THE SUNG VIEWS ON THE CONTROL OF GOVERNMENT CLERKS

BY

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1. A Historiographical Introduction

The extensive use of clerks (li)—principally the clerical scribes (shu-li) and broadly all kinds of miscellaneous clerks (hsü-li)—has been a striking characteristic of the Chinese government particularly since the Sung period. In the rigidly structured society, the clerks were a unique substratum between the two broad socio-political classes, the officials and the people 1). They worked for the government as a servile group and often had to suffer humiliating punishment when they displeased the officials. Most of them were prevented by specific segregating regulations from moving up into the officialdom. Usually, the clerks were not even allowed to take the civil service examination which was open to all the common people. On the other hand, they did entrench themselves in an advantageous position. While the officials made the administrative decisions, it was the clerks who implemented them vis-à-vis the common people with an official air. As the officials moved from one office to another because of short tenure and did not acquaint themselves with the particularities of a given office or locality, the clerks were the indispensable experts on administrative details. In most cases natives of the area, whether the capital or a local place, they acquired the specialized knowledge through the family, the tradition, apprenticeship, and years of service. There was plenty of opportunity for them to cheat both the officials and the common people. The officials were, so to speak, the brains of the Confucian government.

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They could hardly carry out effective actions, when the clerks dragged their feet or refused to lift them from the mud of vested interests. It is amazing how the dynasties rose and fell but this obviously deplorable system of clerks limped along through the centuries with neither fundamental change nor major breakdown.

A brief review of the relevant evidence would be helpful. The historical records, compiled chiefly according to the interest of the official class, contain only limited and scattered information on the clerks. Reflecting the same intellectual bias, most scholars in the traditional days made little more than summary observations, either decrying the malpractices or denouncing the incorrigible clerks. Only in contemporary times have some Chinese scholars shown an analytical interest in such topics as the collusion of clerks with corrupt officials, local powerful groups, and other law-contravening elements. Unfortunately, their research productivity has been seriously handicapped by their turbulent and limiting circumstances. Most of the contributions have come in the last thirty years from a number of Japanese scholars whose research on local government, fiscal matters, and economic activities are particularly valuable. Pre-eminently Miyazaki and recently Sudō have carefully traced how, from the period of the Five Dynasties on, the growing socio-economic complexity led to the gradual evolution of numerous part-time, temporary, and miscellaneous services to the government into full-time, permanent, and professional duties of an increasingly larger clerical staff. According to Sudō’s estimates, a sub-prefecture by the middle of the Southern Sung probably had at least 150 clerks and a prefecture 300 clerks, if not more. A large office in the

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3) Miyazaki (1953): Miyazaki Ichisada, “The chou-sien system under the Sung