

The Forbidden Forests: State Control and Local Conflicts  
around the Imperial Tombs in Ming Dynasty China

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**Abstract**

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History

Thirty miles from the Ming Dynasty's (1368-1644) ruling center, the northwestern mountains near Beijing housed the imperial tombs and critical northern frontier sites. Due to their ritual and strategic importance, forests in this region remained under strict control throughout the dynasty. This thesis examines the conflicts between state-imposed logging restrictions and local demands for wood-based fuel against the backdrop of shrinking forest resources. It reveals officials' active involvement in unauthorized logging, shedding light on the tensions among local authorities and their entanglement with broader factional struggles. Furthermore, it explores the relationship between forest preservation and national security, demonstrating how these forests served as both natural barriers against Mongol invaders and secret hideouts beyond the reach of imperial surveillance. By cross-referencing the Ming *Veritable Records*, local gazetteers, literati writings,

and stone inscriptions, this thesis illustrates the flow of forest resources, illicit revenues, and imperial power around the imperial tomb site. It argues that the dense network of state institutions failed to eliminate persistent violations; instead, it produced a complex structure that enabled various actors to advance their own interests. Through a close examination of the political dynamics that shaped the forested landscape, this research provides insights into the agency of the environment, the practical operation of imperial power, and the making of local agency in Ming Dynasty China.

# Content

<b>Chapter 1 Introduction</b> .....	1
Governing the Woodlands: Management Practices and Forested Frontiers .....	2
Setting the Stage: Mountains, Forests, and Capitals.....	7
<b>Chapter 2 Tomb Trees or Fuelwood: Negotiating Imperial Regulations and Local Needs..</b>	12
Demarcating the Forbidden Zone: Boundary-Making on the Ground.....	13
Economy of Exclusion: The Cost of Preserving a Sacred Landscape .....	18
When Trees Became Sacrilege: The Legal Response to Forest Violations .....	21
<b>Chapter 3 Politics of Trees: Institutional Tensions and Forest Violations</b> .....	26
Fragmented Authority: Shifting Institutional Structures.....	27
The Custodian Who Stole: Official Complicity in Illegal Logging.....	32
<b>Chapter 4 The Inaccessible Zone: Between Defense, Ceremony, and Resistance</b> .....	41
Blocking Mountain Passes: Forests as Natural Barriers .....	42
A Frontier Within: Imperial Presence and Local Tensions .....	48
Sheltered by the Landscape: Evasion and Local Resistance .....	53
<b>Chapter 5 Conclusion</b> .....	59

## Chapter 1 Introduction

When Gu Yanwu, an eminent literatus and Ming (1368-1644) loyalist, visited the imperial tombs after the fall of the dynasty, he was deeply struck by the transformations of the sacred burial ground. He lamented, “There used to be no less than several hundred thousand green pines and cypresses. Now they have been completely cut down.”<sup>1</sup> By depicting the changes in the once-forested landscape, Gu implicitly expressed his sorrow for the perished empire and sentiments for the vicissitude of history. As he understood it, the trees surrounding the imperial tombs symbolized the rise and decline of the Ming state, providing an insightful perspective into the imperial power and its projection into local society.

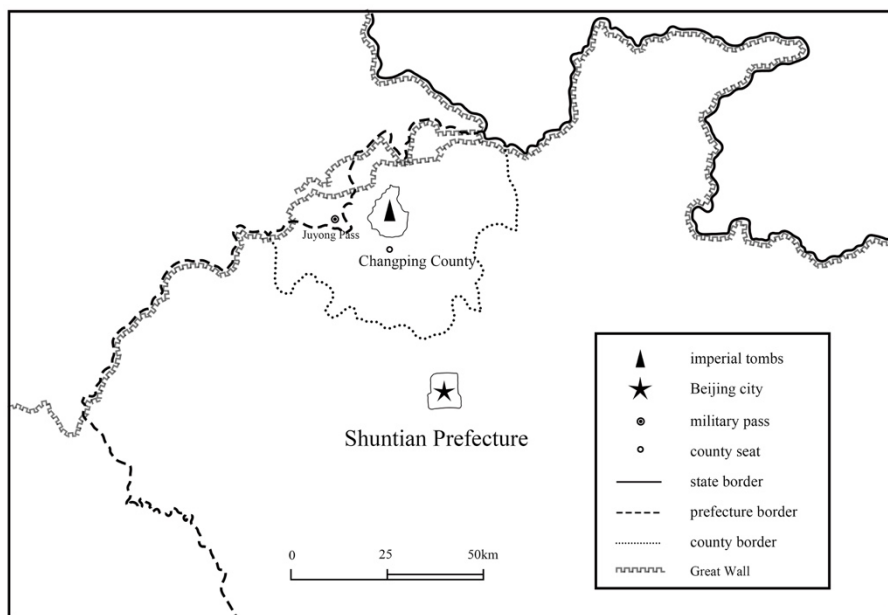
Located about 30 miles from the Forbidden City, mountains in the northwestern suburb of Beijing housed the tombs of thirteen Ming emperors, their empresses, and imperial concubines. Adjacent to the south of the Great Wall, this area was also exposed to the northern frontier and therefore susceptible to Mongol attacks. Due to its unparalleled ritual and military significance, forests in this region were under strict control throughout the Ming Dynasty. However, as official records indicated, illegal activities, such as falling, stealing, or trading protected trees, were never eliminated from the forbidden forests. In a place of such importance to the ruling house, who were the ones daring to commit the crimes? What was the incentive behind their actions? How did the state react to these violations? Addressing these questions helps to illuminate the effectiveness of state control and the agency of local society during a period when imperial rule is thought to operate at its fullest extent.

Framing the inquiry in this way brings two overlapping landscapes into focus: a natural one defined by forest cover, and a political one that accommodated persistent violations. By

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<sup>1</sup> Gu Yanwu 顧炎武, *Changping shanshuiji* 昌平山水記 [Records of the Mountains and Waters of Changping] (17<sup>th</sup> century), juan 1, 4-5.

examining the transformation of both landscapes, along with the various actors who inhabited and navigated them, this thesis illustrates the flow of forest resources, illicit revenues, and political authority around the imperial tomb site. Through analysis of the persistent crimes arising within this locality, it demonstrates both the capacities and the limits of state power in shaping a specific terrain of power and resources. As specified in the following chapters, the very form of these crimes was influenced by both natural environment and local networks, which themselves exercised significant agency in response to the penetration of imperial power.



**Figure 1.1** Location of the imperial tombs. Created by the author. Based on Hou Renzhi 侯仁之, *Beijing lishi dituji: Zhengqu chengshi juan* 北京歷史地圖集：政區城市卷 [*Historical Atlas of Beijing: Volume on Administrative Divisions and Cities*] (Beijing: Wenjin chubanshe, 2013), 54-55.

### **Governing the Woodlands: Management Practices and Forested Frontiers**

To better position this study within existing scholarship, it is necessary to situate these specific forests in relation to the broader historiography of woodland in imperial China. Since

Mark Elvin introduced his grand theory of long-term deforestation in Chinese history, scholars have worked to enrich his framework with regional nuance.<sup>2</sup> Ian Miller and Meng Zhang, for instance, investigate the commercial logging industry in South China during the Ming and Qing Dynasties, highlighting the market-driven forces and limited state intervention behind the flourishing timber trade.<sup>3</sup> David Bello and Jonathan Schlesinger, on the other hand, examine the forests in northeast China, uncovering the Qing rulers' efforts to preserve ethnic distinctiveness through maintaining or even constructing the specific ecology of the Manchu homeland.<sup>4</sup> In contrast, forests in North China have received less scholarly attention, understandably because much of the region had already been deforested by the late imperial period. Brian Lander notes that the North China Plain was largely stripped of woodland as early as the Han Dynasty, and the remaining forests were patchy and easily disrupted throughout subsequent history.<sup>5</sup> The forested landscape in North China thus stood in stark contrast to that of the South or Northeast: smaller in scale and more fragmented in form, yet it embodied complex cultural and environmental dynamics that were comparably meaningful to those of better-forested regions.

Arguably, one of the distinctive features defining North China woodland is the close oversight by imperial authority. Multiple swaths of woodland were preserved to function as hunting parks, animal enclosures, and interment complexes, which could not have existed

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<sup>2</sup> Mark Elvin, *The Retreat of the Elephants: An Environmental History of China* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004).

<sup>3</sup> Ian M. Miller, *Fir and Empire: The Transformation of Forests in Early Modern China* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2020); Meng Zhang, *Timber and Forestry in Qing China: Sustaining the Market* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2021).

<sup>4</sup> David A. Bello, *Across Forest, Steppe, and Mountain: Environment, Identity, and Empire in Qing China's Borderlands* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016); Jonathan Schlesinger, *A World Trimmed with Fur: Wild Things, Pristine Places, and the Natural Fringes of Qing Rule* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2017).

<sup>5</sup> Brian Lander, "Deforestation in Early China: How People Adapted to Wood Scarcity," in *The Cultivated Forest: People and Woodlands in Asian History*, ed. Dagmar Schäfer and Victor Seow (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2024), 1-19; David A. Bello, "Splintered Habitats: The Fragmentation of Ecotone Northern China's Imperial Woodland Complexes," in *The Cultivated Forest*, 98-101.

without the intervention of state power. In an early seminal work on Chinese forests, Nicholas Menzies asks, in the general context of deforestation: what were the conditions under which forest management was practiced?<sup>6</sup> The question was particularly pertinent to North China, which faced unparalleled environmental pressure for housing successive capitals yet somehow managed to maintain certain woodlands. Through in-depth analysis of Mulan Enclosure and Qing imperial tombs, scholars reveal the cultural, ethnic, or even supernatural rationales underlying the continued imperial efforts to preserve these woodlands.<sup>7</sup> Forest management in North China was therefore markedly different from the commercial logic of South China: here, symbolic and political meaning was prioritized ahead of economic interests. And it was also distinctive from that of Manchurian forests, which bore similar cultural imperatives but experienced far less direct control. In this sense, woodlands in North China were a direct manifestation of state power as well as its limits, revealing an intriguing story about the dynamic balance between dynastic authority, inhabitants' economic demands, and the forest's natural capacity.

As the advancement of agrosocieties pushed forests to remote mountainous areas, the study of woodlands intersects with the history of borderlands. Early historiography of borderland development is frequently framed by the narrative of "Sinicization," associating the transformation of forested landscape with the spread of Han civilization.<sup>8</sup> Moving away from this Han-centered view, later scholars emphasize the agency of peripheral societies and the cultural

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<sup>6</sup> Nicholas Menzies, *Forest and Land Management in Imperial China* (Dordrecht: Springer, 1994), 2.

<sup>7</sup> Menzies, *Forest and Land Management*, 55-64; Elvin, *The Retreat of the Elephants*, 289-296; Bello, "Splintered Habitats," 101-116.

<sup>8</sup> For instance, Mark Elvin argues the removal of the original vegetation cover in borderlands was accompanied by the spread of Han peoples, a process he terms "Chinese colonialism." Elvin, *The Retreat of the Elephants*, 216-272.

distinctiveness that emerged through their interactions with central power.<sup>9</sup> More recent studies explore the limits of human efforts in cultivating border landscapes and highlight the active role environments played in constructing frontier identities.<sup>10</sup> Manifested in nuanced ways in the empire's southwest and northeast forested frontiers, these perspectives bring in local and environmental insights that enrich our understanding of how the state exploited frontiers and how these efforts were constrained by local cultural and natural realities. While holding great importance in Ming politics, the northern border was not typically linked to a forest frontier. Instead, it was marked by a more well-known human structure, the Great Wall, and often associated with images of serious deforestation. However, as scholars underscore, the preservation and active planting of forests was carried out periodically from the Song to the Ming period, forming a consistent part of both dynasties' border defense systems.<sup>11</sup> By the mid-15th century, the retreat of the Ming defense line positioned the imperial tombs into a contested frontier zone, where forests became increasingly tied to national security. In this context, examining the woodlands surrounding the imperial tombs offers a valuable lens to understand how the state manipulated the environment for defensive purposes and actively maintained a frontier right next to the political heart of the empire.

Both forest and borderland management required the involvement of imperial forces, which trickled state authority down and reshaped the social textures of local communities. Imperial power manifested in nuanced ways across the empire, most often not through formal institutions

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<sup>9</sup> Pamela Kyle Crossley, Helen F. Siu, and Donald S. Sutton, eds., *Empire at the Margins: Culture, Ethnicity, and Frontier in Early Modern China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006); Stevan Harrell, ed., *Cultural Encounters on China's Ethnic Frontiers* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2011).

<sup>10</sup> Bello, *Across Forest, Steppe, and Mountain*; Schlesinger, *A World Trimmed with Fur*.

<sup>11</sup> Qiu Zhonglin 邱仲麟, "Guofang xianshang: Mingdai changcheng yanbiande senlin kanfa yu rengong zaolin" 國防線上：明代長城沿邊的森林砍伐與人工造林 [On the defense line: Deforestation and afforestation along the Ming Great Wall], *Mingdai yanjiu* 明代研究, no. 8 (2005): 1-66; Yuan Julian Chen, "Frontier, Fortification, and Forestation: Defensive Woodland on the Song - Liao Border in the Long Eleventh Century," *Journal of Chinese History*, no. 2 (2018): 313-334.

or official representatives, but through regulatory regimes and governing structures.<sup>12</sup> The bureaucracy's inability to reach the bottom of society invited various actors to fill this power vacuum, which is assumed to undergird the very basis of local agency. Yet, places where state power was directly present have remained unexpectedly underexplored. What if, instead of being absent, state power did permeate the arteries of local life? How might such a presence have reshaped local dynamics in distinct ways? In his study of the "economy of violence" in the Ming capital region, David Robinson argues that a "strong aggregate state presence" did not result in total control but led to internal conflicts and persistent crises.<sup>13</sup> Similarly, the area surrounding imperial tombs witnessed a dense institutionalized presence of state power that introduced both troubles and flexibility into local society. Taken together, studies of these places deepen our understanding of state power, particularly how it operated and manifested, not in opposition to, but entangled with the structures of local communities.

Forests, borderlands, and the imperial capital—these elements define the distinct character of this region, underscoring the need for an in-depth examination of its social structures and political dynamics. Several tensions complicate the puzzles of local history: positioned near the border yet adjacent to the capital, forests vital to local life but under central oversight, and the state exerting distant control while maintaining a nearby presence. These dynamics challenge the dichotomies historians have adopted to interpret Chinese society, demonstrating that realities rarely align with either end but always emerge as a blend of both. Though touching on multiple themes, this research does not aim to address all the fields equally. Rather, it centers on a

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<sup>12</sup> Michael Szonyi, *The Art of Being Governed: Everyday Politics in Late Imperial China* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018), 6-10.

<sup>13</sup> David M. Robinson, "Banditry and the Subversion of State Authority in China: The Capital Region during the Middle Ming Period (1450-1525)," *Journal of Social History* 33, no. 3 (2000): 527-529; David M. Robinson, *Bandits, Eunuchs, and the Son of Heaven: Rebellion and the Economy of Violence in Mid-Ming China* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2001), 165-167.

persistent issue that runs through them all, the presence of imperial power, and tends to frame the discussion through the perspectives of environment, society, and borderland. It demonstrates that the dense network of state institutions failed to keep one of the dynasty's most significant sites inviolate; instead, it produced a complex structure that enabled various actors to advance their own interests. These interactions unfolded across a physical landscape where profitable trees, rugged terrain, and shielding forests each offered advantages to different groups. By tracing the specific dynamics surrounding the imperial tomb site, the study reveals how both natural and human actors exercised agency in response to the reach of imperial power and ultimately shaped the outcomes of state intervention.

### **Setting the Stage: Mountains, Forests, and Capitals**

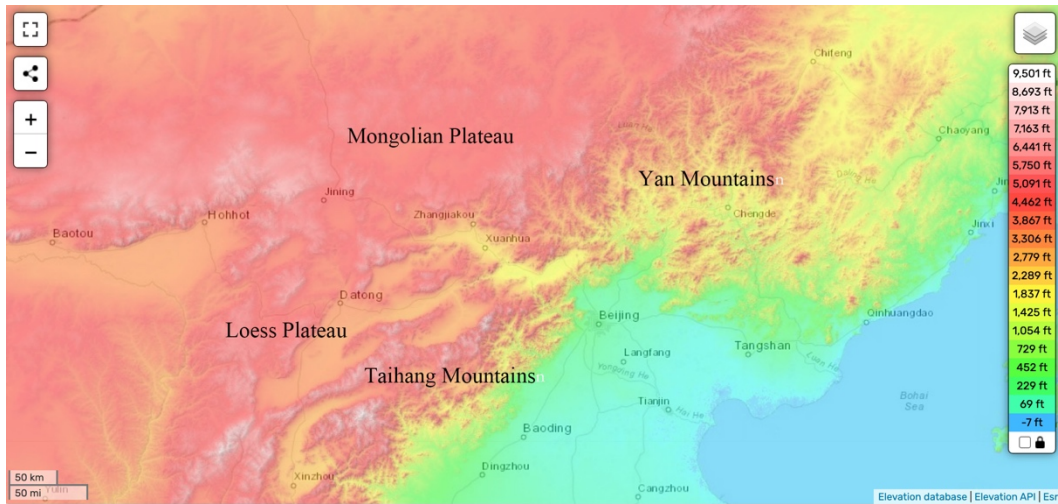
Having established the broader historiographical context, this section turns to the particular forests at the center of this study, outlining their geographic setting and tracing their historical development under imperial rule. When describing the natural landscape of Changping County, where the Ming imperial tombs were located, the compiler of the 1543 gazetteer wrote, “Surrounded by towering mountains, the landscape is naturally majestic and graceful.”<sup>14</sup> The mountainous terrain and its geomantic advantages led to its selection as a favorable site for the imperial burial ground. Furthermore, it marked the geographic foundation of a vast forested region where the state struggled to exert its control.

Zooming out, the geopolitical significance of the region becomes apparent. The imperial tombs rested at the northern fringe of North China Proper, where the Taihang and Yan Mountains meet. Beyond the Taihang Mountains to the west lies the Loess Plateau, while across the Yan

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<sup>14</sup> Cui Xuelü 崔學履, *Changpingzhou zhi* 昌平州志 [Gazetteer of Changping Prefecture] (1568; rpt. Beijing: Guojia tushuguan chubanshe, 2024), juan 1, 8.

Mountains to the north stretches the Mongolian Plateau. These mountain ranges had long been strategically vital to regimes based in North China Proper, as they separated the plain from the steppe dominated by non-Han groups and constituted a natural barrier against nomadic invasions.



**Figure 1.2** Topographic Map of North China (“Topographic-map.com,” accessed May 5, 2025, <https://en-us.topographic-map.com/map-pxv3q/China/?center=32.27784%2C107.28793&zoom=7&base=4>.)

From northwest to southeast, as latitude and altitude decrease, the mountains also mark the transition of vegetation. While grasslands dominated the landscape beyond, forests once extended across the mountains and into the plain. For much of the time before the 10th century, when Beijing stood at the edge of Han-Chinese dynasties, the region’s original vegetation saw only limited exploitation. Several Tang dynasty records mention the existence of commercial timber and charcoal industries in the city, which scholars interpret as evidence of relatively abundant forest resources in the surrounding area.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Wang Jiuling 王九齡, “Beijing diqu lishi shiqi de senlin” 北京地區歷史時期的森林 [Forests in the Beijing Region during Historical Periods], *Nongye kaogu* 農業考古, no. 2 (1983): 37.

The profound transformation of the forested landscape began with the onset of long-term foreign rule. In 938, Shi Jingtang ceded a portion of North China to the Khitans in exchange for their support for his regime. As a result, the region remained under the Liao Dynasty's (916-1125) rule for nearly two hundred years. It was not until 1123, when the Northern Song (960-1127) allied with the Jurchens and overthrew the Khitan regime, that the area briefly returned to Han-Chinese rule. However, as the Jurchens soon broke the alliance and occupied the North China Plain, control over this region was transferred in 1127. The Jurchen Jin dynasty (1115-1234) governed the area for another century until 1213, when Genghis Khan's forces advanced southward and annexed the territory under Mongol rule.<sup>16</sup>

Throughout its long history of foreign occupation, Beijing continued to serve as a strategic base for foreign rulers to extend their control over China Proper. It witnessed the construction of the Liao Upper Capital, Jin Middle Capital, and Yuan Dadu, and along with these developments were large-scale immigration and rapid population growth. As the foreign rulers imposed few restrictions on wood extraction, the surrounding forests faced unprecedented levels of exploitation. In addition to supplying resources, these nearby woodlands also functioned as hunting grounds for the nomadic rulers. Based on the variety of wild animals recorded during their hunting excursions, scholars believe that vast tracts of forest remained, providing habitats for diverse wildlife.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> See summary of local history in each version of the county gazetteer. Cui, *Changpingzhou zhi*, juan 1, 4-5; Wu Duliang 吳都梁, *Changpingzhou zhi* 昌平州志 [Gazetteer of Changping Prefecture] (1683), juan 2, 1-2; Changpingxian zhi bianzuan weiyuanhui 昌平縣志編纂委員會, ed., *Changpingxian zhi* 昌平縣志 [Gazetteer of Changping County] (Beijing: Beijing chubanshe, 2006), 1.

<sup>17</sup> Wang, "Beijing diqu lishi shiqi de senlin," 37-38. Yu Xixian 于希賢, "Beijing shi lishi ziran huanjing bianqian de chubu yanjiu" 北京市歷史自然環境變遷的初步研究 [A Preliminary Study on the Historical Environmental Changes in Beijing], *Zhongguo lishi dili luncong* 中國歷史地理論叢, no. 1 (1995): 45-52.

Paradoxically, it was these foreign rulers, not the Han civilization, as the sincinization theory argues, who initiated the irreversible deforestation in Beijing's history. The trend continued into the Ming period, and was exacerbated especially after Emperor Yongle relocated the capital to Beijing in the early 15<sup>th</sup> century. The reestablishment of Han rule in the North China Plain once again heightened the geopolitical significance of these mountains along its fringe. And what Yongle did not anticipate, however, was that its strategic importance would become even more critical after the Ming defense perimeter drastically retreated inward in the mid-15th century. Since then, what was once the last line of defense became a true frontier zone, with the mountainous terrain and forest cover increasingly tied to the very survival of the dynasty.

Unlike in earlier periods, Beijing was no longer a border town of the Han-Chinese regime. It became the regime's political center, home to majestic palace complexes, imperial offices, and an ever-growing population. The staggering demand for wood, whether for construction or fuel, made it virtually impossible to maintain a high level of forest cover. While the western mountain ranges had almost been depleted of forests by the late 15th century, the areas surrounding the imperial tombs surprisingly retained their wooded landscape. Visiting officials praised the lushness of the forests in their poems, seeing in them a symbol of the dynasty's prosperity.<sup>18</sup> Tigers were also reported in the area, whose very existence points to a well-preserved ecosystem that was likely supported by extensive forest cover.<sup>19</sup>

From a longer historical perspective, forests were once a natural feature of the mountains northwest of Beijing. However, as the region developed over time, its existence became

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<sup>18</sup> Cui, *Changpingzhou zhi*, juan 1, 15-26.

<sup>19</sup> Tiger hunters were recorded as being dispatched to the northern mountains. *Yingzong Shilu* in *Ming Shilu* 明實錄 [Veritable Records of the Ming] (1418-mid-17th century, rpt. Taipei: Institute of History and Philology, Academia Sinica, 1961-1966), (1457-9-13), 6058; (1462-12-22), 7000.

increasingly dependent on the intervention of state power. Compared to earlier foreign dynasties, the Ming rulers felt more pressing to preserve these woodlands, not only because they sheltered the sacred burial grounds, but also because geopolitical changes had heightened their defensive significance. This historical backdrop helps establish essential context for interpreting the conflicts that arose around the imperial tombs, which reflected a broader struggle over shrinking forest resources that intensified particularly during the Ming period. As the following chapters reveal, these conflicts offer insight into how imperial authority managed to shape the natural landscape for its own purposes, and how it was ultimately constrained by both the physical limits of the environment and the ongoing economic pressures from the local population.

## Chapter 2 Tomb Trees or Fuelwood: Negotiating Imperial Regulations and Local Needs

After the death of his empress in 1407, Emperor Yongle, who had made up his mind to move the capital to Beijing, commanded several prominent geomancers to select an auspicious site for their joint tomb near his new capital. Through careful analysis, they identified a mountain called Loess (*huangtu* 黄土) in Changping County, which then received the emperor's visits and was bestowed with the prestigious name Heaven-Longevity (*tianshou* 天壽).<sup>20</sup> The construction of imperial tombs started two years later in 1409 and continued until the end of the dynasty, when there happened to be no available land for the next Son of Heaven to establish his afterlife residence. After a failed attempt to secure a spot in his family tomb site, Emperor Chongzhen was forced to look elsewhere. Unfortunately, this newly selected location did not become auspicious until 1644, by which time the dying dynasty no longer had the fortune to endure.<sup>21</sup>

Here, the rise and fall of the burial ground was deemed intimately connected to the fate of the dynasty, reflecting an entrenched belief in the interconnectedness of life and death that was centered in Chinese geomancy, or *fengshui*. As Tristan Brown's research highlights, one of the crucial determinants of an auspicious site was its earth vein (*dimai* 地脈), which referred to invisible subterranean channels that directed *qi* through the land, and could be harmed by cutting down trees, modifying water flows or mining a mountain.<sup>22</sup> To protect geomantic fortune and ensure the longevity of imperial rule, any potential destruction of the "dragon veins" (*longmai* 龍脈) around Heaven-Longevity Mountain, whether through the theft of sacrificial objects, felling of trees, mining, or unauthorized entry, was strictly prohibited throughout the Ming dynasty.

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<sup>20</sup> *Taizong Shilu* (1409-5-8), 1202.

<sup>21</sup> Zha Jizuo 查繼佐, *Zuiweilu* 罪惟錄 [A Record of the Solely Condemned] (1672; rpt. Shanghai: Shanghai shangwu yinshuguan, 1936), juan 28, 16-17.

<sup>22</sup> Tristan G. Brown, *Laws of the Land: Fengshui and the State in Qing Dynasty China* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2023), 7-8.

The enforcement of such prohibitions required administrative measures, and therefore, the state demarcated the forbidden zone, issued imperial regulations, and established a whole set of management apparatus. However, the exertion of dynastic authority inevitably disrupted the area's socio-economic equilibrium, cutting off long-standing local dependence on nearby natural resources and introducing persistent troubles into daily life.<sup>23</sup> This problem was further exacerbated by the dynasty's decision to impose a wood-cutting ban in a largely deforested region, which nearly predetermined its failure to achieve the intended effect. Centered on this conflict, this chapter examines how state regulations were initially designed to ensure forest protection and how they were forced to adapt in response to shifting local demands and resource constraints.

### **Demarcating the Forbidden Zone: Boundary-Making on the Ground**

An effective management regime, in Nicholas Menzies's view, should include "the capacity to control access to as well as utilisation and distribution of the resource." He further points out that control over access is particularly significant where forests are protected for normative and symbolic reasons, as these forests owe their existence to the symbolic significance of their location, and their physical presence can only be maintained by controlling access.<sup>24</sup> Control over access involves first defining boundaries and then enforcing them, both of which are crucial for the Ming rulers to manage the forests surrounding their sacred burial ground.

When Yongle initiated the first construction in Heaven-Longevity Mountain, he commanded the evacuation of the original residents, relocation of their villages, and removal of their temples

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<sup>23</sup> Similar phenomenon were also observed at the Qing imperial tombs and Mulan hunting closure. Elvin, *The Retreat of the Elephants*, 294; Bello, "Splintered Habitats," 99.

<sup>24</sup> Menzies, *Forest and Land Management*, 131-132.

and tombs.<sup>25</sup> This practice was continued by subsequent emperors, who gradually filled the valley with majestic tomb buildings and shaped the area into an inviolable zone. Later historical narratives tend to overlook this transformative process and describe the interment complex as clearly demarcated from the very beginning of its construction. The core burial complex was thought to be the region surrounded by the mountain passes, encompassing an area of over 80 square kilometers. And the broader prohibited forests were defined by the edges of mountain ranges associated with the tomb's geomantic principles, covering an area exceeding 1,000 square kilometers.<sup>26</sup> However, not only were these boundaries subject to continual adjustment, but even with imperial efforts to formalize and render them permanent, they were rarely enforced with precision on the actual landscape.

During Emperor Hongxi's short-lived reign, a debate regarding the boundaries of the forbidden forests emerged in the court. The emperor finally decided to retain the logging ban in areas from Juyong Pass eastward to Heaven-Longevity Mountain, while releasing restrictions in other regions to satisfy local demands for natural resources.<sup>27</sup> A year later in 1425, the newly crowned Emperor Xuande released another edict opening the mountains from Yellow Flower Town eastward to Red Snail Mountain.<sup>28</sup> Both edicts can be seen as early attempts to define boundaries that balanced the protection of geomantic fortune with minimal disruption to local life. Although they appeared to delineate the area under the logging ban, the practical implementation remained ambiguous: How should the boundaries of a mountain be defined?

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<sup>25</sup> Liang Fen 梁份, *Diling tushuo* 帝陵圖說 [Illustrated Treatise on Imperial Tombs] (18<sup>th</sup> century), juan 2, 27-28.

<sup>26</sup> Hu Hansheng 胡漢生, *Ming Shisanling yanjiu* 明十三陵研究 [Research on the Ming Thirteen Tombs] (Beijing: Beijing yanshan chubanshe, 2013), 374-375.

<sup>27</sup> *Renzong Shilu* (1424-9-3), 42.

<sup>28</sup> *Xuanzong Shilu* (1425-7-11), 90.

How could those boundaries be effectively communicated to local residents? The situation grew more complicated as the policy ideal confronted the reality of the difficult landscape.

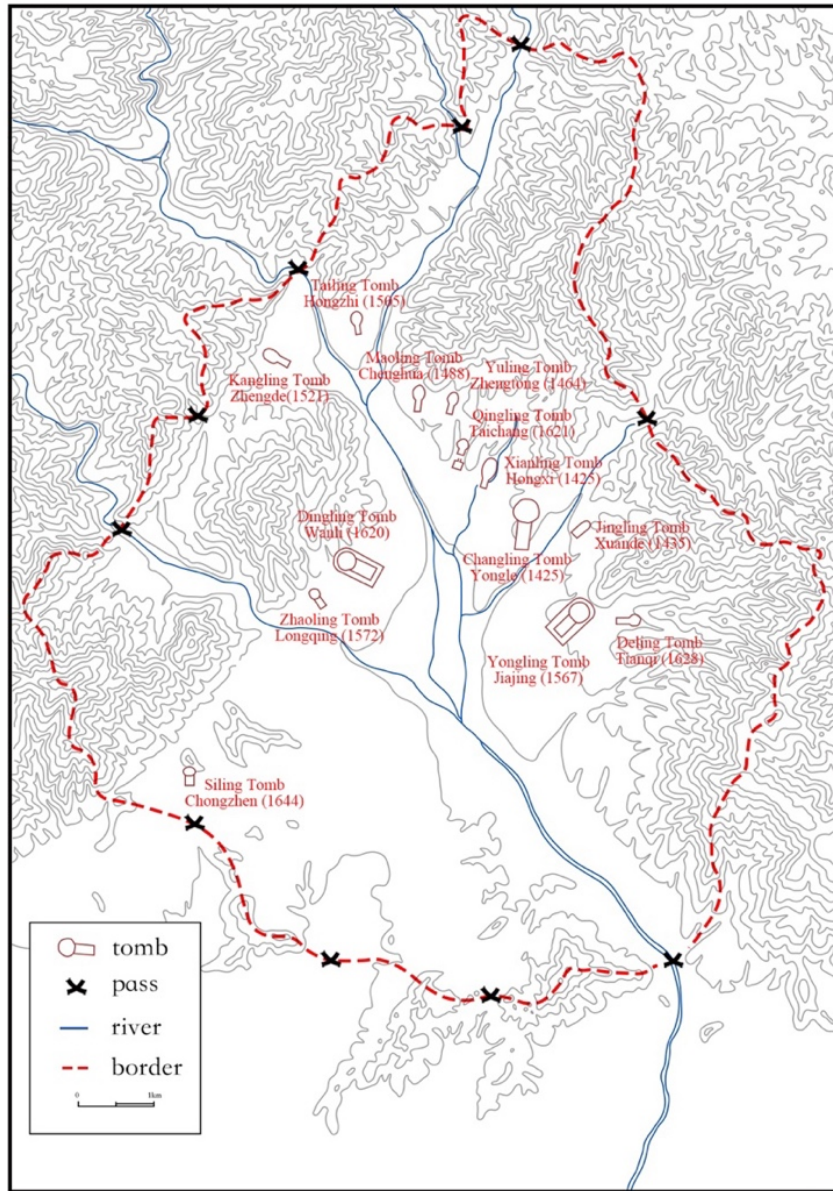


Figure 2.1 Contour map of the imperial tombs. Created by the author. Based on Hou Renzhi, *Beijing lishi dituji*, 70.

In 1437, Emperor Zhengtong ordered the Ministry of Work and the Imperial Astronomical Bureau to demarcate boundaries around the mountains in response to persistent violations of the

logging ban.<sup>29</sup> Official records provide no details on how these boundaries were marked or whether they were visible on the site at all. What is known for certain is that the emperor instructed officials to post imperial proclamations to communicate the restrictions to the public. A relatively fixed forbidden zone was likely established sooner or later, at least on paper. The 1568 gazetteer provides a detailed description of the zone's extent, stretching from Yellow Flower Town in the north to Phoenix Mountain in the south, and from Juyong Pass in the west to Sujiakou in the east, encompassing nearly all the major mountains in the northern part of Changping County. This extent was inscribed on a stele erected on a mountain just outside the county's east gate, presumably to warn local residents against entering the restricted area.<sup>30</sup>

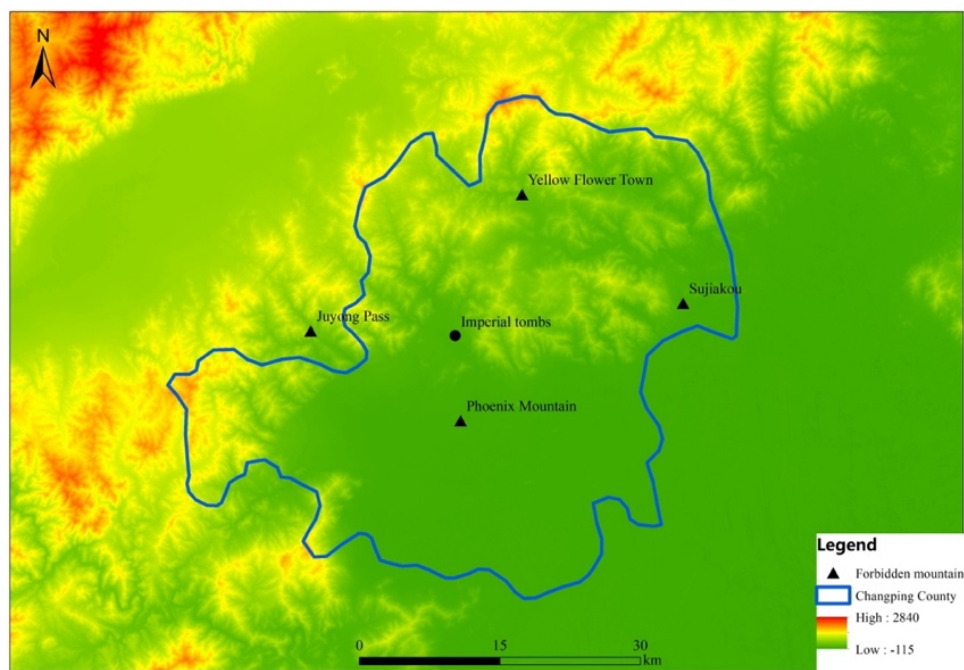


Figure 2.2 Map of the forbidden zone. Created by the author.

<sup>29</sup> *Yingzong Shilu* (1437-4-17), 581.

<sup>30</sup> Cui, *Changpingzhou zhi*, juan 1, 10.

The imperial efforts to mark out the boundaries, however, did not improve the situation. Visiting scholars frequently recorded encounters with wood cutters, whether in the mountains a few miles east of the interment valley, or around the passes surrounding the burial complex.<sup>31</sup> As late as 1548, officials were still recommending that the boundaries be demarcated more clearly, arguing that the lack of clarity had led commoners to unintentionally violate the forbidden zone:

The imperial tombs at Heaven-Longevity Mountain are of vital importance and should, of course, be carefully protected. However, as the mountain boundaries are unclear and the punishments have been improperly applied, it amounts to setting a trap for ignorant commoners. It is advisable to clearly delineate the boundaries and prominently inscribe the forbidden areas to make them plainly known to the people.<sup>32</sup>

Arguably, posting imperial proclamations and erecting prohibition steles were not the most effective means of delineating boundaries. Though materializing the imperial authority, they failed to create a visible or enforceable enclosure on the ground. This was in stark contrast to the Qing imperial tombs, where the forbidden zone was physically laid out using color-coded wooden posts and painted rocks. Even then, the enforcement of regulations still required a degree of flexibility due to spatial complications.<sup>33</sup> In this light, it is understandable why the Ming state struggled to exert effective control over access in such a rugged mountainous landscape. The boundaries were never firmly established in the first place, which allowed for considerable leeway in practice. The ambiguity of boundaries blurred the geographical distinction between legal and illegal behavior, and when combined with economic incentives, it drove local residents to violate the sacred forests, whether intentionally or unintentionally.

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<sup>31</sup> Yuan Hongdao 袁宏道, *Yuan Zhonglang quanji* 袁中郎全集 [The Complete Works of Yuan Zhonglang] (1629), juan 11, 12; Li Yuanyang 李元陽, “You Yinshan Tiebi mantan” 遊銀山鐵壁謾談 [Casual Remarks on Traveling to Yin Mountain and Iron Wall], in *Gujin you ming shan ji* 古今遊名山記 [Accounts of Travels to Famous Mountains from the Past to the Present], comp. He Tang 何鏜 (1565), juan 1, 20-21.

<sup>32</sup> *Shizong Shilu* (1548-9-13), 6192-93.

<sup>33</sup> Bello, “Splintered Habitats,” 111-12.

## Economy of Exclusion: The Cost of Preserving a Sacred Landscape

As observed in the Qing imperial tomb site, most economic activities that would have provided part of the resources of the local economy were seriously affected as the area became geomantically sensitive.<sup>34</sup> A similar pattern emerged around the Ming tombs, where residents used to enjoy the rich supply of forest products but were now forced to look for alternative means of livelihood. Among all the resources the forests provided, wood was perhaps the most indispensable. It was not only essential for constructing buildings and crafting tools, but also served as the primary fuel for cooking and heating in the capital region, at least during the early Ming period. Once collecting branches from the protected mountains was no longer permitted, residents were left with no choice but to turn to the fuel market, where firewood and charcoal were transported from hundreds of miles away and traded at prohibitively high costs.<sup>35</sup> The urgent demands pressed the state to adjust its original forest ban, and as a matter of fact, the early discussions about boundary-setting unfolded precisely around how to balance those local interests.

In the year 1424, Emperor Hongxi released an edict:

In ancient times, forests, mountains, rivers, and marshes were all shared with people. Although there were regulations on the time of harvest and the limit of using the resources, in essence, they were managed for the benefit of people, not as private property of the state. There are millions of military and civilian households living in the capital area. If firewood is not sourced from the mountains, where else can it be obtained? The ruler should treat the people as parents treat their children, granting them anything beneficial, not to mention the resources from mountains, marshes, and the earth, which are naturally provided for the people's benefit. Therefore, the area from Juyong Pass

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<sup>34</sup> Elvin, *The Retreat of the Elephants*, 294.

<sup>35</sup> Gao Shouxian 高壽仙, "Mingdai Beijing ranliao de shiyong yu caigong" 明代北京燃料的使用與採供 [Fuel Use and Procurement in Ming Beijing], *Palace Museum Journal* 故宮博物院院刊, no. 1 (2006): 130-32; Qiu Zhonglin 邱仲麟, "Renkou zengzhang, senlin kanfa yu Mingdai Beijing shenghuo ranliao de zhuanbian" 人口增長、森林砍伐與明代北京生活燃料的轉變 [Population Growth, Deforestation, and the Transformation of Household Fuel in Ming Beijing], *Bulletin of the Institute of History and Philology, Academia Sinica* 中央研究院歷史語言研究所集刊 74, no. 1 (2003): 165.

eastward to Heaven-Longevity Mountain should retain restrictions on logging, but these restrictions should not apply to other areas.<sup>36</sup>

The emperor's benevolent policy saw a slight reversal when someone was reported to have uprooted trees in these newly opened mountains.<sup>37</sup> However, a year later, Emperor Xuande furthered his father's policy by releasing restrictions in areas to the east of the imperial tombs. He stated that benefiting the people was not something he would hesitate to do, but if forests were harvested without restraint, the supply would quickly be exhausted. He thus ordered local officials to ensure wood was taken at proper times and root was not harmed, convinced that this could ensure the resource would be used sustainably.<sup>38</sup>

What seemed to justify both emperors' decisions to ease restrictions was the Confucian ideal that rulers should share natural benefits with the people. However, the policy adjustments were in fact driven by more practical concerns, namely, the "millions of military and civilian households" who depended on the local environment for their daily needs. The construction of the imperial tombs transformed not only the natural landscape but also the social fabric of the surrounding area. It brought in large numbers of imperial personnel and thus placed additional strain on an environment that had already been under great pressure.

Among these newcomers, soldiers constituted the largest group. After each emperor's death, a designated group was dispatched from the Capital Military Guard and reorganized as a Tomb Guard (*lingwei* 陵衛). Each Guard consisted of five battalions, with a nominal strength of 5,600 soldiers, though due to flight and desertion, the number rarely reached half that.<sup>39</sup> Initially, these troops rotated around the mountain passes, but following the Tumu Incident in the mid-15th

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<sup>36</sup> *Renjong Shilu* (1424-9-3), 42.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.* (1425-4-28), 300.

<sup>38</sup> *Xuanzong Shilu* (1425-7-11), 90.

<sup>39</sup> Hu Hansheng 胡漢生, "Mingdai Tianshoushan de lingjun" 明代天壽山的陵軍 [The Tomb Guards of Heaven Longevity Mountain in the Ming Dynasty], *Zijin Cheng* 紫禁城, no. 3 (1991): 44-45.

century, they took up residence in the newly built Changping City.<sup>40</sup> According to the local gazetteer, “with military garrisons stationed in the city, the population steadily grew, shops flourished, and buildings proliferated.”<sup>41</sup> In 1551, Emperor Jiajing ordered the construction of more military barracks and allowed soldiers’ wives and children to move in and live with them.<sup>42</sup> By the end of the Ming Dynasty, a total of twelve Tomb Guards were stationed in the county. Combined with even larger numbers of troops deployed across strategic mountain passes, their presence greatly intensified the demand on local natural resources.

As local civilian and military households struggled to meet their daily fuel needs, residents within the city of Beijing depended on the forests in the surrounding suburbs as well. To ensure a stable supply for the palace, the Ming state established an imperial facility in the western mountains to extract firewood and charcoal.<sup>43</sup> Meanwhile, the needs of city residents and government offices further incentivized woodcutters to exploit these forests and accelerated their depletion.<sup>44</sup> From the mid-15th century onward, urban residents gradually turned to coal as a major fuel, but coal mining inflicted additional ecological damage on the suburban forests.<sup>45</sup> In contrast, the northern ranges, where the imperial tombs were located, maintained better vegetation cover due to state prohibitions, though a significant number of criminal cases were recorded there as well. The increasingly urgent resource shortage faced by the capital underlies a broader understanding of these violations, which reflected not so much resistance to state authority as a basic drive to secure daily subsistence.

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<sup>40</sup> *Yingzong Shilu* (1450-1-5), 3774.

<sup>41</sup> Cui, *Changpingzhou zhi*, juan 1, 9.

<sup>42</sup> *Shizong Shilu* (1551-1-8), 6596-6598.

<sup>43</sup> Qiu, “Renkou zengzhang,” 157-165.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 151-154.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 165-174.

## When Trees Became Sacrilege: The Legal Response to Forest Violations

Cutting trees around the imperial tombs was nothing like a normal theft. As stipulated in the Great Ming Code: “Anyone who steals trees from within the imperial tombs or gardens shall be punished with a hundred blows of the cane and three years of penal servitude.”<sup>46</sup> In his annotation of this statute, Wang Kentang, a late 16th-century scholar, remarked: “Those who steal trees from the imperial tombs or gardens are punished more severely than those who steal official property. Therefore, regardless of the value of the stolen goods, and whether the individual is a principal or an accomplice, all are to receive a hundred blows of the cane and three years of penal servitude.”<sup>47</sup> His commentary distinguished tomb trees from other forms of imperial property, underscoring the special protection received by the former owing to their symbolic significance.

Another way to interpret this law is by comparing it to other statutes under the same legal category. The following clause concerns the theft of trees from private tombs, which carried a lighter sentence of eighty blows of cane.<sup>48</sup> The legal distinction between stealing from imperial and commoners’ tombs thus seems less stark than expected, especially when compared to the harsher death penalties for stealing sacrificial objects, which likewise derived importance from their symbolic connection to the deceased emperor.<sup>49</sup> It is clear that when the law was originally drafted, the theft of tomb trees may not have been considered a grave offense. Nonetheless, as violations mounted over time, the perceived seriousness escalated and eventually prompted revisions to the law itself.

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<sup>46</sup> *Da Ming lüli* 大明律例 [The Ming Code] (1554), juan 18, 5.

<sup>47</sup> Wang Kentang 王肯堂, *Wang Kentang jianshi* 王肯堂箋釋 [Wang Kentang’s Annotations on the Ming Code], comp. Gu Dingzhong 顧鼎重 (1691), juan 18, 16.

<sup>48</sup> *Da Ming lüli*, juan 18, 5.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, juan 18, 3.

As the boundary-setting efforts of early Ming rulers proved ineffective in eliminating private logging, Emperor Zhengtong resorted to harsh crackdowns on the rampant violations. In 1437, he issued an edict:

It has been recently heard that some unscrupulous individuals are cutting down trees in the imperial tombs, while the authorities remain indifferent. Proclamations prohibiting this behavior should be posted immediately and officers of the Embroidered Uniform Guard should be dispatched to patrol the area. Those who dare to violate this order will be arrested and severely punished, and their families will be exiled to the frontier. The Ministry of Works, along with the officials from the Imperial Astronomical Bureau should demarcate the boundaries around the mountains, allowing the people to harvest firewood outside these boundaries. Officials and officers are also instructed: those who patrol should not accept bribes to condone theft, nor should they create false charges to harm the people. Violators will also be severely punished without leniency.<sup>50</sup>

The emperor did not specify how offenders were to be “severely punished”, yet he did order their families to be exiled to border garrisons, which was not prescribed in the original legal clause. In 1441 and 1443, groups of commoners were caught cutting trees in restricted areas. In addition to the prescribed punishment of penal servitude, he further commanded them to be put in stocks at the mountain entrance as a warning to the public.<sup>51</sup> Zhengtong’s commitment to combat private logging through hardline measures set a precedent for the subsequent emperors, justifying their decision to impose harsher penalties that did not necessarily align with the law.

The formal revision of the law itself was later triggered by another incident. In 1538, a group of men headed by Sun Ji was arrested and charged for felling the imperial trees. The Investigating Censor proposed their crime be treated as equivalent to stealing sacrificial objects, and according to the law, this would warrant the death penalty for both the offenders and their families. However, citing the 1437 decree, the Censor decided to be lenient and recommended that they be exiled to border garrisons instead.

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<sup>50</sup> *Yingzong Shilu* (1437-4-17), 581.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.* (1411-3-12), 1520; (1443-7-23), 2158.

When reviewing this proposed sentence, the Censorate offered a different opinion. They argued that sacrificial objects normally refer to items used in the imperial rituals. While tombs trees were protected as part of the interment complex, they were products of the wild and thus different from sacrificial objects. Moreover, although Emperor Zhengtong's decree called for severe punishment, it did not specify a defined penalty. Since Sun Ji and the others were just ignorant commoners who pursued profit and fell into wrongdoing, equating their crime with that of stealing sacred ritual objects appeared excessively harsh.<sup>52</sup>

It is interesting to see how Emperor Zhengtong's harsh punishments were perceived as a lenient alternative to the death penalty, and how the Censor attempted to equate the theft of tomb trees to that of sacrificial objects. This debate highlights the ambiguity surrounding the legal status of tomb trees, an issue that lawmakers in the early Ming period did not anticipate but gained increasing importance by the 16<sup>th</sup> century. At a deeper level, it reveals a structural tension between ancestral edicts and statutory law that was unique to the Ming legal system, which, on the positive side, afforded the emperor some flexibility to base his decisions on specific circumstances. Given the increasing seriousness of illegal logging, Emperor Jiajing eventually opted for a stricter punishment:

The trees around the ancestral tombs at Heaven-Longevity Mountain are of great importance. My revered ancestor Zhengtong issued a strict edict to prohibit illegal tree falling, but recent lax enforcement has led to rampant logging and repeated violations. The Investigating Censor has already proposed the death penalty, how dare you Censorates advocate for inappropriate leniency? The responsible patrol officers should report on the situation in detail. Sun Ji and others will be executed as initially proposed. Their families will be exiled to border garrisons in Liaodong, and those not yet captured will be strictly pursued until apprehended.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> *Shizong Shilu* (1538-10-15), 4442.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.* (1538-10-15), 4442-4443.

In 1550, his verdict was officially incorporated into the Ming Code as an amendment, stipulating that anyone found cutting down tomb trees with verified evidence would be charged with a crime equivalent to stealing sacrificial objects and sentenced to death. Those who aided in such crimes would be exiled to border garrisons.<sup>54</sup> This revision can be seen as an adaptation to changing circumstances, which compelled the Ming rulers to impose more stringent punishments and redefine the legal status of tomb trees. Despite the severity of these measures, they proved insufficient in curbing widespread violations. Private logging persisted until the collapse of the dynasty, reflecting both the state's struggle to maintain control and the strength of local forces that continued to infringe upon imperial regulations.

To recapitulate the tension over the forests surrounding the imperial tombs, from the early 15th century, a logging ban was imposed on the vast region around the burial complex for the sake of *fengshui* protection. The extent of the forbidden zone underwent a few adjustments and seemed to be finalized on paper and stone inscriptions, yet it was never clearly demarcated on the physical landscape. These prohibitions clashed with the local population's demands for fuel and other resources, driving them to harvest protected trees at the risk of receiving severe punishments. The blurry boundaries and economic motivation underpinned their repeated violations of the forbidden forests, determining that no matter how stringent the state's prohibitions, illegal logging could hardly be fully eradicated.

The state started to tackle the problem as early as the 1420s when the emperors attempted to control illegal logging by releasing certain restrictions. Although a reasonable policy shift in theory, it did little to alleviate the conflict, as the entire capital region was facing a serious wood

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<sup>54</sup> Shen Shixing 申時行 et al., *Da Ming huidian* 大明會典 [Collected Statutes of the Ming Dynasty] (1587; rpt. Taipei: Guofeng chubanshe, 1963), 2338-2339.

shortage by the mid-15th century. To better protect the tomb trees, later emperors shifted their focus to combating crimes. They posted imperial proclamations in public, imposed harsh punishment on offenders, and even revised the law itself. However, none of these efforts were truly effective, as they failed to address the fundamental conflict over access to forest resources.

At the heart of the ongoing struggle between the state and local communities lay the issue of dwindling forest resources, which fueled both the commoners' relentless violations and the state's increasingly stringent policies. The scarcity of natural resources created a battleground where the state and local actors competed, shaping the natural and political landscape of the forbidden forests throughout the Ming Dynasty. Although the state's regulations failed to fully eliminate local crimes, the violations were maintained within certain limits. The preservation of the lush forest can be seen as a significant achievement for the state in enforcing its restrictions. At the same time, the persistence of such crimes highlights the agency of local people in navigating state regulations.

### Chapter 3 Politics of Trees: Institutional Tensions and Forest Violations

Manifested through proclamations, stone inscriptions, and severe punishments, the imperial regulations played a critical role in deterring locals from entering the restricted area. While these mandates were theoretically unbreakable, their enforcement in practice relied heavily on the actions of the deputed officials. Tasked with maintaining the tombs and protecting the forests, these officials often prioritized personal interests and involved themselves in illegal activities. As Emperor Zhengtong noted, they not only condoned theft but even created false charges that harmed local people. In the amendment to the law of stealing tomb trees, Emperor Jiajing commanded that “if any dispatched officials accept bribes to release offenders, engage in fraudulent conduct, or use the law to arbitrarily seize and harm innocent civilians, they shall all be punished without distinction.”<sup>55</sup> It gives a clue to how officials may have abused their power; otherwise, the emperor would not have been able to specify it in such detail.

Understandably, it was far more difficult to combat the violations committed by officials than those by commoners, as they were not external transgressors but embedded within the structure of state operation. Their ties to the central government granted them authority in local society, while their entanglement in local networks made them elusive to central oversight. Scholars have studied the ambiguous role officials played in local society, arguing that they were not necessarily aligned with state interests.<sup>56</sup> However, what distinguishes the imperial tomb site from other localities is the existence of multiple tiers of officials, who each occupied different positions along the state-society spectrum and therefore provided an opportunity to challenge the dichotomy to a much deeper extent. Starting with an introduction to the complex institutional

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<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 2339.

<sup>56</sup> Joseph W. Esherick and Mary Backus Rankin, eds., *Chinese Local Elites and Patterns of Dominance* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990): 5-6.

setup surrounding the imperial tombs, this chapter examines how state-affiliated actors became embedded in local networks, competed for influence over the forbidden forests, and ultimately undermined the very regulations they were meant to enforce.

### **Framged Authority: Shifting Institutional Structures**

In his general depiction of the political structures in the Ming capital regions, David Robinson reveals that the dense institutionalized existence of state power often gave rise to tensions at the local level or even within the imperial bureaucracy itself.<sup>57</sup> This dynamic is exemplified in Changping County, where tomb management and border defense apparatuses were layered atop the basic administrative structure. The resulting institutional complexity made Changping a unique arena that brought together various official actors, who each represented imperial authority to varying degrees and inevitably came into conflict with one another.

The administrative institution led by county officials was established before the construction of the imperial tombs, when Changping was still an ordinary county in the early Ming period. The later arrival of soldiers and other tomb-related personnel introduced overlapping jurisdictions, a problem not unique to the imperial tomb site but common in regions where military garrisons operated alongside civilian administration.<sup>58</sup> In most cases, civil and military institutions governed separate populations, and they managed to maintain a workable balance despite occasional disputes. In Changping, however, the county administration was increasingly marginalized by the expanding tomb management institutions, especially as the county's major function shifted toward serving the imperial tombs. In the mid-15<sup>th</sup> century, the

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<sup>57</sup> Robinson, *Bandits, Eunuchs, and the Son of Heaven*, 27-43.

<sup>58</sup> David M. Robinson, "Why Military Institutions Matter for Ming History," *Journal of Chinese History*, no. 1 (2017): 302-311.

county seat moved into the newly built city, which was inhabited mostly by soldiers in the Tomb Guards. Over time, the administrative authority was gradually seized by the commandants, which reduced county officials to supplementary roles in local governance. As noted by the compiler of the local gazetteer: “(By the mid-16<sup>th</sup> century) the city has housed eight Tomb Guards and had commandants to govern them. Supplemented by the county administration, this arrangement is intended to mutually reinforce each other.”<sup>59</sup> Although the account does not explicitly emphasize a hierarchy, the narrative order and the term “supplemented” nonetheless imply its existence.

Tomb-related institutions were established in the early 15<sup>th</sup> century and underwent continual changes in response to shifting border conditions. According to Ming regulations, each emperor’s tomb was managed by three key institutions: the Eunuch Directorate (*shengongjian* 神宮監), the Tomb Guard, and the Sacrificial Office (*cijishu* 祠祭署), responsible respectively for the cleaning, security, and ritual affairs.<sup>60</sup> In the first few decades after their establishment, these officials seemed to reside by their affiliated tombs and focus on their designated duties, with few records suggesting their influence extended beyond the interment complex. Following the Tumu Incident in 1449, however, as the soldiers relocated to the city, tomb-related institutions started to infringe upon the existing administrative structure. To strengthen defense and manage local personnel, Grand Commandants (*shoubei* 守備) were appointed to Heaven Longevity Mountain, and as in other frontier regions, a eunuch commandant was stationed alongside a military one.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Cui, *Changpingzhou zhi*, juan 1, 6.

<sup>60</sup> Hu, *Ming Shisanling yanjiu*, 365-377.

<sup>61</sup> There is no clear record of the exact year in which these posts were created, but they first appeared in the *Veritable Record* a few years after the Tumu Incidents. Scholars believed their establishment was in reaction to the Mongol invasion. See Hu, *Ming Shisanling yanjiu*, 369. Hu Dan 胡丹, *Mingdai huangguan zhidu yanjiu* 明代宦官制度研究 [A Study of the Eunuch Institution in the Ming Dynasty] (Hangzhou: Zhejiang University Press, 2018), 277-278.

While the eunuchs were initially assigned to supervise military officials on behalf of the emperor, they gradually gained the upper hand over their counterparts, establishing direct control over the soldiers and interfering deeply in county affairs.<sup>62</sup>

It was from that point onward that the impacts of the commandants, especially the eunuchs, became visible across the county. At one of the city's key religious sites, the Temple of Perfected Martiality (*zhenwu* 真武), a stele stands as enduring evidence of their continued engagement with temple maintenance.<sup>63</sup> The earliest record dates to 1458, when Eunuch Commandant Chen Gong donated land for offerings and inscribed the teaching of Zhenwu on the stele. His inscription was succeeded by that of Eunuch Zhou Chang, though the date of his donation was not specified. Later, in 1486, the temple was refurbished through the joint efforts of Eunuch Wang Ding and Military Commandant Du Shan. The final set of inscriptions dates to 1522, recording Eunuch Han Xi's renovation of the temple's interior and Military Commandant Zhou Lin's claim as a descendant of Eunuch Zhou Chang. Previous research has uncovered the significance of Zhenwu worship during the Ming period, particularly in regions along the Great Wall.<sup>64</sup> The commandants' dedication to maintaining this symbolic temple and inscribing their names on the stele can thus be seen as an effort to consolidate their presence and project persistent authority through religious means.

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<sup>62</sup> Several records indicate that the Eunuch Commandants frequently exploited soldiers for their own purposes. For instance, *Xianzong Shilu* (1485-2-19), 4441-4442; *Shizong Shilu* (1528-10-2), 2170; (1550-9-13), 6527. Sometimes, they provided protection to tax evaders, infringing upon the authority of county officials. *Shizong Shilu* (1522-12-21), 619.

<sup>63</sup> "Xuandi chuixun" 玄帝垂訓 [Instructions of the Supreme Emperor of the Dark Heaven], in *Beijing tushuguan cang lidai shike taben huibian* 北京圖書館藏歷代石刻拓本彙編, vol. 52 (Zhengzhou: Zhongzhou guji chubanshe, 1997), 8-9.

<sup>64</sup> Guo Jianbin 郭建斌, Wang Wenjing 王文靜, and Ou Xinju 歐新菊, "Mingdai Changcheng yanxian de Zhenwu xinyang yanjiu" 明代長城沿線的真武信仰研究 [The Study of Zhenwu Belief along the Ming Great Wall], *Changcheng yanjiu* 長城學研究 (2024): 228-238.

Similarly, in other prominent sites outside the city, such as the Temple of the Dragon King or the shrines of local sages, the names of these commandants also appear frequently.<sup>65</sup> Although these sites were established before the arrival of eunuchs and soldiers, the newcomers actively contributed to their upkeep through donations and refurbishment. These efforts were immortalized in stone, and the names inscribed on the back of these stelae follow a consistent order: eunuch commandants and their subordinates, military commandants and their subordinates, county officials, and finally, commoners. These inscriptions offer insight into the commandants' gradual integration into local structures, reflecting a hierarchy commonly acknowledged in the local society.

As the dispatched commandants became embedded in local structures, a new tension emerged between them and civil officials. Not only did these deputed officers fall under the scrutiny of Inspecting Censors, but as border tensions escalated, civil bureaucrats began to take a more direct role in military affairs. Their presence in Changping became regular since the mid-16th century, when another serious Mongol attack caused great destruction to the capital area. In 1554, a Military Defense Circuit (*bingbeidao* 兵備道) was established in Changping, with a commissioner dispatched to “rectify border defenses, oversee military and civilian affairs, and manage legal disputes and fiscal provisions.”<sup>66</sup> A few years later, in 1560, Changping was further separated from Jizhou and became an independent Garrison, with a Regional Commander (*zongbingguan* 總兵官) stationed there to take full charge of military affairs from Juyong Pass to

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<sup>65</sup> “Chongjian Dulongwangmiao beiji” 重修都龍王廟碑記 [Inscription on the Reconstruction of the Capital Dragon King Temple], in *Lidai shike taben huibian*, vol. 53, 37-38; “Digongci bei” 狄公祠碑 [Stele of the Shrine to Lord Di Renjie], in *Lidai shike taben huibian*, vol. 56, 37-38; “Chongxiu Changpingzhou Jiuxian Zhaoshengsi bei” 重修昌平州舊縣昭聖寺碑 [Inscription on the Reconstruction of Zhaosheng Temple in Jiuxian, Changping Prefecture], in *Lidai shike taben huibian*, vol. 58, 42-43.

<sup>66</sup> *Xizong Shilu* (1621-3-5), 370-371.

Yellow Flower Town.<sup>67</sup> Along the way, soldiers from the original Tomb Guards were also reorganized into combat units, and only about 50 from each guard were permitted to remain at their affiliated tombs to handle miscellaneous duties.<sup>68</sup> The arrival of civil bureaucrats introduced significant changes to existing administrative structures, undermining the commandants' authority and reshaping the balance of power within local society.

This tension found expression in stelae at other sites across the county. Changping had long maintained shrines for two eminent Tang dynasty scholar-officials, Di Renjie and Liu Fen. When the new city was constructed, Liu Fen's shrine was relocated to the Confucian School within the city walls, while Di Renjie's shrine remained at its original site. For a long time, eunuchs had patronized Di Renjie's shrine, turning it into a local center where temple fairs were held.<sup>69</sup> In contrast, Liu Fen's shrine, though meant to receive regular sacrifices, was barely maintained and gradually fell into decay. The fact that Liu Fen was known for his outspoken attacks on eunuchs may explain why they showed little interest in preserving his memorial. In 1563, Li Yonglu, the Surveillance Commissioner in charge of Changping's Military Defense Circuit, refurbished Liu's shrine and moved Di Renjie's spirit tablet there for joint worship. In his sacrificial text, Li openly praised Liu's bravery in confronting eunuch power: "While officials turned a blind eye and dared not speak out against the eunuchs, Liu alone denounced their treachery without fear or evasion. Though his proposals were never put into practice, his heroic spirit was sufficient to quell the

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<sup>67</sup> There is no exact record of its establishment date either. While the Ming gazetteer attributes it to 1559, most scholars believe it was founded in 1560. Cui, *Changpingzhouzhi*, juan 3, 15; Hu, *Ming Shisanling yanjiu*, 372; Fan Chuannan 范傳南, "Lun Beijing fangwei yu Tianshoushan lingjun" 論北京防衛與天壽山陵軍 [On the Defense of Beijing and the Tomb Guards of Tianshou Mountain], in *Di shiqi jie Mingshi guoji xueshu yantaohui ji jinian Ming Dingling fajue liushi zhounian guoji xueshu yantaohui lunwenji* 第十七屆明史國際學術研討會暨紀念明定陵發掘六十週年國際學術研討會論文集, ed. Zhongguo Mingshi xuehui and Beijing shi Changpingqu Shisanling tequ bangongchu 中國明史學會、北京市昌平區十三陵特區辦事處 (Beijing: Yanshan chubanshe, 2018), 291.

<sup>68</sup> Cui, *Changpingzhou zhi*, juan 3, 6-7.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid*, juan 8, 2.

evil forces and uphold the crumbling imperial order.”<sup>70</sup> Facing a similar political environment in which eunuchs held considerable power, Li’s public endorsement of Liu Fen reflected his own response to contemporary political dynamics.

The intervention of civil bureaucrats proved insufficient to curb the deeply entrenched eunuch forces, as Eunuch Commandants retained their influence over the original Tomb Guards soldiers and obstructed civil bureaucrats from disciplining local forces.<sup>71</sup> In the 17th century, eunuchs further regained control over military affairs and were elevated to a status nearly equivalent to that of the Regional Commander.<sup>72</sup> The shifting power dynamics around the imperial tombs were not isolated developments but reflections of broader political struggles radiating outward from the Ming court. As these competing officials complicated governance at the local level, they also fractured imperial authority and created multiple avenues for various actors to maneuver within state regulations. This multilayered institutional structure defined the political terrain of the forbidden forests, embedding persistent violations within the very mechanisms of state operation.

### **The Custodian Who Stole: Official Complicity in Illegal Logging**

With such a dense network of state institutions, one would assume it difficult to commit even trivial violations within the restricted area. The persistence of logging crimes in such a context directs our attention beyond merely economic issues to further consider the political mechanisms that allowed their occurrence. Although violations of the forbidden forests were classified under the same legal category, they in fact encompassed various kinds and bore

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid., juan 5, 8-9.

<sup>71</sup> *Xizong Shilu* (1621-3-5), 370-371.

<sup>72</sup> Hu, *Mingdai huanguan zhidu yanjiu*, 277-278.

differentiated ties to official forces. Examining these variegated cases thus provided a lens through which to observe the actual operation of state apparatuses and the complex networks they cultivated within local communities.

Although the state's control over the forests was far more porous than it claimed, stealing trees under imperial surveillance was still not easy. Collecting a few fallen branches might have been possible, but felling trees without being discovered was too much of a risk to take. Several potential ways might help navigate this surveillance, among which the most accessible one was to collude with the very officials responsible for enforcing the prohibition. In the year 1432, a military commander called Qin Ying and his subordinate Li Zhong were beheaded for profiting from the protected trees. They summoned more than fifty families each month from the nearby military and civilian households, ordering each to submit a bolt of cloth in exchange for permission to enter Heaven-Longevity Mountain and cut down trees. When discovered, Qin and Li had already accumulated up to three hundred bolts of cloth.<sup>73</sup> By bribing the officers, commoners secured protection to harvest firewood from the forbidden forests. In return, the soldiers received generous profits without directly laying their hands on the protected trees. The arrangement served the interests of both parties and remained uncovered for a remarkably long period, ultimately involving a considerable amount of money and resulting in a correspondingly harsh punishment of death.

In other cases, it was the officials themselves who committed theft. For instance, in 1444, Ruan Ju, a Vice Eunuch Director in the Directorate for Jingling Tomb, was sentenced to death for felling over a hundred trees for private purposes.<sup>74</sup> The record does not specify how he managed to carry out such a large-scale act, but it is reasonable to infer that other actors were engaged,

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<sup>73</sup> *Xuanzong Shilu* (1432-9-26), 2159.

<sup>74</sup> *Yingzong Shilu* (1444-12-12), 2475.

either complicit or manipulated by Ruan to enable the cutting of such a staggering number of trees. A more detailed case was recorded in 1479, when Dong Neng, a patrolman in the Jingling Guard, colluded with a few soldiers from other Capital Military Guards and felled twelve trees in the restricted area. When caught, Emperor Chenghua ordered them to be taken to Changping County, fitted with cangues, and paraded for one month as a form of public shaming. Since some of the offenders died by the end of the one-month punishment, the remaining ones, including Dong Neng, were spared execution and instead sent to frontier garrisons in Liaodong along with their families.<sup>75</sup> In both cases, the principal offenders were the very functionaries tasked with enforcing the logging ban. Their familiarity with the local terrain and unrestricted access to the forbidden zone granted them greater opportunities to steal trees at significantly lower risk. It is therefore plausible that, beyond the few cases uncovered, there were numerous similar schemes that succeeded without ever being recorded in official accounts.

The phenomenon that state agents deviated from their obligations and sought personal benefits at the cost of state interests was by no means novel to imperial rule. What was unique to the imperial tomb site, however, was that it hosted a more complex power game where multiple strands of state forces converged. Entering the second half of the dynasty, the arrival of commandants and civil bureaucrats saw criminal cases increasingly marked by delicate schemes and deeper entanglement of imperial power. Two well-recorded cases provide insight into the involvement of high-ranking officials in illegal activities, echoing the broader factional struggles that characterized Ming politics until its collapse.

In the year 1531, an Inspecting Censor called Yu Hong reported a case of illegal logging at the Yuling Tomb, where the offenders managed to escape punishment by bribing Liu Cen, the

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<sup>75</sup> Dai Jin 戴金, *Huang Ming tiaofa shilei zuan* 皇明條法事類纂 [Classified Statutes and Precedents of the August Ming] (1531; rpt. Tokyo, 1966), juan 32, 20-21.

Eunuch Commandant, and Qin Zhen, the Grand Commandant. Having revealed the collusion between criminals and local administrators, Yu requested the immediate dismissal of Liu Cen and Qin Zhen. Furthermore, he proposed to restore the “correct” political order, suggesting Eunuch Commandants should be subject to the supervision of Inspecting Censors and not overpower Grand Commandants anymore. This proposal was approved by Emperor Jiajing, who then withdrew Liu Cen from the imperial tombs and reassigned him to another position.<sup>76</sup>

This seemingly inconspicuous incident did not create many ripples in the court, yet it highlights the tension between eunuchs and bureaucrats that continued to heat up in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Studies of eunuch power during the Ming period have revealed its fluctuating yet steady expansion since the very beginning of the dynasty, which profoundly shaped the power structure at the central, local, and border levels.<sup>77</sup> It was not until Emperor Jiajing, who ascended the throne in 1521 from a side branch, that systematic efforts were made to rein in eunuch influence. By the 1540s, nearly all the eunuchs tasked with coordinating military affairs had been recalled to Beijing with their positions abolished for good.<sup>78</sup> Because of its unique role in managing the imperial tombs, the Eunuch Commandant of Heaven-Longevity Mountain was among the few positions that persisted. Nonetheless, its influence was still significantly restrained by the appointed civil bureaucrats.

As early as three years before the 1531 incident, the eunuch Liu Cen had already been accused of greed and malfeasance. In response, Emperor Jiajing ordered the Inspecting Censors to take care of military issues and asked Liu Cen to provide a detailed explanation of his

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<sup>76</sup> *Shizong Shilu* (1531-10-12), 3116-3117.

<sup>77</sup> Hu, *Mingdai huanguan zhidu yanjiu*, 379-384.

<sup>78</sup> Hu Dan 胡丹, “Mingdai ‘santang tizhi’ de goujian yu jieti” 明代「三堂體制」的構建與解體 [The Formation and Dissolution of the ‘Three Hall System’ in the Ming Dynasty], *Guoli Zhengzhi Daxue lishi xuebao* 國立政治大學歷史學報, no. 32 (2009): 37.

conduct.<sup>79</sup> Immediately in the following month, a case of illegal logging in the Jingling Tomb annoyed the emperor and caused Liu Cen to be reprimanded once again.<sup>80</sup> Although Liu tried to defend himself by retaliating against the bureaucrats, Emperor Jiajing rejected his distorted explanation. He denied Liu's request to reinstate the previous regulations and further empowered the Inspecting Censors to oversee the Tomb Guards.<sup>81</sup>

Despite Jiajing's clear gesture of backing bureaucrats in their attack on eunuchs, Yu Hong's wish to restore the ideal political order was far from completely realized. After Liu Cen's dismissal, a new Eunuch Commandant was promptly assigned to Heaven-Longevity Mountain, continuing the duties of "drilling the troops, patrolling the mountains and forests, and enforcing prohibitions and regulations."<sup>82</sup> The appointment of civil bureaucrats and their interference in military affairs posed a certain challenge to the eunuchs' authority, yet the eunuchs managed to retain significant influence over local society and patiently awaited an opportunity to reclaim their power.

In the early 17<sup>th</sup> century, another criminal case involving illegal logging caught Emperor Wanli's attention. It began when Li Jun, the Eunuch Commandant, submitted a memorial approving the testimonies of a few patrol soldiers who accused some people of felling and trading trees in the forbidden mountains, with fresh stumps serving as key evidence. Outraged by this blatant disregard for imperial regulations, Emperor Wanli promptly ordered the Embroidered Uniform Guard to arrest the accused and hand them over to the judicial authorities for

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<sup>79</sup> *Shizong Shilu* (1528-7-17), 2063.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.* (1528-8-30), 2107.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.* (1528-10-2), 2170.

<sup>82</sup> Wang Xianguo 王顯國, "Mingdai taijian Xin Shou muzhi kaolue" 明代太監辛壽墓志考略 [A Preliminary Study of the Epitaph of the Ming Dynasty Eunuch Xin Shou], *Shoudu bowuguan luncong* 首都博物館論叢, no. 1 (2019): 307.

interrogation.<sup>83</sup> Suspecting this to be a false accusation, however, Investigative Censor Tang Zhaojing requested a more thorough investigation. Drawing on his previous inspections, he argued it was not uncommon for patrol functionaries to fabricate accusations to extort money, and at times, even local officials and commanders could become victims.<sup>84</sup> His suspicion deepened when Li Jun, the Eunuch Commandant, made repeated excuses to prevent him from meeting the plaintiffs and defendants after he had arrived at the crime site.<sup>85</sup> These concerns also made Emperor Wanli doubt Li Jun's claims, leading him to reject the eunuch's request and order a joint investigation by several bureaucrats.<sup>86</sup>

After a careful examination, Tang exposed the truth behind this fabricated case:

It is evident that the patrol functionaries have been exploiting the prohibitions for personal gain. Those who take bribes protect one another, and those who seek to defraud can stir up trouble out of nothing. Ever since the 29<sup>th</sup> year of Emperor Wanli's reign (1601), when the Commissioner in Charge of a Military Defense Circuit was dismissed, functionaries scattered and sought new patrons. Two patrolmen, Li Duo and Li Xiang, are particularly notorious for their frequent extortion of commanding officers and nearby residents. If their demands are not met, they either confiscate trees from those households to present as evidence of crime or incite hooligans to file false accusations. In minor cases, the patrolmen take bribes and consider the matter settled; in more severe cases, the Eunuch Commandant accepts a bribe and releases the offenders. Along the border walls, any soldier or civilian with even the slightest wealth suffers greatly, and all military officers who defend the borders for Your Majesty tremble in fear.....

As for one of the cases mentioned in Li Jun's memorial, the patrolman Li Xiang apprehended six individuals and brought them to the eunuch's office. Li Jun held a court session, decided three of them should be executed and three should be sent to military service, and then took them out to negotiate for private money transactions..... The other two cases also originated from their failed attempts to extort money. They escalated the matter by submitting that memorial, removing the names of a few people from whom they had received money, while the relatives and brothers of those individuals were still implicated. All these issues were caused by Li Jun listening to Li Xiang's fabrication, which ultimately stirred Your Majesty's compassion and filial sentiments.<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> *Shenzong shilu* (1605-5-15), 7628.

<sup>84</sup> Tang Zhaojing 湯兆京, *Lingxuange ji* 靈護閣集 [Collected Works from the Pavilion of Numinous Fragrance] (1620; rpt. Jinan: Qilu shushe, 2001): juan 1, 48.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, juan 1, 52-54.

<sup>86</sup> *Shenzong shilu* (1605-5-15): 7628.

<sup>87</sup> Tang, *Lingxuange ji*, juan 1, 57-59.

As Tang had anticipated, this case was far from a petty theft of tomb trees but filled with intricate conspiracies and corrupt transactions. Instead of profiting directly from falling trees, these functionaries exploited state prohibitions to extort money and frame disobedient officials. While the immediate offenders appeared to be figures like Li Xiang and Li Duo, the real mastermind was the Eunuch Commandant Li Jun, whose approval was crucial in orchestrating and concealing the plot. His unchallenged authority rested on a key precondition: the dismissal of the Commissioner, which had taken place a year earlier following the latter's failure to contain a wildfire in the imperial tombs. With no civil bureaucrats to check his power, Li Jun was able to extort bribes, usurp the magistrate's judicial authority, and gradually establish himself as the de facto power in the surrounding area.

When it came to punishment, Emperor Wanli was notably different from Jiajing's firm stance against eunuchs. He sent Li Jun back to Beijing but allowed him to continue his corrupt practices without consequence.<sup>88</sup> In contrast, the twenty-seven people accused by Li Jun, including soldiers, civilians, and students, were imprisoned at the start of the trial and never regained their freedom.<sup>89</sup> After the truth of this incident was revealed, Emperor Wanli's decision seemed confusing and unjust. Yet this puzzling decision underscores the unique role eunuchs held in Ming politics and their distinct influence within the local power structure.<sup>90</sup> As delegates of the emperor and representatives of imperial interests, Eunuch Commandants enjoyed greater privileges than their civil and military counterparts. Their appointments and removals bypassed the traditional bureaucracy, and their performance was evaluated without a standardized

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<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, juan 2, 24-27.

<sup>89</sup> *Shenzong Shilu* (1605-12-8), 7824; (1606-12-3), 8065-8066; (1607-12-15), 8375-8377.

<sup>90</sup> Robert B. Crawford's classic piece has discussed the connection between eunuchs and imperial power. Robert B. Crawford, "Eunuch Power in the Ming Dynasty," *T'oung Pao*, Second Series, 49, no. 3 (1961): 115-116.

system.<sup>91</sup> When they violated regulations, punishment was left entirely to the discretion of the emperor, typically amounting to nothing more than superficial reprimands, mild penalties, or, in the most serious cases, recall to Beijing. The relatively low consequences for violations emboldened them to pursue increasingly audacious schemes, while their extended assignments allowed them to cultivate connections deeply rooted in local networks.

The later arrival of civil bureaucrats helped to disperse eunuch power, yet neither the Commissioner nor the Inspecting Censor was able to exert as lasting an influence as the eunuchs. This 16th-century case demonstrates how the dismissal of a single commissioner could easily weaken the bureaucrats' grip on local society, while the Inspecting Censors' futile attempts to report eunuch violations reveal their limited capacity to challenge eunuch influence. Yu Hong mentioned that the Inspecting Censors of the Great Wall visited Heaven-Longevity Mountain no more than twice a year, making it difficult for them to exert the same long-lasting impact as the stationed eunuchs.<sup>92</sup> Similarly, Tang Zhaojing said that when he was conducting an inspection tour around the imperial tombs, although overwhelmed by complaints about the Eunuch Commandant, he was asked to stay quiet, for the locals feared that his report would provoke the eunuch's wrath and retaliation.<sup>93</sup>

These two detailed cases offer insights into the practical operation of imperial institutions as they were imposed on local structures and the varying degrees to which they became embedded in local society. Their intimate connection to central authority turned local conflicts into repercussions of the broader factional struggles, while at the same time, the manifestation of broader tensions remained constrained by local structures. As the officials navigated a

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<sup>91</sup> Hu, "Mingdai 'santang tizhi' de goujian yu jieti," 32-33.

<sup>92</sup> Wang Shiqiao 王士翹, *Xiguan zhi* 西關志 [Gazetteer of Xiguan] (1548), juan 6, 41.

<sup>93</sup> Tang, *Lingxuange ji*, juan 1, 52.

differentiated political landscape that stretched from the center to the local level, local actors, though depicted with little agency in bureaucratic narratives, also actively exploited the institutional complexity and sought patronage from whichever authority promised the greatest advantage. The alliances of interest formed in this process shaped local networks, making it difficult for central intervention to penetrate a site where its own representatives gathered.

The involvement of officials in criminal cases highlights the difficulty of drawing a clear line between state and local society. Instead of a rigid division, alliances were temporarily formed and constantly adjusted in response to changing circumstances. From county officials, tomb management personnel, to eunuch, military, and civil officials, the interspaces between these institutions and the corresponding flexibility were what an extremely intricate network of state institutions brought to local society. It was not that without these institutions, the restricted area would not have been violated. On the contrary, the continued existence of forest cover until the end of the dynasty suggests that they fulfilled their duties for the most part. However, this particularly complicated structure did determine the very forms of these violations, which were shaped not only by tensions between imperial and local interests but also by nuanced priorities of state agents who mediated in the middle. This specific dynamic prompted reflection on how the concentration of state power could complicate local issues, and how the involvement of various representatives might fragment imperial authority and impede coherent governance.

#### **Chapter 4 The Inaccessible Zone: Between Defense, Ceremony, and Resistance**

In his research on the political history of upland Southeast Asia, James Scott famously reveals the interplay between state governance and geographical conditions. He notes that agricultural plains have historically fallen under tight state control, whereas mountainous regions naturally impede the penetration of central power and often serve as “zones of refuge” for those seeking to evade state authority.<sup>94</sup> This mountain-plain dynamic is well-attested in Chinese history, particularly in borderlands where physical inaccessibility was compounded by distance from the political center. The imperial tomb site presents a nuanced variation of this model: while the state maintained a looming presence and exerted some influence, it was still unable to assert full control over the rugged terrain.

Li Dongyang, a Ming official, once recorded his experience of getting lost in the forbidden forests during a sacrificial visit:

The sound of wind and rain was mixed with the rustle of trees, resembling the roars of tigers and leopards, echoing through the mountains and valleys. The servants and companions, though only a short distance apart, could not respond to each other, and only the cries of those who fell into pits and ditches could be heard.<sup>95</sup>

The mountains were unwelcoming to outsiders, whether they were visiting officials, foreign invaders, or even the owners of this burial ground. The combination of rugged terrain and trackless forests rendered the site as inaccessible as other remote mountainous regions, which was utilized as both natural barriers against the northern tribes and a secret haven to avoid state surveillance. Yet the site was not located in some distant periphery but within reach of the emperor’s carriages. As such, it received visits from the emperors themselves, whose

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<sup>94</sup> James C. Scott, *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 23-26, 40-63.

<sup>95</sup> Cui, *Changpingzhou zhi*, juan 2, 13.

appearances significantly shaped this area's social and natural landscape. This particular paradox makes the low mountains on the outskirts of the imperial capital a valuable case to examine, in terms of how state power could shape the natural landscape according to imperial designs, and how it produced unexpected outcomes that defied effective control.

### **Blocking Mountain Passes: Forests as Natural Barriers**

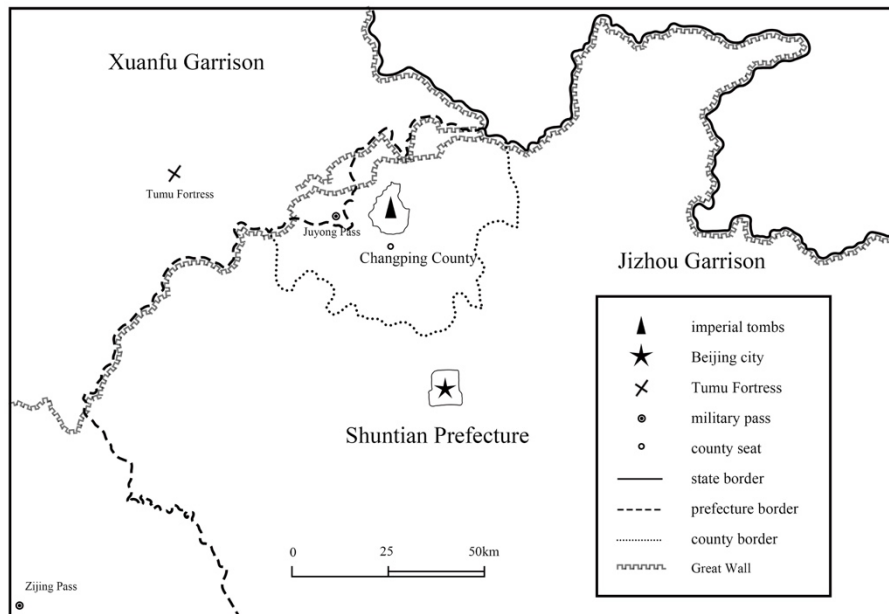
Viewed from beyond the Great Wall, the imperial tombs faced not only domestic encroachment but also serious threats of foreign invasions. Following Emperor Yongle's decision to withdraw most outlying garrisons from the steppe, the Ming defense perimeter retreated greatly inward, leaving the capital directly exposed to Mongol incursions.<sup>96</sup> Despite Yongle's offensive campaigns to drive the Mongols back to the steppe, the line of defense was never restored to its former position. This geopolitical vulnerability remained a persistent challenge for subsequent rulers, who lacked Yongle's boldness yet were forced to contend with the looming threat near the dynasty's ruling center.

Positioned south of the inner line of the Great Wall, Heaven-Longevity Mountain fell under the Jizhou Garrison's control and neighbored the jurisdiction of the Xuanfu Garrison. Although somewhat removed from the immediate frontier zones that experienced frequent Ming-Mongol conflicts, the spot rested on the last line of the capital's defense, which became increasingly significant since the mid-15<sup>th</sup> century. Less than ten miles to the west lay Juyong Pass, the region's most vital stronghold, and about eighty miles southwest stood Zijing Pass, another key defensive spot on the capital's western pathway. As Tang Long, the Minister of War, commented in 1545, "Xuanfu and Datong are the defensive fences; Juyong, Zijing, and other passes are the

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<sup>96</sup> Arthur Waldron, *The Great Wall of China: From History to Myth* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990): 79-81.

gateways; Shuntian Prefecture, Baoding, and other counties are the inner chambers. When the fences are secure, the gateways are strong; when the gateways are strong, the inner chambers are safe.”<sup>97</sup>



**Figure 4.1** Strategic position of the imperial tombs. Created by the author. Based on Hou Renzhi, *Beijing lishi ditu*, 54-55.

Situated within this intricate network, Heaven-Longevity Mountain served as a critical stronghold in safeguarding the capital. Nestled in a valley facing south, the core burial ground was encircled by mountains on three sides, with rugged terrain, mountain passes, and constructed walls forming a near-closed protective zone. Though seemingly unbreakable, these defenses were breached several times by Mongol forces, who not only violated the sacred fortune land but posed great threats to the dynasty’s political center.

<sup>97</sup> *Shizong Shilu* (1545-4-14), 5679.

In the year 1449, Emperor Zhengtong was encouraged by his eunuch supervisor Wang Zhen to lead armies into battle against the Oirats. The troops were crushed badly at the Tumu Fortress, causing the emperor to be captured by the Mongols.<sup>98</sup> After failed negotiations with the Ming court, the Oirat leader Esen Taysi launched his forces toward Beijing. Guided by a defected eunuch named Xining, they crossed Zijing Pass, breaching the capital's defenses and endangering the palace.<sup>99</sup> Although the Oirats ultimately failed to seize Beijing, they inflicted significant damage on local society by desecrating the imperial tombs, killing Tomb Guard officials, and capturing countless residents.<sup>100</sup> In the aftermath of this crisis, officials in the Ministry of War started to associate these forests with border defense, arguing that they should be better preserved to prevent future invasions:

The areas around the passes of Zijing, Juyong, and Yanmen stretch for thousands of *li*. In the past, the dense growth of trees formed forests that acted as natural barriers, preventing the passage of people and horses. However, in recent times, due to continuous logging driven by public or private interests, trees have been almost depleted, mountains have been cleared to create roads, and the once difficult terrain has become easy to traverse. As a result, invaders did not enter through the passes but instead crossed over the mountains. We request that military commanders and officials strictly enforce the prohibitions, patrols be dispatched, and those who continue to engage in logging be punished accordingly.<sup>101</sup>

Rather than merely disrupting geomantic fortune, illegal logging was seen as a threat to national security, as it created alternative routes for the Mongols to bypass key military strongholds. This renewed awareness led Emperor Jingtai to approve requests for forest preservation as a defensive measure, which was adopted by later rulers and rigorously enforced across the northern borderlands. Alongside other efforts to fortify the Great Wall frontier, these

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<sup>98</sup> John W. Dardess, *More Than the Great Wall: The Northern Frontier and Ming National Security, 1368-1644* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2019), 154-155.

<sup>99</sup> *Yingzong Shilu* (1449-10-9), 3627.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.* (1449-10-22), 3647.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.* (1450-2-4), 3867-3868.

measures marked a broader shift in Ming strategy from active offense to passive defense against the Mongols.<sup>102</sup> As this shift unfolded, the forests surrounding the imperial tombs were recognized as essential to the defense system and consequently received stricter protection.

The effectiveness of forests as natural barriers remained highly debated, as they failed to prevent Mongol incursions from recurring. Nonetheless, Ming officials continued to uphold this policy, reinforcing stringent restrictions on gathering timber and collecting firewood in forests around critical military spots.<sup>103</sup> The persistent implementation of such measures influenced local perceptions of these border forests. As the next case demonstrates, during another serious Mongol attack on the capital region, the forests were seen, or at least believed, to have played a crucial role in shielding the imperial tombs from foreign invaders.

In the year 1550, Altan Khan, leader of the Tümed Mongols, initiated an incursion into Beijing due to the Ming rejection of his tribute and trade request. His forces penetrated the border through a relatively unfortified area northeast of Beijing and then swept across the capital region in a series of raids. Having forced Emperor Jiajing to agree to tribute relations and border markets, he lifted the siege of Beijing and led his forces out of the capital.<sup>104</sup> During this crisis, although the forests did not stop the invaders from approaching the imperial tombs, they were believed to have prevented the Mongols from causing greater damage. As the local gazetteer recorded:

Outside the eastern gate of the city, there is a pine grove consisting entirely of pine and cypress trees, without any other species. They were originally planted to provide replacements for trees at the imperial tombs. For two hundred years, logging and gathering firewood there have been prohibited, allowing it to grow into a dense forest. The trees stand tall in neat rows, lush and verdant, extending all the way to the

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<sup>102</sup> Dardess, *More Than the Great Wall*, viii.

<sup>103</sup> For a comprehensive study of forest preservation in the northern frontier, see Qiu, “Guofang xianshang,” 1-66.

<sup>104</sup> Dardess, *More Than the Great Wall*, 412-413.

mountaintop and remaining unchanged throughout the seasons. In the twenty-ninth year of the Jiajing reign (1550), when bandits invaded through the eastern gate, our forces lay hidden within the forest, launching an attack with remarkable success. The enemy retreated and dared not invade again. This forest thus serves as a protective screen for the county.<sup>105</sup>

This account highlights two distinct functions of the pine grove: supplying trees for the imperial tombs and protecting the county from Mongol raiders. While the former was directly mandated by imperial authority, the latter emerged in response to the escalating Mongol threat. By the 16th century, as the memory of the Tumu Incident still weighed heavily on local consciousness, the recurring Mongol incursions at the county's border passes served as a stark reminder of the enduring danger. In 1516, a notable incident happened when Mongol forces reached Baiyangkou, a key fortress at the county's western boundary. Rumors spread that the fortress had already been breached, triggering widespread panic in local society: "The visiting officials mounted their horses and fled, while people of all ages, from the elderly to toddlers, supported each other in a crowded escape along the road."<sup>106</sup>

During the 1550 incident, the Mongols indeed entered Changping but left the imperial tombs untouched. Their sudden retreat surprised and confused local people, who had little idea of the agreement reached between the Mongols and the palace. Their withdrawal was attributed to two factors in the local gazetteer: the unexpected attack from the forest and the divine intervention of Guandi, the god of war.<sup>107</sup> In recognition of their great deed of safeguarding the county, a Guandi temple was established at the city's east gate, and the trees received high praise in the poems of local literati.<sup>108</sup>

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<sup>105</sup> Cui, *Changpingzhou zhi*, juan 1, 15.

<sup>106</sup> *Wuzong Shilu* (1516-7-16), 2742.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*, juan 8, 1.

<sup>108</sup> For instance, someone likened the trees to soldiers defending the county, writing: "Originally intended as trees to be reserved for imperial tombs, who could have foreseen they would be used to defend against invaders? Now, the key to the northern gate needs no questioning; even the grass and trees have become soldiers in defense." *Ibid.*, juan 1, 15.

The 1550 incident was merely one episode in the broader Ming-Mongol conflicts during Emperor Jiajing's reign, a period defined by frequent skirmishes and clashes along the northern frontier. Nevertheless, it highlights how the defense policy fostered a nuanced understanding of the forests—not only as the imperial tombs' protectors but also as Changping County's guardians. This image was further solidified as the border tensions persisted, leading Ming rulers to tighten restrictions on illegal logging and launch proactive initiatives to plant trees along the border regions. In a 1566 memorial, the Ministry of War suggested:

At forbidden mountains and significant passes like Huilingkou, it is feared that traitors may come and go, creating unauthorized pathways. Prohibitions were strictly enforced in the past, and they should be reinforced again right now. The Eunuch and Military Commandants should lead their subordinates in regular patrols to ensure secure guarding. They should also promptly plant trees along the restricted areas around the mountains to strengthen the barriers. Anyone violating these prohibitions by traveling through or engaging in illegal logging, and those who shelter them shall all be punished according to the law.<sup>109</sup>

Emperor Jiajing approved this proposal, and together with other efforts to demarcate forbidden zones, amend the law, and suppress eunuch collusion, these measures significantly enhanced the protection of forests near the imperial tombs. In 1580, when Emperor Wanli decided to hold a sacrificial ceremony at Mountain Heaven-Longevity, the Ministry of Rites once again proposed planting trees around the imperial tombs. They recommended that the Eunuch and Military Commandants “plant abundant trees to provide cover and barriers, prohibit illegal logging to block unauthorized routes, deploy night patrols to ensure strict defense, and increase inspections to deter and punish spies and traitors.”<sup>110</sup> The emperor's approval of this proposal underscores a persistent concern for potential Mongol incursions in the late Ming period, which motivated a sustained commitment to preserving forest cover as a defense strategy.

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<sup>109</sup> *Shizong Shilu* (1566-7-13), 8988-8989.

<sup>110</sup> *Shenzong Shilu* (1580-2-6), 1924.

To a large extent, forest preservation was more of an imperial ideology than a practically effective defense strategy, yet it gradually gained acceptance in local perceptions, as the threats of foreign invasions troubled the region as deeply as it did the ruling house. The destructive warfare following the Tumu Incident instilled an entrenched sense of displacement and a lasting need for security among residents. This demand for protection later found expression in local narratives after the retreat of the Mongol armies during the mid-16th-century crisis, where the forests began to be recognized for their role in deterring invaders. While this shared recognition did not resolve conflicts over forest resources, the fear of Mongol invasions did shape a common understanding between the state and local communities. Based on this shared perspective, the forests were no longer regarded solely as natural barriers along the dynasty's northern frontier but were deemed as vital for ensuring regional security.

### **A Frontier Within: Imperial Presence and Local Tensions**

Besides necessitating forest preservation, the changing border situations also influenced the emperors' visits to their ancestral tombs. Although not officially required, it was customary for the Ming rulers to pay reverence on significant occasions. These visits served various purposes, including claiming legitimacy, selecting burial sites, or simply engaging in leisure activities like wandering and hunting.<sup>111</sup> Perhaps more importantly, it offered the emperors an opportunity to observe local conditions through their eyes and engage directly in local affairs. As Emperor Hongwu emphasized, such visits were aimed at “traversing the mountains, rivers, and fields, understanding the toil of horseback travel through the hardship of the journey, observing the

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<sup>111</sup> Zhu Hong 朱鴻, “Yi zhansi wei ming: Mingdai huangdi de yeling huodong” 以展思為名：明代皇帝的謁陵活動 [In the Name of Mourning: Imperial Tomb Visits in the Ming Dynasty], in *Jinshi Zhongguo de shehui yu wenhua* 近世中國的社會與文化 (Taipei: Department of History, National Taiwan Normal University, 2007), 164.

livelihoods of the common people to comprehend the struggles of securing food and clothing, and examining their sentiments to discern the virtues and flaws of local customs.”<sup>112</sup> Though primarily intended to educate imperial princes who had not experienced the hardships of real life, the homage trip later became a reminder of imperial authority in local society, embodied in its highest form by the emperors themselves.

The proximity of the dynasty’s later capital to the imperial tombs in its suburbs made such visits less arduous. Nevertheless, the principle laid out in the first emperor’s instructions was rigorously followed. In 1430, Emperor Zhengde accompanied the Empress Dowager to pay tribute to Mountain Heaven-Longevity. They spent a particularly long fifteen days at Changping County, not only holding sacrificial ceremonies at the tomb site but also interacting closely with nearby residents. The *Veritable Records* documented their activities in vivid detail:

The Empress Dowager entered a farmhouse along the roadside and inquired an elderly woman about her livelihood and well-being. The woman, along with her daughters and young children, responded with joy and enthusiasm as if they were speaking with family members.<sup>113</sup>

Emperor Zhengde saw a farmer plowing the field from a distance and then rode over with a few attendants to observe. He inquired about the farmer’s crops, took the farmer’s plow, and pushed it several times. The farmers initially did not realize it was the emperor. When the eunuchs informed them, they were astonished and overjoyed, hastily gathering around, bowing, and shouting, “Long live the emperor!”<sup>114</sup>

While the scenes appeared more like carefully orchestrated political displays than truly spontaneous encounters, they reflected the same ideal emphasized in Emperor Hongwu’s instructions: the Son of Heaven directly engaging with local realities, rather than through the intermediaries of any agents or institutions. In this sense, the emperor’s presence extended

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<sup>112</sup> *Taizu Shilu* (1366-10-22), 400.

<sup>113</sup> *Xuanzong Shilu* (1430-2-26), 1495-1496.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*, (1430-3-8), 1501.

beyond ceremonial greetings and symbolic gestures but functioned as a form of oversight that discouraged deputed officials from abusing commoners or prioritizing personal interests over compliance with state policies. A broad review of crimes in the forbidden forests confirms the substantial impact these visits made on the local society, showing that crackdowns on illegal activities often coincided with periods of frequent imperial presence, while violations surged during times when such visits diminished.

Table 4.1 Imperial visits and local crimes

Emperor's reign	Years of visits	Criminal cases
Yongle (1403-1424)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 1409</li> <li>• 1410</li> </ul>	
Hongxi (1425)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 1425</li> </ul>	
Xuande (1426-1435)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 1426</li> <li>• 1430</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• (1425) Someone uprooted trees.</li> </ul>
Zhengtong (1436-1449)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 1442</li> <li>• 1445</li> <li>• 1446</li> <li>• 1447</li> <li>• 1448</li> <li>• 1449</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• (1432) Military Commanders Qin Ying and Li Zhong took bribes and allowed people to cut down trees.</li> <li>• (1441) A group of commoners headed by Zhao Fugui fell the protected trees.</li> <li>• (1443) Someone fell the protected trees.</li> <li>• (1444) Vice Eunuch Director Ruan Ju fell over a hundred trees for personal use.</li> </ul>
Jingtai (1450-1457) Tianshun (1457-1464) Chenghua (1465-1487) Hongzhi (1488-1505)	none	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• (1479) A group of soldiers headed by Dong Neng and Li Yi cut down dozens of trees.</li> </ul>
Zhengde (1506-1521)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 1517</li> <li>• 1518</li> </ul>	
Jiajing (1522-1566)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 1536</li> <li>• 1537</li> <li>• 1538</li> <li>• 1539</li> <li>• 1543</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• (1531) Eunuch Commandant Liu Cen sheltered some unauthorized loggers to escape punishment.</li> <li>• (1538) A group of commoners headed by Sun ji fell the protected trees.</li> </ul>
Longqing (1567-1572)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 1568</li> </ul>	
Wanli (1573-1620)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 1580</li> <li>• 1583</li> <li>• 1584</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• (1605-1607) Eunuch Commandant Li Jun faked an accusation of illegal logging to extort money.</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 1585</li> <li>• 1588</li> </ul>	
Tianqi (1621-1627) Chongzhen (1628-1644)	none	

Source: *Ming Shilu*, *Huang Ming tiaofa shilei zuan*

As shown in the table above, the frequent visits before the mid-15th century led to the uncovering of some minor offenses, particularly during Emperor Zhengtong’s reign. This heightened scrutiny also explains why, despite the persistence of minor violations, only a small number of crimes implicated high-ranking officials or exposed entangled interest networks. The consistent imperial presence was disrupted by the 1449 Tumu Crisis, which turned Heaven-Longevity Mountain into a flashpoint for Ming-Mongol tensions. For over fifty years thereafter, emperors avoided setting foot on the land, and officials were delegated to perform sacrificial rituals instead. Unsurprisingly, this prolonged absence coincided with the growing influence of eunuchs in the local society, fostering intricate collusion and widespread violations within the forbidden forests.

It was not until the early 16<sup>th</sup> century that Emperor Zhengde revisited Heaven-Longevity Mountain, motivated not by any resolution of border tensions but purely by personal enjoyment. His successor, Jiajing, who came from a side branch of the ruling house, revived this tradition to bolster his legitimacy and advance his broader scheme of ritual reform. Both emperors faced strong opposition from bureaucrats, as concerns over potential dangers on the road rendered the prospect of leaving the palace an unacceptable risk. While the court’s extreme caution did not prevent them and the following rulers from visiting their ancestral tombs, it shaped their trips distinctive from those of their predecessors. To ensure safety, every journey was carefully planned with military precautions: The Supreme Commanders of Xuanfu, Jizhou, and Changping Garrisons were ordered to move their forces to strategic spots surrounding the imperial tombs,

and high officials were appointed to escort the imperial entourage and oversee the capital's security.<sup>115</sup> The emperors normally resided at the imperial residence at Gonghua City, about 10 miles south of the imperial tombs, while the county officials, clerks, scholars, and elders waited by the roadside and paid homage at the palace.<sup>116</sup> For later Ming emperors and their court, the scene of 1430 seemed an unattainable ideal that was far removed from their reality.

Regardless, their reappearance still triggered significant shifts in the local power dynamics, leading to the inspection of secret schemes, crackdowns on illegal activities, and checks on abuses of authority. During his 1536 visit, Emperor Jiajing was shocked to find a significant decline in the local population and widespread desolation of the fields. Concerned about the lack of people to support and safeguard the imperial tombs, he issued an edict stating: "Officials must care for and nurture the people, providing relief and support with dedication. Arbitrary taxes or levies must not be imposed, nor should acts of cruelty that harm the people be committed."<sup>117</sup> Through his edict and presence, the emperor signaled his attention to the county and tomb site, warning local officials against defying state regulations or mistreating commoners.

The relatively quiet border since the late 16th century encouraged Emperor Wanli to make several visits to Heaven-Longevity Mountain, initiating another round of intensive detection of crimes in the forbidden forests. The schemes uncovered during this period differed significantly from those of the early Ming, with powerful state representatives deeply engaged and orchestrating events from behind the scenes. However, these imperial efforts to suppress violations proved short-lived, as the rise of Jurchen power on the northeast frontier once again made the imperial tombs a site of heightened tension. In the emperors' absence, control of the

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<sup>115</sup> *Shenzong Shilu* (1580-2-21), 1932; (1580-3-5), 1942; (1583-2-28), 2490; (1583-2-1), 2493; (1585-9-25), 3007.

<sup>116</sup> *Shizong Shilu* (1539-4-27), 4639; *Shenzong Shilu* (1580-3-12), 1950; (1583-9-6), 2624; (1588-9-10), 3796.

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.* (1536-3-25), 3925-3926.

forests reverted to deputed officials who operated with minimal oversight from the central government. As a late Ming bureaucrat lamented, “Ever since the road once cleared for the imperial visits became deserted, for the past decade, the old eunuchs have been idle with nothing to do.”<sup>118</sup>

Influenced by the ever-changing situation along the northern frontier, the emperors’ visits to Heaven-Longevity Mountain followed no consistent pattern. These journeys allowed the Ming rulers to observe local conditions through their eyes, while at the same time reinforcing imperial authority among deputed officials and the local populace. Notably, the imperial presence appears linked to crimes within the forbidden forests, demonstrating the intricate relationship between emperors and their local representatives. Though unable to keep continuous surveillance on local circumstances, the anticipation of the imperial presence deterred local actors, particularly officials entrusted with upholding imperial interests, from committing intolerable violations. However, the disappearance of such anticipation after the mid-15<sup>th</sup> century encouraged state agents to develop an increasingly strong influence over local affairs and advance their interests at the cost of imperial benefits. These power shifts underscore both the symbolic weight and the practical limitations of the emperor’s direct engagement in local governance, further complicating the political landscape that underpinned the violations in the forbidden forests.

### **Sheltered by the Landscape: Evasion and Local Resistance**

As the rising border tension and the close imperial attention helped preserve forests around the imperial tombs, the resulting dense vegetation in turn hindered the state’s ability to exert full control. Besides imperial functionaries, various other actors, whose identities were usually

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<sup>118</sup> Yu Minzhong 于敏中 et al., *Qinding rixia jiuwen kao* 欽定日下舊聞考 [Imperially Commissioned Examination of Antiquities Below the Sun] (1788), juan 136, 4.

unclear in official records, also inhabited the restricted area. Under the cover of the forest canopy, they evaded state obligations, stirred up troubles, and at times organized resistance, adding another layer of tension to an already intricate political landscape.

According to the local gazetteer, nearly all of Changping's administrative units were located in the plains, with only sparse records confirming the presence of mountain residents. This absence from official registers demonstrates the limited reach of administrative power into the rugged terrain, which consequently exempted these residents from taxes and conscription. Life in the deep mountains was far from ideal, especially given the official prohibition against gathering resources from the surrounding forests. Yet as the economic burden of serving the imperial tombs escalated, the benefits of administrative invisibility outweighed the hardships of mountain life, prompting some registered individuals to abandon their official identities and seek refuge beyond the state's grasp.<sup>119</sup>

Fleeing into the mountains allowed plain residents to escape heavy obligations, but it also cut them off from farming as a means of livelihood. Many of the aforementioned criminal cases involved these unregistered individuals, who sought to make a living by colluding with deputed functionaries and exploiting the protected forests. In his 1437 edict, Emperor Zhengtong noted that "certain unregistered people frequently entered the mountains to steal trees, while the responsible military commanders, local officials, and *li-jia* elders failed to enforce strict

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<sup>119</sup> In contrast to its growing military presence, Changping experienced a steady decline in its civilian population. In 1391, the civilian population was recorded at 16,946, but it fell sharply in the aftermath of the Tumu Incident. By 1508, the number had dropped to just over 8,000, and by 1541, it had declined by another 3,000. A slight increase is recorded by 1561, though it did not signal a meaningful reversal of the long-term downward trend. Several factors contributed to this persistent depopulation, including increasing economic burdens, frequent Mongol incursions, and a widening gap between the rich and the poor. While some residents relocated elsewhere, others simply abandoned official registration to evade state surveillance. Their flight, however, placed greater pressure on those who remained, often triggering further waves of escape. For population figures, see Cui, *Changpingzhou zhi*, juan 4, 18-19.

control.”<sup>120</sup> In his memorial to Emperor Wanli, Tang Zhaojing also mentioned, “Certain unregistered hooligans are colluding with patrol functionaries to stir up trouble, fabricate accusations, and extort money.”<sup>121</sup> By secretly cooperating with local officials, these individuals secured protection and access to profits. Though rarely detailed in official records, this symbiotic relationship formed a crucial part of the interest networks that enabled repeated violations in the forbidden forests.

Peaceful arrangements between unregistered individuals and local officials were not always achieved. While some runaways only sought petty profits, others aimed for greater autonomy. The forested mountains were a recurring source of unrest. As noted in the local gazetteer, “People who lived in the mountains tend to have a fierce and wild nature. They are obedient when treated with kindness, but rebellious when forced.”<sup>122</sup> This observation underscores the persistent unruliness of the mountains, which posed enduring challenges to local governance. In 1504, a bandit named Wang Xi, known as the “King of the Mountain” (*kaoshanwang* 靠山王), gathered followers in the mountains of Changping County and plundered the region for several years. Given its proximity to the imperial palace, officials requested that he be eliminated without delay.<sup>123</sup> Yet few dared to confront his force, as it was shielded by the rugged terrain and dense forests.<sup>124</sup> It was not until a courageous officer from the Embroidered Guard struck his base that Wang was finally wiped out. In this case, the very landscape that once blocked Mongol cavalry prevented the state forces from penetrating the mountains, leading to a protracted crisis and exacerbating instability in the surrounding communities.

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<sup>120</sup> Dai, *Huang Ming tiaofa shilei zuan*, juan 32, 20-21.

<sup>121</sup> Tang, *Lingxuange ji*, juan 1, 48.

<sup>122</sup> Cui, *Changpingzhou zhi*, juan 1, 7.

<sup>123</sup> *Xiaozong Shilu* (1504-6-22), 4007

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.* (1504-7-15), 4033.

In addition to the unregistered hooligans, these mountains were also home to religious figures. The geographical isolation and tranquil environment made them ideal settings for retreat and worship, rendering the area a significant religious site since the Middle Imperial period. A stele records the existence of thriving Buddhist communities and the construction of pagodas and temples as early as the 11<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>125</sup> Just a few miles east of Heaven Longevity Mountain, a temple renovated by Jurchen nobles in the 12<sup>th</sup> century reportedly attracted five hundred followers and was surrounded by seventy-two affiliated monasteries.<sup>126</sup> The temple received further refurbishment by the Ming emperors, who entitled it Fahua and endowed it with land and property.<sup>127</sup> Moreover, even the burial complex itself once housed Buddhist institutions, which were only relocated due to the tombs' construction.<sup>128</sup> The proliferation of Buddhist constructions in the area cultivated a strong religious atmosphere, which intertwined with rebellious activities and supported the resistance to state authority.

In 1418, a Changping resident named Liu Hua was executed for treason. Originally called Seng Bao (a distinctly Buddhist name), Liu had fled military service and sought refuge in Xincheng County, Baoding Prefecture. Disguised in Daoist robes, he proclaimed himself the reincarnation of Maitreya Buddha and destined to rule the world. He preached various scriptures, deceiving over 140 ignorant followers to believe in him. Subsequently, people in Rongcheng County, Zhending Prefecture, and Hongdong County, Shaanxi Prefecture also took his vows and joined his camp.<sup>129</sup> Another crisis did not have such a far-reaching impact but posed a more

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<sup>125</sup> “Shelita ji” 舍利塔記 [Record of the Relic Pagoda], in *Lidai shike taben huibian*, vol. 45, 81.

<sup>126</sup> “Chongjian Dayanshengsi ji” 重修大延聖寺 [Inscription on the Reconstruction of Dayansheng Temple], in *Lidai shike taben huibian*, vol. 46, 88.

<sup>127</sup> “Chici Fahuasi ji” 敕賜法華寺記 [Inscription on the Imperial Grant of Fahua Temple], in *Lidai shike taben huibian*, vol. 51, 83.

<sup>128</sup> “Fayunsi bei” 法雲寺碑 [Stele of Fayun Temple], in *Lidai shike taben huibian*, vol. 53, 46.

<sup>129</sup> *Xiaozong Shilu* (1504-7-15), 4033.

immediate threat to Beijing. In 1538, a monk named Tian Yuan from an ancient Buddhist temple in Changping was accused of fabricating heretical teachings to deceive the masses. He falsely appointed a commander named Chen Yun as the Duke of State Pacification (*anguogong* 安國公) and killed several people to cover his plots. Once discovered, both Tian Yuan and Chen Yun were arrested and sentenced to death. The official records do not specify the exact origin of their forces in Changping County, but given their deep entanglement with religious power, it is likely they maintained intimate connections with temples in the northern mountains. One official even likened these religion-backed movements to the White Lotus Sect, a catch-all label the state frequently applied to seditious activities that oftentimes emerged from mountainous terrain.<sup>130</sup> With dense forests, scattered Buddhist temples, and the influx of desperate fugitives, the mountains offered a perfect environment for conspiracies to take root, which could have spiraled into a full-scale crisis without timely state intervention.

With its unique topography of half mountain and half plain, Changping witnessed an interplay between its political and geographical landscape. The mountains in the northwest connected to the military frontier, while the plains in the southeast extended into the capital's hinterland. Affected by the growing economic burdens, plain residents continued to abandon official registrations and seek refuge in the mountains. The rugged terrain provided not only a sanctuary to evade state obligations but also a space to collude with officials or even organize resistance movements. This mountain-plain dynamic, which hindered the process of "state making" in Southeast Asia, also manifested itself in the capital region of the Ming dynasty, where state control was believed to have developed to a relatively higher level. As James Scott illustrates, geographical challenges could significantly constrain the reach of state power, and

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<sup>130</sup> *Shizong Shilu* (1538-11-6), 4466.

even in a place near the heart of the Chinese empire, “the friction of terrain” remained a significant obstacle to the state’s effective control.<sup>131</sup>

Preserved by state regulations and frequented by emperors’ carriages, the forests surrounding the imperial tombs did not submit to full state control but rather resisted its penetration. This paradox brought the rugged terrain and lush forests to the forefront, which did not merely serve as the background for various actors to interact, but actively impacted their strategies and decisions. Their inaccessibility prompted the state to use them as natural barriers against foreign invasions, while their hidden dangers made emperors cautious about whether to leave the palace and set foot on their ancestral burial grounds. Although official actors appear to dominate the historical record, an equally important force was the environment itself, and perhaps those who lived within it. The interaction between these actors and the natural terrain underlay the very agency that resisted total state control, which, unfortunately, often disappeared from historical narratives due to its intentional distance from central forces.

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<sup>131</sup> Scott, *The Art of Not Being Governed*, 40-61.

## Chapter 5 Conclusion

In his long poem recounting his visit to the imperial tombs, Gu Yanwu vividly depicted the transformation of the surrounding forests. Reflecting on the height of the Ming dynasty, he wrote: “Encircling mountains stretch for miles around, Towering pines and cypresses, verdant and profound.” However, after Heaven’s wrath struck the imperial land, he observed: “From Kangling Tomb to Qingling Tomb, Growing modestly, short trees frail.”<sup>132</sup> For Gu, the tomb trees symbolized the fortune of Ming rule, which flourished during its prosperity and withered as the dynasty met its end.

The forests were not just silent witnesses to imperial history. Instead, they provided natural resources that enticed various actors and served as a physical arena for their interactions. Viewed from an environmental perspective, the persistent violations suggest that the forests played as central a role as the human agents involved. The difficult terrain obstructed the enforcement of the forest ban, the valuable trees attracted profit seekers to infringe state regulations, and the dense canopy shielded resistant forces from imperial interference. None of these occurred in remote areas beyond the state’s direct reach, but in low mountains just a stone’s throw from the palace. Paradoxically, the woodlands maintained by imperial power demonstrated the agency of nature itself, which, though largely shaped by human forces, ultimately impeded its total domination.

The imperial need to preserve these forests was driven by both the geomantic significance of the burial ground and the growing tension along its receded frontier. And to be fair, this effort did succeed in maintaining forest cover that would not have survived otherwise. The very need for forest management gave rise to a multi-layered institutional structure, through which state

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<sup>132</sup> Gu Yanwu 顧炎武, *Tinglin shiji* 亭林詩集 [Collected Poems of Tinglin] (17th century), juan 3, 12.

authority was trickled down in fragmented ways. As the arrival of state agents complicated local political structures, it also created avenues for all related parties to maneuver around imperial regulations. This institutional complexity shaped a political landscape that enabled persistent violations, revealing how broader court struggles could be extended and embedded in the local terrain, and how a dense presence of state power could fracture imperial authority and in turn hinder coherent control.

Beyond the state and its representatives' immediate reach, there were areas where unregistered individuals gathered, religious figures resided, and resistant forces took refuge. Their activities were hardly detected unless escalating into open crises, rendering them almost invisible in official records. Typically portrayed as either impoverished victims abused by corrupt officials or as disruptive elements threatening local order, these silent masses in fact included a range of actors who developed nuanced strategies to pursue their own interests. They bribed functionaries for protection, navigated the terrain to evade surveillance, or even incited crises to resist state control. Though only sparse traces of their stories could be found in official archives, they played a significant role in challenging the extension of imperial authority and asserting the agency of local communities.

In this sense, the political dynamics observed near the imperial tombs differed significantly from those in remote areas where the state or its agents were largely absent.<sup>133</sup> In the capital region, the state manifested itself in various forms, including proclamations posted in public spaces, deputed officials residing in the city, bureaucrats dispatched for sacrificial rituals, and, at times, the emperors themselves visiting to pay homage. Previous research has already pointed out that a strong state presence often led to internal conflicts rather than ensuring complete

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<sup>133</sup> Szonyi, *The Art of Being Governed*, 7.

control.<sup>134</sup> As proved in this case, the close imperial watch via its competing agents did not suppress local agency but instead shaped its very expression. Whereas in remote societies people might only experience state power through routine administration, here they had to navigate a complex bureaucratic landscape, contend with multiple representatives who, to some extent, were embedded in local society, and seek out whichever authority offered the greatest advantage.

In the forests that held great significance for the Ming ruling house, persistent local violations revealed a distinctive tension between strong state intervention and its limited capacity to enforce effective control. This case demonstrates that the power of the state can only be fully understood through close examination of its varied manifestations on the ground. Likewise, the agency of local communities emerges most clearly when considering the embeddedness of state actors within local networks. All of this unfolded in a forested landscape that itself exercised agency through its interactions with human actors. As a unique arena that brought together emperors, bureaucrats, eunuchs, soldiers, commoners, and the natural environment, the imperial tomb site invites multiple perspectives for analyzing their complex entanglements beyond a simple state-society dichotomy, providing insights into the practical operation of imperial power and the making of local agency in Ming Dynasty China.

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<sup>134</sup> Robinson, *Bandits, Eunuchs, and the Son of Heaven*, 166.

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