

SPECIAL ISSUE

A Crisis of Competence: Information, Corruption, and Knowledge about the Decline of the Qing State

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This article elaborates on the claim of this special issue that “bureaucratic actions” are “knowledge practices” that have “the power to both make and break social and material worlds” to question the standard assumption that the Qing state became increasingly corrupt over the course of the long nineteenth century. It examines the evolution of the Qing information regime in one field—prison administration—to elucidate the relationship between information *about* the Qing state and knowledge *of* it. By reviewing how processes of enhanced reporting led to greater regulation and scrutiny, the first portion of this article argues that reporting processes that have seemed (both to Qing actors and historians) to be straightforward requests for information led over time to subtle but profound shifts in the epistemological and administrative foundations of the Qing state. It then demonstrates how Qing actors themselves engaged in discourses of corruption that eventually evolved into revolutionary critique and, finally, historiographical commonplace. The article concludes with the suggestion that although an abundance of information *about* the rise of corruption throughout the Qing administration appears from the middle of the eighteenth century onward, neither historians nor Qing actors themselves have distinguished between the growth of information alone and the growth of corruption itself.

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Historians generally date the decline of the Qing (1644–1912), China’s last imperial dynasty, at a point early in its history. Although the exact mechanisms and timing of dynastic decline are unclear, scholars uniformly locate a turning point somewhere in the second half of the reign of the Qianlong Emperor (r. 1735–1796), making the collapse of the Qing the product of a very long nineteenth century beginning sometime in the second half of the eighteenth century and climaxing with the 1911 Xinhai Revolution. In particular, the Qianlong-Jiaqing transition in the last decade of the eighteenth century and the eruption of the White Lotus Rebellions (1794–1804) are considered watershed events that separated the prosperous High Qing from the prolonged chaos and confusion that followed in the nineteenth century.¹ The nineteenth century is portrayed as the period in which “the government of China had grown steadily weaker, more ineffective, and more corrupt.”² It is known as an era of “administrative entropy” and stands out in the history of the Qing as a century of “*années de crise*.”³

Explanations differ about how and why the Qing is supposed to have entered an era of decline sometime late in the eighteenth century. Some scholars have pointed to the overwhelming burden the state encountered in the face mounting population growth, which skewed the ratio between subjects and officials so heavily

¹ Mann Jones and Kuhn, “Dynastic Decline,” 107.

² Wright, *Last Stand of Chinese Conservatism*, 11.

³ Kuhn, “T’uan-lien,” 228; and Will, “Histoire de la Chine Moderne,” 762.

that the Qing bureaucrats were out-peopled.⁴ Other studies have emphasized the link between the wealth of the age and the rise of excess and greed among both local and central officials.⁵ Under-monitored and tasked with an excessively heavy administrative burden, officials throughout the empire are supposed to have resorted to “informal” practices for governing the populace.⁶

Whether viewed as methods of last resort by well-meaning but overwhelmed bureaucrats or as exploitative predation by the scholar-official class, scholars tend to characterize these “informal” practices as corruption. The labeling of such practices as corruption has led to a broad consensus among scholars that corruption was the terminal condition of the Qing state in spite of disagreement about how to explain it or its origins. The resulting confusion and fascination have generated so much scholarship that the field of late imperial history can be said to have engendered an entire sub-field of “corruption studies.”⁷

This article offers a proposition that qualifies the narrative of corruption and decline: that the very information-gathering processes used by the Qing central state to *reduce* corruption were precisely what spurred the growth of *reports of* corruption. The key condition under which this paradox operated was that, as a massive territorial bureaucracy, the Qing relied on the large-scale collection and scrutiny of information to govern its officials. Central officials targeted potential problems by expanding the empire’s information regime in order to bring local administrative activity in the provinces under the purview of the central administration. When they were successful in expanding the information net across the vast provincial territories, the result was both enhanced control and, ironically, greater concern about what seemed to be an increasing prevalence of corruption.

There were three distinct but interwoven components of the expansion of the Qing information regime—reporting, regulation, and review. Each of these information-based tools of administrative control were mainstays of the central state’s attempt to overcome the gap between local administrative activities and central oversight. In their ubiquity, they are unremarkable. But in their combined growth and in the proliferation of information that resulted from their greater implementation, they created an imperial information regime that constituted nothing short of a revolution in the epistemological foundations of the Qing state. The result—which only became apparent after more than a century—was a complete transformation in the way that the Qing understood itself.

By the dawn of the nineteenth century, a massive reporting and auditing apparatus tied central state documentary processes closer to local administrative ones than any previous government in Chinese history. But this fundamental revolution in central-local interactions has gone unnoticed in part because it is a story whose elements unfolded across several generations. The Qing information regime expanded piecemeal over more than a century through the efforts of officials who were not consciously working towards a common purpose. As a result, changes at one point in time might not bear fruit until one or two generations later, making the repercussions of multiple reforms difficult to attribute to one action or one author.

The slowly accreting multitude of information demands by the central state were not intended to revolutionize the Qing’s self-conception but rather to target a legion of seemingly mundane administrative loopholes and idiosyncrasies. Using the example of prison administration, the first half of this article looks at innovations in information collection that led to regulatory expansion and increasing accountability in multiple, self-proliferating cycles. In their sum, the innovations instituted in the first one hundred years of the Qing—from 1644 to the middle of the eighteenth century—transformed the relationship between the central state and the local administrations acting on its behalf in the provinces.⁸

Eventually, the accumulation of these incremental increases in information about local governance led to a fundamentally new understanding in Beijing of what was happening across the territories of the empire. The result of this gradual and unplanned epistemological shift was existential despair. In a poignant irony,

⁴ For examples of the “expanding population, static bureaucracy” argument, see Liu, “Nineteenth-Century China”; Wakeman, *Fall of Imperial China*, 150; Hsü, *Rise of Modern China*, 126; and Kuhn, *Origins*, 4–5.

⁵ For such examples, see Wakeman, *Fall of Imperial China*, 103–5; Fairbank et al., *East Asia*, 107–16; Hsü, *Rise of Modern China*, 42, 125; and Elliott, *Emperor Qianlong*, 157.

⁶ For a seminal account of this kind of “informal” state activity, see Zelin, *Magistrate’s Tael*. A more recent portrait can be found in Will, “Corrupt Histories.”

⁷ The field of “corruption studies” is large and diverse. It includes documentary collections, such as the *Heshen Secret Archives* and the *Qianlong Corruption Archival Selection*, both published by the Number One Historical Archives; surveys of the broad phenomenon of corruption in the Qing, such as Park, “Corruption”; detailed studies of specific instances of malfeasance, such as Kaske, “Metropolitan Clerks”; and Gabbiani, “Corruption and its Enemies”; local histories of corruption, such as those collected in Antony and Leonard, *Dragons, Tigers, and Dogs*; and studies on famous “corruption cases” involving high-profile officials, such as Niu, *Qing Court Sanctions*. For an in-depth exploration of the flaws of the most common strands of corruption-driven decline narratives, see Akcetin, “Corruption at the Frontier.”

⁸ For a broader and more detailed sketch of these processes on a large scale, see Dykstra, *Empire of Routine*.

the growth of the information regime designed to keep local administrations in the territories in check led instead to an “information trap” that guaranteed the Qing state would see more corruption wherever it tried to stamp it out. The very moment the central state’s knowledge about the local administrations reached its zenith, the central court’s faith in its own bureaucracy reached its nadir.

The dread created by the growing recognition of the scope of local administrative activities that lay beyond the central state’s purview can be tracked in the evolution of discourses of corruption over time. The spread and radicalization of these discourses of corruption from the eighteenth to the early twentieth century are discussed in the second half of this article. Discussions about corruption during the Yongzheng Era (1723–1735) involved what could only be discerned at the time as the vague outline of a problem that had only recently become perceptible to the central court. In contrast, the Jiaqing Emperor (r. 1796–1820), who inherited and presided over the most information-full administration in Qing history to date, despaired of a crisis that seemed to reflect the decay of the moral fiber of the state itself. The more information the central state possessed, the more convinced it became of its own irredeemable character. It was precisely this discourse of corruption that emerged from the dismay of self-recognition that was picked up by revolutionaries and reformers in the late nineteenth century and then carried forth by historians into the present day.

“Death by Prison” and Information Problems in the Early Qing

There was no such thing as punishment via imprisonment in Qing China—detention in a state facility was only a prelude to trial or an expedient for those awaiting corporal punishment. As such, only the most dangerous criminals were supposed to be held in custody for extended periods of time. This did not mean that imprisonment was an uncommon phenomenon in the Qing. In fact, stories of abuse and deaths in prison are abundantly documented in Qing sources. But since imprisonment was not itself a punishment that fell under the purview of the court in Beijing, the early Qing central state had no direct information on prisons in the provinces.

The absence of information did not reflect the absence of a problem. But without a systematic information regime to monitor activity in the empire’s thousands of local prisons, the only way the throne could obtain information about both individual and large-scale problems was through extraordinary communications outside of routine information channels from individuals with local knowledge. The first time that such a report became the subject of imperial discussion was in 1651 (seven years after the Qing conquest). That year, the young Shunzhi Emperor received a report about prisoners crowding the jails under the jurisdiction of the metropolitan administration in Beijing. In a rescript to a memorial on one particular case of overcrowding that arrived shortly after this report, the Shunzhi Emperor opined:

We have been pondering: the empire is so vast; how many people have died in its many prisons? Some die of illness. Some die of hunger. Some die from the torture they receive. Some even die as a result of the plots of depraved and cruel wardens. All of these pitiful fates: they are so numerous they cannot be counted. We are deeply aggrieved by it... . Those prisoners who die under the force of the law do so because it is fitting for their crime. But what about the others: those who, without guilt, perish from perversion of justice... ?⁹

The Shunzhi Emperor issued a decree insisting that local officials clean up their prisons to prevent such injustices. But seven years later, in 1658, Wei Yijie (魏裔介, 1616–1686), an official in the Censorate, reported that the judicial commissioners responsible for clearing cases and overseeing prisons were still not fulfilling their duties properly. He reported that thousands of legal cases were piling up in the provinces. The Shunzhi Emperor’s decree to clean up the administration of local prisons was clearly a dead letter.

Obviously, imperial fiat alone was inadequate to resolve the problem. The tools of reporting, regulation, and review were therefore brought to bear on the problem of “death by prison.” Since these were paperwork solutions, they had to be implemented over extended periods of time. First, information would have to be gathered from new reporting channels and requirements. Once information from these new sources accumulated, additional, more detailed regulations for resolving the problems of the empire’s prison administration could be written. Over time, compliance with the new reporting requirements and the regulations that followed could be enforced. Once the territorial bureaucracies had been coaxed and threatened into adhering to these empire-wide standards, the central state could finally demand audits and reviews of local practices from provincial supervisors.

⁹ SZSL, 8.3.8.

Reporting

Gathering information was the first step. Without information about the individuals being held in prisons throughout the empire, no effective exercise of power over their condition could be attempted. In the same memorial in which he bemoaned the current state of the empire's prisons, Wei Yijie elaborated a grand scheme that would allow the central state to discipline the territorial officials who were not complying with the imperial decree. The first step was to demand information about local conditions:

In every prefecture and county, each season the presiding official should create a register of all the criminals in the local prisons, in addition to an account of the reason for their imprisonment, the dates of their imprisonment, the official under whose tenure they were tried, and the reason their case has yet to be resolved.¹⁰

With these measures, all local offices would be required to generate new types of information about those being held under their authority. After reporting this information at the local level, Wei proposed supervising offices could be required to review and discipline the local officials below them. In this manner, behavior that was in violation of existing dynastic regulations could be flagged and punished.

Furthermore, provincial officials could be required to forward both summary reports and updates on extraordinary problems to Beijing “so that the central ministries will have some basis for investigating and examining the situation. In this manner,” Wei concluded, “the system of justice and imprisonment will be rectified, and offenders will not be left to rot in the jails and thus offend the harmony between Heaven and Earth.”

The Shunzhi Emperor forwarded Wei's proposal to the relevant capital ministries for deliberation, and shortly thereafter the Ministry of Punishment submitted a recommendation that “Henceforth, every prefecture and county should create a seasonal register detailing the date and circumstances of each prisoner's internment as well as the official responsible for each case and the reason why the case had not yet been resolved.”¹¹ These reports were to be sent to the circuit officials and then to the governor of each province for investigation.

As indicated by the Ministry of Punishment's more modest proposal made in response to Wei's memorial, the first step—both the easiest and the one without which no others could proceed—was demanding that local offices gather and report information. Attaching sanctions and review demands from Wei's proposal to this information at the outset could have killed the initiative in its inception: requiring local officials to generate reports was an altogether different matter than requiring them to generate reports that would lead immediately to disciplinary action by provincial supervisors and the central ministries. While reasonable and ultimately true to the eventual goals of the Qing development of central-local reporting and provincial disciplinary responsibilities, the ambition of Wei's proposal endangered its initial implementation. As a consequence, the Qing court began its reform of the prison system with a straightforward insistence on reporting before making further demands.

Regulation

Once information about the nature and scale of the problem of “death by prison” became increasingly available to the central state, it could begin to regulate the activities it deemed most harmful. The regulation of prisons started in the 1670s, roughly a generation after Beijing first demanded new reports on prisons in the provinces. The more information the state collected about local detention practices, the more dense the regulatory framework became. All manner of regulations pertaining to the maintenance of and reporting about prisons were compiled over the course of the next one hundred and twenty-five years.

The growing amount of information available to the Qing court led not only to a marked increase in the sheer number of regulations, but also an expansion of regulatory frameworks into new fields of local governance over time. As new reporting mechanisms connected more and more quotidian aspects of territorial administration to the central court, the field of possible activities falling under central dictates grew. The development of reporting mechanisms capable of enforcing these regulations led to the proliferation of more detailed expectations. The result was the growth of increasingly concrete and detailed expectations by the central state about day-to-day administration at the local level.

¹⁰ Wei, *Literary Collection*, Memorials, “A Memorial on the Ming Censorial Offices.”

¹¹ SZSL, 15.5.4.

Many of these new regulations were not the product of imperial *fiat* but were based on memorials from high provincial officials reporting policy suggestions derived from the new information being gathered at the local level. Problems in local administrations throughout the Qing provinces resulted in a corresponding variety of regulatory proposals by provincial officials to the central ministries. Deadlines for handling cases were established and refined to prevent unnecessary delays.¹² Regulations on the transfer of prisoners became increasingly detailed.¹³ Administrative sanctions for those who abused prisoners or failed to report such abuse were called for and implemented.¹⁴ Accountability for “death by prison” was implemented piecemeal with increasingly specific and concrete punishments for officials under whose jurisdiction prisoners died in prison.¹⁵ Regulations on the timely transport of prisoners were elaborated.¹⁶ Even regulations against less likely sources of abuse—such as local officials claiming that a prisoner did not exist in order to delay a transfer—were eventually instated.¹⁷ The more information high-level provincial officials and the central ministries gathered about potential problems, the more forms of state intervention sprung up. The result of more information was more regulation.

The expansion of the provincial and central administrations into previously unmonitored fields of local activity led in turn to new reporting demands.¹⁸ There is a clear feedback loop in the chronology of the central state’s expansion of its oversight: new reports led to new regulations, which in turn led to new reports. As the Qing central bureaucracy demanded more information on local operations of prisons (and other institutions), it began to establish a host of regulatory standards for governing local administrations.

Review

The elaboration of reporting and regulation necessitated the growth of a third area of the Qing information regime: review. The review of reports about local conditions and administrative procedures—a series of activities organized predominantly in the Censorate and its functionaries in the various metropolitan ministries in Beijing—was a critical component of the operation of the massive Qing state. But the critical process of scrutinizing reports was threatened by the very expansion of the administration into new and more detailed areas of local activity. By the end of the Kangxi Emperor’s reign in the first quarter of the eighteenth century, the Qing state had already created so much information about case handling in the provinces that it began to address the possibility of having too much information to wade through effectively.

The Yongzheng Emperor adopted a novel approach to this dilemma: requiring provincial supervisors to supplement the efforts of censors in Beijing by reviewing the regular reports of their own subordinates. In a 1727 edict, he demanded a new level of reporting on prisons in the provinces. But this new requirement—unlike the ones before it—would not result in reports being forwarded to Beijing. Rather, the emperor mandated that an in-province review of the information be made and only pertinent information be forwarded to Beijing later:

All of the case-trying *yamen* of the territories will each month create a register, to be reported to the governor of the province for inspection. If there are any instances of illegitimate imprisonment or related abuses, a memorial should be drafted for deliberation on appropriate sanctions. If the governor does not send a memorial, but the malfeasance is discovered through other means instead, then the governor will be punished together with the responsible official.¹⁹

This is the first time in Qing regulations on handling prison cases that the regular reporting and auditing procedures that existed to ensure censorial oversight in the ministries were explicitly extended to the provinces (with the gubernatorial officials acting in the place of the Censorate). Many of the Kangxi-era regulations had presumed that some sort of auditing mechanism existed in the provinces. And, indeed, the responsibility of provincial supervisors for the reported actions of their subordinates had long since been

¹² See the regulations from the thirteenth and eighteenth years of the Shunzhi reign at DQHD, Ministry of Personnel, Deadlines for Imperially-Mandated and Ministerial Affairs being Handled in the Provinces.

¹³ DQHD, Ministry of Personnel, Office of Evaluation, Trial, Transfer of Prisoners.

¹⁴ KXSL, 22.7.27.

¹⁵ KXSL, 9.11.18.

¹⁶ DQHD, Ministry of Personnel, Office of Evaluation, Trial, Impermissible Instruments of Punishment.

¹⁷ DQHD, Ministry of Punishment, Penal Laws, Capture, Deadlines for the Capture of Bandits.

¹⁸ See, for example, the eighteenth-century regulations on reporting cross-provincial prisoner transfers and delays at DQHD, Ministry of Punishment, Penal Laws, Capture, Deadlines for the Capture of Bandits.

¹⁹ See the 1727 regulation at DQHD, Ministry of Punishment, Personnel Laws, Forms, Inspections and Procedures for Official Documents, Inspecting Documentary Files.

foreshadowed in the Shunzhi-era proposal of Wei Yijie. But no such concrete policy could be implemented until two generations of reporting and regulatory groundwork had been laid. Only in the second quarter of the eighteenth century could the Yongzheng Emperor extend requirements for a report-and-audit mechanism into the territorial bureaucracy.

After requiring the handling of cases and prisoners be documented, reported, and reviewed by provincial administrations, more specific reporting requirements were introduced. Cycles of new information and regulation arose in response to the expansion of review, and vice versa. New regulations demanded that more and more activities be reported and supervised through provincial review. Once the mechanisms for reviewing prison administration at the county level were established in the prefectures, new requirements could be instituted in realms where no routine documentation had previously existed. Thus, prison-specific reports and review procedures proliferated over time.²⁰

The institution and expansion of in-province review was the cumulative and unprecedented achievement of earlier advances in reporting and regulation. For only with predictable streams of information about local performance and exceedingly clear and enforceable regulations about administrative practice could the duty of scrutinizing and punishing local practices be delegated to provincial officials with any expectation of fidelity to central standards. The institution of in-province review of local prison administration thus reflected a fundamental shift in the relationship between central mandates, local official activities, and the role of the provincial administrations in demanding compliance with dynastic policies. With this shift, the central state was finally able, in the middle of the eighteenth century, to do what Wei Yijie had imagined almost a century before: demand that provincial supervisors hold local officials accountable for enforcing dynastic regulations in a realm previously ungoverned (and, indeed, unseen) by the ministries in Beijing.

These advances in reporting, regulation, and review resulted in several new layers of paperwork and administrative oversight, which paved the way for routine government supervision over areas previously unregulated by the Qing state.²¹ Massive compendia of new regulations were compiled in the seventeenth century to aid territorial officials in keeping track of the ever-proliferating regulations of the dynasty.²² And entire new genres of administrative handbooks were invented over the course of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, which also witnessed an unprecedented boom in the circulation and reproduction of materials related to the duties of local officials.²³

Discourses of Corruption from the Long Nineteenth Century: Statecraft and its Discontents

The net effect of the unfolding of innovations in reporting, regulation, and review over the first century of Qing rule was the increasing *routinization* of administrative affairs in the provinces, all the way down to the county level. As the sources, standards, and handling of information were expanded and integrated, the central ministries became incrementally more able to hold officials accountable for a wider range of quotidian administrative activities. These achievements were not constrained to the world of prison management alone. Cycles of reporting, regulation, and review brought the central state closer to local administration in every major field of governance over the course of the eighteenth century.²⁴

The growth of reporting, regulation, and review in the nineteenth century is linked with the rise of the “practical statecraft” (*jingshi* 經世) movement. *Jingshi* texts emphasized concrete problems of governance, the efficient conduct of local administration, and the cultivation of the technical and professional skills of the bureaucratic elite.²⁵ Practical administrative handbooks proliferated.²⁶ Officials of every level and distinction debated how to make pragmatic and flexible policies for implementing the increasingly stringent regulatory

²⁰ See, for example, the chronology of regulatory growth documented at DQHD, Ministry of Punishment, Penal Code, Trial, Purposeful Imprisonment or Judicial Torture of Commoners, and the reporting requirements for prisoner illnesses mandated at QLSL, 21.5.27.

²¹ Note, for example, the number of reports required in Xue, *A Few Doubts*, Personnel Laws, Forms, Inspections and Procedures for Official Documents, Inspecting Documentary Files, sub-statute 03.

²² These include the compilation of the *Legal Code* of 1646; the *Current Sub-Statutes* of 1680 (a temporary expedient before the compilation of the *Collected Institutions*) and the *Collected Institutions* ordered to be compiled by the Kangxi Emperor in 1684.

²³ For an understanding of the scope and volume of the production of statecraft manuals in the nineteenth century, see Will et al., *Handbooks and Anthologies*.

²⁴ For further documentation and discussion of the broadening of administrative scrutiny in this period, see Dykstra, *Empire of Routine*.

²⁵ On the statecraft movement, its seminal texts, and its position in the wider intellectual context of the era, see Janku “Preparing the Ground”; Elman, “Relevance of Sung”; Shen, “Tseng Kuo-Fan”; and Kuhn, “Ideas.”

²⁶ Will, “Political Theory.”

requirements of the central ministries. Discussions about ubiquitous, local, and large-scale administrative challenges facing the nineteenth-century state became increasingly common.²⁷

In addition to voluminous compendia and diverse treatises on the art of administration, the statecraft movement of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries also gave rise to new ways of understanding administrative problems. From a certain perspective, then, the nineteenth century might be considered a golden age of administration. But, as the following sections discuss, the spread of administrative savvy came at a cost. For the preoccupation with a growing range of administrative behaviors and challenges led not only to more strategies for practical governance but also to more concerns about the problems of administration.

The growth of the Qing information regime is directly reflected in the development of discourses of corruption in historical sources. Early discussions of corruption in the Yongzheng era reflected the manner in which increased information demands gave rise to concern about the “rote” in “routine;” the shadowy figure of the clerk and the impenetrable world of “bureaucratic custom” presented themselves as targets for state intervention in the early eighteenth century. By the turn of the nineteenth century, as the elaboration of the information regime penetrated an increasing number of local administrative realms, the ever-expanding cycles of reporting, regulation, and review led to a growing conviction that the state was incapable of handling the work it had only recently generated. By the dawn of the twentieth century, these historical discourses of corruption were put to work for reformist, polemical, and revolutionary purposes.

Bureaucratic Custom

By the end of the Yongzheng Emperor’s reign in 1735, the Qing state had conquered many realms of administrative ignorance. A host of new reports, regulations, and levels of review kept the central ministries and the heads of provincial administrations apprised of activities that in previous eras would have gone unnoticed. But, not coincidentally, the very moment the information net was at its most effective, the men at the top of this growing bureaucracy in Beijing became convinced it was at its most ineffective.

Two phantoms haunted this age: the specter of “bureaucratic custom” and the boogeyman of the wicked clerk. Since early on in the Qing, the phrase “bureaucratic custom”—meaning literally “accumulated practices (*ji xi* 積習)” —had been used to characterize all the local administrative practices that determined how cases would be handled beyond the broad strokes outlined by central regulations. It was a decidedly negative characterization of all the quotidian routines, ad hoc regulations, and administrative formulae that local offices relied on to produce the work demanded by the central court. Looked upon as an arcane collection of tricks and methods developed by low-level bureaucrats to fulfill the central court’s requirements to the letter (even if not the spirit), the phrase was used only when alluding to the problems of the provincial administrations. Never a label for a specific particular practice, it referred to all of the practices that in their sum gave rise to malfeasance and delay.

The boogeyman of “bureaucratic custom” was the *yamen* clerk.²⁸ The *yamen* clerk’s familiarity with the intricacies of the bureaucracy made these literate-but-not-*literati* government agents seem like puppet masters pulling the strings of the officials nominally presiding in the *yamen* of the empire. As the Yongzheng Emperor himself opined in a 1733 edict:

We have heard that in the *yamen* of the governors-general, governors, fiscal commissioners, and judicial commissioners in the heartland provinces there are clerks handling the cases in the archival and drafting offices. All promotions and demotions, all sentencing cases, all affairs pertaining to the collection of revenue are—without exception—drafted by these men who examine the appropriate regulations. They are drawn up for execution and transmission, and then the presiding officer merely modulates the contents slightly before approving an order on the basis of the draft.²⁹

The critical yet banal form of labor the clerk performed inverted the hierarchy of authority. As the Yongzheng Emperor concluded, this meant that the individuals who determined the character of administration on the ground were not those empowered by the central state to do so:

²⁷ On the popularity of statecraft among the members of the lower ranks of the bureaucracy, see Mitchell, “Limits of Reformism,” 182. On the emphasis on local government inherent in the philosophy of the school of practical statecraft, see Shen, “Tseng Kuo-fan,” 68.

²⁸ For a more on clerks in the Qing, see Reed, *Talons and Teeth*.

²⁹ YZSL, 11.8.25.

This is how the clerks of the *yamen* gain control over all of [an office's] affairs. They run loose, and partake of every form of abuse [in spite of the fact that] ... it is the governors-general, the governors, the fiscal commissioners, and the judicial commissioners who have been handed the trust and responsibility of the dynasty.

The very quotidian nature of these problems rendered bureaucratic expertise itself a stumbling block. Those who were supposed to have authority were rendered ignorant—mere tools of their subordinates:

There are none among [the governors] who knowingly permit this kind of wanton abuse. But these practices have accumulated for long periods of time, and in accepting them the officials who preside over the *yamen* are unaware of their implications. They are concealed by the army of functionaries, who strive to keep them in the dark.

For officials and emperors in Beijing, clerks seemed to sit at the intersection of every earnest attempt to communicate and scrutinize information from the provinces. The unnamed, untitled, uncultured figure of the clerk was the very embodiment of the information concerns about the central bureaucracy and an easy scapegoat for local officials.

Nevertheless, although condemnations of “bureaucratic custom” placed the clerk at the fore, behind the specter of the vilification of clerks was a more fundamental concern about the extent to which the routinization of local administrative responsibility focused attention on the wrong details and created opportunities for manipulating the system. As much as the central state may object to it, the rubber-stamping of the provinces was a direct consequence of the scale of the administrative burden now placed on the territorial administrations. And it was a burden that would only grow heavier with time, as the Qing state further expanded its information demands, reporting requirements, and review processes to chase down the phantoms that haunted its administration.

The more reports demanded, the more regulations implemented, the more methods of enforcement invented, the more bureaucratized the administrations in the territories became. “Wicked clerks” presiding over arcane and secret bureaucratic practices were a convenient scapegoat for a more fundamental problem: any bureaucratic means of solving problems of governance demanded the requisite growth of bureaucratic expertise and specialization by provincial officials and their retainers. The result was the early modern state equivalent of a bureaucratic arms race: the more reports the central state demanded to control and scrutinize local officials, the more feverishly local officials worked to generate precisely the information the central state wanted to hear.

The Accumulation of Cases

The layers upon layers of regulation and thickets of mandated reports that accrued over the first century of the Qing's administrative development culminated in a daunting mass of information demands. The basic administrative tasks now required in local offices were insuperable for any official working alone. From the late eighteenth century forward, reports from officials in the provinces began to complain about the “piling up of cases” (積案 *ji an*). The proliferation of administrative backlogs was, in reality, the direct outcome of the *growth* of the Qing information regime and the burden it placed on local officials. At the very moment the central state was able to know about and act upon local realms that had once been invisible from Beijing, the empire's administrative machinery began to suffer under the weight of the information required to achieve the central court's ambitions. As the bureaucracy of the Qing became more aware than it had ever been of the work being done across the empire, it was also more overcome by the burden of self-reflection and more aware of its flaws than ever before. The result was disgust and dismay.

From the single, haunting figure of the clerk and the general malaise of “bureaucratic custom” in the eighteenth century, the further expansion the Qing's information regime in the nineteenth century facilitated the spread of the conviction that the very moral fiber of officialdom itself was flawed. By the middle of the eighteenth century, memorials from provincial officials arriving at their posts had already begun to frame administrative problems in terms of how to “clean up” (*qingli* 清釐 or 清理) the accumulation of cases in local offices throughout the empire.³⁰ Those entering high-level provincial offices with a large number of unresolved cases quickly reported news of case backlogs to Beijing to avoid personal responsibility for the mounting administrative disaster and to offer their own solutions to what increasingly seemed to be an

³⁰ For two such examples, see QLSL, 12.12.29 and 18.11.16.

empire-wide problem. The piling up of cases in the provinces was not new to the eighteenth century, nor even to the Qing.³¹ But complaints from the provinces about the “piling up” of cases spiked dramatically in the nineteenth century when an entire world of previously undocumented realms of local administrative practice were placed on the case dockets monitored by higher levels of the administration.

The more the central state knew about local administration, and the more information that Beijing demanded from offices in its empire, the more rapidly the category of “Affairs Not Being Handled” seemed to grow. The result of this newly available technology of administrative aggregation was panic. The piling up of cases became synonymous with a lack of discipline in the administration. Take the following 1806 decree by the Jiaqing Emperor:

Regarding the judgment and handling of affairs in the provinces: there is an extraordinary amount of delay. The supervising officers, for their part, merely push off issues by delegating them to others and only occasionally oversee affairs.³²

Because delay constituted a lapse of bureaucratic discipline, in the imperial imagination (fueled, no doubt, by compelling anecdotal evidence reported to the capital), the officials who were not busy handling the affairs piling up in their *yamen* must have instead been preoccupied with trying to ensure that their supervisors did not report them:

County officials do not take the duties of their office seriously. Every day from morn to noon they are at the *yamen* of their superiors, busily waiting upon their pleasure and exhausting themselves in pandering to and lavishing one another with attention. When it comes time to actually handling the affairs of office, they cannot but do a sloppy and hurried job. Things pile up.

Overwhelmed with frustration about an administration incapable of handling a growing number of affairs, the Jiaqing Emperor found signs of laziness and delay everywhere, even in the capital ministries. Every sign of lax behavior became more evidence of a mounting trend toward dissolution among officials:

This habitual air (*xi qi* 習氣) of wanton disregard is, further, not solely the problem of the provinces. Of late, one notices delay and piling up even among the central ministries and *yamen* of the capital. Officers in the ministries arrive at late hours. It is hard to avoid laziness and cutting corners.

Evidence of disregard for the affairs of the state seemed to be everywhere. The irony of this vitriol was the Jiaqing Emperor's failure to recognize that many of the cases piling up in offices across the empire were cases that would not have existed five, ten, or fifty years before. Lacking a ready explanation and flooded with anecdotes of ineptitude and delay, the emperor developed the conviction that he alone was striving to keep the boat from sinking:

We are diligently working every day to govern the empire. Of late, We read deep into the night by candlelight. Never do We slacken our efforts. But the ministers great and small, once they arrive at their offices, which of them enter the court early? And often when they go in to work, there are delays. How can this be considered the way of taking duties seriously and handling affairs hurriedly? As for the governors and others in the provinces who take their ease and wake up late, and all of their subordinates who while away their time in attendance on their superiors, they each lead one another on in further delay of official duties. It makes for a truly intractable problem.

Increasingly, as cases mounted and anecdotes about shirkers haunted the imagination of Qing emperors, the problem seemed to be a matter of the collective personal failures of officialdom in its entirety. As the most directly responsible for territorial affairs, the heads of the provincial administrations were made the target of much of the blame and were repeatedly told to clean up the backlog of cases mounting in provincial offices by enforcing stricter disciplinary standards:

³¹ For a good example of the framework of ‘ji an’ being used in the Ming Wanli era, see WLSL, 26.5.4. For an early Qing example, see the Shunzhi Emperor's complaint about the delays and the piling up of cases in the provinces at SZSL, 12.10.18.

³² JQSL, 11.11.17. This was later adapted into a Board of Personnel regulation at DQHD, Regulations on Sanction, Deadlines for Territorial *Yamen* Affairs.

Henceforth we must vigorously alter “bureaucratic custom.” Behavior should be reexamined and rectified. Affairs of office that ought to be attended to should be handled with diligence. Carefully we must guard against the possibility of continued delay and the piling up of problems. Against looking at “cleaning up piled-up cases” (*qingli ji'an* 清理積案) as something other than empty words recited upon the transfer of office. Only then will the officials of the land be able to support the livelihood of the people. Only then will there be some small benefit to the empire.

To increasingly panicked officials at the central court, the insuperable problem of delay took on a moral cast. Emperor after emperor exhorted his subordinates and the territorial bureaucracy to clear up case backlogs. And emperor after emperor failed. Ironically, the response to the growing panic was consistently to continue tightening the reins on provincial administrations through further information-gathering and regulation. The cycle of the shock of information and resulting dismay would begin again.

The discourse of state failure grew apace with the expansion of the Qing information regime. Early fears that ignorance had allowed injustice to prevail in the territories first led the Qing to demand more information from official channels. This “bureaucratization” of the state led, after several generations, to concerns about *pro forma* performance and wicked clerks undermining the spirit of administrative procedures while obeying the letter of them. An entire “statecraft” movement led officials to focus on the technical demands of administration while officials and emperors at the center strove to build a better mousetrap. Fears of “bureaucratic custom” eventually gave way to the clear-eyed conviction that delay, error, and rote performance of government tasks was a common phenomenon, as the state first mandated and then learned about the piling up of ever-more cases. The sobering self-recognition by the Qing state in the nineteenth-century lent an emotional or moral quality to the quandary of officialdom. The language of empire had been bureaucratized, and those at the heart of the state feared that bureaucracy was now all that remained.

Corruption in the Late-Nineteenth-Century Rhetoric of Reform

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, revolutionary rhetorics seized on this discourse of crisis. In late Qing political treatises, officialdom was consistently portrayed as overcome by the plague of bureaucracy and the disease of corruption. The very essence of the state, according to an array of authors, was threatened. Behind these chilling condemnations—many of which conflated problems of fundamentally different natures—was a range of political agendas.³³ But the enemy of bureaucracy was common to them all.

By the end of the nineteenth century, the discourse of corruption had become a commonplace. When Qing activists and intellectuals began to call for a simplified state system (whether this entailed the centralizing legal reforms of constitutionalists, on the one hand, or the decentralizing of functions of local administration to the county level, beyond central oversight, on the other), this crisis of corruption became a rallying cry for generations of reformers. No matter what their position was on the solution to the problems of the era, late Qing reformers were unified in their objection to the complexity of the nineteenth-century state and the bureaucracy whose scope had grown to unprecedented dimensions. The now common imagination of an empire full of scheming clerks became a handy rhetorical tool. The very accumulation of administrative ties between Beijing and the provinces, which had been designed to bring previously unobservable problems under the purview of the central state, was portrayed as a disaster of ridiculous dimensions.

Feng Guifen, whose *Remarks of Protest* had not made a particularly large impact at the time he wrote it in 1860, became a posthumous representative of the spirit of a new movement that focused largely on the need to reduce an overgrown state. Playing on the homophonous relationships between three characters, all pronounced *li*, Feng had declared that there were three “great evils” (大弊 *da bi*) of the contemporary age: clerks (*li* 吏), regulations (*li* 例), and profit (*li* 利):

There are those who say that today there are three great sources of malfeasance: *li* (clerks 吏), *li* (regulations 例), and *li* (profit 利). To wit: those who serve as *clerks* manipulate *regulations* for their own *profit*. All of the chaos in the empire emerges from this!³⁴

In Feng’s figuration, the sophistication of the regulatory apparatus—a direct product of the growth of the Qing information regime—was its fatal weakness:

³³ On the “constitutional crisis” of the late nineteenth century and discourses of reform in the late Qing, see Kuhn, *Origins*.

³⁴ Feng, *Remarks of Protest*, “On Provincial Statutes and Regulations.”

It is said regulations are for governing the empire. So long as regulations are constrained to constructing the basic outlines of governance, they serve as a guideline for the dynasty. But the more complicated and detailed regulations become, the more likely they are to leave the realm of reality and rationality. Ultimately, they become completely unrelated to one another. Truth and nonsense cannot be distinguished. In the end, it is unsure what was ever said.

His prescription for the confused state was a radical reduction in the number of regulations connecting the central state to the conduct of local administration:

In curing any ill, one must search for the root of the disease. When the root is expelled, the illness will right itself. The “clerical disease” of the empire is rooted in regulations: and how so? For one simple reason: because regulations and cases are too many and too complicated. It is fitting to simplify them... .

The state should be simplified to prevent the byzantine mechanisms of governance from providing a breeding ground for malfeasance. In Feng’s work as well as the many others that followed in the closing decades of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth, the conviction that the bureaucracy was getting in the way of the state engendered a common and powerful yearning for a more intimate and direct relationship between the state and its subjects.

Appointed officials were increasingly portrayed as hapless victims whose talent was buried under the weight of “bureaucratic custom.” As Zheng Guanying, author of the late nineteenth-century *Words of Warning for a Prosperous Age*, characterized the problem:

For every affair that the county official permits, there’s a clerk who says that it is not permitted... . Then it is pushed up to a high court official like a minister, deputy-minister, governor, or governor-general, who gives permission. But then a clerk sitting in some ministry revokes the permission. It is no longer permissible! ... Sometimes even the Son of Heaven grants permission. But then some clerk in some ministry refuses to grant permission. The power of the clerks therefore exceeds that of even an imperial councillor or high minister... . For their own part, clerks are merely seeking ministerial fees and nothing else guides them. And yet, for all that, what hangs in the balance of their actions is a matter of life and death to the rest!³⁵

In the politically driven reassessments of the late nineteenth century, the clerks of an overly routinized bureaucracy were presented as the *de facto* political authorities of the doomed empire. The very administration that had been painstakingly constructed out of the unrecognized and uncounted efforts of unknown myriad of officials had become a joke.

Corruption as Historical Discourse: Problem or Solution?

By the close of the nineteenth century, the Qing state was reeling from a massive information shock. The reporting and regulatory demands it had instituted to establish greater administrative accountability had led to a revolution in the way that the state understood and talked about itself. Whereas in the early Qing, local administrations had operated far beyond the margins of central state observation, by the close of the eighteenth century, the problems of county and provincial administrations had become a part of the imperial imagination. That the frustration of this incredibly ambitious enterprise culminated in a discourse of despair over the helplessly corrupt nature of an administration in the midst of an unprecedented transformation is, ultimately, a matter of small surprise.

But historians of the Qing have consistently taken these critiques for accurate representations of the problems of the nineteenth century. The extent to which modern scholars should continue to take the spread of a *discourse* of corruption as evidence of corruption *itself* must be called into question. With the growth of the Qing information regime, the central state essentially invented administrative problems that had never existed before. The empire-wide piling up of cases, reports on cases, and cases about cases were the direct result of the implementation of a system designed explicitly to bring *more information* about the operations of the local administrations to higher levels of government. Historians reproducing claims about the nature and scale of corruption of the late imperial state must, therefore, carefully distinguish

³⁵ Zheng, *Words of Warning*, “Controlling the flow, no. 3,” “Rooting out Malfeasance.”

between characterizations *in* historical sources and reliable characterizations *of* history. That “corruption” was perceived as a widespread problem in the nineteenth century after the creation of a system designed to expand oversight of local government through procedures of reporting and bureaucratic discipline should be understood first and foremost as a historical irony that must not be lost on those writing about the Qing.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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Notes on the Citation of Imperial Sources

Readers will notice that the citation of imperial sources in this article are more sparse than usual. The aim of these pared down references is to ensure ease of access in an era when members of the field can no longer be presumed to have recourse to standard print versions of imperial compilations and many scholars use digital platforms to access historical texts. When citing an entry in the *Veritable Records*, for example, this article includes only the date (year, month, day) of each entry as opposed to the precise page number in a specific printed edition. All dates and entries can be found at the appropriate location in a printed version of choice or at the National Institute of Korean History online version of the Ming and Qing *Veritable Records* (URL in bibliography). Similarly, when referring to laws and regulations, only the sections of the relevant regulatory compendia are cited. With this format, scholars can locate the cited source material in any edition of a Qing legal or regulatory reference so long as it was published after the date that the item was codified (usually mentioned in the text of the article). For other Qing texts, such as magistrate manuals and memorial collections, which circulate in digitized form, in compendia, and in modern typeset editions in addition to original editions and facsimiles, I cite the title, section name, and subject or essay title rather than page numbers in a particular printed edition. In this way, the relevant passage can be found in any medium, rather than having to refer to the exact same copy used by the author.

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