THE SELECTION OF LOCAL OFFICIALS THROUGH RECOMMENDATIONS IN FIFTEENTH-CENTURY CHINA

BY

THOMAS G. NIMICK
United States Military Academy

In the early Ming dynasty, most local officials were selected on the basis of seniority from a pool of men who had met the required qualifications. By 1430, however, the Xuande Emperor (r. 1426-35) became dissatisfied with the service record of officials appointed on the basis of seniority. Twice that year he asked his capital officials to recommend men from among their subordinates to fill a total of thirty-six prefectural posts. Then, in 1432, he decided that both prefects and leading officials at the provincial level should regularly be appointed by means of recommendations. From that time forward recommendations became the dominant form of special selection. Over the next decade government leaders expanded their use to fill all kinds of posts from the level of county magistrate and censor to high capital posts; but prefects continued to be the local officials most consistently appointed this way.

1 The extent to which this was a new practice is discussed below. The prefecture’s primary function was the oversight of counties and subprefectures, which were the offices that exercised direct territorial control. Nine recommendations were requested on June 14 and twenty-five were requested on December 7. See Ming Xuanzong shilu (hereafter MSL Xuanzong, and likewise for the other reigns), 66/1564-65 and 72/1690-91.

2 These recommendations, for which the usual term was baoju 保舉, were used to identify qualified officials for service in specific posts. They were distinct from the more common form of recommendation, generally known as jianju 薦舉, which was used as a method to recruit commoners for service as officials. The latter form was one of the three paths into officialdom and was particularly important in the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries.

3 Other forms of special selection were the promotion of lower level officials in the same region at the request of local people, the appointment of demoted but capable capital officials, and the extension in office of officials who had a successful first tenure.

© Brill, Leiden, 2005
Also available online – www.brill.nl

T'oung Pao XCI
In the following decades candidates eagerly sought recommendations, and organizers of political cliques within the bureaucracy used them to patronize their supporters in the lower levels of the civil service. By the late fifteenth century abuse of recommendations had given them such a taint that many preferred to seek appointment through regular bureaucratic procedures. Disuse finally led to the effective end of recommendations by the early sixteenth century.

The use of recommendations for the appointment of local officials has received limited attention in existing scholarship. The most complete study to date is part of Zhang Ronglin’s broader examination of appointment practices in the Ming dynasty. Zhang approaches the study of recommendations primarily through the *Veritable Records* (*Ming shilu*) and the *Institutes of the Ming* (*Da Ming huidian*). He challenges the explanation offered in those materials, to wit, that recommendations were instituted to divide the authority of the Ministry of Personnel. Zhang maintains that the Ministry continued to dominate appointment procedures because of the way recommendations were handled, but he does not provide an alternative explanation for the origin of the practice. Likewise, he notes that the latter was discontinued as the result of disuse, but does not explain why it was no longer used.

The recommendation of prefects has also been briefly surveyed in Pan Xinghui’s dissertation on Ming appointment practices. Pan suggests that the recommendations evolved from earlier recommendation practices used primarily to recruit men into official service, and that their use was essentially over by the Chenghua period (1465-1487). Earlier experience with recommendations did facilitate their use in the appointment process, but it does not fully explain the latter development. Pan’s dating of the end of recommendation cannot be sustained in light of recommendations and discussion of the practice occurring in the Hongzhi period (1488-1505). Pan has consulted the more readily available materials, but these do not suffice to provide a definitive description of the practice.

---

5 Ibid., 346.