

Local Elites in Medieval China*

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1. Preface : Nature of “despotic” empires

Let's begin with a question: was pre-modern Imperial China despotic? There are some reasons for inquiring in this way when this paper tries to explore the global history in a comparative perspective. Despotism was particularly known for Asian despotism or Oriental despotism at first in contrast to Athens democracy, and then deepened by Karl Marx and Karl Wittfogel, which gave us a deep impression of tyranny by the emperors, often with mechanical bureaucracy that supported the empires. This classical view also evoked some ideas like *allgemeine Sklaverei*, in which the emperor was the only free person, and all the others, including imperial bureaucrats, were like slaves. But in most cases, this picture was an illusion.

If economic policy can be divided into two types, command economy and market economy, were those “despotic” Asian empires operate command economy? The answer is no. John Hicks (1969) has argued that the tendency of economic history has been the movement from command to market economy, however, in Chinese history alone, there was huge scale market economy after the Sung dynasty, which is usually regarded as the period of autocracy run by emperors and civilian bureaucracy. Turning our eyes to the west, Muslim merchant has built a large scale networks that worked well for commerce in and out of Islamic empires (Lapidus 1988). Economies in these large scale empires were not command economies, that can easily let us be reminded of modern socialist nations like U.S.S.R. and P.R.C. before 1980s.

About political institutions and society, the answers are more complicated. Let's think of the Ottoman Empire. This Saracen Empire

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seemed to be Asian despotic to many contemporary Europeans. Particularly after the fifteenth century, the reign of Mehmed II, sultanate consolidated bureaucracy, terminated the legend of the Roman Empire in Constantinople which stressed people in the whole Christian world in Europe. From 1517 onwards, the Ottoman Sultans were Sultan-Caliphate. This means Sultan, the emperor, had almost unlimited power both politically and religiously. However, the Ottoman Empire was not a hard despotic state. Suzuki Tadashi reveals through a series of his works that the empire was of “soft despotism” despite its despotic image held by Europeans (Suzuki 1992, 93, 97). For example, he first pointed out the incredible generosity about religions. The empire accepted Jewish refugees from Europe, and he shows there was no discrimination against them or any other religious groups within the empire. Then he draws our attention to high social mobility into and inside bureaucratic personnel. He mentions cases that even a shepherd could become a prime minister. He stresses the way to be an elite in the empire was open to almost everybody. Thus the despotic image of the Ottoman Empire must be reconsidered.

More and more people are engaged in a controversy over China's despotism. For at least more than three decades after the World War II, deeply affected by Marxist theory, the leading scholars of Chinese history called Imperial China a “despotic state” like, to name but a few, Nishijima Sadao (1961), Tanaka Masatoshi (1973) in Tokyo school, Adachi Keiji (1998) and Watanabe Shin'ichiro (1986) from Kyoto University. A researchers' group named *Chugokushi Kenkyukai* (The Group for Chinese History Researches), consisted of several researchers of Chinese history¹, of which Adachi and Watanabe are the members, has published two books (1983, 1990), together with tens of other books and articles by each member, which stresses the ultra power of the government and often nonexistence of autonomy. The Kyoto University school professors like Naito Konan (see Fogel 1984), Miyazaki Ichisada (1992), Saeki Tomi (1969), and Umehara Kaoru (1985) all

¹ Yoshida Koichi (Chinese agriculture), Watanabe Shin'ichiro (Ancient China), Osawa Masaaki (Sung China), Adachi Keiji (Ming-Ch'ing China), Shimasue Kazuyasu (T'ang-Sung China), and Miyazawa Tomoyuki (Sung economy) contributed to *Chugokushi Kenkyukai* (1983) based on Marx-Leninist theory. These scholars are regarded as the members of this group, and most of them follow the theory presented by Nakamura Satoru. See Nakamura 1977. Nakamura 1993 is also a compilation of these members.

defined the Chinese polity after Sung as Emperor's dictatorship or Emperor's despotism, though denying direct application of Marxian frameworks. Because for long after the war, denying stagnancy of pre-modern Chinese society was politically correct, regardless the difference between Tokyo and Kyoto's views, Nishijima, Miyazaki emphasized historical progress from Han to T'ang, to Sung to Ch'ing in the same way. Chugokushi Kenkyukai was a bit different, and they advocate uniqueness of Chinese history, but did not deny gradual progress of the society.

However, there are other types of argument about relationship between state and society. Some economic historians did not join them. Shiba Yoshinobu (1968, 1988), taking after Kato Shigeshi (1952-63) and William Skinner (1964), analyzed Chinese medieval² economy and found it a highly-developed market economy. His understanding is totally against that of Miyazawa Tomoyuki (1988), who stressed on absolute power of government which intervenes the private sector. There are other social historians who are skeptical about calling Chinese empire despotic or dictatorial. For example, Ueda Makoto (1986) used a metaphor. Chinese people are iron sand on a white sheet of paper without forming a community or having autonomy, he wrote, but once electricity goes through the coils under the paper, those iron sand form shapes. These shapes may be religious organizations, underground syndicates, kinship lineages, or governmental orders. His metaphor coincides with our understanding of present-day Chinese society, as we have witnessed since 1980s, when it became easier for us to access Chinese continent. In this picture, the role of government is so limited. Social order given by the government is only one alternative for a Chinese. He (she) may act in accordance with religions norms, play a role in an organization of people coming from the same birthplace, keep contacts with local administrative branches and local gentries who enjoyed prestigious status politically, economically and culturally in local societies, or try to avoid troubles with governmental staffs, paying taxes and observing its policies.

Another point is the size of the government. For example, the Sung dynasty ruled approximately one hundred million people by two hundred

² An important point missing here is periodicalization. This has something to do with the following argument regarding elites and aristocracy, however, here discussion is done about the late imperial China, i.e. after the T'ang-Sung transition. See "Appendix".

thousand to four hundred thousand governmental staffs including civilian bureaucrats and clerks by 1500 seats of counties. Population expanded onwards, and the Ch'ing ruled four hundred thousand population at her end, still by almost the same number of counties. Counties are the lowest level in administrative hierarchy, and below counties there were no administration both in the cities and farm lands, with a small exception in the beginning of the Ming. However, it is a mystery why the total number of them is almost fixed, hovering around 1300 to 1500 regardless population growth. The number was about 1300 when Han dynasty ruled five hundred thousand before Christ.

Thus, a simple calculation can be done. Given the number of all the counties in the empire is 1500, each county ruled 33,000 people when the total population was 50 million, 66,000 when a hundred million, 200,000 when 300 million. It means so-called the administrative density was getting more and more sparse as time passed. In other words, the distance between an ordinary Chinese person and the bottom of the imperial administration became farther and farther. At the same time, these numbers show how the size of the government was small in contrast to the huge population, especially when compared with other parts of the world. Many scholars of Chinese history histate to call the Empire despotic.

Then, what organization was the most important for pre-modern Chinese people? The government? Temples? Villages? Kinship lineages? Or anything else? To think around this question, this paper will ask what choices the elites made.

2. Chinese elites and their society – is China one?

In a rigidly fixed society like one in Edo era, Japan, people were given very little choices. A farmer could not be a warrior (samurai), if not in an exceptional case. People in medieval Europe usually could not override the borders of social status. However, in a society of high mobility like in China and the Ottoman Empire, even ordinary people could become high rank officials.

If the elite is defined as selected people with power in a society, the range of elite depends on the range of society. For example, a thirty year old section manager (*kacho*) director in a small company, who graduates a small

low grade university, usually cannot be called an elite in Japanese society. But, he may be an elite inside that company. In the same way, mafia is not a part of power elite group in a developed country. But members of headquarter of a mafia family have real power, and they are no doubt elites in the black society. Concept of elite heavily depends on the society in which they act.

And if the concept of elite is affected by that of society, or if we explore elite in China, then the next question is : what is Chinese society? Has there been a single society that should be called “Chinese society” throughout two thousand or three thousand year history? In the same way we can ask what is German society, or Japanese society. Focusing on China, were people under the 1300 counties really essentially same through the two-thousand-year imperial period?

Accordingly, the word Chinese is also too vague. One may say that those who speak Chinese should be called Chinese, but what is Chinese language? Is Cantonese Chinese? The distance between mandarin and Fukienese is as far as the distance between English and German.

If temporarily Chinese is defined as those who speak languages of which most of the words can be written in Chinese characters, then, history of Chinese people are rather limited to a certain restricted area.

For example, before Chin dynasty (265~420) moved her capital from Loyang in the north to Chinling (Nankin) in 317, whole South China (Figure) was a world of non-Chinese. In the times of *The Romance of Three Kingdoms*, in the third century, it is believed that Southern China was so sparsely dwelt that leaders of Wu kingdom carried on war in order to capture labour, which was the scarcest economic resource (T'ang 1955). And they were usually non-Chinese.

Even in the Sung era, the area where Chinese speaking people were dwelling was rather limited. They were living in Northern China, the Lower Yangtze, core districts in the Middle Yangtze and Fukien, Szechuan Basin, and big cities in Lingnan (i.e. Kwangtung and Kwangsi). Vast area in Hunan, Hupeh, the mountain district in Szechuan and Fukien, the most part of Lingnan were left for people who were not regarded as Chinese, namely groups called Yao, Hei-fong-t'ong (or Cave of Black Wind) etc. (see Okada 1993).

Modern Taiwan is the best and well-known case to consider this problem.

Lots of Chinese people think Taiwan is a part of China, despite 42.5% of Taiwanese think they are Taiwanese but not Chinese and 38.5% Taiwanese and Chinese (Liu 2000). Unlike mainland China, Hong Kong and even Singapore, they have democracy and the rule of law. Such a society is not equal to mainland Chinese society. Whether a society is Chinese or not, does not depend on if people speak Chinese, just as in “American society” people speak English but it is not called British society.

The borderline between Chinese and non-Chinese is very controversial, and it became widely accepted that in many cases it is dealt with taxation and civil service examinations (Katayama 2004). For example, Yao people were exempted from coercive duties. Yao means coervee.

Tuning back to the inquiry about Chinese society, it is hard to give a definition satisfactory for every research fields and every period of history. Shiga Shuzo, the representative scholar in the field of Chinese legal history, reveals in his world famous book (1967) the unchangeable structure of kinship relations and what was believed to humanity for Chinese, however, I would say that most of his findings were about Confucian principles, and not about Chinese (Aoki 2003). In my article it is argued that Shiga relies on Confucian discourse too much, and the reality must have been far various.

Thus it is difficult to conceive that there has been a Chinese society that had lasted for a long period, say, one thousand, or two thousand years. About Chinese elite, it is surely possible to regard high ranking officials as elite, however, they are just among the community that carried on administration, or in other word, “the dynasty”. And the dynasty mentioned above, was rather small in contrast to the huge size of total population, and its power was surprisingly limited in local societies, as to be demonstrated in the following chapter.

3. A case study – two elite families in the Sung³

Now what are the elites in the world history again? A free citizen in the Roman Empire, high-ranking bureaucrat in an empire like the Ottoman, and anybody in the noble class in medieval Europe may have been elites.

In Chinese dynasties, there had been a civil examination system since the Sui, and particularly after the Sung, civil bureaucrats coming into

³ This chapter is described mostly based on Aoki 2003b and 2005.

dynastic hierarchy through the exams were in position of controlling the whole things inside the empire under emperors. They were elites. Even the names of most of them after the Sung period are known; they are listed in *tongnienlu* (Record (of successful candidates) of the same year, the surviving books are all in the Ch'ing dynasty), or *tengk'echi* (List of successful candidates, after the Sung). In local gazetteers the names of candidates in the provinces or counties who passed the exams are proudly listed in special chapters. Almost all of the famous politicians in the late imperial China acquired quasi-doctoral degree (Chinshih), and they were truly the elites in the dynasties, as well as the emperors themselves, a few princes and eunuchs. In the Sung period alone, to name but a few, there were Ssu-ma Chien, Wang Anshih, and Chu Hsi. However among them, those who enjoyed power and fame were the bureaucrats who had wore quasi-doctoral degree. Now a question rises. Are they the only type of elite? They passed the exams, their names are known, they were governmental staffs, they wrote history, they said they had power, however, do these mean that they were the only powerful men in the real society? To think around this question, this paper will closely look at a person and a family : Fan Yingling and the family of Yue. Although they are not as famous as Wang Anshih or Chu Hsi, but they were both successful, acted in the same place and time, but their stand positions were entirely different. They show us clear contrast.

(a) Chu Hsi school and the carrier of Fan Yingling

Hymes (1986) through analyzing social intercourses and marriage behaviors of eighty-one elite families in Fu-chou, Kiangsi convincingly proved that their interest shifted from court (capital) oriented to local oriented. His findings were followed by several scholars and recently it is asserted this great shift took place in the times of Huei-tsung, the last emperor of the Northern Sung (Ihara 2004). Thus most materials which tell us the local social situation are mostly found in the Southern Sung materials, however, quite a few of them were written by Chu Hsi (1130-1200) school literati. We often use *CMC*, the judicial precedents book entitled *The enlightened judgments : Ch'ing-ming chi* (About this book see McKnight and Liu 1999), but the authors (*mingkung*=eminent judges) are mostly of Chu Hsi school, and no names belonging to the opposing schools are found. Other

representative materials about the Sung Chinese societies like magistrates' political proposals for resolution of social problems, letters from a bureaucrat to another, are very often written by those of Chu Hsi school, such as by Huang Chen (黃震) of Kiangsi, Wang Yen (王炎) of Hunan, or Chu Hsi himself describing social problems in Chekiang and Hunan etcetera. And the reason why is because this school thought describing the local social problems in their point of view and proposing their policy is a good way to improve harmony of the universe. This forces us to understand the Sung local society only through eyeglasses of Chu Hsi school.

Now, Fan Yingling. His birth and death years are not known, but his name is found in the list of successful candidate of the year 1205 (*Chianghsi Tongchih*, vol.50), and presumably after 1230s he was still at office. According to his biography, "He listened to cases in full dress and was like a supernatural being in exposing the facts. Therefore, there was nothing that was not dealt with properly, and even those who lost their cases did not fail to submit to his judgement. Chen Te-hsiu gave him a plaque inscribed "The Answer" for his office (*Sung-shi* 410). He was thus extremely proficient in his handling of lawsuits and is said to have left a collection of judgements in 49 fascicles entitled *Tui-yueh chi* (*Collection of the Answers*). His method of adjudication is summed up in his own comment that "in the case of civil cases there already exist specific provisions, and so by quoting them when adjudicating, the cases can be settled with a single word" (*CMC* 4). He wrote some rulings against Yue family, that we see next.

(b) A History of the Yue Family

Yue family stemmed out of the famous literati named Yue Shih. He is famous for having compiled a book *T'ai-p'ing Huangyu Chi*, one of the best topographies during and after the Sung Dynasty. At the same time Yue Shih was the first person in his family to appear in historical records, and the first successful political candidate from Kiangsi province in the Sung. His sons and grandsons also became successful political candidates, however, the Yue family did not flourish after the middle of the Northern Sung Period. After the dark period in which almost no records are found, the offspring of Yue Shih in Fu-chou, the birth place of Yue Shih, appeared again as great landowners. But according to materials from the Sung and the Yuan Periods,

they faced a lot of difficulties. They were threatened by the laws that restrict landownership by distant descendants of a title holder, and when in the last days of the Southern Sung. The following descriptions are seen in *CMC* in the thirteen century.

- (a) 「照对本県穎秀一郷，共計七都，相去城圍纔十五里，無非在城寄產，省簿立戶，並有官称，無一編民」（『清明集』三「限田論官品」）。

As it is regarded, the town Yinghsiu is consisted of seven tu's, six kilometers distant from the county seat, but the land is totally registered to those who live within the county wall, and their families are all written on official registers as office-holders, thus there exist no common (non-office holding) people. (*CMC 3*)

Particularly, Fan Yingling wrote in this book:

- (b) 「拖照省簿，樂侍有稅錢一貫七百七十二文，並無告敕、砧基簿書，可以稽考。崇仁樂侍郎生於南唐，仕於國初，今不見得子孫分作幾位，每位合占限田若干，仍省簿內稅錢是與不是樂侍郎宅產業」（『清明集』三「贍墳田無免之例」）

According to the official register, the family of Yue Shih is estimated as a tax payer of 1 *kuan* 772 *wen*, but there exist no written appointment or land-holding records which help us to confirm. Yue Shih of Chungjen was born in the times of the Southern T'ang, appointed to the beginning of the Sung dynasty, but it is impossible now to see how many descendants remained, how much tax-free fields each descendant is ought to possess, or to find if the officially exempted properties are really Yue family's. (*CMC 3*)

- (c) 「雖據賚出官司文榜，係樂侍郎撥作贍墳田產，每年付安原、東林、鍾山三寺主管，然律之設法，難以此免」（『清明集』三「贍墳田無免之例」）。

(The Yue family) brings out the government's notices about Yue Shih's land properties for the family's funeral services which were to be managed by the three temples: Anyüan, Tonglin and Chungshan. However, the Imperial Code says (these properties are) not to exempted (of taxes and coercive duties). (*CMC 3*)

These judicial precedents show that the family of Yue had long been

enjoying the privileges of the “official family” using the office of Yue Shih who had lived approximately three hundred years before. Fan Yingling is a Chu Hsi school’s Confucian magistrate whose judicial rulings show his enthusiastic attitude against immorality and injustice in the society. However, the important things are, that the family had been abusing this exemption privilege for nearly three hundred years until Fan Yingling, and that it is unnatural to conceive these rulings terminated their privileged position in the local society. Magistrates were at their positions less than three years, and in Chinese legal tradition, any ruling by governmental court could terminate trials. There was not the last sentence at any level of judgment (Shiga 1984).

The last successful candidate from the Yue family was Yue Yi. He was dying in the situation that no adopted son could be found thus his assets were to be lost or confiscated. Yu Chih, a famous scholar in Fu-chou in the beginning of the Yüan Period, recounted that the Yues failed in compiling a genealogical record. Unlike Fan family of Fan Chungyen, the Yue family was apparently a case of failure of establishing a lineage organization in the Sung-Yüan Periods. Through tracing their history, it is found that there was the demerits of not establishing a lineage organization to the contrary of the merits of establishing one. The strategy the Yues took was neither establishing a lineage organization nor succeeding in the bureaucratic world, but was a hometown-oriented landownership, sometimes being threatened by imperial policies but mostly successfully surviving in the local society where customs and local power-politics dominated.

Now we can think of two types of local elites. Fan Yingling pursued official carriers, stood on the state’s side, made friends with a big name in Chu Hsi school, cracked down the rebellions, attacked the Yue family’s privilege in the local society, and wrote history. We see the thirteenth century local society in Kiangnan through his eyes. But there are no evidences that he was as rich as the Yue family, or his offspring prospered. On the other hand, Yues kept distant from official world, did not establish their lineage organization in a way which Neo-Confucians loved, but they were extraordinarily rich in Chungjen and I-huang counties, prospered throughout the three-hundred-year Sung history and even later. Today there are still lots of people in I-huang county whose family name is Yue.

Apparently Fan Yingling and Huang Chen fit our conception of elite

much more than the Yues, however, the one who survived is the Yue family. They had real power in a small cosmos along the Lo river, and they were elites among people living there.

4. Conclusion

What is Medieval Chinese Elite? This question is deeply concerned with the style of government. A traditional view to China after the Sung Period emphasizes its despotism and/or absolutism. In this picture, the elites were civilian bureaucrats who had passed the exams. They wrote the books, through which we see their society. There are no historical materials left, which were written by ordinary people, monks, or merchant.

However, the family of Yue survived. Except for the first few generations after Yue Shih, they were not successful in exams, thus never delivered high rank officials anymore. They kept distance from the society of literati, which bring them a bad reputation in historical records, written mainly by Chu Hsi school officials. But this reputation is a kind of imaginary, or at least among Chu Hsi school's. In the small world along the Lo River, the family prospered, and possessed a huge amount of assets. They succeeded in evading taxes and duties for a long period of time. Their offspring are still dwelling in this area nowadays.

The Yue family was a group of power-elite neither inside the intellectual and dynastic society, nor in historical records left for us by Neo-Confucians, however, they were an elite family in the small cosmos in this area. To ignore this kind of local elites may mislead us in understanding the real whelm of political sphere of the government before modern times. Micro histories in local societies reveal the limits of the imperial power. Thus the despotism theory about the Late Imperial China still has to be reconsidered, as well as lther pre-modern dynasties, like the Ottoman Empire, and so on.

Appendix : Periodicalization, Aristocracy and Bureaucracy

James T. C. Liu (1967) summed up these topics in his book about the famous literati Ou-yang Hsiu as follows.

A great divide in Chinese history occurred around the eighth century, in the middle of the T'ang period (618-907). Between the eight century and the founding of the Sung dynasty (960-1279), a China run by aristocrats slowly evolved into a China run by Bureaucrats. Aristocratic families generally ceased to exist. Nor did the military exercise regional control. The government, effectively centralized from the capital down to each walled city, was staffed by professional bureaucrats, most of whom had risen by their own merits through the competitive examination system and years of service. Most bureaucrats were landed gentries, but it was essentially their earned status as administrators, not their inherited status as landowners, that made them members of the ruling class. Many other factors contributed to the transformation from aristocracy to bureaucracy : the development of commerce and of a money economy; increasing urbanization the spread of movable-type printing, and thus of education; and the opportunity for some commoners to rise through the civil-service examinations to the ranks of the elite. This set of conditions remained largely characteristic of China from the early Sung to the early twentieth century.

This point of view may be closer to Kyoto than to Tokyo before 1960s, however, it is accepted more widely than before. More recently, Smith and von Glahn (2003) argued the connections between two well-studied epochs in Chinese history: the mid-imperial era of the Tang and Sung (ca. 800-1270) and the late imperial era of the late Ming and Ch'ing (1550-1900). According to the publishers, introduction that well sums up the contents, these eras are seen as periods of explosive change, particularly in economic activity, characterized by the emergence of new forms of social organization and a dramatic expansion in knowledge and culture. The task of establishing links between these two periods has been impeded by a lack of knowledge of the intervening Mongol Yuan dynasty (1271-1368). This historiographical "black hole" has artificially interrupted the narrative of Chinese history and bifurcated it into two distinct epochs. They aimed to restore continuity to that historical narrative by filling the gap between mid-imperial and late

imperial China. The contributors argue that the Song-Yuan-Ming transition (early twelfth through the late fifteenth century) constitutes a distinct historical period of transition and not one of interruption and devolution. They trace this transition by investigating such subjects as contemporary impressions of the period, the role of the Mongols in intellectual life, the economy of Kiangnan, urban growth, neo-Confucianism and local society, commercial publishing, comic drama, and medical learning.

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