VISIONS AND REVISIONS:  
VILLAGE POLICIES OF THE MING FOUNDER IN  
SEVEN PHASES

BY

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In high antiquity... laws were not ordered revised.  
Zhu Yuanzhang, “Youwu guishen”

Pursuing a vision of an ideal social order, the Ming founder Zhu Yuanzhang (r. 1368-1398 as the Hongwu emperor) created a new state that aimed at controlling and shaping society. But society also shaped the state-building policies. A chronological account of how the early Ming regime built village institutions shows, first, that many policies initially accommodated existing social formations, and second, that Zhu frequently revised his stance. Discussions of Zhu’s creation of the Ming state often consider the reign as a whole, or split it in two at 1380. But such analyses gloss over the details of village policies that are confusing, complex, and self-contradictory. Different laws described the same institution differently, and local leaders with various titles were charged with overlapping functions. Institutions were proposed, rejected, and then established anyway; or were established and then abolished, sometimes to be re-established later. Surveyed year by year, the contradictions make sense: the laws fall into definite phases. The revisions took account of resistance to the laws. As John Dardess has shown, Zhu understood that resistance as individual recalcitrance, stupidity and wickedness, but his own texts also suggest that it was the product of working social networks. Zhu’s response to resistance echoed its disruption of the hierarchy, solidarity and immobility he hoped to impose, thereby undercutting his own original blueprint for state and society. Resistance, therefore, revised the autocrat’s vision from the beginning.

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Village administrative policies changed considerably over the course of the first reign, both in specifics and in overall approach. Tax collection, population registration, religious institutions, community rituals, indoctrination, commendation of virtuous people, and surveillance were all aimed at assuring the dynasty material, social and spiritual support. The new dynasty implemented policies to reconstruct and control the tax base; tap into the social resources of local communities to enhance its own prestige and keep the peace; and coordinate with, and when necessary control, deities and their followers. The first section of this essay shows that these policies came in seven phases. Considered within each phase, the whole set of regulations makes sense together, and each phase differs coherently from the others. The second section shows that other kinds of regulations, such as those governing the Buddhist clergy and institutions, can also be understood within the seven-phase framework. From one phase to the next, whole systems were created and dismantled: for instance, the lijia system superseded Assemblies; official community schools were turned over to civilians; the Community Elder system replaced the Senior system for settling local disputes.

Specific policies changed; but the basic approach also changed. Zhu Yuazheng and his advisors initially constructed a bureaucratic hierarchy incorporating both officials and deities and fostered cooperation in the promotion of moral values among clergy, officials and subjects. By the end of his reign, Zhu Yuazheng had promulgated laws that undercut family, administrative and spiritual hierarchies and may have fostered disension. He had had to sacrifice elements of what Edward Farmer has called the largely successful “Ming constitution,” which “strongly influenced the development of Chinese government and society for the next six centuries”: a system of rituals, regulations, and laws meant to shape society and culture into a unified, hierarchical whole, embodied in institutions resistant to decay and change.

The changes were made in a battle against corruption and disobedience that Zhu saw, as John Dardess has shown, as essential to the survival of the dynasty. He understood the forces facing him as, in Dardess’s words, “stupidly criminal” examples of “recalcitrance