CHAPTER 15

The Fixers: The Role of Zhili Grain Brokers in the 1826 Sea Transport Experiment

Jane Kate Leonard

Introduction

No group involved in the Zhili end of the sea transport plan caused more consternation than the lowly grain brokers\(^1\) (jingjiren 經紀人)—extra-bureaucratic employees of the Granary Superintendency, who managed the transfer and storage of the yearly grain cargoes from the eight-province canal-zone.\(^2\) Officers on the government grain fleets and lighterage boatmen hated them because they controlled porterage labor on the docks and could, as a consequence, extort “excessive” fees to unload and transfer grain. Shanghai merchant shippers, who frequented the port of Tianjin each year, were aware of this pattern of extortion and, as a consequence, had initially been reluctant to ship grain for the state in 1826 unless broker extortion was eliminated. Zhili

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and Liangjiang official planners saw brokers as spoilers who could derail the Zhili end of the sea transport plan, so they acted decisively to ban any and all direct contacts between brokers and Shanghai merchant shippers on the Tianjin docks, and they created a temporary bureau (jiù 局), headed by Tianjin officials, to pay merchant shippers, porters, and lighterage boat men directly in order to eliminate broker extortion and “skimming” of labor payments.

And yet no actor in the sea transport drama was more crucial to its success than the broker who performed critical low-level organizational and managerial tasks—tasks on which the experiment depended. Zhili officials, especially those from the Granary Superintendency, recognized their importance, asserting that brokers had a “profound grasp of the care of grain and issues connected to the lighterage of grain.” They were “knowledgeable and experienced” in the grading, measuring, and bagging of grain; their close links with porterage networks enabled them to mobilize labor organizations to transfer grain from boat to dock to granary.3 While government officials openly and repeatedly disparaged them, yet, each and every one of them knew that the broker was the ultimate “fixer” for the myriad organizational tasks of low-level grain management for which there were no other regular government staff to perform.

Like “recruitment” (zhao shang 招商, zhao lai 招來), brokerage was a tool that provided the government with private managerial talent to direct crucial low-level government operations from the production and sale of salt, construction and maintenance of river work, copper mining, transport, and minting to the construction of government buildings and coastal and riverine harbor management.4 Out-sourcing the management of these operations
