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Xiaohong Xiao-Planes



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- 1 Li Huaiyin focuses on Chinese rural society in Huailu County in south-central Hebei Province, especially on forms of village administration and their relations with state power in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. The work follows a research path taken since the 1960s and 70s by historians Hsiao Kung-chuan, Ch'ü T'ung-tsu, Saeki Tomi, and John Watt,¹ who concentrated on the organisation and functioning of village sub-group institutions called *lijia*, *baojia*, *xiangbao*, *baozheng*, and *libao*, among others. These semi-official administrators helped magistrates by collecting taxes and ensuring social order. The works of Philip Huang and Prasenjit Duara in the 1980s regarding rural North China updated this historiography.² Huang scoured the rich archives in the Baodi sub-prefecture of north-eastern Hebei and found ordinary villagers who did not belong to the gentry performing the function of *xiangbao* (rural administrators). Thus, the configuration of power in rural society appears to have been more complex than might have been expected. Duara, for his part, characterised the role of village leaders as a sort of protection brokerage in which they served as go-betweens in the pre-modern Chinese state, allowing the imperial state to be present in the countryside without being actually installed there.
- 2 Li's work belongs to this line of historiographic revisionism. Having gained access to the archives of Huailu County, he traces a certain type of rural governance based on the institution of *xiangdi*, a sort of village agent or assistant. Unlike the *xiangbao* in north-eastern Hebei, who acted as an intermediary administrator between the local government and some 20-odd villages under his jurisdiction, the *xiangdi* in Huailu functioned between the local *yamen* and his own village. Li thus bases his study on a micro-history of the village, or so it would seem.
- 3 In fact, the institution of *xiangdi* formed the relational interface between rural communities and the administration, since its main function consisted of levying and

delivering taxes to the state. The archives consulted belonged to the Huailu County yamen and covered a period from the Guangxu Era until the 1930s. Li identified a total of 200 villages in the area. Most of them had just one xiangdi, but some had more, depending on the number of village subdivisions (pai). There were about 500 xiangdi in all, and this number remained stable throughout the period studied.

- 4 It is plausible that the xiangdi system was created in the eighteenth century, following the fiscal reforms of the Yongzheng Emperor in 1726, as a means of circumventing the role of intermediaries and yamen clerks in tax collection. In principle, villagers took turns performing the xiangdi function, but in practice, the selection process depended on the traditional social structures of the villages, such as clans (zu) and their branches (fang), who took it upon themselves to choose a family charged with serving as xiangdi. Some villages rotated the title based on a family's landholdings or tax quota, and exempted the poorest families from xiangdi service.
- 5 The concrete task of the xiangdi was to punctually collect taxes and, if necessary, advance the sums needed for deferred or temporary charges. To fulfil these obligations, the xiangdi could use the funds of the village community or the clan, or even borrow from shopkeepers (puhu) or traditional bankers (qianzhuang). They had to then collect the taxes they had paid in advance on behalf of the villagers, and transfer responsibility to their successors at the end of the year. The xiangdi role was deemed a public duty to the community and was not remunerated. On the other hand, the xiangdi enjoyed a legal status as middleman in local transactions, for which he was allowed to draw a small commission. All of the relevant rules – modalities of nomination, duration of mandate, responsibilities of the xiangdi, villagers' obligation to repay sums advanced as taxes on their behalf – were clearly set out in village regulations (cungui, xianggui or paigui). These rules, considered to hold the utmost authority, were handed down through generations and regulated interpersonal relations well into the 1920s in Huailu, the author notes.
- 6 The status and position of the xiangdi had the implicit backing of the cantonal administration. Magistrates depended on them to pay taxes in advance, and endorsed the prerogatives of the xiangdi as set out in village regulations. As Li Huaiyin describes it, however, even under this efficient cooperative machinery, village communities in Huailu were far from being an idyllic, harmonious society based on Confucian precepts. Conflicts broke out over rejection of xiangdi service, the refusal to pay taxes paid in advance on villagers' behalf, rivalries over the selection of xiangdi, or the use of communal funds. The yamen archives from which Li drew much information consisted mostly of administrative files. These showed that villagers appealed to the state representative any time the community or inter-community arrangements proved insufficient to settle disputes. Using this data, Li analyses the arguments of complainants and the accused, especially the community norms to which they routinely referred. These were the principles and regulations of the cungui, which the villagers internalised and respected widely, and the magistrates affirmed in their judgements. The village statutes were thus ratified by the authorities, acquiring a doubly coercive force that governed both the community's internal life and its rapport with the external authorities.
- 7 For state representatives, this institutional flexibility had great merit; the xiangdi who delivered up the taxes on behalf of the population ensured close to 100 percent compliance in Huailu during the period studied. In view of this, magistrates tended to

delegate new functions to the *xiangdi*, such as the task of maintaining order, electing village chiefs, or setting up and maintaining primary schools. The stable role of the *xiangdi* helped the cantonal council (*xian canyihui*), composed of local elites, to successfully resist tax increases on several occasions during the 1910-1920 period.

- 8 The author also considers the issue of state penetration into the countryside during the New Policy (*xinzheng*) period after 1900 and during the Nationalist era by examining institutions introduced in Huailu. Imposed from above, these were soon rendered ineffective and unreliable, as they lacked financial backing and local participation.
- 9 Li's study is measured and rigorous and calls attention to the oft-cited but perhaps insufficiently stressed notion of China's great diversity. The work also draws attention to the extraordinary socio-cultural wealth of the region, and forcefully highlights the condition that is a *sine qua non* for building a nation-state, namely the population's voluntary participation in the enterprise.

NOTES

1. Hsiao Kung-chuan, *Rural China: Imperial Control in the Nineteenth Century*, Seattle, University of Washington Press, 1960. Ch'ü T'ung-tsu, *Local government in China under the Ch'ing*, Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 1962. Saeki Tomi, "Shindai no kyoyaku jiho ni tsuite" (On the *xiangyue* and the *dibao* in the Qing time), in *Tohogaku*, n°28, 1964, p. 91-119; "Shindai no risho" (The *lishu* in the Qing dynasty), in *Toyo gakuho*, n. 46/3, 1965, p. 67-77, and John R. Watt, *The District Magistrate in Late Imperial China*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1972.

2. Philip C.C. Huang, *The Peasant Economy and Social Change in North China*, Stanford University Press, 1985; and Prasenjit Duara, *Culture, Power and the State: Rural North China, 1900-1942*, Stanford University Press, 1988.