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A DECADE OF CONSIDERABLE SIGNIFICANCE Late-Ming Factionalism in the Making, 1583-1593

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It has been long held that, although the Ming dynasty collapsed in 1644, the dynastic fate had been sealed much earlier. The compilers of *Ming shih* pronounced that “the Ming dynasty actually foundered under [the Wan-li 萬曆 emperor (r.1573-1620)].”¹ They considered Shen I-kuan 沈一貫 (1531-1615), the senior grand secretary of the late Wan-li period, to be one of the principal contributors to the Ming decline. Some of them maintained that the dynasty fell apart primarily due to factionalism, and factionalism began with Shen.

Wan Yen 萬言 (1637-1705), himself a compiler of *Ming shih*, disagreed with this assessment. He acknowledged Shen I-kuan’s impact on the last few decades of factionalism, but he argued that Shen Shih-hsing 申時行 (1535-1614) and Wang Hsi-chüeh 王錫爵 (1534-1611) had started it.² Wan’s observation pointed to a decade (1583-1593)

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¹ *Ming shih*, ch. 21, p. 295. For complete citations see the bibliography at the end of this article.

² In Wan’s analysis, Wang Hsi-chüeh was the shrewdest of all, followed by Shen Shih-hsing. Shen I-kuan, who came after them, was less astute, but much more aggressive than Shen Shih-hsing; after he had used vicious tactics to force out his rivals his notoriety surpassed that of his two predecessors. Wan Yen’s view is recorded in Ch’üan Tsu-wang’s *Chieh-ch’i t’ing-chi, wai-pien*, ch. 19, p. 919. Shen I-kuan’s rivals were Shen Li 沈鯉 (1531-1615) and Kuo Cheng-yü 郭正域 (1554-1612). For his hostility toward these two men, see Ch’ien Ch’ien-i, *Mu-chai ch’u-hsüeh chi*, ch. 51, pp. 1289-1292. Incidentally, while some scholars have suggested that late-Ming factionalism had direct roots in the so-called Great Ritual controversy that took place at the beginning of the Chia-ching reign (1522-1566), this remains a subject of debate. Therefore I would like in this essay to step aside from this viewpoint and

that marked a political juncture in the late Ming. This period deserves closer attention. It witnessed the end of Chang Chü-cheng's 張居正 authoritarian but effective administration and the beginning of increasing discord which eventually paralyzed the central government. The senior grand secretaries Shen Shih-hsing and Wang Hsi-chüeh undoubtedly contributed to this discord, as Wan said. But the evidence shows that the reality was much more complex, with two other elements, the Wan-li emperor and the opposition, helping to inflame factionalism.

Under what circumstances, then, did the situation begin to shift? Why did things change to such a degree that factionalism overwhelmed the government? To address these questions we must first consider two powerful men, T'ai-tsu 太祖 (r.1368-1398), the founder of the Ming dynasty (1368-1644), and Senior Grand Secretary Chang Chü-cheng (1525-1582), who both cast enormous shadows over the political developments of this decade.

Living with Tai-tsu's Legacy

The institutional disintegration was the unintended consequence of the vision of T'ai-tsu, the man who set the despotic tone for Ming governance. As is well known, the dynastic founder was determined to keep the bureaucracy subordinate to the throne and abolished the prime ministership.³ As the burden thereby forced upon the throne was too much for later emperors, the Grand Secretariat gradually assumed many of these responsibilities. Lacking formal executive powers, the senior grand secretaries faced the perpetual dilemma of, in the words of Charles Hucker, "how to become a prime minister under a system that did not permit a prime ministership."⁴

Another feature of T'ai-tsu's institutions came from his realization that his descendants' misrule might jeopardize the dynasty. He established a set of strict rules and mechanisms to prevent the throne from

focus on the political struggles during the decade 1583-1593, which I believe set the stage for the chronic, destructive factionalism that eventually crippled the Ming dynasty.

³ This was in 1380. See *Ming shih*, ch. 72, p. 1733.

⁴ Charles O. Hucker, "The Tung-lin Movement of the Late Ming period," p. 139. In light of Hucker's remark, the term "administration" as used in this article refers to the senior grand secretary's office and senior ministers and censors. Although administrations technically "headless", like the grand secretariat, did not exercise formal executive power, they nevertheless controlled the decision-making process and submitted their recommendations to the emperor for final approval.

disrupting governmental operations. For instance, the emperor was not expected to initiate policy, and supervising secretaries of the Six Offices of Scrutiny, part of the censorial-supervisory branch of the government, were empowered to veto imperial decisions.⁵ As Charles Hucker explains, "Although the civil-service establishment was legally restricted to advisory rather than legislative powers, the normal administrative routine gave it some significant procedural checks on imperial irresponsibility or arbitrariness. The right to make final decisions was always the emperor's, but the civil servants normally prescribed the alternatives among which the emperor could choose."⁶

Against this background, Chang Chü-cheng was probably the only senior grand secretary in the Ming who acted somewhat like a prime minister. He was able to run the government in a heavy-handed fashion mainly because the Wan-li emperor was still a boy, and his mother, the Empress Dowager, allowed Chang to discipline her son strictly.⁷ The deep resentment the emperor vented after Chang's death as a consequence reaffirmed the despotic intimidating power of the throne.⁸

The passing of Chang Chü-cheng in 1582 unsettled the government. His opponents, who had been suppressed by his administration, clamored for redress of their grievances. The Wan-li emperor, who was now an adult, exploited anti-Chang resentment to condemn his stern former tutor's leadership style, purge his clique, and confiscate his family property.⁹ Chang's policies were abandoned by grand secretaries who were eager to disassociate themselves from their

⁵ *Ming shih*, ch. 74, pp. 1805-1806. Also see Charles O. Hucker, *The Censorial System of Ming China*, pp. 100-102.

⁶ Hucker, *The Censorial System of Ming China*, p. 42.

⁷ Yü Shen-hsing, *Kü-shan pi-chu*, ch. 2, p. 16; p. 19. Wen Ping, *Ting-ling chu-lüe*, ch. 1, pp. 18-19.

⁸ Yü Shen-hsing, ch. 2, pp. 19-20; ch. 4, p. 42.

⁹ Chang Chü-cheng's authoritarian presence at court and intolerance of criticism reached a peak in 1577 when Chao Yung-hsien 趙用賢 (1535-1596), Wu Chung-hsing 吳中行 (1540-ca. 1598), Shen Ssu-hsiao 沈思孝 (1542-1611), Ai Mu 艾穆 (cj. 1558), and Tsou Yuan-piao 鄒元標 (1551-1624) criticized him for not observing the mourning of his deceased father. Their memorials infuriated the senior grand secretary; they were, as a result, flogged and cashiered. See Wen Ping, ch. 1, pp. 38-44, and Hucker, "The Tung-lin movement of the late Ming period," pp. 139-140. This harsh suppression of his critics generated more anti-Chang resentment. Shortly after Chang's death, his opponents condemned the previous administration with a vengeance. With imperial connivance the purge went overboard, causing the suicide of Chang's eldest son. See Hsü Hsüeh-mo, *Kü-yu-yuan kao*, ch. 19, 126/12. Wu Yüan-ts'ui, *Lin-chü man-lu*, ch. 6, pp. 312-313. Wen Ping, ch. 1, pp. 68-69. T'an Ch'ien, *Kuo-ch'üeh*, ch. 72, p. 4479.

predecessor¹⁰. Few could then foresee that this reaction would have serious repercussions.

The Wan-li emperor, Chang Chü-cheng's opponents, and the Grand Secretariat all maneuvered to align the administrative offices to their own advantage. Both the emperor and Chang's opponents feared that the power of the Grand Secretariat might easily slip into the hands of a senior grand secretary again. To prevent this, they teamed up to weaken that office. Their concerted denunciation of the deceased grand secretary sent a chilling message to his successors, and effectively ended the practice by which a powerful senior grand secretary dominated the central government.¹¹ The Grand Secretariat's authority, as a result, was significantly reduced in favor of the emperor: no grand secretaries after 1582 ever risked standing up to him.¹² But the emperor's victory did not bode well for the long-term health of the dynasty.

The Grand Secretariat, beginning with Senior Grand Secretary Shen Shih-hsing, found itself on the defensive. It was difficult to operate in such hostile political climate, when anti-Chang resentment and the emperor's suspicion of the Grand Secretariat were at a peak. However, soon the emperor and the opposition started to clash on policy and administrative issues, and their strained relationship provided opportunities for Shen to moderate the emperor's hostility.¹³

Shen Shih-hsing had to balance effectiveness against survival. Effective administration required a strong leadership, which would surely provoke the emperor. Mediation between the emperor and his colleagues, always placating the throne, would foster his own survival. Not a risk-taker, he played the role of mellow housekeeper. He indulged the emperor and swayed him to his side, gaining the leverage necessary to deal with the opposition. The consequences of his choice were by no means trivial. The mechanisms the Grand Secretariat had once used to manage the emperor were now brushed aside.¹⁴ This was

¹⁰ T'an Ch'ien, ch. 72, p. 4441, 4448. The grand secretaries T'an referred to were Chang Ssu-wei 張四維 (1526-1585) and Shen Shih-hsing. Also see Ch'ien Ch'ien-i, ch. 30, p. 895.

¹¹ Hsieh Kuo-chen, *Ming-Ch'ing chih-chi tang-she yün-tung k'ao*, pp. 12-14.

¹² *Ming shih*, ch. 218, p. 5768.

¹³ As the focus of attention at court shifted from the purge to the issue of balancing power among many other administrative concerns, a growing number of junior officials found themselves in the opposition challenging the emperor and the Grand Secretariat. The term "Chang's opponents" no longer adequately applies to this pressure group. From this point onwards, therefore, I shall use the word "opposition" instead.

¹⁴ *Wan-li shu-ch'ao*, Ts'ai Shih-ting's memorial, 58/259. T'an Ch'ien, ch. 83, p. 5155.

just one of the institutional practices that eroded quickly during Shen's tenure as senior grand secretary (1583-1591).

Under T'ai-tsu's shadow, the management of state affairs had been balanced uneasily between the throne and the Grand Secretariat, and between the Grand Secretariat and the ministries. The decade 1583-1593 saw this balance undone as Chang Chü-cheng's legacy and T'ai-tsu's institutions bedeviled the relationship between the Wan-li emperor, the Grand Secretariat, and the opposition. Tension grew between the emperor and the opposition, each offering conflicting interpretations of T'ai-tsu's rules regarding imperial power and its limitations. Meanwhile, the opposition called for the Grand Secretariat to relinquish control over the six ministries, using T'ai-tsu's intent as their justification. Thus, the emperor bent the Grand Secretariat to its knee and the opposition tried to free the six ministries from the Secretariat's interference. Pressured from both sides, Shen Shih-hsing used their conflicting interests of the emperor and the opposition to further his ends. The entanglement of this triad gradually undermined the government, taking it to uncharted territory, with ominous implications for the future.

Obstreperous Emperor

The Wan-li emperor, after 1582, "rapidly degenerated into a self-indulgent and irresponsible despot."¹⁵ The remaining thirty-eight years of his reign witnessed the full exhibition of his unbridled character: aloofness from government affairs, volatile temper, and extravagance.¹⁶ His isolation deepened his suspicion and distrust of officials, creating a vicious cycle in which he raged against outspoken critics, cut off communications with the government, and unleashed eunuchs as his special agents in the ruthless pursuit of wealth, thereby generating still more criticism.¹⁷ One scholar-official lamented that the emperor's

¹⁵ Hucker, *The Censorial System of Ming China*, p. 153.

¹⁶ In a memorial from 1600, Wang Te-wan voiced his concerns about the Wan-li emperor's huge expenditures, which caused fiscal tightness and a drastic reduction of the defense budget. See *Wan-li shu-ch'ao*, 59/282-285.

¹⁷ L. C. Goodrich and Fang Chaoying, eds., *Dictionary of Ming Biography*, account of the Wan-li emperor by Charles Hucker, pp. 324-337. Ray Huang, "Fiscal Administration during the Ming dynasty," p. 113. Also see Frederic E. Wakeman, Jr., *The Great Enterprise*, p. 11. It should be pointed out that Ray Huang presents a more sympathetic picture of the Wan-li emperor in his *1587, A Year of No Significance*, pp. 1-41, 93-95.

desire ran rampant at the cost of his people's flesh and blood, leaving them impoverished and putting the state in great peril.¹⁸

All of these problems began to surface as early as in 1585. One of the alarming indicators was the emperor's withdrawal from his imperial duties. Study sessions, ceremonies, memorials, and daily audiences with officials bored him. Drink, sex, and extravagance gave him excitement and pleasure. He remained aloof from government affairs, while insisting on his right to ultimate power.

We should not underestimate the importance of imperial study sessions, ceremonies, reviewing of memorials, and daily audiences. Woven together as a web of restraints, they worked to mold an emperor's public persona as a responsible ruler and a man of dignity and compassion. These rituals exalted the emperor, but they also restrained him, trimming his rough edges and taming his tyrannical impulse as far as was possible. Above all, they pressured him to maintain a modicum of civility and self-restraint toward his subjects, especially those around him. The frightening consequences of an emperor's non-compliance were a sufficient impetus for officials to urge him to play his assigned roles. Understandably, then, several heated controversies at the late-Ming court focused on imperial deportment and decorum.

In a small, isolated world where humble eunuchs and submissive grand secretaries kowtowed to him, the Wan-li emperor defied political and ethical constraints. He did not encounter much resistance from his senior grand secretary: Shen Shih-hsing carefully calculated how much risk would be involved if he upset the emperor. The condemnation of Chang Chü-cheng served as a reminder.

The year 1586 saw the emperor's behavior obstruct the operation of the government and his resentment toward criticism harden, when the issue of choosing an heir apparent (the so-called *Kuo-pen* 國本 controversy, which I shall discuss later) began to heat up. Since Shen Shih-hsing was reluctant to speak frankly to the emperor and other senior officials followed suit, junior officials took on the task of confronting him. The "avenues of criticism" (*yen-lu* 言路), an institutional mechanism dating from the beginning of the dynasty, permitted them to admonish the emperor and senior officials.¹⁹ Wan-li's cancellation of study sessions, official audiences, and ceremonial

¹⁸ Ting Yüan-chien, *Tsun-cho-t'ang wen-chi*, ch. 1, 170/654-656.

¹⁹ *Ta-Ming hui-tien*, ch. 209, pp. 481-482. Also see Ono Kazuko, *Minki tôsha kô*, pp. 166-173.

proceedings late that year prompted Lu Hung-ch'un 盧洪春, a secretary of Rites, to submit a critical memorial.

In his edict, the Wan-li emperor had adduced health problems to justify the cancellation. Lu's memorial cited information leaked to the public that the emperor had fallen off a horse and bruised his forehead, pointing out the contradictions. Whether it was a horse-riding accident or dizziness and fatigue,²⁰ he reminded the emperor of the consequences of his behavior, using a traditional technique to warn the emperor that his misconduct would tarnish his image in history: "Your Majesty is observed by the public today, and will be judged by future generations... Even if all the officials, intimidated by Your Majesty, dared not point out your misbehavior, it would be impossible to prohibit such (unfavorable) information from being recorded in unofficial histories passing on to later generations." He then advised the emperor, "If Your Majesty is really sick, you should restrain yourself from pleasure-seeking for the sake of the state. If you are not sick, you should maintain truthfulness in your imperial edict rather than use an excuse leading to the spread of rumors."²¹ Lu's memorial enraged the emperor. He was flogged and then cashiered.²²

By contrast, Shen Shih-hsing carefully phrased his words to the emperor at the end of 1587: "Your Majesty only attended a lecture once this year. Please pay attention to the study of classics and history next spring."²³ The emperor cordially thanked his senior grand secretary, but the following year he failed to attend a single session. Shen submitted the written lectures out of obligation, quietly accepting the emperor's absence.²⁴

The emperor figured that he could force the officials to keep quiet about his behavior. In principle, the senior grand secretary should counsel him. But Shen Shih-hsing acted as a yes-man; thus it was junior officials that the emperor had to deal with. Wan-li thought that severe consequences, corporal punishment in particular, would silence them.²⁵ Much to his dismay, intimidation did not work on Lu Hung-ch'un, and there was no shortage of courageous junior

²⁰ Lu Hung-ch'un believed that the emperor's indulgence in sexual pleasure probably caused fatigue and dizziness.

²¹ *Wan-li ti-ch'ao*, pp. 335-339.

²² *Ibid.*, pp. 339-340.

²³ T'an Ch'ien, ch. 74, p. 4569.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, ch. 74, p. 4583. Also see *Ming shih*, biography of Shen Shih-hsing, ch. 218, p. 5749.

²⁵ Wang Chia-p'ing, *Wang Wen-tuan kung ch'ih-tu*, ch. 7, 149/701.

officials who stubbornly and persistently raised the issues. This agitated him immensely.

Dogged Opposition

By 1589, the Wan-li emperor's relationship with his officials had further deteriorated. Tensions rose over the issue of naming an heir apparent. Furthermore, his lavish expenditures contributed to serious fiscal tightness, his rare contacts with the administration undermined governmental operations, and the flogging of palace eunuchs and maids became a frequent and disturbing occurrence.²⁶ The unrestrained emperor, a volatile man only in his twenties, disrupted the government and committed arbitrary violence to vent his blind rage. It was indeed a fearsome thing to reprimand him. But Lo Yü-jen 雒于仁 (cs. 1583), a commentator in the Grand Court of Revision, came forward to do just that.

In his memorial of 1589, Lo rhetorically assumed the role of a doctor diagnosing the sickness and offering a four-point prescription to his patient. He began,

I believe that if a man pursues a government career he ought to speak to the emperor with all sincerity. I have been in the capital for more than a year now and have only met Your Majesty three times at court. It is said that you suffer from an overabundance of fire element inside the body, and fatigue. Your Majesty cannot even preside over the state ceremonies such as paying homage to Heaven and the imperial ancestors, and has to send officials to represent you. For quite a long time Your Majesty has engaged in state affairs only rarely, has abandoned the study of classics, and has stopped attending lectures. Based on all this, I conclude that the sickness of Your Majesty is impossible to cure through normal medical treatment. I am confident that my four-point prescription can heal you. The condition comprises heavy drinking, sexual pleasure, greed, and volatile temperament. Heavy drinking hurts your stomach, concupiscence consumes your energy, greed weakens your mental concentration, and hot temper harms your liver.

Surrounded with delicious delicacies, Your Majesty should restrain yourself from drinking too much. To the contrary, you imbibe during the day, not satisfied, then continue drinking long into the night. Highly intoxicated, Your Majesty is running around unsteadily brandishing knife and sword. It is heavy drinking that causes you to stumble.

Surrounded by consorts and concubines, Your Majesty should restrain yourself from too much sex. To the contrary... you have become attracted to Consort Cheng and promote her rank lavishly... you spoil her to the point of doing whatever she says. As a result, the decision to name the imperial

²⁶ *Ibid.*, ch. 7, 149/686.

heir is postponed again and again. It is sex that makes you indecisive [on the issue of the heir apparent].

With the whole empire under your command, Your Majesty should uphold the virtue of frugality. To the contrary, you repeatedly demand [from the government] as much as several hundred thousand taels of silver, and as much as several thousand yards of silk. You show no sense of frugality. Furthermore, you press your eunuchs to hand in quantities of silver. If they do you are delighted; if they don't you are angry and flog them... Clearly, there is a problem of greed.²⁷

Your Majesty beats palace maids and eunuchs daily. If they are indeed guilty of misconduct, the law will hold them accountable. Depending on their wrongdoing, they should be reproached or dismissed. There is no need to resort to corporal punishment to the point of beating them to death. These people live close to Your Majesty. If beating to death doesn't fit their offense, severe punishments are likely to trigger incidents. More seriously, Your Majesty harbors resentment and anger towards outspoken officials... They are demoted, dismissed or exiled. This is due to your volatile temperament.

Lo appealed to Wan-li to resume his imperial duties:

Your Majesty loves drinking. How can you prohibit officials from attending drinking parties? Your Majesty loves sex. How can you stop officials from excessive indulgence in sexual pleasures? Your Majesty is greedy. How can you hold officials accountable for their avarice? And Your Majesty is hot-tempered. How can you persuade officials to remain on good terms with each other? This disease, manifested in drinking, sex, greed and outbursts, disturbs your mind and weakens your body. It is no wonder that you are not well. Your Majesty is now in your prime, but you don't attend state affairs at court. Once you pass this age, what will you then do about your duties?

And he concluded,

What I present here is neither pleasant to your ear nor welcome to your heart. But it is the right diagnosis for your sickness. If you accept my advice, you will attend state affairs, be close to honest officials, and keep a distance from consorts and concubines. Stay away from the four problems, compose yourself and meditate. Within half a year, you will become vigorous and healthy again.²⁸

Lo Yü-jen's memorial was a bitter pill for the emperor to swallow. During an audience with Shen Shih-hsing he complained: "I am criticized for keeping memorials and not sending them back to the administration, as those ridiculous memorials claim. The truth of the matter is, I am very sick, incapable of reading the memorials under

²⁷ Wen Ping, ch. 4, pp. 229-303, provides a detailed overview of the eunuch commissioners' brutal abuse of power and unbridled pursuit of wealth, which according to him inflicted immense damage on society and common people. Chao Yung-hsien, *Sung-shih-chai chi*, ch. 28, 41/442-444. Also see Ray Huang, *Taxation and Governmental Finance in 16th-Century Ming China*, pp. 7-8.

²⁸ Lo's memorial is included in *Wan-li ti-ch'ao*, pp. 469-474.

the dim light. This causes occasional slowdowns. Meanwhile, these officials, one after another, express their crazy opinions continually. I have yet to finish reading one memorial: a second has already arrived. They keep attacking each other in their memorials to the point of paying no respect to the court etiquette."²⁹ He dismissed Lo's memorial as nonsense, but did not go so far as to call it slanderous, no doubt for fear of triggering an investigation.

Lo Yü-jen's courage unsettled Shen Shih-hsing. Flogging Lo, which the emperor contemplated, would only draw public attention to the vindictive monarch and his compliant administration. It was better to hush it up. Shen, therefore, advised the emperor to sequester Lo's memorial and dismiss him on the charge of insubordination.³⁰

In the opposition's eyes these actions breached the ground rules of politics. Shen Shih-hsing knew very well the procedure that required memorials, after the emperor's review, to be returned to the Six Offices of Scrutiny. The Six Offices of Scrutiny were to make copies of memorials and imperial edicts and then send them to the appropriate ministries. Also, the memorials should be included in the official gazetteers to document the political life of the emperor and the administration.³¹ This procedure had at least two functions: to keep the communication between the throne and its officials transparent, and to keep them in check. Sequestering critical memorials, known as "*liu-chung*" 留中, aimed to purge objectionable materials from the official record. The emperor henceforth did this repeatedly. He "pigeonholed memorials in the palace and refused to make decisions even on appointments, so that large numbers of offices fell permanently vacant and much governmental business could not be carried out at all."³²

Not surprisingly, the "avenues of criticism" became a battleground. The opposition fought to broaden them, defending its right to scrutinize the emperor and the Grand Secretariat. The other side attempted to constrict them, for which purpose the accusation "insubordination" (*ch'u-wei* 出位) was another handy device. Junior officials who

²⁹ Ibid., p. 483.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 483. Also see *Wan-li shu-ch'ao*, Ch'ien I-pen's memorial, 58/244. In reviewing Lo's case, the *Ming shih* compilers agreed with the late-Ming critics that Shen's advice, i.e., sequestering memorials, provided the emperor the means to cut off communications with the officials. *Ming shih*, biography of Shen Shih-hsing, ch. 218, p. 5749.

³¹ *Ta-Ming hui-tien*, ch. 213, p. 526. *Ming shih*, ch. 74, pp. 1805-1806.

³² Hucker, *The Censorial System of Ming China*, p. 43.

asserted their institutional right to speak out were charged with this infraction. They saw this as censoring their tongues and blocking the “avenues of criticism.”³³

Shen Shih-hsing’s subservience won the emperor to his side. The two realized that they had more in common than not, and both found the opposition irritating. Thus they often teamed up to suppress the other side. Yet far from cowing the opposition, sequestering memorials and preferring charges of insubordination only stoked its outrage against what it saw a gross violation of principles, and often triggered confrontation.

The two sides had collided over a dispute between senior officials in the Nanking administration in 1586. In that year, Fang Huan 房寰, Education-intendant Censor at Nanking, submitted a memorial accusing Left Censor-in-chief Hai Jui 海瑞 (1513-1587) of incompetence, rigidity, and hypocrisy. Fang was believed to have initiated this preemptive assault as a defense against Hai Rui’s report to the central government about his corrupt behavior.³⁴ A man of notorious dishonesty and cruelty, he smeared Hai whose integrity and character were legendary among officials and common people alike.³⁵ Three freshmen *chin-shih* in Nanking, outraged by Fang’s shameless attack, submitted a memorial to the central government demanding his impeachment.³⁶ Rather than conduct a fair inquiry, the administration sheltered Fang and discharged the three young men for “insubordination.”³⁷ Shortly afterwards, the Censorate issued a new regulation requiring the directors of all departments in both capitals to tighten their supervision over newly appointed *chin-shih*.³⁸ These actions sent

³³ *Wan-li shu-ch’ao*, Shih Meng-lin’s memorial, 58/352-353.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, Hsü Ch’ang-chi’s memorial, 59/99-100. Fang Huan was affiliated with the circle of the senior grand secretary. Hsü Fu-tso, a native of Su-chou, made a harsh indictment of Fang Huan’s conduct. He cited a pamphlet, written and circulated by Su-chou students, which exposed Fang’s abuse of power, brutality, and corruption. See his *Hua-tang-ko ts’ung-t’an*, ch. 3, pp. 10a-12b.

³⁵ Ho Ch’iao-yüan, *Ming-shan ts’ang*, 427/273-279. Wu Yüan-ts’ui, ch. 7, pp. 327-329. Hsia Hsieh, *Ming t’ung-chien*, ch. 68, pp. 2679-2680. Also see Goodrich and Fang, *Dictionary of Ming Biography*, account of Hai Jui by Chaoying Fang, pp. 474-479.

³⁶ One of these three memorialists was Ku Yün-ch’eng 顧允成 (1554-1607), Ku Hsien-ch’eng’s 顧憲成 (1550-1612) younger brother. Considering the elder brother an active member of the opposition, the administration suspected that it had orchestrated this move and therefore deemed the memorial nothing but another partisan attack. This memorial is included in *Wan-li shu-ch’ao*, 59/94-99.

³⁷ Wu Yüan-ts’ui, ch. 8, p. 368.

³⁸ *Wan-li ti-ch’ao*, p. 326. Also see T’an Ch’ien, ch. 73, p. 4538.

a message to all junior officials that the administration would not tolerate their frank expression of views.

This case infuriated the opposition. Shen Ssu-hsiao 沈思孝 (1542-1611), a well-known opposition figure, submitted a memorial citing the *Ming Statutes* and the *Ming Code*, which clearly stated that officials and commoners were both entitled to express their views about state affairs. He argued, "The fact that officials of the censorial agencies are obligated to speak by no means suggests that officials from other branches, as well as commoners, should be prohibited from speaking... As long as the issues concern the welfare of the people and the state, not only the censors but also other officials, not only senior but also junior officials, have the right to speak out." Shen criticized the new regulation, saying, "Directors should discipline the freshmen for cultivating personal access to the powerful; instead they discipline them for speaking the truth. They should teach them to be honest and loyal officials; instead they instruct them to bite their tongues and shut their mouths." The result, he said, was that the censors and senior officials did not speak out for fear of jeopardizing their own careers; non-censorial and junior officials, who were not afraid, were not allowed to speak out. Shen wondered whether the sanctions would serve the interest of the state at all.³⁹

Grand Secretary Wang Hsi-chüeh, a trusted friend and colleague to Shen Shih-hsing ever since he joined the Grand Secretariat in 1584, defended the policy on grounds of protecting the senior officials' dignity and the court etiquette.⁴⁰ He insisted: "This is the court; it is not like a village where an old man tolerates anyone yelling, quarreling and fighting in front of him. If the state indulged this kind of behavior, it would harm the state. As for the new regulations, the Censorate made them. This has nothing to do with us (Shen Shih-hsing and Wang). Besides, it is wrong to remain indifferent to improper conduct without reprimand. Yet no sooner is the reprimand issued than we are accused of intolerance."⁴¹

The central government was likened by one scholar-official to a quarrelsome law court with endless scandal, dispute, protest, and retaliation.⁴² The Grand Secretariat and the opposition were mired

³⁹ *Wan-li shu-ch'ao*, Shen Ssu-hsiao's memorial, 58/470-472. Wen Ping, ch. 2, pp. 134-138, describes the clash between the Grand Secretariat and the opposition over the Hai-Fang case.

⁴⁰ Shen Shih-hsing, *Ssu-hsien-t'ang chi*, ch. 9, 134/193.

⁴¹ Wang Hsi-chüeh, *Wang Wen-su kung ch'üan-chi*, ch. 9, 135/668.

⁴² Wang Chia-p'ing, ch. 7, 149/699.

in partisan wrangling and mutual torment.⁴³ Wang Hsi-chüeh commented on court politics in a letter to the effect that "The tendency at court these days is that whatever accusers say must be true and whatever defendants say must be false."⁴⁴ In another letter, he described the court as crowded with "hungry hawks."⁴⁵ Wang, in other words, implicitly acknowledged that the opposition had won the popularity contest. Its aggressive presence was a reality he and his allies had to reckon with.

The Grand Secretariat-Personnel-Censorial alliance, discussed later in this essay, controlled the decision-making process. While the active members of the opposition were either forced out of government or blocked from promotion,⁴⁶ the opposition's strength came from its ability to criticize. Its relentless charges stripped the Grand Secretariat-Personnel-Censorial alliance of public faith in its trustworthiness, competence, and fairness, and in the character of its members.

The opposition did not stop at submitting official memorials, however. It also boosted public awareness through devastating pamphlets, satire, and fiction. For example, when the examination scandal of 1588 described below intensified, an anonymous broadside entitled "The exile's appeal for justice" appeared in Nanking, a hotbed of active oppositionists. Rhetorically, it put the powerful suspects on "public trial" in the southern capital. Peking banned circulation of this pamphlet.⁴⁷ Against this background, it is not hard to understand why the Grand Secretariat-Personnel-Censorial alliance felt itself preyed upon by hungry hawks.

Rancor over Examinations

In this charged atmosphere, everything and anything could raise suspicion or evoke a heated dispute, followed by attack and counter-attack; character assassination became routine.⁴⁸ These activities

⁴³ Tung Fen, *Mi-yuan chi*, ch. 8, p. 4a. Wen Ping, ch. 2, p. 123.

⁴⁴ Wang Hsi-chüeh, ch. 13, 136/55

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, ch. 9, 135/673.

⁴⁶ Chao Yung-hsien, ch. 25, 41/389. Also see Ch'ien Ch'ien-i, ch. 62, p. 1470.

⁴⁷ T'an Ch'ien, ch. 75, p. 4612.

⁴⁸ *Wan-li shu-ch'ao*, Chao Nan-hsing's memorial, 59/360. In this memorial, Huang Hung-hsien and several other officials who were closely associated with the circle of Shen Shih-hsing and Wang Hsi-chüeh were accused of attacking Shen Ssu-hsiao, Wu Chung-hsing and Chao Yung-hsien and forcing them out of government. This memorial is included in Chao's *Chung-yi-kung shih-wen chi*, ch. 19, 68/567-570. Huang

resulted in ever deepening resentment. Although the Grand Secretariat could severely punish antagonists, repression strengthened, rather than weakened, the opposition. Bold memorialists gained tremendous reputations as courageous heroes, holding the moral high ground while they risked their careers and lives. Their ability to influence public opinion and attract support among the educated served as their weapon against those who flouted the norms of conduct. Political ethics and ideals, especially at a time of growing corruption and abuse, retained their importance in politics and public life.

Civil service examination scandals implicated the powerful, providing the opposition with ammunition. Such scandals had occurred from time to time throughout the second half of the Ming dynasty.⁴⁹ But never before had power and money compromised so frequently and outrageously the process of grading and final decision-making, especially at the metropolitan and provincial levels.⁵⁰ Frustration and distrust toward the examinations ran high among candidates.

In 1588, the results of the metropolitan *chü-jen* examination stirred up rumors and public outrage in the capital because the candidate who received the highest distinction was none other than Wang Heng 王衡, the son of Wang Hsi-chüeh. Li Hung 李鴻, another new *chü-jen*, was Shen Shih-hsing's son-in-law. There were several other privileged sons whose examination success raised eyebrows. In fact, rumor mongers in the capital had predicted the outcome prior to the official announcement. It had been an accurate forecast. The opposition wasted no time in probing the scandal. Kao Kui 高桂 (cs. 1577) and Yü K'ung-chien 于孔兼 (cs. 1580), two officials from the Ministry of Rites, took the initiative.

Kao Kui was the first to submit a memorial challenging the results and calling for an investigation of deals involving the Chief Examiner, Huang Hung-hsien 黃洪憲, and the two grand secretaries.⁵¹

Hung-hsien's son Huang Ch'eng-hsüan (cs. 1586), on the other hand, charged the other side with using the 1588 *chü-jen* examination to smear his father. See the biographical account he wrote for his father, *Ou-meng-t'ang chi*, ch. 10, pp. 18b-19a.

⁴⁹ See Wen Ping's account of the examination scandals under the Wan-li reign, ch. 1, pp. 70-85.

⁵⁰ *Wan-li shu-ch'ao*, Wang Ssu-mei's memorial, 59/481-483; Ts'ai Shih-ting's memorial, 58/253. Also see Hsü Fu-tso, ch. 5, pp. 32a-38b.

⁵¹ Huang Hung-hsien was a Han-lin academician and the right mentor of the Secretariat of the Heir Apparent. He was a close associate of Shen Shih-hsing and Wang Hsi-chüeh. He married his daughter to Wu P'eng's 吳鵬 grandson, his grandson to Tung Fen's 董份 great-granddaughter, and his granddaughter to Shen Shih-hsing's grandson. See Huang Ch'eng-hsüan, ch. 10, p. 24a. For information about

He said he had dismissed the rumors until errors in the essays by the implicated candidates and the disappearance of other candidates' essays caught his attention. This constituted sufficient evidence to warrant an investigation.⁵² The administration responded by demoting him three ranks.⁵³

This response prompted Yü K'ung-chien to action. He stated in his memorial that he had been assigned to review the essays and had reported to the minister of Rites and the chief supervising secretary of Rites, pointing out suspicious signs.⁵⁴ When they took no action, Kao Kui turned in his memorial. Yü went on to say, "Speaking out frankly can establish one's reputation, but it can also bring one trouble. Weighing reputation and risk, it is human nature to avoid the latter as far as possible... But I cannot bear to stay away from trouble while another person (Kao) takes the heat alone." Because of his report, Yü said, he had been "bombarded with the Su-chou faction's slanders and with the two grand secretaries' reproaches." The Censorate had joined in against Yü and Kao as well. "Instead of questioning the examiners' involvement in the scandal, the censors blamed us for ruffling a few feathers; and instead of investigating the back-door connections of these candidates, they scolded us for being reckless."⁵⁵

Enormous pressure forced the administration to resolve the crisis by ordering eight new *chü-jen* to retake the test, and appointing a review panel chaired by Left Censor-in-chief Wu Shih-lai 吳時來. Wu's clash with the opposition was inevitable.⁵⁶ According to Yü K'ung-chien, this crisis could have been resolved had Wu rendered his opinions based on the quality of the candidates' essays. Instead he sided with the two grand secretaries and the chief examiner.⁵⁷

Wu P'eng and Tu Fen, see Jie Zhao, "Ties that Bind: The Craft of Political Networking in Late Ming Chiang-nan," pp. 138-144.

⁵² *Wan-li shu-ch'ao*, Kao Kui's memorial, 59/483-486. One of the offices in Shun-t'ien prefecture where the examination essays were kept had been burglarized. About fifty essays, hand-copied in red ink by the clerks, were missing as a result. This incident aroused the opposition's suspicion. Although the original essays, in black ink, existed, there was no way of telling whether or not they were compromised since the red-ink ones had been stolen. *Wan-li ti-ch'ao*, pp. 418-419. Wen Ping, ch. 1, p. 75.

⁵³ *Wan-li ti-ch'ao*, p. 435

⁵⁴ The minister of Rites was Chu Keng 朱賡 (1535-1609) and the supervising secretary was Miao Ch'ao-yang, both affiliated with the senior grand secretary, who chose to ignore Yü K'ung-chien's report. Yü Shen-hsing's account, ch. 8, pp. 93-94, supports Yü K'ung-chien's assertion.

⁵⁵ *Wan-li ti-ch'ao*, pp. 435-437.

⁵⁶ Shen Te-fu, *Wan-li yeh-huo pien*, p. 1291.

⁵⁷ Yü K'ung-chien, *Yü Ching-su hsien-sheng shan-chü kao*, ch. 1, pp. 3a-3b. Yü Shen-

Wu's decision to pass all the essays led to a third memorial, this time by Jao Shen 饒伸 (cs.1583). Jao charged that chief examiner Huang Hung-hsien had placed Wang Heng first to please Wang's father and had passed Li Hung to please his father-in-law, despite inevitable public outrage. "People were so angry that they wanted to spit in Huang Hung-hsien's face and beat him on the back." As for Wu's evaluation, "I learned that some of the candidates were incapable of composing decent essays. Wu Shih-lai, chief of the Censorate, simply accepted all of the essays as fine. Kao Kui argued with him, but he shamelessly insisted upon his judgement. This scandal began as a poorly conceived theft and ended up as a blatant robbery; it began with one person cheating, and ended up with the whole faction cheating."⁵⁸ Jao's rebuke cost him terribly. On behalf of the emperor, the administration threw him in prison, where he was subjected to interrogation and torture and nearly beaten to death. He was later deprived of his official status.⁵⁹

Huang Hung-hsien submitted nine memorials to the administration vehemently denying all the charges. To Kao's charge, he responded that past examination scandals were exposed by actual evidence. If evidence was insufficient, there were at least plenty of suspicious traces to substantiate the allegations. Never until now had accusations been based on blind prejudice and a few words picked up from the essays. Huang then insisted, "Since (Kao) Kui alleges bribery, he should present the facts as to who offered the bribes, who received them, who passed the money to whom, and who witnessed when and where the pay-off took place. Confronted with actual evidence, I and other examiners can come forward to testify."

As for the prominent backgrounds of the candidates, Huang argued that all the names were concealed and the examiners read not the original essays, but the ones hand-copied by the official clerks. "Were Kao Kui the chief examiner, could he possibly tell which essays were written by a person of humble origin and who therefore should be passed, and which essays were written by a person of official back-

hsing did not affiliate himself with either side. As a member of the review panel, his observations shed a critical light on Wu Shih-lai's attempt to pass all the essays in order to please the two grand secretaries. Yü Shen-hsing, ch. 8, pp. 93-95. *Wan-li shu-ch'ao*, Wang Chi-kuang's memorial, 58/354; Shih Meng-lin's memorial, 59/488-489. Wen Ping, ch. 1, p. 77.

⁵⁸ *Wan-li shu-ch'ao*, Jao Shen's memorial, 59/487-488.

⁵⁹ *Wan-li ti-ch'ao*, p. 438. *Wan-li shu-ch'ao*, Ts'ai Shih-ting's memorial, 58/253. Also see T'an Ch'ien, ch. 75, p. 4597.

ground and who therefore should be excluded? Besides, the officer in charge of keeping the examination essays distributed them to the examiners, and then a group of examiners read and graded all the essays... With such procedures, I dared not and could not engage in any illegal deals."

As far as the essay errors were concerned, Huang said that opinions differed on literary style and taste. "What (Kao) Kui approves does not necessarily deserve approval, and what he disapproves does not necessarily deserve disapproval. It is impossible for me or any other examiners to tailor our opinions to Kui's. Furthermore, it is easy to find flaws, but difficult to compose essays. Kui should have remembered his own experience in the provincial examination. Is it reasonable to demand perfect essays? Is it fair to make a bribery charge based on a few flaws?"

In conclusion, Huang defended his integrity. "I come from a family that has served the government for a few generations with a clean conscience. I am not a beggar. Who in the world would be so insane as to take such a risk in order to ingratiate himself with the grand secretaries, who don't abuse power, and to take a few stinking coppers from fellow provincials?"⁶⁰

In another memorial Huang responded to Jao Shen's charge. "(Jao) Shen laid out three charges against me. First, Wang Heng, son of the Grand Secretary, should not be placed first. Given that the candidates' names are concealed and the essays handed to us are hand-copied by the clerks, it is the quality of the essays that counts. Wang Heng's remarkable intelligence has been nationally recognized ever since he was a child. Even Kao Kui acknowledges his talent." It was a unanimous consensus among fourteen examiners as to which were the best essays. "When we opened the seal, we saw the name of Wang Heng. Is it right for me to disregard his essays for the sake of keeping a distance from power? His essays are now widely circulated with high praise. Is (Jao) Shen the only man who doesn't know about it? On reexamination, Wang Heng took the brush and finished the essays, thousands of words, right away." As to the second and third charges involving Li Hung and several other implicated candidates, Huang maintained that his colleagues passed their essays; and he respected their decisions.⁶¹

The administration's harsh punishment of Kao Kui and Jao Shen invited even louder protests from the opposition. The opposition was

⁶⁰ Huang Hung-hsien, *Pi-shan hsüeh-shih chi*, ch. 8, 30/248-250.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, ch. 8, 30/252

convinced that Huang Hung-hsien had abused his power as the chief examiner to make a big profit. One memorial claimed that the 1588 metropolitan *chü-jen* examination had been turned into a market where the price tag for the *chü-jen* degree was 5,000 taels of silver.⁶² Another suggested that Huang's decision to place Wang Heng first was calculated to seek Wang Hsi-chüeh's support for Huang's appointment as a grand secretary. And he counted on Wang's protection if the scandal was exposed.⁶³

Above all, this dispute inflicted deep personal wounds on both sides. The opposition's probing came at the price of demotion and dismissal. Huang Hung-hsien paid even more dearly. He took sick leave and never returned to government service; his ambition to join the Grand Secretariat withered. The examination scandal cast a shadow over his reputation for the rest of his life.⁶⁴ Wang Heng postponed taking the metropolitan examination until after his father had left office. Wang Hsi-chüeh, infuriated by the allegation against his son, became more confrontational against the opposition.⁶⁵

Weighing the dispute carefully, it is probably fair to say that the men in the opposition had a tendency to parade their righteousness and were all too eager to expose corrupt senior officials. Their questioning of Wang Heng's placement did not advance their position and only gave Huang Hung-hsien an opening to repudiate their charge and ignite Wang Hsi-chüeh's temper. On the other hand, Huang's emphasis on the examination procedures did not allay suspicion. If these procedures had indeed been inviolable, as Huang claimed, examination scandals should never have arisen. In fact, it cannot be doubted that the examination system was corrupt; power and money compromised the process of grading and decision making.⁶⁶ As one memorialist pointed out, even Huang's colleagues in the Han-lin Academy frowned at the result of the examination, which, in their view, did not smell right.⁶⁷

⁶² *Wan-li shu-ch'ao*, Wan Tsu-yüe's memorial, 58/363.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, Shih Meng-lin's memorial, 59/489. Also see Yü K'ung-chien, ch. 1, p. 4a.

⁶⁴ Wu Yüan-ts'ui, ch. 8, p. 360.

⁶⁵ *Wan-li shu-ch'ao*, Li Wan's memorial, 59/30. *Ming shih*, biography of Wang Hsi-chüeh, ch. 218, p. 5751.

⁶⁶ Hsü Fu-tso, ch. 5, pp. 38a-b, describes the cheating techniques employed by corrupt examiners and by the clerks who hand-copied the examination essays.

⁶⁷ *Wan-li shu-ch'ao*, Wan Tsu-yüe's memorial, 58/363.

The *Kuo-pen* Controversy

Not surprisingly, the opposition's call for reforms fell on deaf ears. As the decade 1583-1593 came to an end, Chao Yung-hsien 趙用賢 (1535-1596), a prominent opposition figure, expressed pessimism about the future. He saw major crises looming, problems requiring administrative and judicial improvements, financial and tax reforms, and frontier defense strengthening, among many other concerns.⁶⁸

Through all of this, the famous *Kuo-pen* stalemate continued to poison the political atmosphere.⁶⁹ As is known, the year 1586 set the stage for the controversy. It was triggered by the emperor's promotion of Lady Cheng to the rank of imperial consort shortly after she bore him a son.⁷⁰ The emperor's elder son, whose mother was originally a humble palace maid, was already five years of age, but he had received no loving attention from his father. A neglected child, his vulnerability was increased as Consort Cheng aspired to make her own son heir apparent.⁷¹ He was innocently unaware that a contest between him and his newly born half-brother had begun. The battle pitted the Wan-li emperor and Consort Cheng against the opposition. The latter insisted that the emperor should name the elder son heir apparent, as required by the "Ancestral Precepts" of the Ming (*Huang-Ming tsu-hsün* 皇明祖訓) established by the dynastic founder.

The controversy could have been avoided if the Wan-li emperor had followed T'ai-tsu's rules. According to the rules, as the opposition pointed out, naming an heir apparent in a judicious and decisive manner assured a smooth succession. If the empress failed to produce a male child, the vacancy should be filled on the basis of seniority.⁷² The emperor was expected to make his decision at the earliest possible time. In most previous cases the heir apparent had been chosen at age five or six and had immediately begun his formal education under Han-lin academicians.⁷³

The Wan-li emperor insisted that the precepts preferred the empress's son as heir apparent. Therefore, he wished to wait a few years to see whether his youthful empress would produce a boy.⁷⁴ He totally

⁶⁸ Chao Yung-hsien, ch. 29, 41/460.

⁶⁹ Shen Te-fu, p. 271.

⁷⁰ T'an Ch'ien, ch. 73, p. 4527.

⁷¹ *Ming shih*, biography of Shen Shih-hsing, ch. 218, p. 5749.

⁷² *Wan-li shu-ch'ao*, Shih Meng-lin's memorial, 58/225.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 58/227. Ray Huang, *1587, A Year of No Significance*, p. 43.

⁷⁴ *Wan-li ti-ch'ao*, p. 742.

ignored the fact that his own father, the Lung-ch'ing 隆慶 emperor (r. 1567-1572), had named him heir apparent while the empress was still young and his own mother was a consort. The Wan-li emperor had little affection for his empress; he simply used her as a pretext to postpone the decision. Behind this delay lay a palace conspiracy allegedly masterminded by Consort Cheng to elevate herself one day to the rank of empress, legitimizing her son as heir apparent.⁷⁵ After years of strong pressure from his officials, the emperor in 1591 reluctantly agreed to name his successor in two years.⁷⁶

But the Wan-li emperor had established a pattern of making and then breaking promises. To ensure that he would not waver this time, the opposition submitted two requests: the eldest imperial son should begin his formal education at once, and the Ministry of Rites should start preparations for his investiture. The emperor reacted with rage. Meng Yang-hao 孟養浩, the Left Supervising Secretary of Revenue, in turn responded in a memorial that "Education and the announcement of heir apparent are not two separate issues. Since the naming is scheduled, why is it forbidden to educate the eldest imperial son now? If his education is blocked today, how could it be otherwise when the time for naming arrives?"⁷⁷ For these remarks, Meng was flogged and cashiered.⁷⁸

While protests, floggings, and dismissals continued, Shen Shih-hsing wavered. He occasionally expressed his concerns to the emperor on behalf of the administration, but he distanced himself from the dispute itself. The emperor's behavior eventually prompted two grand secretaries, Hsü Kuo 許國 (1527-1596) and Wang Chia-p'ing 王家屏 (1537-1604), to submit a memorial on behalf of the Grand Secretariat urging him to honor his latest promise.⁷⁹ It upset him. Shen Shih-hsing, on sick leave at the time, told the emperor in a secret memorandum that this step had been taken without his knowledge. "It is Your Majesty who shall choose the heir apparent. Don't let this talk confuse you."⁸⁰ The memorandum became public, revealing the cunning character of the man. The opposition accused him of selling out his two colleagues and compromising correct principles

⁷⁵ Hsia Hsieh, ch. 68, pp. 2671-2672.

⁷⁶ *Wan-li ti-ch'ao*, p. 584.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 630.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 632. T'an Ch'ien, ch. 76, p. 4665.

⁷⁹ Tan Ch'ien, ch. 75, p. 4657.

⁸⁰ *Wan-li ti-ch'ao*, p. 587.

to ingratiate himself with the emperor.⁸¹ Embarrassed, Shen was forced to resign that same year.⁸²

The year 1593 saw Wang Hsi-chüeh, the emperor's choice as senior grand secretary, take charge of the administration.⁸³ He assumed the office during a nervous waiting period for the emperor's delivery on his promise. The Ministry of Rites asked the emperor for instructions concerning the ceremonies for the announcement of the heir apparent, but received none.⁸⁴

The positions of the emperor and of the opposition were irreconcilable. Wang Hsi-chüeh could not resolve the deadlock. To support the opposition, even though it was institutionally the right thing, was a recipe for losing imperial patronage and putting his career on the line. Besides, it was the emperor who had made him the top man, whereas the political wounds inflicted on him by the opposition were still smarting. At any rate, his first priority was to look after his own interests. Anticipating a bumpy road ahead, he carefully crafted his advice to the emperor so that the latter understood his meaning, while its ambiguity and evasiveness left no clear evidence for his opponents to use against him.

Wang Hsi-chüeh and the emperor exchanged confidential memorandums that set the stage for an imperial announcement. Wang's memorandum stressed that the choice of heir apparent rested with no one but His Majesty; a slip of paper from His Majesty would settle

⁸¹ It was customary in the Grand Secretariat that the grand secretaries bowed to the authority of the senior grand secretary. See *Wan-li shu-ch'ao*, Ch'ien I-pen's memorial, 58/243. Chao I, *Er-shih-er shih cha-chi*, ch. 33, p. 483. There were few occasions when grand secretaries found some channels to vent their views, as is seen in the memorial submitted by Hsü Kuo and Wang Chia-p'ing in the absence of Shen Shih-hsing. The Wan-li emperor usually kept the secret memorandums in the palace, but he deliberately returned Shen's to the Grand Secretariat to humiliate Hsü and Wang. The memorandum was a slap in their faces. The two grand secretaries, instead of keeping the memorandum in their office, sent it to Lo Ta-hung, the supervising secretary of the Ministry of Rites, who was bound to release it to the public, thereby putting Shen Shih-hsing on the spot. In an attempt to minimize the damage, Shen sent a clerk to Lo's office to "borrow" the memorandum, but he refused to return it when Lo came to pick it up the next day. This prompted an angry memorial from Lo. See Lo's *Tzu-yüan wen-chi*, 139/509. His memorial is also included in *Wan-li shu-ch'ao*, 59/33-35. Lo was demoted to county clerk in a remote region as a result. *Wan-li ti-ch'ao*, p. 593.

⁸² *Wan-li ti-ch'ao*, p. 600. *Ming shih*, biography of Shen Shih-hsing, ch. 218, p. 5750. T'an Ch'ien, ch. 75, pp. 4657-4658.

⁸³ Yüeh Yüan-sheng, *Ch'ien-ch'u-tzu wen-chi*, ch. 5, p. 3a.

⁸⁴ Yü K'ung-chien, ch. 1, p. 12a.

the issue right away. Any difficulty that might arise from the emperor's decision, Wang wrote, would be left to him, Wang, to deal with. For all its ambiguity, this struck a chord with the emperor and boosted his confidence. In his reply, the emperor, who now had three sons, insisted that T'ai-tsu's precepts gave priority to the empress's son and therefore decided to postpone the appointment of the heir apparent in order to wait for his empress to produce an heir. He would instead bestow upon his three sons the title of prince, a scheme known as *San wang ping feng* 三王並封. He asked Wang to draft an imperial edict to this effect. Wang immediately complied. He wrote in an attached memorandum that his majesty had appropriately balanced principle with personal feeling. The edict was sent to the Ministry of Rites with a directive that the ministry should arrange the necessary ceremony.⁸⁵

Even though the emperor emphasized that his decision was consistent with T'ai-tsu's precepts, his critics found serious flaws in his interpretation. Guessing that what was really on his mind was the installation of the son of Consort Cheng, they argued that only when an emperor had no male children and the heir apparent was selected from a cadet family, was there a strict provision that the candidate's mother must be the prince's principal wife. Otherwise, the precepts dictated that if the empress did not have a son, the heir apparent must be decided on the basis of seniority.⁸⁶ The Wan-li emperor had taken this provision out of context and twisted it to his needs.

Anticipating strong objections from his officials, the Wan-li emperor skipped any court discussion and proceeded to announce his decision. It was even more troubling to many officials that Wang Hsi-chüeh, the only person consulted by the emperor, assisted him in sidestepping the succession rules.⁸⁷ The opposition demanded a reversal. Some kept vivid accounts of their intensive lobbying, their protest via memorials, and their confrontation with Wang Hsi-chüeh in his office: these accounts offer an extraordinary glimpse of the strained relationship between the emperor and his officials.

Thus, when nine junior officials marched to Wang Hsi-chüeh's

⁸⁵ Yüeh Yüan-sheng, ch. 5, pp. 3a-4a. *Wan-li ti-ch'ao*, pp. 751-755. Also see *Ming shih*, biography of Wang Hsi-chüeh, ch. 218, p. 5752. T'an Ch'ien, ch. 76, p. 4692.

⁸⁶ Yüeh Yüan-sheng, ch. 1, p. 6a. Also see *Wan-li shu-ch'ao*, Shih Meng-lin's memorial, 58/225-226; Chang Cheng-kuan's memorial, 58/223-224; and Ku Hsien-ch'eng's memorial, 58/239-241.

⁸⁷ Yüeh Yüan-sheng, ch. 1, pp. 20a-20b. *Wan-li shu-ch'ao*, Chang Na-pi's memorial, 58/228-229.

office,⁸⁸ Yüeh Yüan-sheng 岳元聲 recalled that Wang was angry and raised his voice several times over the course of their conversation. Yüeh raised his voice as well and said to Wang: "There is no alternative but that we officials pressure you, Sir, to tell the emperor to retract his decision." Wang responded: "Then I must report your names," to which Yüeh answered: "Put my name first. The interest of the state is at stake. It is worth flogging, exile, demotion or dismissal, so long as the decision is overturned."⁸⁹

In the end Wang Hsi-chüeh yielded to the pressure and submitted a memorial apologizing for his misunderstanding of the succession rules, and asking the emperor to retract his decision.⁹⁰ The emperor replied to his senior grand secretary, "You have admitted the mistakes, leaving me nowhere to turn to. I will cancel the decision. However, I shall not name an heir apparent for two or three years, during which time the empress may bear me a son. If she doesn't, only then will I appoint an heir apparent."⁹¹ The immediate crisis was resolved, but it took yet another eight years before the emperor finally named the eldest imperial son his successor.⁹²

⁸⁸ The confrontation is recorded in *Ming shih*, biography of Wang Hsi-chüeh, ch. 218, p. 5752.

⁸⁹ Yüeh Yüan-sheng, ch. 5, pp. 5b-7b.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, ch. 5, p. 8a. *Wan-li ü-ch'ao*, pp. 761-762.

⁹¹ Yüeh Yüan-sheng, ch. 5, p. 8a. Also see *Ming shih*, biography of Wang Hsi-chüeh, ch. 218, p. 5752.

⁹² The imperial edict was issued in the 10th month of Wan-li 29 (1601). So it had taken fifteen years to bring the issue to a closure. T'an Ch'ien, ch. 79, p. 4884. To argue that the Wan-li emperor's wish was not without justification from the standpoint of statutory or customary law, Ray Huang maintains that "had the emperor been governed by an independent judiciary and the throne submitted its proposal to the court, and had his wish been candidly presented and vigorously argued by jurists, chances are that the sovereign's case against the bureaucrats would have been won": see *1587, A Year of No Significance*, p. 83, also pp. 84-85. Does not this author import modern criteria into a 16th century debate? We are dealing here with a traditional world in which ethics and the established codes of behavior played an important part in making the imperial power amenable to persuasion. In the eyes of many officials, the imperial succession was an exceedingly important institutional issue of which morality was an integral part. To assume a rigid distinction between a moral argument and a legal one seems anachronistic to me. It is important to maintain a sense of perspective about late Ming politics, keeping in mind that ethical discourse and institutional checks were carefully interwoven into a web of restraints to check imperial arbitrariness and irresponsibility.

The Grand Secretariat's Control over Censorate and Personnel

The *Kuo-pen* controversy peaked between 1591 and 1593. To speak of blood on the floor of the court was hardly an exaggeration. Yet, for all the damage it caused, it was only part of the wrangling that raged for a decade and sapped the government. The conflict between the opposition and the Grand Secretariat boiled down to power and control. The opposition called for reforming the administrative structure to the point where the Grand Secretariat would relinquish control over other government branches and share its responsibility and decision-making power with them. This balanced relationship, they thought, would increase efficiency and keep both the throne and the Grand Secretariat in check.

The opposition's advocacy of institutional checks as well as its uncompromising stand on principles caused Shen Shih-hsing and Wang Hsi-chüeh tremendous stress and trouble. They were constantly under fire, challenged and embarrassed. Among the issues that kept the Grand Secretariat and the opposition at odds, the realignment of administrative authority was central. And at the core of the issue was the Grand Secretariat's relationship to the Ministry of Personnel and to the censorial offices.

The Ministry of Personnel controlled selection and appointment. The censorial-supervisory branch, which included a Chief Surveillance Office, thirteen Provincial Surveillance Offices, and the Six Offices of Scrutiny, ensured open avenues of criticism and exercised disciplinary power to keep the government officials, including the grand secretaries, in check.⁹³ The jurisdiction of the Ministry of Personnel and of the censorial-supervisory branch inevitably created frictions with the Grand Secretariat. Powerful grand secretaries in the past decades had successfully reduced these agencies to a subordinate status. That Chang Chü-cheng could treat the minister of Personnel as if he were a humble clerk and maintain tight control over the censors exemplified his iron-fisted style.⁹⁴

But the Grand Secretariat was on the defensive after 1582. The opposition insisted that it take its hands off the Ministry of Personnel and the censorial-supervisory branch so that they could exercise

⁹³ *Ming shih*, ch. 73, pp. 1767-1769; ch. 74, pp. 1805-1807. Also see Hsieh Kuo-chen, *Ming-Ch'ing chih-chi tang-she yüan-tung k'ao*, pp. 4-5. Hucker, *The Censorial System of Ming China*, p. 9.

⁹⁴ Ting Yüan-chien, ch. 6, 171/29. Also see Shen Te-fu, p. 639.

their duties fully. This might indeed alter existing political arrangements profoundly and lead to a further reducing of the Grand Secretariat's power. Unwilling to endorse, but unable to reject, this institutional challenge, Shen Shih-hsing chose to finesse it. Unlike Chang Chü-cheng, he appeared congenial and deferential to his colleagues; he tolerated criticisms to a considerable degree, and he respected the decisions made by senior personnel officials and by censors. As a matter of fact, his allies held most of the senior posts in the central government. Networking was exceedingly useful for Shen Shih-hsing. Multiple ties included teacher-disciple and classmate (*t'ung-nien* 同年) relationships associated with the civil service examinations, regional affiliations, friendships, and marriages. They bound him and his associates together against the opposition, protecting their interests.⁹⁵ It was through such alliances that Shen could temper the decisions of the Ministry of Personnel and manipulate the censorial-supervisory branch.⁹⁶ His deference was just a cover.⁹⁷

The Grand Secretariat controlled by Shen Shih-hsing and Wang Hsi-chüeh clearly bore a Chiang-nan 江南, or more precisely, a Su-chou 蘇州 character.⁹⁸ The differences in their personalities complemented each other nicely. The soft-tempered Shen did not like to push his opponents too far. After he had transferred, demoted, or dismissed people, he often recalled some of them to government service. He was able to minimize personal animosity and enhance his own image of congeniality and generosity.⁹⁹ Wang, on the other hand, was quick-tempered, stubborn and tough. If Shen was known for stepping back in face of the opposition's challenges, Wang actively engaged the attackers. The blending of their approaches gave the Grand Secretariat a nice guy, tough guy duality.¹⁰⁰

Thus, the Grand Secretariat's relation to the Ministry of Personnel and the censorial-supervisory branch remained somewhere between Chang Chü-cheng's authoritarian grip and the hands-off advocated by the opposition. Aggrieved and unconvinced, the opposition continued its relentless probing and pounding. As Shen was to complain to a friend, "Administrative power has already been restored to the Six Ministries, so that I am not able to promote a person or take an

⁹⁵ For his Chiang-nan ties, see Jie Zhao, "Ties that Bind," p. 142.

⁹⁶ *Wan-li shu-ch'ao*, Ma Ying-t'u's memorial, 58/332. Also see Shen Te-fu, p. 640.

⁹⁷ Chao Yung-hsien, ch. 4, 41/47-48.

⁹⁸ Yü Shen-hsing, ch. 8, p. 93. Shen and Wang were both natives of Su-chou.

⁹⁹ *Ming shih*, biography of Shen Shih-hsing, ch. 218, p. 5749.

¹⁰⁰ *Wan-li shu-ch'ao*, Li I-wan's memorial, 59/31.

initiative on my own. But I am still accused of having too much power. What should I do then? Should I stand by with my hands in the sleeves and my mouth shut?"¹⁰¹ Shen's correspondence depicts him as trapped in a predicament wherein his concessions could never be enough to satisfy the opposition.

Nonetheless, a large number of often very long memorials by the opposition rebutted Shen's claim. For example, a memorial of 1585 described the "consultation requirement" (*ch'ing-chiao* 請教) in the following terms: "The censorial agencies are obligated to send reports to the senior grand secretary to receive his advice on the tone of their investigations and recommendations. Likewise, Personnel and other ministries send their reports to the senior grand secretary to seek his opinions on appointment and other matters."¹⁰² Even when he was on sick leave, Shen Shih-hsing insisted that the ministers consult him at his residence before making decisions.¹⁰³ They did not exercise independent authority.

To assert the consultation privilege, Shen Shih-hsing relied upon two sources of support: one was the Grand Secretariat-Personnel-Censorial network, of which he was the patron, and the other was imperial patronage, successfully cultivated since 1583. Despite the monarch's egotistic desires and hot temper, in dealing with the emperor Shen had no difficulty finding weak points where imperial authority could be turned to his advantage and thus a tacit agreement could be reached. Under Shen's administration the annual budget of the Palace Treasury had originally been about one million, but later he had it increased by 200,000 taels of silver. In addition, the huge expenses for the imperial birthdays and weddings, for palace renovations, and so forth, were met by the state, draining the public treasury.¹⁰⁴ The emperor in turn supported his senior grand secretary against the opposition. Furthermore, he granted Shen the privilege of sending him confidential memorandums, known as *mi-chieh* 密揭. Indeed, given his infrequent participation in state affairs his information was very much limited to such confidential memorandums from his senior grand secretary. This made it easy for Shen to shape the emperor's opinions. As Ch'ien I-pen 錢一本, an active member

¹⁰¹ Shen Shih-hsing, ch. 36, 134/752.

¹⁰² *Wan-li shu-ch'ao*, Ma Ying-t'u's memorial, 58/333.

¹⁰³ *Wan-li ti-ch'ao*, p. 540.

¹⁰⁴ *Wan-li shu-ch'ao*, Ch'ien I-pen's memorial, 58/246; Feng Ying-feng's memorial, 59/272. The Ministry of Revenue submitted several memorials in 1588 reporting the fiscal deficit and urging the emperor to restrain himself with regard to lavish spending, but to no avail. See *Wan-li ti-ch'ao*, pp. 409-410, 411-413.

of the opposition, pointed out in a memorial of 1591, the emperor entrusted Shen with the power to draft and issue imperial edicts on his behalf. Nine out of every ten decisions, all bearing the imperial imprint, were in fact made by the senior grand secretary.¹⁰⁵

To illustrate Shen Shih-hsing's hold on other government branches, Ch'ien I-pen chose the minister of Rites as an example. The latter was not affiliated with the inner circle of the senior grand secretary. Nevertheless, in selecting the chief examiners for the provincial examinations, he discussed the selection with the senior grand secretary, not once but twice. Ch'ien commented: "For this decision alone, he had to consult the senior grand secretary twice to make sure he did not miss his hints." In short, even an unaffiliated man could not resist the pressure, to say nothing of ministers who willingly humbled themselves to the senior grand secretary.¹⁰⁶

The Grand Secretariat's relation to the Ministry of Personnel was the key to its ability to exert authority over the six ministries. It was mutually beneficial to the senior grand secretary and the minister of Personnel to maintain a cozy collaboration. An opposition member put it bluntly: "Take a look at senior grand secretaries. Which of them hasn't pursued his selfish interests by manipulating Personnel? Take a look at the ministers of Personnel. Which of them hasn't visited the senior grand secretary's office and private residence to please him? The senior grand secretary takes advantage [of his influence on the Ministry of Personnel] to take bribes, while in return he allows the minister to serve for a long time. Above all, the senior grand secretary and the minister of Personnel team up to engage in thievery. What public good is served by this?"¹⁰⁷ This critique was directed specifically at the relationship between Shen Shih-hsing and Yang Wei 楊巍 (1514-1605), the then minister of Personnel.¹⁰⁸

"Thievery" caught the essence of power politics. Power and profit fueled the Grand Secretariat-Personnel-Censorial alliance, which distributed desirable appointments and other favors and tolerated bribery and corruption.¹⁰⁹ The oversight system was bankrupt, and

¹⁰⁵ *Wan-li shu-ch'ao*, Ch'ien I-pen's memorial, 58/246.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 58/246. The minister of Rites was Yü Shen-hsing 于慎行 (1545-1608). See Ono Kazuko, *Minki tôsha kô*, pp. 191-197.

¹⁰⁷ Yü K'ung-chien, *Yüan-hsüeh-chai i-yü*, ch. 3, p. 62b.

¹⁰⁸ For Yang Wei's collaboration with Shen Shih-hsing, see Chao Yung-hsien, ch. 28, 41/439. *Wan-li shu-ch'ao*, Ch'en T'ai-lai's memorial, 58/365. *Ming shih*, biography of Sung Hsun, ch. 224, p. 5890.

¹⁰⁹ Wan Kuo-ch'in, *Wan Er-yü hsien-sheng i-chi*, ch. 1, 78/10-14. In his memorial, Wan pointed out that the high-ranking generals used the defense budget to bribe Shen Shih-hsing. The memorial is also included in *Wan-li shu-ch'ao*, 59/21-24.

institutional checks were inoperative. It was such conditions that gave free reign to officials like Yang Wen-chü 楊文舉 (cs. 1577).¹¹⁰

In 1589, Chiang-nan suffered a terrible drought and famine. An imperial edict authorized the distribution of 200,000 taels of silver to Nan-chih-li and 100,000 taels to Che-chiang as a relief fund. This distribution was assigned to Shen Shih-hsing's protégé Yang Wen-chü, the right supervising secretary of Revenue.¹¹¹ With such a huge sum at his disposal, he seized the opportunity. The bulk of the fund went to pay for Yang's extravagant parties with local Chiang-nan officials and to finance the expensive gifts he received from them. Little was left to rescue the starving from widespread famine. Many years later, Ting Yüan-chien 丁元薦, a native of Che-chiang and an upright scholar-official, still felt indignation as he recalled this scandal: "Ordinary people in Chiang-nan have a fresh memory of what Yang did to them. They hate him so much that they wish they could tear him to pieces and eat all his flesh and bones."¹¹²

When Yang Wen-chü returned to the capital, it was no secret that he had made a fortune from his assignment. But no disciplinary action was taken against him. To the contrary, he was soon promoted to be chief supervising secretary of Personnel.¹¹³ In other words, a man who should have been brought to justice now held a powerful position in the censorial-supervisory system.

In a memorial of 1591, T'ang Hsien-tsu 湯顯祖, a secretary of Rites at Nanking, brought up Yang's corruption, saying: "The three grand secretaries (i.e., Shen Shih-hsing, Wang Hsi-chüeh, and Hsü Kuo) are natives of Su-chou and Hui-chou 徽州. (Yang) Wen-chü's avarice is well known in these two prefectures. How is it possible that these grand secretaries have not learned about it? It is indeed unbelievable that Yang now ranks high in the Six Offices of Scrutiny!"¹¹⁴ For these remarks T'ang was demoted to county clerk in a remote region.¹¹⁵

¹¹⁰ Chao Yung-hsien, ch. 4, 41/47. *Wan-li shu-ch'ao*, Chang Ying-yang's memorial, 59/124-126; Yang Ting-lan's memorial, 59/128.

¹¹¹ *Wan-li ti-ch'ao*, p. 465. Also see Shen Te-fu, p. 644.

¹¹² Ting Yüan-chien, ch. 1, 170/659.

¹¹³ Shen Te-fu, p. 1317. The chief supervising secretary of Personnel held the most powerful position in the Six Offices of Scrutiny. Yang was promoted to that position in 1590. See *Wan-li ti-ch'ao*, p. 523.

¹¹⁴ *Wan-li shu-ch'ao*, T'ang Hsien-tsu's memorial, 58/260-263.

¹¹⁵ *Wan-li ti-ch'ao*, p. 552. Also see T'an Ch'ien, ch. 75, p. 4649. The dismissal of T'ang Hsien-tsu only prompted more critical memorials. In the end, a memorial by Chang Shou-ch'eng brought down Yang, who was cashiered in late 1591. His patron

The reading public in the two capitals captured glimpses of the spectacle through unofficial essays, plays, stories, and satires. The anonymous writers of these works seemingly either had access to high circles or were themselves insiders. One satire, circulating in the capital at this time, depicted a distinctive feature of Peking politics, namely, how the chief servants of the powerful officials handled back-door deals. The satire, entitled "The Biography of Five, Seven and Nine," identified Chang Chü-cheng's servant Yu Ch'i 游七, Shen Shih-hsing's servant Shen Chiu 申九, and Wang Hsi-chüeh's servant Wang Wu 王五 as big bribe-takers and influential behind-the-scene brokers.¹¹⁶ T'ang Hsien-tsu's memorial did point out that Shen Chiu had played a decisive role in securing the position of chief supervising secretary of Personnel for Yang Wen-chü.¹¹⁷

When he joined the Grand Secretariat, Wang Hsi-chüeh had made a solemn oath to eschew cheating, favoritism, and bribery, to the applause of his colleagues. One Chiang-nan friend praised him as incorruptible.¹¹⁸ But his own financial history told a different story. A student with little wealth to start with, Wang not only achieved great success in his career, but also great affluence. He was one of the richest men in his native Su-chou. His servant Wang Wu, a character in the satire, accumulated a large fortune as well.¹¹⁹

The Yang Wen-chü scandal was just the tip of the iceberg. It was a practice for Shen Shih-hsing, a protective patron, to appoint his men to desirable and lucrative assignments and shelter the corrupt from prosecution. His protégés in turn manned the front line, attacking his opponents and protecting his interests.¹²⁰ As Ch'ien Ch'ien-i 錢

Shen Shih-hsing had stepped down by then. See *Wan-li shu-ch'ao*, 58/670-671. *Wan-li ti-ch'ao*, p. 575.

¹¹⁶ Shen Te-fu, p. 628. Shen Te-fu suspected Yü Shen-hsing to be the author of this satire. According to him, Shen Shih-hsing blocked Yü from joining the Grand Secretariat. He wrote his satire, therefore, to expose the dirt and ridicule in the way politics were played out behind the scenes in the hands of a few servants. The focus of the satire was Shen Shih-hsing's chief servant Shen Chiu (sometimes also called by his birth name, Sung Chiu). In his memorial, Li I-wan described Shen Chiu's role in taking bribes and his connections with eunuchs: see *Wan-li shu-ch'ao*, 59/28.

¹¹⁷ *Wan-li shu-ch'ao*, T'ang Hsien-tsu's memorial, 58/262.

¹¹⁸ Shen Te-fu, p. 620.

¹¹⁹ Wu Yuan-ts'ui, *ch'i-chi*, ch. 2, p. 467. T'an Ch'ien, ch. 81, p. 5028.

¹²⁰ Shen Shih-hsing's most aggressive henchmen were called the "three sheep (a pun on the surname Yang) and eight dogs." Yang Wen-chü was one of the three sheep. Yü Shen-hsing, ch. 12, p. 128. Shen Te-fu, p. 2321. Also see *Wan-li shu-ch'ao*, Chang Na-pi's memorial, 58/371; Chang Shou-ch'eng's memorial, 58/670-671; Li T'ien-lin's memorial, 58/672-674.

謙益 (1582-1664) was to say, "Officials working for Chiang-ling 江陵 (i.e., Chang Chü-cheng) were competent horses, whereas officials affiliated with the grand secretaries after Chang were shrewd foxes and cunning rats."¹²¹ This late Ming observation depicts "foxes" and "rats" destroying the institutional and ethical foundation of the state. When a modern scholar contrasts Shen Shih-hsing's sincerity and humility with Chang Chü-cheng's arrogance, asserting that Chang "tended to overlook the larger issues and in the end evolved into the kind of man Mencius had described as capable of seeing the barbs of a feather but unable to visualize a cartload of faggots,"¹²² we can only disagree. It is important, in this regard, to be reminded of Hai Jui's assessment at the time: Chang Chü-cheng had a great talent for managing state affairs, but was not good at protecting his own interests (居正工于謀國，拙于謀身).¹²³ The reverse could actually be said of Shen Shih-hsing.

Institutional Erosion

Shen Shih-hsing inherited from Chang Chü-cheng efficient management of state affairs, well-guarded frontiers, sound fiscal policies, and overflowing treasuries.¹²⁴ By 1591, after nine years as Senior Grand Secretary, he left behind a government crippled by partisan politics, maladministration, corruption, deficits, frontier defense failures, and, more dreadfully, by the breakdown of the procedural checks on imperial irresponsibility and arbitrariness.¹²⁵

In a letter to Left Censor-in-chief Li Shih-ta 李世達 (1531-1599), Chao Yung-hsien blamed Shen's administration for this appalling disintegration and called Li's attention to the problems that afflicted the Censorate. That institution, in Chao's opinion, had over the recent decade been reduced to the Grand Secretariat's partisan tool, blocking the opposition from reprimanding the administration for its misconduct. "The Censorate is obliged to investigate and impeach wrongdoing so as to keep officials under discipline," he recalled; but, contrary to their duty, the censors only went after outspoken officials. "If someone

¹²¹ Ch'ien Ch'ien-i, ch. 30, p. 895.

¹²² Ray Huang, *1587, A Year of No Significance*, ch. 2., p. 61, and also see p. 53, p. 59.

¹²³ T'an Ch'ien, ch. 71, p. 4415.

¹²⁴ Hsia Hsieh, ch. 67, p. 2638. Also see Hucker, "The Tung-lin Movement of the Late Ming period," p. 132.

¹²⁵ Wang Chia-p'ing, ch. 8, 149/714. Tan Ch'ien, ch. 72, p. 4441

criticizes a powerful official and touches a nerve, that person is immediately attacked by a gang of censors. Isn't it preposterous when the chief of the Censorate fails to discipline these censors? Worse than that, he himself jumps in and backs up the attackers, claiming that he does so in order to protect the dignity of senior officials."¹²⁶

Turning to the sanctions, Chao stated that the *Ming Statutes* permitted all officials to speak honestly and frankly. Wang Chen 王振 and Liu Chin 劉瑾, for all their abuse and brutality, dared not openly forbid officials from speaking out.¹²⁷ It was unprecedented for this administration to create sanctions in order to prohibit junior officials from expressing their views.

Furthermore, the administration also withheld critical memorials from being filed in the official gazetteers. Chao argued, "From ancient times, critical views about state and society, even though not accepted on the moment, have been documented in the official records for the purpose of informing the later generations of the wisdom and intelligent opinions in the past." Now the administration disregarded this tradition and issued the ban out of fear of the exposure of its wrongdoing.

The Grand Secretariat-Personnel-Censorial alliance, as Chao saw it, provided a sanctuary for corruption, a disease that weakened institutional practices and political ethics more rapidly than ever before. Corruption in the Censorate was not just the failure of one office or an isolated case, such as a failure of the Grand Secretariat. Charged as it was with the enormous responsibility of searching out illegal activities in officialdom, the Censorate itself committed corruption and bribery. These were offices that used their power to engage in all sorts of unethical transactions, with the connivance of powerful patrons.

Taking censorial inspection as example, Chao said the following:

There is a strict and orderly procedure for scheduling provincial inspection assignments. When Chiang-ling (i.e. Chang Chü-cheng) was in power, the procedure was observed. But lobbying for assignment is common nowadays. The intimate and deceitful are sent to near and profitable provinces, while the honest and unconnected are assigned to the far and difficult... Isn't it

¹²⁶ Chao Yung-hsien alluded to Wu Shih-lai, the former Left Censor-in-chief under Shen's administration.

¹²⁷ Wang Chen in the 1440s and Liu Chin in the early 1550s were powerful eunuchs who terrorized the officialdom through the Eastern and Western Depots, the imperial secret services. *Ming shih*, ch. 304, section on Wang Chen, pp. 7772-7774, and section on Liu Chin, pp. 7786-7792.

absurd that the Censorate, the office in charge of oversight, takes the lead in breaking the rules? As for investigations, the central government relies upon its inspectors as ears and eyes to report the performance of local officials. Inspectors today frequently receive secret instructions [from their patrons] before their trip as to which matters they should investigate. If local officials do not bend, they manufacture evidence against them and block their promotions... As a result, men of integrity and ability are put down; those on the fast track are all affiliated with the powerful.”

Corruption was running rampant within the Censorate. “In the past, censors on inspection were forbidden to bring back any item after their tours of duty. Even twenty or thirty years ago there was no such a thing as a censor on inspection bribing powerful officials in Peking to the tune of several hundred taels of silver. But it is not unusual now... So the bookcases in their return boats are filled with gold and jewelry... Above all, it is now customary to pass gifts as gratitude for recommendations, awards, upcoming appointments, evaluations, etc. Prefects and magistrates are running around day and night looking for ways to meet these demands. How can they be expected to observe ethical principles and not abuse the common people to line their pockets?”¹²⁸

Chao Yung-hsien’s letter raised serious concerns about the deteriorating health of the dynasty. He feared that the government would be heading for disaster if no serious measures were taken to repair the corrupt censorial-supervisory system. The Grand Secretariat, in this view, was the problem, not the solution. The opposition now became more convinced than ever that the answer lay in initiatives by the six ministries to reform the dysfunctional institutions. To that end, the Grand Secretariat must relinquish control over them. Surely the opposition saw it as an encouraging sign when the Secretariat-Personnel-Censorial alliance in effect collapsed: in 1590 and 1591 its three key members, Minister of Personnel Yang Wei, Left Censor-in-chief Wu Shih-lai, and Shen Shih-hsing himself, all had to resign.¹²⁹

Shen Shih-hsing had seen the Ministry of Personnel drifting away after the resignation of Yang Wei. Before he left office, he searched for a cooperative minister of Personnel and gambled on Lu Kuang-tsu 陸光祖 (1521-1597). Lu’s disagreement with the opposition on a few occasions, his political skills, and his solid reputation in officialdom made him seem the right man for the job. Shen badly needed a competent ally to assist him in reinvigorating his shattered admi-

¹²⁸ Chao Yung-hsien, Chao’s letter, ch. 28, 41/438-440.

¹²⁹ Yang and Wu resigned in 1590; Shen stepped down in 1591. T’an Ch’ien, ch. 75, p. 4623, p. 4627.

nistration and pacifying the opposition.¹³⁰ With his strong support, Lu was appointed Minister of Personnel in 1591.

But Lu Kuang-tsu proved to be a huge disappointment to Shen Shih-hsing. The new minister was interested in restoring the dignity and authority of his office, paying little heed to the “consultation privilege” that the Senior Grand Secretary had enjoyed for years. What troubled the Senior Grand Secretary even more were Lu’s personnel initiatives: Shen’s opponents, ousted years ago, were now recalled, and a number of officials affiliated with his faction were either transferred or demoted. With such independent actions by Lu, the institutional challenge now returned to the spotlight and Shen could only express his regret. As he told Wang Hsi-chüeh, “I was fooled by this bald old man!”¹³¹

Lu Kuang-tsu presided over the 1592 triennial “great reckoning,” that is, the evaluation of all the officials outside the capital. Aided by Left Censor-in-chief Li Shih-ta, he promoted twenty-two officials who had a strong record of competence and moral character, and demoted or dismissed several officials infamous for corruption, most of whom were affiliated with the faction of the Grand Secretariat.¹³² For the first time in the decade, the Minister of Personnel and Left Censor-in-chief worked together to reform their offices and oversee this important occasion without any scandals.

These two senior officials were not affiliated with the opposition. Yet, their exercise of authority propelled them into the thick of partisan fighting: they provoked the Grand Secretariat by their “defection” and received warm applause from the opposition. Keenly aware of the circumstances, Lu forced himself not to let personal likes and dislikes blind his judgement and temper his decisions.¹³³

¹³⁰ Ting Yüan-chien, ch. 6, 171/30.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, ch. 6, 171/31. Wang Hsi-chüeh expressed his negative view of Lu Kuang-tsu in a letter to Ku Hsien-ch’eng: Wang Hsi-chüeh, ch. 18, 136/171-172. This letter is also included in Ku’s *Ching-kao ts’ang-kao*, ch. 3, 1292/29-30.

¹³² Ting Yüan-chien, ch. 6, 171/31. As a crucial part of the appointment and evaluation system of the Ming, all the officials outside the capital were subject to evaluation every three years, known as the triennial “great reckoning,” or *ta-chi* 大計. All the officials in the capital below fourth rank were subjected to a similar evaluation every six years, known as the sexennial capital evaluation, or *ching-ch’a* 京察. The Ministry of Personnel and the Censorate conducted these evaluations. See *Ta-Ming hui-tien*, ch. 209, p. 482. Shen Te-fu, p. 800, p. 2240. Also see Pierre-Étienne Will, “Creation, conflict, and routinization: appointing officials by drawing lots, 1594-1700,” p. 5.

¹³³ Ting Yüan-chien, ch. 6, 171/31. Also see *Ming shih*, biography of Lu Kuang-tsu, ch. 224, p. 5893.

And yet, despite his effort to carry out the 1592 great reckoning fairly and judiciously, and precisely because he stood firmly on principle, he caused much agitation in the Grand Secretariat. He was soon pushed out of office.¹³⁴

Although it got rid of Lu Kuang-tsu, the Grand Secretariat failed to resolve the frictions with the Ministry of Personnel. The next minister, Sun Lung 孫鑰 (1525-1594), was even tougher to deal with. Sun presided over the 1593 sexennial evaluation of capital officials with the aide of Chao Nan-hsing 趙南星 (1550-1628), the director of the Bureau of Appointments. The stakes on both sides were very high, since the capital evaluations "could result in drastic changes of personnel at the higher echelons and mark the onset of new policies."¹³⁵

The 1593 capital evaluations proceeded strictly under the direction of the Minister of Personnel, independent of the Grand Secretariat's influence. To ensure the integrity of the evaluations, Sun Lung and Chao Nan-hsing applied the strict rules to themselves first, by demoting their own relatives. After this, no one dared to tamper with the process.¹³⁶ Their report went directly to the emperor, without any consultation of the Grand Secretariat; and it came as no surprise that among the dismissed and demoted were favorites of the grand secretaries.¹³⁷

The 1593 capital evaluation challenged the decades-old practice following which the Grand Secretariat, not the Ministry of Personnel, always called the shots on important personnel decisions.¹³⁸ Wang Hsi-chüeh, who was now Senior Grand Secretary, felt threatened as Sun Lung and Chao Nan-hsing could now rally the six ministries to free themselves from the Grand Secretariat's influence, a cause which the opposition had long advocated. To eliminate this threat, he turned to the emperor for support. An imperial edict was issued, reproaching Sun Lung for arbitrary use of authority and dismissing Chao Nan-hsing. The edict prompted Sun Lung to submit his resignation.¹³⁹

¹³⁴ Lu's tenure lasted less than a year. *Ming shih*, biography of Lu Kuang-tsu, ch. 224, pp. 5892-5893. T'an Ch'ien, ch. 76, p. 4669.

¹³⁵ Will, "Creation, conflict, and routinization," p. 5.

¹³⁶ *Wan-li shu-ch'ao*, Ch'en T'ai-lai's memorial, 58/365.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, 58/364; Chia Yen's memorial, 58/367. Also see *Ming shih*, biography of Sun Lung, ch. 224, pp. 5894-5895.

¹³⁸ Wu Yüan-ts'ui, ch. 1, p. 41.

¹³⁹ In the epitaph he wrote for Sun Lung, Chao Nan-hsing described the 1593 capital evaluation and the Grand Secretariat's retaliation: Chao Nan-hsing, ch. 14, 68/401-403. Also see *Wan-li ti-ch'ao*, pp. 729-730. *Ming shih*, ch. 224, p. 5895.

Unlike Shen Shih-hsing, Wang Hsi-chüeh did not care much for the niceties of politics; he pulled up his sleeves and went after his opponents. Chao Yung-hsien, before being forced out of government, had predicted that vicious attacks upon upright officials would not stop until they were all driven out of government.¹⁴⁰ Playing rough, however, only increased the tension between the Grand Secretariat, the Ministry of Personnel, and the opposition.¹⁴¹ Their continuous strife further undermined an already fractured government, ushering in a far more aggressive and destructive phase of factionalism. With a battle looming, Wang Hsi-chüeh considered he had had enough; he resigned from government in 1594.¹⁴²

Conclusion

Chang Chü-cheng passed away in 1582 with no sense of foreboding. But confidence and order, the hallmarks of his administration, evaporated quickly in the following decade. In the writings of literati nostalgia for the past and worry for the future were blended to convey a sense of insecurity and uncertainty.¹⁴³ Indeed, by the end of the decade anxiety and recklessness had already permeated the official world, and they would soon trickle down through society.

This poignant and gloomy sentiment echoed the rapid disintegration that had been taking place in the higher spheres of Ming government during the decade of 1583-1593. For the sake of their political survival Shen Shih-hsing and Wang Hsi-chüeh winked at the Wan-li emperor's tearing down of the web of restraints. This enabled them to secure imperial support for the managerial power they exercised over other government branches. Stained by corruption scandals, obstruction of the ground rules, and subservience to the emperor, Shen and his

¹⁴⁰ Chao Yung-hsien, ch. 31, 41/467. Wang Hsi-chüeh's retaliation was fierce. About sixty officials were cashiered as a result. See Wen Ping, ch. 3, p. 179. For Wang's involvement in forcing Chao out of government, see *Wan-li shu-ch'ao*, Ch'en T'ai-lai's memorial, 58/366. Wu Yüan-ts'ui, ch. 5, pp. 162-163. Wen Ping, ch. 3, pp. 170-175. Ch'ien Ch'ien-i, ch. 62, p. 1471.

¹⁴¹ The dismissal of Chao Nan-hsing and Sun Lung's resignation outraged the opposition. See *Wan-li shu-ch'ao*, Shih Meng-lin's memorial, 58/369-370; Chang Napi's memorial, 58/371-374; and Kao P'an-lung's memorial, 58/375-376. Wen Ping, ch. 3, p. 161, viewed the 1593 dispute about the capital evaluation as a cause for further escalating partisan rancor and criticized Wang Hsi-chüeh for it.

¹⁴² Wang Hsi-chüeh resigned in the 5th month of Wan-li 22; his tenure as senior grand secretary had lasted a year and a half. T'an Ch'ien, ch. 76, p. 4730.

¹⁴³ See Timothy Brook, *The Confusions of Pleasure*, pp. 1-13.

associates provided the opposition with ample ammunition to discredit them on institutional and ethical grounds. The agitated administration in turn punished its critics by means of demotion, dismissal or transfer. As a result, the emperor's caprices and the partisan struggles between the Grand Secretariat and the opposition together destroyed the balance crucial for a reasonable management of state affairs.

Upon reflecting on the fall of the Ming, Huang Tsung-hsi 黃宗羲 (1610-1695) stated that the origin of misrule under the Ming lay in the abolition of the prime ministership: "After the prime ministership was abolished, the moment an emperor was succeeded by an unworthy son there was no worthy person at all to whom one could turn for help. Then how could even the idea of dynastic succession be maintained?"¹⁴⁴ The compilers of *Ming shih*, for their part, held the senior grand secretaries accountable for the disintegration. Yet for all their culpability, we must recognize the potential perils of their situation. The senior grand secretaries were held hostage by T'ai-tsu's institutions, which assured the ultimate power of the throne. Operating in a system that did not allow for prime ministership, they were vulnerable both to imperial rage and to the opposition's criticisms. Motivated by the survival instinct, the senior grand secretaries served the emperor humbly, with "the mind of a eunuch or palace maid."¹⁴⁵

The opposition, using T'ai-tsu's abolition of the prime ministership to justify its cause, wished to devolve the managerial power of the Grand Secretariat to the six ministries. In a situation where the emperor was aloof from state affairs and abused his power arbitrarily, the devolution of the Grand Secretariat's managerial power was a recipe for destroying the already very fragile unity of the government. Given the fact that none of the six ministries was able to replace the Grand Secretariat by taking over its policy-making and managerial responsibilities, to nullify the Grand Secretariat was bound to lead to chaos.

With this in mind, and as the disintegration accelerated after 1593, it was not difficult to anticipate the end result. The power struggle between the Grand Secretariat and the Ministry of Personnel paved the way for a savage war of factionalism. When the Wan-li reign approached its end the Grand Secretariat had become utterly dysfunctional. Yeh Hsiang-ko 葉向高 (1559-1627), the senior grand secretary at the time, could only lament that "the senior grand secretary today is very much like the head of beggars, using up all

¹⁴⁴ Huang Tsung-hsi, *Waiting for the Dawn: A Plan for the Prince*, transl. deBary, pp. 101-102.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 95.

of his energy to keep his voice as loud as possible in begging for food. Yet his fellow beggars, still unsatisfied, yell at him for not raising his voice even louder.¹⁴⁶ Yeh's remark is sad testimony to the struggles which devoured not only the Grand Secretariat but also the entire central bureaucracy. The warring factions cleared the way for the rise of the eunuch party.

The fateful legacy of T'ai-tsu's institutions was precisely the extent of his desire to grasp power for the throne alone, which inevitably sapped the quality of the central bureaucracy.¹⁴⁷ Thus, the decade 1583-1593 was a turning point in shaping the fate of the Ming dynasty. An unworthy emperor and his unworthy senior grand secretaries wrangled with the opposition, the only force that cried out for containing the spread of the illness. The opposition brought down the senior grand secretaries and discredited the Grand Secretariat, but it could not break through the gridlock and was unable to renovate the government. "Since partisan wrangling could only be resolved by one clique's winning imperial favor and ousting its adversaries from positions of influence, these struggles served merely to weaken the officialdom's resistance to the irregularities of the emperor and his eunuch favorites."¹⁴⁸ This consuming and destructive process continued until the dynasty was brought to an end.

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Abbreviations:

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¹⁴⁶ Huang Ching-fang, *Kuo-shih wei-i*, p. 685.

¹⁴⁷ Yü Shen-hsing, ch. 6, p. 64.

¹⁴⁸ Hucker, *The Censorial System of Ming China*, p. 46.

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