ABSTRACT

This article examines the political and social networks that bound officials in the Qing bureaucracy and their role in concealing abuses and bribery, as well as the Yongzheng Emperor’s attempts to inculcate proper political behavior and bureaucratic accountability. The essay begins with a brief discussion of the state of affairs in Fujian and Taiwan under officials appointed by the Kangxi Emperor. It then turns to the Yongzheng Emperor’s efforts to revitalize what he perceived to be a moribund bureaucracy in the region through the pursuit of a case of corruption. The trial that resulted from a censor’s accusation revealed a complex web of patronage, manipulation, malleance, and mutual recrimination among officials and provides us a glimpse into the workings of Qing field administration under pressure from a reformist emperor. The corruption case in Taiwan was important to the emperor not on its own merits, but as an object lesson in proper political behavior and bureaucratic accountability.

Keywords: Yongzheng Emperor, Qing, bureaucracy, China, factionalism, Taiwan
That is, when Chanjibu impeached Magistrate Zhou Zhongxuan 周鐘瑄 for illegally accepting seven hundred taels of silver from a defendant in a criminal case. Ordinarily, this “crime” would hardly even have aroused the attention of the prefect, much less that of the emperor, particularly when the sum involved was so small. Nevertheless, the case would embroil bureaucracies in Taiwan, Fujian, and beyond, make and break several careers, cause the governor-general—and one of Yongzheng’s most trusted administrators—to lose the emperor’s favor, be handed over for resolution to a new governor, and ultimately require the appointment of two imperial commissioners before its denouement. Clearly, the case was after all not just about squabbling or corrupt officials in Taiwan, or even necessarily the bureaucratic administration there.

Qing historians have become increasingly interested in the bureaucratic monarchy’s strategies for crisis management, which challenges the notion that the late imperial Chinese state was characterized by a rigid approach to the issues of governance. Indeed, even routine business associated with Qing field administration regularly raised concerns about the standards of local administration, the bounds of proper bureaucratic behavior, and the difficulties inherent in defining political crime, administrative shortcomings, legitimate policy debates, factional activities, and official bickering.3

This essay is an exploration into the issues of the factionalism endemic to the Qing bureaucracy, of its role in the social and political networks that bound officials together and in concealing abuses and malfeasance, and of the Yongzheng Emperor’s attempts to inculcate proper political behavior and bureaucratic accountability. The essay begins with a brief discussion of the state of affairs in Fujian and Taiwan under officials appointed by the Kangxi Emperor (r. 1661-1722). It then turns to the Yongzheng Emperor’s efforts to revitalize what he perceived to be a moribund bureaucracy in the region. The trial that resulted from Chanjibu’s accusation revealed a complex web of patronage, manipulation, malfeasance, and mutual recrimination among officials and provides us a glimpse into the workings of Qing field administration under pressure from a reformist emperor. The

1 Qinggong gongzhong dang zouzhe Taiwan shiliao 清宫宫中档奏摺臺灣史料 [Taiwan historical sources in the secret palace memorials of the Qing palace] (Taipei: National Palace Museum, 2001) 1: 197-200. Hereafter referred to as QGZTS.

2 QGZTS 1: 358. One Qing commentator has noted that clerkships often served as a proving ground for promising talents who aspired to higher office, and that many senior officials had once served as clerks. For more on the origins of clerks and a description of a clerk’s duties, see Fuge 福格, Tingyu congtao 聽雨叢談 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1984), 22-23. Yongzheng preferred to reward clerks who were diligent or especially skilled in some area with promotions rather than raise their meager stipends (only twenty-eight taels annually) because he was concerned that to do otherwise would be to remove an incentive for them to attend wholeheartedly to their duties in hopes of advancement. See Yongzhengchao hanwen yuzhi huibian 雍正朝漢文諭旨匯編 [Collected Chinese-language edicts of the Yongzheng reign], 10 vols. (Guilin, Guangxi: Guangxi shifan daxue chubanshe, 1999), 10: 212-13. Hereafter referred to as ZHYZHB.

3 For example, Thomas Metzger has pointed out that distinguishing the difference between crime and administrative shortcomings in the Qing bureaucracy could be a problematic proposition. See Thomas A. Metzger, The Internal Organization of Ch’ing Bureaucracy: Legal, Normative, and Communication Aspects (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1973), 276-97.