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Publication Date

2018-07-03

DOI

10.1080/0147037x.2018.1467149

Peer reviewed



Ming Studies

ISSN: 0147-037X (Print) 1759-7595 (Online) Journal homepage: <http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/ymng20>

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To cite this article: Sarah Schneewind & Leif Littrup (2018) An Interview with Leif Littrup, Ming Studies, 2018:78, 74-76, DOI: [10.1080/0147037X.2018.1467149](https://doi.org/10.1080/0147037X.2018.1467149)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/0147037X.2018.1467149>



Published online: 27 Sep 2018.



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INTERVIEW

AN INTERVIEW WITH LEIF LITTRUP[†]

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[Sarah Schneewind:]

As a graduate student, I read *Subbureaucratic Government in China in Ming Times*, by Leif Littrup 李来福, as well as his translation of chapter 20 of the *Da Ming huidian* on the Yellow Registers. So I was thrilled when Dr. Littrup contacted me in December 2016, about contributing an updated translation of the whole chapter, as well as his translation of a 1567 memorial by Ge Shouli, to the Ming History English Translation Project. I unceremoniously invited myself to meet him when I traveled to Copenhagen in September 2017. Leif and his wife Lisbeth, a scholar of Malay literature, took me and my traveling companions on a wonderful all-Sunday tour of the area of Denmark just north of Copenhagen, including Helsingør, better known to Shakespeare fans as “Elsinore.” Leif also responded to the *Ming Studies* Editor’s questionnaire about his journey into Ming studies.

[Leif reports:]

The subjects in my first three years at university were economics, Latin, history, and philosophy. History was really my field, but for some time I planned to concentrate on the philosophy of history, probably to get beyond the perceived limits on the study of history at the University of Copenhagen around 1965. It turned out that philosophy was not a good idea, so I had to find another way of “breaking out.” The solution was to study the indigenous history of an Asian country, and not from the point of view of European trade, which was already being studied and taught in the department. Chinese history was the choice, and after a short time my teacher of Chinese language mentioned that very few studied Ming history. So Ming it was, and it suited me fine—not too old and not too recent. Later, I discovered that others may have followed similar advice!

But doing Chinese history in Denmark was a rather lonely affair at the time. When seeking a topic for my MA thesis, I wrote to Charles O. Hucker in Michigan and asked him to suggest a topic, which he very kindly did, and I followed his suggestion. My teachers of Chinese and history in Copenhagen gave encouragement and assistance when I wanted to continue my studies abroad. I went on to a PhD, with the overall question: “How—by what methods—was it possible to govern a country and a population the size of China with a fairly small bureaucracy?” This led to a study of the interface between the bureaucracy and the people, and the participation—forced or voluntary—of the people in governing the country, a little early for “civil society” but in the same direction.

My intention was to stay with the Ming period and I would probably have done so in a more conducive academic environment. But back in Copenhagen the interest was in either the Classical period or the Modern/Contemporary period, so I drifted towards the Modern and took up the study of World History in Modern China, particularly after 1978; but also post-Ming history and, more recently, a study of Danes in Tianjin in late Qing. The study of Chinese history had, after all, made me curious what Danes were doing out there.

In answer to your question, Ming is just as important in world history as the history of my home town in the same period but, of course, much larger! And Ming seems just as alive/dead/present in China today as does the same period of the past in Europe or Denmark. When people so far away in time and space as Ming China in many ways were so similar to ourselves now, then perhaps people closer to ourselves in time and space are also not so different as they sometimes

appear. Material conditions and safety considerations seem to be rather universal and are in my view indispensable—explicitly or inexplicitly—for historical interpretations. The study of other fields of history might have taught me the same but Ming history was where I—as historian—started to develop this view of the study of human society. Since the time when I started studying Ming, a lot has changed in the field. Of particular importance may be the studies of the military and of violence. The Ming has become more “normal” and easier to handle in a larger context.

Leif Littrup’s published work on Great Ming in English includes:

“The Early Single Whip in Shandong 1550–1570,” *Papers on Far Eastern History* 15 (1977): 63–95.

“The Yellow Registers of the Ming Dynasty—Translation from the *Wan-li Da-Ming Hui-dian*,” *Papers on Far Eastern History* 16 (1977): 67–106. Updated version available on the Ming History English Translation Project (<https://knit.ucsd.edu/minghistoryinenglish/>).

Subbureaucratic Government in China in Ming Times: A Study of Shandong Province in the Sixteenth Century (Irvington-on-Hudson: Oslo Universitetsforlaget, distributed by Columbia University Press, 1981).

“Local Administration in Ming and Early Qing—A Case of Subcontracting?” In *China: Continuity and Change*, edited by Robert Paul Kramers (Zurich: Hausdruckerei der Universität, 1982), pp. 99–109.

“The Un-Oppressive State and Comparative History: Some Observations on Ming-Qing Local Society.” In *La société civile face à l’État dans les traditions chinoise, japonaise, coréenne et vietnamienne*, edited by Léon Vandermeersch (Paris: École Française d’Extrême-Orient, 1994), pp. 157–72. (This chapter has also appeared as “Fei yazhixing guojia he bijiao lishi” 非壓制性國家和比較歷史, in *Di erjie Ming-Qing shi guoji xueshu taolun huilun wenji* (Tianjin: Tianjin renmin chubanshe, 1993), pp. 204–19.) Available on the Ming History English Translation Project.

“Shandong Revisited: Developments in the Subbureaucratic Government System in Shandong Province during the Ming-Qing transition.” In *Zhonghua mingguoshi zhuanli lunwenji di wu jie taolunhui* (Taipei: Guoshiguan, 2000), pp. 828–48.

“Ming dynasty.” In *Brill’s Encyclopedia of China*, edited by Daniel Leese (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2009), pp. 657–60 (Translated from “Ming-Dynastie,” in *Das große China-Lexikon*, edited by Brunhild Staiger et al. (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft), pp. 502–4.)