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The Zvi Yavetz School of Historical Studies,
Tel Aviv University,
Israel

Research Statement

Song historiography is dominated by three major narratives: the rise of a new non-hereditary elite through the civil service examination system; the preference for civil and “Confucian” values over martial ones, and for civil officials over generals; and the conflict between Chinese and non-Chinese peoples. By placing common soldiers at the center of my study, my research offers new narratives: the formation of a new lower class of soldiers and their families, the growth of a martial counterculture at the bottom of society, and the violent clash between the elites and the poor.

When the history of common soldiers is woven into the broader fabric of Song dynasty history, much of what we know about that world changes. The social mobility of the Song was mostly limited to elites and it did not trickle down to the bottom of society. I demonstrate that the economic boom of the Song period was achieved with labor extracted by force from marginal populations, reluctant to serve and hostile to the social order. Instead of a society organized in a harmonious Confucian hierarchy, my research shows elites that were fearful of the poor and a state whose authority was exercised with the cane, the sword, and the tattooing needle.

There is abundant Chinese language secondary literature on Song dynasty military affairs, yet state-centered narratives dominate this body of secondary literature. Western scholars, on the other hand, have been more interested in social issues but have shown relatively

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little interest in studying military affairs. In my research, I ask questions that have been of interest to Western social historians, but I do so while working in a field that has been mostly of interest to Chinese scholars. In doing so, my study demonstrates the importance of military affairs to the analysis of broad social issues.

Military and penal tattoos are an important theme of my work. While there are a few articles in English, Chinese, and Japanese on tattooing in Middle Period China, my work offers the first in-depth study of this issue. My work analyzes tattoos as a hidden textual layer and as a means to “short-circuit” our understanding of traditional historical narratives. In the process, my study opens up new possibilities for studying tattoos in later periods of Chinese history but also in other regions in the world.

My work is breaking new ground for a gender history of lower class men. Gender historians of Middle Period China placed women of a more diverse social background in the center of historical enquiry and painted a social picture that went beyond the stories of elite men. My research brings to light the stories of lower class men, and by doing so reveals a lower class masculinity based on violence, brotherhood, and a disdain for elite values and practices.

By examining the hitherto unexplored world of lower class males in Song China, the dissertation also reveals the gendered aspects of class: while females of the lower classes had new opportunities of moving socially upward and spatially towards the commercial and economic centers as concubines and courtesans, lower class males were pushed downward and outward, into the ranks of the army, stationed on the empire’s borders. While female bodies became merchandise available to the rich, male bodies were measured, branded, and monetized as an expense item in the state’s defense budget.

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A major premise of my research is that social attitudes are crucial for the understanding of institutions. My research focuses on the institutions that managed the most marginal groups of Song society, but it does so by analyzing sources produced by elite members of society. In order to read through the elite narratives, I examined literary, legal, and political sources. Analysis of literary sources allowed me to decode elite attitudes to common soldiers and identify the scholar-officials of the Song dynasty as “hostile witnesses,” men whose reports contained valuable facts but whose attitudes towards soldiers were largely antagonistic. I then used the insights gained from literary sources to analyze legal and political sources in search of the rationale behind the Song penal-military complex.

As I faced the challenge of writing a lower class history for the Song period, I had to gather fragments of information from a wide range of sources, analyze them “against the grain,” and reassemble them into a coherent narrative. In doing so, I found great inspiration in a body of literature outside of the China field. Such works include Lacan’s psychoanalytic theories, Žižek’s writings on violence, and Michelle Alexander’s work on mass incarceration in contemporary USA. My work offers a close reading of Song texts, but it does so while engaging subjects and lines of analysis that resonate across time and cultures. This aspect gives my work a broad appeal that extends beyond the field of Song history.

Research Plan

A year of support from The Zvi Yavetz School of Historical Studies will allow me to make important steps in revising my dissertation and turning it into a manuscript. For that purpose, I will analyze a variety of legal and institutional primary sources—some as-yet unused in English-language studies—to broaden my coverage of the legal aspects of Song military history. The *Song huiyao*, a vast institutional history, contains a great deal of information on military law.

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This study will be the first English language scholarship to do in-depth research of the “military” section of this collection.

In addition to intensive primary source research, analyzing the lower classes demands a strong theoretical base. During this fellowship, I will strengthen my theoretical framework through extensive reading in literature dealing with subaltern voices, power and class, crime and incarceration systems, and body culture.

Since the Song army was both a military space and a penal space, I will put my work into conversation with broader legal and military history, and add a comparative perspective with other periods in China and with other regions in the world. This will allow my research a wider angle on the interplay between social, military, and legal developments, and to place the story of the Song dynasty’s tattooed soldiers within military and legal history.

In addition to revising my dissertation, I plan to publish a few articles that will be based on smaller research projects. I was invited to write a chapter on “the state of the field” in the military history of Middle Period China for a handbook on military history in East Asia. I will also write an article on desertion in the Song armies based on a paper I that I am scheduled to present at the Association of Asian Studies conference in Seattle in March 2016. This paper is part of a panel I organized that deals with desertion in East Asia from the tenth century to the present day. I will finish most work on the book chapter and article by June 2016, and I plan to do final revisions in preparation for publication during my stay in Tel Aviv University.

My study of soldiers opens a door into new and exciting possibilities for research on the lives of lower classes in Middle Period China. I already have more projects planned for the future. One of my next projects will be a study of soldiers’ families during the Song period, a topic that has not been explored by scholars of the Song dynasty. An important source for this

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study will be a twelfth century anecdotal compilation, *Yijian zhi*, that contains a record of hundreds of bizarre and supernatural events. This study will use these stories to chart the physical and social landscape of the military camp and of the families who inhabited them. In the crowded alleyways and wine shops of the military camps we can rediscover the soldiers and prostitutes, crippled veterans, unfaithful wives and their jealous and violent lovers, drunken brawls and grisly executions in the marketplace. The picture that emerges from their stories is that of small nuclear families who waged a struggle for survival in the shadow of poverty, abuse, and war.

Thank you for considering my application.