
LOCAL GOVERNMENT IN
CHINA UNDER THE CH'ING

T'UNG-TSU CH'Ü

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INTRODUCTION

This book attempts to describe, analyze, and interpret the structure and functioning of local government at the chou and hsien levels in the Ch'ing dynasty. The chou and hsien were the units of local government that actually carried out administration and dealt directly with the people. An understanding of how they functioned can tell us much about how the populace was ruled in imperial China. Yet no systematic and comprehensive work on this subject has ever been published in Chinese, in Japanese, or in any Western language. The few available studies on Chinese government have dealt either with the central government or with provincial government, which merely exercised a supervisory function over the administration of local government.

It is my hope that the present book will contribute to an understanding of Chinese political institutions in the Ch'ing period and thus assist comparative studies of governments in the future. Historians and social scientists, who have displayed an increasing interest in the comparison of Chinese and Western governments, have inevitably been hampered by the lack of information on the Chinese side.

Although this book is not directly concerned with bureaucratic behavior, it is also hoped that it will provide data for the science of bureaucracy and administration. There is an increasing demand in the social sciences for research on bureaucracy, yet up to the present time most works in this field have been theoretical and speculative. There is a gap, as R. K. Merton has observed, between the theoretical study of bureaucracy and empirical data.¹ There can be no doubt that all behavioral analysis must be contextual—that is, we must consider any behavior as it is actually manifested

in a concrete social and political situation. In this sense, the behavior pattern of Chinese bureaucrats in a particular political situation should also shed light on the science of administration and bureaucratic behavior in general.²

Certain basic concepts in this volume may be outlined as follows.

In dealing with the functions of local government, a distinction is made between those prescribed in administrative codes and government orders and those that were actually performed. With the latter as the chief focal point, the following questions are posed: What were the actual functions of the local government? How were they carried out and by whom? Who were the decision-makers?

The importance of the magistrate has long been recognized. But the significant role of his private secretaries has, by and large, been overlooked and deserves our special attention. As the chief advisers to the magistrates, they provide a vital key to an understanding of the local government operations.

Laws and statutes must always be a part of the data on political behavior, for they prescribe and in some ways condition the behavior of bureaucrats and the people under their jurisdiction. However, the study of a political system can never be completely adequate if it is based merely on laws and statutes. The laws are not always observed, and frequently there is a gap between the law in letter and the law in action. For this reason, I have sought to go beyond laws and administrative codes in order to construct a picture of the local government in action.

As the reader will see, this book is concerned not with the formally organized government alone. Government is conceived as a "participation in the governing process," and this concept inevitably encompasses both the "formal" and "informal" government, to use the terms of C. E. Merriam.³ Needless to say, informal government exists in different forms in different social and political structures. In China, it was in the hands of the power group called the "gentry" or the local elite. As the gentry participated in local administration, influenced and sometimes even shaped local policy, a chapter is devoted to an examination of their role in order to see how the informal government functioned, how it was related to the formal government, and how the two complemented each other. A study of Chinese local government that left out the gentry would be as incomplete as a study of the Western political system that did not include parties and other pressure groups.

While it is undeniable that regional differences existed in China in administrative as well as in social practices, my belief is that those differences were of secondary importance, and that the dominant characteristic of Ch'ing government, brought about by centralization, was uniformity. Thus, I have chosen to survey the Chinese empire as a whole, with the exception of Manchuria and certain districts governed by local tribesmen (*t'u-ssu*), which had administrative systems peculiar to themselves. This approach is only partly necessitated by the fact that data are insufficient to permit the study of specific regions in detail; a more important consideration is that a broad approach to the little-explored subject of Chinese local administration seems to me to be more meaningful.

And finally, I have chosen to deal with the entire Ch'ing dynasty rather than with one period in the dynasty. Although changes occurred from time to time throughout the dynasty, as indicated in the revision or introduction of edicts and regulations, most of these changes were technical and procedural and therefore not of major importance. Furthermore, it is only by investigating a long time span that we can discover the common patterns and characteristics of the Ch'ing administration and whether it was marked by continuity or discontinuity.

The plan of the book is as follows: The opening description of the structure of local government gives the reader a background picture of the position of the *chou* and *hsien* in the provincial government, and the administrative relationships between the different levels. One chapter is devoted to each of the five groups of personnel in the *chou* and *hsien* government: the magistrate, clerks, runners, personal servants, and private secretaries. In order to give the reader an idea of who these *yamen* workers were, what they did, and how they did it, the discussions center around such factors as recruitment, social and legal status, duties, maintenance, promotion, supervision, and disciplinary control. Chapters VII through IX deal with the functions performed by the local government. The magistrate is taken as the focal point to which all the other elements are related. Through him we are able to see the local operations as an integrated process.

To the reader who may expect a section dealing with local finance, it will soon become apparent why there is none: the Chinese local government had no revenue of its own, and the magistrate was expected to defray both office and personal expenses from his own income. No distinction was made between public and private expenses. Thus it seemed more

sensible to discuss local finance under the heading of the maintenance of the magistrate, where the system of "customary fees" (*lou-kuai*) is discussed.

The final chapter discusses the role of the gentry in local administration. By considering their status and position in the community and their relationships with the government officials as well as with the people, we may see how the formal and informal governments operated, interacted, and were integrated within the social and political order.

A few words should be said about the sources I have used. The basic data were provided by the laws, statutes, administrative codes, official compendia—such as the *Ta-Ch'ing hui-tien* (Collected statutes of the Ch'ing dynasty) and *Shih-li* (Cases)—and various encyclopedias. But even more valuable data were found in the handbooks or guidebooks written by magistrates, private secretaries, and personal servants. These materials, which served the practical purpose of guiding succeeding incumbents, contain advice based upon personal experience in office. Other valuable sources were official documents, records, correspondence, and memoirs (*pi-chi*) written by officials, private secretaries, and other persons versed in administration. These materials provide valuable information concerning the administrative operations and problems of local government, behavior of the groups attached to the bureaucracy, and interpersonal relations, including tensions and other psychological manifestations. Biographies, local gazetteers, essays, and miscellaneous works also yield pertinent information.

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