CHAPTER 4

Salt Merchants in Yangzhou: Migration and Social Mobility

By the sixteenth century salt merchants dominated Yangzhou’s social life, but their status in the community remained precarious. Despite their wealth, merchants were regarded as outsiders under the household registration system.

Household registration was the Ming government’s major social control mechanism, a system devised to keep people in one place, both literally and metaphorically. Families were registered under occupational and territorial categories that were supposed to remain fixed from one generation to another. Since a household was registered where it first resided, the early Ming government assumed that salt merchants who came to Yangzhou to apply for salt certificates would return to their hometowns once they had drawn and shipped their salt.

But it made sense for salt merchants to relocate to Yangzhou, the seat of the Lianghuai Salt Distribution Commission.¹ As we shall see, they moved into the salterns and established themselves there. This would create problems later, when they and their descendants wanted to take the imperial examination.

The Imperial Civil Examination and Household Registration

Passing the examinations and earning a degree was the ladder to success in China, a way to achieve status without being born to it. In theory the imperial examinations were open to everyone, and during the Ming dynasty 47.5 percent of the jinshi, the highest degree, went to candidates from families where no one, for the three preceding generations in the male line, had possessed even the most elementary degree. But for all its fairness and openness, the civil examination system could be extremely hostile to “outsiders”. Those who had the misfortune to be perceived as outside the approved social hierarchy could

also be considered “alien” or “base”, and denied access to the civil examinations entirely.

Throughout the Ming and Qing dynasties, the imperial civil examinations operated in more or less the same way, with three tiers of examinations that ran parallel with the government’s administrative structure. The first step was for a boy to enroll in a local government school (girls were denied access both to the examinations and to formal schooling), and then to pass the Annual Examination [suishi] and the Qualification Examination [keshi] held there. This qualified a student to take the tri-annual Provincial Examination [xiangshi], which was held in various provincial cities. If he passed this examination, he received the juren degree and was allowed to sit for the tri-annual Metropolitan Examination [huishi] in Beijing, the capital. If he passed this final exam, he received the highest degree, the jinshi, and could become a government official.

An extremely lucky and capable young man then, could go from being a nobody to becoming a jinshi in four years, with a government appointment, and the attendant honor. But if he failed in either the Provincial or the Metropolitan Examination, he had a three-year wait, since these examinations were held only once every three years. It was quite common for a student to spend more than “ten years under a cold window”, as the Chinese saying goes, preparing for the imperial examination, and even then, very few students passed it.

The difficulty of the examinations was one matter, access to it was another. While the imperial civil examinations were a series of extremely rigorous competitions, its entry point was the county or prefecture government school. It was here that those who were considered “outsiders” ran into trouble, since the examination system was closely tied to household registration. Under the household registration system, the occupational registration assigned taxes as well as the family’s work, but the territorial registration provided legitimate access to a local government school. A boy from a family registered in County A would have access to the County A government school. Access was still neither easy nor automatic, since he had to take a series of examinations before being enrolled. But for those who had settled in County A and were registered elsewhere, i.e., the “outsiders”, access to the County A government school was next to impossible. By incorporating the civil examination system with the household registration system, the government tied

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2 For the time being, I leave aside the problem of purchased degrees. Jiansheng and gongsheng were the two degrees that could be bought. Although common, they were considered inferior to degrees acquired through examination.