundamental reform.

This monetization did occur with some forms of military service. The most obvious example was the decision to hire hundreds of thousands of soldiers to augment hereditary garrison forces discussed in the first section of the paper as a response to the battle of Tumu in 1449. The people’s stalwarts also witnessed a high degree of monetization. During the 1430s, local administrators in various parts of the dynasty had begun to draft men into local constabularies called people’s stalwarts, that is, they were not members of military households. Following the debacle at Tumu, people’s stalwarts were recruited in far larger numbers and their duties expanded to include military functions, which in some cases meant incorporation into garrison units. 92 By the end of the fifteenth century, the court formalized the policy and issued orders for its empire-wide implementation. 93 After experimenting with both conscription and hiring, many local magistrates concluded that hiring military labor yielded better results than did coercive recruiting. 94 The result was that the service levy appeared as a line item in

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90 Szonyi, Practicing Kinship, pp. 61 and 23.
91 For a brief discussion and citations to relevant scholarship, see Wu (Go), Min Shin jidai no yôeki seido to chihô gyôsei, pp. 187-192.
92 Kawagoe, “Sôkôki no minsôsei ni tsuite”.
93 Scholars debate the precise year. Saeki Tomi dates the national policy to 1489. See Saeki, “Min Shin jidai no minsô ni tsuite”, p. 35. Ray Huang sees 1494 as the year it became dynastic policy. See Huang, Taxation and Governmental Finance in Sixteenth-Century China, p. 111.
94 Kawagoe stresses the importance of conscription during the 1450s-1480s (“Sôkôki no minsôsei ni tsuite”, pp. 26-27).
local budgets, as say, forty people's stalwarts, with between 2 and 10 taels of silver designated for each man's pay.95 By 1500 or so, the silver to hire militiamen was regularly apportioned across the local population, in the form of either a land or a poll tax.96 Estimates of how many people's stalwarts were hired vary, but the scale was considerable – somewhere between 200,000 and 300,000 during the sixteenth century.97 One consequence of this policy was to increase the variability or elasticity of local budgets. In times of military crisis, county and prefectural governments needed to hire more militiamen quickly, which in turn necessitated a hike in local taxes that were paid in silver.98

Similarly, the military grain-transport system was subject to larger changes within the Ming economy. The late fifteenth-century reforms represented a form of monetization. Prior to this time, some farmers had been responsible for transporting tax grain to the capital, a duty that became far more onerous when the capital was moved to the north. Now, they instead paid a fee to local authorities and the military moved the grain.99 During the sixteenth century, the grain-transport soldiers ceased to serve much if any military function. During the early fifteenth century, personnel had been drawn from the pool of active-service garrison soldiers; by the 1430s, “supernumerary soldiers”, the men whose function was to aid active-service soldiers, were used in large numbers; by 1500, men completely outside the hereditary military households were increasingly hired as replacements. This last group of men often comprised men who were sailors and transport workers by trade. Men in the military grain-transport corps were not expected to drill, nor were they expected to be proficient with arms.100

Finally, the monetization of the economy, including many different kinds of corvée labor due to the state, on this scale in turn was sustainable only through Ming China's integration into the global economy, most particularly the steady flow of silver from Spanish mines in the New World.101

95 Estimates for wages are from Saeki, “Min Shin jidai no minsō ni tsuite”, pp. 53-59. People's stalwarts might win additional bonuses for noteworthy service or be subject to fines for failing to meet their quotas of, for instance, smugglers.
96 Ibid., p. 48.
97 Saeki Tomi (ibid.) suggests 300,000, while Liang Fangzhong prefers 200,000. See Liang, “Mingdai de minbing”, Zhongguo shehui jingjishi jikan, 5.2 (1937), pp. 200-234; reprinted in Wu, Mingshi yanjiu luncong, I, p. 266.
98 Huang, Taxation and Governmental Finance in Sixteenth-Century China, pp. 111-112, 126.
100 Ibid., pp. 191-192.
101 The literature on silver and the Ming economy is voluminous. For a convenient point of entry, see Atwell, “Ming China and the Emerging World Economy”.
If changes in the Ming economy, particularly a trend toward monetization, deeply shaped military labor relations, the highly fluid Chinese military labor market also explains much. Nearly all commentators, whether capital ministers, provincial authorities, county magistrates, or local elites, took for granted that substantial numbers of men could be mobilized quickly for military service. When a dangerous princely revolt occurred in 1519, rather than depend on garrison forces, the well-known literatus Wang Yangming (1472-1529) sought his troops locally, recruiting 2,000 to 3,000 men from small counties and 4,000 to 5,000 men from large counties as a way to raise an army quickly. The state provided provisions but the recruits supplied their own weapons.102 During the piracy crisis of the mid-sixteenth century, one official, Zheng Xiao, offered the following proposal: “We should search out and recruit ten men who are adept in martial arts. Each of them shall instruct one hundred men. After one month, again have each one teach ten men. Thus we will able to secure ten thousand men.”103 Although the official expected that training would be necessary, he had no doubt about the pool of men available. The initial training in this case, it should be noted, was to be provided neither by the state nor by military instructors but by hired soldiers already possessed of skills in the martial arts.

Similarly, well-informed officials assumed that arms of the day, including bows and arrows, metal-linked whips, spears, cudgels, and swords, circulated widely among the subject population. Writing in the midst of a large-scale rebellion in 1510, the senior minister Yang Yiqing (1454-1530) recommended that each household in regions affected by the rebellion keep these weapons at hand. Strong young men and hired laborers fulfilling their labor obligations toward the state were to drill with these weapons. Likewise in the late sixteenth century, the famed official Lü Kun (1536-1618) advocated regular drill, this time under the instruction of professional instructors, in the use of “spears, swords, bows and arrows, short cudgels, rope whips and other such weapons” during agricultural slack periods.104

Implicit in these various proposals was the idea that the state or its local representatives could shed excess military personnel once a crisis had passed. Although some advocated registering new recruits into the hereditary military system, others explicitly rejected such a policy. Their most common argument was that permanent registration would undermine

103 Zheng Lüzhun, Zheng Duan jian gong nian pu, 3.22b (Wanli edn held at Shanghai Library; reprinted in Si ku quan shu cun mu cong shu, shi 83, p. 558).
104 Robinson, Bandits, Eunuchs, and the Son of Heaven, p. 95.
recruiting efforts. Men were attracted by the promise of cash and repelled by permanent obligation, they insisted. 105

*Ad hoc* recruiting held appeal for several reasons. For local officials, it provided a relatively high degree of autonomy. They could mobilize local men without incurring long-term fiscal responsibilities, responsibilities that would have required substantial modification of tax regimes, which in turn would have meant negotiation not only with higher-ups but also with local populations. Similarly for the central government, local *ad hoc* recruiting offered several advantages. It was one way to mitigate the challenges that great distances and enormous regional variation posed in the age before telegraphs and steam-powered travel. Local officials (or at least their staffs) had a surer sense of how and where to recruit quickly. Increasing the number of hereditary military households would have expanded an already overstretched bureaucratic structure and, in principle, put garrison authorities on the hook for expenses related to medical care, assistance to widows and orphans of fallen soldiers, and stipends to the lame. 106 For better or for worse, the flexible military labor market saved the central government from the need to push through large-scale fundamental reforms.

Critics of recruiting focused on concerns of finance, security, and governance. Officials frequently expressed frustration that the state’s vast financial commitment to the hereditary military household system was essentially money down the drain. Hiring mercenaries required additional funds on top of standing obligations. These costs could add up quickly. Less than one year after advocating hiring martial artists as troops and trainers as part of an effort to organize a force of 10,000 men, Zheng Xiao expressed some surprise that “within a week’s time of the pirates entering our jurisdiction, we have already used more than 9,000 taels of silver for recruiting soldiers, feeding them, paying out on bonuses, and providing rewards”. 107

The ability of the central government, county magistrates, military commanders, and even private subjects with sufficient social status and

105 In 1431, a military officer from the border region of Shaanxi suggested that men who had served in earlier military expeditions in the steppe be kept as a kind of reserve force that would report monthly for drill. The court rejected his proposal. Implicit in its reasoning was that, once men had completed their tour, the soldiers would return to their original units and civilians would return to their farms or herds (*Ming Xuanzong shilu*, 76.8b).

106 Sometimes wages continued to be issued to soldiers even after their death on distant battlefields, usually because it took some time before garrison authorities received notification of death. Occasionally they tried (usually unsuccessfully) to make bereaved family members repay such wages (*Ming Yingzong shilu*, 36.5a-b).

economic means to recruit hundreds or even thousands of men quickly (in the space of days or weeks) strongly suggests the existence of a large pool of young men whose labor could be temporarily removed from agricultural production, animal husbandry, artisanal occupations, and other economic activities. This situation is perhaps most profitably viewed from the perspective of family units rather than individuals. Many families pursued sophisticated economic strategies of diversification designed to hedge against risks. Thus, although agricultural production might comprise the core economic activity of the family, individuals within the family would commonly engage in other activities, either full- or part-time. Adult females might contribute to family production through weaving, peddling jewelry, selling food as small vendors, etc. Adult males might work for part of the year on other people's farms, engage in commerce, fish, hunt, etc. Children could serve as herders for cows and sheep or help with simple tasks on the farm. Thus, many households pursued diverse economic activities in a way that allowed for variable but relatively predictable factors, such as season, natural resources, and age, and for other less predictable factors, such as epidemic, drought, warfare, or dramatic changes in the composition of the household.

Thus short-time service in the military was one element of a larger strategy of economic diversification pursued at the level of individual households or groups of households linked through kinship and or marriage. Young men might serve for a single “tour” of several months or might serve periodically over a more extended period of time depending on demand within the military labor market.

The dynamic for men who served as mercenaries for longer periods of time differed in several important ways. Although such men, too, are best understood in the context of larger family economic strategies, their absence was generally more enduring. Detailed documentary material related to their contributions to larger family units is limited, but evidence from men serving in hereditary military households would suggest that time and distance often weakened economic ties to larger family units. To the degree that “housemen” became long-term retainers, it seems likely (but far from certain) that regular, substantial contributions to their original household may have diminished. An initial study of one region famed in the sixteenth century as a source of military labor, Yiwu County, indicates that military service dramatically influenced local demographics. “Most young men in Yiwu”, wrote one sixteenth-century observer, “have given up their original trade, responded to recruiting drives, and joined the army”. Local
officials complained that the resultant dearth of young men impinged on their ability to secure sufficient labor for government needs.108

As noted above, the conditions of service of “household men” varied significantly, from fairly straightforward short-term arrangements whereby they received cash for military labor, to long-term arrangements that involved accompanying their employer to new assignments or even into retirement. Presumably long-term arrangements involved more than a simple economic transaction: feelings of personal loyalty, an identification with other men serving under the patron, and perhaps the adoption of fictive kinship or oaths of brotherhood. Such behaviors no doubt also shaped the identity of those soldiers serving in regular garrison forces.

In addition to (a) economic changes and (b) supply and demand in the labor market, ideological or political considerations also shaped military labor relations during the Ming. More specifically, the Ming state considered the hereditary military household system and imperial garrisons essential to the maintenance of the empire. The great physical size, geographic variation, ethnic complexity, and economic diversity of China generated considerable centrifugal force. Given such centrifugal pressure, the Ming state went to considerable lengths to ensure the viability of the dynasty by strengthening the centre. Thorough control of the military and the many functions built into the hereditary military household system were essential to such efforts.

The Ming founder used various methods to prevent his generals from gaining sufficient power to challenge the court. Generals were assigned command of garrison units for specific campaigns. Once the fighting was concluded, the generals were to be recalled to the capital or to their positions on the border.109 The founder divided the highest level of military command into five military commissions to prevent an undue concentration of power in the hands of single man or institution. He also killed many of his leading generals during sanguinary purges that left tens of thousands dead.

The hereditary garrison system, too, was a critical instrument of central control. Ultimate responsibility for household registration of military families was in the hands of the central government. The court dispatched officials to local garrisons to track down or replace deserting (or deceased) soldiers. Enormous swathes of territory were turned over to the garrisons

109 The prominent official He Qiaoxin considered this as one of the founder’s six greatest accomplishments as a ruler (“Di wang gong de”, in He, He Wen su gong wen ji, 2.24a, 1694 edn; reprinted in Taibei: Weiwen tushu chubanshe, 1976, 1, p. 109).
for farming. The central government retained control over the lands, the men who farmed them, their harvests, and granaries. The central government exiled criminals to serve as soldiers in garrisons, especially along the borders. During the early decades of the dynasty, the garrison system was the mechanism through which the central government forcibly relocated hundreds of thousands of men, women, and children from one part of the empire to others (as part of economic reconstruction). Further, it was the tool through which the court tried to keep them there on a permanent basis. When the state first approved measures to hire soldiers from within and beyond hereditary military households, it initially tried to limit the pool to men who could demonstrate evidence of proper household registration.110

Thus, although officials in the central government were fully aware of the monetization of parts of the economy, the flexibility of the military labor market, and the viability of hiring soldiers to defend the dynasty, there is little evidence that abolition of the hereditary military household system or the imperial garrisons was ever given serious consideration. In the case of the Ming dynasty, maintenance of the hereditary military household system was integral to imperial power and legitimacy. This involved a measure of irony. The Ming court had adopted the hereditary military household system from the Mongol Yuan dynasty, a regime that the early Ming emperors spent considerable time decrying as abusive, corrupt, and fundamentally incompatible with the enduring values and customs of Chinese civilization.

Thus, several factors shaped the particular configuration of military labor relations under the Ming. Insofar as dynastic legitimacy became entwined with strong control over military resources and the Ming wished to be considered a successor to the Yuan, the hereditary military household system and its vast array of garrisons owed much to ideological factors.111 One might argue that the Ming state’s use of Mongol, Jurchen, Yao, and other non-Chinese warriors could be explained in similar terms. The initial emergence of hired soldiers in the fifteenth century and more especially their proliferation during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries must be understood in the wider context of socioeconomic changes transforming China. The growing, if still uneven, use of silver as a medium of exchange,

110 Li Du (Mingdai huangquan zhengzhi yanjiu, pp. 152-226) stresses the central government’s high level of control. Li notes the initial efforts to recruit only from among properly registered men in “Mingdai mubingzhi jianlun”, p. 66.
111 For the Ming court as a successor to the Yuan, see Robinson, “The Ming Imperial Family and the Yuan Legacy”.
the monetization of labor and material obligations to the state, and the decline of the hereditary occupation household system all contributed to conditions favoring hired soldiers. Finally, the large and flexible military labor market must be mentioned. It arose as a result of the socioeconomic conditions enumerated above, a steadily growing population (including the population of young, often single men), diversified economic strategies pursued by individual families and lineages, and competition for military labor by the imperial state, local authorities, private elites, and other groups ranging from mutual-aid societies among farmers, men of force, bandits, pirates, and rebels. This competition for military labor almost certainly contributed to its commodification.