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Jie Zhao

University of Southern Maine, zhaoj@usm.maine.edu

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TIES THAT BIND
THE CRAFT OF POLITICAL NETWORKING IN
LATE MING CHIANG-NAN

BY

JIE ZHAO
University of Southern Maine

In 1595 Tung Fen 董份 (b. 1510), one of Chiang-nan's prominent retired scholar-officials, passed away. His passing should have been the occasion for great family pride and satisfaction. He died at 86, immensely wealthy, prestigious, and well connected. He had served as a Han-lin academician and Minister of Rites during the late Chia-ching 嘉靖 period, and his son and grandsons were *chin-shih*. He had been able to indulge in material pleasures uninterrupted for many years. In a biography written shortly after his death, his grandson, Tung Ssu-ch'eng 董嗣成, described him as a man with a long beard and piercing eyes, who was well regarded for his literary talent both at court and in literati circles.¹ Very few people indeed could equal him in the achievement of power, wealth, and academic success.

But there was a cloud over the last rites. Tung Fen himself had specified that a banner of grievance be draped over his casket, identifying him as "a man who has suffered tremendous humiliations."² This last word to his family conveyed his bitter feelings about a traumatic crisis they had just been through. During his last two years, an outburst of local protests against his family turned his life into a nightmare. Thousands of local people were clamoring for justice against them and lodging countless lawsuits.

¹ After the death of his grandfather, Tung Ssu-ch'eng asked his maternal grandfather Mao K'un (see below) to write a biography of Tung Fen. Mao K'un wrote the account based on the material provided by Tung Ssu-ch'eng and he adopted Tung Ssu-ch'eng's voice in this work. It is appropriate therefore to view it as a collaboration of Mao K'un and Tung Ssu-ch'eng. See *Mao K'un wen-chi*, biography of Tung Fen, ch. 3, p. 24b. [For complete citations see end Bibliography.]

² *Ibid.*, p. 24b.

This had triggered a provincial investigation and caused division within Tung Fen's family. The Tungs had lost a fair amount of property. Clouding the elegant image of Tung Fen in his grandson's account was a darker picture painted by the testimony of his critics, friends, and even kinsmen.

However, despite the crisis, Tung Fen's family escaped almost certain catastrophe. Its wealth remained relatively intact. The demonstrations and lawsuits went away. And the provincial officials who were investigating Tung's misdeeds were removed from office. This narrow escape was all due to the fact that Tung Fen was a master at political connections, and even in his final months of life he was able to use them to thwart and punish his pursuers.

Tung Fen's official career, the connections he forged, and the political skills and cunning with which he maintained and manipulated those connections, enabled him to confront and eventually topple the provincial administration of his native Che-chiang. His case offers us a dramatic opportunity to observe how networks could be built up to link both central and local politics, and how they could function over a period of many years to further and protect the interests of great families, both while their principal members participated in court politics and when they confined themselves to the local affairs of their own home provinces.³

³ Professor Saeki Yûichi has published a study of the Hu-chou disturbance entitled "Mimmatsu no Tô shi no hen," in *Tôyôshi Kenkyû*, vol. 16, no. 1 (1957), pp. 26-57. His study focuses primarily on the disturbance and its local social impact. The social, economic, and political structure of Ming society has been the subject of numerous studies. Two important works which explore the economic and social aspects of urban and rural Chiang-nan are Fu I-ling, *Ming-tai Chiang-nan shih-min ching-chi shih-t'an* (Shanghai: Shanghai jen-min ch'u-pan-she, 1957) and Hamashima Atsutoshi, *Mindai Kônan nôson shakai no kenkyû* (Tokyo: Tokyo University Press, 1982). Cultural and commercial connections and networks of the Ming have been studied in Nelson Wu, "Tung Ch'i-ch'ang: apathy in government and fervor in art," in Arthur Wright and Denis Twitchett, eds., *Confucian Personalities* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1962); Yü Ying-shih, "Chung-kuo chin-shih tsung-chiao lun-li yü shang-jen ching-shen," in his *Shih yü Chung-kuo wen-hua* (Shanghai: Shanghai jen-min ch'u-pan-she, 1987); John Meskill, *Gentlemanly Interests and Wealth on the Yangtze Delta* (Ann Arbor: the Association for Asian Studies, Inc. Monograph and Occasional Paper Series, no. 49, 1994); and Timothy Brook, *The Confusions of Pleasure: Commerce and Culture in Ming China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998). Works which discuss late Ming politics and the social upheaval include Hsieh Kuo-chen, *Ming-*

Tung Fen's high-level network and his official career, 1541-1565

A *chin-shih* of 1541, Tung Fen entered officialdom at a time when the capricious Chia-ching emperor (r. 1522-1566) promoted, dismissed, and even executed officials at a whim, and when court politics was dominated by Yen Sung 嚴嵩 (1480-1565), the senior grand secretary who could make or break careers at will. At the peak of Yen's power, Hsü Chieh 徐階 (1503-1583), himself a grand secretary, behaved submissively "as if he were Yen's concubine."⁴ Several scholar-officials who held high ethical standards were exiled, jailed, and even killed for their sharp criticism of government policies. In this nasty and merciless environment, Tung quickly learned how to survive and made his way by using his considerable talent to please the powerful.

Tung Fen's duty as a Han-lin academician was to draft imperial pronouncements and to meet the various demands of the Chia-ching emperor, including Taoist erotica. He studied the emperor's moods and then composed pieces which cleverly catered to the monarch's sexual and religious fantasies.⁵ Occasionally he would receive imperial orders to draft essays three times in the same evening, an indication of the emperor's satisfaction. Based on this ability he became the emperor's favorite Han-lin academician and was granted the special privilege of riding a horse in the imperial compound.⁶

However, Tung Fen knew very well that winning the emperor's favor alone would not make him secure nor put him on the fast track to high office. Since most senior positions were held by Yen Sung's trusted men, his chances for promotion were dependent on his personal relationship to Yen. Unfortunately, one type of connection commonly used, the teacher-disciple relationship

Ch'ing chih-chi tang-she yun-tung kao (Peking: Chung-hua shu-chü, 1982) and Nakayama Hachirô, "Ban Min no doka dohen," in his *Min Shin shi ronshû* (Tokyo: Kyûko Shoin, 1995). The present paper revisits the Hu-chou disturbance first studied by Saeki Yûichi, using Tung Fen as a case study to illustrate how late Ming political networks linked central and local politics together. I am greatly indebted to Professor Craig Dietrich for his advice and editing in the course of revising this paper for publication.

⁴ Wu Yuan-ts'ui, *Lin-chü man-lu*, ch. 2, p. 92.

⁵ Shen Te-fu, *Wan-li yeh-huo pien*, ch. 2, pp. 157-158.

⁶ Shen Shih-hsing, *Ssu-hsien-t'ang chi*, epitaph of Tung Fen, ch. 29, pp. 9a-b. Also see *Mao K'un wen-chi*, ch. 3, p. 20b.

within the civil service examinations, was out of the question. As a member of the 1541 class, Tung Fen automatically became a "student" of Hsü Chieh, the chief of the metropolitan examination of that year. Since Hsü was now Yen's rival for power, this teacher-disciple relationship could bring Tung nothing but difficulties; it could cause Yen's faction to suppose that he was Hsü's man.

Tung Fen approached Yen Sung through other means. Among Yen's friends and allies were three strategically placed officials, who combined a formidable amount of civilian and military power.⁷ One was Lu Ping 陸炳 (1510-1560), Chief of the Imperial Guards, who headed the imperial secret agency. Another was Wu P'eng 吳鵬 (1500-1579), Minister of Personnel, a key post for placing supporters in office. A third was Chu Hsi-chung 朱希忠 (1516-1572), Duke of Ch'eng-kuo 成國公, who commanded the military defense of the capital. Yen Sung had kinship relationships with this trio. He married his grandson to Chu's daughter, one of his granddaughters to Lu's son, and another granddaughter to Wu's grandson.⁸ Meanwhile, one of Wu's daughters was the wife of Lu Ping's son.⁹

Seeking connections, Tung Fen discovered this web. To start with, both Lu Ping and Wu P'eng were his fellow provincials from Che-chiang, a useful link. More important, he managed to have his daughter engaged to the son of Chu Hsi-chung, who, as we have seen, was related to Yen Sung.¹⁰ This gave Tung a very important entry to Yen. Then when his own wife died, Tung cast his eye upon Wu P'eng's youngest girl, who, however, was inconveniently engaged to another man. To handle this difficulty, Yen Shih-fan 嚴世蕃 (1513-1565, Yen Sung's son) stepped in as a me-

⁷ Yen Sung actively sought strong support from Chu Hsi-chung and Lu Ping, the emperor's two watchdogs. Through his marriage ties with them, a solid alliance between the civil and military powers was thus cemented. See *Ming-shih*, biography of Yang Chi-sheng, ch. 209, p. 5540; biography of Lu Ping, ch. 307, pp. 7892-7894.

⁸ Sheng Feng, *Chia-ho cheng-hsien-lu*, ch. 4, p. 2b.

⁹ Tung Fen, *Mi-yuan chi*, biography of Wu P'eng, ch. 31, p. 9b. Also see Huang Hung-hsien's *Pi-shan hsüeh-shih chi*, biography of Wu P'eng's wife, ch. 6, p. 3b.

¹⁰ Tung Fen, biography of Chu Hsi-chung's mother, ch. 31, p. 13a. Apparently, Tung's daughter died before the marriage took place. Chu Hsi-chung's son later married Lu Ping's daughter.

diator, leading Wu to dissolve his daughter's prior commitment and to marry her to Tung.¹¹ Thus through marriage, Yen Sung and Tung Fen were both related to Chu Hsi-chung, while Yen, Tung, and Lu Ping were all related to Wu P'eng.¹²

Tung Fen made good use of these connections. For example, when his son entered the examination hall for the provincial examination, he was escorted by Lu Ping's imperial guards, a clear display to Che-chiang provincial officials of Tung Fen's powerful friends.¹³ Beyond mere ostentation, Tung's official career advanced nicely. While retaining his Han-lin appointment, he moved back and forth between the ministries of Personnel and Works, serving as deputy minister in both. And although in 1561 Hsü Chieh blocked his promotion to Minister of Personnel, he was later appointed Minister of Rites.¹⁴

Much to his dismay, Tung Fen could not savor this achievement for long, as it came just on the eve of Yen Sung's downfall at the hands of Hsü Chieh. It was too late for Tung to switch his loyalty to the new paramount official. In any case, Hsü considered him greedy, cunning, and shameless.¹⁵ Hsü Chieh proceeded to purge Yen's faction in the following years, as a result of which Tung Fen was expelled from the government in 1565.¹⁶ It should be pointed out that Tung received a much milder dismissal than others. Whereas Yen's other associates were officially condemned, he was quietly terminated with no official denunciation. How he managed this remains unknown. There is no question, however,

¹¹ *Wan-li ti-ch'ao*, p. 512.

¹² Marriage politics served as a useful tool for the power holders to cultivate their political ties and smooth the relationships among themselves. In the case of Lu Ping, his sons-in-law included Yen Sung's grandson, Hsü Chieh's son, and Chu Hsi-chung's son; and one of his sons married Wu P'eng's daughter. See Feng Shih-ko's *Feng Yuan-ch'eng hsüan-chi*, ch. 46, p. 70b.

¹³ Ting Yuan-chien, *Hsi-shan jih-chi*, p. 1.

¹⁴ Mao K'un, p. 21a. Also see Shen Shih-hsing's *Ssu-hsien-t'ang chi*, p. 10b. The minister of Personnel was a dream position. It had control over appointments, promotions, and demotions, and was thus an excellent position from which to build a political network. See Chao I, *Er-shih-er shih cha-chi*, ch. 33, pp. 485-486.

¹⁵ *Ming-shih*, biography of Kuo P'u, ch. 213, p. 5642. Although Saeki Yüichi (p. 32) asserts that there is little information about Tung Fen's character, evidence such as Hsü Chieh's observation and several statements by other people permits some conclusions to be drawn.

¹⁶ Mao K'un, p. 20b. Also see Shen Shih-hsing's *Ssu-hsien-t'ang chi*, p. 10b.

that he could not have fallen so gently without Hsü Chieh's approval. Years later, he even married his grandson to Hsü's granddaughter and composed essays on Hsü's birthday and other occasions, suggesting that he had somehow prepared an exit which helped him avoid public disgrace in 1565 and warm up the relationship later on.

Tung Fen's high-level network in retirement

Tung Fen faded into obscurity at the age of 56 on account of the abrupt termination of his official career. The Yen Sung stigma made it impossible for him to stage a political comeback. Although he himself was no longer a player on the central stage of power, he was determined not to cut himself off from court politics. To that end he cultivated multiple kinship and teacher-disciple relationships.

Tung Fen's wife, a daughter of Wu P'eng, former Minister of Personnel, once said to her husband, "There are no commoners in our families."¹⁷ Indeed none of their children and grandchildren married into ordinary families. Tung Tao-ch'un 董道醇, Tung Fen's only son, married the daughter of Mao K'un 茅坤. Mao K'un (1512-1601), also from the 1541 class and Tung's fellow provincial, did not advance his career as successfully as Tung Fen. Yet he was regarded as an accomplished essayist and a military strategist in literati circles, and he had a handsome fortune. Tung's daughter was married to Hsü T'ai-shih 徐泰時 (cs of 1580, 1540-1598),¹⁸ of whom more will be said later.

As for the third generation, Tung Tao-ch'un had several children. The most accomplished of them was Tung Ssu-ch'eng (1560-1595); he married Hsü Chieh's granddaughter. Two much younger grandsons were Tung Ssu-yang 董嗣陽, who became the son-in-law of Sun Chi-kao 孫繼皋 (1550-1610), and Tung Ssu-chang 董斯張 (1586-1628), who became the son-in-law of Shen Ching-chieh 沈敬玠 (1554-1631); both Sun and Shen were senior

¹⁷ Lang Ying, *Ch'i-hsiu lei-kao, hsü-kao*, ch. 6, p. 832.

¹⁸ Hsü T'ai-shih, a native of Ch'ang-chou, Su-chou prefecture, Nan Chih-li, was a vice minister of the Court of the Imperial Stud. Fan Yun-lin, his son-in-law, wrote this biography at the request of Hsü's son. See Fan's *Shu-liao-kuan chi*, p. 573.

government officials. The most important family tie of all was the marriage between Tung Fen's granddaughter and Shen Shih-hsing's 申時行 (cs of 1562, 1535-1614) son. Tung Fen's relationship with Shen Shih-hsing, the senior grand secretary during the period from 1583 to 1591, exemplified a tripartite politics which included geographic (Shen was a native of Ch'ang-chou district, Su-chou prefecture), teacher-disciple (Tung was the chief of the 1562 metropolitan examination), and marital components.¹⁹

Another key to long-term eminence was academic success. Prominent families often vanished from the political and social scene after one or two generations due to failure in academic pursuits. Pressing his son and grandsons to prepare for the civil service examinations became Tung Fen's personal mission. He chose teachers and selected friends for them, people who had mastered the writing of examination essays. His primary goal was to mold his son and grandsons into competitive candidates and successful bureaucrats. Trained by the best tutors, Tung Ssu-ch'eng received his *chin-shih* degree at the age of 21 in 1580. His father Tung Tao-ch'un took his belated *chin-shih* in 1583. The much younger grandson Tung Ssu-chao 董嗣昭 got his degree at the remarkable age of 20 in 1595. Behind this success lay not only study and preparation, however, but also political connections and money. Tung Fen was alleged to have paid 20,000 taels of silver to Chang Wei 張位 (cs of 1568, grand secretary, 1592-1598) to guarantee the *chin-shih* degree for Tung Ssu-chao.²⁰

To these impressive kinship ties and academic successes were added crucial teacher-disciple relationships cultivated through the civil service examinations. Among Tung Fen's disciples were Shen Shih-hsing (also, as noted, related to Tung Fen by marriage) and Wang Hsi-chüeh 王錫爵 (1534-1611), the two most prominent members of the 1562 class. With the passing of Chang Chü-cheng 張居正 (1525-1582), the powerful grand secretary at

¹⁹ Shen Shih-hsing, birthday essay for Tung Tao-ch'un's wife, *Ssu-hsien-t'ang chi*, ch. 15, pp. 23a-b. Tung Fen was a native of Hu-chou, Che-chiang province, but he viewed himself as a native of Wu-chiang district (in Su-chou prefecture, Nan Chih-li) as well. As a matter of fact, the Tung family cemetery was in Wu-chiang, not to mention its extensive landed holdings there. In this sense, Tung Fen and Shen Shih-hsing were related not only through the teacher-disciple relationship and marriage, but also through their geographic affiliation with Su-chou.

²⁰ *Wan-li ti-ch'ao*, p. 1111. Also see Wen Ping's *Ting-ling chu-lüeh*, p. 119.

court during the first decade of the Wan-li period, these two emerged as a new clique of power holders. The post-Chang Chü-cheng era of the 1580s and beyond had a different political cast than the preceding decades. Following years of dominant senior grand secretaries, culminating with Chang Chü-cheng, the Wan-li emperor (1563-1620) was determined to keep grand secretaries in check and weaken this office, using censors as his instrument.²¹ Operating in this environment, Tung Fen's protégés marshaled their energy to satisfy the emperor's whims on the one hand, and wage factional struggles on the other. They collided with a group of outspoken junior officials over almost every major government decision.²² Despite their considerably diminished authority, they still retained sufficient power to protect their own interests, build up their own faction, and block initiatives proposed by the opposition party.²³ They became an indispensable asset for Tung Fen, providing powerful protection for his local interests.

One of their loyal followers was Tung Fen's son-in-law Hsü T'ai-shih. Hsü's father Hsü Lü-hsiang 徐履祥, another *chin-shih* of 1541, had had a notorious reputation for humbling himself to Yen Sung as his adopted son.²⁴ In terms of pleasing the powerful at court, Hsü T'ai-shih obviously inherited the ingratiating skills of his own father and of his father-in-law, Tung Fen, whose connection with the senior grand secretaries, especially Shen Shih-

²¹ The period between the 1540s and 1582 witnessed a number of powerful grand secretaries in charge of government affairs, beginning with Yen Sung, followed by Hsü Chieh, Kao Kung, and ending with Chang Chü-cheng. See Shen Te-fu, *Wan-li yeh-huo pien*, ch. 9, pp. 596-598, 641-643. After the death of Chang, the Wan-li Emperor played a significant role in weakening the cabinet in an attempt to prevent grand secretaries from becoming too powerful. Although the emperor was pleased with a much weaker cabinet, factional struggles arising from the tension between the grand secretaries and junior officials loomed on the horizon, and paralyzed the central bureaucracy in the end.

²² Hsieh Kuo-chen, *Ming-Ch'ing chih-chi tang-she yun-tung k'ao*, pp. 12-14.

²³ Wu Yuan-ts'ui, *Lin-chü man-lu, ch'ien-chi*, ch. 2, p. 467. Court politics during the post-Chang Chü-cheng era deteriorated quickly, largely due to factional struggles. As Ch'ien Ch'ien-i noted, "Officials working for Chiang-ling (i.e., Chang Chü-cheng) were competent horses, whereas officials affiliated with the grand secretaries after Chang were no more than shrewd foxes and cunning rats." These "foxes" and "rats," in his opinion, were only good at seeking their own interests and engaging in factional struggles. See Ch'ien's *Mu-chai ch'u-hsüeh chi*, ch. 30, p. 895.

²⁴ Wu Yuan-ts'ui, ch. 3, p. 92.

hsing and Wang Hsi-chüeh, provided Hsü with a short cut to influence. Under this patronage, Hsü T'ai-shih advanced his career successfully. His regular deliveries of delicacies and wine to his patrons earned him the nickname "chef of the senior grand secretaries" in official circles.²⁵ Hsü's humble service was well rewarded with lucrative assignments. He was put in charge of the confiscated family property of Chang Chü-cheng and allegedly made a huge fortune from it.²⁶

Meanwhile, Tung Fen assiduously cultivated relationships with Chiang-nan officials. He manipulated local politics by means of his personal prestige, his powerful connections, and generous presents to the local officials, as a result of which the latter always turned a blind eye to his family business.²⁷ A poem satirizing its magistrate circulated in Wu-chiang district, Su-chou prefecture, Nan Chih-li, where Tung Fen had large holdings of land. Arriving in Wu-chiang, this new magistrate vowed to investigate the Tung family's misconduct. However, his resolve softened when Tung sent him a generous present. Someone composed the poem to mock how fast the magistrate had switched his position.²⁸

To sum up, Tung Fen had established himself firmly in the upper echelon of local elite. He was invulnerable owing to multiple layers of prestige, kinship, and connections, both in the capital and in the Chiang-nan region. From district, to prefecture, to province, to the court, Tung had associates who could protect his interests.

²⁵ Wen Ping, *Ting-ling chu-lüeh*, p. 168.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 197.

²⁷ Tung Fen's fellow provincial Li Yüeh, who maintained a close relationship with the Tung family and had been employed by Tung Fen to teach his son and grandsons before he received the *chin-shih* in 1568, reported the opinion of T'ang Shu 唐樞 (1497-1574, cs 1526), a retired scholar-official who was highly respected in Hu-chou, on Tung Fen's involvement in local politics as follows: for T'ang, as Tung Fen had been the minister of Rites, a position which endowed him with tremendous prestige, it was not appropriate for him to spend the Tuan-yang festival paying visits to local officials with presents; he should have celebrated the festival at home with his own family. T'ang Shu's remarks reveal his disapproval of Tung Fen's effort to cultivate networks with local officials. See Li Yüeh's *Chien-wen tsa-chi*, p. 730.

²⁸ Shen Te-fu (1578-1642), a native of Chia-hsing, Che-chiang province, records this satiric poem in his *Pi-chou-hsüan sheng-yü*, pp. 36-37. (Saeki, pp. 30-31, mistakenly identified Chu Lin-ch'ü, the magistrate of Wu-chiang district, as the author of the poem.)

Tung Fen's local henchmen and his pursuits of wealth and stature

Wealth made it possible for Tung Fen to maintain a very useful but also very expensive network, sustain his luxurious life style, and satisfy his desire for land and property. His enormous landed holdings were not limited to his home province, as they expanded into neighboring Nan Chih-li.

Tung Fen's pursuit of economic interests reveals a pattern of behavior common to many retired officials at that time. This syndrome was extraordinarily widespread in the five prefectures of Su-chou, Sung-chiang, Chia-hsing, Hu-chou, and Hang-chou—the richest in Southeast China, and prefectures with a high profile of academic success.²⁹ A gentleman from Sung-chiang observed the scholar-officials' profit-hunting frenzy and commented:

Nowadays scholar-officials' behavior in government and in their home places are often inconsistent. Those who love fame act on principles when they serve government with the purpose of gaining good reputation. After their retirement, however, they manipulate local politics through their ties with local officials, abuse people, and seek wealth; their behavior appalls and disgusts local folks. Those who have lust for power hide their true desire in their home places in an attempt to gain good reputation from their countrymen. In government, however, they shamelessly seek profit at the cost of principles. These two types are evidence of a drastic decline of the ethical standard which scholar-officials are expected to uphold.³⁰

Whether or not they always followed this moralist's typology, scholar-officials certainly enjoyed prestige and wealth associated with their service in the government administration. Take the Sung-chiang literati for example. Feng En 馮恩 (1491-1571), a man of character during his government service, managed to expand his family wealth to approximately 30,000 *mu* of land after his retirement from government.³¹ But Feng could not compare with Hsü Chieh, who was a master at using his political power to enhance his pursuit of affluence. His landed wealth

²⁹ Chao I, *Er-shih-er shih cha-chi*, ch. 34, pp. 495-496. See also Hamashima, *Mindai Kōnan nōson shakai*, pp. 306-335, 466-483.

³⁰ Lu Chi, *Chien-chia-t'ang tsa-chu chai-ch'ao*, pp. 14-15. Professor John Meskill has published a solid study of the Sung-chiang literati's behavior in the sixteenth century: see his *Gentlemanly Interests and Wealth on the Yangtze Delta*.

³¹ Feng Shih-k'o, *Feng Yuan-ch'eng hsüan-chi*, ch. 53, p. 55b.

amounted to 240,000 *mu* of land.³² The Hsüs' landed estates were scattered both in Nan Chih-li and Che-chiang province.

It was quite common for these great families to employ their chief servants and adopted sons to seek profit and manage landed estates and other sorts of business. Adoption was practiced in sixteenth-century Chiang-nan as a major form of the master-servant relationship. A bond was forged by which a person was forced to surrender his own surname and take his master's as a way of pledging his loyalty and obedience. In most such cases, a contract was signed to witness this subjugation.³³ In principle, the statuses of "adopted son" and of "bondservant" were distinct. In other words, one could be a bondservant or an adopted son, or both. But in reality the line between the two categories was often obscured.

The contract granted the master full authority not only over the life of his adopted son or bondservant but also over the fate of the latter's family. An adopted son was placed at the mercy of his master. According to one observer, "As soon as the contract is signed, he dares not stand straight in front of his master; nor does he dare be negligent whenever he is called for service. Moreover, his descendants inherit the status of bondservant. Occasionally, a bondservant becomes rich and redeems himself by paying a large sum of money to his master. Although this redemption is acknowledged, he remains inferior to his master's family."³⁴ An adopted son of this kind endured social discrimination derived from his inferior status as bondservant. For example,

³² Wu Yuan-ts'ui, ch. 1, p. 31.

³³ Liu Yuan-lin, a *chin-shih* of 1580, was appointed as the new governor in 1594 after Wang Ju-hsün had been removed in the wake of the scandal recounted below. He wrapped up the investigation and filed two detailed memorials to the court concerning the cases of the Tung and Fan families. His memorials provide important information with regard to adoption and commendation practices. For example, Ts'ai Sung's father sold him to Chin Shih-neng and signed a contract to confirm the transaction of his son to Chin as the latter's adopted son in 1554. Ts'ai Sung's name was changed to Chin Sung. See Liu Yuan-lin, *Che-fu tsou-shu*, ch. 4, p. 2a. See also a brief account of Liu Yuan-lin in *Ming-shih*, ch. 118, p. 6015.

³⁴ Wang Chia-chen, *Yen-t'ang chien-wen tsa-chi*, p. 30. Tung Han, a native of Sung-chiang who described the master-bondservant relationships of his time, viz. the late seventeenth century, suggests through his account that the basic rules remained the same as they had been earlier. See his *San-kang shih-lüeh*, ch. 3, pp. 7b-8a.

his family members were ineligible to take the civil service examinations.

At the expense of personal freedom, a bondservant or adopted son often found himself financially better off than an impoverished free man. "Given that a bondservant is often assigned to manage his master's business, he has a good opportunity to make a fortune of his own. Even a dull person in this situation doesn't worry about basic needs such as food and clothing."³⁵ An adopted son enjoyed the protection of his adopted father. According to the contract, "he is not subject to outsiders' harassment. His master shall protect him if an outsider attempts to assault him."³⁶

The master-servant relationship was complex and did not always work in favor of the master. Sometimes an adopted son betrayed his master by surrendering himself and his master's property to someone more wealthy and powerful. This betrayal took his old master by surprise and dragged him into a miserable lawsuit. He found himself confronted by the bondman's new master. Such legal disputes reflected aggressive land competition in which great families encroached upon "middle-class" families by seducing or encouraging the latter's adopted sons to commend their masters' property to them. Evidently, the Tung family engaged in those activities.³⁷

In fact, the relationship between Tung Fen and his adopted sons provides us with a perfect example of these practices as they flourished in the sixteenth century. He had at least fifty of them,³⁸ whom he trained as his most aggressive and loyal henchmen in his pursuit of affluence. In the process of enriching himself Tung allowed his adopted sons to build up their own family

³⁵ Wang Chia-chen, p. 30.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 30.

³⁷ In 1580 Ts'ai Chin-sung (see above, note 33) ran into conflict with the sons of his late adopted father, Chin Shih-neng. He then surrendered himself and a portion of the property of the Chin family to the Tung family to seek its protection, and had his name changed to Tung Sung as a result of this second adoption. See *Che-fu tsou-shu*, ch. 4, p. 9b. Ting Yuan-chien described a similar incident in which a servant surrendered not only his master's property but also the master's wife and children to the brother of Shen Shih-hsing's wife. See his *Hsi-shan jih-chi*, ch. 2.

³⁸ In Liu Yuan-lin's memorial dealing with the Tung case discussed below, fifty of the indicted servants of the Tung family were identified as Tung Fen's adopted sons. See Liu Yuan-lin, *Che-fu tsou-shu*, ch. 4, pp. 1a-2a.

properties and to recruit their own henchmen through adoption.³⁹ He even helped his favorites among them to purchase student status, a move which trespassed the social line between educated man and bondservant.⁴⁰ Tung Fen's adopted sons organized commendations, forced people to sell their lands and houses at cheap prices, lent money at high interest, bribed local officials on their master's behalf, and harassed whoever was in their way.⁴¹ This aggressive behavior reflected their master's coaching and relied upon his powerful protection. As a result, within three decades his family wealth had increased so drastically that Tung Fen became one of the richest men in Chiang-nan.⁴²

Adoption and commendation practices in Chiang-nan began to show troubling signs during the Wan-li period.⁴³ As coerced subjugation increased, servants who were mistreated by their masters harbored tremendous resentment and unleashed their hatred violently.⁴⁴ However, outbursts remained sporadic until, at the

³⁹ Some of Tung Fen's adopted sons were allowed by Tung to have their own adopted sons. Eight of the indicted servants of the Tung family were identified as being in this position. For example, Ts'ai Chin-sung was adopted by Tung He, himself Tung Fen's adopted son, and became an aggressive henchman working for the Tung family. See Liu, *Che-fu tsou-shu*, ch. 4, p. 9b, 16b.

⁴⁰ Three of the indicted Tung servants purchased student status. See *Che-fu tsou-shu*, ch. 4, p. 1a. It should be pointed out that Tung Fen was not exceptional in this regard. Wu Yuan-ts'ui complained that a growing number of students in Chiang-nan came from bondservant background: they had purchased student status with the help of their masters. See his *Lin-chü man-lu*, ch. 2, pp. 67-68; ch. 5, pp. 574-576.

⁴¹ In Liu Yuan-lin's memorial, the evidence against the chief servants of the Tung family is overwhelming. See *Che-fu tsou-shu*, ch. 4.

⁴² This is at least what is claimed in Sheng Feng's *Chia-ho cheng-hsien-lu*, ch. 6, p. 13b.

⁴³ In his essay, "Wan-Ming nu-pien k'ao," Hsieh Kuo-chen offers a theory on the evolution of the master-servant relationship during Ming times according to which it went through three major phases. The first phase, from the early Ming until the Lung-ch'ing period (1567-1572), saw a steady growth in the acquisition of servants and the formation of master-servant relationships. The second phase, between the Wan-li and T'ien-ch'i periods (1573-1627), witnessed the unruly conduct of the servants from great families. The last two decades of the Ming dynasty marked the final phase, characterized by the servants' violent riots against their masters. See *Ming-Ch'ing chih-chi tang-she yun-tung k'ao*, p. 218.

⁴⁴ Tung Ch'uan-ts'e, a *chin-shih* of 1550, was respected by his colleagues in government for his bold criticism of Yen Sung's control of court politics; in Sung-chiang, however, he struck his fellow natives as a man with violent impulses: there were many occasions when he tortured servants to death, and in

junction of the dynastic change in the 1640s, they turned into a large-scale movement sweeping over the entire Chiang-nan region and hitting the great families with a vengeance.⁴⁵ Another serious problem during the Wan-li period was the explosion of public outrage against the great families' abuses, often perpetrated by their chief servants and adopted sons. The Su-chou disturbance of 1587 against Ling Yun-i's 凌雲翼 (cs of 1547) family,⁴⁶ the protest of 1593, which I shall discuss in detail in a moment, and the Sung-chiang disturbance of 1616 against Tung Ch'i-ch'ang's 董其昌 (cs of 1589, 1555-1636) family, exemplify these public protests in Chiang-nan.⁴⁷

Tung Fen's failed attempt to obtain an official eulogy

Tung Fen reached the age of 81 in 1590, an age which naturally compelled him to pay more and more attention to the matter of death. The recent death of his son had affected him immensely, and the death of his wife at the end of the year made him become even more obsessed about his own mortality.

the end he himself was violently murdered by his own servants. See Feng Shih-ko's *Feng Yuan-ch'eng hsüan-chi*, ch. 46, pp. 25a-29a. Meskill describes the murder of Tung in the context of Hsü Chieh's role in Sung-chiang local politics. See *Gentlemanly Interests and Wealth on the Yangtze Delta*, p. 127. Shen Te-fu describes similar incidents in *Wan-li yeh-huo pien, pu-i*, pp. 2338-2339.

⁴⁵ Wu Ch'ien, *Yü-ku wen-ts'un*, ch. 13, p. 6. Also see Wang Chia-chen, *Yen-t'ang chien-wen tsa-chi*, pp. 4-8, 30. Both accounts provide us with important information regarding the servant riots at the juncture of dynastic change. Nakayama Hachirô discusses the issue concerning the servant riots in his essay, "Ban Min no doka dohen," in Nakayama, *Min Shin shi ronshû* (Tokyo, Kyûko shoin, 1995), pp. 306-312.

⁴⁶ Wen Ping, *Ting-ling chu-lüeh*, pp. 456-457.

⁴⁷ As the Sung-chiang disturbance came to an end, an anonymous essay entitled *Min-ch'ao Tung-huan shih-shih* 民抄董宦事實 circulated in the area, providing abundant information with regard to the wrongdoings of Tung Ch'i-ch'ang's family, the local people's outrage against the Tung family, and the provincial government's role in resolving this crisis. The essay is included in *You-man-lou ts'ung-shu*, vol. 1, pp. 1a-41b. Wen Ping also records the Sung-chiang disturbance: see *Ting-ling chu-lüeh*, pp. 468-469. Shen Ping-hsün later included Wen Ping's account in his *Ch'üan-chai lao-jen pi-chi*, ch. 3, pp. 11b-12a. Nelson Wu, "Tung Ch'i-ch'ang: apathy in government and fervor in art," pp. 286-288, briefly describes the disturbance of 1616 against the Tung family. Fu I-ling also discusses those major disturbances in *Ming-tai Chiang-nan shih-min ching-chi shih-t'an*, pp. 118-122.

Tung Fen, reflecting on his 80 years, must have felt satisfaction that nothing had really prevented him from getting what he desired—power, wealth, and academic success. What he wanted very much now was to look forward to an elaborate funeral with an official eulogy. As the former minister of Rites, however, Tung Fen knew that his past government service created considerable difficulty in achieving this goal. According to regulations, the court did not offer official condolences to officials, such as himself, who had been impeached and subsequently removed from office.⁴⁸ Yet principle often yielded to politics; his relatives and protégés were senior court officials who would help him to work this out.

The maneuver began with a rather modest request. It was Ts'ai Hsi-chou 蔡希周, a touring censor in Che-chiang province, who took the initiative. He was known as one of the eight attack dogs commanded by Shen Shih-hsing and Wang Hsi-chüeh. Apparently on behalf of his patrons,⁴⁹ he submitted a memorial to the court in which he suggested that the government should consider offering a courtesy greeting to the aging Tung Fen, former minister of Rites.⁵⁰

Ts'ai Hsi-chou's memorial triggered a court debate. The opposition to his request was led by Wan Kuo-ch'in 萬國欽, also a censor. In his argument, not only did Wan remind his colleagues of Tung Fen's history of association with Yen Sung, but he also exposed Tung's horrendous behavior in local society. He charged that Tung Fen manipulated local politics and abused local people. Because of his powerful connections, local officials bowed to him and dared not investigate; his neighbors were furious, but dared not speak out. Wan then argued, "If we were to approve this request, he (Tung) would go around to encroach more land and take away more wives and daughters from ordinary people. What is worse, to approve this request is only the beginning; it would pave the way for a second request asking for

⁴⁸ *Ming-shih*, ch. 60, p. 1484.

⁴⁹ Wu Yuan-ts'ui commented that Ts'ai Hsi-chou's motive was to please the senior court officials (Wang Hsi-chüeh and Shen Shih-hsing). See *Lin-chü man-lu*, ch. 6, p. 321. Shen Te-fu made similar comments. See *Wan-li yeh-huo pien*, ch. 13, pp. 892-895. Also see Wen Ping's *Ting-ling chu-lüeh*, pp. 108-109; and *Wan-li ti-ch'ao*, p. 734.

⁵⁰ *Wan-li ti-ch'ao*, p. 512. See also *Ming-shih*, biography of Wan Kuo-ch'in, ch. 230, p. 6011.

official condolences and a third one for a posthumous title for himself when he dies."⁵¹ Wan concluded:

If we were to approve this request, the decision itself would insult the entire scholar-official community. Tung Fen was impeached and removed from office. He has since remained a guilty man. I wonder whether this request asks the court to pay a courtesy greeting to a former minister or to a guilty person.⁵²

Wan's sharp criticism zeroed in on Tung Fen's ulterior motive to seek official posthumous condolences. Tung's associates understood that their support for the request would probably cause tremendous embarrassment if the opposition party should insist on an official investigation. They decided to have the matter dropped quietly. Tung Fen must have been well informed by his associates concerning the whole debate and must have been profoundly disappointed. There was nothing he could do; he had to be patient and wait for another opportunity. Meanwhile, however, his associates at court wasted no time in retaliating. A few months later, Wan Kuo-ch'in was cashiered.⁵³

Tung Fen suffered a further disappointment affecting his capital contacts. It had to do with Tung Ssu-ch'eng. They were so close as grandfather and grandson, yet they were so far apart in their vision of politics and ethics. The grandfather was famously greedy, cunning, and shameless, while the grandson was known for his modesty, idealism, and uprightness.⁵⁴ The grandfather had been dismissed from office because of his association with Yen Sung. Now the grandson was removed from office because of his involvement in what is known as the *kuo-pen* 國本 controversy. This controversy, relating to the imperial succession, touched the most sensitive spot of the Wan-li emperor's private life. The emperor, reluctant to name his eldest son as crown prince, favored another son by his favorite consort. When several officials submitted memorials criticizing him for postponing the decision, the furious emperor had one of them beaten in court, and the

⁵¹ *Wan-li ti-ch'ao*, p. 513.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 513.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 532. Also see Wen Ping, *T'ing-ling chu-lieh*, pp. 198-199.

⁵⁴ Mao Kuo-chin 茅國縉, Tung Ssu-ch'eng's maternal uncle, wrote a biography of Tung Ssu-ch'eng which is included in the latter's *Tung li-pu chi*, pp. 1b-4b. See also Fan Yun-lin, *Shu-liao-kuan chi*, biography of Tung Ssu-ch'eng, pp. 601-602. Both Mao and Fan expressed their high opinion of Tung Ssu-ch'eng.

rest demoted.⁵⁵ Witnessing the brutal way in which the emperor raged against the outspoken censors, Tung Ssu-ch'eng dared support his colleagues by submitting a critical memorial. He too was discharged in 1592.⁵⁶

Apparently, Tung Ssu-ch'eng attempted to serve with a good conscience and compensate with his own clean record for his grandfather's disgrace. Nevertheless, he found himself extremely uneasy amidst the factional struggles between his grandfather's close associates and the opposition party: the fact that he supported the opposition in the *kuo-pen* dispute could only irritate his grandfather's friends.

Tung Fen under siege, 1593-1595

Back in Chiang-nan, Tung Ssu-ch'eng was immensely disturbed by his grandfather's lavish parties with friends. Being sensitive to a growing discontent among local people, he urged Tung Fen to give out some portion of his wealth to the poor, discipline his henchmen's unruly behavior, and live a modest life. His advice did nothing but infuriate Tung Fen. Compelled to be silent on family matters, Tung Ssu-ch'eng expressed his frustration to a friend in the following terms: "I would like to pray for Buddha never to have me be reborn in an official family in my next life."⁵⁷ He seemed to sense that misfortune was about to befall his family.

The year 1593 witnessed the beginning of a big crisis which was to haunt Tung Fen until his death. There was a sudden eruption of public outrage against the Tungs. Angry mobs protested against their unbridled pursuit of wealth and abuse of power. Protests materialized in several districts in Che-chiang province and in Nan Chih-li, where the family owned large landed holdings, businesses, and pawnshops.

The protests began in the district of Wu-chiang 吳江, Su-chou prefecture, in Nan Chih-li, where the Tung family's holdings

⁵⁵ Hsieh Kuo-chen, pp. 14-17.

⁵⁶ Mao Kuo-chin, in *Tung li-pu chi*, pp. 2b-3a. See also Fan Yun-lin, *Shu-liao-kuan chi*, pp. 604-605. Tung Ssu-ch'eng's involvement in the *kuo-pen* controversy and his subsequent dismissal is recorded in major works such as *Ming-shih*, ch. 233, p. 6075; *Wan-li ti-ch'ao*, p. 629; and T'an Ch'ien's *Kuo-ch'üeh*, ch. 76, p. 4665.

⁵⁷ Mao Kuo-chin, in *Tung li-pu chi*, p. 4b.

amounted to approximately 20,000 *mu*. Seven landed estates there were looted by the mob.⁵⁸ Fearing that the clamor would spread, Tung Ssu-ch'eng decided to return some of the land to its original owners; almost half of the Tung properties were lost as a result.⁵⁹ This concession did not stop the protests; on the contrary, they spread rapidly into Tung Fen's home district of Wu-ch'eng 烏程, in Hu-chou prefecture, Che-chiang province. Every day hundreds gathered in front of his house shouting and demanding the return of their lands improperly taken by the Tung family. Tung Ssu-ch'eng tried again to buy off the angry people. He posted a notice on the door of his house, "Those who come with hate get nothing; those who come with manners receive rewards."⁶⁰ This notice invited an even larger crowd eager to receive compensation. Within a few months, the Tung family lost two-tenths of its landed wealth, while the protests went on.⁶¹ One official who sympathized with the Tungs commented: "The Tung family's wealth has a limit, but the mob's desire has no limit."⁶² Tung Ssu-ch'eng was now caught in the middle between his grandfather, who was furious about the way in which he handled the crisis, and the mob who hardly appreciated his concession.⁶³

The widespread protests forced the provincial administration to step in. Wang Ju-hsün 王汝訓 (1551-1610), the provincial governor of Che-chiang, reported to the central government that thousands of people rallied in front of his office crying for justice. "If I had not responded to this crisis promptly," the governor wrote, "it could have escalated into a violent riot."⁶⁴ Wang had to choose between pleasing Tung Fen by using force to disperse the mob

⁵⁸ Tung Fen, *Mi-yuan chi*, ch. 8, p. 7a.

⁵⁹ Tung Ssu-ch'eng, *Tung li-pu chi*, ch. 1, pp. 15a-b.

⁶⁰ Mao Kuo-chin, in *Tung li-pu chi*, p. 3a.

⁶¹ Sun Chi-kao described the local protest against the Tung family in his epitaph for Tung Ssu-ch'eng's mother. See *Sun tsung-po chi*, p. 76b. Also see Tung Ssu-chang's brief description of the crisis in the biography of his elder brother Tung Ssu-hsin, *Ching-hsiao-chai i-wen*, ch. 2, p. 6a. And see Li Yüeh, *Chien-wen tsa-chi*, p. 444.

⁶² Tung Fen, ch. 8, p. 8b. The official was Chu Lin-ch'ü, the magistrate of Wu-chiang, who had received generous presents from Tung Fen and was implicated in the sarcastic poem mentioned above.

⁶³ Mao Kuo-chin, in *Tung li-pu chi*, p. 3b. Also see the section on Tung Ssu-ch'eng in Shen Te-fu's *Pi-chou-hsüan sheng-yü*, pp. 8-9.

⁶⁴ *Wan-li ti-ch'ao*, p. 838. See also Wen Ping, *Ting-ling chu-lüeh*, p. 459.

and appeasing the angry people by promising them a fair investigation. He chose the latter. With the aide of his colleagues P'eng Ying-ts'an 彭應參, a touring censor in Che-chiang province at that time, and Chang Ying-wang 張應望, the magistrate of Wu-ch'eng district, the governor looked into the legal complaints which charged the Tung family with numerous counts of misconduct. A number of chief servants from the Tung family were arrested and interrogated.⁶⁵ Protesters hailed the provincial administration's endeavor to redress abuses, and filed their complaints with the local government.

Tung Fen considered the provincial administration's position shocking. In a letter to an influential scholar-official, he bitterly complained that this official investigation was unprecedented in Hu-chou prefecture.⁶⁶ Heretofore, Tung had turned local officials into his "friends" using presents and reminders of his capital connections. Now Tung was convinced that the provincial governor of Che-chiang and the governor of Nan Chih-li (who was cooperating with the former since many holdings of the Tungs lay in his jurisdiction), both Shan-tung natives and same-year *chin-shih*, had teamed up to give him a hard time.⁶⁷ Indeed, these two were neither protégés, nor relatives, nor Tung's fellow provincials. In other words, they did not associate with his network, and therefore they did not feel obligated to protect his interests. Moreover, the two governors, motivated by a sense of justice, committed themselves to aggressively pursuing high-profile cases.⁶⁸

Tung Fen's counterattack

Never before had Tung Fen been subjected to such intense public humiliations and pressures from a provincial investigation. His grandson's conciliatory approach failed; and his own political

⁶⁵ Tung Fen, ch. 8, p. 7b. See also Tung Ssu-ch'eng's *Tung li-pu chi*, ch. 2, p. 3a.

⁶⁶ Tung Fen, ch. 8, p. 7b.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, ch. 9., p. 3b.

⁶⁸ Chu Hung-mo, the governor of Nan Chih-li, had received the *chin-shih* in the same year (1571) as governor Wang Ju-hsün. See *Ming-shih*, biography of Chu Hung-mo, ch. 227, p. 5963; biography of Wang Ju-hsün, ch. 235, pp. 6117-6119.

technique of manipulating local officials did not work because he had no connection with the current governors. Tung's remaining option was to use his capital connections to block the on-going official inquiry. At the age of 85, he was going to fight his last fight to prevent his family wealth from being shattered.

In fact, the Tung family was not the only target of the demonstrations. Fan Ying-ch'i 范應期 (cs of 1565, 1527-1594), a native of Hu-chou prefecture, also became a target of public rage. He had been an Imperial Tutor and Chancellor of the Imperial Academy before he was dismissed from office. Fan and Tung were related by marriage and maintained an informal teacher-student relationship. Over the years, Fan and his son were notorious in local society for their horrendous misconduct, and therefore were under fierce attack from the mob. Fan's son, charged with numerous wrongdoings, knew that the official investigation would hold him accountable. Afraid of prosecution, he committed suicide in the third month of Wan-li 22 (1594).⁶⁹ Fan Ying-ch'i, a proud and volatile man, was under extreme stress. The continuous protests, betrayal by servants, infighting in the household, official investigations, and most dreadfully, the death of his eldest son, drove him to the edge. Two months after his son's suicide, no longer able to endure the humiliations and pressure, he hanged himself.⁷⁰

This incident had explosive consequences. The provincial government immediately began investigating and arrested some suspects.⁷¹ The suicides, on the other hand, played right in the hands of Tung Fen in his confrontation with the provincial administration. The Tungs and Fans changed quickly from defense to offense. What probably happened next is that Tung Fen immediately collaborated with Fan Ying-ch'i's widow to draft a complaint.⁷² She accused the mob of violating her family compound. They smashed the houses, killed pigs and sheep, drank and shouted in the living room, intruded in the bedrooms, and chopped down all the trees in the Fan family cemetery. In addition, the mob's attack frightened her nephew's pregnant wife to

⁶⁹ Liu Yuan-lin, *Che-fu tsou-shu*, ch. 5, p. 9b.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, ch. 5, p. 11a. See also Li Yüeh, *Chien-wen tsa-chi*, pp. 445-446.

⁷¹ Liu Yuan-lin, ch. 5, pp. 11b-12b.

⁷² This information comes from Shen Ping-hsün. See his *Ch'üan-chai lao-jen pi-chi*, ch. 3, p. 8b.

death. All of these outrages, which led to the death of her husband and son, could have been avoided had the provincial government dealt with the local disturbances differently.⁷³ Soon Widow Fan was on her way to the capital with her lament. She appealed directly to the central government, crying for justice. Meanwhile, Tung Fen was getting intelligence and support from friends in the capital. Above all, he was working his contacts to assure a hearing for her complaint.

Incidentally, it turned out that virtually all of her charges were false, as attested to by the report prepared by the new governor, Liu Yuan-lin 劉元霖, who replaced Wang Ju-hsün. After a thorough investigation, Liu wrote that her nephew's wife had been sick for a long time (not pregnant) and had died in early 1593; contrary to the widow's charge, it was her husband's chief servant who shocked her to death. The nephew dared not file a lawsuit against that servant. As for the charges related to the mob's intrusion into the family compound, the governor reported that the houses stood magnificent without having lost a single piece of wood or brick; the family cemetery was covered with thick vegetation and tall trees; and no one had gone into the family compound smashing, killing pigs and sheep, drinking and making noise, as she alleged.⁷⁴

Before any of these facts were known, the complaint of Fan's widow reached to the Wan-li emperor. The emperor reportedly became outraged by the news that Fan Ying-ch'i, his former tutor, killed himself under pressure both from the mob and from the provincial administration's investigation. An imperial edict was issued which removed governor Wang and dispatched imperial guards to arrest censor P'eng Ying-ts'an and magistrate Chang Ying-wang.⁷⁵ These three were blamed for having mishandled the

⁷³ In his report concerning the Fan case, Liu Yuan-lin quoted a substantial portion from the complaint filed by Fan Ying-ch'i's widow. See *Che-fu tsou-shu*, ch. 5, pp. 26b-27a.

⁷⁴ Liu Yuan-lin wrapped up the official investigation and submitted two detailed reports to the court, which presented plenty of evidence regarding the wrongdoings of the chief servants of Tung and Fan, and recorded the official decision on each charge. As for his report regarding the widow's accusations, see *Che-fu tsou-shu*, ch. 5, pp. 26b-27b.

⁷⁵ According to Wen Ping, the imperial edict was issued in the 10th month of Wan-li 22 (1594). See *Ting-ling chu-lieh*, pp. 458-459. Also see *Wan-li ti-ch'ao*, p. 864. Chang Ying-wang, a native of Kao-ch'un, Chiang-ning prefecture, Nan

suppression of the disturbances. A later edict dismissed Wang from office, deprived P'eng of his official status, and exiled Chang to a remote region.⁷⁶ When several officials suggested that the court should carefully question the widow's complaint, they were reprimanded and demoted.⁷⁷ The imperial edict left no room for investigating whether or not the woman's accusations were true, nor any room for listening to the provincial government's appeal to the court.

Among those concerned with the case at the time, a divergence of opinion emerged as to whether Tung Fen could actually have pulled strings in this way. Was Fan's widow capable of bringing down a provincial administration by herself, and so quickly? Could her complaint possibly have reached the emperor without help from senior officials? Rumors circulated that Tung Fen had orchestrated the whole counterattack.

Tung Ssu-ch'eng repudiated such assertions as slanderous, basing his argument on the claim that his grandfather was dying and in no condition to do what people were saying. He suggested that the disposition of the case was based solely on its merits, and offered no explanation of how Widow Fan could have gotten a hearing. In his letter to a government official, he wrote, "Thanks to his majesty's decision and the public opinion at court, the Fan case is resolved."⁷⁸ It was absolutely outrageous, he said, that his grandfather, a man who quietly waited for his final destiny, was being ruthlessly slandered. "My grandfather is dying, I am no better than cold ashes, and my family is like a broken jar."⁷⁹ This

Chih-li, took his *chin-shih* in 1592. The court decision to exile him was viewed by many people as being extremely harsh and unfair. See the 1880 edition of *Chiang-ning fu-chih*, ch. 38, p. 22b.

⁷⁶ Wen Ping, p. 461. According to *Wan-li ti-ch'ao*, p. 882, the second edict was issued in the 2nd month of Wan-li 23 (1595). Also see *Ming-shih*, ch. 235, p. 6118. T'ang Hsien-tsu, appalled by the court intervention, expressed his moral support to his friends P'eng Ying-ts'an, Wang Ju-hsün, and Chang Ying-wang in his correspondence. See *T'ang Hsien-tsu chi*, ch. 12, pp. 457-458; ch. 45, p. 1262, p. 1274; ch. 47, p. 1360.

⁷⁷ Two junior censors submitted memorials to defend P'eng Ying-ts'an. They were demoted right away. See *Ming-shih*, ch. 235, p. 6118; *Wan-li ti-ch'ao*, p. 865. Sun P'ei-yang, Minister of Personnel, submitted a memorial later in which he urged the emperor to reconsider his decision. The memorial was ignored. See *Wan-li ti-ch'ao*, pp. 870-871.

⁷⁸ Tung Ssu-ch'eng, p. 5a.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 5a.

is indeed a bleak picture of a fragmented family with its head—an 85-year-old invalid man—waiting for death.

Since the case represents a striking example of influence, it merits a review of whether, as the grandson claimed, such a thing was impossible given Tung Fen's rapidly failing health. Two documents by Tung Ssu-ch'eng, the letter and the biography, provide inconsistent evidence. According to the biography, Tung Fen's health began to deteriorate in 1594. By the end of the year he "could hardly sleep well at night. Outsiders saw him talking and smiling as usual during the day, but they had no idea that frustration and agony were eating away his spirit." And after seeing off his grandson, Tung Ssu-ch'eng's younger brother Tung Ssu-chao, who was bound for the capital and the metropolitan examination, "he took my brother's hands and wept as if he would not see him again. Within a month, Grandfather fell ill; he did not eat nor sleep."⁸⁰ Tung Fen passed away in the third month of Wan-li 23 (1595); for Tung Ssu-ch'eng, the crisis had contributed to his grandfather's death.⁸¹

Inconsistent with his use of his grandfather's failing health to argue that Tung Fen, in his final agony, was in no condition to engineer political reprisals, Tung Ssu-ch'eng himself noted that Tung Fen traveled three hundred *li* when he saw his grandson off to the examinations. He said that his grandfather had been in good health and full of energy. Those who knew him predicted that he would live to the age of 100.⁸² There is no indication that Tung Fen was struck with any serious illness during the period of time that elapsed between Fan Ying-ch'i's suicide and the intervention of the court, which took place in the tenth month of Wan-li 22 (1594). On the contrary, his own correspondence shows that he was actively seeking support. We learn from Tung Fen's letters that Shen Ching-chieh (whose daughter was married to Tung's grandson) contacted one of Tung's associates in the capital. This meeting resulted in the latter's personal letter to the governor of Nan Chih-li on behalf of Tung Fen and in the fact that Tung was provided with a copy of governor Wang's supposedly confidential memorial concerning the investigation.⁸³

⁸⁰ Mao K'un, *Mao K'un wen-chi*, ch. 3, pp. 23b-24a.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. 24b.

⁸² *Ibid.*, p. 24b.

⁸³ Tung Fen, ch. 9, pp. 2b-3a.

Moreover, Tung Ssu-ch'eng's writings contain letters to his grandfather's court associates, indicating that Tung Fen was mobilizing his protégés and relatives to rescue him.⁸⁴

Substantiating the claim of Tung Fen's involvement is a much later witness, Shen Ping-hsün 沈炳巽, who lived in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. Shen's family and the Tungs had been closely related through marriage for generations, which probably gave him access to inside information.⁸⁵ Disagreeing with a mid-seventeenth century account that discussed the Fan suicides,⁸⁶ Shen pointed out:

The death of Fan (Ying-ch'i) was actually related to the provincial administration's memorial against Tung Fen. Thanks to Tung's powerful connections at court, the provincial officials received extremely severe penalties. Otherwise, a woman's complaint alone would not have been able to bring down the top provincial officials.⁸⁷

⁸⁴ Among his correspondence with his grandfather's capital associates were letters to Wang Hsi-chüeh and Shen Shih-hsing. In a letter to Wang, Tung Ssu-ch'eng expressed his gratitude to him and to Shen Shih-hsing for their involvement in helping the Tungs out of the crisis. See *Tung li-pu chi*, ch. 2, pp. 2b-3a. Also see two letters to Sun Chi-kao, ch. 1, pp. 6b-7a; ch. 2, pp. 11b-13a.

⁸⁵ Shen Ping-hsün, *Ch'üan-chai lao-jen pi-chi*, ch. 3, pp. 14b-15a. Shen Ping-hsün was a descendent of Shen Ching-chieh, the man who had married his daughter to Tung Ssu-chang, Tung Fen's grandson, and who helped the Tung family out of the dire situation. Shen Ping-hsün's own maternal grandfather was Tung Fen's great-grandson. The Tung case during his time was no more than a piece of past local history; moreover, by then the Tung family could no longer maintain its social prestige and wealth. Therefore there was no need for him to keep his inside information secret. Sketchy information about Shen Ping-hsün is found in the entry regarding his elder brother Shen Ping-chen 沈炳震 (1679-1738) in Arthur W. Hummel, ed., *Eminent Chinese of the Ch'ing Period* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1944), pp. 644-645. Ping-chen, Ping-hsün, and Ping-ch'ien 炳謙 (b. 1685), another brother, were well-respected scholars in their time.

⁸⁶ Shen Ping-hsün was critical of Wen Ping's 文秉 account, which was in his view limited to the Fan suicide and the court decision. Wen Ping, eldest son of Wen Chen-meng 文震孟 (1574-1636, grand secretary, 1635), committed suicide when the Ch'ing government pressed him to serve the Manchu court. See L. Carrington Goodrich and Fang Chao-ying, eds., *Dictionary of Ming Biography, 1368-1644*, vol. II, p. 1644. Wen Ping wrote several books, including the *Ting-ling chu-lüeh*, where there is a description of the Hu-chou disturbance related to the case of Fan Ying-ch'i (pp. 458-461).

⁸⁷ Shen Ping-hsün, ch. 3, p. 8a.

Still according to Shen,

Tung (Fen) was in a much more serious situation than Fan (Ying-ch'i). Legal complaints against Tung numbered in the thousands. Hundreds of people stayed outside his house every day demanding the return of their lands. The investigation report would soon be completed and submitted to the court. Under tremendous pressure, Tung was desperately looking for an opening that could be used to attack the provincial administration. Fan and Tung were related through marriage and teacher-disciple relationship. Fan always consulted Tung on important matters. Fan asked Tung how to cope with this crisis.⁸⁸

Shen felt that this conversation heightened Fan Ying-ch'i's fear and drove him to mental collapse and suicide. Then,

Tung Fen helped Fan's widow to draft the complaint and urged her to go to the capital the day after the death of Fan. At the same time, he encouraged his powerful associates at court to take care of her appeal. Before P'eng Ying-ts'an's memorial arrived in the capital, the imperial edict to arrest P'eng had been issued. P'eng's memorial was blocked. What a magic spin and maneuver!⁸⁹

Shen Ping-hsün's testimony supports the allegations regarding Tung Fen's role in the counterattack. If Tung was indeed a dying man in 1594, he surely remained capable of some rather remarkable feats. He used Fan's suicide as a turning point from which to mastermind a superb counterattack. His associates opened the way for Fan's widow to approach the Wan-li emperor, blocked the provincial memorial from going to the emperor, and gave no opportunity for the accused to defend themselves. As soon as the emperor's temper was aroused, Tung Fen's associates delivered an imperial edict which knocked down his enemies—the provincial governor, the censor, and the magistrate of Wu-ch'eng district.

Conclusion

The court intervention blocking the provincial investigation of the Tung family was not unprecedented. A precursor to the case

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, ch. 3, pp. 8a-8b.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, ch. 3, p. 8b. It is important to note that Shen Ping-hsün did not originate, but only reinforced, the view that Tung Fen masterminded the whole counterattack which successfully toppled the top provincial officials. Shen's take on this issue has its special merit owing to his family's close ties with the Tung family. T'an Ch'ien too held the same position. See *Kuo-ch'üeh*, ch. 76, p. 4739.

of Tung Fen was Hsü Chieh's use of his capital connections to knock down his enemy Hai Jui 海瑞 (1513-1587), the governor of Nan Chih-li. In 1570-71, Hai Jui took tough measures to investigate the misconduct of Hsü's family. Hsü had Hai Jui removed from the governorship and the investigation shut down by means of a court intervention.⁹⁰

Tung Fen, like Hsü Chieh, was no ordinary wealthy provincial. He was a cunning politician who knew exactly how the political system worked and had great capacity to manipulate politics to satisfy his needs. His close connections with power holders secured his presence in local politics and protected his family's wealth and prestige in local society.

To a considerable degree, the dispute between the provincial administration and Tung Fen was an unfortunate coincidence. This happened not only because the governor was not associated with Tung's network, but also because he intended to exercise his full judicial authority as the representative of the state over the dispute between the Tung family and the angry locals. This was an unusual combination of circumstances. The dispute was abruptly resolved by the court intervention, the result of a desperate but carefully crafted counterattack which enabled Tung Fen to turn the tables on his prosecutors and emerge victorious.

Tung Fen's case shows us how central and local politics were intricately interrelated to create "safe havens" and protect the great families' interests in local society. Networks of kinship, regional affiliations, and teacher-disciple relationships linked local elites to power holders at court. In this regard, local politics in a large prefecture like Hu-chou was not just local, and residents of elite status were not simply local elites. They sometimes had the ability to overturn a governor's decision, close investigations, or even remove provincial officials from office.

The Tung family survived a major crisis, but its victory was shadowed by three deaths. Tung Fen passed away in the third month of Wan-li 23 (1595). Within a month, his grandson Tung Ssu-chao, who had just received his *chin-shih* degree, died unexpectedly in the capital. The passing of his grandfather and brother broke the heart of Tung Ssu-ch'eng, and he too died at the end of that year. They had enjoyed power, prestige, and

⁹⁰ Wu Yuan-ts'ui, *Lin-chü man-lu*, ch. 1, p. 31.

wealth for several decades. With the loss of its three *chin-shih* degree holders, however, the heyday of the Tung family was over.

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