SECTION 1

CHINA’S ECONOMY: OVERVIEW AND PERSPECTIVE
Numbers and Units in Chinese Economic History

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The British scholar J. H. Clapham has remarked that the methodological distinctiveness of economic history “hinges primarily upon its quantitative interests.” In dealing with quantities it is of course necessary to have a thorough understanding of the numbers and units in use. As a student of economic history, I have found that there are certain precautions which should be observed in the use of numbers and units in Chinese texts. The principles involved may seem to be commonplace and may not be limited to texts in the Chinese language. Constant recurrence of the same old examples and constant discovery of new ones indicate that these general precautions are nevertheless worth attention.

The first precaution is to watch out for misprints and copyists’ errors. The Chinese characters for one, two, and three are easily confused because they are written with one, two, and three horizontal strokes respectively. The number four in its archaic form has four horizontal strokes and thus adds to the confusion. Archaic forms of the characters for seven and ten resemble each other even more than their modern forms. Both are represented by a cross, the only difference being that the vertical stroke in the character for ten is much longer. Modern characters for ten and thousand differ by only one stroke on the top.

Numerous examples of misprints of numbers may be found in Chinese texts. To avoid such mistakes, careful Chinese have introduced what may be called alteration-proof forms of numbers. There are special forms for numbers from one to ten, and also for hundred and thousand. Some of these forms can be traced back to a few centuries B.C., although the whole set of ten or more alteration-proof forms is datable only from the end of the seventh century.

Among misprints in units the most important is the use of shêng for tou and tou for shêng (two measures of capacity: ten shêng equal to one tou). From medieval manuscripts discovered in Tun-huang, we learn that these two characters in their semi-cursive forms are so similar to each other that the reader can easily mistake one for the other. The similarity was probably noted by medieval contemporaries and