

Chinese Rural Society in Transition

To a Revered Teacher
Frederic E. Wakeman, Jr.
and
The Memory of My Parents



INSTITUTE OF EAST ASIAN STUDIES
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Chinese Rural Society in Transition

A Case Study of the Lake Tai
Area, 1368–1800

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Introduction

Rural changes and urban growth were two of the most fundamental socioeconomic trends discernible in the Lake Tai region during the Ming-Qing period (1368–1800). We witness the disappearance of agricultural bondservants, the revival of old towns and the growth of new ones, the development of rural industry, the adoption of new modes of farming, the rise of absentee landlordism, changes in the composition of the social elites, the emergence of new tenurial relationships, and a rapid population growth from 1650 to 1850. In the face of these changes, the hierarchically organized rural society and basically self-sufficient peasant economy of the fourteenth century slowly disintegrated and transformed into a relatively egalitarian rural community and a market-oriented economy.

Various studies on the Chinese rural economy of the Ming-Qing period have attempted to explain these changes. In his classic study, *Agricultural Development in China, 1368–1968*, Dwight Perkins sees population pressure as the major dynamic force behind the increased agricultural output in this period. He argues that an expanded population led to migration and, consequently, to an increase in the total acreage of cultivated land, an intensification of agricultural production, and the dissemination of New World food crops.¹ Perkins' study has greatly contributed to understanding Ming-Qing economic history. However, given China's immensity and its socioeconomic and topographical diversity and complexity, the conclusions of a general history are apt to overlook important regional differences. My conviction is that the understanding of a general history should be built up by a complex appreciation of local variety.

In "Food Supply and Population Growth in Southwest China, 1250–1850," James Lee challenges Perkins' overall estimates and argues that in southwest China from 1700 to 1850, the population in-

¹ Dwight Perkins, *Agricultural Development in China, 1368–1968*, pp. 184–189.

crease from five million to more than twenty million was due largely to immigration rather than to the use of improved agricultural techniques or an increase in arable land. Immigration from 1700 on was largely a response to the rising demand for labor that resulted from the well-known expansion of mining enterprises in the southwest.²

Some historians emphasize commercialization as the prime force behind this socioeconomic change. Liu Yongcheng maintains that the expansion of market demand for agricultural goods stimulated the production of cash crops and the commercialization of food crops, thereby promoting improvements in agricultural technology and leading to social differentiation among the peasants. Some of these peasants then emerged as managerial landlords who employed agricultural workers on money wages and grew crops mainly for the market.³

Oyama Masaaki, a leading Japanese historian of the Ming-Qing transition, argues that the Ming dynasty was a slave society that began to break down as a result of the commercialization of handicraft industries in the mid to late Ming, a trend that enabled slaves and tenants in the Jiangnan region to achieve economic independence. Once slaves and tenants could maintain themselves independently, the old slave-owning landlord class declined, providing the opportunity for a rich-peasant class to emerge. According to Masaaki, this economic trend was accompanied by the growth of a new community consciousness on the part of the peasants and the beginning of more intensive forms of class struggle with the landlords over production surplus as the control over community regulations was transferred from the managerial landlords to the tenants who made up the community. The disintegration of the old system resulted in a steady increase in the number of urban landlords in the Yangzi delta region in the late Ming-early Qing. That rent arrears were handled by the tax office within the county *yamen* (government) indicates that the relationship between large landowners and tenants was one of direct political control and subordination.⁴

² James Lee, "Food Supply and Population Growth in Southwest China, 1250-1850," *Journal of Asian Studies* 41.4 (1982): 742, 743.

³ Quoted in Yeh-chien Wang, "Notes on the Sprouts of Capitalism," *Chinese Social and Economic History from the Song to 1900: Report of the American Delegation to the Sino-American Symposium* (hereafter *CSEH*), p. 53.

⁴ Oyama Masaaki, "Large Landownership in the Jiangnan Delta Region during the Late Ming-Early Qing Period," in *State and Society in China: Japanese Perspectives on Ming-Qing Social and Economic History*, ed. Linda Grove and Christian Daniels, pp. 101-102, 142-143, 146-150.

Evelyn Rawski's book can be regarded as representative of this approach in the United States. It focuses on two provinces of south China: sixteenth-century Fujian, a coastal province, and eighteenth-century Hunan, an inland province. Rawski attributes the rapid agricultural and commercial growth in these provinces to an unusual expansion of demand resulting from such changes as the increased foreign trade in the sixteenth century and the transportation of crops to national grain markets in the eighteenth century. She argues that because participation in the market offered a higher profit for food producers, farmers were encouraged to intensify cultivation by increasing the amount of water, labor, and fertilizer applied to the soil; these efforts resulted in higher acreage yields for food. Market opportunities could also divert peasant efforts away from grains into other types of production. Rural handicrafts and the development of specialization in cash crops were two aspects of this trend.⁵

There is difficulty, however, with this second approach. Evidence suggests that, during the late Ming-early Qing period, the force of the market was unable to automatically bring about the dissolution of agricultural bondservants and the improvement of the social position of tenant farmers in the Lake Tai region. The socioeconomic position of agricultural bondservants depended on the landlord's ability to control them, in particular their movements. In fact, evidence suggests that the impact of commerce on the peasant economy cannot be discussed without also considering the specific triangular relationship among the state, the owners of the means of production, and the direct producers.

In the historiography of the People's Republic, the role of the state in socioeconomic development before 1949 has been almost invariably cast as a negative one, the state representing the vested interests of the ruling landlord class and suppressing any demand for social and economic changes from other social classes. Only within the last decade have a few mainland China historians begun to suggest that the Qing government was one of the prime positive forces for socioeconomic change in the premodern period.⁶ Peng Zeyi, for example, maintains that measures adopted by the Qing state allowed handicraft workers to develop their own economy and helped stimulate production. Four policies, according to Peng, were crucial:

⁵ Evelyn Rawski, *Agricultural Change and the Peasant Economy in South China*.

⁶ Yeh-chien Wang, "Notes on the Sprouts of Capitalism," *CSEH*, p. 51.

1. The abolition of the Ming system of hereditary registered craftsmen. In effect, this policy liberated handicraft workers by eliminating their obligation to perform corvée labor.
2. The alteration of the tax structure to exclude taxes in kind in silk, satin, or cotton goods. This served to expand market exchange and aided the development of the handicraft textile industry.
3. The decrease in size and scope of the official handicraft industries and the use of hired laborers within these industries. Like the first policy, this also eliminated the obligation of civilian handicraft shops and workers to provide goods or services.
4. The liberalization of the operation of civilian mining and metal-work industries.

Responding to the development of productive forces, merchants steadily increased the goods they sent to distant markets. A transformation in production relations also took place. As it became increasingly difficult for individualistic modes of handicraft production to fulfill the demands of the expanding market, many merchants began to distribute products themselves and organized large-scale retail operations.⁷ It would be a mistake to neglect the significance of a *laissez-faire* stance by the Qing state toward the handicraft industry; it is equally negligent, however, to focus only on the supply side of the economy without considering the demand side, as does Peng Zeyi's study.

Other mainland Chinese historians regard landlords as an exploited social class. They emphasize that the heavy burden of taxation imposed by the state on the landlords was a reason for the socioeconomic changes. Bao Yanbang, for example, proposes that the tax system on grain transported via the Grand Canal in the Ming dynasty was in essence an example of the feudal rulers' brutal exploitation of the landowners by tax and corvée. This heavy taxation burden forced the peasants to engage in handicraft production to earn the extra income needed to subsist. Consequently, they were drawn into the developing commodity economy and markets where they were subjected to heavy exploitation by commercial capital and usurers. As a result, many were financially ruined and abandoned their land. Numerous instances exist of peasants bitterly resisting the collection of taxes and rent in grain tribute provinces.⁸ This oversimplified interpretation of

⁷ Peng Zeyi, "The Development of the Handicraft Industry in the First Half of the Qing Dynasty," *CSEH*, pp. 105–106.

⁸ Bao Yanbang, "The System of Tax on Grain Transported from South China via the Grand Canal during the Ming Dynasty," *CSEH*, p. 74; Zhuge Ji, "The Sino-American Symposium on Chinese Socioeconomic History from the Song Dynasty to

the socioeconomic transition by this group of historians seems to be based more on political dogma than on critical historical research.

Philip Huang calls his approach toward the analysis of the transformation an integrated one. In his book, he is concerned mainly with the long-term pattern of agrarian change in North China; he regards population pressure and commercialization as the prime instigating factors of the change. He maintains that various kinds of peasants (such as rich-peasant-farmer and tenant-laborer) and farms (such as managerial farm and family farm) differed in the ways they responded to population pressure and commercialization. In essence, Huang's book is an in-depth analysis of how different kinds of peasants and farms responded to changes. He maintains that the individual peasant household's economic situation determines the manner and degree to which particular demographic and commercial changes affect long-term trends in socioeconomic change. One of his famous theses is that the spread of cotton cultivation led to the social stratification of small peasantry. He argues that cotton cultivation brought far greater return than food grains, thereby providing the opportunity for some peasants to profit from farming and to move up the socioeconomic ladder. But it also increased the risks of farming. Many peasants who turned to cotton slid down the ladder. These less fortunate peasants became agriculture laborers and sold their lands to managerial farmers or rich-peasant households.⁹

While Huang correctly stresses the great variety of personal and institutional responses to the processes of change, his approach has two weaknesses. First, since he focuses on the family farm as the unit of analysis, he should have also considered family by-employment. With the help of income derived from family by-employment, peasants with a failed cash crop might have been able to avoid selling off their lands and sliding down the socioeconomic ladder. Second, before the advent of modern sociological or anthropological studies, source materials available for premodern history study were not detailed enough to provide the quantitative evidence needed to prove that most land sellers were in fact down-moving peasants with a failed cash crop.

Many historians of China engage in the study of Ming-Qing history in the hopes of finding explanations for China's economic backwardness in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Most of these studies adopt a negative comparative approach focusing on what did not hap-

1900," *CSEH*, p. 146.

⁹ Philip C. Huang, *The Peasant Economy and Social Change in North China*, pp. 3-32, 62, 106, 108-109.

pen in China and why. The most prominent preoccupation in this genre of inquiry revolves around the question of why China failed to undergo the sort of modern transformation that first took place in Europe. In the West, two of the most stimulating efforts to explain the Chinese failure to develop in the same way as Europe are Max Weber's *The Religion of China* and Mark Elvin's *Pattern of the Chinese Past*.¹⁰ In China, discussions of the so-called sprouts of capitalism began in 1955; in 1989 five volumes of collected articles on the subject were published.¹¹ At the core of all these discussions lies the belief that "China's feudal society had developed a commodity economy. Therefore, it carried within itself the embryo of capitalism and would have gradually developed into a capitalist society even without the influence of foreign imperialism."¹²

The main weakness of this line of thinking is that it is based on biased historical research. To prove the existence of the capitalist mode of production in Ming-Qing China, these mainland Chinese historians overemphasize certain uncommon or semantically ambiguous cases and neglect questions concerning what had changed during the Ming-Qing period and what were the main characteristics of early modern Chinese society and economy.

This study is concerned mainly with long-term patterns of agrarian change in the Lake Tai region between 1368 and 1800. With this perspective in mind, it focuses on the agrarian structure as the unit of analysis. The agrarian structure referred to here consists of four kinds of socioeconomic relations: the relations among all community members, including peasant economic cooperation and the self-government of peasant villages; the "tax relations" between the state and the landowners; the relations between landowners and their

¹⁰ See Edward L. Farmer, "An Agenda for Ming History: Exploring the Fifteenth Century," *Ming Studies*, Fall 1988, p. 9.

¹¹ Foon Ming Liew, "Debates on the Birth of Capitalism in China during the Past Three Decades," *Ming Studies*, Fall 1988. The five volumes are: (1) *Zhongguo zibenzhuyi mengya wenti taolunji* (Discussions of the question of the sprouts of capitalism in China), 2 vols. (Beijing: Sanlian shudian, 1957); (2) *Zhongguo zibenzhuyi mengya wenti taolunji, xubian* (Continuation of the discussions of the question of the sprouts of capitalism in China) (Beijing: Sanlian shudian, 1960); (3) *Ming-Qing zibenzhuyi mengya yanjiu lunwenji* (Collected research papers on the sprouts of capitalism in the Ming Qing period) (Shanghai: Renmin chubanshe, 1981); (4) *Zhongguo zibenzhuyi mengya wenti lunwenji* (Collected articles on the question of the sprouts of capitalism in China) (Jiangsu: Renmin chubanshe, 1983).

¹² Mao Zedong, "Zhongguo geming he Zhongguo gongchandang" (The Chinese Revolution and the Chinese Communist Party), *Mao Zedong xuanji* (Selected Works of Mao Zedong) (Beijing: Renmin chubanshe, 1969), vol. 2, p. 589.

tenants, hired laborers, or bondservants; and the relations between the state and the direct producers.

Although the state had the right to impose taxes on landowners, the collection of taxes was largely dependent on its ability to enforce that right. The best manifestation of the state's prerogative was its control over the country's administrative, judicial, and military powers. The landowners' ability to control their tenants, hired laborers, or bondservants depended largely on whether they could gain extraeconomic power over them or apply direct force in the relationship.

The interests of the big landowners and managerial farmers were not always the same as those of the state. The landowners were interested in securing the highest possible profit for themselves. The state, in addition to tax collection, was concerned with preserving the peasant class as its economic base and maintaining the prosperity and order of the society. Evidence suggests that in the case of the rent resistance incidents during the Qing, the state was not always on the side of the landowners. For this reason, the analytical framework of this study includes the relation between the state and the direct producers.

The agrarian structure of the Lake Tai region changed during the Ming-Qing period. Evidence suggests that state policy, demographic change, and commercialization were the major impetus of this change. This study analyzes how and to what extent a particular state policy, demographic change, and commercialization affect long-term trends in agrarian structural change.

The geographic focus of this study is the Lake Tai region in the heart of the Yangzi delta. Lake Tai, which covers an area of 2,213 square kilometers, lies between the south Jiangsu plain (in the northern part of the region) and the Hang-Jia-Hu plain (in the southern part of the region). This study includes six counties of the Lake Tai region as they correspond to Ming-Qing administrative divisions: Wuxi, Wujiang, Guian, Wucheng, Tongxiang, and Xiushui.

All these counties lie within the Lower Yangzi macroregion as defined by G. William Skinner.¹³ This region, basically a compound alluvial plain created by an accumulation of sediment laid down by the rivers and swamps over time, lies ten meters below sea level, with Lake Tai in the center. This means, of course, that the inhabitants of the area always faced the danger of floods. From as early as the Tang dynasty (618–907) on, as a result of the ever-present need for agricul-

¹³ G. William Skinner, *The City in Late Imperial China*, p. 215.

tural land and the constant threat of floods, people have constructed dikes and created polder lands along the rivers, canals, and shores of the lake. Such responses in turn determined its predominant type of agriculture; the Yangzi delta has since then become the leading rice-producing area of China.

The Lake Tai region lies in the subtropical zone and enjoys an average temperature of 15 to 18 degrees centigrade. Temperatures in January are usually above zero degrees centigrade; in July the temperature averages 28 degrees centigrade. The total annual rainfall is about 1,000 to 1,500 millimeters, and the month-long "plum rains" in early summer are particularly beneficial for rice growing. These favorable climatic conditions allow for a growing season of eight to nine months.

The Lake Tai region is situated at the crossroads of two main water routes, the Yangzi River and the Grand Canal, which connect the region with the immense territories of western and northern China. The region also enjoys the greatest river density in China; an excellent network of navigable rivers and canals in the area characterizes its transportation system. Peasants along the waterways can easily transport what they produce to markets in nearby towns, where they can also purchase what they themselves need. Most towns are situated at the centers of water transportation.

During the Ming-Qing period, the Lake Tai region was the most advanced economic area in China. Thus, it makes sense to study the origin and growth of this particular local community, to analyze the peculiar and individual nature of its society, and to explore the ways in which it solved certain basic political and economic problems, such as how to provide livelihoods for an increasing number of people from a fixed supply of land and other natural resources.¹⁴ A study of this region will illuminate and deepen our understanding of the wider aspects of general socioeconomic history.

As it happens, a rich and impressive collection of historical materials on the Lake Tai region is available in the libraries of the United States, including genealogies, local gazetteers, and contemporary accounts. In the collection of genealogies, most of which are from southern China, are thirty-eight from the Lake Tai area.

A genealogy can be regarded as the internal history of a kinship group. It can often provide eloquent witness to the effects of local

¹⁴ C. W. Chalklin and M. A. Havinden, eds., *Rural Change and Urban Growth 1500-1800: Essays in English Regional History in Honour of W. G. Hoskins*, p. xxii.

economic and social conditions on the lives of lineage members. These thirty-eight genealogies provide a wide range of information about the socioeconomic experiences of lineages in the area over an extended period. They provide information regarding demographic change, social and geographical mobility, occupation, inheritance, investment, land tenurial system, land prices, tax relations, local power struggles between privileged gentry landlords and commoner landlords with local leader status, and market development. They not only provide accounts of events that took place in the area, but also instruct lineage members how to deal with certain specific problems. This information makes it possible for us to ask such questions as What was the general occupational pattern of people in the area? When, why, and how did this pattern change? What was the pattern of capital investment? What was the land tenurial system during this period? What was the role of influential lineages in the rural community? What was the nature of relations among the types of rent, tenurial relations, and agricultural productivity? When, why, and how did the rural power structure change? By using a diachronic comparative approach, we can trace the changing socioeconomic landscape of the region over a period of nearly five hundred years.

The local gazetteers available for this study have two unique features. During the Ming-Qing period each county put out several consecutive editions of its gazetteer, each of which covered a certain period. By studying these consecutive editions, we are able to see more clearly the peculiar nature of the society and the important changes in the community over time. Gazetteers of this kind provide information about such things as topography, transportation, irrigation systems and water control, taxation systems, cropping systems, customs, changes in the composition of social elites, land acreage, and the government's role in local affairs. In addition to county gazetteers, there are also local gazetteers put out by market towns, cantons of a county, and villages, all of which make it possible to delve even more deeply into the roots of the society and the economy.

Contemporary accounts are also an important source of information. In this study, I have made particular use of two agricultural treatises and a record of a trial. The two treatises are historically valuable because they were written by two managerial landlords, both of whom had firsthand knowledge of, and direct experience with, farming. Thus their treatises record the farming practices of their localities. In addition, these accounts were both written in periods of drastic socioeconomic transition when the previous mode of farming practice was declining and a new mode of farming was taking shape.

One was written in the 1640s, the other in 1658. Finally, these two treatises represent two different topographical areas, a predominantly paddy field area and an area of half paddy field, half dry land. Thus, the modes of farming described in the two treatises likely represent those used in most of the Lake Tai region. Together, the two treatises provide information about the new modes of farming practice as well as the factors that shaped the development of the new modes.

The trial record concerns a local incident that took place in Huzhou prefecture in Zhejiang province in 1589–1594. Because the defendants included two powerful gentry members and their forty bondservants, this record provides valuable information regarding the origin, the social and economic role, and the legal status of the bondservants during this period. It also suggests that the institution of bondservants was a very complex one.

In the study that follows, I use the information and insights provided by this wealth of material to explore in some detail the process of social and economic change in the Lake Tai area. This in turn will serve to shed light on the greater question of the transformation of the socioeconomic landscape of China during the Ming-Qing period.

CHAPTER ONE

Rural Society in the Early Ming

A gradual but dramatic transformation in the socioeconomic structure of Chinese agrarian production occurred during the Ming and early Qing periods. This study attempts to shed light on the causes and the scope of that transformation by looking carefully at the individuals involved in this transformation and in particular at their evolving relationships with local and national administrators. This first chapter, then, describes the general structure of agrarian production during the early Ming by defining the types of relations that existed during this time among individuals, officials at the prefecture (*fu*), county (*xian*), and subprefecture (*zhou*) levels, and the state itself and by showing how social positions were determined on the basis of the right to receive and the obligation to deliver resources from the land and the right to administer and to adjudicate community affairs. This examination of the general structure will make it possible to appreciate the significance of the changes that came afterward.

Wealth and Power in Rural Society

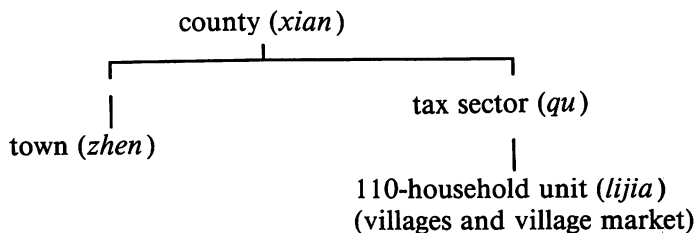
After the founding of the Ming dynasty in 1368, Emperor Taizu took two important steps toward reforming the local administrative system. In 1371, he ordered the establishment of a subcounty administrative system controlled by the *liangzhang* (grain tax captain); ten years later, in 1381, he institutionalized nationwide another subcounty administrative system, the *lijia*, 110-household units responsible for sharing out taxes and labor services among their members. Both the *liangzhang* and *lijia* were staffed and operated by selected local people. The main purpose of the two organizations was to empower selected members of the local elite to regulate their own affairs on behalf of the emperor and in the process to reduce the power of local magistrates and restrain them from direct contact with the local people. The emperor believed that local representatives would act more responsibly in local affairs than county magistrates because they were also more con-

cerned with the interests of their local communities.¹

Who were these selected local representatives, and what were their qualifications? According to law, local leaders were chosen from wealthy landowner families. Economic capacity in terms of amount of property owned and the number of adult male laborers of each individual family was the main criterion in determining the appointment of a local leader. The grain tax captains, therefore, were the wealthiest landlords of the various grain tax sectors (*qu*), and the headmen of *lijia* organizations, the *li* captains (*lizhang*), were the less prosperous landlords. In principle, an area assessed at 10,000 *shi* (or 1,000,000 liters) in grain tax constituted a grain tax sector and was headed by the grain tax captain. In each tax sector, there were several *lis*, each of which consisted of 110 households. The ten wealthiest households of the 110 provided the headmen for the *li*. The remaining 100 households were divided into ten units of ten households (*jia*) each.

The administrative system of Wujiang county in Jiangsu province illustrates these subcounty organizations. In 1488, the county consisted of 46 grain tax sectors. Each sector was headed by two grain tax captains, and a total of 92 grain tax captains oversaw 550 of the 110-household units. Each 110-household unit was made up of a varying number of villages (*cun*, *zhuang*, *shan*, or *bin*) and village markets (*shi*).² The actual subcounty administrative units of Wujiang county were as shown in chart 1.

Chart 1
Subcounty Administrative Units of Wujiang County



¹ Liang Fangzhong, *Mingdai liangzhang zhidu*, pp. 13–15, p. 19.

² *Wujiang xianzhi* (hereafter, *Wujiang XZ*), 1488 ed., 2.4–12. In 1488, the subcounty organizational structure of Wujiang county was as follows: Upper Fanyu *xiang* (canton): The First *du* (township) consisted of 1 *qu*, 17 *li*, 35 villages, and 2 *shi*; the Second North *du* consisted of 2 *qu*, 24 *li* (including 10 *li* in the county capital), 8 villages, 14 urban and suburban units; the Third East *du* consisted of 2 *qu*, 30 *li*, 5 villages, and 1 *shi*; the Third West *du* consisted of 1 *qu*, 15 *li*, and 5 villages; etc.

The case of Wujiang county indicates that the market towns (*zhen*) were under the jurisdiction of neither the grain tax captain nor the li captain. In fact, it would seem that since the early Ming, market towns were treated differently from agricultural zones. In 1488, there were eleven village markets and four market towns in Wujiang county. All eleven village markets and the county capital were under the jurisdiction of qu and lijia organizations; the four market towns—Pingwang, Lili, Tongli, and Zhenze—were under the jurisdiction of the county government.

How wealthy were these local leaders at various levels? Before answering that question, we need to see how agricultural land property was distributed in the early Ming. In 1370, the Board of Revenue presented a report to Emperor Taizu concerning the affluent households of Suzhou prefecture. The report disclosed that there were 554 wealthy households in Suzhou that year. The households classified as “affluent” by the Board of Revenue were those who paid more than 100 shi in grain taxes annually to the government.³

These 554 households can be divided into three groups according to the amount of grain tax each paid. The first group, composed of the 8 wealthiest landlords in the prefecture, accounted for 1.4 percent of all the rich households. They paid a grain tax ranging from 1,000 to 3,800 shi of grain. Group two, 56 households, which constituted about 10 percent of the total, paid an annual grain tax payment ranging from 500 to 1,000 shi. The remaining 88 percent of households (490 in number) belonged to group three; their payment ranged from 100 to 400 shi.

Below group three was another group; it consisted of landowners who paid a grain tax of less than 100 shi annually. The size of this group can be calculated from the total annual grain tax paid by all taxpayers in Suzhou and the total grain tax paid annually by the 554 wealthy households. In 1371, the total grain tax of Suzhou was 2,809,000 shi, of which 150,184 shi, or 7 percent of the total, was paid by the rich households. The remaining 93 percent, or 2,658,816 shi was paid by this fourth group.⁴ Household certificates of the Lake Tai area dated 1371 suggest that some grain taxpayers owned only a very small piece of land. The household of Gu Lu in Wujiang county is a typical example of a family of six who owned less than three mu of land.⁵ The Gu Lu household numbered five males (Gu Lu, age 44; his

³ *Ming Taizu shilu*, 49.3.

⁴ Gu Yanwu, *Yuan jiaoben rizhi lu*, 14.3000.

⁵ *Gushi zupu*, pp. 47–48.

adult son, Guanshou, age 16; his second son, Haitong, age 13; his third son, Haisun, age 9; his fourth son, Abao, age 5) and one female (his wife, nee Zhu, age 40). They owned a house with three rooms on 2.52 *mu*. The amount of land owned by the Gu Lu family suggests that some landowners in this group were petty landholders. When we compare the 554 wealthy households with the total registered 463,862 households of Suzhou in 1371,⁶ we can see that the population of group four was much greater than that of the rich households. In other words, the small holding, or family farm, was the dominant form of land tenure at that time.

The large number of family farms and small number of big landlords probably resulted from the harsh social and economic policy adopted by Emperor Taizu toward the powerful local magnates of the previous dynasty whereby he had deliberately rooted out many previously influential big landlord families from their socioeconomic bases. The devastating purge of the Pu lineage of Puyuan town is a typical example of this policy. During the early years of the Southern Song dynasty (1127–1279) the Pu lineage migrated from the northern province of Shandong to Zhejiang province, where they established large estates and introduced advanced sericulture techniques from northern China. The lineage named the place they lived after their own family name, and for more than two hundred years—between 1127 and 1368—the Pu lineage produced many high government officials and degree holders, thus reinforcing its influential socioeconomic position in the region. During the political upheaval of the late Yuan, the leaders of the lineage made contact with Taizu, the most promising rebel leader at that time, and, to demonstrate their wholehearted support, contributed ten thousand shi of rice to Taizu's army. Their cooperative attitude toward Taizu, however, did not soften his policy. In 1369, two years after the founding of the Ming dynasty, one of the Pu families held an extravagant wedding ceremony, contrary to the emperor's restrictions against waste. This provided the excuse Taizu needed: he ordered all but one of the 72 branches of the lineage to leave Puyuan town and resettle in various locations in Anhui, Jiangsu, Zhejiang, Fujian, and Shandong provinces. After the purge, almost all the Pu properties were confiscated, although the government allowed the one remaining household, that of Pu Shouqing, to retain a meager piece of land and a tiny house. According to his household certificate, in 1371 Pu Shouqing was 34 years old and his wife was 26. They had

⁶ *Suzhou fuzhi* (hereafter, *Suzhou FZ*), 1379 ed., 10.2–3.

two children—a four-year-old daughter and a one-year-old son—and owned 3.51 mu of land and a two-room house.⁷ It is clear that Pu Shouqing had become a petty landholder.

The purge of the Pu lineage was not an isolated case, but one of many.⁸ Faced with Taizu's harsh policy, what could the big families do? Evidence indicates that the rich, to avoid persecution, simply gave their properties away, sometimes to their landless neighbors. The reactions of the rich families of Tun village in Wujiang county as recorded in the village gazetteer are a good example of this:

After the Ming troops moved into the area of Wu, they "borrowed" from the rich. The main concern of the rich in the village was to save themselves from execution. They all gave their valuables away to the poor, abandoned their lands and houses, and ran away with their wives and sons. Eventually, their lands were confiscated by the government... and their houses torn down. Consequently, only two or three out of every ten middle income families were left.⁹

The big families in Huzhou prefecture reacted in very much the same way. Tang Shiwei, for example, purposely gave his land away to his relatives and neighbors. The gazetteer of the area comments:

After the founding of the Ming dynasty, Emperor Taizu summoned Tang to Jinling, the nation's capital. During an audience, he firmly declined all jobs offered by the emperor with the excuse of having an old mother to take care of. Shortly after Shiwei returned home, he invited his relatives and neighbors over and distributed all his family properties to them. People did not understand why he did so. Soon afterward, most of the rich households in Jiangnan were charged with violating the law, their properties were confiscated, and their family members were executed or banished. Only Shiwei was saved from the purge.¹⁰

Taking lands from big families and giving them to the poor was not a short-term Ming policy but continued to be carried out long after the 1370 Board of Revenue report to Emperor Taizu on rich households in Suzhou. In 1391, for example, the emperor forcibly moved 5,300 rich households from all parts of China to the capital.¹¹ In 1403, when the nation's capital moved from Jinling to Beijing, the new emperor, Chengzu, ordered the local governments to send another

⁷ *Puyuan zhi*, 1927 ed., 25.5–6; *Puyuan jiwén*, 7.

⁸ Liang Fangzhong, *Mingdai liangzhang zhidu*, pp. 21–22.

⁹ *Tuncun zhi*, 5.

¹⁰ *Wuqing zhenzhi* (hereafter, *Wuqing ZZ*), 1760 ed., 9.2–3.

¹¹ *Ming Taizu shilu*, 210.2.

group of rich households to Beijing. Although the paucity of documentation makes it difficult to know exactly how many wealthy households were uprooted at this time, the case of Wujiang county is sufficient to illustrate this movement. The Wujiang gazetteer discloses that the emperor's 1403 order caused great panic among the county's rich families when they heard that twelve rich households who paid annual grain tax of less than 500 shi of rice had been ordered to go to Beijing.¹² In 1409, another group of rich households was sent to Beijing and, sure enough, this time ten families were chosen from Wujiang county.¹³

The forced deportation of big families from their native places to the nation's capital must have had a dramatic effect on the pattern of land distribution and on the local power structure during the early Ming. It is likely that, after the forced deportation and the purposeful purge of the local wealthy households, both the number of the 554 affluent households in Suzhou prefecture and the land owned by them were drastically reduced. At the same time, the number of family farms must have increased proportionally because after the unification of China, Taizu had made efforts to move 144,000 landless households from southern Jiangsu and northern Zhejiang to the Fengyang area of Anhui province by providing transportation, working capital, and exempting these households from taxes for three years.¹⁴

Despite the efforts of the early Ming government, however, not all family farmers were able to become economically self-sufficient since the land they owned often did not produce even enough to feed their own families. The information provided by household certifications of the Gu and Pu families supports this conclusion. Gu Lu's family had three adults and three children; they owned 2.52 mu of land. Pu Shouqing's family had two adults and two children; they owned 3.51 mu of land. Assuming that the per mu yield of the lands they owned was as high as that of land in the same region during the 1930s, each mu of land would have produced in a normal year a little over two shi of rice. In the 1930s, the annual average rice consumption of different individuals were as follows: adult male, 4.36 shi/year; adult female, 3.27 shi/year; man over 50, 3.27 shi/year; woman over 40, 2.73 shi/year; child over 10, 1.64 shi/year (children under 10 were not included).¹⁵ We can calculate, then, that the annual output of the Gu

¹² *Wujiang XZ*, 1747 ed., 5.29.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 5.29.

¹⁴ *Ming Taizu shilu*, 53.11.

¹⁵ Fei Hsiao-t'ung, *Peasant Life in China*, pp. 33, 125. In a normal year, each mu of land could produce six bushels of rice. If one shi equals 2.7497 bushels, then each mu

family's land was about 5.49 shi of rice, while the family's minimum annual food consumption—excluding two boys under ten—was 13.63 shi of rice. The annual yield of the Pu family's land was probably about 7.65 shi of rice, while the family's annual food consumption—excluding two children under ten—was 7.63 shi of rice. Although in theory the Pu family would seem to have been able to produce the minimum food needed to feed themselves, according to the 1930s standard, food expenditure in general amounted to only 40 percent of the total annual expenses of a peasant family in the region.¹⁶ Obviously, both families would need additional sources of income to make up the difference. Before the commercialization of rural industry in this region, the most common solution to this problem was either to hire the family's surplus labor out to the landlords or to lease additional pieces of land from the landlords and become their tenants. Thus, from the beginning of the Ming dynasty, there were both tenants and hired laborers.¹⁷

Judging from Emperor Taizu's policies toward landlords and landless peasants, the number of landless households was not likely to have constituted a significant proportion of the total registered population. It is generally agreed that one li consisted of 110 households of spatially contiguous landowners, regardless of their occupational registration.¹⁸ If one knows how many li a county had, one can easily calculate the total number of taxpaying households by multiplying the number of li by 110. If one also knows the total number of registered households of the county, one can then calculate the approximate number of landless households in the county by subtracting the number of grain taxpayers from the total number of registered households. Since in 1376 there were 530 li and 81,572 registered house-

of land could produce 2.18 shi of rice. According to Chen Hengli's *Bu nongshu yanjiu*, in the late Ming the area of mu in the southern part of the Lake Tai region was 0.95 percent the size of what it is today. However, in the early Ming and before the 1573–1619 land survey, the mu was probably the same size as the present-day mu. The Ming shi, on the other hand, was a little larger—1.07 percent of what it is today. This meant that each Ming mu of land might produce fewer than six bushels of rice (pp. 293–95).

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 125.

¹⁷ *Wujiang XZ*, 1488 ed., 5.21: "The propertyless peasants who cultivate land for the rich landlords are called long-term hired laborers. Those who borrow rice and grain from the rich landlords in advance for food or other uses and pay it back by one or two months of farm work during the busy season of farming are called short-term hired laborers. Those who rent land to cultivate from the rich landlords are tenants."

¹⁸ Tsurumi Naohiro, "Rural Control in the Ming Dynasty," in *State and Society in China*, ed. Grove and Daniels, pp. 358–59.

holds in Wujiang county, the distribution of the landed property of Wujiang county and the number of landless households can be estimated as follows: 58,300 landowner households (71 percent) and 23,272 landless households (29 percent).¹⁹

Since Wujiang was a well-developed area agriculturally and the availability of new land was comparatively limited, it is not surprising that there was a rather high percentage of landowner households and a low percentage of landless households during the Ming. In Taicang, a frontier region to the east of Suzhou prefecture, the number of landless households was even lower. In the early Ming, the government allocated 16 mu of land to each adult male in Taicang. By 1391, there were 67 li and 8,986 registered households. Consequently, the distribution of the landed property and the number of landless households can be estimated as follows: 7,370 landowner households (82 percent) and 1,616 landless households (18 percent).²⁰

Some historians have suggested that occasionally there must have been a certain number of supernumerary households (*jilinghu*) attached to the regular li. These supernumerary households might also have included some petty landholders.²¹ If this were the case, the percentage of landless households would be even lower than the 18 percent to 29 percent of the total registered households in the early Ming.

We can conclude, therefore, that toward the end of the Taizu reign the rural population in the Lake Tai region consisted mainly of (1) a small number of medium-sized landowner households who paid grain taxes ranging from 100 shi to 400 shi of grain, (2) a large number of small family farm households, and (3) 18–29 percent landless tenant farmer households. The leaders of qu and lijia were probably chosen from the group of medium-sized landowners.

Grain tax captains resided on their farms. They were the foremost leaders of each grain tax sector. They had numerous responsibilities, including settling community legal disputes, drawing up and implementing the sector's labor-service assignment rosters, collecting tax in grain and forwarding it to the designated granary, maintaining agricultural production, promoting public education, and keeping a watchful eye on the administrative conduct of local magistrates.²² Among their duties, two were most important: levying taxes and labor services

¹⁹ *Wujiang XZ*, 1488 ed., 2.4b; *Wujiang XZ*, 1747 ed., 5.26b, 16.4b–5a.

²⁰ Liang Fangzhong, *Mingdai liangzhang zhidu*, p. 135, quoting from Zhou Chen's letter to the officials of the Board of Revenue.

²¹ Tsurumi, "Rural Control," p. 259.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 262; Liang Fangzhong, *Mingdai liangzhang zhidu*, pp. 42–53.

upon the people; and taking responsibility for local agricultural development and construction projects, such as water control, irrigation, and roads. With regard to the first duty, a tax captain was directly responsible to the emperor and the Board of Revenue while the local magistrate played mainly a supervisory role. The whole process, from the assessment of taxes and labor services to tax collection and the delivery of taxes to the assigned government granaries, was all managed independently by the tax captain. Under the direction of the tax captain, the headmen of *lijia* organizations either delivered the taxes collected in their areas to the tax captain's family granary or loaded the taxes directly onto the grain boats waiting to take shipments. When the grain taxes arrived at the assigned government granaries, they were received by officials from the Board of Revenue. Since the whole operation was carried out in villages, it was difficult for a local magistrate, who usually lived in the county capital, to fulfill his supervisory duties;²³ this lack of supervision reinforced the independence of the tax captains' position.

The tax captains were not formal government officials, but they enjoyed official-like position and power. The local magistrate treated them with courtesy, and their power over their subordinates was definite. They were able to arrest and punish *li* captains and the heads of *jia* when necessary. An account from the gazetteer of Tun village reveals the considerable prestige associated with the post of tax captain:

The responsibility of the tax captains in the early Ming was very important. They wore tax captain kerchiefs, long gowns which were wider on the bottom, and black boots. When they visited the government offices, they were accorded a courteous reception. When the *li* captains and the heads of *jia* came to see the tax captains, they did not dare sit and remained standing. From each township (*du*) was chosen one tax captain who was then responsible for the payment of all the grain and silver taxes of that *du*. The local government would only request the responsible *li* captain and the head of *jia* once or twice for taxes payments, after which it would hand the responsibility over to the tax captain. A tax captain's home was furnished with an official table and chair, and bamboo sticks and other implements of punishment were also kept at hand. A tax captain was allowed to order an arrest with a warrant written in red ink and to set deadlines for the payment of taxes. When the time limit was up, the tax captain would call in the responsible *li* captain and the head of *jia* and force them to pay. This

²³ *Wujiang XZ*, 1747 ed., 12.7.

was exactly the same method as that used by the government.²⁴

This account probably does not represent the heyday of the tax captains' power, but it does highlight their distinguished position in rural society, where they not only owned most of the county's land and exercised authority over tax collection, but also adjudicated local lawsuits.

The tax captains' unique position could also be attributed to their legal privileges: If a tax captain committed a crime that had nothing to do with his official duties, he had only to pay fines for his crime, even if the crime was normally punishable by death.²⁵

Local agricultural development was a tax captain's second important duty. He could mobilize local people and material resources to carry out necessary construction projects. Evidence suggests that most tax captains in the early Ming were active in this respect. The reason is obvious. The successful performance of a tax captain in office depended largely on the effective collection of taxes for the government. A failure in the irrigation system or water control system of an area could have direct effects on the total amount of crop produced. If the taxpayers of an area were not able to pay the full amount, the tax captain would be unable to fulfill his duty as a tax collector, and he would then be in serious difficulty with the government. Thus, it was in his own interest to pay particular attention to the conditions of agricultural production.

We know that the tax captains were responsible for local tax collection and agricultural development. However, it would seem that they were not equally concerned with fairness or the welfare of each individual in their communities. The evidence suggests that they often manipulated their privileges for self-gain and favored some people, in particular close relatives, while arbitrarily exploiting others. For example, in 1431, Zhang Zheng, an investigating censor of the central government, submitted a memorial to Emperor Xuanzong in which he criticized the illegal conduct of the tax captains and suggested that measures be taken to restrict them. The memorial reads:

During the period of Hongwu (1368–98), the position of tax captain was created whose main responsibility was to collect grain tax. Recently I discovered that in Jiaxing and Huzhou prefectures of Zhejiang province and in Suzhou and Songjiang prefectures of Zhili province, the tax captains concurrently undertake several responsibilities of the

²⁴ *Tuncun zhi*, 5b.

²⁵ Liang Fangzhong, *Mingdai liangzhang zhidu*, pp. 49–50.

local government. However, when they allot labor services among the people, they assign *corvée* to the poor and connive with the rich to evade duties. When they levy taxes, they demand ten times more than what the taxpayers should pay. In dealing with legal disputes, they confound black and white. They have no set criteria with regard to land tax collection. They have even made good and honest people wait on them and treated *li* captains and the heads of *jia* as slaves. They have violated laws and committed crimes at the expense of the people. I ask that measures be taken to prohibit these abuses.²⁶

Before looking at how the government responded to this problem, let us further examine the socioeconomic characteristics of the medium-sized landowners and the role of the tax captains in maintaining agricultural production. Since neither the medium-sized landowners nor the tax captains held gentry or official status, in the following discussion I will refer to them as commoner landlords.

Commoner Landlords during the Ming

Socioeconomic Characteristics of Commoner Landlords

To illustrate the socioeconomic characteristics of the commoner landlords in the Ming times, I take as examples the experiences of two Wuxi families: the Hua family of Lake E and the An family of Jiaoshan.

By the time of the founding of the Ming dynasty in 1368, the Hua family had already lived in Longting in Wuxi county for many generations. Between 1279 and 1368, several members of the family were officials in the Mongol government, and the family was one of the most powerful and wealthy families in the county. Toward the end of the Yuan dynasty, Hua Zongwei (1341–97) accompanied his parents east to Songjiang and Suzhou prefectures to avoid the ravages of civil war. After Taizu restored order, Hua Zongwei and his parents decided to move back to their home county only to find that their houses and properties had been destroyed during the war. Therefore, in the third month of the third year of Hongwu (1370), they moved to the Lake E area in the eastern part of the county where they lost no time in cultivating the wastelands; by winter, they had built two houses in the middle of their fields. Because of the exemption from grain tax for the first year, the first harvest was just enough to meet the family's food requirements. The following year, Hua Zongwei, then thirty

²⁶ *Ming Xuanzong shilu*, 78.8.

years of age, reclaimed more land for cultivation. Both he and his wife worked very hard; Zongwei “cultivated the land himself and produced food through his own labor” (*gonggeng shili*), while his wife “diligently spun and sewed” (*gongqin renji*); and “over the next few years, the family wealth grew gradually.”²⁷

By dint of persistent hard work, Hua’s family, which included three sons, became the leading family in the area; two of his grandsons were appointed to the post of tax captain.

An Xiao was the first generation of the An family to settle in Nanhou village, Jiaoshan. Born to a poor peasant family, An Xiao had been a farmer most of his life. During the Taizu period, he became an owner-cultivator, and since he was industrious and thrifty in land management, his family gradually became wealthy and he himself was “appointed as the leader of his locality.” Later, under the leadership of An Zuo (1446–1505), An Xiao’s elder son, the An family became even more prosperous, and An Zuo became a tax captain of his area.²⁸

The commoner landlords in the Ming times can be divided into those of the period between 1368 and the 1520s and those of the period between the 1520s and the 1640s. The first group can be characterized by five features:

1. Most of them were managerial landlords.
2. They were extremely hard working and thrifty.
3. They employed bondservants and tenant farmers; they sometimes hired laborers as farm laborers.
4. Most of their sons engaged in farming and were very proud if they could be appointed tax captains of their local communities.
5. Before the penetration of commercial capital into the rural area, they were the only group to finance rural credit.

Let us look at the first of these characteristics. Many landlords during this period personally participated in agricultural work and/or supervised their farm laborers’ work. For the first six generations of the Hua family, managerial landlords constituted the majority of the landlords of the Hua lineage. For example, Hua Zongwei, the founder of the Lake E Hua branch of the lineage, personally participated in agricultural production; Hua Xingshu (1370–1438), his second son, “himself farmed and applied the sharp plough diligently; he enjoyed a

²⁷ *Xishan Huashi benshu* (hereafter, *Benshu*), 25.1–10; *Ehu Huashi zongpu* (hereafter, *HSZP*), juan shou, 11–12.

²⁸ *Jiaoshan Anshi jiacheng*, 9.1.

good harvest almost every year.” He also “by applying farming strategy, gave daily instructions to his bondservants (*jiaren*) on how to engage in agricultural production.”²⁹ Hua Zonglong (1388–1465), Xingshu’s oldest son, was the first of the family to be appointed tax captain, a position he held for fifty years. He also managed the family’s finances and “led his younger brothers to work diligently to expand the family wealth amassed by his father.”³⁰ Hua Zong’an (1407–1571), one of Zonglong’s younger brothers, was also a successful landlord and the second person in the family to be appointed tax captain. In fact, during his term, he was so preoccupied with his job that he left the management of his family’s finances to his wife.³¹ Hua Fang (1407–87), Zonglong’s oldest son, succeeded his father as tax captain. He too personally managed his family’s finances and in the process “accumulated more wealth than his ancestors.”³² Hua Zheng (1416–94) was one of Fang’s younger brothers. “His family already owned much fertile land to begin with, but he brought even more wasteland under cultivation, resulting in a very large income.”³³

Hua Ye (1453–97) was a tax captain and a fifth-generation managerial landlord who “established farm estates in Xin’an canton (*xiang*). He opened up extensive agricultural fields and livestock farms and applied good methods both to raising livestock and to farming.”³⁴ Hua Chun (1429–1501) was another successful managerial landlord.

When he was young he studied the classics and histories with a local scholar. At the age of twenty, he undertook the responsibility of managing his family’s properties. When his family’s properties were divided up, he inherited fifty mu of land, and he recruited farm laborers and developed his property rigorously. He worked side by side with the hired laborers in the field, and his farm property expanded daily. Later, he established farm properties in Shangfu canton, which was a few Chinese miles from his home. He kept annual records of the names of his tenants and the number of his livestock. He also distinguished the old, weak, disabled, the sick farm laborers from those who were able and trustworthy. He emulated Suireshi [a legendary ruler said to have discovered fire] and promoted water irrigation and improved soil quality.³⁵

²⁹ *Benshu*, 25.10–13; *HSZP*, juan shou, 13.

³⁰ *Benshu*, 31.2; *HSZP*, juan shou, 16.

³¹ *Benshu*, 25.15–19.

³² *Benshu*, 31.3; *HSZP*, juan shou, 18.

³³ *Benshu*, 31.3–4.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 32.6.

Hua Tan (1452–1545), a sixth-generation landlord, assumed the responsibility for the management of the family property at the age of sixteen. “He exerted great efforts in farming and rigorously observed the farming time schedule. He established new methods and procedures for handling fodder collection and tax payment, and his reputation and influence grew tremendously. He accumulated a fortune of one hundred million taels of silver and owned land all over the county.”³⁶

The second characteristic of early Ming landlords was hard work and thrift (*qin-jian*), moral values that accurately characterized the working attitude of the first five generations of landlords in the Hua family. Hua Zongwei and his wife, the first-generation couple of the Hua family, not only practiced diligence and thrift themselves but instructed their children to do so as well.³⁷ Hua Xingshu, Zongwei’s second son, went so far as to call himself “Leqin” (Delighting in Diligence) and even composed a song by the same title designed to inspire both himself and his fellow countrymen. “He managed his property meticulously and saved for future expenses.”³⁸ In the same way, Hua Xingding (1381–1459), Zongwei’s third son, who “enjoyed farm work and often worked with his farm laborers in the field,” called himself “Lenong” (Delighting in Farmwork).³⁹

Among the third-generation landlords of the Hua family, two in particular serve as examples—Hua Zonglong and Hua Zongzhen. Zonglong, as noted, was a tax captain for fifty years. The record states that “his family was rich but he worked industriously and spent carefully; therefore, his wealth increased tremendously.”⁴⁰ On his deathbed, he instructed his sons and grandsons to practice filial piety, friendliness, industry, and frugality (*xiao, you, qin, and jian*).⁴¹ Hua Zongzhen (1401–73), Xingding’s oldest son, called himself “Xiaoqin” or “Emulate Diligence” and “carefully observed his ancestors’ teachings. Although his family was rich, he lived a simple and frugal life.”⁴²

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 29.5.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 29.7–8.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 25.1–10.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 25.10–13; *HSZP*, *juan shou*, 16.

³⁹ *Huashi chuanfang ji*, 3.28.

⁴⁰ *Benshu*, 31.2.

⁴¹ *HSZP*, *juan shou*, 16.

⁴² *Huashi chuanfang ji*, 4.13.

Hua Fang is said to have commented that “hard work without thrift is like a leaking wine vessel. Thrift without hard work is like a barren land.”⁴³ One of Hua Fang’s younger brothers, Hua Shouzhuang (1429–1511), was also a successful landlord and in his biography is praised for “being a model of hard work and frugality all his life.”⁴⁴ Hua Fang’s son, Hua Yi (1444–86), a fifth-generation landlord, was very much like his father and likewise “lived a simple and frugal life.”⁴⁵ Hua Ao (1455–1505), Hua Zhen’s son, was also a tax captain and a successful landlord. “His everyday clothes were made of coarse cloth, and he ate no more than one dish each meal. He was in charge of agricultural production, and he followed the agricultural schedule without slacking.”⁴⁶

A third unique feature of early Ming landlords was their employment of bondservants, tenant farmers, and sometimes hired laborers as farm laborers. Although slavery per se had been prohibited and manumission orders issued in early Ming, slave owners manipulated loopholes in the law, either by disguising the slaves as bondservants or by giving them their owners’ surnames.⁴⁷ In this study, therefore, I have adopted the term *bondservant* for all persons of slavelike status including *tongpu*, *zanghuo*, *jiaren*, *yinanfu*, *jiading*, and the like.

It is recorded, for example, that Hua Zongwei, the first generation of the Hua family to settle at Lake E, in assigning jobs to his three sons, made his oldest son, Xingren (1364–1429), responsible for “receiving guests and controlling *tongpu* (bondservants).”⁴⁸ Apparently, Zongwei’s father, Hua Youwu (1301–76), had also owned bondservants: his biography notes that “when he was at home, he was kind and courteous even to his *zanghuo* (bondservants); he was rarely angry at them.”⁴⁹ It was most likely, therefore, that the family had bondservants for at least two generations. When Zongwei moved to the Lake E area his bondservants must have contributed greatly to the reclamation of wastelands and the construction of new houses. In fact, without such assistance, Zongwei could probably have never built up his family’s fortune so fast.

⁴³ *Benshu*, 31.3; *HSZP*, *juan shou*, 18.

⁴⁴ *Benshu*, 31.5–6.

⁴⁵ *HSZP*, *juan shou*, 21.

⁴⁶ *Benshu*, 32.6–7, 31.12–14.

⁴⁷ Tsurumi, “Rural Control,” p. 251.

⁴⁸ *Benshu*, 29.1–2.

⁴⁹ *Huashi chuanfang ji*, 2.22.

The biographies in the genealogy clearly indicate that by the second generation of the Hua family bondservants were used in the fields. Hua Xingshu, Zongwei's son, used his bondservants (*jiaren*) to farm a part of his land; he also rented land to tenant farmers for additional cultivation. He is praised in his biography as being a considerate landlord because once he gave a rent reduction of one thousand shi of rice to his tenants.⁵⁰

Xingshu's method of land management can be better illustrated with the case of Zou Xianzhi, a successful contemporary managerial landlord of Wuxi county in Jiangsu province. According to the local gazetteer:

Xianzhi owned several thousand mu of land. He instructed his bondservants (*jiaren*) to cultivate part of his land and rented the rest to landless peasants. In a year of bumper harvest, he collected the rents according to the figures agreed upon in their contracts. In a year of crop failure, he reduced his tenants' rent. In a year of great famine, he further reduced the rent; sometimes he even relieved the tenants of their rent entirely.⁵¹

In addition to bondservants and hired laborers, the fixed rent tenancy system Xianzhi adopted seems to have been common practice in the Lake Tai region in Ming times. A 1488 edition of the Wujiang gazetteer records that the rents for each mu of paddy field ranged from 1 shi to 1.8 shi of rice and that on the second month of winter each year, the tenants paid the rent to their landlords in fine quality rice.⁵²

It required much time and energy to be a managerial landlord. When the head of a managerial landlord family was for some reason not able to manage his property personally, he had to find someone to manage for him, in some cases his own wife. When Hua Zong'an, for example, was preoccupied with his responsibilities as tax captain, he left the management of the property to his wife, who directed about a hundred bondservants successfully. As Zong'an's biography relates:

[Mrs. Hua] sat in the main hall, and one hundred male and female bondservants, both adults and children, reported to her one by one on what they had done. She rewarded the diligent with cloth and silk in accordance with their accumulated achievements and made note of the lazy, reducing their pay and forcing them to make up for it. She never assigned them work that was beyond their individual abilities. There-

⁵⁰ *HSZP*, juan shou, 13.

⁵¹ *Taibo Meili zhi*, 1897 ed., 6.15.

⁵² *Wujiang XZ*, 1488 ed., 5.22a.

fore, the family's property expanded more than ever before.⁵³

The big landlords usually needed additional personnel to help manage their farming enterprises and supervise various productive activities. Most of these managers were bondservants selected and trained by their masters. Let us again look at Hua Zong'an's case as an example of the origins of the bondservant-managers. According to Zong'an's biography,

He ordered the intelligent bondservants (*zanghuo*) to live separately from the main residence, paid them to study, taught them the skills of writing and mathematics, vested them with lands, established families for them and ordered them to assist their master's family. As a result of his awe-inspiring family rules, those who were chosen served their master conscientiously and prepared in advance both the public and private affairs of their master.⁵⁴

The Hua genealogy suggests that the hired laborer was the least common of the three labor forces in early Ming. In fact, Hua Chun (1429–1501) was the only Hua landlord who used hired laborers, and he was not a big landlord but an owner-cultivator who owned only fifty mu of farm land and worked together with the hired laborers in the fields.⁵⁵

After the first half of the fifteenth century, the number of small family farms gradually declined, and big landlords began to emerge. This change is reflected in the pattern of land distribution in Tongxiang county in 1430, by which time the percentage of landless households had increased to about 40.5 percent of the total population (landowner households numbered 19,690; landless, 13,376).⁵⁶ Hua Zonglong and his four younger brothers, for instance, owned 100,000 mu of farm land before the family division.⁵⁷ An Guo (1481–1534) of Jiaoshan also owned 100,000 mu of land.⁵⁸ According to the records of the Wuxi gazetteer, there was a total of 1,255,025 mu of agricultural land in the county in 1502,⁵⁹ which means that Hua Zonglong and An Guo owned 16 percent of the total land in the county. If one as-

⁵³ *Benshu*, 25.17a.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 25.15a.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 29.5.

⁵⁶ *Tongxiang XZ*, 1887 ed., 6, shihuo, shang, hukou, 1a. There were 179 lis and 31,426 households in Tongxiang county in 1430 and 1432. The data are calculated from these two numbers.

⁵⁷ *HSZP*, juan shou, 16.

⁵⁸ *Jiaoshan Anshi jiacheng*, 14.12.

⁵⁹ *Wuxi xianzhi* (hereafter, *Wuxi XZ*), 1881 ed., 8.10–11.

sumes that in Ming times a single able farm laborer could cultivate about ten mu of farm land⁶⁰ and that all of An Guo's and Hua Zonglong's property was arable, they could have employed as many as ten thousand farm laborers each to cultivate their 100,000 mu of land.

The fourth characteristic of the early Ming landlords is that most of their sons continued to engage in farming. Moreover, they were very proud if they could be appointed tax captain of their local community, and in those families who were able to maintain their economic strength, the tax captain position would be hereditary. The first six generations of the Hua family produced a total of nine tax captains, with Hua Zonglong's family holding the position for four generations: the first son of each generation succeeded his father in the position.

There were occasional landlords' sons who were not interested in farming and who, at least in the Hua lineage, devoted their time to study instead. However, unlike their mid-Ming descendants, they studied simply for the pleasure of it and without any intention of entering the political arena. Hua Zongkang (1409–97), the youngest son of Xingshu, was such a scholar. He inherited a great fortune from his father and built up a private library of several thousand juan of books. Because he spent all his days in this library and did not do anything productive, his family's fortune did not grow.⁶¹ Hua Sui (1439–1513) is another example. By the time he was a young man, he had read most of the classics and histories; by middle age, he derived much pleasure from collating texts in the search for printing errors. Later, he invested in printing and adopted a method of printing with movable type using tin type instead of whole page wooden blocks. He also published his own edited versions of rare books. Because Hua Sui's printing business was designed solely for the preservation of rare books, he made no profit on it at all, and his family's fortunes fell into decline.⁶²

The fifth characteristic of the early Ming landlords was that they were, before the penetration of commercial capital into the rural area, the only group to finance rural credit. At this juncture, it is necessary to take a brief look at peasant life in the Lake Tai region. In 1488 the practice of sericulture in Wujiang county was still at an early stage of

⁶⁰ Zhang Lǔxiang, *Shenshi nongshu*, xia, p. 44.

⁶¹ *Benshu*, 34.1; *Huashi chuanfang ji*, 4.16.

⁶² *Benshu*, 31.9–10. On the history of printing, see Tsuen-hsüan Tsien, "Paper and Printing," in *Science and Civilisation in China*, ed. Joseph Needham, vol. 5, pt. 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), esp. pp. 211–13.

development, and peasant families depended mainly on farm production for their livelihood. In the highlands, the peasants practiced double cropping, planting spring crops such as wheat and rapeseed after they had harvested the rice crops. In the lowlands, the paddy fields were too wet to plant spring crops, so some peasants rented them out for raising ducks; others relied on fishing to supplement their family income.⁶³

The poor peasants cultivated lands for the rich and paid high fixed rents to the landlords—ranging, as we've seen, from 1 shi of fine rice per mu to 1.8 shi of rice per mu. In a normal year, the rice produced on a farm was not enough to sustain a small peasant family. Thus, for approximately six months, from the fourth or fifth month of the lunar year to the autumn harvest, a small peasant family depended mainly on the yield from the spring crops for its food supply. In the lowland areas, for half the year, a peasant family was dependent on being able to exchange fish for rice. When the peasants were confronted with financial difficulties, they would usually go to the wealthy landlords for help. Customarily, if one borrowed one shi of rice, one had to pay back two shi after the autumn harvest; if one borrowed money (i.e., silver or copper cash), one had to pay a 50 percent yearly interest.⁶⁴

Hua Zongzhen, though, was a very kind creditor who “when he lent grains to people, always lowered the interest rate. In a year of famine, although people brought their clothes to pawn, not only did he not take their clothes, he also lent them what they needed.”⁶⁵ Hua Zhen (1416–94) was another considerate creditor. According to his biography, “In a year of crop failure, many people borrowed from him. When they begged for an extension of the repayment date, he estimated the total amount of grain that was owed, which was more than two thousand shi, and destroyed all the receipts for the loan without demanding repayment.”⁶⁶

But if Hua Zhen destroyed the receipts for the loans, there must have been many other creditors who pressed for repayment without mercy, causing small peasants gradually to lose their lands and even their free peasant status. In short, the moneylender's role played by the wealthy landlords clearly strengthened their dominant position in the rural society.

⁶³ *Wujiang XZ*, 1488 ed., 2.30–31, 5.21, 22, 28.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 5.21, 22.

⁶⁵ *Huashi chuanfang ji*, 4.13.

⁶⁶ *Benshu*, 31.3–4.

Tax Captains and Agricultural Development

The tax captain system was a responsibility system adopted by the founder of the Ming dynasty; it held tax captains responsible for the completion of grain tax collection. This meant that if taxpayers failed to pay their share, the tax captains would be held fully responsible for the deficient payment, sometimes even having to make up for the deficiency out of their own pockets. Hua Zong'an was an example of this kind of tax captain. "By the time he had been in charge of local taxes for over ten years, there were several tens of households which owed the government. Because Zong'an had neither the courage to delay tax payments nor the heart to press the helpless people to pay, he paid them from his own savings."⁶⁷ Some tax captains would, of course, share the deficiency with other taxpayers; but if a tax captain could neither force the taxpayers who owed the taxes to pay nor make up the deficiency himself, he had to suffer the consequences. Hua Jin (1465–1517), for example, was a tax captain who owed a large amount of taxes to the government. If his son Hua Yue had not obtained a *jinshi* degree just at that time, Hua Jin probably could not have avoided punishment by the government.⁶⁸

To fulfill his responsibility for tax collection, a tax captain was obliged to pay attention to the problems that might affect agricultural production in his jurisdiction. In Ming and Qing times, the most common threats to agricultural production were flood and drought, and guarding against these became one of tax captain's main duties. Thus, for example, in the Lake E area, where the land was low and flat, the tax captains' main concern was to prevent flooding. In contrast, in the Jiaoshan area, where the land was high, their main concern was to build reservoirs to combat drought. The following examples illustrate the tax captain's role in agricultural production.

Hua Zonglong, the first tax captain of the family, built a long embankment to protect lakeside lands from being flooded. According to his biography, "The lands along the lake had been submerged several times by flood waters. But even when the lake covered the land, the government still insisted that the grain taxes be collected, and the landowners suffered. The revered Mr. Hua provided grains, mobilized workmen, and built a long dike to protect the lands from flood, and as a result, settlements were built and crops were produced."⁶⁹ If the

⁶⁷ *Benshu*, 25.15–19.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 31.29.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 31.2.

flooded lands could not be saved, the tax captain would often open up some uncultivated land to replace the lands his tax sector had lost. Thus, when Hua Fang succeeded his father as tax captain, he reclaimed four hundred mu of wasteland in the neighboring districts to solve his tax collection problem. His biography records the incident:

Hua's residence is in the district of Yanxiang canton near Lake E. The local people had built dikes to protect the lakeside lands from flooding. Dikes were severely damaged by the heavy rains of 1405, and the lake waters burst out, inundating four hundred mu of farmland. This land had been confiscated by the government during the early years of the dynasty, and the taxes on it were comparatively higher than those of other land. Now although the land no longer existed, it was still being taxed, and the landowners often went bankrupt because they were no longer able to pay these taxes. Hua Fang noticed this and sadly said: "How can this situation continue? Now, I will help them to bring wastelands under cultivation." He made trips to inspect unclaimed lands in the cantons of Meili, Shangfu, and Zhairan, and he acquired as much land as his people had lost. He provided 2,000 *hu* of grain for expenses and asked the people of his area to cultivate it. Saying "the revered Mr. Hua is trying to help us," the people were all happy to undertake the task. Shortly thereafter, the lands were transformed into good farmland, the problem was solved, and there were sufficient taxes.⁷⁰

Tax captains also paid attention to the improvement of the quality of the land in their jurisdiction. When Hua You (1437–1500), a cousin of Hua Fang, was a tax captain, he invested in the improvement of one thousand mu of boggy land. His biography notes that

the county's poor owned one thousand mu of low-lying land. Since the land had drainage problems, the entire area often became inundated by lake water. This made it impossible for the landowners to pay grain taxes every year. The revered Mr. Hua Dongyang [Hua You] bought the lands and personally planned and supervised the drainage and the construction of dikes, polders, and irrigation ponds, measures which resulted in fertile lands. In addition to paying off the grain taxes, he also used the surplus from the land income to repair bridges and roads and dredge rivers and irrigation canals; he did not keep the surplus for himself.⁷¹

These three examples show clearly that tax captains were actively involved in local waterworks projects. It would seem that this was essential if they were to successfully fulfill their duties. As the last two

⁷⁰ *Huashi chuanfang ji*, 4.26–27; *HSZP*, *juan shou*, 18.

⁷¹ *Benshu*, 31.12–13.

examples strongly suggest, however, the underlying motivation of their active involvement was ultimately self-interest; that is, they were often concerned more with their own well-being than with helping the miserable peasants restore the lands they had lost to the lake or obtain the ownership of another piece of land. In fact, their active role in local irrigation and water conservancy would eventually bring more and more land under their own ownership and turn more and more unfortunate peasants into farm laborers, tenant farmers, or hired laborers.

The tax captains of the highland field area also had to deal with water supply problems. When An Guo served as the tax captain of Jiaoshan, he made a great contribution to the prosperity of his local society by rebuilding the irrigation system in his jurisdiction. The mile-long river behind his village, the Xishanjiang, which originated in the mountains to the north, eventually merged with another river further downstream. Before An's time, two dams had been built, one to the west of the village, the other to the east; all the peasants in the area were dependent on these two dams for irrigation. Later, in the early Ming, a wealthy local family named Yu had expanded the west dam to enable boats to sail up and down the river. This whole water system was very convenient for the local people. Then, as the Yu family declined, individual peasants built many separate small dams to store water for irrigating their own plots, and eventually the entire water supply system of the area was destroyed. In 1503, An Guo studied the river situation and then mobilized local people to rebuild the west dam. He also constructed irrigation canals and diverted water from the river so that it flowed to the east dam. After the completion of the water control project, all the lands to the east of the river as well as the lands behind the village were free from drought. An Guo also planted flowers and willow trees and built inns and market-places along both sides of the river.⁷² This project both assured good agricultural production and provided market and transportation facilities for the people. By the sixteenth century, the Hou village where the An family resided had developed into a market town, and the local people renamed it "An zhen" to commemorate the An family.⁷³

The tax captains were also supposed to assist the poor. Their helping hands, however, did not extend to everybody in need in their jurisdiction. They were concerned mainly with their relatives, and often only their closest relatives at that. Generally speaking, in the early

⁷² *Jiaoshan Anshi jiacheng*, 9.28-30.

⁷³ *Taibo Meili zhi*, 1.10; *Wuxi XZ*, 14.12.

period of the Ming dynasty, a tax captain was likely to provide aid to those relatives who could not afford to marry, had no money to bury their dead, or had no son or brother to support them in old age.⁷⁴ However, even this help was sporadic; thus, the tax captains could hardly be considered community leaders in this area.

The Rural Community in Transition

The Reform of Zhou Chen

During the reign of Yongle (1403–24), the power of tax captains was seriously challenged. Yongle, a strong and ambitious ruler, levied heavy taxes on his people to support his ambitious undertakings. Of these projects, two were especially important. In 1405, soon after his accession, Yongle dispatched a maritime expedition to Southeast Asia. Between 1405 and 1432, seven such expeditions were launched. These unprecedented maritime adventures were very costly, and they required great amounts of manpower and material resources. The first voyage, for instance, included 62 vessels and 28,000 men. Yongle's second major undertaking was to rebuild Beijing as the home of the Son of Heaven after moving the capital from Jinling (Nanjing) in 1421. The large-scale plan included the construction of a magnificent palace, government offices, and strong city walls. To cope with the special financial needs of these projects, the government imposed additional taxes—called *gongxian* or *suiban* (annual contribution)—on the people and entrusted the tax captains with the responsibility for collecting them.⁷⁵ The additional taxes did not only mean hardship for the taxpayers; collecting them was also an added burden for the tax captains.

The second major challenge was also a consequence of the transfer of the nation's capital from Jinling to Beijing. The new capital in the northeast was approximately six times farther from the Lake Tai area than the old capital had been. When the capital was in Jinling, the grain taxes had to be shipped only about 227 miles,⁷⁶ and the Yangzi River provided cheap and convenient water transportation. Thus, the responsibility of shipping the taxes to Jinling was not an unbearable

⁷⁴ *Benshu*, 32.8, 31.7–9; *HSZP*, *juan shou*, 16–17, 18.

⁷⁵ *Wujiang XZ*, 1747 ed., 17.22.

⁷⁶ *Wujiang XZ*, 1488 ed., 1.36. It was a 635-li journey by boat from Wujiang county to Jinling. One Ming-Qing *yingzao li* = 1.152 present-day *shi li*, and 1 *shi li* = 0.3107 miles (*Cihai*, comp. Shu Xincheng et al. [*Xiang'gang: Zhonghua shuju*, 1940], appendix, "On measurement units," pp. 4–5).

burden on the tax captains of the Lake Tai area. After the capital was moved, however, the government had to use the Grand Canal to transport its tribute grain the 1,369 miles from the Lake Tai region to Beijing. Not only was the Grand Canal a less convenient connection to the new capital than the Yangzi River had been to Jinling, but the seasonal change in the water level of the Grand Canal greatly limited its capacity to convey the tribute grain fleet.⁷⁷

Shipping tax grain to Beijing meant a vast increase in both time and money. In 1430, for instance, nearly 230,000 men from Suzhou prefecture were mobilized to ship the tax grain from the Lake Tai area to the national granaries in Beijing, Linqing, Nanjing, and other places. Some of these labor services took several months to complete. Kuang Zhong, the prefect of Suzhou, described these onerous services in his memorial: "They had barely finished shipping the grain taxes of last year and returned home before it was about time to begin the shipping for this year."⁷⁸

Who participated in the transportation service? According to the early Ming regulations, participants were the landholding civilian households, including landlords, independent farmers, and part tenants.⁷⁹ These, of course, were also the people most fully engaged in agricultural production. If they spent so many months in labor service, how could they have managed their farm production? If they did not have enough time to farm their lands, how could they have paid their taxes or rents? Above all, if each year nearly 230,000 farm laborers in Suzhou prefecture could not fully participate in agriculture, how could production in the area have been maintained at its normal level?

At the same time, to meet the financial needs of the long-distance grain tax transportation, tax captains had to impose additional grain tax surcharges upon the taxpayers. When the taxpayers were no longer able to meet these demands, they deserted their lands and fled. Consequently, many farms were left uncultivated, and total agricultural production declined. Under such conditions, tax captains were unable to meet their collection quotas. In Suzhou prefecture, for in-

⁷⁷ *Wujiang XZ*, 1747 ed., 12.7-8; *Wujiang XZ*, 1488 ed., 1.36. The distance between Wujiang county and Beijing was 3,825 li by boat and 3,590 li by land.

⁷⁸ Kuang Zhong, *Ming Kuang Taishou zhi Su ji*, 8.7. Quoted from Hong Huanchun, ed., *Ming-Qing Suzhou nongcun jingji ziliao*, p. 535.

⁷⁹ Yamane Yukio, "Reforms in the Service Levy System in the 15th and 16th Centuries," in *State and Society in China*, p. 284; Ho Ping-ti, *Studies on the Population of China*, p. 26.

stance, the total unpaid grain tax up to 1429 amounted to 7,600,000 shi of rice.⁸⁰ When the government's Board of Revenue noticed that revenue was consistently falling short, it sent representatives to the local area to force the tax captains to pay off their arrears. As a result, many tax captains were arrested and punished as cruelly as if they had been common criminals, a procedure that greatly diminished the dignity of the position of the tax captain in the eyes of his fellow villagers.⁸¹

The persecution of tax captains did not solve the problem, however; the rural economy of the Lake Tai area continued to deteriorate, and in 1430 Emperor Xuanzong appointed Zhou Chen to be imperial commissioner for economic reconstruction in the area of Jiangnan and western Zhejiang. Because Zhou Chen believed that the failure of the economy was due both to the taxation system and the malpractice of tax captains, he implemented a series of reforms in those areas. First, he put into practice a new procedure for tax collection. Each year, after the prefect of each prefecture had determined the grain tax quota of the counties under his jurisdiction, each county government, based on its quota, was to estimate the total amount of grain tax surcharges—a task that had formerly been carried out by the tax captains. Then the county government was to send to each taxpaying household a tax notice with the figures for the grain tax and surcharge. Thus the taxpayers would know exactly how much grain tax and surcharge they should pay, and the county government would know just how much tax the tax captains were responsible for collecting. Zhou Chen also ordered each county to establish county granaries outside the county capital where all grain taxes were to be paid and stored, and from where they would be transported to the national granaries. In this way the ins and outs of the grain levies could be supervised closely by county officials, and the tax captains would no longer be able to engage in malpractice and embezzle public funds.⁸² Significantly, this reform deprived tax captains of their previous role in the assessment of local tax surcharges and their distribution.

At Zhou Chen's suggestion, each county appointed an additional assistant magistrate responsible for irrigation and water conservancy.⁸³ Later, a dike captain (*tangzhang* or *yuzhang*) and sometimes

⁸⁰ *Mingshi*, 153.4212.

⁸¹ *Wujiang XZ*, 1747 ed., 12.7–8.

⁸² *Wujiang XZ*, 1488 ed., 9.16–17; *Wujiang XZ*, 1747 ed., 16.8, 12.8; *Mingshi*, 153.4212; *Wuxi XZ*, 1881 ed., 6.3.

⁸³ *Wujiang XZ*, 1747 ed., 18.45; *Wuzhong shuili quanshu*, 9, shui-guan.

also an elder (*qilao*) who was a specialist in irrigation and water conservancy was assigned to each tax sector to coordinate the work of this assistant magistrate.⁸⁴ We can see, then, that the tax captain's leading position in local irrigation and water conservancy was gradually replaced by that of the assistant magistrate, to whom the dike captains or elders reported.

Zhou Chen also institutionalized the annual contribution system. Before the reform, the tax captains had the power to decide how much a household should pay; Zhou Chen deprived the tax captains of that power and instead made the county magistrate responsible for the annual contribution. He ordered each household to pay 120 copper cash a year to the county government, which could then use the funds to purchase goods needed by the imperial household and the central government.⁸⁵

The three reforms mentioned above drastically changed the position of tax captain from that of an independent, dignified, and authoritative local leader to that of a passive subordinate of the county magistrate, who became the sole administrative and fiscal authority. Tax captains not only lost their initiative in local affairs, they also lost the right to hold funds to deal with local needs, for without the leadership and the financial support of county officials, no public construction project could legally be started. In short, these reforms established the administrative authority of the county magistracy on the local level and put the subcounty organizations under direct bureaucratic control of the county government.

As far as economic reconstruction was concerned, two later measures appear to have been more practical and beneficial than the three mentioned above. In 1432, Emperor Xuanzong approved a request by Zhou Chen and other officials to reduce grain taxes; as a result, lands that formerly paid a grain tax from 0.1 to 1.0 shi per mu had their taxes reduced 20 to 30 percent. For example, in 1391, Wujiang county paid grain taxes of 427,147 *shi*; Guian, 188,714; Wucheng, 212,002. The figures for 1432 were 399,216; 130,358; and 152,685.⁸⁶ This large-scale tax reduction was of great significance for the recovery of the rural economy, as the 1747 edition of the history of Wujiang county indicates:

⁸⁴ *Wujiang XZ*, 1747 ed., 16.4; *Huzhou FZ*, 1872 ed., 43.9–11. Tangzhang had been established in Huzhou prefecture in 1411.

⁸⁵ *Wujiang XZ*, 1747 ed., 17.22.

⁸⁶ *Huzhou FZ*, 1542 ed., 8.9; *Guian XZ*, 1881 ed., 14.1; Ling Jiexi, ed., *Cheng-An-De sanxian fukao*, 1.5–8.

Because Zhou Chen's reforms happened to coincide with the tax reduction, the goal of rural economic reconstruction was easily achieved. Had there been no tax reduction, and had the government continued to observe the old tax quota for levying taxes, then even if [Zhou's] reform plans had been perfect, they would not necessarily have been able to produce the same result.⁸⁷

The second important reform was the improvement of the method of shipping grain tribute. The new method allowed the local people to transport their grain taxes to Huai'an and Guazhou, two halfway stations on the Grand Canal, and then pay the army to complete the other half of the shipping, considerably shortening the process. In 1471, the army took complete responsibility for shipping the grain tribute, while the local taxpayers bore the total expense of the work.⁸⁸ Since farm laborers could again devote more time and energy to agricultural production, agricultural productivity was restored to normal, and economic prosperity ensued.

Thanks to the reforms, in particular the tax reduction, the income of peasant families increased, and the taxpayers had sufficient income to pay their taxes. Thus, both the taxpayers and those who were responsible for tax collection were better off. Furthermore, as a gazetteer of Wuxi county indicates, although the authority of tax captains had been restricted, they were still the leaders of the local community, and they could still intervene in local disputes and collect taxes:

During the period between Chenghua and Hongzhi [1465–1505], the three leaders of the rural community who were responsible for tax collection rode swift horses and wore colorful clothing. They arbitrated disputes among the people. They built up their fortunes by always collecting an excess of taxes. They did not admire officials or want to become one of them. The people always had a substantial annual land income, only a small portion of which they were required to pay to the government in taxes.⁸⁹

The economic recession between 1403 and 1430 not only resulted in a change in the local political structure, it also accelerated changes in the rural social structure. The number of owner-cultivators declined as more and more big landlord families began to emerge. After the capital was moved to Beijing, the increasingly heavy burden of land taxes and labor services forced many vulnerable small

⁸⁷ *Wujiang XZ*, 1747 ed., 12.8.

⁸⁸ *Mingshi*, 153. 4213, 79.1916–19; *Tongxiang XZ*, 1887 ed., 6.7–8.

⁸⁹ *Wuxi XZ*, 1881 ed., 37.8–9.

owner-peasants into bankruptcy, and they deserted their lands. Some even gave up their free status, selling themselves and their families to their more powerful neighbors as bondservants (*puli*) or giving themselves in adoption to the wealthy (*yinanfu*). In so doing, they became dependent on their masters for a living; they also exempted themselves from the responsibilities of both land taxes and labor services in their local community. Thus, while the number of owner-cultivators and part-tenants decreased, there was a rapid growth of big landlord families including bondservants and adopted persons. A letter written by Zhou Chen to the officials of the Board of Revenue sometime between 1426 and 1436 describes this change in the rural social structure of the Lake Tai region:

The wealthy and powerful families either demand their debtor family's adult male to compensate for their debts or else they forcibly take sons from the people to serve as subordinates in their families. Sometimes all the members of an enslaved family serve a single master family, and other times the members of one enslaved family are distributed among the several houses of the master family. Some enslaved males were given their master's surnames and were regarded as adopted children (*yinan*), while others became bondservants (*puli*) and were forced to change their first names. Since all these individual belong to their masters and perform services for them, they are no longer responsible for the land taxes and labor services for the community. Since they have willingly become appendages of powerful people, there is nothing anyone can do about it. Consequently, the number of the subordinates of the powerful families daily increased while the numbers of independent peasants daily decreased.⁹⁰

The contribution of Zhou Chen's reform to the well-being of the owner-cultivators was only temporary; before long, they were again put in an economic tight spot. According to a 1494 report by the Ministry of Justice, the estates of the tax captains provided a refuge for many displaced people, including bankrupted peasants, criminals, and labor-service evaders. However, these same tax captains also forcibly seized small peasants' property, took their children as bondservants, and generally used their influence to oppress people in debt and set up private jails.⁹¹ In fact, the prerogatives of tax captains in the rural communities did not disappear until the rise of the gentry.

⁹⁰ Liang Fangzhong, *Mingdai liangzhang zhidu*, p. 133.

⁹¹ Wang Yuquan, "Huang-Ming tiaofa shilei chuan duhou," *Mingshi luncong*, 1:15.

The Rise of the Gentry

The rise of gentry was the second and decisive force that led to the decline of the power of local leaders. I use here Ch'ü T'ung-tsu's definition of the term *gentry*, which includes two groups of people: (1) active, retired, and dismissed government officials; and (2) holders of academic degrees who had not yet entered officialdom.⁹² In the Ming-Qing period, the gentry was a special social group whose members had a higher social status than commoners. However, the gentry did not become an influential social group until about ninety years after the founding of the Ming dynasty. There were two reasons for this delay. The first was the attractiveness of the privileged tax captain position, which caused the heads of ordinary families to encourage their children to pursue this position.⁹³ The second reason was Taizu's relentless policy of repression toward the gentry families. The effects of the policy were so profound that the people "regarded a political career as misfortune."⁹⁴ The author of the Wujiang gazetteer testifies that before 1457, a person recommended for a *shengyuan* degree, the lowest gentry status, would condemn his recommender as if he had been assigned to heavy labor service, and his mother and wife would weep at the news.⁹⁵ Most families, therefore, stopped providing their children with the education needed to compete for gentry positions. This general attitude began to change gradually after 1457, when people again "esteemed studies and desired to become officials."⁹⁶

In the latter half of the fifteenth century, when the prestige of the local leaders began to decline, the sons of tax captains became the most frequent competitors for gentry positions. They were anxious to acquire the gentry privileges that could effectively save their families from decline. The personal experience of Hua Yue illustrates the importance of gentry status to a commoner family.

Yue's father, Hua Ji, was a tax captain, but he was always treated high-handedly by the local magistrate and some of the powerful local families. He also owed the government a large amount in taxes. When, in 1522, Yue earned the *juren* degree and attained gentry status, the family's situation changed dramatically. Hua Yue assumed responsibility for the back taxes and managed to pay them off; at the same time, the local magistrate and the powerful families in his local-

⁹² Ch'ü T'ung-tsu, *Local Government in China under the Ch'ing*, pp. 171-72.

⁹³ Gu Yanwu, *Tianxia jun guo li bing shu*, yuan bian, 6: Su-Song, 18.

⁹⁴ *Tuncun zhi*, 5; *Zhenze XZ*, 1746 ed., 25.1-2; *Huzhou FZ*, 1872 ed., 29.2.

⁹⁵ *Wujiang XZ*, 1488 ed., 3.17-18.

⁹⁶ *Wucheng XZ*, 1881 ed., 28.21; *Zhenze XZ*, 1746 ed., 25.1-2.2.

ity stopped bullying Hua Ji.⁹⁷

Some rich landlords willingly invested substantial resources to prepare their sons to compete in the civil service examinations. The family of An Guo was typical in this respect. The genealogy of the family recorded An Guo's educational plan as follows:

An Guo instructed his sons to study the five classics one after the other, and he invited all the famous scholars of that time, both from his native county and the neighboring counties, to tutor them at his family school. He also offered a reward of three hundred mu of land at the Songjinghe estate to whichever one of his sons earned the highest degree first.⁹⁸

This prize was won by An Rushan (1503–70), An Guo's oldest son, who obtained the jinshi degree in 1529. As more and more of the landlords' sons became full-time students to prepare for a political career, they increasingly distanced themselves from economically productive and managerial activities.

Gentry members enjoyed certain legal and economic privileges that directly challenged the authority of local leaders. First, the gentry were not subject to regular judicial procedures, nor were they under the judicial power of local officials and local leaders. In theory, a gentry member did not have any authority in his native place, nor was he allowed to interfere with the government business of local leaders and local officials. However, the personal relationships of a gentry member with his teachers, relatives, fellow officials, fellow degree-holders, and students usually provided him with close connections throughout the power hierarchy and enabled him to bypass the magistrate and directly influence decisions at a higher level. It was this link that gave the gentry members power to pressure local officials.⁹⁹ For these reasons, whenever a legal dispute occurred between a gentry member and a commoner, not only did the local leaders lack the right to hear the case, they also could not do anything to protect the interests of the commoner. A local leader who could not provide legal protection for his fellow villagers would obviously lose their respect; gradually, therefore, the local leaders lost their power to control the behavior of fellow villagers. The deterioration of the judicial power of local leaders had become very evident by the second quarter of the sixteenth century, as indicated by the gazetteer of Tun village in Wujiang county: "By the early years of Jiajing [1522–66], the gentry

⁹⁷ *HSZP*, juan shou, 29–30; *Benshu*, 31.36.

⁹⁸ *Jiaoshan Anshi jiacheng*, 16.1–4.

⁹⁹ Ch'ü T'ung-tsu, *Local Government*, p. 176.

members had become self-important, and they despised the lowly-placed government servicemen. The judicial functions of the elders (*laoren*), therefore, ceased to be effective, and the villagers behaved without any restraint."¹⁰⁰

Members of the gentry were also exempt from labor-service obligations. This labor service was a unique institution of the early Ming, the basic idea of which was that each county was a self-sufficient unit in which all services needed by the county were supported by its own resources. The responsibility of the local leaders was to mobilize local resources, human and material, to carry out these services. Under this system, apart from a few formally appointed officials, the people who served in this capacity were not government employees but unpaid local people. All local people, rural and urban, were obligated to serve, whether as manual laborers, office clerks, secretaries, or community leaders. In Wujiang county, during the reign of Taizu (1368–98), for example, at least 21,471 men were needed each year to provide the necessary services of the county. Of this total, only 25 persons, including the county magistrate, were government employees; the other 21,446 were unpaid local people. Some decades later (1465–87), the number of government employees had increased by almost ten percent (to 28) and the number of local people providing services almost as much (to 22,325).¹⁰¹

The high demand for labor services at the county level made the question of how the services should be distributed a major concern of local people; an unfair distribution of labor services could result in virtual agricultural bankruptcy for many peasant families. Generally speaking, two criteria were adopted to determine the distribution of labor services. One was the value of the property, including real estate and business, a family owned; the other was the number of adult males in a household. Thus, a wealthy family with a large number of adult males had to undertake heavy services (*zhongyi*), while a family with less wealth and fewer adult males was given lighter services (*qingyi*). A heavy service load was distinguished from a light service load by the amount of time and the total expense required to perform the service. However, wealthy households with fewer adult males would contribute more money than labor hours, while the household with little property would contribute more labor hours than money. Since a family's wealth would not necessarily be in agricultur-

¹⁰⁰ *Tuncun zhi*, 5.

¹⁰¹ *Wujiang XZ*, 1747 ed., 16.4–5, 18.44–47.

al land, merchants, tradesmen, craftsmen, and others were also subjected to labor services.¹⁰² Gentry households were a major exception; they were exempt from these services.

During the Taizu reign, only active government officials were exempt from labor service, but gradually the degree holders also acquired this privilege. In 1377, the emperor defined the privileged position of gentry by saying:

The treatment accorded to the official families and to commoners varies. It is the commoners' responsibility to undertake services for their superiors. Since the men of virtue are already highly placed, if we assign them labor services, it would mean that we make no distinction between men of virtue and commoners. Because this is not the way to treat men of virtue and encourage the educated, from now on, all families of active officials, if they own lands, will be required only to pay land taxes and are exempt from all labor services.¹⁰³

Later, the exemption for active officials was extended to after their retirement, then to their households for three years after their death.¹⁰⁴

From the Zhengtong period (1436–49) onward, the law concerning labor-service exemption changed in several important ways. First, the exemptions given to official households were divided into several grades according to the rank and the position of the individual officials. A high-ranking official, for example, would receive a greater labor-service exemption than would a low-ranking one, and a local official's exemption would be only half as much as that of a central official of the same rank.¹⁰⁵ Second, holders of academic degrees were included in this privileged group. Consequently, the number of exemptions multiplied by several factors. Among the degree-holders, even shengyuan, holders of the lowest, and the most numerous, academic degree, were exempt. The increase in the number of privileged households in an area meant that more households and properties were exempt from labor service, and fewer households and properties were left to share the burden. In a famous essay, Gu Yanwu (1613–82) detailed the effects of shengyuan tax privileges upon the labor-service system:

It is a common phenomenon at the present time that a large county might have more than one thousand shengyuan. Let us suppose that if

¹⁰² *Xiushui XZ*, 1596 ed., 3.139.

¹⁰³ *Ming Taizu shilu*, 111.7.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 111.8, 126.2.

¹⁰⁵ *Da Ming huidian*, 20.14–15, 20; Sakai Tadao, *Chugoku zensho no kenkyu*, pp. 199–203.

a county has 10,000,000 mu of land, and half of them were registered under the name of shengyuan members, then the remaining 5,000,000 mu of land, which are owned by commoners, have to undertake the labor services that should be supported by 10,000,000 mu of land. However, if a county has 10,000,000 mu of land, and 9,000,000 mu of the total belongs to the shengyuan households, then the labor service of the county will be born by the remaining 1,000,000 mu of land owned by commoners. When the percentage of land owned by the commoners decreases, the commoners, in order to avoid heavy labor service, register their lands falsely under the name of shengyuan holders. This further reduces the land owned by commoners, and the social status of shengyuan becomes more important. The rich bribe the examiners in order to become shengyuan, and the poor run away or die.¹⁰⁶

The direct victims of this situation were tax captains and other local leaders, since the county government held them, and not the individual taxpayers, responsible for the fulfillment of labor services. Faced with the financial shortages and the threat of punishment, some local leaders had to sell their own properties to supplement the services. The suffering of local leaders is recorded in a 1527 memorial, which reads:

After one year of service, some rich tax captain families that previously owned properties worth one thousand taels of silver became beggars, and some larger families that previously had more than ten adult males became families without posterity. Therefore, commoners tried to avoid being appointed as tax captains even more persistently than they tried to avoid the punishment of exile to the border regions. . . . To cope with the problem, the government has adopted either a limit of one year on the term of service to substitute for long-term service or the method of several tens of families undertaking one service collectively. In the beginning, only the richest families went bankrupt; after a few years, however, almost no commoner landowners' families in the district could be saved.¹⁰⁷

As we have seen, in the early years of the Ming dynasty, tax captains were the richest landlords in the villages. This situation continued up to the first half of the sixteenth century, when the local leaders first lost their executive power over their fellow villagers, then their judicial power, and finally their wealth. When the social prestige and wealth of the local leaders declined, the hierarchical social structure of the rural society of early Ming disintegrated. The case of Tun village is a good example of this transformation. According to the gazetteer

¹⁰⁶ Gu Yanwu, *Tinglin wenji*, 1.24.

¹⁰⁷ Zhang Xuan, *Xiyuan wenjian lu*, 32.7.

of Tun village:

By the middle period of Jiajing, the authority of tax captains in tax collection had gradually ceased to be binding, not to mention that currently the status of the li captain is equal to that of the tax captain; even the taxpayers of a *jia* organization treat the current li captain as an equal without any status distinction between superior and inferior. If a current li captain cannot even protect himself and his family from punishment and humiliation, how can he expect respect from his fellow villagers?¹⁰⁸

In the beginning of the Ming dynasty, authoritative positions for local leaders were created, and the socioeconomic policy of Taizu worked to their advantage. However, the rise of the gentry with its privileged status, particularly its privileged exemption from labor services, resulted in the decline of the local leaders. This process of change was accompanied by a gradual but substantial shift in the psychology of commoners as two kinds of social relationships emerged to take the place of the hierarchical order of the early Ming. One was an unequal relationship between the gentry and the commoners, the other an equal relationship among all commoners. Meanwhile, commoner landlords became progressively impoverished, while gentry landlords acquired increasing holdings of real estate.

On the basis of the social background outlined in this chapter, the next chapter will discuss the economic roles of the gentry landlords during the Ming.

¹⁰⁸ *Tuncun zhi*, 5.

CHAPTER TWO

Gentry Landlords during the Ming

In the face of an unbearable service levy burden, landowners, in particular the local leaders, sought protection from members of the gentry. The landowners of a lineage usually sought the patronage of the gentry members of their own lineage. Consequently, the gentry members of a locality gradually became leaders among their fellow kinsmen and fellow villagers.

The Establishment of Gentry Control in the Rural Community

An example illustrating the transition of power in the rural communities from commoner local leaders to members of the gentry is the tax reform in Wuxi county in 1554 led by Hua Cha (1497–1574), a powerful member of the local gentry. After earning his jinshi degree in 1536, Hua Cha, the son of a wealthy landlord, held various eminent positions in the central government, including the office of Reader-in-Waiting in the Hanlin Academy. His outstanding political achievements coupled with his wealthy landlord background made him the most prominent member of the Hua lineage of Lake E in Yanxiang canton. There were more than 100,000 mu of land in that area, all of which belonged to members of the Hua lineage, who also held virtually all the local leadership posts. Their high social prestige and power, however, began to decline after the reign of the Hongzhi emperor (1488–1505). Wang Shizhen (1526–90), an official and a famous poet who also happened to be a student and the son-in-law of Hua Cha, provides us with firsthand information about what happened to the local leaders. According to Wang, one day in 1553 the elders of the Hua lineage traveled to Beijing to ask him and other government officials who had good relations with the Hua lineage to make use of their political influence to intercede for them with the local authorities of both Wuxi county and Changzhou prefecture to reduce the tax quo-

ta of the area. When Wang Shizhen heard that they wanted a tax cut of 1,000 taels of silver, no small amount, he demanded an explanation.¹

According to the elders, when the landowners of the area had financial difficulties, their lands were usually bought up by gentry landlords from other areas. These buyers preferred a special arrangement for these land transactions, by which they would purchase only the right to receive the income from the land, leaving the ownership title of the land to the original owners. This meant that the buyers had the right to the income from the land, but the original owners were forced to remain responsible for land taxes and labor services. Then, when the original owners were no longer able to pay the taxes and undertake the labor service, they would either move away or go into hiding, leaving the problem to the local leaders. Because the local leaders could not locate the original landowners or dare demand that new buyers undertake the fiscal responsibilities of the ownership, they had to use their own money to make up the shortage. When the savings of the local leaders were dried up, they, like the original owners, also moved away and left the problem of tax collection to their successors, the less wealthy landowners of the Hua lineage, who, after they were appointed tax captains or li captains, were confronted with even more difficult problems than their predecessors, since often they did not even know who the taxpayers were nor where the taxable lands were.² Hua Cha describes the miserable situation of his kinsmen as follows:

The powerful families annexed the land of other people.... They enjoyed the products of the land and paid no grain taxes, the responsibility for which they left to the original landowners. Not only did the local officials not look into the reasons why the tax collectors could not fulfill their duty, they also used physical punishment to press for payment of the taxes. Every year, the local leaders of the area were so severely beaten that their wounds bled and their bones were broken. In the area of Nanyan, the rich became poor and some inhabitants ran away and some died.³

Faced with this threat, Hua Cha, as the leader of the lineage, took two steps toward resolving the problem: he promoted cooperative efforts among lineage members to help those who were responsible for tax

¹ Wang Shizhen, "Yanxiang xiang yitian ji," cited in *Wuxi XZ*, 1881 ed., 37, "Yiwen," 8a-9b.

² *Ibid.*

³ *Ibid.*, 37.5-7.

collection, and he used his political influence to protect the socio-economic interests of the lineage. In 1554, Hua Cha mobilized both the gentry and the commoner landowners of the lineage and got them to contribute parcels of land to establish a joint estate, known as a "labor-service field" or *yitian*, the income from which was to be used to support the local leaders of the lineage who had to render services in tax collection and delivery. Hua Cha and his brothers took the lead and contributed 800 mu of land, the other landowners of the lineage followed suit, and before long the total contribution amounted to 2,400 mu of land. This greatly alleviated the heavy financial burden on the local leaders.⁴

The root of the problem still remained, however, since many lands in the area were still under the control of outside gentry landlords, who paid no taxes on these lands. Hua Cha initiated a new struggle against these outside gentry landlords. When a former student of his, Weng Dali, was appointed *canzheng* (administration vice-commissioner) to supervise tax collection in Suzhou and Songjiang prefectures, Hua Cha seized the opportunity and persuaded his student to submit a memorial to the throne on his behalf requesting tax reform in Wuxi county. At the same time, he sent a group of local representatives from Yanxiang canton to present the central government a petition that explained the unfairness of the distribution of the tax burden in Wuxi county. Emperor Shizong (1522–66) was moved by this petition and ordered Sun Shen, an investigating censor, to take charge of the case. Sun Shen in turn entrusted Weng Dali with responsibility for the work. Weng Dali, convinced that the most effective way to deal with the problem was to conduct a land survey and registration so that both the amount of taxable land and its owners could be identified, worked out a plan. In 1553 he assigned the magistrate of Wuxi county, Wang Qiqin, to put it into effect. Wang Qiqin, who had been disturbed for years by the practice of land tax evasion by the powerful gentry landlord families, took up his task with enthusiasm. Once the land survey was carried out, all landowners responsible for the tax payment, both gentry and commoners, were identified, and all landowners who enjoyed the income from the land were also held responsible for the taxes on it. As a result, 160,000 mu of formerly unassessed farm lands were entered into the county's tax rolls.⁵

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid., 37.5–7, 8–9; Gu Yanwu, *Tianxia junguo libing shu*, yuanbian, 7: Chang-Zhen, 53b.

Hua Cha's antagonists did not relinquish their vested interests easily. They mobilized their political influences and attempted in various ways to stop the survey. Although at first they hoped to persuade Sun Shen, Weng Dali, and Wang Qiqin to change their minds, they soon realized that the three officials were determined to carry out the survey. The tax evaders then decided to undermine these officials' power, and because of their powerful influence in the higher ranks of the bureaucracy, they were eventually able to have Weng Dali discharged from his post and Sun Shen replaced by someone else. Wang Qiqin was falsely accused of a serious crime and was barely able to avoid execution.⁶ Fortunately, however, the land survey was completed before any of this happened. Afterward, the people of Hua lineage built two shrines in the vicinity of Lake E, one in honor of the three officials who had sacrificed so much in the interest of the Hua lineage, the other in honor of Hua Cha for his leading role in the protection of his lineage.⁷

After this reform, the tax collection problems of the local leaders were temporarily solved, and they were able to fulfill their responsibilities without the financial support of the labor-service fields. Instead of giving the land back to the original donors, however, the lineage leaders decided to keep the land as charity land (*yitian*), the income from which would be used mainly to help poor lineage members.⁸ This decision had a profound influence on rural social and economic development.

Before the founding of charity land, when a member of a lineage developed serious financial difficulties, his ability to solve the problem was severely limited. Often he had to sell himself or members of his family to a powerful family to pay off a debt; sometimes he had to leave his native place and settle in another locality to avoid punishment. After the lineages began to set up charity lands, financial help and subsistence could be provided to the helpless and the poor, and poor lineage members could survive without having to leave their native place or become bondservants. The effects of charity land were evident: thirty years after Hua Cha's lineage founded charity land, it was reported that, with the exception of a few particularly serious cases, poor members of the Hua lineage in Yanxiang canton were seldom forced to leave their native place.⁹

⁶ *Wuxi XZ*, 1881 ed., 37.5-7, 8-9.

⁷ *Taibo Meili zhi*, 5.10-11, 13-14.

⁸ *Wuxi XZ*, 1881 ed., 37.5-7, 8-9.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 37.612-13; *Gujin tushu jicheng*, zhifang dian, 715, ce 118, 3.

Of course, keeping the poor members of a lineage in their native place may not have been beneficial for the economic development of the lineage. Not only did the rich kinsmen have to spend a great deal of money to help these lineage members; keeping the lineage poor in their native places meant an increase in the supply of farm laborers in those areas, further weakening the poor kinsmen's social and economic position.

We have seen, then, that from the early Ming onward, a drastic socioeconomic transformation took place in the Lake Tai region. Many small-holding farmers in the process lost ownership of the means of production. Because of the unique institutions of the tax captain, the gentry, and the charity land, however, these dispossessed peasants did not become "free" wage-laborers but instead became either bondservants, tenants of landlords, bondservant-like hired-laborers or dependents of lineage charity lands.

The Management of Gentry Landlords' Estates

The gentry was a unique status group distinct from the commoners, and when they became landlords they tended to manage their lands differently from commoner landlords. Generally speaking, they usually did not involve their own family members in the actual work of agricultural management but rather entrusted their properties to managers.

Some properties were counted as farm estates (*zhuang*). A farm estate probably included a human settlement and its nearby farmland. The size of individual estates varied. Dong Fen, a big urban gentry landlord of Huzhou prefecture, owned 20,000 mu of land in Wujiang county that were divided into seven farm estates and managed by two bondservant-managers.¹⁰ The average size of the estates owned by the Dong family in Wujiang was 3,000 mu. The Yanglian estate of An Rushan in Wuxi county, in contrast, was somewhat smaller, consisting of 1,000 mu of land.¹¹ As far as the land use of the estate is concerned, two features deserve special attention. First, the fields of an estate were geographically concentrated and were cultivated by bondservants, hired laborers, and tenant farmers. Second, the gentry landlords were able to combine smaller pieces of properties into large farm estates. The Yanglian estate of An Rushan provides an example. An obtained a first piece of land in 1529 from his father, bought a

¹⁰ Dong Sicheng, *Dong libu chidu*, shang, 15–16; Dong Fen, *Biyuan shiwen ji*, 8.7.

¹¹ *Jiaoshan Anshi jiacheng*, 16.1–4.

second piece in 1556, and finally bought a third piece between the other two. He then built the estate house and named it Yanglian estate.¹²

Managers, Bondservants, Hired Laborers, and Tenant Farmers

It seems that most managers came from two sources. Some were chosen from the bondservants of the gentry landlords, while others were junior former local leaders. Using family bondservants to manage property was a relatively common practice in the Lake Tai region, as the case of Hua Cheng demonstrates. According to the Wuxi gazetteer,

Hua Cheng used cruel and crafty bondservants to supervise agricultural production and generously bestowed them with good food and clothing. Consequently, Hua Cheng was able to store up ten thousand *zhong* of grain in his cellar and to reclaim one hundred thousand mu of land for farming. All of this was thanks to the efforts of his bondservants.¹³

A gentry landlord usually treated his bondservant-managers better than he did his ordinary bondservants, and sometimes, although this was illegal, the bondservant-managers could improve their social status. The bondservants of the Dong family of Huzhou provide an example. One source discloses that in 1594 Dong Fen, the head of the family, had thirty-seven bondservant-managers, three of which were the Dongs' hereditary bondservants and the rest first-generation bondservants. The source suggests that the hereditary bondservants of the Dong family had had opportunities to improve their social status, because by 1594, four of Dong Fen's hereditary bondservants had already acquired gentry status. Dong Fu, who died before 1594, had been a holder of the shengyuan degree, while Dong Mingqian, Dong Shiyi, and Dong Shiwei all held the *jiansheng* degree.¹⁴

Some of bondservant-managers even owned bondservants themselves: Dong Mingqian was the owner of two bondservants; Dong Shiwei and Dong Shiyi each owned one bondservant. Sometimes even bondservants without gentry title acquired bondservants: Dong Chun and Dong He, two leading bondservant-managers in the Dong family, for example, owned their own bondservants.¹⁵ Bondservants were not legally allowed to achieve gentry status; but as these exam-

¹² *Ibid.*, 16.1-2, 9.

¹³ *Wuxi XZ*, 1690 ed., 32.13.

¹⁴ Liu Yuanlin, *Fu Zhe zoushu*, 4.1-2.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 4.1-4.

ples show, not only did four bondservant-managers of the Dong family, under the patronage of their gentry master, succeed in obtaining gentry status, but they also illegally became owners of bondservants. However, their families remained attached to the family of Dong Fen, and they continued to occupy an inferior position within the Dong family. The facts described above suggest that the bondservants who played important economic roles in the family of their masters were also able to improve their own economic and social status. In fact, they could even become members of the gentry. Evidence suggests repeatedly that far from being unpaid laborers, some bondservants were paid generously, and others owned as much as two hundred mu of land.¹⁶ It also suggests that the upward social mobility of a bondservant-manager did not necessarily occur only when the wealth and power of his gentry master was declining, but could happen during the heyday of his master's family. In other words, the advancement of a bondservant was often approved or even supported by his master.

The second most common source of estate managers was the junior ranks of the local leaders, who had the advantage of being familiar with local affairs. Feng Yunwu, a native of Wuxi, was a typical example of this kind of manager. Feng Yunwu's father had been a *qushu* (bookkeeper of a grain tax sector) in his locality for many years. Since the *qushu* was responsible for keeping up-to-date records on all the taxpayers and properties of the *qu*, he had to be able to read and calculate. Thus this position was open only to the educated people in the community. Feng Yunwu was also *qushu* and an educated man. After leaving the *qushu* position, he worked for Hua Cha of Wuxi county as the vice-manager of his Dongting estate for twenty years.¹⁷ It is likely that Feng's experience in local affairs and his educational background helped him substantially in his duty as a manager. Feng Yunwu's case also exemplifies the gentry's dominant position in the rural communities at that time.

Below the estate managers, the gentry landlords, like the commoner landlords, employed bondservants and hired laborers and tenant farmers to work their lands. The gentry landlords, especially the less wealthy ones, felt it natural for the bondservant to engage in agricultural and handicraft production for their masters. Chen Que (1604–77), a gentry landlord from Jiaxing prefecture, stated in an es-

¹⁶ *Wujiang XZ*, 1747 ed., 37.55.

¹⁷ Huang An, *Xijin shixiao lu*, 7.406–7.

say entitled “On Bondservants” that “it is the duty of male bondservants to cultivate the land and of female bondservants to engage in weaving for their masters.”¹⁸ Chen Que was a poor gentry who after family division had received only a few mu of land and a few bondservants. His family’s income depended mainly on the productive activities of his bondservants. His male bondservants were responsible for cultivating the land and his female bondservants—directed by his wife—for the reeling and weaving. Zhang Lǔxiang, an intimate friend of Chen Que, described Chen Que’s family situation: “Chen Que managed his family with rules and regulations. At dawn, the sound of weaving could be heard from afar. The male bondservants also started work at dawn. They did not waste time on anything unproductive.”¹⁹

The personal experience of Tang Zhen (1630–1704) serves as another example of the use of bondservants in productive activities. Tang Kaitai, Tang Zhen’s father, was the magistrate of Wujiang county from 1637 to 1640. After the fall of the Ming dynasty, Kaitai and his family went into hiding in a village in Xincheng county in Zhejiang province. There, he bought some land and entrusted all the farm work to his bondservants. Tang Zhen recalled the family situation of those days:

Many years ago, after the fall of the Ming dynasty, I followed my father to his refuge in Nanzhou. We owned 100 mu of land, 5 mu of gardens, and 3 li of bamboo groves along the hill. My father had chicken and pork for meals, while the bondservants tended sheep, cultivated the land, watered the garden, and pounded kudzu vine and brake.²⁰

Judging from the agricultural technology available to the people in the southern part of the Lake Tai area at that time, an able farm laborer could cultivate no more than ten mu of land. Kaitai, therefore, must have employed at least ten male bondservants to take care of his hundred plus mu of land.

Both these examples indicate that the productive labor of small gentry landowners was supplied by family bondservants. Scattered information indicates that some big influential gentry landlords kept hundreds of bondservants. Let us take a few gentry families in Wuxi as examples: Zou Wang owned 300,000 mu of land and 3,000 bondservants; Wang Wen owned 500 bondservants; Yu Xian and

¹⁸ Zhang Lǔxiang, *Yangyuan xiansheng quanji*, 32.10.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 32.21.

²⁰ Tang Zhen, *Qian shu*, pp. 88–89.

Gong Mian each owned more than 100 bondservants.²¹ It is likely that with the exception of those who served as house bondservants and bondservant-managers, many of them must have been field laborers.

The second source of farm labor was hired laborers, of which there were two kinds. The long-term hired laborers, usually landless peasants, cultivated land for the rich landlords. The short-term hired laborers, usually those whose own land holdings were insufficient to support their families, borrowed rice from wealthy landlords for food or other purposes. In exchange, they worked on the landlords' fields for one or two months during the busy farm season.²²

The third group of farm laborers was composed of tenant farmers. Many gentry landlords, like the commoner landlords, arranged it so that only those lands adjacent to their residence were cultivated by their bondservants or hired laborers; the rest were rented to tenant farmers to cultivate under the supervision of the landlord's managers.

The hired laborers were submissive. They obeyed the orders of their masters and worked hard. According to a Huzhou landlord's account, "In those days, people were used to working hard. They went to work at dawn and would not return home until dark. By custom, hired laborers were submissive, and the master's orders were respected."²³ It seems that before the development of commerce in the area, hard work was the only way for the laborers to please the landlords and to ensure their own employment.

The legal status of the short-term laborers was no different from that of commoners (*fanren*), while that of the long-term hired laborers was inferior to that of the short-term laborers hired by contract to work for a certain period of years.²⁴

The ordinary bondservants were probably treated the worst. Their miserable situation is indicated in an essay by a late Ming landlord:

The way I have seen masters treat their bondservants is not the way one treats a human being. Not only did they show no pity for their hunger, cold, and fatigue, they even prohibited the children of bondservants from wearing mourning dress and weeping when their parents died. They also took sexual liberties with the daughters and wives of their bondservants and took properties from the bondservants without asking. They would even kill their bondservants and cremate

²¹ Huang An, *Xijin shixiao lu*, 10.567, 584–87.

²² *Wujiang XZ*, 1488 ed., 5.21.

²³ *Shenshi nongshu*, shang juan, p. 15.

²⁴ *Ming Shenzong shilu*, 194.9a.

them illegally, and nobody dared to accuse them.²⁵

Purchase was the major legal way of acquiring bondservants. The legal status of the purchased bondservants, however, was not the same in all cases. Only those who were bought by the families of *jincheng* were called bondservants and treated as such. *Jincheng* included all gentry members except those who held the lowest degrees, *shengyuan* and *jiansheng*. Those bought by the families of *shishu* (*shi* means “government student,” and *shu* means “commoners”) were called *yinanfu* (adopted male or female persons). The *shishu* included mainly *shengyuan* and *jiansheng* holders and commoners. The category of *yinanfu* was further divided into two different status groups. Those who had been supported by the family for many years and had had marriages arranged by their masters were treated as kin, while the rest were treated as hired laborers.²⁶ The difference in legal status between hired laborers and bondservants or adopted persons was that the latter were as kin of their master’s families, while the hired laborers were not.

Although fixed-rent tenancy had been one of the dominant modes of farming in the Lake Tai region since early Ming times, the tenant farmers were not free from exploitation by their landlords. The landlords of Huzhou prefecture, for example, always exacted as much as they possibly could from their tenants. When Xu Xianzhong, a native of Songjiang prefecture, visited Huzhou in 1550, he was deeply impressed by the obedient and docile nature of the tenant farmers:

In Huzhou, the *hu* used by the landlords to measure their rent rice is 0.03 *shi* bigger than an ordinary *hu*. The general practice of the landlords is that when they collect the rents, they use the biggest measure; when they pay the grain tax to the government, they use the official measure; when they sell rice in winter, they use the smallest measure. This has long been the customary practice, and the tenant farmers do not feel that there’s anything wrong with it.²⁷

The landlords also had the full right to unilaterally cancel a rent contract if a tenant farmer failed to pay in full. Zhu Qiong, a tenant farmer of the Dong family of Huzhou, cultivated 1.6 *mu* of Dong’s land. When he failed to pay his rent, Yu Sheng, one of Dong Fen’s bondservant-managers, forced him to sell his son to make up for his unpaid rent. In the meantime, Yu Sheng canceled Zhu’s contract and

²⁵ Zhang Lüxiang, *Yangyuan xiansheng quanji*, 19.25–26.

²⁶ *Ming Shenzong shilu*, 194. 9a; Terada Takanobu, “Guanyu xiangshen,” in *Ming-Qing shi guoji xueshu taolunhui lunwen ji*, pp. 115–16.

²⁷ Xu Xianzhong, *Wuxing zhanggu ji*, 12.7.

rented the land to someone else to cultivate.²⁸ According to law, tenant farmers had commoner status, but in reality they were not always treated justly. In fact, some powerful gentry landlords even treated them as bondservants.²⁹

Water Control Systems

Because rice cultivation requires a regular supply of water, successful agricultural management depends on the existence of an adequate water control system. In the early Ming, tax captains were responsible for maintaining normal irrigation and water conservancy in local communities. After Zhou Chen's 1430 reform, the responsibility for water control went to the county government. Ordinarily, if waterwork needed to be done, the local leaders would submit a project proposal to the county government for approval. However, because of the local leaders' financial weakness and lack of political influence, even if they could get their proposal approved, which rarely happened, they would have been unable to mobilize enough financial support and manpower to carry it out. After the gentry established their leading position in the rural community, they usually played an active role in local water control projects. An example of the gentry landlords' leading role in this respect is An Rushan.

To the north of Jiaoshan were three rivers. The Baoyan and Xixin rivers, which ran parallel from east to west, were linked by the Pengzu. The Pengzu River was about a mile long, with sixteen big and small tributaries on both sides. Although some several thousands of mu of land in the area depended entirely on these rivers for irrigation, runoff in the steep area caused the rivers to silt up, and the water supply was not sufficient even in a year of abundant rainfall. Local landowners had planned to dredge the rivers and construct reservoirs, but they gave up because they lacked funds. Then when they realized there was no way they could change the situation, they moved away and let their lands go fallow.³⁰

In 1563, An Rushan heard that the people of the neighboring cantons of Hui ren and Zhai ren had built reservoirs in their areas, and he ordered the elders Mi Heng and Qian Zhu to ask the county government for permission to construct reservoirs as well. The assistant magistrate of the county in charge of waterworks approved their re-

²⁸ Liu Yuanlin, *Fu Zhe zoushu*, 4.20.

²⁹ Han Dacheng, "Mingdai guanshen dizhu kongzhi xia de dianhu," in *Mingshi yanjiu luncong*, 3:73.

³⁰ *Jiaoshan Anshi jiacheng*, 9.37-39.

quest and appointed a *ting* (waterworks specialist) elder, Feng Xuan, to supervise the work. An Rushan was not only the first of the local landowners to contribute money to finance the project; he also saw the work through to completion. After the project, which included the construction of three reservoirs, was completed, the people who had moved away returned home, and uncultivated lands again became high yield fields.³¹ This example suggests that without the leadership of a concerned influential gentry member, waterworks like this could hardly have been realized.

The Investment Behavior of the Gentry Landlords

The gentry landlords generally invested their capital in four areas: loans to fellow villagers, land, commerce and manufacture, and bondservants. These inclinations were encouraged by the taxation and service levy system of the time and the gentry's uniquely privileged position in rural communities. A gentry member was legally able to reduce his family's labor-service responsibilities because of his privilege of labor-service exemption. However, he could also abuse his privileges and practice tax evasion. Dong Fen, for example, had been a minister of the Board of Rites in the central government. When he was in office, he was a powerful political leader; he maintained this influence in his native Zhejiang province even after he was dismissed in 1565. Dong Fen registered his household and property in Wucheng county under the name of Dong Shu, or Minister Dong, a name that actually included four separate ownership groups: Dong Fen's family, his grandson's family, his daughter-in-law's family, and the corporate property of the Dong lineage.³² By means of this illegal arrangement, Dong Fen extended his privileges in tax and labor-service exemption beyond those of his own family and property to those of his relatives, and the subordinate households and the lineage property enjoyed as much in tax and labor-service exemption as did Dong Fen himself. Dong Fen also owned 20,000 mu of farm land in Wujiang county, upon which by 1593, he had not paid taxes for years.³³ Thus, through both legal and illegal practices, the gentry landlords' investment in land could reap higher returns than that of the commoner landlords. In addition, the abundant supply of farm laborers could reduce their wage expenditures and increase their profit from

³¹ Ibid.

³² Dong Sicheng, *Dong libu chidu*, xia. 6.

³³ Dong Fen, *Biyuan shiwen ji*, 9.4.

property investments. This was not the case for commoner landowners. Tax evasion on the part of the gentry families meant an increased burden on nongentry households, who had to make up the difference. The latter were so vulnerable to both crop failure and heavy tax and labor-service responsibilities that they often needed loans to relieve their financial difficulties, and the gentry landlords became creditors as well. While the loans became an indispensable source of capital for the village poor, the relationship between the two parties was characterized by economic exploitation by the gentry landlords of the people in need. If a debtor could not repay his debt in time, the gentry landlord would forcibly confiscate the mortgaged property, which usually was worth more than what had been borrowed. This meant that, in practice, the making of loans became another way for gentry landlords to expand their landholdings, an indirect way of investing in land. What follows is a description of how two gentry families of Huzhou, that of Dong Fen and that of Fan Yingqi, managed their investments in four different areas.

Loans to Fellow Villagers

The most common way these two gentry families invested capital was to loan money to fellow villagers at usurious rates. Most often, such arrangements were managed by bondservant-managers on behalf of their masters. According to local custom, a borrower usually had to mortgage land, house, farm products, or the like as security. Following are three examples of this practice. Ding Mengli mortgaged a house and 35 mu of farmland to borrow sixty taels of silver from Dong Jinsong, a bondservant-manager of the Dong family, at a 24 percent annual interest rate. When the year was over, Ding Mengli was unable to repay the debt plus interest, so Dong Jinsong sent men to forcibly harvest rice worth thirty taels of silver from Ding's field. He also forced Ding Mengli to sign over all his mortgaged land and house to pay off the loan and its interest, leaving Ding Mengli with nothing but twenty taels of silver.³⁴

Yao Luan mortgaged a house worth fifty taels of silver to Dong Chun and Qiu Cheng, two bondservant-managers of the Dong family, as security for a loan of twenty taels of silver. When the deadline for repayment had passed, Yao was imprisoned in a dark room and tortured by Dong Chun and Qiu Cheng. They offered him fifty taels of silver for the mortgaged house and forced him to sign over the ownership of the house to them. In desperation, Yao Luan accepted their

³⁴ Liu Yuanlin, *Fu Zhe zoushu*, 4.16.

arrangement. After deducting the loan and the interest, the managers should have paid Yao Luan twenty-five taels of silver. However, relying on the power and the influence of their master, they refused to pay the balance.³⁵

A third example is that of Mrs. Shi, the stepmother of Wu Jigao, a holder of the shengyuan degree in Xiushui county, who sold 40 mu of land to Dong Mingqian, a bondservant-manager of the Dong family, for fifty taels of silver. Shortly thereafter, she borrowed forty taels of silver from Mingqian and agreed to pay it back after two years. The total debt including interest was fifty-three taels of silver. Two years later, when Mrs. Shi was unable to pay back her debt, Mingqian forced her to sign over to him the title deed for her 4-mu mulberry field, a house, and 7.8 mu of building foundation.³⁶

The direct relation between labor service and many of the loans contributed to the practice of usury in two ways. First, the men in service usually needed cash to support their families while they were away from home and without farm income. Second, some services required heavy cash expenses. We have three cases of this kind of borrower to present. The first is that of Yang Ming who, while undertaking the labor service of shipping grain tax to a national granary, pawned 28.5 mu of land to Yang Sheng, a bondservant-manager of the Dong family, for fifty taels of silver. Yang Ming returned without any cash, so he decided to sell the land to the Dong family. However, when he would not accept the price Yang Sheng offered, Yang Sheng sent his man Dong Liang to lodge a false accusation with the local government that Yang Ming was a bandit. This gave Yang Sheng an excuse to seize the land by force.³⁷

A second case is that of Luo Hui, who helped his uncle, Luo Dan, in shipping the grain tax to Nanjing. To cover his expenses while in service, Luo Dan borrowed forty taels of silver from Dong Chun, a bondservant-manager of the Dong family. Half a year later, Dong Chun notified Luo Dan that he owed a total of eighty-four taels of silver including both the principal and the interest. When Dong Chun found out that Luo Hui owned 36.6 mu of fertile paddy field, he forced Luo Hui to pay off his uncle's debt.³⁸ Finally, there was the case of Qian Can who, before he left home on labor service as a sailor on a tribute boat, borrowed, through a middleman named Yu Ke, five

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 4.12.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 4.14.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 4.18–19.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 4.11.

shi of rice and two taels of silver from Dong He, a bondservant-manager of the Dong family. Before Qian Can's return, however, Dong He demanded that Qian Can's wife pay back the debt. When she was unable to comply, Dong He took away her ten-year-old daughter and made the daughter a bondservant of the Dong family. In despair, Qian Can's wife committed suicide; the baby girl she was then nursing died of starvation shortly after.³⁹

The gentry landlords also made loans to handicraft producers, who usually mortgaged or pawned what they produced. Pan Fumin, for example, pawned 113 catties of silk, worth eighty-one taels of silver, to Cao Min, a bondservant-manager of the Dong family, for seventy-five taels of silver. Shortly thereafter the pawnshop was robbed and the silk stolen. Cao Min unreasonably refused to pay Fumin the balance of six taels. Later, Pan Fumin borrowed another eighteen and a half taels of silver from Cao Min as capital; when he was unable to repay the debt by the deadline, Cao Min charged him an additional 1.5 percent monthly fine.⁴⁰

The examples introduced above suggest that not only were the gentry landlords the money-lenders of the rural community, they also had the power to force the debtors to repay their debts. Furthermore, tenant farmers and bondservants in practice had no legal remedies for their exploitation.

Land

Land was the second major investment of the two gentry families. Gentry landlords could pay less than the market price when they purchased farm land. Dong Jinsong, for example, bought 27 mu of paddy field and a house from Zhu Zhenlou for only 127 taels of silver, approximately 43 taels less than the expected market value.⁴¹ It is likely that Zhu Zhenlou accepted Dong's lower price because the rural society of the Lake Tai area in the mid-Ming period was so firmly dominated by the gentry landlords that petty holders like Zhu Zhenlou had no alternative. Surely, such a socioeconomic environment was conducive to the development of big gentry landlords.

Fan Quan's case offers us another example of land investment based upon social coercion. Fan Quan was a bondservant-manager of the Fan family who bought a pawnshop worth 300 taels of silver and 35 mu of land worth 100 taels of silver from Xu Yuande. However,

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 4.7-8.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 4.20.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 4.12.

Fan Quan paid only 220 taels of silver and refused to pay the remaining 180 taels.⁴²

Commerce and Manufacture

Gentry families also invested in commercial activities. We examine three examples illustrating this kind of investment. The first is that of Sun Rong and his wife, who “took refuge” (*toukao*) with Dong Fen by becoming his bondservants. Dong Fen invested 120 taels of silver in a store that the couple was to manage. Some time later, however, Dong Fen discovered that the store was losing money and sent two of his bondservant-managers, Lu Ben and Shi Ning, to check up on things. In the end, however, Dong Fen decided to let the Suns continue in business.⁴³ A second example is that of Lu Yingshi who took refuge as the bondservant of Fan Yingqi. He received 1,200 taels of silver as capital to open a pawnshop at Shuanglin town; he was also responsible for the sale of his master’s rice in the winter. In addition, Yingshi received from his master’s wife, on three occasions, a total of 600 taels of silver to operate a transport service. Unfortunately, however, the pawnshop was not successful, and Fan Yingqi suffered severe losses. To compensate for the loss, Lu Yingshi gave his house, worth 970 taels of silver, to his master.⁴⁴

The third example is that of Dai Shan, a servant of the Dong family, who received capital from his master to open a business. When he claimed to have lost the capital in the business, Dong He and Dong Chun, two of Dong Fen’s bondservant-managers, accused him of being a liar, had him imprisoned, and forced him to admit that the capital had been embezzled by his wealthy relative Yu Ke. They then imprisoned and tortured Yu Ke for three months, until he finally handed over 100 taels of silver to make up for the loss.⁴⁵

These three examples suggest that the commercial activities of the gentry landlords were managed mainly by their family bondservants. The most significant feature of the gentry’s commercial activity was that some of the bondservants who operated these business were voluntary bondservants who, like Lu Yingshi and Sun Rong, voluntarily bartered away their commoner status for the patronage of a gentry member. They were not propertyless poor, but rather retained their own property even after they became bondservants. In other

⁴² Ibid., 4.2–3.

⁴³ Ibid., 4.17.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 4.2–3, 3–4.

⁴⁵ Liu Yuanlin, *Fu Zhe zoushu*, 4.11–12.

words, they did not lose their private property because of their change in legal status. Moreover, they were not ordinary peasants; in fact, they usually came from a commercial background. There are four possible reasons why they chose to be bondservants rather than freemen. First, before the service levy reform of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, merchants and tradesmen were all subject to taxes and labor service, and seeking refuge with a gentry member was one way to avoid the burden of these obligations. Second, the patronage of an influential gentry member was necessary for the operation of a business in a society dominated by the gentry landlords. Third, for the poor, this was a way to secure business capital. Fourth, voluntary bondservants could provide more security than an ordinary merchant or money-lender for the gentry landlords' investment. This was not only because of their legally subordinate status, which gave their owners special legal privileges and means of exercising coercive control, but also because their own property stood as collateral. The use of voluntary bondservants in commercial activities could effectively minimize the risk to the gentry landlords' investment in commerce.

On the other hand, a successful business could enable the nonvoluntary bondservant-merchants to improve both their economic condition and their legal status. The following two cases illustrate how the rich bondservant-merchants successfully improved their social status. Shen Gui was a hereditary bondservant of the Shen family of Huzhou prefecture. Even as a child, he was intelligent and trusted by his owner. After he grew up, his master provided him with the money to open a shop in Wu town to manufacture and sell iron implements. The business was prosperous and profitable, and Shen Gui made himself a fortune. However, after Shen Gui became wealthy, his son, Shen Jizu, was very uncomfortable with his lowly hereditary bondservant status, and he bribed some of the declining gentry families of the Shen lineage to testify for his freeman status against his master. To promote his family's position he also established marriage bonds between his family and some of these declining, poor gentry families in town. When Shen Jizu's master realized that he could not win the case at the county level, he filed a lawsuit with the provincial authorities of Zhejiang. However, Shen Jizu again bribed the provincial officials and successfully turned them against his master.⁴⁶

⁴⁶ Zhang Lüxiang, *Yangyuan xiansheng quanji*, 38.2.

A second case is that of Ding Min, a third-generation hereditary bondservant of the Shen family of Huzhou. Ding Min had engaged in commercial activities for his master for forty years, during which time he not only made a yearly profit of one thousand taels of silver for his master, but also became a wealthy merchant in his own right. When Ding Min's master, a local official serving in Fujian, was sent to jail because of a minor infraction, Ding Min sent his son to Fujian with some money to help him. As a result, the master was released and returned home safely. To show his gratitude for Ding Min's help, the master ceased treating the family as bondservants.⁴⁷

One implication of these two examples is that although wealth could improve a successful bondservant-merchant's financial life, it would not automatically liberate him from bond servitude.

Understandably, many bondservant-merchants were more concerned with their own interests than the interests of their masters. For this reason Huang Xingzeng, a Ming scholar of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries called for the owners of bondservants to adopt the widely acclaimed method that the people of Huizhou prefecture and the Dongting area in Suzhou had devised to manage their family affairs. It is well known that both Huizhou of Anhui province and the two mountainous areas of Dongting in the middle of Lake Tai had produced many successful big merchants in the Ming-Qing period. According to Huang Xingzeng, the people of Dongting area adopted a hired labor system instead of bond servitude because they could continue or discontinue the employment of hired labor at will depending on their need. They could not, however, do the same with their bondservants, for whom they were responsible for all their lives. For economic reasons, therefore, even the richest families in the Dongting area did not keep more than two bondservants per family.⁴⁸

In Huizhou, it was customary to use only young, unmarried bondservants to manage family affairs. After the bondservants married, they left their masters' houses and started their own families with the financial help of their masters. Once independent, they did not have to go back unless their masters sent for them.⁴⁹ In other words, the lives of the married bondservants were no longer their masters' responsibility. It would seem from Huang's comments that the owners of bondservants in the Lake Tai area, under the impact of an expanding market economy, had begun to realize that the use of

⁴⁷ Ibid., 32.14.

⁴⁸ Zhang Xuan, *Xiyuan wenjian lu*, 6.6.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

bondservants to operate a business was not the most profitable way to preserve family fortunes.

Bondservants

The fourth investment of gentry landlords was in the maintenance of bondservants. Evidence suggests that bondservants in the Lake Tai region came mainly from six sources. The first was commendation. Commoners sometimes voluntarily commended themselves as bondservants, with or without property, to gentry families to free themselves of labor-service obligations. Lu Yingshi and Sun Rong were of this kind. Children or adults of poor peasant families provided the second source of bondservants. Some poor peasants, driven by misery and hunger, sold their family members for temporary relief. When Cai Song was a boy, for example, his father, Cai Rong, sold him to the Jin family of Wucheng county. Later, he adopted his owner's family name and became a bondservant-manager of the Jin family.⁵⁰ The third source was the children of debtors or tenant farmers of the gentry landlords who were taken from those in debt when they could not repay their debts on time or when they could not pay their rent. Children of hereditary bondservants constituted the fourth source of bondservants, and hired laborers provided the fifth. If an employer arranged for a hired laborer to marry one of his female bondservants, the hired laborer would also agree to work as his bondservant for a certain time.⁵¹ Tenant farmers were the sixth source of bondservants. Powerful landlords would deprive their tenant farmers of their free-man status and force them to become the landlords' bondservants. Although this local customary practice was illegal, it enabled the powerful gentry landlords to recruit cheap laborers effectively.⁵²

Based on the foregoing discussion, we can derive the following conclusions: (1) The investment behavior discussed above became predominant in the Lake Tai region during the second half of the sixteenth century, at which time the commercialization of production was already under way. Therefore, the investment behavior of gentry landlords, particularly in the areas of commerce and usury, not only reflects a new trend in economic development, but also represents a basic dynamic force behind the newly emerging commercial develop-

⁵⁰ Liu Yuanlin, *Fu Zhe zoushu*, 4.2,9; Zhang Lǔxiang, *Yangyuan xiansheng quanji*, juan 17; *Wujiang XZ*, (1488), 5.24a.

⁵¹ Zhao Gang, *Zhongguo jingji zhidu shi lun*, p. 160, 339. *Gujin tashu jicheng*, zhifang dian, 715, ce 118, 3.

⁵² *Dingli xubian*, 5. "hubu huyi."

ment. (2) The investment activities of gentry landlords were undertaken mainly by their bondservant-managers or their agents. (3) The bondservant status group was complex because bondservants came from a variety of different sources. Some bondservants were physically dominated forced laborers; other bondservants themselves owned bondservants. Some bondservants even became gentry members. Some were treated as kin, while others were not. Some were hereditary bondservants; some were like temporary hired laborers in status. Some owned nothing, while others were well paid and held relatively extensive private property. Their social identity was also complex. Although one might think they would have shared a common class consciousness, ironically, bondservant-managers were often the most brutal oppressors of their fellow bondservants.

As the political and economic power of the gentry in the rural community began to expand, increasing numbers of gentry landlords distanced themselves from actual managerial activities and started to indulge in lives of luxury and extravagance. Such landlords tended to exhaust the family fortunes they inherited very rapidly. Hua Shizhen (1482–1566) from Lake E is a typical example of this kind of gentry landlord. Shizhen was the only son of a very wealthy landlord. Although groomed from childhood for an official career, he only managed to obtain a shengyuan degree. Despite this status, he lived extravagantly, completely ignoring his family's financial situation. He had a large circle of friends, including all the well-known officials and scholars of Wuxi county, and he held lavish banquets every day to entertain them. Not surprisingly, he had soon squandered his family's fortune.⁵³ This way of life characterized many wealthy gentry landlords in the second half of the sixteenth century.

Because of the economic domination of the gentry, the majority of the peasant population had to adapt to the meager resources available to them. The poor peasant families, therefore, implemented measures to control their family population. Evidence suggests that poor families could dispose of their "surplus" male children by selling or giving them away as bondservants, as Buddhist monks, or as sons-in-law of other families. It was a customary practice in Xiushui county in 1596, for example, for peasant families who had more sons than they wanted either to give them to other families as their sons-in-law or to Buddhist temples as monks.⁵⁴ The 1576 edition of the Huzhou prefec-

⁵³ *Benshu*, 31.41a–43a.

⁵⁴ *Xiushui XZ*, 1596 ed., 1.39.

ture gazetteer and the 1673 edition of the Guian county gazetteer record similar customs. The poor families of Guian county sold or gave their male offspring to other families either as sons-in-law or as adopted sons.⁵⁵ In this way, the poor families could reduce their financial burden, the total number of marriages, and consequently, the pressure of population on them.

Challenges to Gentry Landlordism

It was no later than the early years of the Jiajing reign (1522–66) that the unrestricted expansion of the gentry's power and wealth began to face serious challenges. These challenges came mainly from three developments. One was the politically and financially motivated tax reforms in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, the second was the harassment by Japanese pirates in 1550s, and the third was the commercial development of the Lake Tai area. One particular incident represents a turning point in the fortunes of the Ming gentry landlords.

In the sixteenth century, some government officials began to realize that, because of the abuse of gentry privileges, tax collection and labor services had become more difficult to fulfill, and government revenue was seriously threatened with being in constant arrears. To relieve the financial tension created by the gentry landlords, local officials carried out a series of taxation reforms in the Lake Tai area. Between 1537 and 1538, Administrative Commissioner Ouyang Duo of Yingtian and Prefect Wang Yi of Suzhou initiated taxation reforms in Suzhou prefecture. Three years later, in 1541, Prefect Zhang Duo of Huzhou tried and failed to implement a similar reform in Huzhou prefecture. In 1547, Prefect Zhao Ying of Jiaying successfully carried out a taxation reform in his prefecture. All these reforms had one thing in common: they were designed to stop the gentry from abusing their privileges. As the exploited peasants saw it, the local officials were now on their side.

The invasions and harassment by Japanese pirates in the Lake Tai area and the southeastern coastal region between 1551 and 1555 provided the peasants with both the means and the confidence to challenge their gentry masters. The authoritative position of the gentry in the rural society depended primarily on the backing of the police or the military forces of the government. During the period of the pirate

⁵⁵ *Guian XZ*, 1673 ed., 7.7; *Huzhou FZ*, 1758 ed., 39.2. Quoted from *Huzhou FZ*, 1576 ed.

invasion, however, all the Ming regular troops, local and regional, proved useless; and in great emergencies, rural gentry landlords and their families would seek refuge within the walled county capital, while outside the wall many people were slaughtered and many houses laid in ruins. All this badly damaged the prestige of both the government and the gentry, and the local officials were forced to enlist peasants, craftsmen, and bondservants to form local militia for self-defense. In 1551, the local officials of Jiaxing and Xiushui counties, for example, recruited one man from each li and formed an army of 581 men.⁵⁶ In 1553, the magistrate of Wuxi county formed a local militia that included potters, hunters, porters, firewood carriers, gardeners, young idlers, local braves, and even itinerant Buddhist priests.⁵⁷ In 1554, the magistrate of Wucheng county enlisted men from among the bondservants of the gentry families and formed a defense force for Wucheng county.⁵⁸ Before long the facts proved that the local armies were braver and more skilled in battle than any regular government army in the Lake Tai area. Two decisive victories in the area were attributed to the local militia: The bondservant troops of Wucheng county were the main force that defeated the pirates at Wangjiangjing in 1555,⁵⁹ and that same year, it was the local militia of Jiaxing and Xiushui counties that changed the situation on the battlefield from defeat to victory at Pingwang.⁶⁰ Most important, the military training and war experience enabled individual peasants and bondservants to exchange ideas and information and to work together with their fellows for common goals; these experiences stood them in good stead after the fighting was over and they returned home.

In the course of the tax reforms, a new political attitude developed among some local officials, who practiced and advocated the idea of "curbing the powerful and the privileged, and assisting the weak and the exploited" (*furuo yiqiang*) in their jurisdictions. An incident in Wujiang demonstrates this new political trend. When Zhu Shihua was appointed magistrate of Wujiang county in 1589, he adopted a stern policy toward the gentry landlords. When collecting taxes, he always pressed the big families to pay first and allowed the small holders to delay their payments. When he was in office, most of the farm lands in Wujiang were owned by powerful gentry families from neighboring

⁵⁶ *Jiaxing FZ*, 1878 ed., 31.2-3.

⁵⁷ *Wuxi XZ*, 1897 ed., 7.3.

⁵⁸ *Wuxing beizhi*, 1624 ed., 19.19b.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰ *Xiushui XZ*, 1696 ed., 2.19.

counties who, relying on their political influence, refused to pay the taxes on their properties. Among these gentry landlords, Dong Fen of Wucheng was one of the most wealthy and powerful. The 20,000 mu of land he owned in Wujiang was managed by his bondservant-managers, who were notorious for bullying the poor and exploiting the weak. Zhu Shihua, however, was not afraid of them; when he discovered their illegal activities, he did not hesitate to punish them according to the law. Before long, the local people realized that, unlike most of his predecessors, their new magistrate was concerned with the interests of the exploited people. Therefore, with the encouragement of their magistrate, one after another the people of Wujiang came to the county government to file lawsuits against the Dong family. Most of their complaints were against Dong Fen's bondservants for forcing people to sell their lands or for refusing to pay the full price when they bought the land. At that time, Dong Sicheng, the first grandson of Dong Fen and the director of the Ministry of Rites, regretted what his grandfather had done to the local people and asked the provincial administrative commissioner of Jiangsu for permission to resolve the disputes privately before the situation worsened. He then announced that those who had been forced against their will to sell landed properties to the Dong family could redeem them and that those who had sold land to the Dong family but had not yet received full payment could demand the unpaid balance. Within ten days after the announcement, about a thousand people came to the Dong residence demanding compensation. Dong Sicheng did his best to satisfy them. When he sensed that there were even more to come, however, he grew afraid, closed the front gate, and refused to accept any more complaints. The people who had not yet received compensation were angry and gathered outside the Dong residence, shouting and cursing.⁶¹ Eventually, according to a letter written by Dong Fen to one of his friends, the crowd lost control: "The protesters occupied my seven estates and seized rice, grain, and other valuable things. The losses totaled ten thousand taels of silver."⁶² In the face of this uncontrollable situation, Sicheng took the advice of a guest and gave twenty percent of his total land back to the original owners. Not until then did the shouts of protest gradually die down.⁶³

⁶¹ Dong Sicheng, *Dong Libu ji, zhuan*, 1-3; *Wujiang XZ*, 1747 ed., 22.62-63; Li Yue, *Jianwen zaji*, 5.68-69; *Wucheng XZ*, 1881 ed., 34.1-4.

⁶² Dong Fen, *Biyuan shiwen ji*, 8.7.

⁶³ Li Yue, *Jianwen zaji*, 5.68-69.

During the tumult, the magistrate refrained from taking any strong action against the exploited people. On the contrary, according to Dong Sicheng's description in a letter to a government official, the magistrate's attitude was "ambiguous" and "timid," and the actions he took to stop the riot were "like extinguishing fire by pouring oil on it, so that the fire could never be put out."⁶⁴

The people's victory over the Dong family in Wujiang county greatly encouraged the people in neighboring counties. To the south of Wujiang was Wucheng county, the native place of the Dong family. Those who had been bullied by the Dongs there had been waiting for an opportunity to appeal to a higher authority to redress the injustice. In 1593, Peng Yingcan, an investigating censor, was appointed administrative commissioner (*xunfu*) of Zhejiang province. He had earned a reputation for being upright when he was a magistrate, and as soon as he arrived at the prefectural capital of Huzhou the people knew that their opportunity had come. Many exploited people tried to be the first to file their complaints with him; within a short time, he had received six hundred written complaints. At that time, the magistrate of Wucheng county was Zhang Yingwang. Both Zhang Yingwang and Peng Yingcan were advocates of the policy of "curbing the powerful and assisting the weak." Consequently, about forty bondservants of the Dong family were arrested, and some of them were punished severely. According to the local gazetteer of Wucheng, the cases exhausted nearly half Dong Fen's total wealth.⁶⁵

Except for a few tenant farmers, handicraftsmen, petty merchants, and lower gentry members, the majority of the plaintiffs were either landowners or former landowners. That the exploited people, with the support of local officials, dared to openly oppose the powerful local gentry families had a deep impact on the once submissive attitude of the Dongs' tenant farmers toward their landlord. The new attitude of the tenants is indicated in a letter written by Dong Sicheng to a local official:

By the end of the litigation, many of my family's lands had been divided up by court orders and private settlements. Even more disastrous is that either the farm produce from my family's land has been seized by others or the tenant farmers unreasonably refuse to pay their rents. Consequently, although I have not collected a single grain of rice from my lands, I still have to pay the annual taxes.⁶⁶

⁶⁴ Dong Sicheng, *Dong Libu chidu*, shang, 4.

⁶⁵ Dong Fen, *Biyuan shiwen ji*, 8.7; *Wucheng XZ*, 1881 ed., 34.2.

It seems that the incident with the Dong family was the spark that started a prairie fire: tenant farmers in neighboring prefectures soon copied the actions of the Dong family's tenant farmers. The change in the attitude and behavior of the tenant farmers of Jiaxing prefecture is described in the *Xiushui* gazetteer as follows:

In the past, after the harvesting of rice and the planting of wheat, the rich peasants stored their new rice in the high granaries and kept a fixed amount of grain tax for submitting to the government, while the tenant farmers, after paying their rents to the big houses, kept the rest for the next spring's planting. Everyone was pleased with this arrangement. Recently, however, the rice merchants have established pawnshops for pawning rice, and now the tenants pawn their top-quality rice for silver and use the medium- and low-grade rice to pay their rents. Even when it has been a bumper harvest year, the tenants still tell their landlords that they have had a poor harvest so that they can delay their rent payments. A while back, the disloyal people of the Huzhou area assembled together and swore a mutual oath not to pay rents to the big families. Lately, the protest of the tenants has eased off a bit, but this practice is gradually becoming a custom. The officials press urgently for tax payments, but they are not interested in the accusation that the tenants refuse to pay their rents. The landlords, therefore, have to borrow money to pay the taxes. The interests of landlords have been badly hurt.⁶⁷

The impact of the Dong Fen incident in Huzhou was profound, and by the 1570s, the struggle against the gentry landlords had become part of daily life for many tenants in the Lake Tai area.⁶⁸ There is no doubt that the commercial development in the area in the sixteenth century had created the necessary motivation for the producers to seek maximum profit from their products through market activities. The silver for which "the tenants pawned their top-quality rice" was most likely used as capital for market-related activities. The question is, however, why the tenants did not engage in rent resistance earlier. Why did they wait so long to unite and swear "mutual oaths not to pay rent to the big landlords"? Evidence strongly suggests that as long as the gentry landlords had firm control over the peasants and the local economy, the small producers could hardly make full use of the market facilities. In fact, as we have discussed, the joint action of rent resistance on the part of the Jiaxing-Huzhou tenants was made

⁶⁶ Dong Sicheng, *Dong Libu chidu*, shang, 17.

⁶⁷ *Xiushui XZ*, 1596 ed., 1.42.

⁶⁸ Han Dacheng, "Mingdai guanshen dizhu kongzhi xia de dianhu," p. 77. Quoted from *Wuxi XZ*, 1574 ed. Rent resistance happened in Wuxi county.

possible by the war against the Japanese pirate incursions. Furthermore, under the patronage of the policy of “bridling the powerful and assisting the weak,” both tenants and rice merchants dared to challenge the gentry landlords’ economic monopoly and to seize the expanding market opportunities. In the meantime, the alliance between government officials and poor peasants seriously damaged the gentry’s authority in the local community.

A rent resistance can hardly take root in a rural community where rural-based gentry landlords are the dominant form of land management. Under the landlords’ close scrutiny, a united action by the tenants would have been very difficult. However it happened during this time, the number of urban landlords increased while the number of rural-based landlords decreased. In fact, except for a few medium-size landlords, the majority of the rural population was made up of tenant farmers. Thus, the environment nurtured tenant cooperation. In the next chapter, we will focus our discussion on the growth of market towns and the emergence of this new socioeconomic environment in the Lake Tai region.

CHAPTER THREE

The Growth of the Market Economy and the Rise of New Local Elites

Market growth is one of the dynamic factors that stimulate change in any society. This chapter will focus on the development of market towns and its effects in the Lake Tai area during the Ming-Qing period. Because of the limited availability of source materials, the following discussion includes only four counties: Guian, Wucheng, Tongxiang, and Wujiang.

The New Trade

Between the sixteenth and the eighteenth centuries, commercial activities in the Lake Tai area increased markedly. Vigorous expansion of foreign trade in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries and the growth of interregional trade in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries stimulated these commercial activities. The increase in foreign trade and expansion of the domestic market provided opportunities for the silk and cotton cloth producers of the Lake Tai area to increase their production. In the domestic market, the Ming-Qing period saw the development of interregional trade between north and south China, heralded by the opening of the Grand Canal to navigation. During the Ming, cotton cloth produced in the lower Yangzi area was shipped to markets in the Shanxi-Shaanxi-Hebei region in the north and the Jiangxi-Huguang region in the southwest. Cotton produced in the Henan-Shandong area in the north was sold to the coastal region in the south.¹ During the Qing, the number of cotton cloth producing areas participating in interregional trade increased

¹ Wu Chengming, "Mingdai guonei shichang he shangren ziben," *Zhongguo shehui kexueyuan jingji yanjiusuo jikan* 5 (1983): 5-6, 12-15.

from one to ten, and the volume of cloth trade increased by about one and a half times.² Silk products produced in Huzhou and Jiaying prefectures had a nationwide market throughout the Ming-Qing period.³

In foreign trade, the Portuguese who sailed to China in the early and mid sixteenth century were allowed by the Chinese government to form a settlement at Macao, which then served as an entrepôt in the trade among China, Goa, Nagasaki, and Manila. During the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries raw silk and silk textiles formed the bulk of the cargo exported from Macao to Europe via Goa, to Japan through Nagasaki, and to Spanish America via Manila. Orders for these silks, most of which came from the Lake Tai area, were placed at one of the biannual Canton fairs.⁴ The founding of a Spanish settlement in the Philippines in 1571 and the initiation of shipments of Spanish American silver to this settlement spurred Chinese trade with the Spanish colony. Chinese merchants provided the Spaniards with large quantities of Chinese silks, porcelain, and linen.⁵ During the early seventeenth century, ships of the Dutch and English East India companies began their trade in Southeast Asia for Chinese silk and porcelain.⁶ After 1700, England emerged as the leading European country that engaged in trade with China. The English merchants imported increasing amounts of raw silk, tea, and the like from China to Europe.

One characteristic of the newly enlarged trade was that it brought an inflow of silver into China from the sixteenth through the early nineteenth centuries (except during the trade suspension in the second half of the seventeenth century). By the end of the sixteenth century, between 600,000 and 1,000,000 taels were shipped annually from Nagasaki to Macao. Silver exports from Nagasaki increased from 1,500,000 taels in 1635 to 2,350,000 taels in 1636 and 2,600,000 taels in 1637. At the same time, the flow of Spanish American silver to China grew from 1,000,000 pesos a year in the late sixteenth century to 2,000,000 pesos in the early seventeenth century.⁷ From 1700 to

² Wu Chengming, "Lun Qingdai qianqi woguo guonei shichang," *Lishi yanjiu*, no. 1 (1983):106.

³ Wu Chengming, "Mingdai guonei shichang he shangren ziben," pp. 16-19.

⁴ Chuan Han-sheng, "The Overseas Trade of Macao after the Mid-Ming Period," *Journal of Institute of Chinese Studies of the Chinese University of Hong Kong* (hereafter, *JICS*) 5.1 (1972):270-71; and William S. Atwell, "International Bullion Flows and the Chinese Economy, circa 1530-1650," *Past and Present* 95 (1982):74-75.

⁵ Evelyn Rawski, *Agricultural Change and the Peasant Economy of South China*, p. 68; and Atwell, "International Bullion Flows," pp. 72-74.

⁶ Atwell, "International Bullion Flows," p. 75.

⁷ Wu Chengming, "Mingdai guonei shichang he shangren ziben"; Chuan Han-sheng,

1830, the influx of foreign silver continued, with a total of about one hundred million pounds of silver shipped to China.⁸

The increasing quantity of silver flowing into China resulting from trade indicates an increasing volume of Chinese silk and silk textiles exported to foreign countries. Because of the lack of documentation on Chinese export trade in the late sixteenth and the early seventeenth centuries, we are limited to examining only the growth in silk exports shipped on English ships in the eighteenth century. In 1723, 100 piculs were shipped; in 1731, 145 piculs; in 1750, 1,192 piculs; in 1755, 1,000 piculs; in 1792, 3,263 piculs.⁹ As the people of the Lake Tai area produced more silk to supply the expanding overseas and domestic markets, there was a corresponding expansion of the need for market services.

A relatively safe and secure environment was another condition that contributed to the sustained market growth in the Lake Tai area. If we take the total number of military personnel stationed in the area as a measure of public security and assume that an increased number means increased security, we realize that law and order in the business districts of the Lake Tai area was better maintained during the Qing than in the Ming. Table 1 illustrates this observation.

During the early years of the Ming dynasty (1368–1435), military guards (*wei*) and battalions (*suo*) were stationed at strategic locations throughout China. Although an independent battalion (*shouyu suo*) consisting of one military officer and forty soldiers was established in Wujiang, it was abolished by the prefect of Suzhou, Zhong Kuang, about 1436 because the soldiers were often the cause of social disturbances. About the same time, the original duties of the military guards and battalions in the lower Yangzi plain was changed; instead of being charged with maintaining public order, they became responsible for the shipment of grain tribute from the lower Yangzi to national granaries.

The military vacuum in the Lake Tai area was not filled until the Japanese pirate raids in the 1560s. During the early period of the raids, the Japanese pirates came and went without serious military confrontation or resistance, and many prosperous market towns suffered severe losses. To cope with the crisis, the local government

“A Study on the Annual Revenue of Silver Taels of the T'ai-ts'ang Vault after the Mid-Ming Period,” *JICS* 5.1 (1972):152.

⁸ H. B. Morse, *The International Relations of the Chinese Empire*, 1:202.

⁹ E-Tu Zen Sun, “Sericulture and Silk Textile Production in Ch'ing China,” *Economic Organization in Chinese Society*, p. 92.

Table 1
Military Personnel in
Wujiang County,
1368–1745

Date	Officers (N)	Soldiers (N)	Total
1368–1435	1	40	41
1436–1559	0	0	0
1560	3	45	48
1569	16	219	235
1628–44	1	400	401
1645–1726	17	831	848
1745	20	617	637

SOURCE: *Wujiang XZ*, 1747 ed., 18. "Guanzhi," 52–54, 47, 49–50, 8. "Yingxun," 32–35.

organized militia for self-defense, and in 1559 the Pingwang Division (Pingwang *ying*) of Wujiang county was established at Pingwang town. Because of the poor training and lax discipline of the division soldiers, however, its existence did not contribute much to the maintenance of law and order.

After the Manchu regime was established in China, the government paid particular attention to military controls. The total number of military personnel stationed in Wujiang county doubled, and they were distributed fairly evenly among the strategic locations of the county, thus ensuring the security of market residents and business activities. In the meantime, cities and towns in the area became ideal places for the families of wealthy merchants, landlords, and retired officials to reside.

The Growth of Market Towns

The immediate effect of trade expansion was the growth of market towns in the Lake Tai area. The growth of market towns, both in number and in size, reflected the growing commercial involvement of the rural people, and to a significant degree, of the urban links with the countryside. From the fourteenth to the eighteenth centuries, the number of towns in the four counties increased remarkably. Wujiang, for example, grew from four towns in 1368 to seventeen towns in 1795. Table 2 shows the increase of market towns in the four counties during the Ming-Qing period.

In table 2, the market towns are divided into two subcategories, *zhen* and *shi*. Of the market towns listed, more than half were found-

Table 2
Number of Towns, 1368–1795

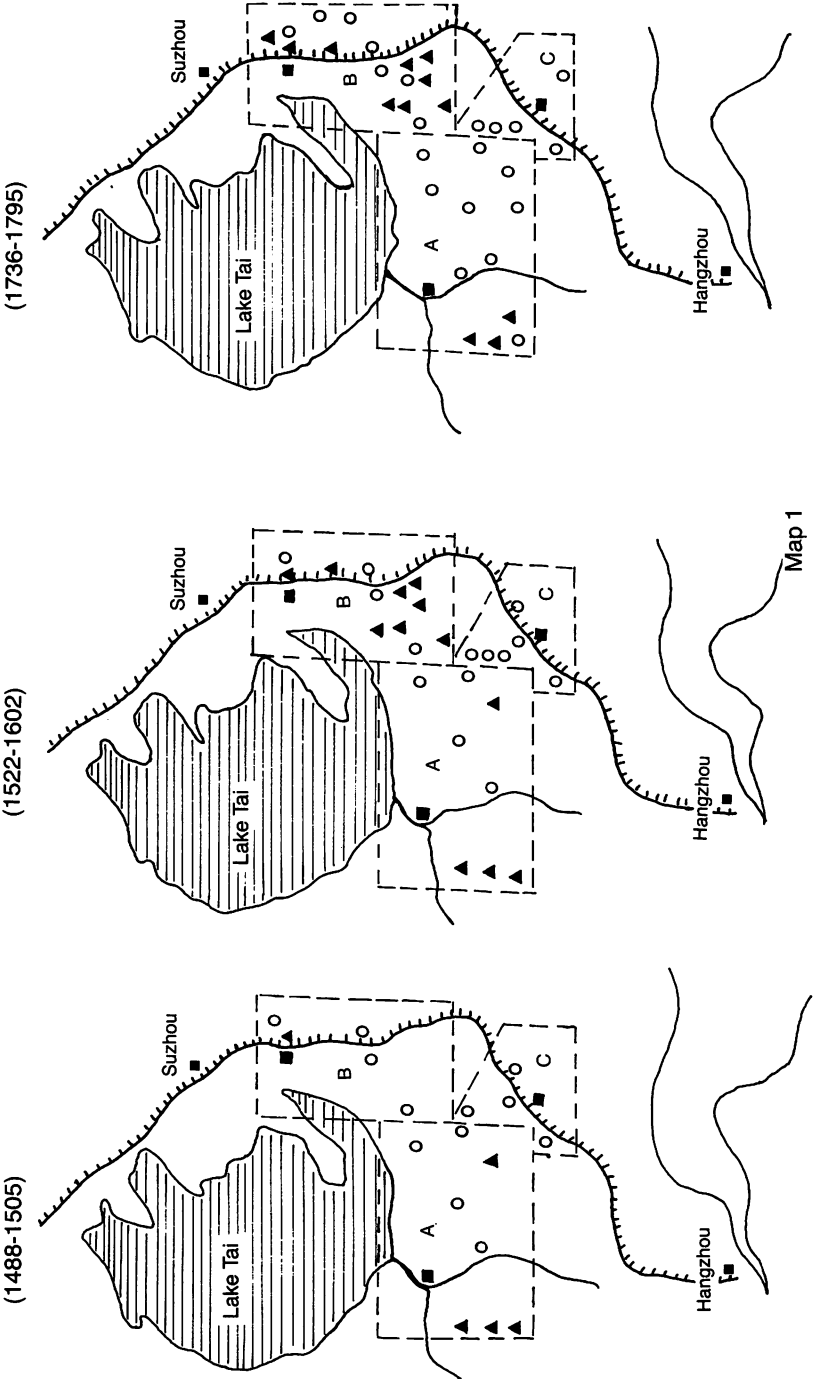
	1368	1430	1488	1561	1573–1620	1662–1722	1736–95
Wujiang							
<i>zhen</i>	2		4	4		7	7
<i>shi</i>	2		3	10		10	10
Total	4		7	14		17	17
Tongxiang							
<i>zhen</i>		4			6	6	6
<i>shi</i>		0			0	0	0
Total		4			6	6	6
Guian							
<i>zhen</i>	2			2		2	6
<i>shi</i>	2			2		3	1
Total	4			4		5	7
Wucheng							
<i>zhen</i>	2			2		2	4
<i>shi</i>	2			2		2	2
Total	4			4		4	6

SOURCES: *Wujiang XZ*, 1747 ed., 4.15–17; *Zhenze XZ*, 1746 ed., 4.1–2; *Guian XZ*, 1882 ed., 6.1–5; *Tongxiang XZ*, 1887 ed., 1.6–17, 2.4–17; *Shenhu zhi*, 1924 ed., 1.1; *Huzhou FZ*, 1542 ed., 7.25; *Wucheng XZ*, 1681 ed., 1.1–13; *Guian XZ*, 1673 ed., 2.2; *Huzhou FZ*, 1874 ed., 22.1–10; *Wucheng XZ*, 1881 ed., 4.17–19.

ed during the Tang and Song dynasties and in particular the Southern Song period (1127–1279). If we take Guian and Wucheng as one area, all ten *zhen* active in 1795 had already existed as smaller markets in the Southern Song period. Six of Wujiang county's market towns were probably also founded during the Song and Yuan periods (960–1368). Thus, twenty out of thirty-six market towns in the four counties are either revivals or direct descendants of market towns established during the preceding dynasties. Only sixteen were founded between 1368 and 1795.

Within a given area, an increase in the number of market towns means a growing sphere of urban influence. In the Lake Tai area, the geographic distribution of market towns is not uniform. Map 1 shows the growth of market towns in the four counties. The sections indicate market locations during the periods 1488–1505, 1522–1602, and 1736–95. Area A includes two counties, Guian and Wucheng; area B includes Wujiang county; area C includes Tongxiang county.

As the Tiao River flows from the south northward into Lake Tai, it divides the area into two different geographic regions. To the west of the Tiao River is highland; to the east lie plains and lowlands. The new market towns in area A were situated mainly to the east of the



The Geographical Distribution of Market Towns, 1488-1795

Tiao River, and the number of zhen there increased from four to eight between 1488 and 1795. There are two noticeable characteristics of market development in area B. First, in the southwestern part of the area, the density of market towns increased rapidly from 1505 to 1795, and the number of zhen and shi increased from two to nine. Second, new markets also appeared gradually in its eastern sector. The growth of market towns in Tongxiang, or area C, was also characterized by two features: the growth of new market towns centered in the northwest and the appearance of new market towns in the southeastern corner.

The growth of market towns was closely related to the adoption and the expansion of handicraft industries. If we ignore the boundaries of administrative districts and observe the entire area from the point of view of the rural handicraft industry, we can see that in general there were three different handicraft regions. The cotton handicraft industry was situated to the east of the Grand Canal. It was probably during the sixteenth century that the technologies of cotton handicrafts were first introduced into this region from its eastern neighbor, Songjiang prefecture, the center of cotton handicraft industries in Ming times. From then the industry expanded in this region, but not until the end of the Ming dynasty in 1644 did the technology of cotton handicrafts from this region successfully penetrate into a few areas west of the Grand Canal. To the west of the Tiao River was the second region, famous for mountain products such as bamboo, tea, lumber, and chestnuts. Between these two regions lay the third handicraft region, renowned for its refined silk products. This region included the eastern part of area A, the southwestern part of area B, and the northwestern part of area C. In Qing times, some areas in the eastern parts of area A and area C also adopted the cotton industry. The growth of markets, especially in the southwestern part of area B, indicates the prosperity and expansion of silk handicrafts in this central region.

A study of demographic change provides another means to demonstrate the urbanization of the Lake Tai area during Ming-Qing times. The extent of demographic change is revealed by the changes in the population of a given town over an extended period. Before the adoption of modern census techniques, neither precise population figures nor complete figures for this period were available. However, the approximate and incomplete population figures of the Lake Tai area available to us can show the general tendency of demographic movement during the Ming-Qing period.

The gazetteer of Shuanglin zhen of Guian, for example, provides usable, though incomplete and poor quality, population records. Based on these records, we can deduce the general tendency of population change in Shuanglin zhen between 1368 and 1853 (table 3).

Shuanglin zhen was a famous silk handicraft town in Ming-Qing times. Although Shuanglin was merely a village of about a thousand people during the early Ming, by 1487 the number of town residents had doubled. This trend of growth was not interrupted until the invasion of Japanese pirates in 1555, when Shuanglin zhen lost more than a thousand people. Nevertheless, this devastating event did not stop the growth of Shuanglin zhen, and between 1628 and 1643, the town population reached 16,000. During the short interval of sociopolitical upheaval at the end of the Ming dynasty, Shuanglin's population was literally decimated by war and natural disasters; soon after the Qing established its rule in China, however, Shuanglin zhen again regained its full vigor. In 1661, it had 21,000 residents, of which ten percent were new immigrants. During the Qing period it seems that both the population and the commercial activities in Shuanglin continued to increase. When in March 1853, Taiping revolutionary forces captured Nanjing and threatened the security of the Lake Tai area, the officials of Huzhou prefecture carried out a population survey in their jurisdictions in preparation for the Taiping attack. This survey disclosed that the population of Shuanglin zhen ranged between 26,500 and 31,000 people.¹⁰

The population increase in Wujiang's market towns is another example of urban growth in the Lake Tai region during the Ming-Qing period (table 4 and map 2). From 1368 to 1745, the number of zhen in Wujiang increased from two to seven. In the same period the average town size also increased: before 1561, a zhen usually had several hundred to a thousand households; in 1745, even the smallest zhen had a population of more than a thousand households, while the larger ones consisted of five to six thousand households.¹¹

There were ten shi in Wujiang in 1745. Xian shi which was in the same walled city as the Wujiang county government, was the most populous. In the early Ming, Xian shi had approximately one thousand households, between 1457 and 1488, it counted more than two thousand households as its residents; and by 1745, it had at least three thousand households. One Chinese mile east of Wujiang's coun-

¹⁰ *Shuanglin ZZ*, 1870 ed., 18.1-2, and *Huzhou FZ*, 1874 ed., 22.8-10.

¹¹ *Wujiang XZ*, 1747 ed., 4. 15-17; *Zhenze XZ*, 1746 ed., 4.1-2.

Table 3
Population in Shuanglin zhen, 1368–1853

Period	Population	Households (N)
1368–1398	1,000	Several hundred
1465–1487	2,000	Double the above
1628–1643	16,000	3,000
1644–1661	21,000	3,400
–1853	26,000–31,000	5,000

SOURCE: *Shuanglin ZZ*, 1870 ed., 18.1–2.

ty capital was Jiangnan shi, which in early Ming had one thousand households. Judging from the location of Xian shi and Jiangnan shi, their commercial activities were probably devoted to serving the needs of the Wujiang county government. The market capacity of Jiangnan shi was about half that of Xian shi, and its commerce began to decline after the emergence of market towns in the southwestern part of Wujiang in the 1560s. Although there was a population growth in Xian shi from one thousand households to three thousand households between 1368 and 1745, the market capacity of Xian shi did not expand accordingly; it remained at the same level as it had in the early Ming.

Of the remaining eight shi, seven were established during the Ming, one in the early Qing. In 1561, the population of these shi ranged from two hundred households to two thousand households. By contrast, in 1745 five shi had populations between one thousand households and three thousand households.

Towns represent a concentration of inhabitants among which there is a substantial nonagricultural population. In the Lake Tai area, the percentage of the total population residing in the zhen and shi was not high. As table 5 shows, between 1681 and 1756, town dwellers in Guian and Wucheng counties comprised less than 11 percent of the population.¹²

The available source materials offer no explanation for the sudden increase in Wucheng's town dwellers in 1751. Despite this lacuna, our basic argument remains unaffected: the low percentage of urban pop-

¹² *Huzhou FZ*, 1874 ed., 39.2–5. This percentage is much lower than that of some preindustrial European countries. In Electoral Saxony in 1550, for example, 31 percent of the population lived in 143 cities. In Lippe, in western Germany, town dwellers made up 28 percent of the population in 1590 (Jan de Vries, *The Economy of Europe in an Age of Crisis, 1600–1750*, p. 149).

Table 4
Number of Households in Wujiang, 1368-1745

Town	1368-98	1457-88	1461	1685	1745
Lili <i>zhen</i>	1,000 ^a	2,000	2-3,000	2-3,000	
Pingwang <i>zhen</i>	1,000 ^a	NA	1,000	NA	b
Tongli <i>zhen</i>	1,000 ^a	NA	2,000	NA	b
Luxu <i>zhen</i>			1,000	b	
Zhuangliantang <i>zhen</i>				1,000	
Zhenze <i>zhen</i>	3-400	600-1,000	NA	2-3,000	
Shengze <i>zhen</i>	50-60	NA	1-200	NA	5-6,000
Xian <i>shi</i>	1,000 ^c	2,000 ^a	NA	NA	2-3,000
Jiangnan <i>shi</i>	1,000	NA	1,000 ^c	NA	1,000 ^c
Bachi <i>shi</i>	100 ^c	NA	200 ^a	300	300 ^a
Huangxi <i>shi</i>				2,000 ^a	2,000 ^a
Tuncun <i>shi</i>		several hundred			1,000 ^c
Shuangyang <i>shi</i>			300	300	300
Yangmu <i>shi</i>	100	NA	200	NA	b
Tanqiu <i>shi</i>		40-50	several hundred		b
Meiyan <i>shi</i>			500	NA	b
Xinhang <i>shi</i>			1,000	NA	b

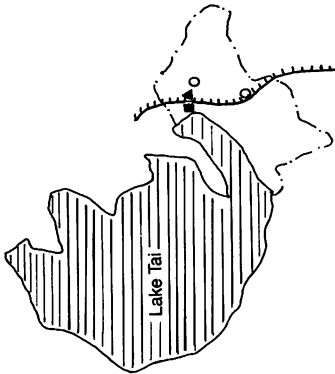
^a = Actual population greater than figure indicated.

^b = Population had increased continuously since the last survey.

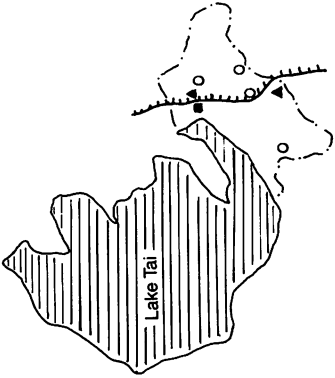
^c = Actual population less than figure indicated.

SOURCE: *Wujiang XZ*, 1747 ed., 4.15-17; *Zhenze XZ*, 1746 ed., 4.1-2.

a. circa 1368-1398



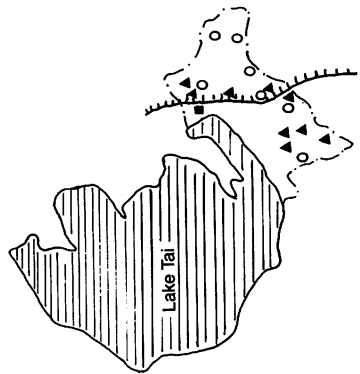
b. circa 1457-1488



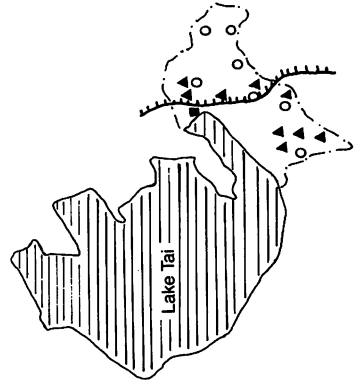
c. circa 1561



d. circa 1685



e. circa 1745



Map 2

The Growth of Market Towns in Wujiang County, 1368-1745

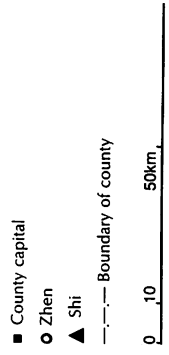


Table 5
 Percentage of Adult Males in Guian and Wucheng
 Counties Residing in Cities, 1681–1756

Year	Guian	Wucheng
1681	5.16	4.90
1726	5.27	5.15
1731	5.27	5.17
1741	5.28	5.34
1746	5.30	5.48
1751	5.30	10.24
1756	5.32	10.23

SOURCES: *Huzhou FZ*, 1874 ed., 39.2–5. Jan de Vries, *The Economy of Europe in an Age of Crisis, 1600–1750*, p. 149.

ulation was probably a result of the towns' being mainly the centers of commercial activities and the residences of absentee landlords; with the exception of a certain amount of silk textile production, most textile production was still dispersed throughout the rural area.

Since the development of trade and commerce depends largely on the investment and activities of merchants, the manner in which merchants conduct business will surely influence the degree of commercial development. The most noteworthy characteristic of commercial activities during the Ming-Qing period was the appearance of *huiguan* (*landsmannschaften*), merchant organizations established on the basis of ties of native locality. The geographic span encompassed by such organizations varied: a *huiguan* could be founded on the basis of a single county or several counties, a single prefecture or several prefectures, or even an entire province. One of the concerns of *huiguan* was to facilitate business, regardless of whether it was import or export, wholesale or retail.

Usually, *huiguan* were established in commercially important places by outside merchants as permanent commercial headquarters. In the Lake Tai area, the earliest *huiguan* were probably established about 1573–1620. The Lingnan *huiguan* and Sanshan *huiguan* in Suzhou, for example, were established during the late Ming period by Guangdong and Fuzhou native merchants respectively.¹³ Their founding can be regarded as the response to the newly emerging foreign trade. In Qing times, the Rencheng *huiguan*, founded in 1677 by a

¹³ *Jiangsu sheng Ming-Qing yilai beike ziliao xuanji*, pp. 338, 355.

group of Shandong merchants, was the first to be established in Shengze zhen, the biggest silk textile producing town in the Lake Tai region. After that, more huiguan were founded, and by 1810, there were six huiguan in Shengze, as shown in table 6.

A large volume of regular trade is a prerequisite for nonlocal merchants to post permanent representatives in market towns to oversee their business. The appearance of huiguan, therefore, is an important hallmark of market development. It indicates that a secure and prosperous market based on firm supply and demand conditions has replaced an insecure one. The founding of huiguan also brought a challenge to the monopoly of local brokerage houses, whose reactions to the new economic forces can be exemplified by the experience of Shanghai brokerages. In Ming times, the fabric market of Shanghai, like the silk cloth market of Shengze, was under the control of local fabric brokers, upon whom outside merchants had to depend for lodging and meals on their visits, as well as conducting business. This manner of doing business did not change until the “guest” merchants hired their own agents and established their own permanent headquarters in towns. Chu Hua, who was raised in a merchant family, describes this change in his famous book, *The Cotton Manual*:

During the late Ming period, Mr. Changshi, a brother of my sixth-generation ancestor, specialized in business management. He hosted the fabric merchants from Shanxi and Shaanxi. There were always several tens of them. He set up a store to purchase goods for them. When the fabric merchants were ready to leave, the costs of purchasing the fabrics were calculated in silver. Then the fabrics were bundled, loaded, and transported away. The profit from this business was enormous. He was the richest man of the county, and remained so into the early Qing dynasty. Recently, however, “guest” merchants have begun to hire their own treasurers for selecting and purchasing goods for them. The only money for local people to make is the rent on their houses. In response to this development, some local merchants have begun to purchase goods in large quantities for themselves to take to other places in search of buyers; this kind of merchant is called *shuike*. Others have purchased small quantities and resold them to other buyers.¹⁴

Chu Hua's paragraph discloses that soon after the outside merchants entered the Shanghai fabric market in the eighteenth century, the local brokers lost their monopoly. To compensate for business

¹⁴ Quoted from Chen Zugui, ed., *Zhongguo nongxue yichan xuanji, mian, shangbian*, p. 129.

Table 6
 Founding of *Huiguan* in Shengze, 1677–1809

Year	Name	Founders
1677	Rencheng	Shandong merchants from Jining prefecture
1710	Shanxi	Shanxi merchants
1736–95	Ning-Shao	Zhejiang merchants from Ningbo and Shaoxing prefectures
1736, 1809	Hui-Ning	Anhui merchants from Huizhou and Ningguo prefectures
1736–95	Huayang	Jiangsu merchants from Nanjing and Tongli
1809	Jidong	Shandong merchants from Jinan prefecture

SOURCE: *Shenghu zhi*, 1874 ed., 6.2–5; 4.2.

losses, some local brokers gave up their previous businesses and adopted new ones. Pushed out of their role as market middlemen, they became either aggressive merchants exporting goods to outside markets or petty local retail merchants. These changes, however, do not mean that brokerage houses were replaced by *huiguan*. Although in the big trade centers such as Shengze zhen and Shuanglin zhen their monopoly was declining, brokers were still the most important legal market institution, especially in minor market towns. *Huiguan* provided fellow native merchants with lodging, meals, storage space, and the protection of group interests. The consequences of the change in marketing transformed previously passive, closed local market towns into active, open, and more competitive national ones.

Both local merchants and *huiguan* merchants contributed actively to export market expansion. For example, during the Jiaqing-Daoguang period (1796–1850), the Jingxian *huiguan* of native Anhui merchants was founded in Shuanglin town. At the same time, Jingxian merchants also established dyeing factories in the town and exported processed black silk cloth to the Nanjing and Anhui areas. By the mid-nineteenth century, Shuanglin merchants had the economic ability to export local products to different markets. Small merchants exported silk products to nearby towns and cities such as Hangzhou and Suzhou, while rich merchants exported local products to more distant markets in Hubei, Hunan, Fujian, Shanghai, and Guangdong provinces.¹⁵ Long before China formally opened its doors to foreign

¹⁵ *Shuanglin ZZ*, 8.2, 15.3.

trade, Shuanglin merchants Cai Xingyuan and Chen Yichang had already sent Shuanglin silk to Guangdong for sale to foreign merchants at a substantial profit.¹⁶ We know, then, that the economic role of urban merchants expanded considerably in Qing times and that by the nineteenth century, not only were they market middlemen, they were also active in imports and exports. The establishment of huiguan by regional merchants in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries meant the appearance and the formation of a formal domestic trade network through which textile goods produced in the Lake Tai region could be shipped to the regional markets within China as well as to export markets.

The Rise of Urban Elites

An important social consequence of the growth of towns in the Lake Tai area was the rise of urban gentry during the Ming-Qing period. Along with the urbanization was a proportional increase in the number of gentry from urban family backgrounds and a decrease in the number of gentry from the countryside. A striking evidence that exemplifies the change in the distribution of social elites between urban and rural areas is the geographic origin of juren degree holders of Tongxiang county in the Ming-Qing period.

The Changing Composition of Tongxiang Elites

The unique information available in the Tongxiang gazetteer allows us to observe the consequences of commercialization in the Lake Tai region (table 7). The upper part of table 7 shows the geographic distribution of the Tongxiang juren degree holders from 1370 to 1643 of the Ming; the lower, from 1644 to 1889 of the Qing. From this table, one can see that the distribution of the Tongxiang juren between urban and rural areas underwent a marked change during the Ming-Qing period. In Ming times, about 76 percent of the total Tongxiang elite resided in the countryside; only 20 percent resided in the urban area. In Qing times, however, the pattern of distribution was just the opposite: approximately 71 percent of the total Tongxiang juren holders were urban residents; only 11 percent were rural residents.¹⁷

Signs of change first appeared after the middle of the sixteenth century followed by a decisive period during the latter Ming-early Qing

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 17.1.

¹⁷ James Shih, "A Preliminary Study of Changes in the Social Composition of the Social Elite in Tongxiang County during the Ming-Qing Period" (hereafter, *SEIT*), *Hanxue yanjiu* 3.2 (1985):741.

Table 7
Juren Degree Holders in Tongxiang County
 from Rural and Urban Backgrounds

Date	Total (N)	Rural (%)	Urban (%)	Origin unknown (%)
1370-1403	4	75	0	25
1404-1432	3	67	33	0
1433-1462	5	80	20	0
1463-1492	5	80	20	0
1493-1522	4	100	0	0
1523-1552	9	89	0	11
1553-1582	12	58	33	8
1583-1612	14	64	36	0
1612-1613	14	86	14	0
1370-1643	70	76	20	4
1644-1675	23	48	48	4
1676-1703	25	24	64	12
1704-1726	37	8	43	49
1727-1752	27	11	78	11
1753-1795	20	0	85	15
1796-1818	17	0	82	18
1819-1837	14	0	93	7
1838-1859	12	8	92	0
1860-1889	27	0	89	11
1644-1889	227	11	71	18

SOURCE: James Shih, "A Preliminary Study of Changes in the Social Composition of the Social Elite in Tongxiang County during the Ming-Qing Period" (hereafter, *SEIT*), *Hanxue yanjiu* 3,2 (1985): 741.

(1613-75). During this period, the rural percentage of the elite declined from 86 percent to 48 percent while the urban percentage of the elite increased rapidly from 14 percent to 48 percent. This change was facilitated by two phenomena: the rapid increase in the number of urban elite from two to eleven and the sustained decline in both the number and the percentage of the rural elite in the total elite population. This downward tendency became clear between 1676 and 1703. From 1775 to 1889, the rural elite constituted no more than 1 percent of the total Tongxiang elite.

Given this new distribution of the Tongxiang elite between rural and urban areas, one can, by taking each individual town and canton or rural canton (*xiang*) as a unit of analysis, further discuss the impli-

cations of these changes. According to the 1747 edition of the Tongxiang gazetteer, the county was comprised at that time of six rural cantons and eight towns. The distribution of the Tongxiang elite among each of these administrative units in the Ming-Qing period is shown in table 8.

From table 8 one can see that during the Ming, not only did the countryside produce 76 percent of the total Tongxiang juren, the distribution of these rural juren among the six rural cantons was also fairly even. These six cantons, with the exception of Qianjin, produced thirteen, twelve, nine, eight, and seven juren degree holders respectively. Qianjin canton, because of its comparatively isolated geographic location and backward economic conditions, produced only four juren degree holders in the Ming period. The urban area produced 20 percent of the total Tongxiang juren. Moreover, 93 percent of the total fourteen urban juren came from Qing zhen and Puyuan zhen, two comparatively prosperous handicraft and commercial towns in Tongxiang county, and 79 percent of these were produced after the mid-sixteenth century.¹⁸

During the Qing, the percentage of urban juren degree holders increased from 48 percent in the early Qing to 88 percent between 1775 and 1889. The number of towns that produced juren degree holders also increased from three to five. There was often a close positive relationship between the number of juren degree holder each town produced and each town's economic situation. Qing zhen or Wu-Qing zhen produced more juren degree holders than any other town in Tongxiang county: eighty-seven between 1644 and 1889. Although Qing zhen was founded in the Tang dynasty (618-907), it was not until the early seventeenth century, when it became a prosperous market town for cotton textile and silk products, that the foundation for its economic development was laid.

The county capital ranked second among urban juren producers. When it was first set up in 1430 on the site of a small village fair, the area began to expand, and roads that led to other parts of the county were built. As a center of county administration, the county capital attracted outsiders to do business and to provide necessary services for the people and the local government. The county capital produced thirty-three juren in Qing times.

Although Puyuan zhen had been a famous silk cloth producing center since the Southern Song dynasty the economic boom of the

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 742-43.

Table 8
Distribution of Tongxiang Elite in Each Canton and Town, 1370-1889

Date	R1	R2	R3	R4	R5	R6	R7	U1	U2	U3	U4	U5	U6	U7	U8	Unk
1370-1403	1		2													1
1404-1432		1		1					1							
1433-1462	1	1	1		1				1							
1463-1492	1	2		1				1								
1493-1522	2	1				1										
1523-1552	2	1	1		1	3										1
1553-1582	1	2	1	2	1	1		1	2	1						1
1583-1612	2	2	2	2	2	1		4	1							
1613-1643	3	2	3	3	3	1		1	1							
1370-1643	13	12	4	9	8	7		7	6	1						3
1645-1675		2		5	4	4		8	2	2	1					
1676-1703	1		1	2	2	2		10	3	3						3
1704-1726				2			1	10	5	1						18
1727-1752	1							9	5	7						3
1753-1774	1	1		1		1		10	6	2						5
1775-1795								5	8	4						3
1796-1818								10	1	2	1					3
1819-1837								7	1	2	2	1				1
1838-1859	1							7	1	2	1					
1860-1889								11	10	10	2	1				3
1645-1889	4	3	1	10	7	7	1	87	32	33	7	2				40

R1 = Number of *juren* from Muhua canton
 R2 = Number of *juren* from Yongxin canton
 R3 = Number of *juren* from Qianjin canton
 R4 = Number of *juren* from Wutong canton
 R5 = Number of *juren* from Qingfeng canton
 R6 = Number of *juren* from Baoning canton
 R7 = Number of *juren* from unidentified rural canton
 U1 = Number of *juren* from Qing town
 U2 = Number of *juren* from Puyuan town
 U3 = Number of *juren* from the county capital
 U4 = Number of *juren* from Lu town or Litou town
 U5 = Number of *juren* from Tudian town
 U6 = Number of *juren* from Chenzhuang town
 U7 = Number of *juren* from Yuxi town
 U8 = Number of *juren* from Zaolin town
 Unk = *Juren* of unknown origin
 SOURCE: Shih, *SEIT*, 742-743.

town really took place during the Wanli reign (1573–1620) in the Ming dynasty when the new trade and an innovation in silk weaving technology brought it an unprecedented prosperity. A direct consequence of the availability of new export markets and technological breakthroughs was the expansion of the town proper as many agricultural lands in the vicinity of the old town were converted into foundations for buildings. Consequently, there was a boom in land values. The price of barren land close to town, for example, soared from two or three taels of silver to more than one hundred taels of silver per mu. Within a period of fifty years, the town proper doubled in size.¹⁹

After the mid-eighteenth century, however, the development of the Puyuan silk textile industry encountered serious problems. First, the cost of silk fabric production increased: the price ratio of raw silk to silk fabric went from 1:4 or 1:4.5 in the Jiajing period (1522–66) to 1:1.6 or 1:2.2 in the mid-eighteenth century. In other words, silk fabric production was less profitable in mid-eighteenth century than during the sixteenth century.²⁰ As table 9 shows, this change was probably due to the growing foreign demand for raw silk and the lessening demand for silk fabrics.²¹

Table 9 indicates that after 1700 the export of silk goods declined markedly from the levels of the last years of the seventeenth century. Conversely, as we have seen, exports of raw silk gained in relative importance as a result of the change of British trade policy in 1750. In 1750 the British parliament reduced the import duty on Chinese silk to the same level as that on Italian silk, a move that led directly to the East India Company's decision to venture on a greater quantity of trade.²²

This unfavorable turn in Puyuan's silk industry was well reflected in the corresponding change in the number of juren degree holders produced in Puyuan: from 1795 to 1889, Puyuan zhen produced only three juren holders.

Lu zhen or Lutou zhen, famous for its iron utensils and iron tools production, was the only iron industry town in the western part of Zhejiang province. The Shens, the most influential lineage in town, owned all the iron works in the town.²³ Lu zhen produced seven juren degree holders in the Qing times, six of them between 1796 and 1889.

¹⁹ *Puzhen jiwén*, 1787 ed., juan shou, "fengsu," 9; "xingfei," 3–4.

²⁰ *Wujiang XZ*, 1747 ed., 38.8, 12–13.

²¹ Chen Zhen et al., comps., *Zhongguo jindai gongyeshi ziliao* (Beijing: Sanlian, 1961), vol. 4, pt. 1, pp. 117–18.

²² H. B. Morse, *The Chronicles of the East India Company Trading to China, 1635–1834*, 1:288.

²³ *Tongxiang XZ*, 1887 ed., 20.14–15; *Wuqing ZZ*, 1936 ed., 21.1–2.

Table 9
Exports of Silk Goods by the
East India Company, 1694–1753

Date	No. of Pieces	Date	No. of Pieces
1694	430,000	1724	10,000
1697	149,000	1731	16,000
1698	650,000	1740	11,031
1701	7,500	1741	11,074
1702	NA	1750	5,640
1722	10,500	1753	1,900
1723	8,150		

SOURCE: Chen Zhen et al., comps., *Zhongguo jindai gongyeshi ziliao* (Beijing: Sanlian, 1961), vol. 4, part 1, pp. 117–118.

Tudian zhen did not become a market town until the introduction of tobacco plantations into the area between 1780 and the 1790s. It was the new cash crop that brought growth to the town. According to the gazetteer, “Local people here had been diligently pursuing the occupations of cotton spinning and weaving. In recent years, however, there are large areas where tobacco has been planted; hence, merchants and traders from the outside gather here to do business.”²⁴ However, Tudian town produced only two juren degree holders in Qing times, one in 1835, one in 1879.

Among the eight towns, three did not produce any juren holder during the entire Qing period. Zaolin town occupied an important strategic location in Tongxiang county. Because it was first destroyed by a Japanese pirate invasion in 1556 and again by Manchu soldiers in early Qing, it was not until the Kangxi reign (1662–1721) that Zaolin become a village.²⁵ Yuxi town was situated on a vital communication line between the city of Suzhou and the city of Hangzhou. The town proper belonged to two counties; the eastern part of the town was under the jurisdiction of Tongxiang county, the western under Shimen county. Yuxi town was neither an industrial town nor a commercial town; its economic development, therefore, was limited. Chenzhuang town was a handicraft town, and most of its inhabitants were engaged in making bamboo articles. Its market was limited mainly to the region of western Zhejiang.

²⁴ *Tongxiang XZ*, 1799 ed., 7, wuchan; *Tongxiang XZ*, 1887 ed., 1.10, 7.1–2.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 1.11.

When discussing the changing distribution of the Tongxiang elite between urban and rural areas in the Ming-Qing period, it is important to note that there were considerable population migrations in this area during this period.

The Migrations and Distribution of the Tongxiang Elite

Migration in Tongxiang county can be divided into three kinds: (1) people who migrated into Tongxiang county and resided there temporarily or changed their original household registration to become legal residents of Tongxiang county; (2) local people who moved their family residences from one place to another within the county (this kind of residential change could be from town to countryside, from countryside to town, from one town to another town, or from one village to another village); and (3) the local people of Tongxiang who migrated to other counties temporarily or permanently.

Immigrants and temporary residents of Tongxiang. Among the first-generation juren degree holders of Tongxiang county in the Ming-Qing period, thirteen juren had immigrant family backgrounds. If we also include the juren who held only temporary resident status in Tongxiang county, then there were fifteen juren degree holders with immigrant background. Table 10 shows the fifteen juren families arranged according to the date of their arrival at Tongxiang.²⁶

The families who moved to Tongxiang county in Ming times could obtain only temporary residential status. Apparently they were not allowed to claim Tongxiang county as their permanent home. By contrast, those who came to Tongxiang during the period of late Yuan, late Ming, and from early Qing onward could give up their original household registration and become legal residents of Tongxiang county, after which they and their children would be eligible to sit for the local civil service examinations. The different treatments accorded immigrants by the Ming and Qing governments were closely related to the population policies and service levy systems established by the two governments. The strict population policy and service levy system of the Ming had changed gradually toward the end of the dynasty. When the Manchus established their rule in China, the main characteristic of their new policy was that people were allowed to migrate legally; the Manchus also allowed immigrants to give up their original household registration and to obtain new legal status where they actually resided. Consequently, the members of the new immigrant families were eligible to take the local examinations and to become members of the local

²⁶ Shih, *SEIT*, p. 745.

Table 10
Juren Families from Immigrant Background

Arrival	Family name	Origin	Destination	Household status
Late Yuan (1350s-1360s)	Feng	Guian, Zhejiang	Puyuan <i>zhen</i>	Naturalized
Mid-Ming (1573-1619)	Wu	Anhui province	Puyuan <i>zhen</i>	Temporary
Mid-Ming (1522-1566)	Wang	Jiaxing, Zhejiang	Xiancheng	Temporary
Mid-Ming (1522-1566)	Yan	Hangzhou, Zhejiang	Qing <i>zhen</i>	Temporary
Late Ming (1640s)	Fang	Yangzhou, Jiangsu	Puyuan <i>zhen</i>	Naturalized
Late Ming (1640s)	Wang	Xiuning, Anhui	Xiancheng	Naturalized
Late Ming-Early Qing (1640s)	Wang	Xiuning, Anhui	Puyuan <i>zhen</i>	Naturalized
Late Ming-Early Qing (1640s)	Jim	Xiuning, Anhui	Xiancheng	Naturalized
Early Qing (1640s)	Zhu	Xiuning, Anhui	Xiancheng	Naturalized
Early Qing (1640s)	Cheng	Shexian, Anhui	Xiancheng	Naturalized
Early Qing (1640s)	Shenli	Jiaxing, Zhejiang	?	Naturalized
Mid-Qing (1723-1735)	Tu	Xiushui, Zhejiang	Puyuan <i>zhen</i>	Naturalized
Mid-Qing (1736-1795)	Wu	Anhui	Puyuan <i>zhen</i>	Naturalized
Mid-Qing (1736-1795)	Zheng	Wujiang, Jiangsu	Puyuan <i>zhen</i>	Naturalized
Mid-Qing (1736-1795)	Lu	Wucheng, Zhejiang	Qing <i>zhen</i>	Naturalized

SOURCE: Shih, *SEIT*, p. 745.

community. With respect to that new policy, *The Draft History of the Qing Dynasty* states briefly:

All people are registered under four different kinds of household registration: commoner, military or *wei*, merchant, and salt producer. Their management depends on their original household registrations. If a person has already owned a house and a graveyard at his current residence for more than twenty years, he is eligible to become a legal resident and to take the local civil service examinations.²⁷

All fifteen immigrant families, with the exception of the Shenli family, settled in towns instead of the countryside. Excluding the two families with temporary residential status, nine of these families were engaged in some sort of commercial activity in the towns. Two were from scholar families but were dependent on the support of their wealthy in-laws for their studies. With respect to the social status of the thirteen families, 85 percent of them, eleven families, were from commoner background. Only 15 percent of them, or two families, had gentry background: one was a poor juren family, the other a wealthy gongsheng merchant family. Although Shenli Kai's father was a juren holder, his poor financial situation forced Shenli Kai to depend on his in-laws for economic support in return for which he adopted his in-laws' family name. Zhu Luduan's father was the holder of a gongsheng degree.

Migration within Tongxiang county. Among the elite families of Tongxiang during Ming-Qing times, seven families moved their residences from one location to another within the county. Five moved in the Ming and two in the Qing. There were at least three reasons for changing residences: the partition of family property, escape from war destruction and social unrest, and concern over social status or prestige.²⁸

There was a close tie between a person's occupational background, social status, and the place to which he was inclined to move. Those who moved into towns instead of rural districts, such as Feng Zi, Lu Ming, Zhou Gongchen's ancestors, and Shen Yuncong, did so because of their merchant or handicraft backgrounds. Towns were the environment with which they were most familiar; they studied and worked there. Therefore, towns were the most favorable places for them to reside. There were exceptions, however. After urban

²⁷ Quoted from Liu Min, "Shi lun Ming-Qing shiqi huji zhidu de bianhua," *Zhongguo gudai shi luncong* no. 2 (1981):225.

²⁸ *Tongxiang XZ*, 1887 ed., 15.5, 10, 12, 15-16, 17, 22, 30, 31-32, 46-47; 11.24, 27, 31, 46; 20.15; 12.15, and *Puyuan zhi*, 1927 ed., 17.7.

residents obtained gentry status, they moved to the rural districts. It would seem that a rural residence meant greater social prestige for a gentry member in Ming times.²⁹

Juren families residing temporarily in other counties. The juren families that moved out of Tongxiang and resided temporarily in other counties are shown in table 11. The arabic numeral before the minus sign is the number of juren holders produced during the period. The arabic numeral following the minus sign is the total number of juren degree holders who took up temporary residences in other counties. When one sees "4-3" in table 11, for instance, it means that in the period between 1493 and 1522, although the rural districts of Tongxiang produced four juren degree holders, three of the four resided in other counties, and only one juren holder still lived in Tongxiang. The arabic numeral following a plus sign indicates the total juren holders who resided temporarily in towns, rural districts, or unknown places in other counties. To facilitate our comparative analysis, I have divided the Tongxiang juren who took up temporary residence in other counties into Ming and Qing groups.

Ming groups. Tongxiang county produced seventy juren holders during Ming times. Eleven of them, or 16 percent of the total, took up temporary residence in other counties. Among the eleven juren holders, 73 percent were previous rural residents and 9 percent were former urban residents; there is no information available with regard to the names of the residential places of the remaining 18 percent.³⁰

When we examine the reasons for the migration of the eleven juren families, we discover that in most cases they took up residence in other counties because of their special-service household registration status. Some artisan households, for example, were required to take up permanent residence in the metropolitan area so they would be available to meet the needs of the government. Those who registered under military status were usually assigned to garrison posts either in the metropolitan area along the northern and western frontier or in the vast interior of the country. It seems that the Ming government allowed those special-service households to take the civil service examinations in the places in which they were stationed. They did not have to go back to their native prefecture or province to take the examinations as ordinary civilians did.

²⁹ Shih, *SEIT*, p. 753. ???p. 754???

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 754.

Table 11
Tongxiang *Juren* Who Resided in Other Counties

Date	TJ	RJ	UJ	UNJ	ORJ	OIJ	OIJ	OUNJ	%
1370-1403	4	3		1					
1404-1432	3	2	1						
1433-1462	5	4-1	1			+1			20
1463-1492	5	4-1	1					+1	20
1493-1522	4	4-3						+3	75
1523-1552	9	8-2		1-1				+3	33
1553-1582	12	7-1	4-1	1-1				+3	25
1583-1612	14	9	5						
1613-1643	14	12	2						
1370-1643	70	53-8	14-1	3-2	0	+1		+10	14
1644-1675	23	11	11-2	1				+2	8
1676-1703	25	6	16-1	3		+1			4
1704-1726	37	3	16-1	18-2	+1	+2			8
1727-1752	27	3-1	21-1	3-1	+1	+3		+1	19
1753-1774	25	2	18-3	5		+3			12
1775-1795	20		17-1	3		+1			5
1796-1818	17		14-3	3		+3			18
1819-1837	14		13-2	1		+2			14
1838-1859	12	1	11-5	0		+5			42
1860-1889	27		24-15	3-2		+17			63
1644-1889	227	26-1	161-36	40-5	+2	+37		+3	19

TJ = Total number of *juren* holders

RJ = Total number of *juren* holders who resided in the rural district of Tongxiang.

UJ = Total number of *juren* holders who resided in the towns of Tongxiang

UNJ = Total number of *juren* holders who resided in Tongxiang (no information available about the names of their residential places)

ORJ = Total number of *juren* holders who took up residence in rural districts in other counties

OIJ = Total number of *juren* holders who resided in towns in other counties

OIJ = Total number of *juren* who resided in other counties (the name of their residential places are unavailable)

% = Percentage of *juren* holders who took up temporary residence in other counties

SOURCE: Shih, *SEIT*, p. 754.

Moreover, with the exception of Li Yue of Qing town who obtained his *juren* degree in his native Zhejiang province in 1555, 91 percent of these eleven *juren* got their degree in the foreign provinces where their families were on official duty. Both Shen Rong and Jin Lan, for example, registered under artisan status: they won their *juren* degrees in 1444 and 1534 respectively. Since their families were assigned to perform services in the metropolitan area, they took their civil service examinations in Shuntian prefecture, where they resided. The biography of Shen Rong provides us with a brief but clear account in this regard:

The revered Mr. Shen Rong styled himself Xiren. When he was a child, he moved with his father to the nation's capital, where the family carried out the duties of an artisan household. After he reached adulthood, he devoted himself to the task of preparing for the civil service examinations. In the *jiazi* year (1444) of the Zhengtong reign, he won his juren degree in the provincial examination held by the prefecture of Shuntian.³¹

Qian Ming and his son Qian Jishi both registered under military status. Qian Ming won his juren degree in 1480 and Qian Jishi in 1507. Since they were stationed at a garrison post in the Beijing area, they were permitted to take the provincial examination in Shuntian prefecture.³² Fan Ren also belonged to a military household. When his family was assigned to a garrison post in Yunnan, a frontier province in the southwest of China, he was permitted to take the examination there; he won his juren degree in 1504. According to the Tongxiang gazetteer, "Fan Ren, a native of Muhua canton, styled himself Rongfu. As a candidate with military status, he obtained his juren degree in the provincial examination of Yunnan."³³

There were other cases like this. The Pan family produced three juren degree holders in 1519, 1537, and 1570, spanning three consecutive generations. Pan Zhen, his son Pan Jingshen, and Pan Zhen's grandson Pan Fengwu all won their gentry status in the provincial examination of Guizhou, a frontier province in the southwestern part of China. Zhang Yunyi and his son Zhang Yaonan both won their juren degree in the Guizhou provincial examinations, the former in 1543, the latter in 1555. Although the Tongxiang gazetteers do not tell us why both the Zhang and the Pan families were permitted to take the examinations in Guizhou province, judging from the household registration policy of the Ming and the case of Fan Ren it was most likely that the two families were also registered as military households.

Qing groups. Tongxiang county produced 227 juren degree holders between 1644 and 1889. Those who had taken up temporary residence in other counties constituted 19 percent of the total Tongxiang juren in Qing times. Comparing the original residential places of the Ming Tongxiang juren who resided in other counties with the Qing juren who took up temporary residence in other counties, it is clear that there was a significant difference between the two groups of juren holders. In Ming times, 73 percent of Tongxiang juren who

³¹ *Tongxiang XZ*, 1887 ed., 15.8-9.

³² *Ibid.*, 11.12, 16.

³³ *Ibid.*, 11.16.

were temporarily residing in other counties were originally rural residents of Tongxiang. By contrast, in Qing times, urban residents constituted 88 percent of the total Tongxiang juren who took up temporary residence in other counties. As far as the reasons for taking up temporary residence in other counties were concerned, there were obvious differences between Ming and Qing. In Ming times, most of the interregional migrations were planned and arranged by the central government; they were compulsory. In the Qing, however, because of the change in the household registration policy, the juren families of Tongxiang usually moved out of their native towns or villages and took up temporary residence in other counties voluntarily.

The places preferred by the Ming juren for their temporary home residences were quite different from those chosen by the Qing juren. During the Ming, some of the temporary home residences of the Tongxiang juren families were far from their home counties. The metropolitan area and the garrison posts in the frontier regions, as discussed above, were the most likely destinations for the emigrant families. During the Qing, however, the pattern of distribution of the Tongxiang juren holders' temporary home residences changed completely. Among the forty-two Qing juren holders who took up temporary residence in other counties, thirty-seven of them (88 percent) made their homes in the towns of the neighboring counties. Moreover, approximately 74 percent of the thirty-seven juren families were distributed among the eight towns in the neighboring counties to the east of Tongxiang: the county capital of Jiading, the county capital of Zhenze, Xinteng zhen of Xiushui county, the prefecture city of Jiaxing prefecture, Wangdian zhen of Jiaxing county, Luzhong zhen of Haiyan county, Chang'an zhen of Haining county, and the county capital of Qiantang. Of the eight towns, two were in Jiangsu province and six were in Zhejiang province. The most attractive town for Tongxiang juren families was the prefecture capital of Jiaxing to which Tongxiang county administratively belonged. Ten Tongxiang juren holders took up temporary home residence there during Qing times. The second most attractive town was the county capital of Zhenze, which was both an administrative center and a commercial center for silk production. Eight Tongxiang juren holders took up temporary residence there in the Qing period. Xinteng zhen had five Tongxiang juren families. The county capital of Jiading and Luzhong zhen of Haiyan county had three and two Tongxiang juren holders respectively in the Qing. The remaining three towns had only one Tongxiang juren holder each. Only three Tongxiang juren resided in the prefec-

ture capital of Huzhou, a neighboring prefecture to the west of Jiaxing prefecture. These nine towns were either local political centers below the provincial level of the government or prosperous commercial and industrial towns. This pattern of geographic distribution suggests that there was a limited openness in the Lake Tai society of that period.

This pattern did not change until 1860. Between 1860 and 1889, not only did the locations of Tongxiang juren's temporary residences go beyond the customary boundary of neighboring towns, but the proportion of the Tongxiang juren who took temporary residences in other counties, 63 percent of the total Tongxiang juren, also increased tremendously. The locations of the new temporary residences included Nanjing, Beijing, the prefecture capital of Shuntian, and Guangdong. This change was probably due to a series of events that occurred in China after the Opium War (1840-42).

If we use juren families instead of individual juren as a unit of measurement, we find that 76 percent of the Qing Tongxiang juren holders who took up temporary residence in other counties came from just five distinguished urban newly emerged elite families. Two of these were immigrant families from Anhui province; the other three were native urban families from Tongxiang county. The Zhou family was originally an urban family from Qing town. In early Qing, one branch of the family moved to Zhenze town of Zhenze county where they took up temporary residence. This branch of the family produced eight juren in the Qing period. The second influential urban family was the Feng family from the county capital. One branch of the family moved to the prefectural capital of Jiaxing in early Qing and another moved to Beijing in the late Qing. The Wang family was the third distinguished urban family. One branch of the family moved to the prefectural city of Jiaxing from the county capital in early Qing. This branch of the Wang family produced three juren. Another branch of the family resided temporarily in Beijing in the late Qing. This family produced only one juren. The fourth was the Zheng family of Qing town. One branch of the family moved to Xinteng town in the mid-Qing. This family produced five juren holders. The final influential family was the Jin family from the county capital. One branch of this family took up temporary residence in the city of Jiading in the mid-Qing and produced three juren degree holders there.

When we examine the geographic movement of the Tongxiang juren families within the county, we notice that, for some time after the 1570s, urban juren families were inclined to take up residence in

the countryside instead of towns. During the Qing, however, urban juren families were drawn instead to high-level administration cities and prosperous towns as places to establish temporary residences. This suggests that a majority of the Tongxiang elite families during the Qing times, in particular the new immigrant families with merchant backgrounds, gradually separated themselves geographically and then socially from their local rural communities, building their social relations mainly on the base of different levels of urban communities.

Some Tongxiang juren who established temporary residences in other counties for extended periods still maintained their original household registration in Tongxiang; others eventually changed their registration status from temporary to permanent. Wang Mengxiao's family, for example, established temporary residence in the prefecture capital of Jiaxing for three generations starting from his grandfather Wang Sen, who moved there after he retired from office early in the Qing. Mengxiao had five sons, all of whom changed their registration status to become permanent residents of Xiushui county.³⁴ The descendants of Shenli Kai and Shi Jie, two juren holders of Tongxiang in the early Qing, also changed their household registration and became permanent residents of Xiushui county after they moved to Xiushui.³⁵

Native Juren Families of Tongxiang in Qing Times

While some of the urban juren of the Qing came from the new immigrant families discussed above, others were from native urban families. Eight native urban juren families for whom information is available in the Tongxiang gazetteer are discussed below as examples of the social and economic backgrounds of this kind of family.³⁶ On the basis of this information, we can conclude that (1) all families, except the Zhong family, which was of a lower gentry family background from the previous dynasty, came from the newly emerged urban families of the Qing dynasty; none of the seven families had produced gongsheng or holders of any higher degree in the preceding three generations; (2) most of the urban gentry families in the Ming dynasty, with the exception of the Shen and the Lu families of Qing town who had already moved into countryside during the Wanli period, had declined in status by the early Qing; these families included the Yang

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 20.21–22.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, dingwu, 8.

³⁶ *Tongxiang XZ*, 1887 ed., 11.31, 34, 96, 99, 106; 15.2, 8–9, 10, 13–14, 19, 20, 26, 34; 18.3.

family, the Shi family, and the Yue family of Puyuan town and the Chen and Xia families of Qing town; and (3) of the ten early Qing juren, half came from rather poor urban family backgrounds.

We have noticed that the urban families of Tongxiang were inclined to adopt diversified and flexible approaches toward economic and social life and that members of a family might engage in several economic pursuits separately or collectively. The main characteristic of this approach was the flexibility of urban families in choosing their family occupation. It seems that they were psychologically ready to change their economic pursuits in accordance with the needs of their families' ever-changing socioeconomic situations. Thus, they engaged in such activities as farm management, urban real estate investment, trade, finance, handicrafts, and civil service examination preparation. The most observable pattern of occupational change was that of a wealthy merchant family encouraging its family members to pursue political careers: the family could afford educational expenses, and gentry status could improve the family's social status. When the family's economy declined, members who had originally devoted themselves to studies would give them up and take on a productive career. Still others depended largely on the income from the handicraft production of the family's female members. This approach was significantly different from that of rural-based mid-Ming elite families. Although the Ming gentry families paid equal attention to investing in the family's future as the Qing urban families, they mainly encouraged their children to pursue political careers, entrusting the jobs of management and supervision of productive activities to their family bondservants.

The following few cases exemplify the preparations made by urban merchant families for the futures of their sons. The evidence available suggests that merchant families usually prepared their sons to be either merchants or scholars. This dual occupational approach can be identified in the family history of a rich merchant. In the preface of the genealogy of the Tan family of Jiaying, the editor discloses that in the past most of the family members were either merchants or scholars and that ever since the third-generation ancestor moved to the prefectural city in the mid-Ming period, members of the family "labored to the best of their ability to be either scholars or merchants."³⁷

China was a society in which partible inheritance was practiced: each son of a family had the right to claim an equal part of his

³⁷ *Tanshi jiapu*, 1905 ed., xu-xu.

father's property, and each was able to decide his own future on the basis of his efforts and propensities. Whether rich or poor, a merchant family usually provided equal opportunities to all its sons. As children, they were sent to school for a few years to acquire basic literacy. During this period, if any one of them showed particular enthusiasm and potential talent as a scholar, he would most likely be encouraged to pursue this goal. His decision to do so did not necessarily mean that from then on he would have to give up business management. In fact, even if he obtained gentry or official status, he might continue to engage in business to supplement his income. Those who were not interested in study could either continue as merchants or else choose to become farmers or craftsmen.

The educational plans of merchant families are exemplified by the practice of the Rong family of Wuxi county. In the Rong genealogy, a paragraph in the Family Instruction section reads:

In our lineage, . . . boys begin to attend school at the age of seven. At that age, how much the boys can learn will all depend on their natural endowment. When they get older and become more comprehending, their families invite dutiful and talented teachers to give them daily instruction. . . . Therefore, even if some of them are later unable to pass the civil service examinations and finally choose to become merchants, craftsmen, or farmers, they will still be honest and judicious men. Although scholars, farmers, craftsmen, and merchants are different occupations, they are all important.³⁸

This paragraph contains two important points worth emphasizing. (1) Urban merchant families paid particular attention to the education of their sons, regularly requiring them to receive a few years of basic education when they were young. From the family's point of view, literacy was a prerequisite to any occupation their sons would take up. As a result, the rise of urban merchants meant an increase in the literate population in towns in contrast with the illiterate masses in the countryside. (2) Gentry status was still the most attractive goal for the sons of merchants. However, they were more practical and liberal than their predecessors and no longer regarded their occupation as less respectable. Even as the head of a merchant family encouraged his sons to pursue a gentry position, he also showed his sons his respect for other occupations, including his own.

The Rong lineage attitude toward the selection of occupation was not unique. The Zhang lineage of Jiaying, a wealthy merchant family,

³⁸ *Liangxi Rongshi zongpu*, "jiaxun."

exhibits a similar attitude in its genealogy of 1768 in the section on Family Instruction:

There is no doubt that the best occupation for men is to be scholars. However, so far as occupation is concerned, it is not necessary that every man be a scholar. Merchant, farmer, medical doctor, fortuneteller, and astrologer are all worthwhile occupations; a man can choose any one of them.³⁹

This paragraph reemphasizes the idea that urban merchants held no prejudices against any proper occupation and that their main concern was to train their sons in practical knowledge and techniques that would enable them to become economically independent instead of parasitically feeding off their family fortunes.

Before the establishment of a modern educational system, it was the family's responsibility to provide for the son's education. Therefore, some clans prepared and printed educational plans for lineage members to observe. Often, families even published their own Family Instructions for other families to consult. Lu Yiting of Jiaxing, for example, published his Family Instruction, which he titled *Jiating jianghua* (A guide to families), in 1805. Lu Yiting and his father, Lu Qikun, were both urban medical doctors. According to Yiting, seven-tenths of the guide was prepared by his father; the rest he added after his father's death in 1794. The nature and content of the book reflect the attitudes and practices of many urban families in the eighteenth century. It contains a relatively detailed description of a family educational schedule, attitudes toward the selection of an occupation, and the role of the head of the family in these matters. In the section on *jiaozi* (instructing sons), Yiting suggested an educational schedule as follows:

1. Beginning at age 4 or 5, a family should teach its sons numerals and have them practice how to make a bow with hands clasped.
2. Beginning at age 5 or 6, a family should teach its sons how to read.
3. Beginning at age 7 or 8, a family should send its sons to school. A family should ask its sons to prepare for the civil service examinations in order to earn for the family the status that comes from the possession of degrees or official rank. If a son leaves school, his father should prepare him to be a craftsman, a merchant, or a farmer. Be his family rich or poor, he should possess some skill and ability. In addition, a family should teach each son how to be a man.
4. From age 16 or 17 onward, a family should let its sons try out the occupations they have chosen. If they are not able to perform the jobs,

³⁹ *Xieli Meixi shuanggui Zhangshi zongpu*, "jiaxun."

the family should let them try another occupation. The trial period should continue until each has found an occupation he is able to master.⁴⁰

This schedule illustrates a realistic approach toward living, one that emphasizes study and practice and does not discriminate against any occupation.

In Ming times, about 76 percent of the total Tongxiang juren resided in the countryside. During the period before the 1580s, Tongxiang's center of social and economic gravity was still the countryside. Most of the gentry families resided on their own farm estates scattered in the countryside, and even the urban elites were inclined to move their residences into the countryside. This trend, however, did not continue into the Qing dynasty. According to the information available in Qing gazetteers, few urban elite families moved their residences into the countryside during this period. Under these circumstances, the rural districts had no choice but to recruit juren candidates from among their rural residents.

When we analyze the twenty-six rural juren of Tongxiang of Qing times, we see that 65 percent of them came from four distinguished rural families. The Zhu family of Muhua canton was an old elite family that had produced three juren holders during the Ming. They then produced two jinshi and two juren in the first half of the Qing dynasty. The Yu family of Baoning canton emerged as a new rural elite family in early Qing and produced four jinshi in the Qing. The third and the fourth families had been urban gentry families during the Ming dynasty but had moved their residences to the countryside during the Wanli reign. One, the Lufei family of Yongxin canton, produced two jinshi holders in the Qing. The other, the Shen family of Wutong canton, produced two jinshi and five juren in the Qing. After a hundred years of prosperity in the early Qing, all four gentry families entered a period of decline between 1730 and 1770. Shen Huiru, who won his degree in 1732, was the last juren of the Shen family. The last juren of the Lufei family was Lufei Chi; he obtained his degree in 1765. Yu Hongqing of the Yu family became a juren in 1736; he was the last juren the Yu family ever produced. Similarly, Zhu Cheng, who won his degree in 1760, was the last juren holder of the Zhu family. The decline of the big rural gentry families suggests a shift in the center of socioeconomic gravity of Tongxiang from the countryside to the towns in the Qing.

⁴⁰ Lu Yiting and Lu Qikun, *Jiating jianghua*, zhong juan, pp. 13–14.

From late Ming times onward, an increasing number of urban people, especially the sons of merchants, joined the gentry. Because of their business experience and urban backgrounds, the new urban elite possessed values different from those of the elites of previous generations. It had become increasingly likely that the sons of merchants would continue to engage in commercial activities even after having passed the civil service examinations and become government officials. By the early Qing, this practice had become common and was noted by contemporary social observers. In fact, whether or not an official should engage in commercial activities became an important topic of debate. An example is the case of Fei Jinwu, the son of a Huzhou gentry member of a merchant family, whose life span covered the second half of the seventeenth century and the early eighteenth century. In an essay written to assure members of his lineage that there was nothing improper about government officials engaging in business activities as well, Fei Jinwu tells of his experiences and sets out his point of view.

He tells how, when he was a boy, his father introduced him to a book entitled *Xuan-ta bian*, in which the author, Xu Zhongguang, expressed his fear that profit seeking might corrupt an official's integrity and result in unjust administration. After Jinwu finished reading the book, his father asked him what he thought of it. The following is the gist of their dialogue:

The father: "Should officials engage in commercial activities?"

Jinwu (seriously): "No, they should not. If they did, I am afraid they would lose the integrity every official should have; it may lead them to break the regulations every official should observe."

The father (disagreeing with Jinwu's opinion): "On the contrary, an official who engages in trade seriously and successfully will violate neither his own integrity nor the regulations of the government; in addition, he will solve his own financial problems. If an official's financial situation is improved, he is more likely to become incorruptible, honest, and law-abiding. Furthermore, according to the regulations of the nine grades of civil officials, the highest grade 1a, *guangludaifu*, are only allowed to receive 180 taels of silver annually, while the eight lower grades receive even less. Because such meager salaries are not enough to meet their actual expenses, officials have to exploit people to satisfy their personal needs. Is it not better for officials to engage in commercial activities to supplement their regular salaries than to exploit the people? In so doing, not only will they not provoke discontent and complaints among

the people, but in addition there will be no need to increase the national budget.”⁴¹

Afterward, Jinwu kept his father’s words firmly in mind. In 1706, he was appointed a local official; but although he served for ten years, he actually received salary from the government for only seven years and nine months. He received the salary of a grade five official for five years and one month and of a grade four official for two years and eight months, for a total of 680,000 copper cash. Jinwu estimated that if he had been paid the full amount of regular salary for ten years, he would have had enough to support his family, with a little left over for saving. This was especially so since Jinwu was a frugal man who ignored his colleagues’ sneers and criticisms and did not participate in their social activities. The main problem was not that Jinwu’s salary was insufficient, however, but that it was not paid regularly, so he could not depend on it to meet his daily expenses. Thus when he was a local official in Yunnan province, he used his free time to engage in trade. Because Yunnan was a frontier province in the southwestern part of China, backward in both transportation and commerce, Jinwu not only engaged in trade himself, but also encouraged the local people to get involved in commercial activities during the slack season of farming. As a result, during his tenure as a prefect, although he did not take a single penny illegally from the people, his family’s income was always large.⁴²

When in 1716, after the death of his father, Jinwu returned home from office, he was well-to-do. He used the savings earned from his commercial activities to buy a piece of land he called *feng-tian* (land bought by an official with his emoluments). He later wrote an essay explaining why he gave it that name. In the conclusion of the essay, he says:

Alas! In ancient times, *feng-tian* (emolument fields) were bought with the savings from officials’ salaries; now, *feng-tian* are bought with the gain from officials’ commercial activities. In ancient times, officials were ashamed to engage in commercial activities; now, the profit of commercial activities helps solve the financial difficulties of officials. Officials may not be able to make as much profit as merchants do, but the official position is an advantage for officials’ commercial activities, and commercial activities have greatly benefited the officials! Why then do I not name the land *shang-tian* (land bought with profit from commercial activities), rather than *feng-tian*? Because when a scholar

⁴¹ *Shacun Feishi zupu*, xiaoji xia, 14.

⁴² *Ibid.*, xiaoji xia, you 14a–15a.

becomes an official, his life belongs to the ruling family. Therefore, all he had gained should be regarded as the gift of the ruling family. It is thus very proper to name the land *feng-tian*.⁴³

Jinwu's family background, personal experience (as a young man he had specialized in business management),⁴⁴ and financial difficulties while he was an official led him to adopt a more realistic attitude toward everyday problems, and he criticized the Song-Ming neo-Confucian scholars for being concerned mainly with empty idealistic discussions about Nature and Mind. Although they promoted ascetic practice, their ideals were too high and too difficult to be put into effect. Fei believed that engaging in commercial activities would not only contribute to the integrity of officials, but would also improve the standard of living of the local people.⁴⁵

In summary, the expansion of both foreign and interregional trade led to the vigorous growth of market towns. As a result of rapid urban development in the Lake Tai area, a new social group of townspeople emerged. They emphasized practical values and promoted realistic approaches to problems, and they paid particular attention to the education of their sons. As the case of Tongxiang county shows, from mid-seventeenth century onward, as an increasing number of townspeople won gentry status, the distribution of social elites in Tongxiang changed. This marked change also suggests that during the Qing many new elites were not only no longer ashamed to engage in commercial activities, but even considered their profit-seeking practices to be highly moral. This change had profound sociological consequences as the old merchant status group gradually disintegrated and the status distinction between merchant and gentry became confused. A look at the composition of merchant associations in Suzhou suggests that they consisted of three kinds of merchants: official-merchant, gentry-merchant, and commoner-merchant.⁴⁶ This change signaled the departure of the old gentry and the emergence of new elites in China's premodern period.

Market Growth and Land Ownership

Along with the rapid proportional increase of the urban gentry population and decline of the old rural gentry in the Lake Tai region,

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 15b.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, xiaoji xia, you 14a.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, you 14.

⁴⁶ James Shih, "Official-Merchants and Gentry-Merchants in Ming-Qing Times," *Guoshi shi lun*, p. 228.

there was a corresponding change in the distribution of land ownership. In Ming times, most of the lands of the Lake Tai region were owned by rural-based gentry families; during the Qing, most were owned by urban elite families. With regard to the ownership distribution of land in the Lake Tai area, the information available on Suzhou prefecture sufficiently substantiates our argument. Fuli (or Luzhi) was a market town of Yuanhe county in the northeastern part of the Lake Tai region. In 1765, about half the top grade farmland in the area belonged to the rich who lived in the prefectural city of Suzhou. According to the gazetteer of Fuli town,

The period of about one hundred years since the establishment of our dynasty has been one of peace and prosperity in which the population has increased day by day. Of the native people (*tuzhu*), those engaged in farming own no more than one hundred mu of land; the rest are all tenant farmers. Half the top grade farmland belongs to rich households who live in the prefectural city. There are occasionally two or three wealthy households in town who became rich because of their diligence and frugality. Since the local people are poor, their habits are simple. They are not like the people who live in luxury in the prefectural city.⁴⁷

This paragraph discloses that in 1765, much of the land was owned by urban residents. It also implies the existence of two different kinds of landowners: native landowner and nonnative absentee landowner. The nonnative absentee landowners were probably the urban immigrant families discussed above.

The 1824 edition of Suzhou gazetteer provides another example: “There are many landowners in Jiangnan, but four- or five-tenths live in compact walled cities and the suburbs, three- or four-tenths inhabit towns, and one- or two-tenths reside in dispersed villages.”⁴⁸

The proportional increase in the number of urban absentee landowners in the area was related to the Single Whip Tax Reform of the end of the sixteenth century. Gu Yanwu (1613–82) provides us with an example concerning this connection. Although the case was about the economic behavior of urban residents including merchants of Nanjing, the situation was probably also true for those in the Lake Tai area. According to Gu Yanwu, before the reform, the labor services were divided into two categories: the silver assignment (*yinchai*) and labor service performed by the taxpayer in person (*lichai*). The service assignments were determined mainly on the basis of landholding:

⁴⁷ *Wujun Fuli zhi*, 1765 ed., 5.1.

⁴⁸ *Suzhou FZ*, 1824 ed., 10. “Tianfu” quoted from Zhao Xixiao, “Yaoyi yi.”

those who owned much land were heavily assessed, those who had little land were assessed lightly. Of the two assignments, the lichai was usually the more difficult for landholders to bear. Not only did the labor assignments require long times and heavy expenditures, the draftee was also often subjected to all sorts of exploitation and extortion by government clerks. In fact, a wealthy landholding family could go bankrupt after a single year of service. Therefore, people often regarded landownership as a burden. This was particularly true among the rich nonnative urban residents, who in order to avoid the lichai obligation refrained from investing in farm land. Only after the reform, when the lichai was substantially reduced or in some cases eliminated, did the wealthy nonnative urban families begin to buy farm-lands. They did not farm these lands themselves, but rather entrusted them to landless native peasants for cultivation. They also invested in land improvement to protect their investment, and during times of famine, they provided loans to peasants in need.⁴⁹ Thus, the growth of absentee landlords was, at least in the early period, beneficial to agricultural development.

The close financial relation between village and town provided the second means by which farm land passed into the hands of the townspeople. The general pattern of this change is typified by the findings of an early twentieth-century field study. A person who urgently needed money for taxes or rent payment was forced to borrow from a moneylender. If the borrower was unable to pay back the capital and the interest within a certain time, he was forced to transfer his title to the subsoil of the land to the lender. The tenant preserved his right to the land surface.⁵⁰

Rural landlords responded to the commercial expansion in the Lake Tai area in the sixteenth and the early seventeenth centuries in two ways. An increasing number of landlords, particularly those of the privileged gentry, indulged in luxury and extravagance and distanced themselves from actual managerial activities. These kinds of families, as we have seen in the case of Hua Shizhen (see Chapter 2), soon fell into decline. Conversely, we have seen in the period the emergence of new managerial farmers whose economic activities were no longer limited to agriculture; they made great profits through the market mechanism. The case of Hua Chunzhi (1538–1604), the oldest son of Hua Shizhen of the Hua lineage is illustrative. When Hua

⁴⁹ Gu Yanwu, *Tianxia jun guo li bing shu* (Taipei, 1959 ed.), yuanbian, 8.58.

⁵⁰ Fei Hsiao-t'ung, *Peasant Life in China*, pp. 183–84.

Chunzhi was a boy, his family's financial situation was already so bad that he did not even have money to pay for his tuition. When he got married, his family could not afford a decent ceremony, and as a result, his wife's wealthy parents did not have any respect for him. Nevertheless, Hua's father continued to live extravagantly and paid no attention to family finances. Forced by poverty and responsibility, Hua Chunzhi, a filial son, finally decided to become a farmer to support his family. Since by that time all the family-owned fertile lands had been sold, he had to rent land from a local rich landlord family. Because the lands were far from home, during the farming season Chunzhi would rise every morning at four o'clock and hasten his bondservants and hired laborers to take their farm tools and go to work. He worked side by side with them in the fields in spite of the rain and the scorching sun. Chunzhi always proceeded in a planned way; he was also an expert in crop rotation. As a result, his lands usually produced twice as much as those of his neighbors. After paying rents, he still had enough left over for his own use.⁵¹

Chunzhi also knew how to take advantage of the principle of market price fluctuation. His biographer points out that he was always able to sell his remaining farm products when the price was the highest. In addition, he reinvested his profits in the moneylending business. Because he charged a reasonable interest rate, none of his debtors failed to repay him on the agreed date. Within a few years, he was able to restore and reclaim three-tenths of the wealth his family had lost.⁵²

Not long after Chunzhi's financial situation began to improve, his father fell ill, and Chunzhi was obliged to stop all his business activities to take care of him. After two months of intensive care, his father finally recovered. By that time, however, all of Chunzhi's savings had been depleted and he had to start all over again. Rather than giving in to discouragement, he simply worked harder and was willing to take more risks. For example, he hired more laborers to reclaim land from marshes and took out a big loan from a rich household to engage in trade. He also hoarded goods when their market prices were low and sold them when their prices were high, thus realizing a great profit.⁵³ During the two successive years of drought in the Suzhou area in 1599 and 1589, the rice price rose as high as one hundred fifty copper cash for a single *dou*. Because Chunzhi knew that the land in the Suzhou area was fertile and that there would probably be a

⁵¹ *Benshu*, 31.42–43; *HSZP*, juan shou, 33.

⁵² *HSZP*, juan shou, 33.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

bumper year after the drought, he loaned his hoarded grains to the people of Suzhou. Sure enough, he ended up making a tremendous profit from the loans.⁵⁴ By the end of his life, he had restored and reclaimed seven-tenths of the wealth previously held by his family.⁵⁵

Hua Chunzhi had two sons. His older son, Hua Zuxiao (1560–1616), took care of the family business; his second son Hua Zuqin (1563–1627) prepared for civil service examinations, winning his juren degree in 1594.⁵⁶

Hua Chunzhi's residence was one Chinese mile from the market town of Dangkou. A village at the time his great grandfather, Hua Yi (1444–86), had first moved there, Dangkou probably began to develop into a market town about the time Hua Chunzhi was building up his business ventures there. His branch of the Hua family became the leading branch of the lineage in Qing times. Hua Chunzhi's case demonstrates that market opportunities in the area could contribute positively to the improvement in a peasant's financial situation.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ *Benshu*, 31.46.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Diffusion of Rural Handicrafts

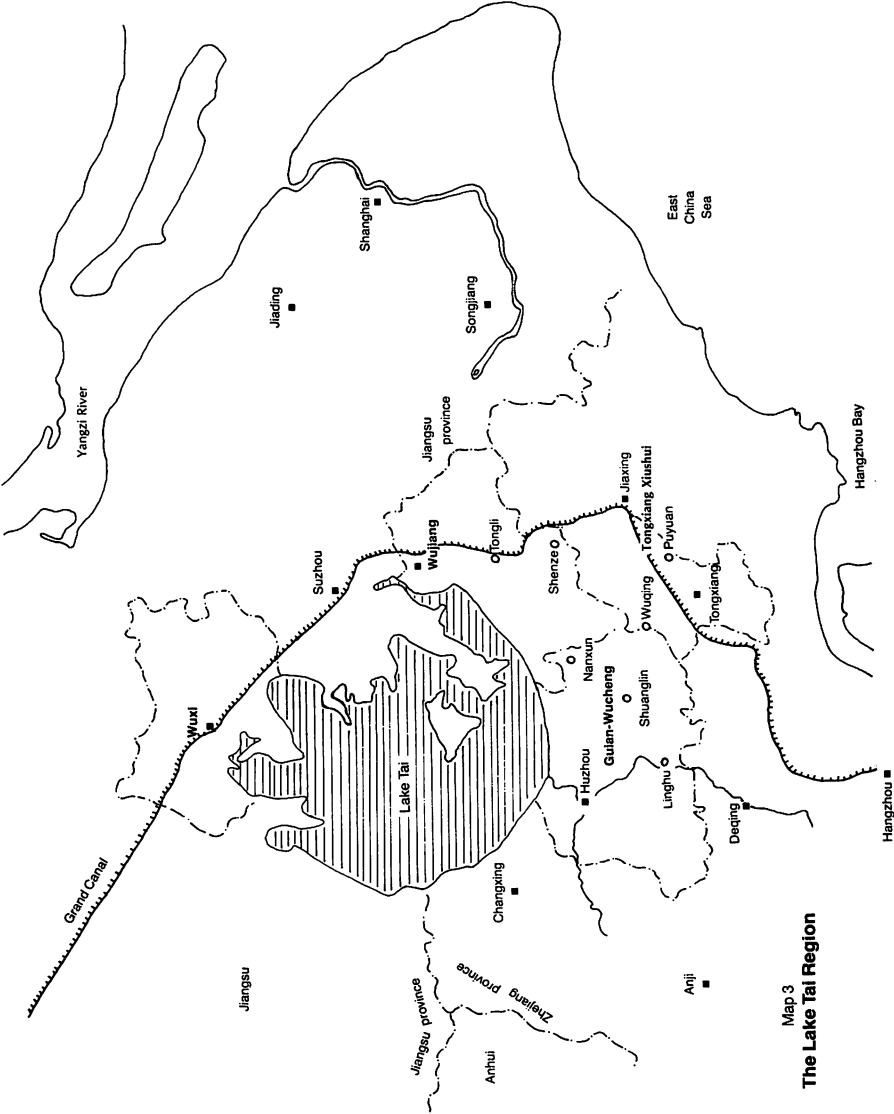
It has already been indicated that the largest and the most important of the Lake Tai region's manufacturing industries, the making of silk and cotton cloth, had won a considerable domestic market in the sixteenth century, and expansion of the overseas and domestic demand was an important factor in its further growth in the seventeenth and the eighteenth centuries. This chapter discusses three aspects of rural industry in the Lake Tai area: geographic distribution, relations with merchants' activities, and economic consequences of development. The discussion includes four geographic areas: Wuxi, Wujiang, Guian-Wucheng, and Tongxiang-Xiushui (see map 3).

The Development and Distribution of Rural Industry

Wuxi

The cotton textile industry was introduced into the rural area of Wuxi by the Jiajing period (1522–66). In Wuxi's eastern neighboring counties, the cotton industry had been thriving since the fourteenth century. In its early stages in Wuxi, the industry was confined to several scattered areas in the eastern part of the county, and the products were sold only in the local market. One source indicates that in the Jiajing period the rural people of Yanxiang canton exchanged cotton and grain for their cloth in the city of Wuxi.¹ It was from areas like Yanxiang that the industry eventually spread westward to the other parts of Wuxi county. The cotton cloth industry became the by-employment for the people of Wuxi; by the second half of the eighteenth century, cotton cloth emerged as the county's major export.

¹ Huang An, *Xijin shixiao lu*, 9.554–55, 6.308.



Map 3
The Lake Tai Region

Local observers described the commercialization of the rural cotton industry in Wuxi as follows:

The women of Wuxi are very hard workers. They spin and weave cotton cloth in such abundance that it is unmatched by any other county.²

Although Wuxi cloth is not as light and fine as the Songjiang cotton cloth, it is tougher and more durable than that produced in Songjiang. Thus, Wuxi cotton cloth possesses the widest export market. The cloth shopkeepers bundle up the cloth they acquired and ship the bundles for sale at places such as Baoying, Gaoyou, Yangzhou, and Huaian [in northern Jiangsu]. The annual cash transactions amount to several hundred million taels of silver.³

This observation clearly suggests that there was a promising prospect for the development of cotton textile industry in Wuxi by the mid-eighteenth century.

Wujiang

The people of Wujiang adopted sericulture in the early years of the Ming period. In 1369, the founder of the dynasty ordered the people in the Lake Tai region to plant mulberry trees. Sixty-three years later, the number of mulberry trees planted in Wujiang county had increased approximately 150 percent—from 18,033 in 1369 to 44,786 in 1432.⁴ The increasing number of mulberry trees in Wujiang county signified a rapid development of sericulture in the area.

Until early Ming, the production of silk textiles was conducted only by the people who lived in the prefecture city of Suzhou. Silk weaving techniques were introduced into Wujiang county during the period of Hongxi-Xuande (1425–35). Some wealthy local families first hired experienced weavers from the prefecture city to produce silk fabric for them in Wujiang. After the period of Chenghua-Hongzhi (1465–1505), some local people also became proficient in the craft of silk fabric production.⁵ By the mid-sixteenth century, a small industrial town, Shengze shi, emerged in the southern part of the county. All of its one hundred households specialized in silk textile production.⁶ By the middle of the eighteenth century, all residents who lived within seven to nine miles of Shengze and Huangxi were profiting from silk

² *Wuxi XZ*, 1751 ed., 11.12.

³ Huang An, *Xijin shixiao lu*, 1:112–14.

⁴ *Wujiang XZ*, 1747 ed., 5.32–34.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 38.7.

⁶ *Wujiang XZ*, 1561 ed., 1.9–11; *Wujiang XZ*, 1747 ed., 4.16.

and satin production. People who lived within this area could make a return trip by boat to Shengze to market their products daily. The well-to-do hired weavers to work for them; the poor were independent producers.⁷

The distribution pattern of the silk textile industry was different from that of the cotton cloth industry. The entire process of cotton fabric production, including both spinning and weaving, was generally carried out by a family in the countryside. The processes of mulberry raising, silkworm tending, and silk reeling were usually separated from those of silk thread spinning and silk weaving. The former was carried out in dispersed rural areas, the latter concentrated in a few industrial towns and their suburban areas—Shengze town and Zhenze town in Wujiang county and Linghu town and Shuanglin town in Guian county.

Along with the development of sericulture and the silk fabric industry in Wujiang, the technology of the cotton textile industry was introduced into this area from counties along its eastern border. According to the 1812 edition of the gazetteer of Tongli zhen, a market town in central Wujiang, “The people of Tongli, both in the villages and in the market town, are engaged in the spinning and the weaving of cotton. They accumulate their products, and trade in the finished cloth for raw cotton. Their product is just as tight and fine as that produced in the eastern areas [the advanced cotton textile industry areas in Songjiang prefecture].”⁸

The gazetteer of Lili, a market town southeast of Tongli, edited in 1805, provides us with records regarding the practice of cotton spinning and weaving in the southeastern part of the county. It says, “Most women of humble families are taking cotton spinning and weaving as their occupation. Their livelihoods depend on it. Hence, the people here pay more attention to cotton spinning than anywhere else.”⁹ To the east of Lili, in the Fenhu area, the people also depended on the cotton industry for their livelihood. According to the 1847 edition of the gazetteer of Fenhu, “Most women are engaged in spinning cotton into yarn, a practice commonly called *yaosha*. The local people take either the trading or the spinning of cotton as employment.”¹⁰ These three examples indicate that the cotton industry had become

⁷ *Wujiang XZ*, 1747 ed., 38.12–13; Fei Hsio-t'ung, *Peasant Life in China*, p. 257.

⁸ *Tongli zhi*, 1812 ed., 8.3.

⁹ *Lili zhi*, 1805 ed., 7.3.

¹⁰ *Fenhu xiao shi*, 1847 ed., 6.7.

the major family employment, in particular for the poor peasant families, in those areas by the early nineteenth century.

Guian-Wucheng

Guian and Wucheng are two of the six counties of Huzhou prefecture in the southern part of the Lake Tai region. The northern border of Guian county is Lake Tai. Wucheng lies to the south of Guian. The two counties are surrounded by Changxing county to the northwest, Anji county to the southwest, Wukang to the south, and Deqing county to the southeast. Most of the surrounding four counties are mountainous, while most of Guian-Wucheng is plains and lowlands.

Since the Southern Song dynasty (1127–1279), Huzhou prefecture has distinguished itself as an area of silk and silk fabric production. At that time, both sericulture and the silk fabric industry were concentrated in the mountainside areas and managed by wealthy landlord families. According to the records of the *Wuxing gazetteer*, edited in 1201, “The annual income of hill villages in this prefecture depends on sericulture and mulberry farming. Some rich households culture as many as several hundred trays of silkworms. They also specialize in the process of reeling and weaving. . . . Some rich households own tens of mu of mulberry trees.”¹¹

During the Yuan dynasty (1271–1368), the geographic distribution of the silk industry had changed. Mulberry raising and the silk fabric industry moved eastward and northward from the hilly villages in Wukang and Anji counties to the plains and lowlands of Guian county. Evidence indicates that Shuanglin town of Guian county had ten silk brokerage houses in the Yuan dynasty.¹²

During the Ming, sericulture developed further in Guian and continued moving northward into Wucheng county. Several towns became well known for their refined raw silk production. The prefecture gazetteer of Huzhou edited in 1491 calls Linghu town of Guian “the number one silk producing place in Huzhou.”¹³ The 1542 edition of the Huzhou gazetteer says that Huzhou “is rich in silk and silk floss products. Fine silk is produced in Guian and Deqing counties.”¹⁴ According to the account of Zhu Guozhen, a late Ming (1620s) gentry-official, the best raw silk was produced at Qili, a place seven Chinese

¹¹ *Jiatai Wuxing zhi*, 1201 ed., 20.6, 16.

¹² *Shuanglin ZZ*, 1917 ed., 16.8.

¹³ *Linghu ZZ*, 1892 ed., 11.5.

¹⁴ *Huzhou FZ*, 1542 ed., 8.23.

miles from Nanxun town in east Wucheng county.¹⁵ And according to an early Qing local historian's observation, raw silk as good as Qili's was produced everywhere in Guian and Wucheng counties.¹⁶ These four illustrations suggest that, in the Ming-Qing period, there was a geographic expansion of the silk producing area from Guian to Wucheng as well as a general improvement in the quality of the silk produced. By the end of the seventeenth century, Nanxun town and Wu town had distinguished themselves as two major silk markets in the Lake Tai region.¹⁷

As the practices of mulberry raising and raw silk producing developed in the eastern plains of Huzhou, the silk weaving industry also migrated from the mountainside areas where it had been concentrated during the Southern Song. By the mid-sixteenth century, Shuanglin town and Linghu town of Guian county and the prefecture city of Huzhou had already become three well known silk fabric producing centers.¹⁸ The industry was conducted mainly by the people who lived in the three towns and their suburban areas. Until the establishment of formal trading relationships with the west in the 1840s, no significant geographic expansion was made by the industry in the area.

To the east of Huzhou were Suzhou and Jiaxing prefectures. It was from there that the cotton textile handicraft industry was introduced into Huzhou. Evidence indicates that when the people of Nanxun and Wu established their reputation for high quality raw silk production, they were also well known for their fine cotton cloth production. They adopted cotton cloth production as their second major by-employment. Nanxun, Wu, and Mayao of Wucheng were the three major centers of the cotton industry.¹⁹

Thus we see that during the Southern Song period there was a clear geographic division in the distribution of handicraft production in Huzhou prefecture. The people in the mountainside areas in the west and in the south specialized in mulberry raising and the products of sericulture; the people in the lowlands and plains in the north and in the east specialized in hemp growing and hemp cloth or yellow-grass cloth weaving.²⁰ By the Wanli period (1573–1620) in the Ming dynas-

¹⁵ Zhu Guozhen, *Yongchuang xiao pin*, 2.44–45.

¹⁶ Wang Yuezhen, *Hu Ya*, 7.19–20.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 7.25; Zhang Yuanzhen, *Wuqing wenxian*, 31.16; *Wucheng XZ*, 1681 ed., 5.3.

¹⁸ *Shuanglin ZZ*, 15.1; *Linghu ZZ*, 11.5; Wang Yuezhen, *Hu Ya*, 7.25–26, 28, 29.

¹⁹ Zhu Guozhen, *Yongchuang xiao pin*, 28.24; *Wucheng XZ*, 1681 ed., 5.2–3.

²⁰ *Jiatai Wuxing zhi*, 1201 ed., 20.5.

ty, however, the previous distribution pattern of handicraft production had changed considerably. The production of sericulture goods in the mountainside areas had declined. The lowlands and plains of Guian-Wucheng became renowned both for silk goods and for cotton cloth production and exportation.

Tongxiang-Xiushui

Tongxiang and Xiushui both had a long history of silk fabric production. According to the gazetteer of Xiushui edited in 1596, four towns specialized in either sericulture or silk fabric handicraft: Wangjiangjing, Xincheng or Xinteng, Puyuan, and Doumen.²¹ Among them, Puyuan was the best known silk fabric industry town. Studying the growth and decline of the silk industry in Puyuan can shed light on the general condition of the development of the silk industry in the entire area.

The silk industry in Puyuan was founded by the Pu family in the early years of the Southern Song. In Yuan times, Pu Ming of the Pu family operated four silk brokerage houses in Puyuan, dominating the export of local silk products.

During the Wanli period, keen market competition between different kinds of silk fabrics stimulated innovation in the technology of silk weaving. For several centuries, Puyuan was famous for its *juan-bo* (lustrous silk) products. Since the technology for silk lustering was first introduced and promoted by the Pu family, the founders of the town, people called the silk lustering *Pu-chou* (Pu silk). During the Wanli period, Shen Xiade successfully replaced the old-fashioned weaving machines with improved ones that produced silk lustering. The breakthrough in weaving technology added fifty years of economic prosperity to Puyuan's history. The gazetteer of Puyuan recorded this change:

In the middle of the Wanli period, the old-fashioned weaving machines were replaced by newer ones in order to produce *sha-chou*. The quality of *sha-chou* is finer than that of the silk fabrics produced previously. They are the best in China. Consequently, many new streets and lanes were opened and many new houses were built in Puyuan. The city grew continuously, doubling in the size in fifty years. The price of infertile land in the suburban area of Puyuan, which before was valued at two to three taels of silver per mu, increased to more than one hundred taels of silver per mu when the land was used for housing construction. At the end of Wanli, after a succession of flood and

²¹ *Xiushui XZ*, 1596 ed., 1.34.

drought, most of the local people were forced to leave Puyuan. Toward the last years of Chongzhen (1628–44), Puyuan was again stricken, first by famines and natural disasters, then by the looting and the burning of the bandits. As a result, things were desolate in all respects.²²

After a short period of economic depression, the silk industry regained its prosperity in the early years of the Kangxi period (1662–1722).²³ In 1678 there were many traders and merchants in the market. Mulberry raising, sericulture, and silk fabric production were the most advanced of all counties. Wherever there was a nonirrigated piece of land there was mulberry raising. Every household was employed in sericulture.²⁴ It seems that, until the end of the eighteenth century, the silk goods of Puyuan maintained a broad market. Traders from Peking, Liaodong, Shandong, Shanxi, and Shaanxi in the north and from Huguang, Jiangnan, and Fujian in the south came to Puyuan for silks. The silk goods of Puyuan were also exported to Mongolia, Japan, and the Ryukyus.²⁵ Toward the end of the eighteenth century (perhaps earlier), however, the market began to decline, partly because Puyuan silks were inferior to those of its major competitor, Shengze, and partly because of the limited domestic and export silk market. Consequently, Puyuan gradually lost its market to Shengze, and the silk industry of Puyuan declined.²⁶

The cotton cloth industry was introduced into Tongxiang and Xiushui probably in the sixteenth century. According to the gazetteer of Xiushui edited in 1596, the people of Doumen zhen, a market town in the eastern part of the area, engaged in both sericulture and cotton textile handicraft.²⁷ Doumen was a famous cotton cloth producing center.²⁸ By the mid-seventeenth century, the cotton industry and sericulture were the two major by-employments for the rural families of Tongxiang.²⁹ Some upland fields were even devoted to cotton plantations.³⁰ According to the observation of a Tongxiang local in the early seventeenth century, the household women of his native place took silkworm tending, silk reeling, and cotton cloth manufacture as their

²² *Puzhen jiwen*, xing fei, 3–4.

²³ Shen Tingrui, *Dongyu zaji*, 1887 ed., 7a.

²⁴ *Tongxiang XZ*, 1678 ed., 2.18, 13.32.

²⁵ *Puzhen jiwen*, 9; Shen Tingrui, *Dongyu zaji*, 4.

²⁶ *Tongxiang XZ*, 1887 ed., 1, “jiangyu shang,” you 14b; 2, “tushuo,” 14b–15a.

²⁷ *Xiushui XZ*, 1596 ed., 1.34.

²⁸ Shen Tingrui, *Dongyu zaji*, 50.

²⁹ Zhang Lùxiang, *Shenshi nonshu*, xia juan, p. 45.

³⁰ *Tongxi jilue*, 1797 ed., 1.47.

major employment. To the west of his native place, the household women produced silk, hemp cloth, and yellow-grass cloth. To the east the household women engaged in either cotton cloth production or some farm work and mulberry raising.³¹ The western region referred to by the Tongxiang contemporary was probably Guian county. The eastern region was Pinghu and Jiashan counties.

Based on the information introduced above, the family by-employment of the Lake Tai region under discussion can be roughly divided into three subregions. The first is the area where cotton textile handicrafts were the major employment or by-employment. Wuxi and the eastern part of Wujiang county were of this area. The second is places where silk thread spinning and silk weaving provided the major employment or by-employment. This area, which included several industrial towns and their suburban areas, was the smallest area of the three. Linghu, Shengze, Shuanglin, the prefecture city of Huzhou, and Puyuan were the five centers of the silk fabrics industry. Finally, there was the area of double by-employments. The families in this area practiced both sericulture and cotton cloth production. More people were included in this area than in the other two areas of the Lake Tai region.

Development of rural industry peaked in the Wanli period. During that time, other changes also took place—in the tax and service-levy system, in the rural social structure and its relations to production, and in foreign trade. In addition, as a result of the foreign trade, a large quantity of American silver flowed into China.

The development of rural industry in the Lake Tai region was not without limitation. While the cotton textile industry developed successfully in Wuxi, the introduction of sericulture and the silk textile industry was met with opposition from the people of Wuxi. In 1726, Wang Qiaolin, the magistrate of Wuxi, hired specialists in sericulture from Huzhou prefecture to teach the people of Wuxi the techniques of sericulture. Wang Qiaolin believed that the adoption of sericulture was the best way to cope with the pressures associated with an increasing population. After a year of promotion, however, the people remained indifferent toward his efforts.³² Finally, he had to cancel his plan.

One local historian of Wuxi attributed Wang Qiaolin's failure to poverty. He argued:

³¹ Zhang Lǔxiang, *Shenshi nonshu*, xia juan, p. 45.

³² *Wuxi XZ*, 1751 ed., 4.14–15.

People all know that laziness leads to poverty; but they don't realize that for some, the reason for their inactivity is poverty. Why? Because people living in cold and hunger are not capable of doing anything to improve their situation and can only continue in misery.³³

This interpretation, however, cannot justify what happened later in the same geographic area. After the establishment of a formal trading relationship between China and the Western countries in 1842, the export market for raw silk and silk products expanded dramatically. The annual export of raw silk increased from an average of 1,664 dan between 1839 and 1844 to 13,220 dan in 1845, and continued to expand thereafter.³⁴ In response to the increasing foreign demand for raw silk, the people of Wuxi, according to the gazetteer of Kaihua canton, a district in the southern part of the county, adopted the technology of sericulture without delay. The gazetteer reads:

After the establishment of international trade, hardly any household in Kaihua canton didn't know the techniques of sericulture!... After the founding of silk textile factories in great number in Shanghai, silkworm cocoon-collecting shops were established in Wuxi county. Hence, the whole county adopted sericulture; the whole prefecture soon followed suit. Clearly, the people go where the profits are.³⁵

The people of Wuxi, both peasants and merchants, were more realistic than their magistrate in their approach to economic life. They knew that within China both silk and silk fabrics were luxury goods with a limited market, and population pressure alone wasn't reason enough to adopt sericulture. Thus, after weighing the marketing situation and the possible return on their investments, they decided not to develop sericulture. Now we can see that the development of commercialized rural industry depended largely on markets and marketing conditions.

Commercial Services and Rural Industry

The development of commercialized rural industry requires commercial services. It needs a supply of raw materials, and, most importantly, the service of sellers of the finished products. Since the development of trade and commerce depends largely on the investment and activities of merchants, the ways in which merchants conduct business will surely influence the extent of rural industry develop-

³³ Wang Baocheng and Hou Xueyu, *Kaihua xiang zhi*, 1916 ed., juan xia, 37.

³⁴ Shi Minxiong, *Qingdai sizhiye de fazhan*, pp. 102-4, 111-13.

³⁵ Wang and Hou, *Kaihua xiang zhi*, juan xia, 42.

ment. Let us first examine the role of merchants in the commercialization of the rural cotton industry. According to the local gazetteers, none of the four areas under discussion produced cotton, so raw cotton needed to be imported if the rural cotton industry was to develop in these areas. The adoption of cotton handicraft in the Nanxun town area provides a good example in this respect. In the early seventeenth century a Nanxun native observed: "Merchants often buy raw cotton from neighboring prefectures and set up shops on our land. The people take what they have produced, cotton yard or cotton cloth, and go to the market early in the morning. They exchange it there for raw cotton which they carry home to spin and weave as before."³⁶

After the cotton industry was well established in Nanxun, the cotton cloth shopkeepers stopped going to the cotton-producing regions to buy raw cotton by themselves; instead, the people of the cotton-producing areas shipped the raw cotton to Nanxun for sale. Outside buyers also came to Nanxun to buy. These changes can be regarded as the second stage of the industry's development. An early nineteenth-century local cloth merchant's account provides us with a vivid description of how the merchants conducted their business:

One hundred li east of Nanxun town is the coastal area. The fields of the uplands there are suitable for cotton planting, and most of the local people plant cotton. They plant in the summer and harvest in the fall. Having harvested a great deal, the local people bundle up the crop and ship it to the west to exchange it for money with the merchants. One hundred li west of Nanxun town is a hilly region where tea, chestnut, bamboo, and lumber are produced. According to the local custom, most women there don't manufacture cloth. The people of the hills, therefore, often trade their products for cotton cloth with the merchants in the east. Nanxun town is situated in the middle of the two regions. . . . As soon as new cotton comes to the market, it piles up like frost or snow high and low in the open ground in the market. The merchants who open cotton cloth shops in Nanxun town buy raw cotton with the cash from the eastern [trade]. . . . The men of the villages buy raw cotton at the market and then give it to their wives [to spin and weave]. . . . When a person wants to sell his cloth, the shop brokers will measure the width of the cloth and estimate its market value. After he exchanges his cloth for cotton, he leaves the shop. Shortly thereafter, the people from the west come into the shop with cash, and if the price is right, they sign the order contract and make a deposit.³⁷

³⁶ Zhu Guozhen, *Yongchuang xiao pin*, 28.24.

³⁷ *Nanxun ZZ*, 1858 ed., 32.22-23.

Nanxun's case shows only the services the merchants provided to the urban people of Nanxun town; it does not tell us how the merchants served the widely dispersed rural residents. The case of Nanxun therefore cannot completely explain the development of the rural cotton industry in the region. Fortunately, the historians of the Wuxi gazetteer provide us with the needed information:

In the market towns, there are rows of cloth shops. They all buy raw cotton in advance and exchange it for [finished cotton cloth] and store [it in the shops], to be assembled later at the main shops. Outside the north gate of the county capital is *bu-hang-xiang* (cotton-cloth-shop lane). The main shops are there. Some cloth shops trade imported preserved long rice, but they trade raw cotton as well.³⁸

The shopkeepers bundle up the cloth they acquired and ship it to places such as Baoying, Gaoyou, Yangzhou, and Huaian for sale.³⁹

The above two accounts disclose that the market system of the cloth industry in Wuxi was organized hierarchically. The cloth shops of the market towns were widely dispersed at the lowest level. The cloth merchants of the market towns became the suppliers of raw materials and rice for the producers and the buyers of the finished cotton products. Commercial services thus enabled the county people to engage in cotton handicraft production at their homes. The main shops at the county capital formed the next higher level, from which cloth was exported to the outside markets. A 1964 field study disclosed that there were many densely distributed small village markets in the Wuxi and Suzhou areas. The average distance between two rural markets was from 0.9 miles to 1.6 miles (1.4–2.6 kilometers). Above the level of small rural markets, there were about seven or eight middle-size market towns in each county with a population above 2,000. The average distance between any two of this kind of towns was 7.5 miles (12 kilometers).⁴⁰ In Wuxi in 1936, there were fifty-five village markets and ten middle-size market towns with a population above 2,000.⁴¹ Based on this information, we can infer that the market structure of Wuxi's cotton industry was three levels instead of two. It

³⁸ *Wuxi XZ*, 1751 ed., 11.12.

³⁹ Huang An, *Xijin shixiao lu*, 1.112–14.

⁴⁰ Cheng Lu et al., "Jiangsu sheng Su-Xi diqu nongye quhua," *Dili xuebao* 25.3:185; Yan Zhongmin et al., "Shi lun Su-Xi diqu nongye fazhan yu zhong xiao cheng zhen de guanxi," *Dili xuebao* 30.3:237, 239–40, 242.

⁴¹ Yin Weihe, *Jiangsu liu-shi-yi xian zhi*, pp. 29–31; Li Changfu, *Jiangsu sheng di-zhi*, p. 285. The ten towns were Anzhen, Batuqiao, Luoshe, Yanqiao, Nanfangquan, Hudi, Shitangwan, Zhouxinqiao, Rongxiang, and Ganlu.

is likely that the cloth shops' services of supplying raw materials and collecting the finished products were preformed through the channels of the rural market system.

When we discuss the business practices of cloth merchants and cloth producers, we notice that the two shared a customary market practice—*yi bu yi hua*. The phrase means that the cloth producers give finished products to cloth shopkeepers in exchange for raw cotton. But the phrase doesn't detail the precise business relationship between the two parties. The sources don't tell us whether the producers were independent weavers or hired wage laborers who worked for the cloth shopkeepers. It was only in 1927 that a modern field study clarified the meaning of the words. The customary market practice was, at least in the late Qing period, a kind of "putting out" system. The study reads:

In the past, people spun yarn and wove cloth, and then they exchanged their products for raw cotton. In this manner, the routine moved in endless cycles. Later, as the cotton mill flourished, the hand-spun yarns became profitless. Thus, the ordinary cloth shops changed their policy; they bought factory yarns [instead of raw cotton] and distributed them to individual weavers. The finished homespun cloth was to be sold in the areas of northern Jiangsu and Anhui. The weavers' monthly wage varied. They earned only one or two dollars a month.⁴²

In the raw silk industry, the "putting out" system was also adopted by some silk shopkeepers. In 1844, the silk shops in Zhenze town carried two kinds of silk thread: *xiangjing* and *liaojing*. *Xiangjing* was produced by independent spinners who spun their own raw silk and sold their products to the shops. *Liaojing* was produced by those who worked for the shopkeepers for wages; the shopkeepers provided them the raw material.⁴³ In the silk-weaving industry, some shopkeepers in Shuanglin town also adopted the system. They gave their raw materials to individual weavers and determined the wage with the weavers in advance.⁴⁴

The "putting out" system had two significant implications. First, the system was able to recruit more people into the productive forces without having them leave home. Those who could not afford to buy raw materials could work for the merchants. Second, the "putting out" system implies the existence of quality control by the merchants over production. In view of these two characteristics of the system, it

⁴² Rong An, "Wuxi," *Dongfang zazhi* 24.16:113.

⁴³ *Zhenze ZZ*, 1844 ed., 2.1-2.

⁴⁴ *Shuanglin ZZ*, 16.8.

may be fair to say that although the "putting out" practice was a negative force in the development of a concentrated (i.e., town-based) modern industry, it must have improved the efficiency of the dispersed rural industry in the Lake Tai region.

So far we have seen how the brokerage houses, including silk shops and cotton cloth shops, played an indispensable role in the commercialization of rural industry in the Ming-Qing period. The brokerage houses underwent noteworthy changes along with trade expansion. Feng Menglong described how a silk shop operated in Shengze town during the mid-sixteenth century:

During the Jiajing period there was a man named Shi Fu in Shengze town. His wife's surname was Yu. This couple did not have children. They owned a silk-weaving machine at home. Every year, they would raise a few baskets of silkworms and the wife wound [silk thread] while the husband wove [silk fabric]. It was rather easy to make a living. Many well-to-do families in the town would not market their finished silk cloth until they had accumulated more than ten bolts of silk cloth, or at least five or six bolts of silk cloth. They would then go to the market to sell them. Big families that produced a lot of silk cloth did not have to go to the market. Brokerage firms induced guest merchants to go to the big families' homes to buy. Shi Fu's family was humble, and his capital for silk production was small. Therefore, whenever he produced three or four bolts of silk cloth, he had to carry them to the market to sell. One day, after he had accumulated four bolts of silk cloth, he folded them neatly, one bolt after another, into the shape of a square. He then wrapped them with a piece of cloth and carried them to the market. He saw many people from all directions gathering in the market. Voices were loud, and it was really a bustling and prosperous place. Shi Fu went to a familiar brokerage house to sell his cloth. He saw many people waiting to sell silk cloth standing in the crowd outside the front door. Inside the room sat three or four guest merchants. The brokerage master stood behind a shop counter, unfolded each bolt of silk, and estimated its price. Shi Fu pushed himself past the crowd and handed his cloth wrapper to the broker. The broker took the cloth wrapper, opened it, examined the silk cloths, and put them on a scale to measure their weight. The broker then offered them for sale to the competing bidders. When the sale price was settled, the broker handed the silk cloths to the guest merchant and said: "The expert weaver Shi is an honest man but lacks patience. Please give him some fine silver." The guest merchant, following the broker's suggestion, picked out a few pieces of fine silver, weighed them, and paid Shi Fu. Shi Fu took out his own scale and weighed the silver again to make sure the weight was right. When he noticed that the weight of the silver was not quite enough, the guest merchant handed him one or two cents more silver. At this point, Shi

Fu stopped bargaining with the merchant, asked for a piece of paper to wrap the silver, put it into his pocket, and took back his scale and cloth wrapper. He folded his hands, bowed to the broker to show his gratitude, said "Excuse me!" to the crowd, and walked away.⁴⁵

During this period, Shengze was only a small silk cloth-producing town. Most of the weavers there probably were urban residents. It seems that the silk brokers knew all the weavers in the area, and the local producers all depended on the local brokers to find buyers for their products.

During most of the Qing period, the silk textile trade was prosperous. Accordingly, the number of silk fabric producers increased. The silk-producing area, like Shengze zhen, expanded outwardly from the town site into the surrounding villages. It seems that the number of weavers and the size of the producing area expanded much faster than did the export markets. In other words, the silk fabric market became more competitive than before. As a result, the local silk fabric brokers were no longer familiar with the local weavers and the situation of production in their area. The local producers who lived in the villages also found it inconvenient and difficult to sell their products at the brokerage houses. Under this situation it took a broker a long time to find the specific items needed to fill a purchase order. The brokers overcame these market confusions and difficulties by establishing a new middleman during the period of Qianlong (1736–96) to adapt to the dispersed industry.

The new middlemen were called by different names in different places: *jieshou* in Puyuan, *xiaojuanzhu* in Shuanglin, and *choulingtou* in Shengze.⁴⁶ Familiar with the local producers and their products, they worked on commission, selling the weavers' silk fabrics to the brokers. When a broker received a purchase order, he would give the order list to *choulingtou* to fill.⁴⁷ Undoubtedly, the adoption of the new middleman contributed greatly to the efficiency of the silk market, but it also increased the cost of production.

The Effects of Rural By-employment on Peasant Economy

The adoption of family by-employment meant an increase in the family employment rate. Before the development of the cotton indus-

⁴⁵ Feng Menglong, *Xing shi heng yan*, pp. 359–60. Although the story is fiction, the details are accurate in recording real practice.

⁴⁶ *Puyuan zhi*, 1927 ed., 14.15. Cited from *Puchuan so wen ji*; *Shuanglin ZZ*, 16.8; He Bing, "Shengze zhi fangzhi ye," *Zhongguo jindai shougongye shi ziliao* 1:220.

⁴⁷ He Bing, "Shengze zhi fangzhi ye," 1:220.

try in Huzhou, for example, the labor potential of women in the family had never been fully used. In 1527, when Xu Xianzong, a native of Songjiang and a local historian, visited Huzhou prefecture, he was surprised by the comparatively comfortable lifestyle of the Huzhou woman. Songjiang prefecture was a leading cotton industry region, and its women, rich or poor, all engaged in the production of cotton textiles. Against this background, Xu Xianzhong contrasted the use of female labor in Songjiang and Huzhou. According to him, the total yearly work performed by a Huzhou woman was less than the work performed by a Songjiang woman in a single month.⁴⁸ In Huzhou, the men did all the productive work except sericulture. The work in sericulture took the women only one month to complete. After that they had no productive work to pursue. After the adoption of the cotton industry, however, the average working period of women in Huzhou was extended from one month to a whole year.

The development of a system of intensive family labor affected the men as well as the women, for the men had to rearrange their work schedule to adapt to by-employment production. The development of the cotton industry in the Nanxun area provides a typical example. According to a local account,

The people who live in the suburban villages of Nanxun, in addition to the practice of agriculture and sericulture, also pay attention to the employment of women. The women of most families work in separating the fibers of raw cotton from the seeds, cotton fluffing, and spinning and weaving. The men of the villages buy raw cotton at the market and give it to their wives. The women engage in cloth making in the daytime; at night, after the lanterns are lit, the men join the women in their work. This way, each family can usually accomplish forty-five days' worth of work in thirty days.⁴⁹

The second effect of the adoption of family by-employment was the change in the financial basis of the peasant household. Previously, peasant households either earned their living from agriculture or, sometimes, depended on their landlords. Under the new mode of production, the peasants' livelihood became, to a large extent, dependent on the family's by-employment and market services. In the mid-eighteenth century, for example, about six months' livelihood for the rural people of Wuxi came from family by-employments, the other six months' from farming. The rural people depended on the markets to supply the raw materials and foodstuffs and to finance production.⁵⁰

⁴⁸ Xu Xianzhong, *Wuxing zhanggu ji*, 1615 ed., 12.6.

⁴⁹ *Nanxun ZZ*, 1858 ed., 32.22-23.

⁵⁰ Huang An, *Xijin shixiao lu*, 1.6-7.

In the southern Lake Tai area, after the people adopted the cotton textile industry, their financial situation became similar to that of the people of Wuxi. The family's income from farming, after paying off the taxes and debts, left nothing for the rest of the year after New Year's Day. The feeding and the clothing of the family depended entirely on handicraft by-employment.⁵¹

The two examples mentioned above clearly indicate that, under the new mode of production, a peasant family in general had to maintain its livelihood through both farming and by-employment. The new practice enabled the newly established peasant families to use less farm land than they would have if they practiced no family by-employment. A peasant family with little land could make up its shortage through by-employment. A peasant family that engaged in by-employment did not need to lease much land from a landlord. It is clear that the new mode of family production was one of the shaping forces of the prevailing small family farm in the Lake Tai region in Qing times. It not only enabled peasant families to use less farm land but also made their livelihood less vulnerable than before. A local of Wuxi in the mid-eighteenth century observed:

The autumn is somewhat rainy and the noise of the shuttles of the looms once again is to be heard everywhere in the villages. The peasants trade the cloth for rice. Thus, even if there is a bad harvest in our county, our country people are not in great distress as long as the other counties have a cotton crop.⁵²

From the viewpoint of modern industrial development, there was enormous unused productive capacity in the peasant families because their weaving machines usually lay unused for many months during the year. From the viewpoint of family economy, however, the new mode of management offered both more security and more income to peasant families.

So far we have demonstrated that half a peasant family's income could have come from family by-employment. When we study the historical materials of the Lake Tai region, we are even more impressed by the economic contribution textile production made toward the survival of a landless family, especially a family without adult male labor. Three examples illustrate this point.

Rong Tiqian, a native of Wuxi, was a successful merchant in Shanghai in the early nineteenth century. His father died when Ti-

⁵¹ Zhu Guozhen, *Yongchuang xiao pin*, 28.24.

⁵² Huang An, *Xijin shixiao lu*, 1.6-7.

qian was only four years old. Even though the family was extremely poor, entirely dependent on the cotton spinning and weaving done by his mother for its livelihood, he was sent to study at a local school. Every winter night, he studied by the side of an oil lamp while his mother worked on the weaving machine. At the age of twelve, he went to Shanghai to study business.⁵³

Mrs. Dong was a native of Wujiang county. Her family owned no farm land. After the death of her husband in 1749, she moved into a small rental house and engaged in cotton spinning and weaving to support herself. She earned fifty or sixty copper cash a day. After paying all her expenses, she had ten cash each day to save. Within forty years, she saved 140,000 of copper cash.⁵⁴

At about the same time, Mrs. Wang of Wujiang county also earned fifty copper cash a day by producing cotton goods. With this income, she could not only support a family of four including her sister-in-law and two children but also repay her previous debts.⁵⁵

The supplementary handicraft income also led to an expansion in the population of the Lake Tai region, breaking up the homeostatic equilibrium of an agricultural population. After the adoption of family by-employment, the same piece of farm land was able to support more people than before. Handicraft production could maintain the peasant's livelihood beyond the support of agricultural land alone. Let us take the demographic change in Wuxi county as an example. Between 1567 and 1749, the population of Wuxi increased by about 192 percent, from 253,607 to 741,024, while the cultivated land remained almost the same (table 12).⁵⁶ Table 12, despite the poor quality of the population data, can also show us a rough picture of the unbalanced development between the population and the arable land. Between 1377 and 1554, arable land in Wuxi increased markedly, especially in the earliest thirty years of the Ming dynasty. From that time onward, the expansion of arable land ceased. In contrast, during the 270 years between 1377 and 1647, the population increased less than onefold, from 138,056 to 253,609. Between 1647 and 1749, the tempo of population growth increased. During this hundred years, the population increased from 253,609 to 741,024, a threefold increase.

⁵³ *Liangxi Rongshi zongpu*, 21.36.

⁵⁴ *Wujiang xian xuzhi*, 1879 ed., 27.2.

⁵⁵ Zeng Jifen, "Chongde laoren bashi zi ding nienpu," *Zhongguo jindai shougong ye shi ziliao*, 1:235.

⁵⁶ *Wuxi XZ*, 1881 ed., 8.1-16, 9.1-3; Huang An, *Xijin shixiao lu*, 1.10.

Table 12
Total Arable Land and Total Population
in Wuxi, 1377–1836

	Land (mu)	Population
1377	720,897	138,056
1391	869,023	177,815
1412	1,220,477	218,789
1482	1,254,767	276,487
1512	1,259,024	283,521
1554	1,491,287	NA
1567	1,418,533	253,607
1613	1,425,698	253,607
1647	1,417,297	253,609
1749	1,434,369	741,024
1836	1,434,395	NA

SOURCE: *Wuxi XZ*, 1881 ed., 8.1–16, 9.1–3;
Huang An, *Xijin shixiao lu*, 1.10.

The practice of family by-employment might have been related to the increase in birth rate, for increase there was. A study on the demographic change in the middle and lower Yangzi areas, based on the materials of genealogies of clans, suggests that before the seventeenth century, the birth rate in the areas was comparatively low: an average of about two sons per married couple. From the second half of the seventeenth century on, however, the average was about three sons.⁵⁷

Under the new mode of production, a peasant family was highly sensitive to market conditions. Its primary economic consideration was to maximize the family income. When handicraft production was more profitable than farming, the family was more likely to concentrate its family's labor on handicraft production and to pay less or little attention to farming. In the sericulture areas, for instance, some peasant families gave up spring crops cultivation to engage in silk production.⁵⁸ It seems that the new mode of production constituted, to a certain extent, an institutional barrier to the development of intensive agriculture. A modern historian has attributed the stagnation in rice

⁵⁷ Liu Ts'ui-jung, "Ming-Qing renkou zhi zengzhi yu qianyi, Changjiang zhong xia you diqu zupu ziliao zhi fenxi," *Di er jie zhongguo shehui jingji shi yanjiu hui lunwen ji*, p. 301.

⁵⁸ *Puyujan zhi*, 1927 ed., 14.2.

yields through the Qing period in the Suzhou area to this new mode of production.⁵⁹

Nevertheless, if rural by-employment in the Lake Tai region had developed and grown without a corresponding change in the organization of agrarian production, the population increase in the eighteenth century would not have had a significant effect. In the next chapter, therefore, I will discuss the changes in the agrarian production system in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

⁵⁹ Rawski, *Agricultural Change*, p. 142.

CHAPTER FIVE

Qing Landlordism and the Land Tenure System

In 1644, the Qing replaced the Ming and became the ruling dynasty in China. For the Ming gentry landlords, the dynastic change meant the termination of their gentry status and privileges; under the Qing they were no different from the commoners. In the Lake Tai region, incidents in which farm laborers, acting individually and collectively, took revenge on their gentry landlords or masters were widespread. According to a witness's account, when the people of the Lake Tai region learned of the fall of Nanjing, the subsidiary capital of the Ming in south China, to the Manchu invaders in 1645, they armed themselves with simple farm tools and rose against their landlords. The record states:

When the event of *yiyou* (1645) happened, hundreds and thousands of people who lived along the lakeside gathered into groups. They carried plough tails and sticks and cried out loudly for revenge. The people who have harbored resentments for the oppressors gladly joined them. They were looking for the people they hated, to destroy their walls and gates, to burn down their houses, and to kill them. The incident lasted almost a month, while the previously influential families either fled or hid.¹

It was only one of many similar incidents. But it showed how unstable was the social foundation of the gentry in the late Ming period. At that time, no morality could have effectively prevented the poor from taking actions against their masters and the gentry landlords.

The Decline of Agricultural Bondservants

During the period of drastic political change, some bondservants broke away from their masters by violent means, while others chose

¹ Zhang Lǔxiang, *Yangyuan xiansheng quan ji*, 38.17.

relatively peaceful paths. According to a rural gentry of Guian county whose family owned several tens of bondservants before the fall of the Ming dynasty, all the bondservants except one took advantage of the dynastic change to seize a part of their master's property and cut themselves off from their masters.² The bondservants of the Dong family in Nanxun town also took nonviolent means to emancipate themselves. In 1645, before the Qing troops occupied the town, the head of the family noticed while organizing his bondservants into a local defense force that the majority of them had left; only seven remained.³

Why is it that some bondservants resorted to violent means and some took more peaceful routes? A local historian of Wuxi in early Qing attributed the different reactions to different local customs. He compared the reactions of the bondservants in Wuxi county with those in a neighboring county, Wujin, during the period of dynastic change. According to him, although it was a popular custom for the people of Wuxi to own bondservants, they took the master-bondservant status very flexibly. They did not insist on a set period for bondservant service and did not feel uncomfortable with bondservants changing masters within a very short time. Therefore, during the transitional period of the early Qing, many bondservants changed their masters freely; some even took their wives and children with them to find jobs in the nation's capital.⁴

This was not the case in Wujin county. The local historian argued that the people of Wujin county regarded the slavery status as hereditary. Under ordinary circumstances, the hereditary bondservants did not have much chance to improve their status; therefore, they tended to resort to violent means of self-liberation. In the early Qing, the bondservants in Wujin county had become too powerful to be controlled. When the political influence of a bondservant's master began to diminish, his bondservants soon planned to rebel against him. Some brought lawsuits against their masters. Some became bandits.⁵

In the early Qing it was also true that, while many bondservants did not want to leave their masters, they were also not as obedient as before. When they managed property for their masters, they were likely to profit themselves at the expense of their masters. Xu Jingke, for example, was a landlord of Jiaxing. He owned four to five hun-

² Shen Bingxun, *Quanzhai wen gao*, 1.21.

³ *Nanxun zhi*, 1920 ed., 19.5-6.

⁴ *Gujin tushu jicheng*, zhifang dian, 715, ce 118, 3.

⁵ *Ibid.*

dred mu of farm land. Surprisingly, because he entrusted the management of the land to his bondservants, he hardly had enough rice to feed his own family.⁶ Cases like this were not uncommon in those days in the Lake Tai region. The bondservant-managers stole properties and embezzled rents from their masters. As a result, the gentry landlords' income diminished while the amount of taxes they owed the government increased. In this manner, most bondservants became a serious economic burden for their masters. In the end, the gentry landlords lost their properties and sometimes their lives.⁷

Evidence suggests that the early Qing bondservant-owners could not dismiss their bondservants as they pleased: owners could dismiss bondservants who requested dismissal, but the owners were still responsible for supporting their bondservants even if the bondservants could not contribute anything to their masters. Zhang Lǔxiang (1611–1674), a gentry landlord of Tongxiang county, described the dilemma of the bondservant-owners in an essay. He wrote: "I have discovered from recent customary practice that none of the bondservants are good and honest. Although masters know it is a mistake to keep bondservants, the circumstances give them no choice; they have to keep them."⁸

One solution to the dilemma was to try to improve the morale of bondservants by treating them as tenant farmers. Zhang Lǔxiang recommended this solution to one of his friends, Yao Dake. The bondservant-owner would give a piece of land to the bondservant to cultivate. In return, the bondservant would cultivate a piece of land for his former master.⁹ This solution was advantageous for both parties; it could somewhat relieve the masters' financial burden in supporting their bondservants, since the bondservants could earn a living on their own, and it provided the bondservants an incentive to work hard to improve their social and economic condition. Although we have no further information about whether Yao Dake accepted Zhang Lǔxiang's suggestion, it was an appropriate method to lighten his financial burden.

The bondservant system was not legally abolished in the Qing period. On the contrary, in an edict in 1728 the Yongzheng emperor honored hereditary bondservitude and the strict master-bondservant relationship.¹⁰ Bondservant ownership was still a symbol of gentry

⁶ Zhang Lǔxiang, *Yangyuan xiansheng quan ji*, 8.20.

⁷ Zhang Lǔxiang, *Shenshi nongshu*, xia juan, p. 45.

⁸ Zhang Lǔxiang, *Yangyuan xiansheng quan ji*, 19.26.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 13.9, 19.26–27.

¹⁰ *Kang-Yong-Qian shiqi cheng xiang renmin fankang douzheng ziliao* (hereafter,

status.¹¹ Such ownership, however, particularly in regard to agricultural bondservants, declined significantly among landlord families in the Lake Tai region. Two primary factors contributed to this decline: (1) the decrease in the demand for agricultural bondservants as a result of the increase in the percentage of absentee urban landowners and the decrease in the percentage of rural-based gentry landlords (urban landlords entrusted their lands to tenant farmers to cultivate) and (2) the drastic reduction in the supply of bondservants.

In the previous chapters, we briefly mentioned the service-levy system of the early Ming. According to the rule, each registered household and its adult male, except for the privileged gentry members and a certain number of their family members, was subjected to the obligations of various labor services, with some being very costly. Only the wealthy landlord families were able to undertake them. Thus, the services were usually allocated among the households on the basis of their economic strength, including the number of adult males and the amount of property. From the founding of the Ming, however, the political and economic privileges granted to local leaders and gentry members led to the concentration of landownership in the hands of a few privileged local or outside gentry landlords. As a result, all the labor services in the area, heavy or light, fell on the shoulders of remaining small and broken peasant households, who could not complete their assigned services even if they exhausted all their resources. Nevertheless, as long as the poor peasants' household registrations remained, they were obligated to undertake their duties. One way they could avoid the labor services, however, was to give up their free-person status to become someone's bondservants. During Ming times, therefore, many small, ruined peasant families either sold themselves or submitted themselves and their properties to the gentry households. This was the most common manner of entering bondservitude in the Lake Tai region.

A series of reforms in the service-levy system between the sixteenth and the eighteenth centuries gradually stopped this practice. There were three essential characteristics of the service-levy reforms.

1. The local authorities, in order to carry on the labor service operation, gradually shifted the burden of the service from every 110 *lijia* households to the actual farmland owners, in particular the rich landlords. As a result, the ruined and landless peasant households

KSCR), shang ce, pp. 480–81.

¹¹ *Wucheng XZ*, 1881 ed., 35, “zashi,” 3. A gentry wife was expected to have one or two bondservants to wait upon her.

were free from the obligation of labor service; consequently, they no longer needed the gentry's protection nor had to give up their free-person status.

2. The practice of commutation of the labor service, particularly the miscellaneous service, into money payment was adopted. Local authorities, in turn, used the money to hire laborers to perform the services. This practice freed the farmers from performing the services themselves and created new employment opportunities for the poor local people.

3. The gentry's privileges in labor service were greatly reduced. In the early years of the Qing dynasty, the head-tax system had been adopted in an attempt to transform labor service into a money tax levied on the adult male; it was originally not levied on property. But a gentry member was exempt from the head tax; certain members of his family also enjoyed this exemption. In addition, the gentry were allowed exemption from a certain portion of their land taxes up to a specified amount. In later times, however, the head-tax exemption was restricted to the gentry member only, and the gentry were not legally exempted from any part of the land tax.¹² This change implies that gentry members' economic privileges were not legally capable of protecting others. A study suggests that throughout the Qing period, with the exception of north China in the very early years of the dynasty, *toukao* or commendation was no longer a source of bondservants.¹³

The service-levy reforms were coupled with the development of rural handicraft industry and the growth of commercial activities. The peasant family, in addition to engaging in agricultural production, adopted handicraft production and/or market service activities as employment or by-employment. The income from these employments enabled peasant families to minimize their economic dependence on agricultural land and landlords.¹⁴ It probably also strengthened the peasant's economic ability to survive crop failure, land loss, and the abuse of tenants' rights.

¹² Chang Chung-li, *The Chinese Gentry*, pp. 37-43; Lai Huimin, *Mingdai Nanxhili fuyi zhidu de yanjiu*, p. 182; Gu Yanwu, *Tianxia junguo li bing shu*, Su-Song (cited in Xie Guozhen ed., *Mingdai shehui jingji shi liao xuan bian*, xia, pp. 154-60); Yamane Yukio, "Reforms in the Service Levy System in the Fifteenth and Sixteenth Centuries," in Grove and Daniels, *State and Society in China*, pp. 279-306.

¹³ Wei Qingyuan, Wu Qiyuan, and Lu Su, "Qingdai nubi zhidu," *Qingshi luncong*, 1:4, 5, 21.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 55. Evidence indicates that many escaped bondservants were able to find employment as manual workers, servants, and petty merchants.

One economic consequence of the increase in employment opportunities was that a shortage of farm laborers developed in the late Ming. The scarcity pushed up the wage rate. By the late sixteenth century, the cost for farm labor had increased almost 25 percent. According to a contemporary's observation, the shortage of farm laborers resulted not from a decrease in the population but from a decrease in the number of people engaged in agriculture. He said: "In recent years, the cost for wage farm laborers has become more expensive each day. It had increased by 25 percent. It is because fewer people are engaged in agriculture than before. This should be a matter of great concern!"¹⁵

The shortage of farm laborers provided the remaining farm laborers more leverage with the landlords to bargain for better treatment. According to a late Ming managerial landlord's account, hired laborers' attitudes toward their masters had changed. By custom, hired laborers were submissive; the master's orders were obeyed. By the early seventeenth century, however, hired laborers were commonly arrogant and lazy; without promising them good food and wine one could not encourage them to be conscientious.¹⁶ In view of the rise of the urban landlords and the problematic work attitude of both bondservants and hired laborers, the early Qing landowners became more and more likely to operate their own lands or to rent them out.

A modern historian, noting that many Ming bondservants were never married, suggests another economic consequence of the disappearance of agricultural bondservants: an increase in the proportion of the population of reproductive age.¹⁷ This change can be regarded as one of the reasons for the tremendous population increase from the seventeenth century onward.

Early Qing Tenant Farmers

In addition to the bondservant and hired laborer problems, another no less difficult problem faced by the early Qing landlord was the resistance to rent payment and the arrears of rent by the tenant farmers. This phenomenon began in late Ming and continued into early Qing. During the early Qing period, the prevailing rent-resisting practice of the tenant farmers often created financial difficulties for the landlords. Without rent income, landlords could neither make a liv-

¹⁵ Zhu Guozhen, *Chuang yong xiaopin*, 2.43.

¹⁶ Zhang Lǔxiang, *Shenshi nongshu*, shang juan, p. 15.

¹⁷ Mark Elvin, *The Pattern of the Chinese Past*, p. 257.

ing nor pay the land tax. In times when tenants competed intensively with each other for the cultivation of land, the best way for the landlord to deal with rent resistance was to dismiss the tenant and replace him with another: the withdrawal of tenancy rights from a tenant farmer was akin to a death sentence. During the early Qing, however, there was not a surplus of tenants, so this option was not available to the early Qing landlords.

In previous discussions I have attributed the shortage of farm laborers mainly to the effects of the development of rural industry, commercialization, and the reforms in the service-levy system. During the period of Ming-Qing transition, years of wars, the freer movement of rural people, and successive natural disasters resulted in substantial population decline in the area. Thus, the supply of farm laborers further deteriorated. In 1620, for example, Tongxiang was stricken by a famine where "one-tenth of the population died." In 1640, 1641, and 1642, Tongxiang was continually stricken by famines and epidemics and "much of the population was lost."¹⁸ Under this circumstance if a landlord dismissed one of his tenant farmers, it was not likely that he would easily find another to replace him. Therefore, when Zhang Lǔxiang of Tongxiang heard that one of his friends was going to dismiss a tenant who did not pay rent, he quickly wrote the friend a letter to stop him. He explained that

presently there are plenty of farm lands, and many natives are moving away. Even if we try with special care to win the support of our tenants, I am still not sure we can make it. It is my humble opinion that once we fail to bridle our tenants, even if we can find replacements, the new tenants may not be better than the previous ones. In the event that the lands are left uncultivated...if we want the land to be productive again, it will be very costly in both money and labor. I honestly believe that you should not let this happen. If you do, the result will both aggravate your financial difficulty and encourage the disobedient tenant. Regarding the idea that you can recruit tenants from other places to cultivate your land, I am afraid the present circumstances may not allow you to do so. Nowadays, the mean people (*xiaoren*) are cunning and fierce; among ten tenant farmers, you can hardly find two or three good and honest ones....Furthermore, you will be wearied from spending money to build houses for your new tenants; soon afterward, you will be exhausted by providing production capital for the new tenants. Therefore, to dismiss a tenant should be the last solution in dealing with the problem.¹⁹

¹⁸ *Tongxiang XZ*, 1887 ed., 6.1-4.

Pressed by the reality of the situation, the early Qing landlords had to make concessions to their tenants and to forgo taking high-handed actions against them.

Although the shortage of farm laborers provided a good opportunity for the tenants to improve their social and economic condition, a favorable opportunity does not necessarily result in the realization of better treatment. If a shortage of laborers occurs in a time of political dominance of the landlords over local officials, for instance, the landlords can use force to tighten their control just as the Prussian Junkers and Polish magnates did in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in central Europe. The latter pursued a policy of *bauernlegen* (peasant oppression) to transform their peasants from free colonists to enserfed laborers on huge estates.²⁰ In the early Qing period, some landlords did use force to try to keep their tenants working for them as bondservants. Fortunately, the early Qing emperors adopted a policy favorable to the tenants that put an end to such attempts. Three cases will exemplify this policy. (1) In 1660 and 1681, the emperors had twice expressed their determination to protect certain rights of the tenants. They decreed that when landlords were buying and selling land, they had to allow their tenants to do as they pleased; they could not sell them along with their fields and compel them to perform service. The Kangxi emperor prohibited the gentry families from enslaving their tenants.²¹ In other words, the emperors preferred that tenants not be a part of the landlord's property, but employees of the landlords by contract. (2) In 1710, the Kangxi emperor approved the proposal by the Board of Revenue that in years of bad harvest, if the government gave tax reductions to the landlords, the landlords should also give rent reductions to the tenants.²² (3) In 1735, the Yongzheng emperor again urged that all landlords in China extend the emperor's favor to their tenants whenever the emperor gave them a tax reduction. In the edict the emperor explained why he was so concerned with the well-being of tenants: "I regard both the landlords and the tenants of the country as my children, [therefore] I want my favor to be shared equally by

¹⁹ Zhang Lüxiang, *Yangyuan xiansheng quan ji*, 8.18–20.

²⁰ Jan DeVries, *The Economy of Europe in An Age of Crisis, 1600–1750*, pp. 55–57; Stanislas Hoszowski, "Central Europe and the Sixteenth- and Seventeenth-Century Price Revolution," in Burke, ed., *Economy and Society in Early Modern Europe*, pp. 97–100.

²¹ Wei Jinyu, "Ming-Qing shidai diannong de nongnu diwei," *Lishi yanjiu*, no. 5 (1963):128; Liu Yongcheng, "Qingdai qianqi de nongye zudian guanxi," *Qingshi luncong*, no. 2 (1985):60, n. 4.

²² *Da Qing (Kangxi) shilu* (reprint) (Taipei: Huawen Shuju, 1964), 244.12b–13a.

them.”²³ No Ming emperors had ever held a policy similar to Yongzheng’s. The early Qing emperors’ policies, therefore, can be regarded as the beginning of a new political era.

The direct intervention by the emperors in landlord-tenant relations surely encouraged the tenants to strive for more economic gain. Evidence indicates that, about 1711, for example, the tenant farmers in Suzhou, Songjiang, and Changzhou prefectures customarily pooled their money for play performances in the villages. The tenants, taking advantage of the opportunities these gatherings offered, made pledges, took blood oaths, and formed pacts to resist the landlords. Any who disobeyed the group decision and paid his rent would be attacked by the majority of the tenants. They might sink his boat, cast away his rice, or destroy his house. Sometimes, the tenants even assaulted and humiliated the landlords. An early Qing scholar of Suzhou attributed the tenants’ behavior to the policy adopted by the government. The tenants were convinced that the local authorities would sympathize with their hardship and would not punish them.²⁴

Evidence also suggests that tenants’ rent payment resistance was related to their participation in market economic activity. The tenant farmers would usually claim crop failure or lean harvests and delay rent payment for days and months while “they pounded and ground grain before the normal harvest season to take advantage of the freshness of the new grains and sell it at high price, or pawned it cheaply, fancying that they could engage in trade and increase their profit.”²⁵ Obviously, the tenants were taking the advantage of the principles of market price fluctuations to seek more profit.

That the impact of the changing behavior of the tenants on the landlord families, gentry landlord families in particular, was profound is clear in the local gazetteer of Wucheng county edited in 1681. According to the author’s observation:

In the past, whenever you went you could hear the sound of books being chanted and of string instruments being played. Nowadays, however, most of the poor scholars are rushing around trying to make a living. Those who own land are constrained by their tenants. Every day, they worry if they can pay the land tax and have enough congee to feed their families. How many of them have the leisure to play string instruments in the house?²⁶

The gentry families were no longer members of a leisure social group.

²³ *Tongxiang XZ*, 1887 ed., 1.19b.

²⁴ Huang Zongjian, *Xuzai ji*, zhengzu yi, 4.21–23. Cited in *KSCR*, shang ce, p. 26.

²⁵ *Nanxun ZZ*, 1868 ed., 21.1.

²⁶ *Wucheng XZ*, 1681 ed., 5.2–3.

It seems that they also, like most common people, had to find other employments to supplement their income.

The situation was clear. If a landlord had to depend on tenants to cultivate his land and wanted his land investment to be profitable, he had to provide better working conditions for his tenants. Otherwise, his tenants might either quit or neglect the landlord's interest. In 1661, Zhang Lǔxiang, a Tongxiang landlord, prepared a sample new contract based on his own local practice for other landlords to follow. It had three main characteristics. (1) The contract guaranteed his tenants a fixed annual land rent. The landlord, therefore, had no right to demand additional payments and services. If the landlord needed domestic animals from his tenants, he had to purchase them at the going prices. If he needed labor service from his tenants, he had to pay them. With the protection of the contract, any additional income from the land belonged to the tenants. (2) Under certain conditions, the tenants were allowed to pay less than the fixed figure on the contract. The conditions included tenants who were widowers, widows, orphans, or childless. Moreover, if the tenant was hit by unexpected disasters such as illness, death, flood, fire, robbery, or crop failure, he was allowed a reduction in payments. (3) The contract emphasized a parental relationship between a landlord and his tenants. Whenever the tenants needed money to implement farming, the landlord would lend it to them. When the tenants had any happy event, such as a wedding, the landlord would give rice as a gift; and if the landlord had a happy event, he would invite his tenants to celebrate with him. The landlord would take care of the childless old tenants and the orphans of his tenants. The landlord also had the obligation to encourage good moral behavior of his tenants and to punish them if they did something morally wrong. If the tenants wanted their children to have an education, the landlord was to allow his family tutor to teach them.²⁷ This contract arrangement assured secure and more profitable working conditions for the tenants.

Pressed by the shortage of farm laborers, many early Qing landlords gradually gave up their previous view that the tenants were economically dependent and emphasized the new perspective that the tenants had other options. This view was best presented in the writing of an early Qing landlord:

The landlords cannot cultivate their lands; the poor households do it for them. Consequently, the landlords are both able to pay their land

²⁷ Zhang Lǔxiang, *Yangyuan xiansheng quanji*, 19.23–24.

tax and to provide food and clothing for their families. If the lands lie uncultivated, the landlords will not be able to pay the taxes, and their livelihood will be in danger. The landlords will be punished by law if taxes are not paid. Their families will also suffer hunger and cold because of lack of income. Therefore, the lives of the rich families, in fact, rely on the poor households. . . . On the other hand, the poor work hard in the field from dawn to night. They wet their bodies and soil their feet. They also expect good benefits to support their families. If we increase our demand for their labor service, but give them only a few benefits, why should they practice farming here and not some place else?²⁸

This was a realistic description of the tenancy relationship in the early Qing period. The free movement of the rural people and the shortage of farm laborers forced the landlords to be realistic in dealing with tenancy problems.

Characteristics of Land Management in Early Qing

The changes in the supply and attitude of farm laborers pressed the landlords to change their practice of farm management by using bondservant-managers. Some landlords, especially the small ones, began to take full responsibility for farm management. They supervised and sometimes engaged in farm activities. They were the decision makers on how to use and what to plant on their lands. However, the managerial work of landlords was not an easy task, especially for those who were accustomed to relying on their bondservant-managers to manage their lands. They were equipped with neither agricultural knowledge nor practical experience. For survival, some landlords began to study farm management; Zhang Lüxiang was one of them. He interviewed extensively many experienced farmers in different areas and studied agricultural techniques with them. In addition, he made a copy of *Shenshi nongshu* (The agricultural treatise of Mr. Shen), which dealt mainly with agricultural practices suitable for the farming conditions of Huzhou prefecture, for his own reference. In a postscript to the book, he explained his motive in making the copy.

I have studied agriculture for several years. After seeking advice about the advantages and disadvantages of different farming practices from experienced farmers, I have learned helpful hints about farming. When I was young, I did not have a chance to practice cultivation, and now I am now physically incapable of coping with farm work. I have to depend on hired laborers to do the cultivation for me, but by doing

²⁸ Ibid., 19.21–22.

so, the profits from my land are reduced. If I do not plan my farming carefully by myself, the land I own will be no different from a stone field.²⁹

Zhang Lǔxiang was a small landlord with fifty mu of land. About 1652, he freed his agricultural bondservants and personally supervised hired laborers to farm for him.³⁰

Xu Jingke, a friend of Zhang Lǔxiang, was another example of a managerial landlord, but with much larger holdings; he owned four hundred to five hundred mu of land. When he realized that he could no longer trust his bondservant-managers with his lands, he, with Zhang Lǔxiang's encouragement, decided to take back the lands and manage them himself. To facilitate his direct management, he moved his family from the prefecture city of Jiaying to the countryside. For the sake of friendship, Zhang Lǔxiang, based on his local practice, wrote out a treatise on agriculture for Xu Jingke's reference.³¹

Wu Xingsu, another friend of Zhang Lǔxiang, represents a third kind of landowner. He was the smallest landowner of the three: Xingsu's total family property included ten mu of land, one pond, and a house. After Xingsu's death, Zhang Lǔxiang arranged a family production plan for Wu's wife. He believed that since the cost of farm laborers was high in the early Qing, the best way to earn a living for a family of four from such a meager property was to farm it themselves. He explained:

With ten mu of land, if you cultivate them yourself, it will be enough to feed your family. If you hired farm laborers to farm for you, however, the ten mu of farm land is the same as ten mu of stone field. If you rent out the land to a tenant, the rent income is barely enough to pay the land tax.³²

After Xingsu's death, the family had no adult male, only two women and two boys. To cope with the limited family labor force, Zhang Lǔxiang worked out a labor-saving production plan for the family: three mu to mulberry trees, three to double-cropping (legumes and wheat or flax), two to bamboo, and two to fruit trees.³³ Zhang Lǔxiang explained this arrangement:

To save labor, I decided not to plant rice.... Since the location of the

²⁹ Zhang Lǔxiang, *Shenshi nongshu*, shang juan, pp. 25–26.

³⁰ Ihara Kosuke, "Mingmo Qingchu shenshi de tudi jingying, yi Zhang Lǔxiang wei li," *Ming-Qing shi guoji xueshu taolunhui lunwen ji*, pp. 572–73.

³¹ Zhang Lǔxiang, *Shenshi nongshu*, xia juan, p. 27.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 47.

³³ *Ibid.*

field is high, rice planting would be hindered by an inadequate water supply for irrigation. Plants such as mulberry, beans, and peas require less care; if you try hard you can manage. Beside, if you plant them you don't have to worry about flood or drought. Although it is not the real duty of farmers to plant fruit trees and bamboos, they can yield long-term benefits in five years.³⁴

The three cases mentioned above, which seem typical for early Qing, demonstrate again the necessity for landlords, except when adopting the fixed-rent arrangement for tenant farmers, to manage their farms themselves. Only by doing so could they make a profit from agriculture.

The farm laborer shortage in the late Ming and early Qing had a profound influence on agricultural technology. Zhang Lǔxiang completed his agricultural treatise around 1658. It repeatedly reflected the fact that his approach toward farming was conditioned by the labor problem. He encouraged his fellow farmers, for example, to substitute commercial fertilizer such as oil cakes for organic liquid manure, because the application of organic liquid manure required more farm labor and money. In addition, if the manure was not applied carefully, farm production could be affected. He said:

In recent years, not only has the cost of farm labor increased, the laborers themselves also tend to be lazy. If they do not apply liquid manure properly, it would be better to apply oil cakes because it would save on both the cost of labor and the manure.³⁵

For a similar reason, Zhang Lǔxiang also advised his fellow farmers to enlarge their mulberry fields. He explained:

The agricultural practice varies according to different natural endowment in different areas. In one area, if the cultivation of dry land is profitable, it would be better to cultivate more dry land than rice fields. In my county, the paddy fields are not suitable for buffalo ploughing; it is also very difficult to cultivate with manpower. In addition, the cultivation of paddy fields requires more fertilizer and more human labor, while the cultivation of dry land requires less fertilizer and human labor. The laborers who work in the paddy fields are all busy, while the laborers in the dry land are relaxed. The time schedule for paddy field cultivation is hectic, while the schedule for dry land is not as intense. The farmers of paddy fields have to worry about drought and flood, while the dry land farmers do not. The contrasting situations between paddy field and dry land is expressed well in a common expression:

³⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 47–48.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 31.

“The cultivation of a paddy field takes you a thousand days, but the cultivation of a piece of dry land takes you only one day.” In the best crop years, one mu of paddy field can produce three shi of rice and one and a half shi of winter cereal grains. However, this is only occasional. On the average, the annual crop income of one mu of paddy field is only three shi. . . . One mu of mulberry land, if the mulberry leaves grow prosperously, can rear more than ten frames of silkworms. Some land can rear four or five frames of silkworms. The worst mulberry land can rear two to three frames of silkworms. . . . When the price of rice is low and the price of silk is high, the value of one frame of silkworms is equal to the interest of one mu of paddy field. Even if the price of rice is very high and the price of silk is very low, the income per mu of mulberry land is still equivalent to that of one mu of paddy field.³⁶

According to this analysis, in the early Qing, a farmer who shifted his investment to dry land crop production such as mulberry leaves could not only relieve the tension from the farm labor shortage and assure a higher return for farm investment but also make the best use of Tongxiang’s natural endowment.

Generally speaking, there were two approaches toward the farm labor shortage. One was to change the kind of crops planted, replacing labor-intensive crops such as rice with labor-saving crops such as mulberry trees, fruit trees, and the like. The other was to substitute labor-saving implements of production for labor-intensive ones. With regard to the second approach, in the early Qing, farm work was mainly carried out by human power. Given the level of agricultural technology of that time, one human laborer’s working capacity was equivalent to only one-tenth of a buffalo’s working capacity.³⁷ In view of the sharp contrast between the working capacities of a buffalo and a human laborer, it would be logical to assume that the early Qing farmers would have substituted buffalo ploughing for human ploughing to solve their farm labor shortage problem. In fact, however, the people in the area did not make this change.

Why not? Several historical considerations have to be considered before the question can be satisfactorily answered. First, with *niugeng* or buffalo ploughing the farmers turned up the soil by ploughs dragged by buffalo. With *rengeng* or human ploughing the farmers turned up the soil by hand with harrows. Although within a given time a buffalo dragging a plough can cultivate an area ten times bigger than a human

³⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 27–28.

³⁷ Chen Hengli, *Bu nongshu yanjiu*, p. 157.

laborer with a harrow, human ploughing was deep ploughing. According to a modern historian's on-the-spot investigation, human ploughing can turn up soil up to eight inches deep, while buffalo ploughing can turn up soil no more than three inches deep. The depth of the soil turned up, he argues, is to a certain extent positively related to the amount of rice produced by the field: the deeper the soil is turned up, the greater the rice output.³⁸ Second, in the Lake Tai area, according to Wang Zhen's *Agricultural Treatise* edited in 1313, the technique of applying *tieta* (iron harrow) to turn the soil was already known in the Yuan dynasty (1271–1368).³⁹ Third, it is likely that the emergence and the gradual substitution of the harrow-ploughing technique for buffalo ploughing was related to the introduction of the double-cropping system in the Lake Tai and lower Yangzi plains during the Southern Song. Previously, after the rice was harvested, the farmers let the farm animals graze in the field. Thus, they were able to keep and feed the farm animals. After the adoption of double cropping, the fodder crops were replaced by winter cereals, which were grown for sale. This change resulted in a decline in both fodder supply and the farm animal population. Consequently, the cost of buffalo ploughing increased.

Since buffalo ploughing was dispensable to paddy field agriculture, in particular on the area of Lake Tai polder lands, reactions toward the change varied among the peasants. The small landowners, seeking to balance their family income, probably soon gave up the practice of expensive buffalo ploughing and adopted human ploughing. The big landlords, on the other hand, tended to maintain buffalo ploughing and at the same time to apply the harrow for deep ploughing. The big landlords were able to maintain buffalo ploughing probably because they also owned hilly land that could produce enough fodder crops for their animals but was not good for much else. When Xu Xianzhong, a native of Songjiang prefecture, visited Huzhou in 1527, for example, a Huzhou landlord told Xianzhong how he prepared his paddy field for rice cultivation. He said: "First I used manpower to harrow my field, then I used buffalo to plough it. As a result, the soil turned up could be as deep as eight inches, and the output of the land doubled."⁴⁰

³⁸ Ibid., pp. 156–59.

³⁹ Wang Zhen, *Nongshu*. Quoted in Amano Motonosuke, *Chugoku nōgyō shi kenkyū*, p. 257.

⁴⁰ Xu Xianzhong, *Wuxing zhanggu ji*, 13.3.

The practice of human ploughing spread slowly and gradually. Nevertheless, by the early seventeenth century, it had prevailed in the Lake Tai area. In his famous treatise *Tiangong kaiwu* (The exploitation of the works of nature), written in 1627, Song Yingxing explained the reason for Suzhou farmers' preference for human ploughing. Using his firsthand observation, Song argued:

The farmers of Suzhou substitute the use of harrow for plough. I discovered that after the poor peasant households estimated the price of the buffalo, the cost of the fodder, the risk of loss, sickness, and death in keeping a buffalo, they concluded that the use of buffalo power is not as feasible as manpower. If a farmer who uses buffalo can cultivate ten mu of land, then a farmer who uses harrow and manpower can cultivate, if he works hard, about half of that land. Since he does not own buffalo, he does not need to graze any buffalo in the field. Therefore, he can use the fields to plant beans, wheat, flax, vegetables, etc. He uses the income from the second crop to compensate for the loss of the fields lying fallow half a year. It seems that the income from the new mode of farm production is equal to that of the previous mode of farm production.⁴¹

From Song Yingxing's analysis, we realize that the diffusion of the technologies of human ploughing and double cropping was still in progress in the early seventeenth century. When the cost of buffalo ploughing made it less profitable than human ploughing, the peasants of Suzhou, especially the tenant farmers and the farmers with small holdings, shifted to human ploughing. It seems that these changes began in the Southern Song dynasty around the twelfth century and continued into the seventeenth century. This new mode of farm practice can be characterized by the double-cropping system, the reduction of the area a farmer cultivated, human ploughing, and a more efficient use of the peasant's labor. This mode of farm practice also implied an increase in the grain output per unit of land. The new mode of farm practice was not merely a profitable means for poor peasants; it was beneficial for all farmers. According to the analysis by the author of *Shenshi nongshu*, if a farmer adopted intensive farming practices and doubled his input in both labor and capital for one mu of land, the output of the land also doubled. In other words, the output per mu of land farmed by such methods was equal to the output of two mu of land farmed traditionally. Although the output of the two practices are the same, the costs are different. In terms of land tax and purchase price, intensive farming costs only half as much as the buffalo-

⁴¹ Song Yingxing, *Tiangong kaiwu*, shang juan, 1, "daogong," p. 20.

based practice. To convince his reader, the author quoted an experienced old farmer in his argument. The old farmer said: "One mu of land can produce two shi of rice, three shi of rice, or five shi of rice [depending on the intensity of cultivation]; therefore, it would be better to cultivate less land than more land because one can save on both labor and land."⁴²

Shenshi nongshu was written around the 1640s. At that time, labor shortages had already become a major threat to the landlords. The old farmer and Mr. Shen learned from their extensive experience that the amount of grain one unit of land could yield was flexible. Among all the agricultural techniques and conditions known to them, reducing the area a peasant cultivated together with adopting intensive farming practices was the key to raising the per unit yield and maintaining a profitable land investment.

It thus becomes clear why the early Qing landlords did not choose buffalo ploughing to relieve their farm labor shortage problem. The adoption of human ploughing triggered a series of complex changes in the farming system that led to the development of a new farming system. Thus, anyone who wanted to re-adopt buffalo ploughing would first have had to double the size of his farm and then re-adopt the single-cropping practice to produce sufficient fodder crop. Instead, the early Qing peasants did not attempt to re-adopt labor-saving buffalo ploughing but rather maintained human ploughing and merely substituted labor-saving crops or practices for labor-intensive ones.

We see, then, that late Ming and early Qing managerial landlords dealt with their farming problems in four major ways that seemed the most beneficial in terms of their land investment: (1) They tended to cultivate or to manage their farms personally. To assure that such self-management would be profitable, they frequently studied agricultural technologies and put into practice the most suitable ones; they also carefully planned the use of their land and closely supervised the farming activities. Such direct management gave them more opportunity to adapt land use to fluctuations in the market. (2) The landlords adopted a labor-saving farming plan to overcome the laborer shortage problem. They also tended to apply more commercial fertilizer such as oil cakes instead of organic manure. In doing so, they could maintain their family's income while using less farm labor. (3) The landlords improved the unstable landlord-tenant relationship by offering the tenant farmers better conditions. (4) The farmers

⁴² Zhang Lüxiang, *Shenshi nongshu*, shang juan, p. 17.

maintained a mixed practice of double cropping, human ploughing, smaller farms, some labor-saving techniques, and by-employment production.

Absentee Landlordism in the Early Qing

The rise of urban merchant-landlords was a phenomenon unique to Qing times. The decline of the rural gentry landlord families in the early years of Qing gave wealthy merchants many opportunities to invest in agricultural land. Because of their keen interest in buying land, commercial capital steadily flowed into the agricultural sector, enabling a rapid recovery of the rural economy in the early Qing. The following examples illustrate the unique role played by merchant families in local agricultural and commercial development.

The Fei family was a successful native merchant family of She village, a market town in the central part of Guian county. The Fei genealogy contains information about the family's land management. An analysis of this information can yield a clear outline of how a native merchant family dealt with land investment in early Qing.

The Fei family migrated to Huzhou from northern China during a period of political chaos at the end of the Northern Song dynasty (ca. 1120s). For generations thereafter the descendants of the family lived in She village of Guian and Daochangshan of Wucheng. Until the middle of the seventeenth century, none of the members of this common peasant family had ever won gentry status. During the period between the mid-sixteenth and mid-seventeenth centuries, the privileged gentry landlords, by tax manipulation and local political influence, encroached upon the land of commoner landowners. Most of the farm lands fell into their hands. In the meantime, the impact of commercialization on rural areas intensified. In 1607, the family's social position in She village declined drastically. The family lost all its ancestral property including the graveyard in the village. At this juncture, some of the family members were forced to earn a living in trade. By the time of the Kangxi emperor (1662–1722), some members of the family had made considerable fortunes from commercial activities. In addition, Fei Zhikui won his jinshi degree in 1676. After the family regained its economic strength and Fei Zhikui embarked on gentry status, Zhikui and other family members decided to buy back the ancestral property that had been lost in the late Ming period.⁴³

⁴³ *Shecun Feishi zupu*, fanli, 2–3, xiaoji zhong, xiaoji xia, 20–21.

The Fei family members also showed a renewed interest in agricultural land investment. This investment, however, went beyond the purpose of profit making. It seems that in this way the Fei family restored its lost family prestige and its local identity. The following analysis is based on the information on thirty-seven plots of paddy land acquired between 1687 and 1764 by the Feis.⁴⁴ The income from these lands was used specifically for maintaining the family shrine and graveyard and for holding the annual memorial ceremony for the ancestors. All of these lands were cultivated by tenant farmers under one of three types of rent arrangement used by the Fei landlords. One was *shizu* or inelastic fixed rent. Under this arrangement, the tenants had to pay a fixed amount of rent no matter how the crop turned out. To distinguish *shizu* from other contracts, the landlords usually added a few words to the rent contract such as “now we agree that, regardless of flood and drought, the tenant should pay no less than” the fixed figure to the landlord. The second kind was elastic fixed-maximum rent. Under this arrangement, the landlords could not ask for more than the fixed figure no matter how good the harvest was. However, they had to give a rent reduction to their tenants if crops failed. The content of this rent contract is similar to the one prepared by Zhang Lǔxiang. The third was sharecropping. Under this arrangement, the landlords usually provided land, seeds, and farm tools; the tenants contributed only the labor. Both parties shared the same risk in farming.

Some modern historians see the three types of rent arrangement from an evolutionary perspective. They argue that sharecropping occurs in the early stages of a tenancy system and that fixed rent characterizes an advanced tenancy system.⁴⁵ Their argument is not, however, applicable to the Ming-Qing Lake Tai area. Fixed-rent tenancy had been a prevalent customary farm practice since the early Ming period, while the sharecropping arrangement was applied only occasionally and was mainly a temporary and transitional measure. In early Qing, the main concern of a landlord was to choose the type of rent agreement that would better protect his land investment. If we extrapolate from records of the thirty-seven plots of Fei land from the time of their acquisition in the 1680s until 1764, the year of editing the Fei genealogy, we can judge that the elastic fixed-maximum rent

⁴⁴ Ibid., xiaoji xia.

⁴⁵ Many historians share this perspective. The following are only two examples. Liu Yongcheng, “Qingdai qianqi de nongye zudian guanxi,” *Qingshi luncong*, no. 2 (1980):56–88; Zhao Gang, *Zhongguo jingji zhidu shi lun*, chap. 3.

was the most popular rent arrangement adopted by landlords in the early Qing. In the 1680s it constituted 92 percent of total land contracts (34 of 37). Shizu constituted only a small proportion (3 of 37 or 8 percent of the total). There was no sharecropping rent arrangement. By 1764, however, the number of elastic fixed-maximum rent arrangements had decreased from 34 to 19. At the same time, shizu increased a little, from 3 to 5. The most obvious change was in the sharecropping rent arrangement: it increased from 0 to 13.⁴⁶ What are the implications of these changes?

As we have mentioned before, the elastic fixed-maximum rent arrangement was customary during the Ming-Qing period. In the early Qing, however, this rent arrangement meant uncertainty in the landlords' rent income since the tenants could easily use crop failure as an excuse for not paying the fixed rent. To protect their land investment, the landlords of the Fei family took several measures to stabilize their rent income and, at the same time, to bring into play the initiative of the tenants. The first common practice was the revision of the troubled elastic fixed-maximum figures and agreement on new ones with lower maximum figures. This revision is illustrated in table 13.

The new contracts, which allowed the tenants to earn a greater return for their labor, also had a psychological effect: they provided the tenants an incentive to work harder. From the landlords' point of view, the revision was only an expedient to stimulate tenant productivity. Thus, after the productivity of some of the lands recovered and stabilized, the landlords again changed some contracts, replacing the unsatisfactory elastic fixed-maximum rent contracts with sharecropping or with shizu contracts. The fixed rents of numbers 1 and 2 were replaced by half-and-half sharecropping; number 3 was replaced by a shizu arrangement. Under the shizu arrangement, the landlord of land number 3 could increase his rent income from 0.5 shi per mu to 0.73 shi per mu.

As for lands numbers 1 and 2, it is most likely that the landlords could also increase their share of the agricultural production by applying the fifty-fifty division of the crop between landlord and tenant. This judgment is based mainly on an early Qing scholar-landlord's estimation. In Huzhou-Jiaxing area, the average annual per mu crop yield was three shi of rice, and the average per mu fixed rent charged by the landlords was about half the yield or 1.5 shi of rice.⁴⁷ There-

⁴⁶ *Shecun Feishi zupu*, xiaoji xia.

⁴⁷ Zhang Lǔxiang, *Shenshi nongshu*, xia juan, pp. 28, 44.

Table 13
The Revision of Elastic Fixed-Maximum Rent

Number	Elastic fixed rent per mu (shi)	New elastic fixed rent per mu (shi)	Sharecropping per mu (percent)	Shizu per mu (shi)
1	1.3	1.0	50	
2	1.3	1.25	50	
3	1.0	0.5		0.73
4	1.5	1.37		
5	1.5	1.35		

SOURCE: *Shacun Feishi Zupu*, xiaoji xia.

fore, after the recovery of land productivity, one half of the land products should be higher than the revised 1.0 shi of rice or 1.25 shi of rice.

In what situation were the landlords most likely to reduce rents to stimulate production? When the yield of a plot of land declined and the previous fixed-rent arrangement became ineffective, the landlords would step in and offer rent reduction to mobilize tenants' initiative. If the tenant alone was financially incapable of improving land production, the landlords would then finance land improvements. In this respect, land number 3 in table 13 is a good example. Fei Fengshan owned three mu of paddy lands. The original annual rent of the land was three shi of rice or one shi of rice per *mu*. For a time, the land was seriously neglected, and its output declined. Fengshan then reduced the annual rent by half. In 1707, he rebuilt the irrigation system and improved the quality of the land. After that he adopted a shizu contract to replace the previous elastic fixed-maximum rent contract. The new inelastic fixed annual rent was 2.19 shi of rice, or 0.73 shi of rice per mu of land.

A second approach was for the landlords to reduce the rent and agree on a new shizu arrangement. The revision of fixed-rent contracts is illustrated by examples from the Fei family in table 14. The genealogy does not give precise reasons for the rent reduction. It shows only that the landlords were kind and deeply concerned about their tenants' problems. For lands numbers 3 and 4, for example, rent was reduced because "it [was] difficult for the tenants to irrigate the lands because their location [was] high." Why had the landlords not considered the location problem before? The real reason for the rent reduction, apparently, was the short supply of farm laborers. When the supply of farm laborers was abundant and most of the land was

Table 14
Revision of Fixed Rent
(elastic to inelastic and sharecropping)

Number	Elastic fixed rent per mu (shi)	Shizu per mu (shi)	Sharecropping (percent)
1	1.3	1.0	50
2	1.0	0.7	70
3	1.5	0.8	50
4	1.3	0.5	
5	1.3	1.0	
6	1.5	0.8	

SOURCE: *Shecun Feishi Zupu*, xiaoji xia.

concentrated in the hands of a few big landlords, landlords were able to demand a greater portion of the tenants' produce. In the early Qing, the supply declined, and tenants were no longer mere submissive farm laborers. They were concerned about their own welfare. Why should they work harder just to benefit the landlord? In addition, the farm labor market assured the laborer that he would have no difficulty finding employment if he were dismissed. Unless the landlord decided to let his land go uncultivated, he had to encourage the tenant by allowing him a better return on his labor.

When the landlords substituted shizu for the previous elastic fixed-maximum rent contracts, they usually gave greater rent reductions to their tenants than when they simply modified the elastic fixed-maximum arrangements. In many cases, therefore, when a shizu contract was adopted, both parties usually agreed that the contract would change after a certain number of years (usually about ten), frequently to be replaced by a half-and-half sharecropping arrangement. In the land record, a few words are usually added to the rent agreement. The agreement for land number 1 in table 14, for example, notes that "when the year 1741 comes, this plot of land will be managed under the former half-and-half sharecropping contract." During the ten-year period, a landlord's rent income, although it was lower than he desired, was guaranteed. At the same time, the tenants' efforts were also well rewarded. They could enjoy all the surplus they produced during that time. Only after that period could the landlord increase his share up to half the total yield.

Sometimes Fei landlords, after using elastic fixed-maximum rent contracts for ten years or so, substituted sharecropping contracts. The examples in table 15 illustrate this practice.

Table 15
Revision of Fixed Rent
(elastic to sharecropping)

Number	Fixed rent per mu, 1689–1700s (shi)	Sharecropping (%)	
		1701	1741
1	0	50	
2	1.5	50	
3	1.6		50
4	1.6		50
5	1.44		50
6	1.2		50
7	1.5		50
8	1.5	50	

SOURCE: *Shecun Feishi zupu*, xiaoji xia.

From table 15 we know that the period between the two rent contracts was ten years or more. Land number 1 was bought in 1681; at that time, it was under elastic fixed-maximum rent arrangement. Twenty years later (1701), the original fixed-maximum rent contract was replaced by sharecropping. In numbers 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, and 8, the landlords substituted sharecropping rent contracts for the original fixed-maximum rent contracts about forty years after the lands were bought. Although the purpose of these changes is not specified, it seems most likely that the landlords made rent concessions to their tenants.

It is important to note that the sharecropping rent contract was applied only to lands bought before 1702. After that time members of the Fei family bought twelve plots of land; ten were under elastic fixed-maximum rent arrangements; two were under shizu. Among this group, the landlords offered neither rent revision nor contract change between 1702 and 1764 because after 1702 the farm labor shortage gradually disappeared, the supply of farm land began to dwindle, and the landlords' attitude toward tenants changed accordingly.

In summary, there was a general tendency for land rents to decline in the early Qing period. Landlords flexibly adopted different rent arrangements to stimulate tenant productivity and to stabilize the return on their land investments. Evidence suggests that the three approaches applied by the Fei landlords were beneficial to the recovery of agricultural productivity. Although the landlords' investment return was slightly lower than during the previous period, their rent income gradually stabilized from the turn of the eighteenth century.

Although the Fei family also invested in land improvement, they preferred reducing rents or changing contracts to investing capital in land improvement as a means of dealing with their land problems. Between 1689 and 1764, the landlords of the Fei family invested in land improvement only four times—once in paddy land improvement, once in mulberry field improvement, and twice by bringing into cultivation two plots of waste land, turning them into mulberry fields. Moreover, all four cases occurred before 1721. The Fei landlords were not interested in direct farm management. Even when they invested in land improvement, they gave the lands back to the tenants to take care of as soon as land conditions improved.

In addition to contributing to agricultural stability and productivity, the merchants' business operations led to a rural economic transition from a relatively self-sufficient peasant economy to a market economy; they also provided the market facilities necessary to connect the peasant economy with the higher-level market network. The Zhang family of Digang is an example of this kind of merchant family. The Zhang family were not natives of Digang. They moved there as small merchants from Shaoxing county in Zhejiang province during the late Ming period. In 1651, Zhang Jiayou (1637–1711) was sent out to learn a business. After thirty years of hard work, he finally became a successful mulberry leaf merchant.⁴⁸ Zhang Tinghong (1676–1737), the son of Jiayou, succeeded to and expanded his father's business. He managed four different businesses at the same time. He invested in mulberry leaf production, fishery, silk trade, and grain trade.⁴⁹ Digang village was like most of the villages in the area south of Lake Tai. Sericulture was the main rural by-employment for the peasant families. Local grain production provided for only part of the local need. The development of areas such as Digang depended mainly on three kinds of market services: the export of local silk products, the import of grain to supplement the local shortage, and the maintenance of a sufficient supply of mulberry leaves for peasant families to feed to silkworms. Zhang Tinghong provided all three services to the local people. With these services the commercial activities of Digang increased rapidly. About 1723–35, Digang emerged as a prosperous market town in Guian county.

Zhang Jiayou also invested in land improvement. His family owned lands in Changxing, a neighboring county northwest of Guian.

⁴⁸ *Dixi Zhangshi jiacheng*, 10.1–6.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 10.12.

Between 1708 and 1709, a devastating famine in the area caused many local people to flee. Jiayou took this opportunity to invest in land improvement; he turned the low-yielding rice lands into highly profitable mulberry fields. In addition, Jiayou contributed more than two thousand taels of silver toward local transportation improvement.⁵⁰ As a result, both water and land communication in that area were substantially improved. Investment of this kind was important for Digang's rural industry development.

The Zhang family's direct involvement in local economic development did not last very long, however. Zhang Youda, a grandson of Jiayou, won his jinshi degree in 1730. From then on to the end of the Qing dynasty, none of the family members, according to the genealogy, contributed anything notable to the development of the local economy. During the same time, the family produced five jinshi holders and six juren holders.⁵¹ It seems that the Zhang family, from the third generation onward, had changed gradually from a merchant-landlord family to a gentry-merchant-landlord family. Its youthful members were encouraged to embark on a scholarly, and ultimately official, career and become urban rentiers. The effect of this transformation is a complex one. On the one hand, it seems that the change created a heavy drain on commercial capital and was detrimental to the expansion of the business. On the other hand, if a merchant successfully embarked on an official career, his family property could be better protected. In the Qing socio-political environment, a gentry member or a nongentry member of a gentry family was more likely to have a better opportunity to increase his family wealth than was an ordinary merchant or landlord.

Thus we see that from the mid-sixteenth century on, because of the rapid commercialization of the Lake Tai region, the economic role of merchants became markedly more important. Trade and commerce brought them great wealth, and an increasing number of the gentry were from merchant family backgrounds. Consequently, the disdainful attitude toward merchants gradually changed. In early Qing, people in general regarded commercial activity as a respectable profession, but they regarded business management as a way to reach their goals and not as a goal in itself. Therefore, a merchant family was always preparing and encouraging its sons to earn gentry status. Both the Fei family of Shecun and the Zhang family of Digang were this kind of family.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 10.5-6.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, jian 10, jian 13.

The Movement of Prices and Landlord-Tenant Relations in the Mid-Qing

During the second half of the eighteenth century, the price of rice increased markedly in the Lake Tai area. The upward trend began around 1748. Since the manner of its increase differed from any experienced previously and affected the entire nation, it was of great concern to the Qianlong emperor and many related provincial authorities. Below are three sets of price data with which we can examine this price increase in the Lake Tai area. The first two are based on contemporary accounts. The figures in their accounts were retail prices, implying that they were subject more to middlemen's speculations than wholesale prices. Their seasonal and year-to-year variations therefore were greater than that of the wholesale price. Moreover, retail prices were usually 20 percent higher than wholesale prices. The third set of price figures is quoted from a recent study on prices in the late eighteenth to mid nineteenth centuries by Wang Yeh-chien. The price figures are constructed from the provincial authority's routine reports on the price of rice in his jurisdiction to the emperor. The reported figures represent wholesale prices.

According to Huang An, a contemporary Wuxi local historian, from 1736 to 1753 the price of rice rose three times: from one tael per shi in 1736 to two taels in 1748–50, two and a half taels in 1751, and three taels in 1752–53.⁵²

Huang An was a well-known historian with great insight. However, there is a serious shortcoming in his price figures. To highlight the significance of the increase in rice price, he deliberately chose a low price figure before 1736 to represent the price figures of that period while choosing the three highest price figures from 1748–50, 1751, and 1752–53 to represent those three periods. Huang An's figures thus do not provide us with either information about seasonal variations or year-to-year price variations.

Qian Yong, another contemporary Wuxi scholar, provides us with the second set of price data. According to him, the rise in the price of rice was a common phenomenon throughout the whole southern Jiangsu province, and the rate of its increase was not as high as Huang An had suggested. From 1723 to 1785, if one takes both the highest and the lowest rice prices in a year into consideration, the price of rice rose approximately 60 to 120 percent, from 1.2 tael per shi in

⁵² Huang An, *Xijin shixiao lu*, 1.14–15.

1723–36 to 1.6–1.9 taels per shi by mid-century and 1.9–2.7 taels per shi by 1785.⁵³

According to Wang Yeh-chien's own analysis, his statistics have two shortcomings. First, the data on which he constructed the statistics of the 1760s through the 1780s are not complete. Therefore, their accuracy is reduced. Second, to impress the emperor that the price of rice was stable in their jurisdictions, the provincial authorities were likely to have purposely left out price figures that showed drastic price increases. Nevertheless, Wang's later price figures, which were basically reliable, are consistent with Qian Yong's account.⁵⁴ If one converts Qian's retail price of 1.2 tael per shi in 1723–36 in Wuxi to the wholesale price and examines it together with Wang's price figures, one can see that from 1723 to 1783 the price of rice moved up approximately 110 percent as shown in table 16.

Table 16 can be divided into three subperiods: 1723–83, 1784–1815, and 1816–44. In the first period, within approximately sixty years, the price of rice increased 110 percent and was accompanied by drastic seasonal and year-to-year price variations. From 1784 to 1815, the price in terms of silver dropped from 30 to 80 percent of the price level of 1783. However, in the same period, the value of silver appreciated between 30 and 60 percent (see table 19). In other words, the price of rice remained fairly stable at the 1783 level; there was no sign of change in supply or demand in the Lake Tai area during that period. After 1816, the price of rice moved up again. During the third period, several phenomena appeared concurrently in the Lake Tai area: a series of natural disasters, continuous appreciation of the value of silver, rent resistance by tenants, tax resistance by landowners, and high rice price. It is likely that the increase in rice price resulted primarily from the shortage in rice supply in the area during this period.

Although the increase in the price of rice was beneficial to tenants and landowners, who constituted the majority of the rural population, it was harmful to those whose livelihood depended mainly on wages and salaries. The rise of rice prices undoubtedly gave peasants larger incomes; but wage laborers, government employees, and teachers suffered from the decline in the purchasing power of currency. Huang

⁵³ Qian Yong, *Lüyuan conghua*, 1.14. See also Nakayama Mio, "Shindai zenki kōnan no meika dōkō," *Shigaku zasshi* 87.89 (1978):25, 33 (n. 65 and n. 66). The prices of rice in terms of silver is based on Nakayama's estimation.

⁵⁴ Wang Yeh-chien and Huang Guoshu, "Qingdai liangjia de changqi biandong, 1763-1910," *Jingji lunwen* 9.1 (1981):4–5, table 8, and pp. 2, 8, 9.

Table 16
Price of Rice in Suzhou

Date	Price (tael per <i>shi</i>)	Index Number (0.96=100)
1723-1736	0.96	100
1764	1.73	180
1767	1.67	174
1778	1.85	193
1783	2.03	211
1784	1.77	184
1788	1.54	160
1789	1.49	155
1790	1.42	148
1791	1.43	149
1800	1.25	130
1801	1.68	175
1816	2.76	288
1826	2.28	238
1833	2.81	293
1834	3.03	316
1835	2.20	229
1836	2.25	234
1844	2.36	246

SOURCE: Wang Yeh-chien and Huang Guoshu, "Qingdai liangjia de changqi biandong, 1763-1910," *Jingji lunwen* 9, 1:4-5, Table 8, pp. 2, 8, 9.

An summarized the effect of the change in rice prices: "One year's income from rice today is equivalent to three years' combined income previously. One day's food cost for the poor now is as much as their previous three days' total expenses."⁵⁵ Huang's (over)statement notwithstanding, tenants and landowners were benefiting from the increase in rice price.

The prosperity of farmers depended not only on prices but also on costs. For landowners, one important element in cost, the fixed tax quota on land and the fixed commutation rate adopted in the early years of the dynasty, climbed with prices; but since the increase in costs generally lagged behind the rise in prices, the landowners benefited from the disparity between 1723 and 1815. A study of

⁵⁵ Huang An, *Xijin shixiao lu*, 1.15.

Suzhou shows that from 1710 to 1830, the tax burden of the Suzhou landowners lightened 43 percent. This means that in terms of rice, the tax collected was about 57 percent of the 1710 quota.⁵⁶

Under the elastic fixed-maximum rent arrangement, the rising grain price was also profitable for tenants. Since there was always a time-lag before rents rose in the 1780s, the rising price of rice led automatically to an increase in income. Moreover, if the tenants produced more they could earn more. They could also use crop failure as an excuse to demand rent reduction or rent exemption. Thus the rising rice price provided them with a greater work incentive. According to a contemporary's observation, in the past when there had been a drought or a flood, most tenants had abandoned their crops because trying to save them was difficult—and not profitable. During the 1750s, however, the tenants would do anything in their power to save their crops because they could legally get a rent reduction or a rent exemption from their landlords and enjoy all the salvaged produce. In addition, the price of rice in a famine year rose, often dramatically. In taking advantage of such circumstances, many hard-working tenants became well-to-do. They were willing to invest in land and turned themselves into small landowners. Consequently, the number of owner-cultivators and part-tenants increased, and landownership was more widely distributed than before.⁵⁷

Generally speaking, the rising price of rice was more beneficial to landowners than to tenants who cultivated only a small piece of rented land because tenant families themselves consumed anything left over after rent was paid. Instead of surplus rice, they customarily sold their family handicraft products in the market to get money for the other expenses. Since the prices of handicraft goods rose in about the same proportion as that of rice during the same period, however, the income of tenants did increase.

Inflation was general during the period, affecting all articles of daily use. The price of rice, firewood, cotton cloth, and silk fabric all increased in the eighteenth century. The Lake Tai area was the main silk-producing region in eighteenth-century China. From 1723 to 1784, the rate of the price increase of raw silk (table 17) was closely related to that of rice: both increased about 100 percent. This up-

⁵⁶ Liu Ts'ui-jung and John C. H. Fei, "An Analysis of the Land Tax Burden in China, 1650-1865," *Journal of Economic History* 37.2 (June 1977):373, table 1.

⁵⁷ Huang An, *Xijin shixiao lu*, 1.36-37.

Table 17
Price Index for Raw Silk in the Eighteenth Century
 (export prices)

Year	Price (tael/picul)	Index	Year	Price (tael/picul)	Index
1723	142	100	1766	265	187
1724	155	109	1767	260	183
1730	159.6	112	1768	265-294	187-207
1731	155	109	1773	272.5	192
1750	175	123	1774	272.5-277.5	192-195
1753	175	123	1777	270	190
1754	155-220	109-155	1780	265	187
1755	190	134	1783	275	194
1756	192.5	136	1784	310	218
1757	225-250	158-176	1785	290-320	204-225
1759	198	139	1787	280	197
1763	240-250	169-176	1792	312	219
1764	260-290	183-204	1793	270	190
1765	269	189			

SOURCE: Nakayama Yoshio, "Shindai zenki konan no bukku doko," *Tōyōshi-kenkyū* 37.4: 85, 86.

ward trend for both types of merchandise began around 1748-50 (compare in tables 16 and 17).⁵⁸

Since family income for a majority of people in the Lake Tai region depended on both farming and handicraft production, the rise in the prices of food, raw silk, and cloth meant an increase in income. This change was evidenced by the marked improvement in the common people's standard of living in the eighteenth century. In early Qing during the Kangxi reign, people in general wore cotton fabric clothing. In winter, only one or two out of maybe a hundred wore fur clothing. By the 1750s, however, common clothing was made of silk. People regarded wearing cotton fabric clothing as a disgrace. In the winter months, the rich wore fox fur clothing while the poor wore sheep fur clothing. Along with clothing, people's diet also changed.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 1.18. Huang An suggested that the price of rice and other articles rose 300 percent. I correct it to 100 percent on the basis of both Qian Yong's and Wang Yeh-chien's figures; table 17 is based on Nakayama Yoshio, "Shindai zenki kōnan no bukku dōkō," *Tōyōshi-kenkyū* 37.4 (1978):85, table 6. Nakayama has shown (p. 86) that the export prices of raw silk at Canton did reflect the prices in the Lake Tai area.

In the Kangxi reign, a feast was usually simple and inexpensive. By the mid-eighteenth century, however, a feast was sumptuous. Moreover, during the Kangxi, there were only a few tea houses and restaurants in the vicinity of the county *yamen* of Wuxi. By the 1750s, many tea houses and restaurants opened, not only in the county capital but also in the countryside.⁵⁹ The improvement in the people's standard of living meant an increase in the demand for luxury goods and, consequently, the creation of a broader-based domestic market. Wang Yeh-chien's study suggests that the inflationary trend in the second half of the eighteenth century was not confined to the lower Yangzi plain. His data show that prices in the areas along the east coast and by the Grand Canal were moving in a closely parallel fashion.⁶⁰ These data show that there was a considerable expansion in the domestic market in the eighteenth century.

In addition to the price factor, the improvement of tenants' standard of living was also related to the new landlord-tenant relationship that took shape in the period of Ming-Qing transition. Had the tenants still been under their landlords' tight control, the landlords would probably have been the only group that could have taken advantage of the inflation of prices. For this reason, we will discuss briefly the landlord-tenant relationship in the eighteenth century.

In the fourth year of the Qianlong reign (1739), the governor-general of Liangjiang, Nasutu, reported to the emperor in his memorial the relationship between landlord and tenant in his jurisdiction. Their relationship can be characterized as follows: (1) The amount of rent was fixed according to the local customary practice. Neither landlords nor tenants had the right to change the rent figure because of a change of landlord, tenant, or land price. With the exception of rent payment, tenants and landlords had little interaction. If tenants were dismissed, they could find other employment; they were not at the mercy of the landlords. (2) It had been an inveterate local custom of the Jiangnan people that tenants could unilaterally reduce their rent payments in accordance with the percentage of decline in their harvest. Some tenants had never paid more than eighty or ninety percent of their rent quotas, even when the harvest was one hundred percent. Still, some deliberately delayed their rent payments while others resisted paying rents. (3) It was a customary practice in Jiangnan that when a tenant rented a piece of land, he paid *dingshou qian* (transfer

⁵⁹ Huang An, *Xijin shixiao lu*, 1.32-36.

⁶⁰ Wang Yeh-chien, "The Secular Trend of Prices during the Ch'ing Period, 1644-1911," pp. 248, 251.

fees) to the previous tenant. If a landlord evicted a tenant, the departing tenant would definitely demand a transfer fee from the succeeding tenant. If the evicted tenant could not get the transfer fee he demanded, he would occupy the land and not let the new tenant cultivate it.

How did the transfer fee come to exist? It seems to have been related to the concessions the landlords had to make in the early Qing to encourage tenants to devote themselves to farming. Under the new, more favorable working conditions, the tenants, for their own sake, invested both labor and capital in the land, and productivity improved. The landlords recognized the tenants' contribution in improving old land and in opening new land while the tenants regarded themselves as important contributors to the value of the land. Thus, they demanded compensation when they left it.

Nasutu attributed all these kinds of behavior to the economic semiindependence of the tenant households. He explained:

Tenant households in North China live in the landlord's houses. Sometimes they are even dependent on the landlords to supply draft animal, plough, and seeds. Therefore, once the tenants are evicted they lose not only the land, but also houses to live in. Consequently, the tenant households are extremely afraid of their landlords, and the landlords can regard them as slaves. In contrast, the tenant households in South China live in their own houses and own their own cows and seeds. They do no more than rent a piece of land from the landlords to cultivate. With the exception of rent payments, they do not interact with each other. If the tenants are dismissed, they can usually find other employment. Therefore, the tenant households are not at the mercy of the landlords, and the landlords are not able to mistreat their tenants too much.⁶¹

The custom of rent resistance by the tenants in the Lake Tai area in the eighteenth century was strengthened by the development of the tenants' economic independence. Because of the increase in employment opportunities in the forms of family by-employments, commercial activities, and an improved social position for tenants, tenant households found it easier to earn a living than before. If they worked hard they were able to accumulate savings and own their own means of production. The tenants' semiindependent economic situation persisted into the twentieth century.

The supportive political policy toward the tenant farmers adopted by the Kangxi and Yongzheng emperors was continued during the Qianlong reign (1736–95). The customary practice of rent reduction

⁶¹ KSCR, shang ce, pp. 10–11.

by the tenants became legal in 1745. That year, the governor of Jiangsu, Cheng Dashou, asked for the emperor's approval to extend the emperor's favor to the tenants whenever the emperor reduced taxes on the landowners. The emperor not only approved Cheng Dashou's proposal, but also praised him as an attentive official.⁶²

The conflict of interests over tenancy rights between landlords and tenants did not become apparent until the farm labor shortage disappeared, the profit of farming increased, and the supply of farmland began to dwindle. Under these new circumstances, both parties tried to protect their interests and get a greater share of the income from the land. As a result, the tenants' rights over their land developed further. The "two lords to a field" system—whereby tenants had topsoil rights and owners subsoil rights—gradually took shape. Topsoil rights included the right to cultivate the land; subsoil rights included the right to collect rents (and the obligation to pay taxes); both rights were transferable. The gazetteer of Wuxi county edited in 1751 offers an example of the intensified situation:

The peasants vigorously engage in farming. There is no land left uncultivated. There is no need to worry that there is land without peasants to cultivate it. The problem is that there is not enough land for the peasants to cultivate. Thus, the price of land is several times higher than before. The price that is used for the selling and the buying of the right to the topsoil, *huifei yin* (fertilized field silver), is equivalent to the price of the right to the subsoil of the land. The price for selling and buying the land among landowners is called *tiandi* (subsoil right). Some crooked and cunning tenants with topsoil right to the land are more dominant over the land than the subsoil owners. When the crops fail slightly, they hide the good quality rice and use blighted grain to pay rent. In the past, the problem was that the landlords exploited their tenants; nowadays, the tenants are afraid of nothing.⁶³

Tenants jointly resisted paying rent to their absentee landlords. According to the gazetteer of Wuqing town edited in 1760:

In recent years, to be deceitful had become a common practice among tenants. Even if the harvest was good they sought to pay less. Whenever there was a slight drought or flood, the tenants of the neighboring area made alliances. They secretly decided how much rent they should pay, united the tenants to be of one mind by showing plays, and made contracts as the proof of their promises.⁶⁴

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 33.

⁶³ *Wuxi XZ*, 1751 ed., 11.4.

Confronted by an increasing number of social disturbances caused by the tenants' rent resistance incidents, the sympathetic policy of government officials toward tenant households gradually changed. In 1788, the authorities of Jiangsu province promulgated a set of new regulations regarding the tenancy rights issue. They can be summarized as follows: (1) People were not allowed to buy topsoil rights from former tenants secretly. The fee for transferring topsoil rights was to be paid not to the former tenant but to the subsoil owner. The owner was to keep the fee until the new tenant left the land. (2) The price of topsoil rights on a plot was to be equivalent to one year's rent. (3) If a topsoil owner defaulted on rent payments for one year, the subsoil owner could legally dismiss him. He could also legally confiscate the transfer fee he kept to compensate for the unpaid rent.⁶⁵

The effect of the new regulations was to legally weaken the ownership rights of the topsoil owners. The terms for topsoil right and subsoil right continued to be used, but the meanings and values attached to the terms changed. The tenants lost the power to sell their cultivation rights without the consent of the subsoil owners. They lost the right to demand a transfer fee from the new tenants. And they could be evicted if they did not pay their rent for one year. Before the promulgation of the new regulations, the values of topsoil rights and subsoil rights were about equal. Under the new regulations, the value of topsoil rights was only about five to ten percent of the value of subsoil rights. The transfer fee was used originally to protect the tenant's investment, but under the new regulations, it served to protect the interest of the subsoil owners. A new tenant's paying the transfer fee to the subsoil owner instead of to the former topsoil owner completed the transition from the double ownership system to the single ownership system. The transfer fee became a rent deposit guaranteeing the tenant's regular payment of rent. In paying the deposit, the new tenant might acquire some security of tenure, but he did not have a claim to even partial ownership of the land. In other words, the subsoil owners regained their control over the tenants.

Although we don't know to what extent the goals of the new regulations were realized, evidence suggests that with the support of officials some landlords did regain considerable control over their tenants. The best indicator for the change was that, from 1780 to 1804, some landlords were able to make a rent adjustment or even to

⁶⁴ *Wuqing ZZ*, 1760 ed., 2, "nong sang," 4.

⁶⁵ *KSCR*, shang ce, pp. 44-46.

impose rent increases as shown in table 18, constructed from information concerning fifteen identical plots of land in the Shen genealogy of Guian county.

Before proceeding with an analysis of table 18, it is necessary to take a brief look at a crucial economic change in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. From 1644 to 1785, generally speaking, an increase in silver supply led to the silver tael's being the principal medium of exchange and means of rent payment. Moreover, the market ratio of exchange between silver and copper during this period was fairly stable. The official ratio of exchange was 1:1,000. In other words, one tael of silver was equal to one thousand copper coins. But the actual market ratio seldom coincided with the official ratio. Before 1786, a tael of silver could often be exchanged for only seven hundred to nine hundred copper cash. From then until 1845, the market value of a silver tael appreciated considerably, as shown in table 19. This change was mainly the result of the heavy drain on silver through the opium trade. Consequently, copper cash became the principal medium of exchange and means of rent payment.⁶⁶

Table 18 shows how the Shen landlord coped with the problem of the unusual appreciation of the value of silver. Among the fifteen plots of land listed in the table, five plots were paddy fields. The rents were given in shi of unhusked rice. The other ten plots were nonpaddy fields. The rents were given in copper cash. When the market ratio of exchange between silver and copper changed from 1:800 to 1:1,000, the Shen landlord took two measures to protect his land investment interest: he replaced the old ratio with an updated one, and he increased the copper cash rent on six of the ten plots of land. He added 4,000 *wen* to the original silver rent due on plot number 1, for example, thus increasing the rent by 40 percent.

When one examines the new ratios of exchange applied by the landlord to the ten plots of land, however, one realizes that they were not the same; they varied from 1:800 to 1:2,000. The ratios of 1:1,000 and 1:2,000 favored the landlord. But the ratio of 1:800 favored the tenants. When one examines this finding together with the fact that on four of the ten plots the landlord did not impose any rent increase, one cannot help but ask the meaning of these exceptions.

⁶⁶ Huang An, *Xijin shixiao lu*, 1, beican shang, jiaoyi yinqian; see also Yang Duanliu, *Qingdai huobi jinrong shi gao*, pp. 195, 198, 208, 209; and Wang Yeh-chien, "Secular Trend," pp. 363, 364, 365.

Table 18
Rents in Guian County, 1780-1804

Plot number	Kind of land	Rent in 1780		Rent in 1804		Increase (percent)	Note
		Rice (shi)	Silver (liang)	Rice (shi)	Silver (liang)		
1	Nonirrigated		10.0		10.0	40	1,000=1
2	Marsh		2.0		2.0	25	1,000=1
3	Sandbars		12.2		13.2	30	1,000=1
4	Nonirrigated		24.0		24.0	33	1,000=1
5	Marsh		9.45		9.45	35	1,000=1
6	Marsh		0.7		0.7		1,000=1
7	Marsh			4.1			1,000=1
8	Sandbars		0.2		0.2	300	2,000=1
9	Reed Marsh		1.5		1.5		800=1
10	Orchard and tea garden		2.0		2.0		800=1
11	Paddy	23.1			23.1		Rent/mu=1.45 ^a
12	Paddy	10.0			10.0		Rent/mu=1.0 ^a
13	Paddy	28.0			28.0		Rent/mu=1.0 ^b
14	Paddy	2.6			2.6		Rent/mu=1.3 ^b
15	Paddy	3.0			3.0		Rent/mu=1.5 ^a
Total rent		66.7	62.05	66.7	67.15	34	

^a Rent rice collected by *Guan hu* (official rice measure)

^b Rent rice collected by *Zu hu* (private rice measure)

SOURCE: *Zhuxi Shenshi jiacheng*: 8, shishan, 2-3.

Table 19
Exchange Ratio, Copper Cash per Tael of Silver

Year	Number	Year	Number
1644	700	1797	1,080
1721	780	1804	919
1729	1,000	1806	963
1736	700–900	1810	1,132
1753	830–870	1818	1,245
1761	780–790	1827	1,340
1786	1,000	1837	1,559
1792	1,300	1845	2,024

SOURCE: Figures for 1644–1799 from Chuan Han-sheng, "Meizhou baiyin yu shiba shiji Zhongguo wujia geming de guanxi," pp. 157–158, table 1. Figures for 1804–1845 from Yan Zhongping, *Zhongguo jindai jingji shi tongji ziliao xuanji*, p. 37, table 5.

Although the rent rice of each of the five plots remained the same from 1780 to 1804, the rent per mu of the five plots varied from 1.0 shi to 1.5 shi. These differences might have been determined by the quality of individual plots of land or by individual landlord-tenant relations. One fact particularly worthy of attention is that the Shen landlord applied two different measuring tools to collect his rent rice—the official rice measure (*guan hu*) and a bigger, private rent rice measure (*zu hu*). Among the five plots of paddy field, the Shen landlord applied the official measure to collect the rent rice of plots 11, 12, and 15; the bigger, private measure to collect the rent rice of plots 13 and 14.

There are two possible reasons why the Shen landlord treated his tenants differently. First, he was probably a practical and rational man. In considering the long-term benefit of land investment, he made the necessary rent adjustments in accordance with each tenant farmer's real financial situation. Second, perhaps he made concessions only to those who resisted his rent adjustments and imposed rent increases on those who were submissive and timid. The behavior of landlord Shen might have been determined by one or both of these reasons.

Because of a series of crop failures and continuous inflation in the Lake Tai area, the landlords' dominance was again seriously challenged by the tenants' rent resistance in the first half of the nineteenth century. By studying the widely distributed rent resistance incidents, we can easily detect three main characteristics: (1) The rent resistance

incidents usually took place between the urban absentee landlords and their rural tenant farmers. (2) The incidents usually took the form of collective action by tenants in a small rural community. The religious activities of the community served as a main vehicle to mobilize and organize the tenant farmers. Moreover, the local deity of the rural community was their main source of inspiration and strength. But precisely because of this circumstance, a particular incident in a rural community was unable to break through the religious barrier that existed between rural communities and develop into a large-scale peasant movement. (3) The rent incidents were usually inseparable from peasants' hardships. In other words, tenants resisted rent payments not necessarily because they were trying to evade their responsibilities but because they suffered from devastating crop failures. As the gazetteer of Shuanglin town noted:

In the winter of the twelfth year of the Daoguang reign (1832), there was a poor harvest [in the area]. Thus, the government postponed the collection of tribute rice until the next year. [However], in the *xia-xiang* area, the landlords were still able to collect three or four dou of rent rice per mu of land. In the twenty-first year of the Daoguang reign (1841), there was a heavy blizzard. As a result, the government ordered a halt to tax collection. The rural people, therefore, made an alliance among neighbors and decided to pay no rent to the landlords. When the [absentee] landlords sent boats to the villages to collect rents, the tenants banged gongs, gathered a crowd, and, shouting loudly, drove them out, even throwing rocks and mud at them. The tenants also pulled the boats ashore or blocked the way of the boats. Consequently, the landlords had to say good things to the tenants in order to be released. Other than this there was nothing the landlords could do. After such incidents, whenever the harvest is not as good as they expected, [tenants] gather to worship [the local protective deity,] Zongguan, to pledge their alliance. [On this occasion,] the tenants decide unilaterally how much rent they are going to pay and forbid any tenant to betray the decision. When a timid tenant has paid more than the figure agreed upon by the group, the majority of tenants will tie him up and beat him. They may also demolish his house. One of the reasons for doing this is to warn the landlords not to take more from their tenants than what the group had agreed. Furthermore, the container, dou, used to measure rent rice by some landlords is about ten or twenty percent bigger than the ordinary one. Sincere and kind landlords will not use it. However, when some landlords collect rent excessively by using the bigger dou, the tenants will pay their rents with bad quality rice. The tenants sometimes will add too much water into the rent rice; consequently, the rice becomes wet and rotten. Be-

cause they deceive each other, rice is wasted. Basically, the blame should be put on the landlords.⁶⁷

In a year of crop failure, tenant farmers were not the only group that acted to alleviate their suffering. When the tenant farmers in the area of Shuanglin town participated collectively in the rent resistance protest in 1821, for example, the landowners in the same area decided collectively to pay no land tax to the government. The landowners who joined the collective action, however, included only the rural landowners, not those who lived in towns. Financially, they were not as secure as their urban counterparts. Moreover, many of them were owner-cultivators and part-tenants. When the magistrate of Guian county learned of the landowners' decision, he sent government employees to the county to press for tax payment. The landowners unexpectedly attacked the government employees, wounding some seriously. After this incident, the magistrate asked the provincial authorities to send troops to put down the tax resistance.

Early the following year, the landowners met again at Hutou village and reaffirmed their previous decision. In the eighth lunar month of 1822, the provincial judge and grain intendant led troops to Guian to arrest and punish the troublemakers. At this critical moment, a group of absentee landowners from Shuanglin town went to meet the troop commander and acted as an intermediary between the provincial government and the group of rural landowners. They pleaded with the commander not to act immediately and to let them talk to the landowners. After their mediation, the landowners agreed to pay their land taxes and disbanded their group. The troops arrested two leaders of the incident and burned down their houses.⁶⁸

What kind of person became a local leader in such protests? Examining the social and economic background of the leader of the tax resistance incident of She village in 1821 can shed some light on the general characteristics of a rural community leader. Lu Mingyang was the leader of She village in 1821. He was a landowner and was active in community affairs. When the village temple collapsed he solicited contributions and rebuilt it. He also established funds for its routine operation and maintenance. This deed earned him a reputation as a man of justice. Gradually, local people started to go to him for the arbitration of minor social disputes. They were confident of

⁶⁷ *Shuanglin ZZ*, 1917 ed., 13, "nongshi," 5b, 7b-9a, 15, fengsu, 10b-11a.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 19, "zaiyi," 13.

his judgment. Later, people also asked him to arbitrate more serious disputes.

Because of the widespread tax resistance of the landowners in the Lake Tai area, near the end of the Jiaqing reign (1796–1820), the local magistrates faced tremendous difficulty in collecting the land tax on time. To overcome this difficulty, some magistrates took the initiative and sent people to negotiate with local leaders on tax payments. The magistrate of Guian, for example, sent a county clerk to see Lu Mingyang. Lu Mingyang agreed to pay the land taxes; in exchange, the magistrate promised him a 10 percent land tax reduction to his locality. A few days later, Lu personally escorted several hundred boats loaded with land taxes to the county granary. With Lu present, no county clerk dared charge more tax than he should. Thereafter Lu Mingyang became the representative of She village in negotiating land taxes with the county magistrate. The landowners were deeply grateful for what Lu Mingyang had done for them; the magistrate and some of his employees, however, were very unhappy about Mingyang's intervention with their official business and sought an opportunity to eliminate him. In 1820 there was a tax resistance incident in Wukang county, a neighboring county of Guian. After the incident, the landowners there were so nervous that they furiously attacked and sank by mistake an official fleet of ten boats of Deqing county that happened to be passing through the county. The magistrate of Guian grasped this opportunity and placed the blame on Lu Mingyang. The prefect of Huzhou prefecture, therefore, ordered his arrest. But Lu Mingyang escaped and hid. In the eleventh month of 1821, the prefect offered a reward of 3,000 taels of silver for his capture. In the meantime, the prefect paid a visit to Wu Jieping, a gentry with a juren degree in She village, and asked him for assistance. Wu Jieping first went to see one of Mingyang's assistants and promised to excuse him from punishment. Then he asked the assistant to persuade Mingyang to consider the welfare of the local community and to surrender himself to the authority. Mingyang agreed to sacrifice himself in exchange for peace for his community; before long he was executed. Ironically, his death did not stop the local landowners from practicing land tax resistance.⁶⁹

From the two cases discussed above, we learn that (1) the practices of rent resistance by tenants and tax resistance by landowners coexisted in the rural community in the early nineteenth century and (2) nei-

⁶⁹ *Huzhou FZ*, 1874 ed., 95, "zazhui," 3, 32a–34b; *Guian XZ*, 1881 ed., 2.2–3.

ther economic status nor gentry status was essential for leadership, although economic independence and literacy were important for a community leader to perform his duties. The essential qualifications were honesty, a sense of justice, enthusiasm, and the ability to promote the public welfare. In addition, a leader was dependent on the public's recognition and support of his leadership in community affairs. We also learn that while the members of the upper gentry and urban gentry were not likely candidates for rural community leaders, they did play a unique role in the relationship between the local government and the rural people. The next chapter will be devoted to a discussion of the distribution of wealth and power in the local community during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

CHAPTER SIX

Rural Society in the Eighteenth, Nineteenth, and Early Twentieth Centuries

This chapter will examine three aspects of rural communities in the Lake Tai area. First we will examine the pattern of landholding distribution in the area. We will then apply a case study to demonstrate how the rural community managed its local hydraulic works. Finally, we will examine the role of the lineage organization and its relation to the rural community.

The Pattern of Land Distribution

The discussions in Chapter 3 have demonstrated that the characteristic pattern of land distribution in the Lake Tai area of the early twentieth century had already taken shape by the eighteenth century. In other words, the pattern seen in the early twentieth century was either the extension or the development of the eighteenth-century pattern. Here we will introduce three field studies; two were done in the 1930s, one in 1941. The study of Kaixing'gong village of Wujiang county in 1936 disclosed that about two-thirds of the subsoil of the village was owned by absentee landlords who lived in towns and cities. The other third was in the hands of the villagers.¹ The second study, of the rural community in the southern part of the Lake Tai area in 1938, found that about 88 percent of rented land in the community was owned by absentee landlords.² The third study is a report on the socioeconomic conditions of three villages in Wuxi county in the northern Lake Tai area. According to this study, approximately

¹ Fei Hsiao-tung, *Peasant Life in China: A Field Study of Country Life in the Yangtze Valley*, p. 191.

² Zhongguo jingji jitong yanjiu suo, *Wuxing nongcun jingji*, p. 106.

26 percent of the land was owned by absentee landlords. Among the total rented lands, 82 percent was in the hands of absentee landlords who lived in Shanghai, the county capital, and several nearby towns.³

What was the pattern of land distribution among the villagers? Were most of the villagers landless tenant farmers and wage laborers? In Kaixing'gong, the percentage of landless households was very low, although 75 percent of households held fewer than five mu and an additional 18 percent had between five and ten.⁴ The researcher also discovered that a majority of the villagers belonged to a single socioeconomic stratum. There was no clear-cut line to distinguish tenant farmers from landowners. As he explained: "The full-owners, leasees, and tenants do not form clear-cut or water-tight classes. The same *chia* (household) may possess all rights to some part of its land, may lease another part from or to others, and a part may belong to absentee landlords."⁵

The second field study provides us with more information on this subject. Among the total 923 rural households surveyed, 97 percent were landowners. Only 26 households or 2.8 percent were landless. Of the 26 households, 19 households or 2.0 percent of the total were tenant farmers and 5 households or 0.5 percent of the total were wage laborers.⁶ The low percentage of landless households meant that neither landless tenants nor long-term hired laborers constituted a significant proportion of the total rural population. The majority of the rural population was landowning peasant households including part-tenants (51.7 percent of households) and owner-cultivators (42.1 percent of households). Small landowners (those who rented out some lands and worked some) comprised 3.3 percent of households. Thus we see that part-tenants (those who rented part of the land they farmed) and owner-cultivators (those who worked only their own land) together constituted 93.8 percent of the total rural population. When we examine further the landholding distribution of the three landowning groups, we once again find that there was no clear-cut distinction

³ Mantetsu, Shanghai jimusho, Chōsashitsu, ed., *Kōso shō Mushahaku ken nōson jitai chōsa nōkokusho* (hereafter, *Mushahaku ken nōson*). Figures are based on table 6; see also p. 33.

⁴ Fei Hsiao-tung, *Peasant Life in China*, p. 192. The author provided no information on the percentage of landless. However, he said: "I did not meet anyone who had been landless all his life. The total number of employees in the village is only seventeen. This shows that this institution [wage laborer] does not play an important part in the village economy" (pp. 179–180).

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 192.

⁶ Zhongguo jingji jitong yanjiu so, *Wuxing nongcun jingji*, pp. 27, 91.

among them (table 20).⁷ Table 20 shows that more than half the village households owned similar amounts of land: 94.7 percent of part-tenants and 86.6 percent of owner-cultivators had less than 15 mu of land. Even 53.3 percent of the small landowners owned fewer than 15 mu of land. The biggest of the small landowners had only 120.5 mu of land.

The households (80 of them) of the third field study were traditionally dependent more on by-employment than farming to supplement their family income. In other words, landownership here was not as vital as in the other two areas. The pattern of land distribution, therefore, was also a little different. The first discernible characteristic of the area was a lower percentage of absentee landlords. The second was the higher proportion of landless households, which constituted 22.5 percent of the total households. However, judging from the existence of the tradition of by-employment, the higher percentage of landless households did not mean that there was a wide socioeconomic gap between the landless and the landowning peasants. Moreover, 90 percent (57) of the landowning households had fewer than 5 mu of land; even the six households that owned more than 5 owned fewer than 10.⁸ In other words, most of these rural landowners had to depend heavily on by-employment to maintain a living. In this sense, their economic condition was not substantially different from that of their landless counterparts.

The third survey also made clear that even though there was a higher percentage of landless households in the villages, there was a very low percentage of long-term agricultural wage laborers. They played no substantial role in the local economy. According to the survey, there was not a single year-laborer in the three villages. Among the total 80 rural households, only 3 households (3.8 percent) had month-laborers. One had an agricultural worker who worked for only one month; the other two households had two long-term agricultural workers, each of whom worked for three months. In the busy agricultural seasons, the landowning families usually hired their neighbors as day-laborers to help them out. Of the 80 rural households, 44 percent had day-laborers in 1941.⁹

As far as land distribution is concerned, the three field studies show us a picture of relatively homogeneous and egalitarian rural communities.

⁷ Ibid., pp. 91, 92, 98.

⁸ *Mushahaku ken nōson*. Calculated from data in table 1.

⁹ Ibid. Figures are based on table 3.

Table 20
Land Distribution in Wuxing, 1938

Land owned (mu)	Part-tenant (percent)	Owner-cultivator (percent)	Small landowner (percent)
>0-4.9	38.6	19.0	6.7
5-9.9	44.6	45.3	23.3
10-14.9	11.5	22.3	23.3
15-19.9	3.8	7.6	20.0
20-24.9	1.3	2.4	3.3
25-29.9	NA	2.1	NA
30-34.9	NA	0.5	3.3
35-39.9	NA	0.5	3.3
40-44.9	0.2	0.5	3.3
50-54.9	NA	NA	3.3
65-69.9	NA	NA	3.3
85-89.9	NA	NA	3.3
120-124.9	NA	NA	3.3

SOURCE: Zhongguo jingji jitong yanjiu so, *Wuxing nongcun jingji*, p. 98.

Comparing the situation in the Lake Tai area with that of the Hebei-northwest Shandong plain area in the 1930s, one finds that agricultural wage laborers played a much greater role in the farming economy of the north China plain than in the region under this study. In a recent study, Philip Huang estimates that 12.5 percent of rural households in that region had long-term agricultural workers and another 36.2 percent had short-term agricultural workers.¹⁰ The author attributes the higher percentage of wage laborers mainly to agricultural commercialization, in particular the spread of cotton cultivation in that region. He explains:

A ruined cotton crop was much more devastating to a smallholder than a ruined sorghum crop, starting him on a downward spiral in which he was forced to offer his land as security for a loan, only to lose it and become first a tenant, then a part-laborer, and finally a landless wage worker. This was the supply of labor demanded by the new managerial and rich peasant farms created.¹¹

But what was true for the north China plain area was not the case in the Lake Tai region, which had been noted for the development of

¹⁰ Huang, *Peasant Economy and Social Change in North China*, p. 83.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 108.

commercialized agriculture since the sixteenth century. It was the leading sericulture region of China. According to the third survey, for example, 23 percent of the farm land of the three villages of Wuxi county was planted with mulberry trees in 1941.¹² The adoption of mulberry tree planting had no marked effect on the supply of wage laborers in this area. Even if there had been an increase in the supply of landless wage laborers, these small landholders would have had no need to hire additional workers except during agricultural busy seasons. It seems that a particular economic factor—in this case, commercialization—can produce certain effects in one socioeconomic environment, but not necessarily in another. That is why regional study is essential for understanding the complexities of China's economic development.

The Management of Local Water Works

From the discussions in Chapter 2, we have learned that after the reform of Zhou Chen in this region in 1430, the executive authority over water control in the local community passed from the local leaders to the county government, although the local leaders were still responsible for the routine maintenance and repair of local dikes and drainage works. If a waterworks project needed to be done, the local leaders would ordinarily submit a project proposal to the county government for approval. This system had remained basically intact and persisted to the end of the Qing dynasty. In addition to the local government, there were two groups of local leaders directly involved in local hydraulic works in Ming times. One was the conscripted sub-county administrators such as the polder captains, the headmen of embankments, and the elders. They were chosen from rural wealthy landowning resident commoners. The other was the influential rural gentry landlords. Although the rural gentry took no subcounty official posts, they actually played a decisive role in the task of local waterworks. After the disappearance of manorialism and the rise of urban absentee landlords, the nature of power in the countryside changed accordingly. In the Qing, three groups of local leaders were involved in local water works. Except for the role played by the wealthy landowning commoners, which remained unchanged, the lower gentry landowners residing in the country replaced the previous powerful rural gentry landlords, and the newly emerged urban absentee landlords

¹² *Mushahaku ken nōson*, p. 23. Farmed lands in the three villages totaled 190 mu; of these 146.4 mu were paddy lands, 42.9 mu were mulberry tree field.

joined the local elite group. To illustrate the operation of the new power structure, let us take a case study of waterworks of Furong polder, in the northwestern part of Wuxi county, to exemplify it.

Furong Embanked Field (*yu*) was formally built and enclosed between 1426 and 1435. It consisted of 108,000 mu of embanked land surrounded by a long and wide embankment of more than twenty miles. Inside the enclosed embankment, the land was divided into many small embanked fields enclosed by dikes, about three hundred in total. Two-thirds of the land in the northwestern part of the field was under the jurisdiction of Yanghu county while the southeastern part of the field belonged to Wuxi county.¹³

On July 8, 1840, several parts of the outer dikes of Furong polder collapsed from successive heavy rainfalls, and the whole area suffered a devastating flood. Soon afterward, Tang Zai, a lower rural gentry who held a shengyuan degree, got together with some of his fellow villagers and on behalf of the people of the afflicted area went to the county capital to ask magistrate Shen and several wealthy gentry of Changzhou prefecture for help. In response to Tang Zai's request, five concerned wealthy gentry members founded a relief bureau (*juanzhen zongju*) at the county capital and donated money and rice to assist the people in the afflicted area. Meanwhile, magistrate Shen reported the disaster to his superior and asked for relief. Shortly thereafter, Shen's successor in office, Zhang, inspected the afflicted area to learn about the situation. Then he paid a formal visit to the relief bureau to consult with the five gentry directors (*shendong*) about how to proceed with the relief work and how to rebuild the polder lands. At that time, the bureau had not raised enough money for both the relief works and the polder reconstruction. Fortunately, a newly retired official who was a Yanghu native agreed to donate eight millions copper cash to cover the needed embankment construction expenses.¹⁴

Magistrate Zhang and the gentry directors of the bureau decided to hire two experts, Yao Xin and Meng Beixi, to be chief engineers responsible for the reconstruction project from design to supervision. To coordinate the project, the people of the polder set up a general headquarters (*zongju*) at Xin'an town and branches (*xiaoju*) at each individual ward (*tu*) in early 1841. The headquarter committee consisted of six lower gentry members (three shengyuan, one gongsheng, and two jiansheng), one upper gentry (*juren*), and two educated com-

¹³ *Furong yu xiu di lu*, 1.20; see also Huang An, *Xijin shixiao lu*, 2, "beican shang," 62.

¹⁴ *Furong yu xiu di lu*, 1.5a, 21b, 22a.

moners (*tongsheng*). All were rural residents; Tang Zai was their leader. Except for the upper gentry member, their main responsibility was to accompany the two chief engineers and to superintend and direct the daily work on the project. Each branch consisted of a certain number of directors (*dongshi*), polder captains (*yuzhang*), foremen (*futou*), and rural control agents (*dibao*). They were responsible for the construction works of their own ward. After two months' intensive work, the project was completed and was checked and accepted by the magistrate. The people who had fled from the previous year's flood gradually returned. However, about the time of rice planting, the same region was struck again by flood. Magistrate Zhang, after consulting with the gentry members of the general headquarters, borrowed grain from the local rich to pay as wages to those who pumped the water out of the polder lands. In the meantime, the magistrate, who took the lead in the cause, mobilized the wealthy gentry to donate grain to feed the victims of the flooded area. Later, the magistrate accepted the gentry directors' proposal that each mu of land pay 0.01 shi of rice each year to the general headquarters. This was used exclusively for dike repairs and maintenance of the Furong polder.¹⁵

From the above case we can easily identify three groups of local leaders in that community. The first group was the five "concerned" gentry directors of the relief bureau. They were wealthy gentry members, most likely absentee landlords, who were advisors to the magistrate on local affairs. Although they were generally regarded by the villagers as outsiders, they sometimes acted as intermediaries between local government and the rural people. Nevertheless, they were not directly involved in actual water conservancy works. The second group was those who constituted the general headquarters committee at Xin'an town. They were resident landowners, and most of them were lower gentry members. At the least they were educated commoners. They were the leaders of that rural community and were also the representatives of their community in dealing with the outside world. The third group comprised landowning commoners. They were the leaders of their respective wards; usually they were illiterate farmers.¹⁶ In a time of emergency, each of the three groups played its unique role in local affairs. However, one must keep in mind that

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 1.8, 9, 22, 23, 24, 25a.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 2.85a-86b.

none of the three groups had any legal executive or judicial power to administer local affairs.

In ordinary times, the polder captains and foremen were responsible for organization of dike repairs and water control of the Furong polder; however, in the egalitarian rural society of Lake Tai, the most distinctive characteristic was that nobody, even the local leaders, had more rights, either administrative or judicial, than others. In other words, no single villager could legally force his fellow countrymen to do what he wanted them to do. Contractual relations therefore were valued. Matters that concerned the benefit of the landowners of a single polder or a single village would be discussed publicly with solutions worked out by all related landowners. With respect to water conservancy works, the most commonly discussed subjects were how to distribute responsibilities fairly among the landowners involved in terms of finance and manpower supply and how to work out a project beneficial to all parties involved. After the public resolutions were reached, all participants signed a written contract agreeing to comply. In matters related to the benefit of more than one polder, village, ward, or to the whole Furong polder, the community leaders and landowners involved would meet together and work out plans for the relevant communities. Generally speaking, the expenses of waterworks management, repair, and construction were shared by all landowners involved according to the size of their holdings. The responsibilities of management were also taken in turn by all parties involved.¹⁷ Thus the practices of contractual relations between landowners or between rural communities clearly demonstrate the autonomous nature of the rural society: it was independent of state initiative in maintaining a favorable condition for agricultural production.

However, this independence was limited: the community leaders had no authority to restrain community members from violating public resolutions and damaging the general well-being of the community. On the local level, the county officials were the only source of administrative and judicial authority. Under this circumstance, local leaders usually sent a copy of their contracts, particularly those involving more than one polder, one villager, or one ward, to the county government to record.¹⁸ Thus, the registered contract became legally enforceable. Anyone breaking it could be dealt with by law. Two cases exemplify this situation.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 2.71a, 74a-75a, 78a, 76, 80a, 81a, 82a, 83, 85a.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 2.74b-75a, 82a, 85a-87a.

In 1845, Yue Zhaoxiong, a shengyuan degree holder of Nanmaotian polder and a former member of the general headquarters, petitioned the Yanghu county government to authorize polder captains to stop local people from forcibly occupying publicly owned pumping spots as their own properties. In Yue Zhaoxiong's own polder, for example, three pumping spots had already been occupied by local households. Those spots had been reserved by the community for the installation of pumping facilities in the years of drought to pump water into the polder. Afraid that there would be no pumping spot available to install pumping facilities in time of need, Yue asked the magistrate for help. The magistrate accepted his request and posted a formal decree. This case illustrates that neither Yue Zhaoxiong nor polder captains had the authority to restrain their fellow villagers from abusing public properties. The second case occurred in 1888 when members of the general headquarters submitted a set of public resolutions to the magistrate for approval. One of the resolutions was that the term of service for polder captain and for foreman be limited to twenty years. They also asked the magistrate to remove the current polder captains and foremen and to appoint new ones. Their reasoning was that those positions, according to the regulation, should be filled by the wealthiest landowning commoners of the community. Unfortunately, since the most recent appointments—some four decades earlier, in 1841—some of the appointees had discovered that their positions were profitable. Consequently, they seized the posts and regarded them as hereditary. They let only their sons and grandsons inherit the posts after they retired, even though their children were no longer the wealthiest landowning men of their community. The magistrate granted the requests of the headquarters committee. This case once again demonstrates the powerlessness of the gentry leaders.

But the gentry leaders not only lacked the authority to deal with the offenders in their own community; they also had difficulty implementing orders given by their superiors. The case of Tang Zai, the leader of the polder, illustrates this difficulty. In 1834 Tang Zai received an instruction from the governor of Jiangsu, Lin Zexu, to repair the dikes in his jurisdiction. Tang Zai invited his fellow countrymen to meet at a local Buddhist convent to discuss the matter. Because there were too many opinions and too little cooperation, the governor's order did not receive the majority support of the participants; it was, therefore, never carried out. It seems fair to say that the primary responsibility of a local leader in the Qing times was to render community service to his fellow villagers, not to control them.¹⁹

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 1.8b, 20b; 2.32a–33a, 85a–87a.

The authority vacuum in the rural community was not confined to the Furong polder but was widely spread throughout the Lake Tai area. The earliest available account that expressed this concern was the 1681 edition of the history of Wucheng county. According to the editors, landowners of the same polder as well as landowners from different polders refused to cooperate with one another. Usually, a landowner was responsible only for his own lands and the land-related share of waterworks; he was not used to thinking that he should help his neighbors when they were in trouble. This was especially true for rented lands where, according to practice, the landlords were financially responsible for the maintenance of waterworks while the tenants were responsible for contributing labor. The landlords, however, were interested only in collecting rents and paid no attention to the works of dike repair and water control.²⁰ But the physical system was inter-related; if one landowner of a polder failed to maintain his part of the waterworks he endangered the public interest of the entire polder. The same was true over the larger system; if one polder failed to take care of its water conservancy works properly, the interests of its neighboring polders were harmed. Nevertheless, neither individuals nor communities worked cooperatively to keep the systems in repair. This kind of situation persisted into the first half of the nineteenth century. According to Qian Yong (1759–1844), a late Qing scholar, this situation was prevalent in the polder land area throughout the lower Yangtze region.²¹ It also appears that the new rural social structure had a negative effect on agricultural development in this area. It seems unlikely that the new system could strengthen the cooperative organization of the irrigation communities as a historian has suggested recently.²²

Lineage Organization and the Rural Community

Lineage organization did not play a noticeable role in local politics in the Lake Tai area until the sixteenth century. Then, as a response to the intense pressure created by the taxation system, landowners, both privileged and nonprivileged, united with other landowners of their own clan under the leadership of their most prestigious gentry member. They intervened in local administration and helped clansmen in financial trouble. During the Qing, the role of the lineage or-

²⁰ *Wucheng XZ*, 1681 ed., 1.16.

²¹ Qian Yong, *Lüyuan conghua*, 4, “weitian,” 9–10.

²² Peter Perdue, *Exhausting the Earth: State and Peasant in Hunan, 1500–1850*, p. 182.

ganization changed; so did its leadership. Lineage organization became incorporated into the local government system as an instrument of local control. In the meantime, if there was no suitable gentry member in a clan, commoners were eligible for the clan leader position. All these changes were closely connected to the policies adopted by the Qing emperors.

The community role of the lineage organization can be divided into three phases. The first phase began in 1726, the fourth year of the Yongzheng reign. The emperor issued an edict ordering that each clan select a leader to take on the responsibility of investigating and reporting bad elements in the clan to the local authorities. The edict reads: "Where clans numbering over one hundred members live together, it is sometimes impossible for the *baojia* to inspect. A clan leader (*zuzheng*) with good moral character and high prestige is to be selected from each clan to detect and report the bad elements."²³

This edict signified an important policy change. From the time of the Northern Song dynasty (960–1127), lineage organizations had been widely established in China. They were a social institution and were always independent of the local political system. Moreover, the government never directly intervened in their internal affairs, and they were not a political instrument of local control until this edict of 1726. Subsequently, the position and the power of clan leaders were recognized and protected by law, and clan leaders became subcounty semiofficials on the local level.²⁴ In 1727, the emperor further strengthened the position of clan leaders by formally recognizing the legal authority of clan rules (*jia fa*), giving clan leaders the judicial power to punish lawless persons in their clans, even to sentence them to death.²⁵ With the encouragement of the emperor, lineage organizations developed rapidly in several parts of southern China; the number of clan-supported lawsuits and clan wars also increased to the extent that they constituted a serious threat to public order and security in local communities. These were unanticipated results of the emperor's policy.

The second phase began in 1740, not long after the new emperor succeeded to the throne in 1736. The Qianlong emperor took a series of steps to bring clan leaders under government control. First, he deprived clan leaders of the judicial power given in 1727 and insisted that the local government remained the only source of judicial, police,

²³ *Da Qing lü li huiji bian lan*, 1877 ed., 25.100.

²⁴ Zhu Yong, *Qingdai zongzu fa yanjiu*, pp. 151, 158.

²⁵ *Qin ding da Qing huidian shi li*, 1899 ed., §11, "xingbu," 2a.

and executive authority on the local level.²⁶ From 1764 to 1766, the emperor restricted what the lineage funds were to be used for: memorial ceremonies for ancestors, clan educational programs, and relief to kin in financial difficulties; interclan lawsuits and armed conflicts were not on the list of approved expenditures.²⁷ In 1789, the emperor reaffirmed his previous policy toward the clan leaders and reasserted that the local officials were the only people on the local level eligible to exercise executive, police, and judicial power on behalf of the emperor. He strictly forbade the clan leaders to have judicial power over clan members.²⁸ The emperor's intention was clear: he wanted clan leaders to play a supporting role in strengthening the ability of local government to maintain public order, but he would not tolerate their endangering public security.

Thus the data suggest that two social forces were at work in rural society during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The prevalent collective rent resistance represented a force of horizontal solidarity by the tenants to fight the absentee landlords, while the lineage organization represented a force of vertical unity for kinsmen of a clan. The significance of the coexistence of the two forces, as historian Frederic Wakeman suggests in his study of nineteenth-century Guangdong society, was that "this horizontal solidarity was mollified by the vertical ties of kinship."²⁹

The relationship between the local government and the lineage organization underwent another change during the early years of the nineteenth century after a series of uprisings and rebellions. The insurrection of the White Lotus sect in 1796, for example, which spread over nine provinces and took eight years to suppress, was politically devastating. At the same time, there was an uprising of Miao tribes in Hunan and Guizhou. The rebellion of the Eight Diagrams of Tianli sect in 1813 directly threatened the security of the capital. With the outbreak of these uprisings, China was ushered into an era of great domestic disturbances, culminating in the Taiping Rebellion of 1851–64. All these disturbances sent clear signals to the emperor that something had to be done to strengthen government control at the local level. In 1831, the Daoguang emperor again authorized clan leaders to be responsible for supervising their kinsmen's behavior. They were also responsible for arresting any criminal in their clans

²⁶ Ibid., 2a–b.

²⁷ Ibid., 399. Li-bu, 12b–13b; *Huang Qing zou yi*, 55.8b–9a.

²⁸ *Da Qing Gaozong chunhuangdi shi lu*, 1335.23b–26b.

²⁹ Wakeman, *Strangers at the Gate*, p. 111.

and sending them to the local government for punishment.³⁰ During the war to suppress the Taipings, the clan leaders' power in local society grew rapidly from organizing local militia to holding hearings on a legal case,³¹ and the lineage organization began to play a greater role in local communities than in earlier Qing times.

In summary, the decline of the Ming gentry landlordism in the sixteenth century provided the opportunity for the development of peasants' collective organizations in the Lake Tai region. The development, however, was conditioned by the socioeconomic structure of the Lake Tai rural community and the Qing policy toward the rural society. Consequently, the peasants' collective organizations were characterized by weak leadership and loose structure.

³⁰ *Da Qing Xuanzong Chenghuangdi shi lu*, 184.1a-2b.

³¹ Zhu Yong, *Qingdai zongzu fa yanjiu*, pp. 176-77.

Conclusion

The data presented here point to certain connections between Ming-Qing socioeconomic transformations and agricultural development in the Lake Tai region. During the first half of the Ming, the agrarian economy in the Lake Tai region showed considerable development. Local leaders were actively involved in promoting agricultural production, constructing irrigation and drainage systems, improving soil quality, cultivating wasteland, improving the transportation system, and establishing markets. Simultaneously there occurred a drastic social and economic differentiation among the rural people. As farmland ownership became increasingly concentrated in the hands of a few local leaders, the number of family farmers who lost their lands and became farm laborers for big landlords also increased. This development was closely associated with the semiofficial status of the local leaders. Not only were they the biggest resident landlords; they also exercised authority over tax and labor-service assessment and collection and adjudicated local disputes. The county government did not have direct jurisdiction over them, and the rural community did not have any peasants' collective organization to keep them in check. The local leaders had almost absolute authority over the people in their jurisdictions.

During the second half of the fifteenth century, the gentry members of a locality gradually became leaders of their fellow villagers while the subcounty organizations became their dependents. Although a gentry member did not have legal authority in his native place and was not allowed to interfere with the business of local government, his privileged status and personal connections in the bureaucratic hierarchy enabled him to mobilize the county political machinery to control the local people and protect his interests. The gentry usually played a dominant role in rural economy. They were the biggest landlords and bondservant owners. They were also the most resourceful creditors of the rural communities. Gentry members responded vigorously to

commercial development by making loans to handicraft producers and investing in commercial and manufacturing activities managed directly by their bondservants.

Concurrent with the decline of the powerful rural gentry landlords were the rise of absentee landlords, the development of peasants' collective organizations, and the direct intervention by the early Qing emperors in landlord-tenant relations. Consequently, large-scale units of farming disappeared, the percentage of landless peasants decreased, irrigation and drainage networks deteriorated, and, above all, absentee landlords lost full control over their lands and the peasants. If we hypothesize that the presence of a powerful and relatively independent landlord is a necessary condition for agricultural improvement as the early modern period English case suggests,¹ then the Qing structure was unfavorable.

In early Ming, the rural population, in terms of land distribution, consisted mainly of four groups of people: many small family farmers, a small number of medium-sized managerial landlords, landless peasants adding up to approximately 18 percent to 29 percent of the total, and some bondservants. The big commoner landlords employed bondservants, hired laborers, and tenant farmers as farm laborers. They also adopted a fixed-rent tenancy system. Before the development of market-oriented handicraft industry in the area, peasant families depended primarily on double cropping agriculture for their livelihood. A small peasant family counted on the autumn harvest for its food supply for about six months and needed the yield from the spring crops for the remaining months. When the peasants were confronted with financial difficulties, they would usually go to the wealthy landlords for loans.

The gentry, unlike the commoner landlords, generally entrusted the management of their properties to their bondservant-managers. Some gentry's properties were counted as "farm estates" (*zhuang*). The fields of an estate were geographically concentrated. Big gentry landlords used bondservants, hired laborers, and tenant farmers for all productive works including agriculture, handicraft, and commerce. Small gentry landowners entrusted all productive works to bondservants. Individual estates varied in size. Some were as large as 3,000 mu of land; some were a third that size. Many gentry landlords, like the commoner landlords, arranged it so that only lands adjacent to their residences were cultivated by their bondservants and/or hired la-

¹ Richard Lachmann, *From Manor to Market*, pp. 66-141.

borers, the rest being rented to tenants to cultivate under the supervision of the landlords' bondservant-managers. Big gentry landlords kept hundreds of bondservants; small ones owned only a few. These bondservants were the mainstay of Ming gentry landlordism. The farm laborers, in general, were submissive and hard working. Although fixed-rent tenancy had been the dominant farming practice in the region since early Ming, the landlords always extracted more rent than the fixed figures. Some powerful gentry landlords even treated tenant farmers like bondservants.

In the 1530s the gentry's power began to face serious challenges. These challenges came mainly from three interrelated developments. The first was the politically and financially motivated tax reforms in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, which were designed to stop the gentry from abusing their privileges and to assist the exploited people. During the course of the reforms, the people, encouraged by the policy, openly challenged the gentry's economic monopoly and seized the expanding market opportunities. The second was the Japanese pirate raids in the Lake Tai area in the 1550s, which provided the peasants with both the means and the confidence collectively to challenge their gentry masters. Finally, there was the area's commercial development. The gentry landlords responded to the commercial expansion by becoming actively involved in the new opportunities through investments in commerce and finance. Some indulged in luxury and extravagance, distancing themselves from actual managerial activities. This kind of family would soon decline.

A successful business also enabled the bondservant-merchants to improve their economic condition and even their legal status at the expenses of their masters. The owners of bondservants in the area began to realize that using bondservants to operate a business was not the most profitable way to preserve a family fortune. Evidence also demonstrates that the market opportunities contributed positively to the improvement of a hard-working peasant's economic situation and led to the emergence of new managerial farmers.

While the bondservant system was not legally abolished in early Qing, the practice of owning agricultural bondservants declined in the area. From the perspective of long-term development, two factors contributed to its decline: (1) the decrease in the demand for agricultural bondservants due in part to the increase in the percentage of absentee landlords and in part to the changing behavior of the early Qing bondservants and (2) the reduction in the supply of bondservants as a result of the gradual abolition of the service-levy system between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries. The peasants did not

need to give up their free-person status because of service levy-related financial difficulties. Moreover, the service-levy reforms were coupled with the development of the rural textile industry and the growth of commercial activities, thus allowing the peasant family to adopt handicraft production and/or market-service activities as employments or by-employments. The income from these employments enabled small peasant families to minimize their economic dependence on both the landlords and agricultural production. The combination of agriculture and handicraft production characterized the economic approach of the majority of peasant families in the Lake Tai region during the Qing.

The increase in employment opportunities in the form of by-employments resulted in a shortage of farm laborers in late Ming and early Qing. Consequently, the cost of farm labor increased. The shortage of farm laborers together with the direct intervention by the early Qing emperors in landlord-tenant relations surely encouraged the tenants to strive for more economic gain through collective rent resistance and pressed the landlords into making concessions. The new contractual relations had two main characteristics. (1) The contract guaranteed tenants a fixed annual land rent. The landlord had no right to demand additional payments and services. (2) Tenants could unilaterally reduce their rent payments in accordance with the percentage of decline in their harvest. Some tenants ended up never paying more than 80 or 90 percent of their rent quotas. The landlords no longer had the ability to enforce rent payments.

The adoption of family by-employment meant an increase in the family employment rate. In the early sixteenth century, for instance, all agricultural work in Guian-Wucheng was the responsibility of the men, while work in sericulture, lasting about a month, was the duty of women. After the adoption of cotton goods production, the average working period for a woman was extended from one month to a whole year. The development of an intensive family labor system also affected the men. They had to rearrange their work schedules in order to join in the family by-employment. In early Ming, peasant households earned their living primarily from double cropping farming. In contrast, in the Qing, about six months' livelihood for the rural household came from the same type of farming while the remainder came from family by-employments. This new mode of family production enabled the peasant family to maintain its livelihood without relying solely on agriculture. In other words, more people than before could be supported by the same piece of farm land. This was one of the factors that directly contributed to a relatively greater population increase in the Qing than in the Ming. Ironically, this population in-

crease in the Qing resulted neither from improvement in land productivity nor from qualitative technological changes in production. Moreover, peasant communities in the area were unable to initiate any large-scale investment in irrigation and drainage work.

Obviously, the new family economy made peasants' livelihood less uncertain and difficult. If there was a bad harvest, for example, peasant families could survive on handicraft production. However, this mode of production, limited by family labor availability, constituted a severe institutional barrier to the development of both intensive agriculture and family industry. In Wuxi county, for example, the weaving machines of peasant families usually lay unused for several months during the busy agricultural seasons. When silk goods production became more profitable than farming, however, the peasant families in sericulture areas gave up their spring crops cultivation to concentrate on silk production.

During the second half of the eighteenth century, the general inflation combined with the new tenancy relationship and new mode of family production created a broader-based domestic market for production. From 1816 on to 1844, however, because of a series of crop failures and the heavy drain on silver caused by the opium trade, price factors began to play a negative role in the economy, and a period of economic depression ensued.

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