PART TWO: MEDIEVAL CHINA
CHAPTER SIX

THE ROLE OF THE ZHOU LI IN SEVENTH- AND EIGHTH-CENTURY CIVIL ADMINISTRATIVE TRADITIONS

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Among the questions faced by candidates for the Examination in Knowledge of the Classics (mingjing 明經) in the year 803 was the following:

Question: The Zhou “regulated the Six [Groups of] Offices, in order to lead the nine regions.”¹ They divided the full range of affairs and duties; they made a count of the multitude of names and objects. The categories of lower officials and headmen who drew income without specified duties were somewhat numerous. The efforts of the higher peasants for sowing and planting were sometimes subordinated to taxes and levies. When something is concise, it is easy to follow through; when [posts] are few, then they can bring good order to the many. Should one suspect that “Mother Song” 宋 lost the truth?² Can it be that the Duke of Zhou would really have approved?

¹ The Six [Groups of] Offices (liuguan 六官) are mentioned in Zhouli zhushu 34.5b; E. Biot 1851, vol. 2, 314. Here they are identified by Zheng Xuan 鄭玄 with the Six Ministers (liuqing 六卿); for which see Shangshu zhushu ji buzheng 尚書注疏及補正1963, 18.15a–b. Quan is here adapting the Shangshu source. For the Six Authorities (liudian 六典), Six [Groups of] Offices (liuguan 六官), and Six Ministers (liuqing 六卿), see also n.53 below.
² For Mother Song, see Jinshu 96.2521–2522. She had been taught the Offices of Zhou (Zhouguan 周官) by her father, who had no son. Her son Wei Cheng 韋逞 became a ritual official for Fu Jian 苻堅, and through him she was introduced as a scholar of the text. Aged eighty, but still “with no defect of hearing or sight,” she was provided with “a lecture hall and 28 students who were taught while on the other side of a silk curtain. She was given the title of Lady Who Manifests Culture (xuanwen jun 宣文君) and had ten serving girls bestowed on her. The learning of the Offices of Zhou again circulated in the world, and she was called Mother Song.” I am grateful to my University of Cambridge colleague and successor Professor Roel Sterckx for this reference.