Abstract

The Imperial Secret Service Agencies of the Ming Dynasty were the products of despotism in the latter part of traditional China. The Agencies emerged as a result of internal conflict within the ruling class. These Agencies helped to ensure the absolute power of the autocrat and they were organs used to strengthen the Emperor's position as the absolute source of power.

The Imperial Service Agencies can be categorised into two major groups: (1) the Depots (厂) (which included the Eastern Depot (东厂), the Western Depot (西厂) and the Palace Depot (内行厂)) and (2) the Embroidered Guards (锦衣卫). There is a major difference between these two groups. While the former group was presided over by an eunuch, the latter was taken under the charge of a military general.

Despite this institutional difference, the two groups of Agencies were actually very closely related. Firstly, officers for the Eastern and Western Depots were usually selected from the Embroidered Guards. Secondly, both groups undertook the common task of spying
on the court officials and the common people in order to report to the
autocrat in power. Thirdly, both groups only took orders from the
Emperor and were under the direct control of the Emperor.

Since the establishment of the Imperial Secret Service Agencies
in the Yongle (永乐) period, they had been used by successive Ming
emperors till the end of the dynasty. Thus they had definite
influence on the development of the Ming Dynasty.

This study consisting of six chapters, attempts to give an
objective view of the establishment of the Imperial Secret Service
Agencies of the Ming Dynasty. Chapter one reiterates the purpose
and area of my study. Chapter two focuses on the establishment of
these agencies, while chapter three analyses its composition. The
development of these agencies throughout the Ming Dynasty is
classified in chapter four. Chapter five gives an examination of the
Ming’s Secret Service Agencies and the political development in the
Chinese history. The concluding chapter evaluates the historical
significance of the Imperial Secret Service Agencies of the Ming
Dynasty.