

The Concept of “*Jian*” in the Qing Period: An Analysis of Regulations on the Capacity for Taking Examinations and Purchasing Degrees

by KISHIMOTO Mio

In the Qing period, “*jian* (mean)” people such as bondservants, actors and government runners were prevented from obtaining degree through examination or purchase. As the line between “mean people” and “good people” was not so clear, local conflicts often occurred where some people attacked others saying that they presumed to take an examination (or to purchase a degree) in spite of their mean status. The Qing government, in order to prevent such wrangling, had to make a series of regulations setting out in detail which jobs should be regarded as “mean” and which jobs should not. The purpose of this paper is to make clear the concept of “*jian*” commonly held by Qing people, through an analysis of these regulations and the process of local conflicts.

The common feature of the people regarded as “mean”, such as bondservants, entertainers, government runners and lower-level quasi-bureaucratic agents in rural areas, was that they engaged in service occupations under the firm control of others (i.e., masters and government officials). Those who received corporal punishment and victims of homosexual rape also could not access examination or degrees by purchase on account of their having already become filthy through these shameful experiences. Unlike outcasts of pre-modern Europe and Japan, “mean people” in China were not necessarily members of hereditary status groups. Rather, they were regarded as “mean” because of the servile relationship with others that they formed individually. As the degree of servitude varied greatly case by case, it was very difficult for the government

to make a general rule which could clearly divide “mean” and “good”. The line between the two remained ambiguous until the end of the Qing period, when the traditional status system was finally abolished.