



Canadian Social Science
Vol. 11, No. 1, 2015, pp. 188-193
DOI: 10.3968/6140

ISSN 1712-8056[Print]
ISSN 1923-6697[Online]
www.cscanada.net
www.cscanada.org

A Preliminary Study on Reorganization of the Shipping Goods Market Department of Guangdong Province in Late Ming Dynasty

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Received 10 October 2014; accepted 4 December 2014
Published online 26 January 2015

Abstract

In the Ming Dynasty, the China overseas trade management administrations, the shipping goods market departments, declined. However, historical materials show that the shipping goods market department of Guangdong Province had been especially enhanced in the overall decline trend. At present, the academia has not paid enough attention to this phenomenon. Based on the historical materials, a preliminary analysis shows that the chief tax inspector Li Feng was in charge of the taxes of Guangdong Province in the late Wanli period (from September 4, 1573 to August 18, 1620) in the Ming Dynasty, and he forced to change the original power structure of the shipping goods market department. The change of the original power structure was one of key factors which strengthened the shipping goods market department of Guangdong Province. The deeper reason was the change of Guangdong overseas trade situation in the late Ming Dynasty. The change made the shipping goods market department to do corresponding adjustments of its management mechanism.

Key words: The late Ming dynasty; China overseas trade management administrations; The shipping goods market department of Guangdong; Reorganization; the late Wanli period

Hui, K. (2015). A Preliminary Study on Reorganization of the Shipping Goods Market Department of Guangdong Province in Late Ming Dynasty. *Canadian Social Science*, 11(1), 188-193. Available from: <http://www.cscanada.net/index.php/css/article/view/6140>
DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3968/6140>

INTRODUCTION

Guangdong has a superior geographical location and a long overseas trade tradition. In ancient China, Guangdong had a leading position in Chinese overseas trade for a long time, “and in Jin Dynasty, the South and North Dynasties, Guangzhou had a bigger shipping goods market.” (Peng, 1999, p.21) The Tang Dynasty imitated the “market supervision department” of Sui Dynasty, and set up the shipping goods market office in Guangzhou, Guangdong. Setting up the shipping goods market department was the beginning of establishing customs to manage the foreign trade in the history. Subsequently, Song Dynasty established shipping goods market departments again in Guangzhou, Mingzhou and Linan, referred to the “three departments”, and the Guangzhou’s shipping goods market was the most prosperous department. “In the late Song Dynasty and early Yuan Dynasty, the Quanzhou’s market was more prosperous (Peng, 1999, p.21)”, but Guangzhou’s shipping goods market still ranked the second in domestic ports. In the early Ming Dynasty, shipping goods market departments were set up in Fujian, Guangdong, Jiaochi and Yunnan. In Zhengde and Jiajing periods of Ming Dynasty, the governments enforced the ban on maritime trade in the south and east China, and shipping goods market departments of Zhejiang, Fujian, and Guangdong were closed. However, in the Wanli period, the Guangdong’s shipping goods market department was different from Zhejiang’s and Fujian’s and it recovered vitality. In the beginning of the Qing Dynasty, the ports were closed. After “Sanfan rebellions”, the central government recovered Guangdong’s shipping goods market department in the nineteen year of Kangxi (1680) and set up Guangdong’s customs in the twenty-fourth year of Kangxi (1685) with ending the system of shipping goods market department. In Guangdong, the system of shipping goods market department had a strong position and was particularly prominent in the history

of China foreign trade system. In the Ming Dynasty, the system evolution should be especially analyzed because of its importance. However, the past study on this issue has more focused on the Fujian part or general discussion. Especially, it is the lack of in-depth study on Guangdong's shipping goods market department and its development in the overall decline trend. This paper tries to find the particularity and explore its causes.

1. REORGANIZATION OF THE SHIPPING GOODS MARKET DEPARTMENT OF GUANGDONG PROVINCE IN THE LATE MING DYNASTY

Since Tang and Song Dynasties, the power of shipping goods market departments had been strengthening. In this situation, the shipping goods market department of Guangdong Province also had a great development. In the early Ming Dynasty, the provisions of shipping goods market departments were "Ningbo opens to Japan, Quanzhou opens to Ryukyu, and Guangzhou Opens to Zhancheng, Siam, and Western countries" (Zhang, 2000, p.1322). Due to the "preference" of the policy, Guangzhou won the first port status. However, the shipping goods market department of Guangdong was like as the departments of Fujian and Zhejiang and showed a decline trend. "History of the Ming Dynasty official records" pointed out: shipping goods market departments "deal with foreign countries' goods which are tributes for the imperial government, and Chinese goods which go abroad, identify people, check documents, ban colluding with foreign people, tax private goods, maintain fair trade, control passing and carefully entertain guests." (Zhang, 2000, p.1232) In addition to the economic function of "deal with foreign countries' goods which are tributes for the imperial government", the imperial government added new political functions of "ban colluding with foreign people, tax private goods". Compared with the Tang and Song Dynasties, shipping goods market departments' functions seemed to be extended, but it was not. In the beginning of the Ming Dynasty, shipping goods market departments had a decline trend since they were set up. The reasons are: first, Ming Dynasty overseas trade was limited in the narrow tributary trade and the valuable time of the tributary trade did not last long, so shipping goods market departments' role was not important. In the Ming Dynasty, Wang Qi in his book "Continued Literature Reviews" wrote,

Shipping tributes are allowed by the law, and it is managed by shipping goods market departments. It belongs to official business. Private foreign trade is not allowed by the law, and it is not managed by shipping goods market departments. It belongs to the illegal business. (Wang, 1991, p.459)

The shipping goods market departments only managed tributary trade, and all other foreign trade was considered

illegal, excluded from the management system of shipping goods market departments. Second, in Ming Dynasty, the status of shipping goods market departments was not high. In Tang, Song and Yuan dynasties, officials of shipping goods market departments were appointed by the central government and they were powerful. However, shipping goods market departments were managed by the local government secretariats in the Ming Dynasty. In the selection of shipping goods market department officials, chief officials often were "successful candidates in the imperial examinations at the provincial level and once even degraded officials were of the chief officials" (Li, 2007, p.125). At that time, shipping goods market departments' power had a decline trend in Ming Dynasty. Third, the management system of overseas trade had a repeated structure in the Ming Dynasty. In addition to shipping goods market departments, the government set up the "shipping goods market inspector offices", whose top officials came from the royal inner court and directly belonged to the royal inner court. Shipping goods market inspector offices formed a new management system and then the overseas trade was controlled by the royal inner eunuchs, so shipping goods market departments had less power.

In the Zhengde and Jiajing periods of Ming Dynasty, pirates, Japanese invaders, Portuguese and Spanish colonial forces intertwined on the south and east coasts of China, and made the tributary system disintegration. At the same time, the private foreign trade, which "is not allowed by the law" in the early Ming Dynasty, had more development but it was not included in the foreign trade management system. Shipping goods market departments only managed the tributary trade. Under the leadership of Guangdong local authorities, a vice-commander who was in charge of coastal safeguard in the seaway department of Guangdong also took over the business of private foreign trade management. In the mid of Ming Dynasty, the shipping goods market department became an administration which had few things to do. However, in the late Ming Dynasty, especially after the Wanli period, the shipping goods market department of Guangdong gained power and was not as same as the department in the mid of Ming Dynasty. This phenomenon can be regarded as the "reorganization of the authority". In the Guangdong local literature, this phenomenon had been recorded. In summary, the main contents include two aspects: One is that the shipping goods market department of Guangdong was in charge of the taxation again, and played a leading role in the trade management in Guangzhou and Macao. In the Wanli period, Zhou Xuanwei's "*Jing Lin Xu Ji*" recorded: When a ship arrived in Xiangshan county of Guangdong,

it first reports to the county government, then notices the provincial government secretariat officials who will order the shipping goods market department and the county government to check the ship..... The shipping goods market department

gets the tax which is about 10% of goods values. This is the income of the shipping goods market department without any risk, punishment and toil, but it is not profitable at the salt management department. (Zhou, 1985, p.34)

Also, in the early Chongzhen period, Yan Junyan in his book *"Meng Shui Zhai Cun Du"* wrote: "carefully look profitable ships passing, Xiangshan county government checks them, and the shipping goods market department of Guangdong taxes them" (Yan, 2002, p.77); "when a ship goes to Macao, the government knows the ship owner and the goods list and the shipping goods market department of Guangdong taxes 10% of the value." (Yan, 2002, p.489) All of the above are the strong evidence which shows that the shipping goods market department of Guangdong regained taxing power. Secondly, the seaway department which led the shipping goods market department had been losing its power of controlling the foreign trade since the mid of Ming Dynasty. The shipping goods market department played an important role in this process, and also played the role of assisting the ban on maritime trade. According to documents of the Ministry of War on eighteenth day of the eighth month of the fourth year of Tianqi period, "A Draft of the Ministry of War for Duties of Guangdong Seaway Department in Supervising Xiangshan, etc, Controlling Macao and Guarding against Japanese Invaders", Mr. Li Qingxin inferred that "Although the Guangdong seaway department nominally 'also leads the shipping goods market department', but the actual functions of the Guangdong seaway department mainly were coastal safeguard and supervised officials of coastal counties." And "the Guangdong seaway department gave the power of managing foreign trade to the shipping goods market department." (Yan, 2002, p.77) The shipping goods market department had had functions of "knowing foreign affairs and controlling profiteers" since its establishment. However, because its authority had been reduced, these functions had not been carried out in the early and mid of Ming Dynasty. Until the late Ming Dynasty, the department started to assist coastal defense. Yan Junyan in his book *"Meng Shui Zhai Cun Du"* documented multiple cases, in which, the department assisted to ban on maritime trade. For example, in the case of Guo Jinxing, the Guangdong provincial government sentenced Fujian businessman Guo Jinxing "to pay 33 liangs (old unit) in addition to regular fine rate in per 100 liangs of gold." Its execution was by the Panyu county government and the shipping goods market department. (Yan, 2002, p.77)

The shipping goods market department became profitable because of the "reorganization of the authority". It was equally like the salt management department to have corruption and degeneration, known as "the coastal greed". Yan Junyan said:

Foreign trade business was managed by the shipping goods market department. Getting a position in the department cost a lot of money. Officials of the department just wanted to get

money back in a hurry, just as hungry flies see pulp, not to care whether live or die. The department had some rules. An official could get several thousand liangs of gold and his income was the same as the income of the salt management department. There were few departments which are like the shipping goods market department. (Yan, 2002, p.339)

Because of the great power of the shipping goods market department, some officials used a variety of means and spent money to seek positions in the department and it was unprecedented. However, causes of the changeable. However, they have been always ignored by people. This paper attempts to explain the following two factors.

2. ROYAL INNER OFFICIAL LI FENG TOOK THE TAX POWER IN GUANGDONG: A KEY FACTOR

In the Wanli period after the reform of Zhang Juzheng, the nation had a troubled time. In

the twentieth year of the Wanli period, Ningxia war expenses cost about two millions (gold). In the winter, it was the beginning of a Korean War of eight years and the war totally cost about seven millions. In the twenty-seventh year of the Wanli period, Bozhou war costs two or three millions. Three wars came one by one and the state had financial losses. (Zhang et al., 2000, p.5225)

In addition to the wars, extravagant corruption and squander of the supreme ruling group made the state finance have more insufficient. The central government was to adopt various means to plunder the wealth, and "the mining tax had been increased" (Zhang et al., 2000, p.5225). Appointing a mining and tax official from the beginning of the twenty-fourth year of the Wanli, later, the emperor ordered eunuchs to go with that office for solving the mining contention in the imperial court. Then the office was everywhere." (Zhang et al., 2000, p.5225) Later, this kind of officials had power to "tax foreign trade and tax shops. They could be responsible for taxes, or also be in charge of mining." (Zhang et al., 2000, p.5225). In the twenty-seventh year of the Wanli period, the emperor Shenzong sent the eunuch Li Feng to Guangdong as the general tax officer. Li Feng was responsible for "mining in places like Leizhou and taxing foreign trade." (Zhang et al., 2000, p.1323) So Li Feng's time started.

Li Feng presided over the Guangdong ship management for fifteen years until his death in Guangzhou in the forty-second year of the Wanli period (1614). Continuity of the Guangdong foreign trade policy made the "reorganization of the authority" of the department to be possible. Li Feng who liked other mining and tax officials had extensive powers. *"History of the Ming Dynasty: Chen Zeng"* said:

The bigger towns and cities had to tax officials. In two Huai places, there were salt management officials. The Guangdong

government had pearl management officials. These officials could get the only job or more jobs. The higher level eunuchs and lower level supervisors harassed people, and got people's money for the tributes. (Zhang et al., 2000, p.5225)

"*History of the Ming Dynasty: the Eunuchs*" recorded:

The emperor appointed eunuchs who were all perpetrators to be officials Guangdong tax official Li Feng impeached Wu Yinghong, etc..... the official Song Yihan said Li Feng got fifty million (money) and other treasures of equal value. A high rank official Li Dai said that Li Feng made disaster and went to Chaozhou to broadcast. The Guangdong people wanted to kill Li Feng. (Zhang et al., 2000, pp.5225-5230)

However, the emperor Shenzong did not check Li Feng's work. In order to complete the tax task which was the annual payment of 200,000 liangs of silver to the court, and also for his personal gain, Li Feng used his power to intervene in local governmental affairs, and grabbed for various business interests and rights. "*Guangdong Tongzhi*" recorded that Haidao, Xiangshan, etc county officials "can estimate things but they have no rights to judge"¹ after Li Feng was in charge of Guangdong taxes. Li Feng finally controlled the economic lifeline of Guangdong. Because of Li Feng's power, he could separate the management authority from the seaway department, counties, etc. He changed the original management structure of the shipping goods market department, and made the department regain the power.

It can be said, in the late Wanli period, Li Feng took tax power in Guangdong that was the key factor for the "reorganization of the authority" of the shipping goods market department. However, this factor can only explain that the shipping goods market department had increased power in Li Feng's presiding time and the factor can not explain that the shipping goods market department had continued strengthening its power after Li Feng died in the forty-second year of the Wanli (1614). Li Feng's death was the end of a contingency situation of eunuchs' political intervention but it was not resulting in the department to decay. Therefore, it is important that we explore more economic factors for deeply explaining this phenomenon.

3. THE GUANGDONG FOREIGN TRADE SYSTEM ADJUSTMENT IN THE LATER MING DYNASTY: A PROFOUND ECONOMIC REASON

In the Ming Dynasty, there were two kinds of foreign trade; the tributary trade (tributary ships) and merchant ship trade. According to Wang Qi of the Ming Dynasty said, the tributary ships formed the shipping goods market, "Shipping tributes are allowed by the law, and

it is managed by shipping goods market departments. It belongs to official business"; the merchant ship trade was private foreign trade, "Private foreign trade is not allowed by the law, and it is not managed by shipping goods market departments. It belongs to the illegal business." (Wang, 1991, p.459) However, the development trend of the merchant ship trade had a significant impact on the department, mainly reflected in the following aspects:

Firstly, the merchant ship trade was gradually opened up and officials struggled for the right of taxation. During the early Ming Dynasty, only the tributary trade was legal. Other foreign trade was considered illegal and was prohibited. In the mid Ming Dynasty, the tributary trade began to atrophy and the merchant ship trade was increasingly public. The considerable tax source of the merchant ship trade led the shipping goods market department with traditional overseas trade management experience to grab for the right of taxation. Particularly, the tributary system tended to collapse due to a variety of impacts in the Zhengde and Jiajing periods. At the same time, the merchant ship trade appeared "A inch long boat is not allowed into the sea, but private big ships come; one gram goods are not allowed into foreign countries, but a large amount of goods and young women can go abroad." (Xie, 2007, p.249) The considerable tax source of the merchant ship trade had become a substantial source of revenue. Therefore, the development of merchant ship trade created good economic condition for the reorganization of the authority of the shipping goods market department. In fact, eunuchs as superior officials had made efforts to get the taxation right of the merchant ship trade. The "food" of volume eighty-one of "*History of the Ming Dynasty*" recorded:

In the Emperor Wu Zong's period, the eunuch Bi Zhen as the head of the shipping goods market department said:

In the old system, the department managed ships along the coast. The ships are managed by other departments recently. I seek to restore the old system." The Ministry of Rites concluded: the shipping goods market department managed tributary ships. Other maritime merchant ships and foreign ships did not carry tributes and the department should not manage them. The emperor commanded to follow Xiong Xuan's old regulations. Xiong Xuan was a eunuch in the shipping goods market department and he made a request to the Ministry of Rites for managing ships along the coast because the department could not get money from the tax revenue of other countries. In the end, Xiong Xuan was impeached. Liu Jin liked the eunuch Bi Zhen and thought that Bi Zhen was right. (Zhang et al., 2000, p.1322)

Accordingly, in the Zhengde period (the emperor Wu Zong's period), the eunuch Bi Zhen as the head of the shipping goods market department had already thought that the business of foreign trade was legitimate and tried to get the right of taxation. His reason was that the business of foreign trade was managed by the department traditionally. This shows that the department had sought to break the old limitation of managing overseas trade of the

¹ Guo Pei (Ming Dynasty). *Guangdong Tongzhi*, Volume 69.

early Ming Dynasty when Guangdong merchant ship trade was gradually opened up. It was an important economic factor for the department's strengthening its functions and powers.

It can be said that the "reorganization of the authority" of the shipping goods market department should really happen after the Wanli period. Why? I think that the influence of the coastal defense pattern of the Ming Dynasty was one of the important and accidental factors. As everyone knows, the Japanese pirates were the most savage in the Jiajing period so the Ming Court enforced the ban on maritime trade. Although Guangdong was affected less than Zhejiang and Fujian, but the central policy did not confine these two places. At the time, all economic and political resolutions of the southeast governments focused on eliminating the pirates. Although Guangdong was less affected by the pirate issue, it was also an important problem: which department obtained the right of tax on merchant ships? To obey the overall situation of coastal defense, under the leadership of Guangdong local authorities, a vice-commander who was in charge of coastal safeguard in the seaway department also took over the business of the shipping goods market department and obtained the right of taxation. It was a blind obedience to the coastal safeguard policy of the central government and the "reorganization of the authority" of the shipping goods market department missed opportunity. In the Wanli period, Japan had unified, and the warlord Toyotomi Hideyoshi organized the former dispersed warriors and maritime groups to carry out his invading plan which focused on North Korea. At this time, the southeast governments of China basically rid of the Japanese. The issue of taxation right on the merchant ship trade was raised again, and the coastal defense agency continued taking over the business of the shipping goods market department that appeared to be inappropriate. The shipping goods market department, which had foreign trade management tradition, was supposed to take the right of taxation on merchant ship trade. Therefore, only in the late Ming Dynasty, the shipping goods market department had chance to get rid of adverse influence of the politics and had taken the right of taxation on merchant ship trade so the "reorganization of the authority" of the shipping goods market department had really happened.

Secondly, China and Western trade that mainly were the trade between Portugal and China were expanding in the late Ming Dynasty. After the fifteenth century, the Europeans began expansion and settlement in the world and Portuguese were the daring vanguard of the sea expansion. The "*Ming History*" recorded: "In the thirteenth year of the Zhengde period, Portuguese envoys brought tributes to the emperor and requested a position. The government began to know Portuguese." (Zhang et al., 2000, p.5647) The immediate relationship of China

and Western countries was established through this event. However, at the time, China was affected by Japanese pirates invading in Zhengde and Jiajing periods. Japanese and Portuguese stayed banned by the Ming government. So the West and China trade was not completely opened, and a little trade between the West and China mainly was in Guangdong where was relatively calm. The governor of Guangdong Lin Fu helped to get the petty trade. In the ninth year of the Jiajing period, he said:

Public and private sectors in Guangdong need to get money from business taxes. If foreign ships do not come here, the public and private are difficult. Now we allow Portuguese ships to come here and trade that have four advantages..... (Zhang et al., 2000, p.5649)

After that, Portuguese ships could now come to Xiangshan and Macao. The Macao situation changed later, Wang Linheng's "*Guangdong Sword*" wrote:

Westerners came to China. Their ships usually stopped in Macao. They would leave Macao after trade. After a long time, the law enforcement began to be loose, and those people gradually gathered to live there. The officials considered the business and could not completely drive them away so the officials only strengthened the limitation of going Macao..... However, those foreign people had a lot of money and earned the profit of dozens of times. Although the law was strict, it could not ban them. I heard that thousands of families, about hundreds of thousands of people in Macao now. (Wang, 1985, p.91)

The historical data reflects two problems. One is the attitude of Guangdong authorities on Chinese and Western trade. The officials thought that maintaining the Chinese and Portuguese trade was beneficial to broaden sources of income, so did not crack down the expansion activities of the business; another is that the continuous development of the Portuguese commercial forces in Macao was due to the acquiescence of the local government. In the late Jiajing period, "Macao not only became a transshipment port of trade between Portugal and China, but also was the commercial and trade hub between Portugal and Japan, Southeast Asia and India. Macao began to enter a period of prosperity." (Li, 2007, p.245) Expanding trade between Portugal and China, and Macao's opening up had an important influence on the power of the shipping goods market department. In the Ming Dynasty, Zhou Xuanwei's "*Jing Lin Xu Ji*" recorded:

Macao of Xiangshan county, Guangdong Province is a place where has a seaway for sea ships in and out. These ships often carry ten thousands of gold, overseas treasures and other items, and some ships carry more. A ship arrives at Macao, Xiangshan county, it first reports to the county government, then notices the provincial government secretariat officials who will order the shipping goods market department and the county government to check the ship..... The shipping goods market department gets the tax which is about 10% of goods values. This is the income of the shipping goods market department without any risk, punishment and toils. (Zhou, 1985, p.34)

Obviously, in order to manage the growing trade between Portugal and China, Macao as the "transshipment port"

and “hub” should have a management administration and the shipping goods market department was the right administration taking the responsibility. In 1930s, the China and Portugal relationship history expert Mr. Zhang Tianze also pointed out the importance of the shipping goods market department in Portugal and China trade: in the context of Portugal and China trade expansion,

Chinese set up a shipping goods market department in Macao, to levy the export tax and the berth tax. When a ship arrived at the port, the inspectors would notify the department officials.....When the ship left, should notify the department officials again. (Zhang, 1988, p.117)

Therefore, this article thinks that the shipping goods market department had made a system adjustment to adapt to the new foreign trade situation.

SUMMARY

In the late Ming Dynasty, the ship goods market departments of Zhejiang and Fujian had some problems or nothing to do. However, in the Wanli period and later, the “reorganization of the authority” of the shipping goods market department made it to become a powerful administration. This state has been long ignored by many scholars. The paper makes a preliminary exploration about the causes. A key factor is that the chief tax inspector Li Feng who was in charge of the taxes of Guangdong Province gave the department a great power in the late Wanli period. However, it is more important to have the economic factors: First, in the early Ming Dynasty, “Private foreign trade is not allowed by the law” but the foreign trade was gradually opened up since the mid of Ming Dynasty. The traditional management experience of the ship goods market department helped the department to strengthen its own power in the battle for the trade tax right; second, the Portuguese came and promoted the development of Guangdong trade and Macao port’s opening. The “reorganization of the authority” of the shipping goods market department was to strengthen its management over the growing trade between Portugal and China, and Macao, the “transshipment port” and “hub.” However, ending the system was irreversible, and the department’s power surge only lasted for a short time in the late Ming Dynasty. The functional enhancement of the department was the preparation for another foreign trade management system — the modern customs system. “Reorganization” is used in the title of this article. It can explain the phenomenon of power increasing in Guangdong’s ship goods market department and it also refers to new factors in the old foreign trade system. The new factors were the preparation for a new system. It needs further research on these new factors’ roles in the process of the old foreign trade system changing the modern customs system.

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