

The relief granary system of the Ming dynasty began during the reign of Ming Tai-tsu (r.1368–1398) who invited a group of elders to contribute cash or grain for relief purposes. Later, all provinces and districts in China were ordered by the imperial government to carry out a similar program. The program worked so well that local governments had a large amount of grain reserves to meet emergencies whenever they arose. Unfortunately this remarkable system was allowed to deteriorate as time went on.

When Yü Ch'ien³⁰ was the governor-general of Honan and Shansi, he revived the relief granary system within his jurisdiction. When Chou Ch'en³¹ was a governor in the south, he likewise restored a system known as "granaries for farmers'

relief."³² Successful as his program was, other governors were unable to duplicate it.

During the Cheng-t'ung period (1436–1449) a new law was enacted to punish more severely those who had committed robbery. People who had been convicted of this crime would be exiled to the frontier, and their wives, if any, would be confiscated by the government. Meanwhile, a man would be officially classified as a "righteous citizen"³³ if he chose to make a contribution of 1,500 piculs of grain to the government; as a "righteous citizen," his household would be exempt from miscellaneous corvée duties. The poor who received one picul of polished rice in a year of famine were required to pay to the lender, namely, the government, 2.5 piculs of unpolished rice in some future time when there was a bumper crop.

In the third year of Hung-chih (1490) an imperial decree stipulated the minimum amount of grain reserve for each community as follows: 15,000 piculs for a community of 100 square *li*, 20,000 piculs for a community of 400 square *li*, 15,000 piculs for a military unit of one "thousand," and 300 piculs for a military unit of one "hundred."³⁴ The grain reserve of each community was to be inspected from time to time, and the official-in-charge was to be rewarded or punished in accordance with the fulfillment or non-fulfillment of the grain quota within his jurisdiction. If the grain reserve was more than 30 percent below the assigned quota, his salary as an official would be proportionally reduced. If it was more than 60 percent, he would be demoted and transferred.

In the eighth year of Hung-chih (1505) a law was enacted to allow criminals to redeem their crimes by paying fines in grain which would be then stored for relief purposes. Officials who had been convicted of corruption and bribery were allowed to do likewise.

A decree issued during the Cheng-te period (1506–1521) stated that a prisoner upon whom the court had imposed a fine could pay to the government's granary an amount of grain equivalent to 80 percent of the imposed fine. Military officials who had committed crimes were allowed to do likewise. Meanwhile they were put under probation until they performed new deeds to redeem themselves. Prior to this time each granary had been headed by a specially designated official who was solely responsible for its operation. This post was then abolished, and the prefectural and district magistrates, together with the regular granary officials, were placed in charge of the granaries within their territorial jurisdiction.

In the first year of Chia-ching (1522) Ku Ting-ch'en³⁵ presented the emperor³⁶ with a memorial which read as follows: "During the Ch'eng-hung period (1465–1505) the yearly grain surplus of each community was transferred to the relief granary to meet whatever emergency might arise. Now that the autumn harvests of each community are barely large enough to meet the grain require-

ment of the government, there is not a single kernel that goes to the relief granary. Whenever a natural disaster occurs, local officials, as a matter of routine, will petition the imperial government to allow them to retain part of the grain for relief, the grain that has been assigned for other uses. Meanwhile, they try to borrow from the wealthy for the same purpose. I beg Your Majesty to quickly restore the ever-ready granary system in order to benefit all people in the empire."

Upon receiving this memorial the emperor ordered responsible officials to store and accumulate paddy rice and other types of grain by whatever means at their command so that the ever-normal granary system of ancient times could be successfully revived. Poor people were entitled to borrow from the ever-normal granary in the spring, on the condition that they would pay their debt in the fall after harvests had been collected. No interest would be charged on these transactions. The law stated that for lending purposes each prefecture was required to maintain a grain reserve of 10,000 piculs; each district from 4,000 to 5,000 piculs; and each subprefecture from 2,000 to 3,000 piculs. As the size of each jurisdictional area increased, the amount of grain reserves should also be increased, from 15,000 piculs for an area of 100 square *li* to 190,000 piculs for a region of 640,000 square *li*.

The grain reserves, though successfully accumulated, were reduced year after year, as poor people continued to buy grain from the government at bargain prices. By the Lung-ch'ing period (1567-1572) a large prefecture had no more than 6,000 piculs in reserve, while a small city had only 1,000 piculs. While grain reserves continued to decrease, the penalty for violating the granary law was also reduced. During the middle years of the Wan-li period (1573-1619) a large prefecture had a grain reserve of no more than 3,000 piculs, while a small city had as little as 100 piculs. The officials-in-charge regarded the law as something to be conveniently ignored; when the imperial government reprimanded them for their inactivity, they merely fabricated figures to hide their own failures.

During the Hung-chih period (1488-1505) Lin Ching, governor of Kiangsi, petitioned the imperial government for the reestablishment of ever-normal and communal granaries. However, it was not until the eighth year of Chia-ching (1529) that the government finally decided to establish communal granaries in all the provinces. According to the royal decree, every twenty to thirty households were to form a commune, and each commune was to be headed by a commune chief, chosen from those who were wealthy and upright. He was to be assisted by a deputy chief, chosen from those who were known for their fairness and impartiality, and by a secretary-treasurer who knew his calligraphy and arithmetic. They were to meet on the first and the fifteenth days of each month to discuss matters concerning the communal granary. All households in the commune were to be divided into three groups: the high income, the middle income, and the low income; and each was to contribute an amount of grain to the communal granary. The amount ranged from one to four pecks per year, depending upon the group to which the household belonged. A 5 percent levy was added to each peck of contributions to allow in advance for its forthcoming depreciation. Only people from the high-income households were eligible for assuming the duty of collecting contributions.

In a year of famine, the decree continued, people of the high-income households could borrow from the communal granary if their harvests were inadequate to meet their expenses, but they would have to return the amount they borrowed

once there was a good year. People of middle- or low-income households, on the other hand, could draw from the communal granary an amount in proportion to their needs without assuming any obligation to return it in a future date. Local officials were required to keep account of each of these transactions, and the books they kept were to be filed with the provincial governor. Moreover, the grain reserves in a communal granary were to be verified by on-the-spot inspections each year. Should it be found empty, the commune chief would be fined by an amount equivalent to one year of his harvests.

This system was unquestionably sound, but unfortunately few of the communities had the necessary resources to make it last in a later period.

²⁹ *Ming shih*, roll 79.

³⁰ One of the greatest statesmen of the Ming dynasty; was put to death by emperor Ming Yin-chung in 1458 on a charge of alleged treason.

³¹ See p. 245, Footnote 34.

³² *Chi-nung ts'ang*.

³³ *Yi min*.

³⁴ Under the imperial garrison system (called *wei-so*) of the Ming dynasty, garrisons of various strength were stationed throughout the empire. A garrison unit of one "hundred" had actually 112 men; that of one "thousand" had actually 1,200 men. The largest unit was *wei* ("guard") which had 5,600 men.

³⁵ Ku Ting-ch'en, a native of Kunshan (modern Kiangsu province), received the highest honor in the *chin-shih* examination of 1505; he died in 1540 after serving the Ming government in a variety of capacities.

³⁶ Ming Shih-tsung (r.1522-1566).