TRANSMISSION OF MING MEMORIALS
AND THE EVOLUTION OF THE TRANSMISSION NETWORK, 1368-1627*

BY

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Within the Ming administrative apparatus, memorials and edicts functioned as the chief documentary media that facilitated the communication between the emperor and his bureaucracy. In a sense, the gigantic apparatus was set into motion only by the frequent issuing of imperial edicts. As a general rule, however, edicts pertaining to the actual (non-ceremonial) conduct of government affairs were based mostly on proposals presented in the form of memorials either from the provinces or from the capital; the emperor seldom made decisions solely on his own initiative 1).

While research into the whole problem of decision-making practice in the Ming times is obviously beyond the scope of a journal article 2), this paper attempts to describe two very basic aspects of the problem: one dealing with the transmission of Ming memorials and the other with the developmental history of the transmission network.

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1) Testifying to the unique function of memorials in the imperial decision-making system, Liu Shih-yang 劉世揚, a supervising censor (chi-shih-chung 給事中) in the Chia-ching reign once wrote in a memorial: “According to the established tradition of our fore-fathers, all [imperial decisions] should be noted on the memorials submitted... The memorials bearing these notations are then sent to the Six Offices of Scrutiny (Liu-k'o 六科) to be copied out [by the respective ministries for execution]... Other than these,” he asserted, “no edicts are to be sent out from the imperial gate”. Liu's memorial was submitted to remonstrate with the emperor for violating the established tradition. See Wang Shih-chen 王世貞, Yen-chou shih-liao ch'ien-chi 項州史料前集, 15. 2nd 5b.

2) For a description of the structural organization of the Ming government as a whole, see Charles O. Hucker's article, "Governmental Organization of the Ming Dynasty", HJAS XXI (1958), pp. 1-66.
I. Types of Ming Memorials

In the Ming imperial channels of communication, two types of memorials were used: t'ī-pen (題本 "official memorial") and tsou-pen (奏本 "personal memorial") 1). By definition, the former was used for memorializing the emperor on official matters; the latter on personal matters. For example, the supervising censor, Chou I, in the Chia-ching reign (1522-1566) once submitted a memorial impeaching the powerful grand secretary Yen Sung; he used t'ī-pen. The emperor was greatly offended because Chou, in his memorial, had also criticized the emperor. He was flogged forty strokes outside the Meridian Gate and was ordered to submit an explanation for his action. When he submitted his explanation and begged for imperial forgiveness he used tsou-pen 2).

Other types of memorials, such as the congratulatory memorials (piāo 表) 3), were used primarily for ceremonial purposes. When t'ī-pen and tsou-pen were used to memorialize the Heir Apparent, who was appointed "regent" (chien-kuo 監國) while the emperor was away from the capital, they were called ch'i-pen (敕本) 4). Since the characters t'ī, tsou, and ch'i always appear in the texts of the t'ī-pen, tsou-pen, and ch'i-pen respectively, these different types of documents can be easily identified.

II. The Transmission Network of Ming Memorials

Within the communication system of the Ming government, memorials were transmitted back and forth through a complicated network. Unless we have a clear picture of this transmission system, we will be at a loss to understand many of the recurring issues debated in the late Ming court. In the Ming records, one often finds that censors presented memorials remonstrating with the emperor on his having issued edicts "directly from the inner palace" (chih ts'ung chung ch'u 旨從中出). The censors called this

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1) For the prescribed forms of memorials, see Ta-Ming hui-tien 大明會典 (1585 ed., Taiwan reprint), 76.1-4b. (Hereafter cited as TMHT.)

2) Na-hsi tsou-shu 証ネタ疏 (Ts'ung-shu chi-ch'eng 叢書集成, 903), p. 25. The character t'i 題 (line 14) appears to be a printing error, because the closing phrase is "chin-chū tsou-wen" 警具奏聞 which signifies that the said memorial is a tsou-pen. Historically, tsou-pen was an earlier form; t'i-pen joined it by 1424. Their distinctive uses were probably not made clear until 1529. Cf. TMHT 76.3b; 212.3-4.

3) Ming-shih 明史 (lithographic edition, 1902), 72.1b. (Hereafter cited as MS).

4) According to a regulation promulgated in 1539: see Ta-Ming hui-tien, 212.44.