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## Expectant Officials in Provincial Capitals in the Nineteenth Century

Pierre-Étienne Will  
(Collège de France)

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Among the many structural problems that burdened the late-imperial system of field administration, two deserve particular attention for the purpose of this paper: one concerned manpower, and the other, competence. According to the view commonly held today, local officials were much too few in regard to the mass of population and territory they were supposed to administer; as a consequence they had to devolve much of their authority to uncontrollable and unprincipled underlings. Then, besides being insufficient in numbers, they were also utterly unprepared to face the daunting tasks that awaited them: they had been trained as Confucian scholars and selected on the basis of examination papers that were essentially an assemblage of sterile rhetoric; and if they had any notions of the more technical subjects they would have to know about once in post, such as financial administration, law, or military matters, these were purely theoretical notions extracted from the canon of Classics and Histories.

Again, this is the standard view held by modern historians. It has certainly been encouraged by the politically correct discourse held under most dynasties, which emphasized a light administration exerted by devoted and ideologically well-trained officials: officials are too numerous, they burden the budget of the state and, ultimately, they cost dearly to the populace that supports them; and things would be better run if a smaller number of functionaries concentrated on being examples of enlightened authority and virtue rather than being first of all interested in technicalities, not to mention their own private and career interests. As a result, in times of financial crisis one of the favorite measures advocated to save expenses was to suppress “redundant officials” (*rongguan* 冗官).

It can indeed be argued that the field administration of late imperial China was light, and even that it became lighter and lighter as time passed, which according to certain authors led to a process of “privatization” of local functions.<sup>1</sup> It is certainly a fact that the numbers of the *ranking* bureaucracy in the prefectures and counties of China remained more or less stable during the Ming and Qing—or more to the point, that whatever little increase took place was definitely out of proportion with demographic and economic growth in the empire. But the more important fact is that this did not prevent the total size of the actual state apparatus and

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<sup>1</sup> This is the Skinner hypothesis presented in *The City in Late Imperial China* and regarded as accepted wisdom by countless scholars thereafter.

available administrative manpower—including subaltern and even non-state personnel<sup>2</sup>—from increasing enormously during the same period. Likewise, even though nobody would deny that the knowledge and *savoir-faire* required to pass the examinations did not prepare the candidates to their future responsibilities in the field—at least not in any technical sense—it is equally true that there was no want of methods, both practical and theoretical, for would-be administrators to acquire a sound knowledge of the problems they would have to deal with once they were put in charge of a *yamen*.<sup>3</sup>

In both respects—enlarging the bureaucratic workforce and training future incumbents—the institution of expectant officials was one of the solutions evolved. Officials “expecting to fill a position” (*houbu* 候補) were posted in the various provincial capitals, where they were available to be deputized (*weiyuan* 委員) to perform all kinds of administrative chores, from participating in judicial investigations or overseeing transfers of government funds to filling magistracies or prefectureships in “acting” capacities for a limited period of time.<sup>4</sup> In this way they provided a substantial amount of administrative manpower in the provinces, independently of the formal hierarchy of provincial, prefectural and county-level officials; and at the same time they had opportunities to get acquainted with and practice the various administrative disciplines they would be supposed to master once their “expectation” came to an end and they were formally appointed to a position in the field hierarchy.

At least this was the case in the nineteenth century—from when exactly is not clear, as we shall see. But the notion that eligible personnel should go through some kind of “internships” in order to get acquainted with their future jobs was much older than that. In what follows I will first discuss these institutional aspects, and then illustrate some of the services required from expectant officials in the nineteenth century, as well as the problems raised by the institution, on the basis of selected contemporary testimonies—few in numbers but striking in the quality of the information they provide.

## Internships and Expectancies

There were two main and very different reasons why officials possessing the required qualifications (*zige* 資格) to get an appointment might have to go through a preliminary period of sometimes sizable duration between their selection by the Board of Personnel and

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<sup>2</sup> I am of course referring to the private cabinets of Qing local officials, which were composed of a variety of sometimes highly experienced technical experts (the *muyou*) and personal retainers (the *changsu* and *jiaren*), whose numbers could be quite considerable.

<sup>3</sup> I have discussed these methods in some detail in “L’apprentissage du métier de fonctionnaire à la fin de la période impériale”, in Christine Nguyen Tri et Catherine Despeux (eds.), *Éducation et instruction en Chine*, vol. 2, *Les formations spécialisées* (Paris/Louvain: Peeters, 2003), p. 7-47; also in Chinese translation, *Faguo hanxue* 8 (2003), pp. 180-219.

<sup>4</sup> Note that in the terminology of the Bureau of Appointments (Quanxuan qinglisi 銓選清吏司) at the Board of Personnel, *houbu* appears to have had the different meaning of “waiting for a reappointment”: According to the extremely precise description of the appointment process proposed in Sun Hong’s 孫宏 *Weizheng diyi bian* 為政第一編 (1702 preface), one of the best early-Qing magistrate handbooks, *houbu* applied to officials who had already left their former position and were waiting for a new selection by the Board (已離舊任而望新銓者，為候補)—they would be part of the drawing-lots procedure taking place on odd months. He glosses the word *bu* as follows: “*Bu* means using a vacancy just opened to fill the function we originally possessed” (補者，即現開之空缺以補我原有之職司也). He is careful to distinguish *houbu* from *houxuan*, which applies to people waiting for the first selection in their career. See *Weizheng diyi bian*, 1/2a-b. This sense of *bu* (being reappointed) is confirmed by later sources. It should also be noted that the terms *weiyuan* or *chaiwei* 差委 were not reserved for expectant officials: an incumbent could be deputized in the same way to perform a particular task

their actual assumption of a ranking position.<sup>5</sup> One, suggested above, was the necessity that was felt to provide them with some degree of practical training before they were put in a position of full responsibility; and this was dealt with already in the Ming, if not earlier, in the form of internships. The other reason was the discrepancy between the numbers of people selected and the actual availability of positions, making it necessary to maintain a buffer of eligible (or rather, elected) officials who would stay on line, so to speak, waiting for the next opening. This situation surely was not new in the nineteenth century, but it appears to have become more and more of a problem by then. As we have seen, one way of dealing with it was to send the men selected by the Board for local positions to the provincial capitals and employ them to perform various duties as “expectant officials”. For the sake of clarity, and despite overlaps, it may be preferable to discuss expectancies and internships separately

### *Internships*

The notion of what we would call “internship” applies only in part to the nineteenth-century “expectant officials”. Most of the time they were not attached to a particular bureau or administration where they would have opportunities to learn from observing how things were run and participating in administration under the guidance of experienced officials. As long as they were not entrusted with specific tasks (*chaiwei*), they just had to be there: more often than not they were idling away their time trying to make connections and waiting for some kind of assignment. Whatever technical training they acquired was through actual practice, when they had the opportunity, or possibly through asking advice from more experienced colleagues or private secretaries.

There were real internships, however, and as already said the practice went back at least to the Ming. They had been instituted for Imperial College (Guozijian) students as early as the Hongwu reign and came to be called *lishi* 歷事 (lit., experiencing [government] affairs). Students of the College (or *jiansheng* 監生) having reached the required seniority would be divided up among the various capital offices (this was called *boli* 撥歷) to spend a period of three months there and acquaint themselves with government work. Those who did best when they were examined at the end of their internship were to be slated for actual positions which they would assume after having spent one more year studying at the College. This was only the regular way, however, and there were many other types of internships, of variable duration, available to Guozijian students, representing on the aggregate quite a number of people who could help in the everyday work of the central agencies.<sup>6</sup>

Internships also existed for people with more substantial claims to become officials. The institution of “watching government” (*guan Zheng* 觀政) in the various central administrations was created for *jinshi* laureates in 1385, not long after the Guozijian internships just mentioned;<sup>7</sup> and it endured to the end of the Qing dynasty, as can be seen in a number of biographies of Ming and Qing scholar-officials containing such mentions as “when he

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<sup>5</sup> I am not speaking here of the period that elapsed between success at the examinations and first appointment, which is another problem. During the Qing a *jinshi* who had not succeeded in the top ranks might have to spend ten to twenty years at home before being called by the Board to “await selection” (*houxuan* 候選): see John R. Watt, *The District Magistrate in Late Imperial China* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1972), p. 20.

<sup>6</sup> See *Mingshi* 明史 (Zhonghua shuju ed.), 69/1683-85. The numbers listed at the end of this section, which are no more than quotas whose relation to actual practice at any given time cannot be ascertained, total 194 positions for “regular internships” (正歷), 138 positions for “extra-internships” (雜歷)—including, interestingly, 42 positions as “followers of touring censors” (隨御史出巡)—and no less than 787 specialized assignments (諸色辦事).

<sup>7</sup> *Mingshi*, 70/1696. The interns were called *guan Zheng jinshi*; only those who were sent to the Hanlin Academy (i.e., the best ranked at the examination) were called by a different name, viz. *shujishi* 庶吉士.

observed government at such and such ministry...”, or the like. To give but one example, it is said of Xue Yunsheng 薛允升 (1820-1901), the famous late-Qing legal specialist and immortal author of the *Duli cunyi* 讀例存疑, that “At the beginning, when he observed government at the Board of Punishments, he came to consider that the names for punishments concern human lives; and for years on end he would ponder over the Penal Code, writing into his booklet any obscurity he might encounter, until at long last he would find about it” (初，允升觀政刑曹，以刑名關民命，窮年討測律例，遇滯義筆諸冊，久之有所得).<sup>8</sup>

Most of the time the duration of these internships for new *jinshi* seems to have been rather short, three months being a typical amount of time. We know of a precise example with the case of Xu Rijiu 徐日久 (1574-1631), the author of a chronological autobiography whose introspective bent and unconventional approach to the world of officialdom are quite fascinating. The text, which is actually called a “chronicle of apprenticeship” (*xuepu* 學譜), starts with Xu’s success at the *jinshi* examination in 1610. In the fourth month of that same year he was sent to the censorate to “watch government”; and only two months later he was selected to be magistrate of Shanghai, a post he reached three months later.<sup>9</sup>

Admittedly, this was at a moment (the last decade of the Wanli emperor’s reign) when the system of official appointments is said to have been in the greatest disarray, with many positions left unfilled, and so forth. Still, the contrast with the situation in the nineteenth century as I will discuss it is quite stunning. In the Qing Shanghai was categorized as a four-character “most important” county, and as such it would never go to a new, inexperienced *jinshi*: instead, it would be part of the pool of “important” and “most important” positions (*yaoque* 要缺 and *zuiyao que* 最要缺, respectively) that provincial governors were allowed to fill by moving experienced local officials around, asking for the Board’s approval afterwards. By the late Ming Shanghai was already a major county, of strategic importance because of its location at the mouth of the Yangzi and on the sea-shore, and with a thriving economy and a large fiscal quota. Yet Xu Rijiu, who had never held any position before and who had “watched” no more government than two months of activity at the censorate central offices, was dispatched to Shanghai without any delay; and indeed, as he recounts in the next few pages of his autobiography, he had a rather hard time there and ended in conflict with some of his superiors.

As I said, the practice of sending the new *jinshi* “watch government” was continued under the Qing. It was confirmed in the Shunzhi reign, but the duration of the internships seems to have been quickly reduced from three months to a few days, after which the interns were sent back home to await selection. In the next three reigns, however, significantly longer periods are mentioned. In the Kangxi period we hear of three-year internships in the capital ministries, and a 1717 memorial proposed to have the interns circulate from one ministry to the other, spending three months in each one, the most zealous being singled out for priority appointment as magistrates.<sup>10</sup> Again, the notion appears to have been seriously discussed in the Yongzheng and early Qianlong periods. In 1730 a system was instituted whereby “extra-quota trainee secretaries” (*ewai zhushi xuexi xingzou* 額外主事學習行走) were selected from

<sup>8</sup> *Qingshi gao* 清史稿 (Zhonghua shuju ed.), 442/12427. The passage might possibly be translated differently, but it seems to me that the point is that it was the experience acquired during his internship that led Xue to be a life-long devotee of Code studies.

<sup>9</sup> See Xu Rijiu, *Zhenshuai xiansheng xuepu* 真率先生學譜 (a rare book in the Beijing microfilms collection), year *gengxu* (1610). There is a brief—and somewhat misleading—discussion of the text in Pei-yi Wu, *The Confucian’s Progress* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), p. 40ff. (Wu’s assertion that the work reads “like a curriculum vitae” does not correspond at all with what I find in this complex and rather sinuous text.)

<sup>10</sup> On this and the following see Adam Yuen-chung Lui, “The practical training of government officials under the early Ch’ing, 1644-1795”, *Asia Major*, 16, 1-2 (1971), p. 82-95. More research is needed on the topic of internships, however. See also Will, “L’apprentissage du métier de fonctionnaire”.

among the new *jinshi* and toured the ministries in groups, staying three months in each, to learn government. This was discussed about fifteen years later in a memorial by the two chief Grand Councillors, Zhang Tingyu 張廷玉 and Neqin 訥親, according to whom fifty to sixty new *jinshi* had been chosen after the metropolitan examinations of 1730, 1733, and 1736 to accomplish three-year internships in the different ministries. Those who ranked best at the final tests were kept in the central bureaus, while the rest joined the group of regular *jinshi* awaiting selection for a magistracy—and since they all wanted to stay in Beijing, add the memorialists, they worked very hard and one got excellent functionaries for the ministries. Apparently the institution had been discontinued after 1736, and therefore Neqin and Zhang Tingyu asked that it be restored after the next metropolitan examination.<sup>11</sup> It also seems that Neqin had a similar measure adopted for provincial graduates recommended by the provincial governors, who would be sent to the capital for one-year (later changed to three-year) internships in the ministries, the best among them being selected for appointment as magistrates.<sup>12</sup> We do find mention in a *Qingshi gao* biography of a 1731 circular from the Board of Personnel to the effect that the licentiates whose turn it was to be selected for magistracies be sent to the capital to “learn government” (吏部檄天下舉人需次縣令者，先赴京學習政事).<sup>13</sup>

In the Yongzheng period sending the new *jinshi* to do internships not in the capital but in the provinces was also discussed. The point of contention, according to a 1725 memorial by Yongzheng’s favorite statesman Eertai 鄂爾泰, was to decide whether they should be stationed in the prefectures, where according to some they would be closer to the realities of the field, or in the bureaus of the provincial chiefs, where according to others (including Eertai) they would be able to get a broader view of the problems of local government.<sup>14</sup> But everybody seemed to agree that the yamens of the provincial governors, treasurers, and judges were dangerous places for the new *jinshi*, who would spend more time getting together with *muyou* and clerks than learning government. One could argue that in fact the *muyou* and clerks were among those who knew best about the concrete problems of local government, but in any case Eertai suggested in his memorial that the new *jinshi* be kept busy with such activities as studying documents, preparing draft answers or memorials, participating in investigations or in the tax administration, and attending the meetings were judicial problems were debated.

It does seem that such a system was formally set up in 1730 in the form of three-year internships in the yamens of provincial capitals, plus one year as probationary official once the intern had been proposed for a substantive appointment. The sequence internship and appointment was encapsulated in the formula *fenfa gesheng xuexi tibu* 分發各省學習提補: as I understand it, contrary to those who went to the capital ministries to “watch government”, the interns discussed here had already been slated for appointment, their actual appointment (*bu*) taking place at the close of their internship: in this way they were close to the *houbu* officials of a later period, except that they were all *jinshi* and that they were supposed to be real interns (*xuexi*). In their memorial of 1745 mentioned above Zhang Tingyu and Neqin were responding to two censors who were again proposing that a few tens of new *jinshi* be sent to the provinces not only as interns, but to be assigned actual tasks (*weiyong* 委用). Yet, according to Zhang and Neqin, “dispatching in this way people to the provinces cannot compare with employing them as interns in the ministries, where there is actual work for them

<sup>11</sup> See Beijing No. 1 Archives, *Yifu dang* 義覆檔, microfilm, reel 6, memorial of QL 10/3/28 (1745).

<sup>12</sup> See Adam Lui, “The practical training of government officials”, p. 86, quoting from the *Tongdian* 通典.

<sup>13</sup> *Qingshi gao*, 480/13144, biography of Li Tunan 李圖南.

<sup>14</sup> See Eertai’s memorial in *Huangchao jingshi wenbian* 皇朝經世文編 (Taipei: Shijie shuju, 1964), 17/13b-14a; partly (and badly) translated in Lui, “Practical training”, p. 89.

to do; whereas in the provinces all they have to do is to show up at the provincial treasurer's and provincial judge's offices and stay at their disposal. Usually they learn nothing about taxation and justice, and afterwards it is difficult to propose them for appointment; even using them as employees raises difficulties (*xingzou yi shu jieju* 行走亦屬拮据).”

Consequently, Zhang and Nuoqin recommended that *jinshi* internships in the provinces be discontinued. What happened next is not altogether clear to me. But it would seem that at some point—then or later—the system of *jinshi* “internships” (*xuexi*) in the provincial capitals was progressively replaced with the institution of “expectancy” (*houbu*), which concerned many more people: not just metropolitan laureates, but any kind of officials having passed the process of selection and appointment at the capital—including, importantly, those who had acquired their brevets by purchase—and awaiting substantive appointment, which could take many years, or even forever.

### *Expectancies*

The institution of expectant officials discussed here was a creation of the Qing, and more precisely, it would seem, of the second half of the Qing. At least nowhere in the Ming record do we find mention of these *houbu* officials congregating in the provincial capitals without any precise assignment and of these “deputies” (*weiyuan*) entrusted with all sorts of tasks who are such a familiar presence in nineteenth-century documents. Still, the reality, if not the term, may have existed in the Ming and in the early Qing, although further research is needed to get a more precise idea. We do find mention of magistrates sent to the provinces without a precise posting, the provincial authorities being at liberty to propose them for this or that position. Thus, for his second posting Xu Rijiu, the late-Ming official already mentioned, was sent to be an “investigator” (*jianjiao* 簡較) in the service of the Huguang administrative commissioner—this was in 1613: when he arrived there he was attached, he tells us, to the cabinet of the commissioner (*fanmu* 藩幕), and this was a position without any precise task (a *sanzhi* 散秩), in other words a sinecure; and indeed, at the beginning he had nothing to do whatsoever and spent his days drinking at the top of a pavilion. Later, however, he was entrusted with the magistracy of Jiangxia 江夏, the leading county of Wuchang, the Huguang capital, and this was of course quite another matter. He held the post for close to five years (1613-1617) and proved himself an extremely active and efficient official: in fact, he tells us, the locals petitioned the provincial authorities asking them to confirm him in it.<sup>15</sup> In any event, the notion of being sent by the Board of Personnel to serve in a provincial government with an ill-defined position amounting to a sinecure, then of being entrusted with an acting magistracy, eventually transformed into a ranking position, all of this is somewhat evocative of the late-Qing system of appointing people to provinces where they will be “waiting for an appointment” (*houbu*). Still, I do not know that such a process was formalized in any way in the Ming, as it was to be under their successors.

Likewise, in the mid-eighteenth century, when Yuan Mei 袁枚 (1716-1797), the famous poet and legal specialist, was sent to the provinces following an imperial audience after he had failed his Manchu tests at the Hanlin Academy, he was “transferred to be a magistrate in Jiangnan” (改知縣江南); the first few magistracies he occupied there for short periods,

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<sup>15</sup> See *Zhenshuai xiansheng xuepu* under the relevant years. Here and elsewhere Xu's modesty and unassuming way of talking of his accomplishments, which were far from negligible, as well as his insistence on mentioning his Taoistic pastimes (like drinking in the nude near an image of Lü Dongbin) or his Buddhist interests, are quite remarkable, certainly a far cry from the straight-laced and humorless stance of practically all the Qing authors recounting their careers. (Gao Tingyao's autobiography, discussed below, is something of an exception, but contrary to Xu Rijiu Gao never distances himself from his official persona.)

beginning in 1743, were all in acting capacities and on the decision of the Jiangnan governor general; but then, on the recommendation of a new governor general, the well-known Yinjishan, Yuan became the incumbent magistrate of Jiangning county (i.e. Nanjing), which was classified as a “most important post”; and there he spent close to three years as a highly popular magistrate. In other words, even though he did not have to wait for a position (*houbu*) strictly speaking, he was apparently dispatched to Jiangsu without a specific appointment, and had to wait some time until he got an incumbency.<sup>16</sup>

However, this pattern became the rule only later, even though we do not know exactly when. In the original Qing system of appointments, which was essentially inherited from the Ming, the larger part of low- and medium-level positions in the provinces (up to circuit intendant, already in the late seventeenth century) were filled by the Board of Personnel, which resorted to drawing lots to apportion the positions available among candidates who had been pre-selected according to their academic status, seniority, record of accomplishments, time elapsed since having passed the examinations (in the case of a first appointment), and other criteria, not to speak of the monetary contributions (*juanna*) which many paid to accelerate the process.<sup>17</sup>

Yet the proportion of positions directly filled by the Bureau of Appointments in Beijing kept decreasing with time. It is not easy to measure the trend exactly, but it seems clear that already in the first decades of the Qing, in a context where the security of the regime was still at stake in many regions, the governors-general and governors wielded significantly greater power than their Ming predecessors in terms of personnel management. The evaluation of local officials lay largely in their hands;<sup>18</sup> and not only their evaluation but also, for a growing proportion of them, their actual appointments. The problem was already debated in the seventeenth century; and it is well known that in time the governors came to have considerable leeway in selecting the men of their choice from among the officials already present in the province to move them wherever they wanted, notably to the more important and/or rewarding positions, while the Board of Personnel in Peking did no more than confirm their decisions.

The debate that went on during most of the seventeenth century (both before and after the dynastic change) was between, on the one hand, ensuring perfect fairness in the appointment process (which was why the method of drawing lots had been invented in the first place, at the end of the sixteenth century), and on the other hand, selecting men whose competence, experience and character would be attuned to the characteristics of a particular position. While drawing lots (assuming it was done honestly) was seen as a rampart against influence-peddling and jockeying for the more desirable appointments, its principal drawback was that it could blindly send people to places for which they were utterly unfit. The trade-off suggested by several late-seventeenth century authors consisted in maintaining the drawing-lots procedure but allowing the provincial governors and governors general to evaluate the personnel sent down by the Board and move them around taking account of their abilities,

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<sup>16</sup> In 1747 his protector Yinjishan recommended him for the post of Gaoyou department magistrate, but the Board refused the promotion; this was the end of Yuan Mei's official career, despite a further appointment in Shaanxi which was cut short by the death of his father. See *Qingshi gao*, 485/13383; Arthur Waley, *Yuan Mei, Eighteenth Century Chinese Poet* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1956), p. 30-35, 38-45.

<sup>17</sup> On the drawing-lots procedure see my essay, “Creation, Conflict, and Routinization: Appointing Officials by Drawing Lots, 1594-1700”, *Ming Qing yanjiu* (Naples), 2002, p. 73-121. For more details on the place of contributions in the process, see Elizabeth Kaske, “The Price of an Office: Venality, the Individual and the State in 19th Century China”, in Nanny Kim et Thomas Hirzel (eds.), *Metals, Monies and Markets in Early Modern Societies: East Asian and Global Perspectives*, Berlin, LIT Verlag, 2008, p. 277-304.

<sup>18</sup> For example, the Ming practice of having magistrates pay triennial visits to the capital and present their “government records” (*zhengshu* 政書) was discontinued, as were, after a while, the triennial “great reckonings” (*daji* 大計) of all the officials outside the capital.

with the least possible interference from the central authorities. And this is indeed what became more and more the accepted practice. In 1728 local positions in the provinces were divided into four categories according to their administrative difficulty, economic activity, and strategic significance, namely, “simple” (簡缺), “medium” (中缺), and the already mentioned “important” and “most important”. From then on the Board filled only the positions ranked “simple” and “medium”: these were the “selection posts” (*xuanque* 選缺). The others—the more strategic and the more significant economically, therefore the more desirable ones—would be filled with seasoned officials already in post in the province and selected by the governor: they were the so-called “transfer posts” (*diaoque* 調缺).<sup>19</sup> Finally, a first appointment could only be to a “simple” posting.

Tracing the many adaptations this pattern went through in the following decades would be much too complicated, and it will require more research in any case. Still, the general picture seems rather clear. While by the middle of the eighteenth century about one quarter of the magistracies in the empire were “transfer posts”, there is no want of evidence that governors tended to use every available pretext to increase their discretionary powers, in particular to extend their control over local appointments beyond this quota.<sup>20</sup> In a remarkable piece of criticism the late-eighteenth century historian Qian Daxin 錢大昕 (1728-1804) complained that the power of appointing officials, which was normally entrusted to the Board of Personnel, had been snatched away by the provincial governors.<sup>21</sup> Qian’s worries concerned the consequences of this situation less in terms of administrative efficiency than in terms of morals (even though it can be argued that corruption eventually impairs efficiency as well): according to him, now that the governors had been empowered to distribute most of the posts in their constituency as they saw fit, local officials jockeyed to get the most desirable positions and did not hesitate to pay handsome bribes to the governors in the hope of being chosen—in Qian Daxin’s words, what had been arrived at amounted to “a practice of selling posts that is ruinous for the state and harmful to the people” (鬻缺之病國殃民).

Although it is difficult to say how much truth and how much rhetorical exaggeration there is in Qian Daxin’s denunciation of the evils of his time,<sup>22</sup> we will see later that the first half of the nineteenth century is no lacking in testimonies showing that by that time the Qing local administration had indeed become a sort of market-place. However, what interests me in Qian’s text for the present purpose is when he notes that “in addition [to their control of the ‘transfer posts’] the governors general and governors ask that men be selected [by the Board] and sent to the provincial capitals to serve as probationary officials” (督撫又請揀發人員到省試用). And he adds: “As a result, the positions to be filled by the Ministry are retained [by the governors] in a proportion of eight or nine out of ten. The power of selection and appointment has been entirely devolved to the governors” (于是部選之缺扣留者十之八九。銓選之權盡移於督撫). In other words, and if I understand correctly, what Qian Daxin is describing here might be characterized as a preliminary version of the *houbu* system which came into existence not long thereafter: instead of being appointed directly to the posts theoretically

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<sup>19</sup> Robert Weiss, “Flexibility in provincial government on the eve of the Taiping rebellion”, *Ch’ing-shih wen-t’i*, 4, 3 (1980), p. 1-42 (here p. 6) makes a further distinction between “preferment posts” (*tique* 題缺) and the more important (and demanding in terms of qualification) “transfer posts”.

<sup>20</sup> This is a major theme in Weiss, *ibid.*, according to whom between 1743 and 1853 the number of positions of magistrate and prefect directly filled by the governor of Hunan grew from 25 to 34 (out of a total 84 in the province).

<sup>21</sup> Cited in Will, “Creation, Conflict, and Routinization”. The text was inserted by Huang Rucheng 黃汝成 in the section of his edition of Gu Yanwu’s *Rizhi lu* discussing the system of appointments (*Quanxuan zhi hai* 銓選之害): see *Rizhi lu jishi* 日知錄集釋 (1834), *Sibu beiyao* ed., 8/26b.

<sup>22</sup> That is to say, somewhere in the late eighteenth century: so far I have not been able to date this quote.



controlled by the Board (i.e. the *xuanque*), the officials it sent to the provinces after selection were kept in the provincial capitals for a trial period (*shiyong*) of indeterminate duration, allowing the governors, in 80 or 90 percent of the cases if we are to believe Qian Daxin, to place whomever they wished to occupy the positions in question as interim officials.<sup>23</sup>

Then, sometime in the nineteenth century, at a date which I am not able to ascertain, the lots drawn by the candidates admitted by the Bureau of Appointments to participate in the bimonthly selections ceased to bear the indication of a specific county or prefecture and bore the name of a province instead, as may already have been the case for purchasers of office patents who chose the way of “informal assignments” to a province (but it is not clear from when exactly).<sup>24</sup> From then on, with the exception of a few favored candidates appointed directly by the court (*tejian* 特簡), everybody was put at the governor’s disposal and had to “await appointment” (*houbu*). This was an encouragement for the Board to yield more than ever to the pressure of eligible candidates (including, prominently, those who had purchased their brevets) and send to the provinces much more people than it would ever be possible to accommodate in the available ranking positions, or even in short-term acting positions; and this is how “expectant officials” available for any kind of assignment continued more than ever to flock in the provincial capitals without much hope or even ambition of being ever appointed to a substantive position; or, in Elisabeth Kaske’s words, how “expectancy... became more and more divorced from regular office-holding”.<sup>25</sup>

Apparently this situation was not yet prevailing in the Jiaqing period, since the early-twentieth century Japanese *Shinkoku gyōsei hō* 清國行政法, which was based on the Jiaqing edition of the *Da Qing huidian shili* (which I have not been able to examine) and has a detailed section on appointments, describes the ancient situation where lots were drawn only to fill actual openings. Besides, Robert Weiss’s description of Hunan in the first half of the nineteenth century definitely implies that the “Board’s positions” (*xuanque*) were still in existence, even though they were being gradually eroded by gubernatorial privileges. Later in the century the relevant sections in the 1899 edition of the *Huidian shili* (j. 43-44) do not tell us anything in this respect: in fact it cannot be excluded that switching to lots bearing only the name of a province was an ad hoc decision not sanctioned by a regular decree. What is clear is that the late-Qing (but undated) commentary to the entry “qiantong” 籤筒 (lots holder) in the Manchu-Chinese glossary of official terms *Liubu chengyu zhujie* 六部成語註解 says that the bamboo slips bear the name of a province (or of a metropolitan *yamen* in the case of selecting metropolitan officials); while the entry “cheqian” 掣籤 (drawing lots) says that the system is used to appoint expectant (*houbu* 候補) or “apprentice” (*xuexi* 學習) officials (the last being the preferred term for people sent to the central administrations)—as opposed to magistrates of such-and-such county, as was originally the case.<sup>26</sup>

In short, what still remains to be understood is when exactly the *houbu* system emerged; in other words, when the Board of Personnel started to send to the provinces people who had the qualifications to serve even though there were no openings, forcing them to “await appointment” for an undetermined amount of time—and started to send them in large

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<sup>23</sup> Still according to Weiss (p. 8), officials appointed by the ministry could be retained in Changsha to be tested, or trained, or could even be refused by the governors, who would find any kind of pretext to have their posts at their own disposal.

<sup>24</sup> See Kaske, “The price of an office”, p. 290-91.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 294.

<sup>26</sup> See E-tu Zen Sun, *Ch’ing Administrative Terms* (Cambridge [Mass.]: Harvard University Press, 1961), p. 7-8; Li Pengnian 李鵬年 et al., *Qingdai liubu chengyu cidian* 清代六部成語詞典 (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.) (Tianjin: Tianjin renmin chubanshe, 1994), p. 16.

quantities, since already by the 1820s many provincial capitals had several hundreds of them.<sup>27</sup>

### Expectant Officials as Seen through Three Professional Autobiographies

Expectant officials stationed in the provincial capitals could be assigned all kinds of administrative tasks, some of them menial, others quite important. We will see some examples below, but first let me quote from the only handbook (to my knowledge) which contains advice specifically directed at expectant officials. This is a short and fairly concrete text entitled *Huanhai erylán* 宦海邇言 (Shallow Talk on the World of Officials), due to a certain Lingshou 靈壽 and with a preface dated 1862; it does not seem to have been ever published.<sup>28</sup> Several entries deal with typically mid-nineteenth century subjects, such as militias and “braves”, or levying contributions (辦捐); and the last two entries concern expectant officials. They read:

Expectant officials in the provincial capitals do not need to have too much social life. If they have too much social life they will naturally have a lot of obligations to return, and how are they going to pay for this? Inevitably they will default on their debts. And when they get an acting position or join a team they will have to pay for their travel expenses and for their debts at the same time, the total cost will be considerable. And is the post which they are filling going to have a vault full of silver to fix their problem? As for desolate areas, [their financial resources] are not even enough to pay for [the official's] trip back and forth, how could they have surpluses to repay his old debts? One can only be cautious about this from the very beginning.

省城候補不必多交往。交往多則酬應自多。從何措辦。必至拖賬。即至委署到班，連盤費還賬，所費便不貲矣。所署之缺果有銀窖以相待耶。瘠苦之區往來盤費尚不足給。豈有餘錢以償宿逋？不可不慎之於始也。

And then:

Expectant officials in the provincial capitals are regularly sent on assignments. There is no need to discuss those [assignments] that follow established procedures. But when it is something new, one must be very careful and investigate carefully with the local officials and gentry; in no case can one rely on one's own opinion to curry favor with one's superiors, say that the others are ignorant and only I understand things, that the others are stupid and only I am intelligent. This is seeking a small advantage and forgetting about great risks, enjoying a temporary success and sowing the seeds of future trouble! Local public affairs must be comprehensively planned, it cannot be done carelessly. As for harassing the locals, requiring servants and horses, extorting travel gifts, this is an even baser and more intolerable sort of behavior, it is totally out of the question.

省城候補派委差使是所恒有。照例者不必論矣。若有事屬創始，切須留神，向本地官紳當細加訪詢。萬不可逞一人私臆討好上司，謂人皆闇而我獨明，人皆愚而我獨智。貪小利而忘大患，見一時之功貽後日之害。地方公事須通盤籌畫，未可草草。至若騷擾地方、多要夫馬、勒索程儀，更是卑鄙不堪之事。萬萬不可。

<sup>27</sup> Weiss, op. cit., p. 12; in the 1860s it may have been thousands of them in certain provinces.

<sup>28</sup> The manuscript is in the library of the Institute of Legal Studies of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences in Beijing.

These two paragraphs rather neatly encapsulate the problems faced by expectant officials, as well as the problems that they caused: they devoted much energy to build up connections; since they were paid no salary they tended to get into debt; then they would try to solve their money problems whenever they got an assignment, since they considered assignments as an occasion to recoup their costs; and as appointees of the provincial government they tended to behave overbearingly and considered they were due every comfort and perquisite.

To illustrate all of this I propose to look at some direct testimonies in the literature. What follows draws from three authors whose careers spanned a little more than the first half of the nineteenth century. Two of them spent time as expectant officials, while the third had many dealings with such officials during his long career in provincial positions. What brings the three together, as I see it, is that they recorded their remembrances and observations in autobiographical writings which are extremely candid in their testimonies, and were all the more so since they were not intended for publication. Let me briefly introduce them.

### *Three Witnesses*

The first of the three, Gao Tingyao 高廷瑤 (1765-1830), spent over a decade with the rank of second-class assistant-prefect (*tongpan*) in Anhui, beginning in 1802. He had won the *juren* degree in 1786, and in 1801 he benefited from the so-called “great selection” (*datiao* 大挑) procedure implemented once every six years since the mid-eighteenth-century, whereby licentiates who had failed three times the metropolitan examination (Gao failed four times) could be considered for magistracies or educational positions; Gao got a rank above that of magistrate because his service against a Miao revolt in his native Guizhou the year before had earned him the 6<sup>th</sup> official rank. He was actually sent to Anhui with a precise assignment (assistant prefect of Luzhou 廬州), but the governor was so impressed by him on his first visit that he removed him from the post after only seven days and kept him as a personal assistant. From there on and during all of his Anhui years Gao operated as a sort of “super-expectant” whom a succession of governors insisted on keeping around as an aide and trouble-fixer rather than recommending him for an incumbency. He actually seems to have spent comparatively little time in acting positions in the territorial hierarchy (one of the expectant officials’ most sought-after assignments): his longest experience in such posts was a ten-month stint as acting department magistrate of Liu’an 六安 in 1805, which he says was his most satisfying time in twenty years because only there could he fully devote his energies to the people. He only got regular positions of prefect in Guangxi and in Guangdong (where he held the prestigious and difficult post of Guangzhou prefect for many years) from 1813 until his retirement in 1827.<sup>29</sup>

Gao Tingyao’s autobiographical essay, the *Huanyou jilüe* 宦游紀略, is an extremely lively and occasionally quite entertaining narrative of his experiences as an official, combined with separate developments on a variety of concrete problems of administrative practice and ethics. At this point the editorial history of the work is not yet quite clear to me. It seems that the remembrances and thoughts penned by Gao Tingyao after his retirement in 1827 were only

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<sup>29</sup> At one point Gao Tingyao lost his post of prefect in Guangxi because of an unresolved case in Anhui, but the Liang-Guang governor general, the famous Jiang Youxian 蔣攸銛, who knew his reputation, insisted that he be allowed to buy a post of expectant prefect in Guangdong, and there he was soon made incumbent of the Guangzhou post. The main biographical source on Gao Tingyao is a “family biography” (家傳) due to a certain Tang Shuyi 唐樹義, a fellow Guizhou native, which is reproduced in all extant editions of the *Huanyou jilüe*. Although much of its content comes from Gao’s own narrative, there are some additional data on his family and academic background.

intended for the instruction of his sons and grandsons, but not for publication. One reason might be Gao's occasionally irreverent remarks concerning colleagues still alive at the time; and more generally, the rather dark picture the text delivers of the world of officials and of the ways of local government—and as we shall see expectant officials figure prominently in it—may have been felt by Gao inappropriate for publication. In any event, the work appears to have remained unpublished for at least twenty-five years after its author's death. Then, at some point in the mid-1850s, Gao's sons and grandsons edited the text and printed it; and from then on the *Huanyou jilüe* appears to have had a highly successful career since at least eight different editions were put out in various places, down to 1908. Clearly Gao Tingyao, a forceful personality bent on attacking administrative problems head-on, was seen as a model by the generation of reformist and activist bureaucrats that emerged at the time of the Taiping rebellion.<sup>30</sup> The main problem, as far as the history of the text is concerned, is that several of these editions feature a number of significant textual differences, sometimes amounting to actual rewriting. At this point I am unable to decide which recension should be considered as the closest to Gao's original manuscript, and therefore preferred.<sup>31</sup>

Like Gao Tingyao, Duan Guangqing 段光清 (1798-1878), a native of Susong 宿松 in Anhui, was a *juven* who had to wait many years before his first appointment: while he had won the degree in 1835, it was only in 1844 that he was sent to Zhejiang (分發浙江) as an expecting magistrate through the same *datiao* procedure as Gao Tingyao forty-five years earlier.<sup>32</sup> His entire career took place in Zhejiang. After having carried out a variety of assignments as an expectant official and filled several acting magistracies, he rose comparatively quickly through the ranks during the 1850s thanks to his demonstrated efficiency in preserving order in a context of considerable social and political tensions—or in the words of his modern editors, “for his loyalty to the feudal ruling class and his talent at devising policies to oppress the righteous uprisings of the people”: at the time Zhejiang was under the direct threat of the Taiping armies, a situation that caused much unrest in the region even before they actually captured Hangzhou in 1860. In a matter of years Duan Guangqing became prefect of Ningbo, Intendant of the Ningbo-Shaoxing-Taizhou circuit, salt commissioner, and finally (in 1859) provincial judge of Zhejiang, his highest position. At the time of this last appointment he had a series of audiences with the Xianfeng emperor, whom he impressed considerably by his account of the situation in Zhejiang.<sup>33</sup>

The manuscript of Duan Guangqing's chronological autobiography, which had been kept in his family, was never published. In 1957 his descendants donated it to the Anhui branch of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, which published a truncated version of it three years later under the title *Jinghu zizhuan nianpu* 鏡湖自撰年譜 (Jinghu being Duan's pen-name).<sup>34</sup> It is a text fairly different from Gao Tingyao's *Huanyou jilüe*—which is not a *nianpu* in the first place—in the sense that it is not a pedagogical essay set in the form of an autobiography, intended for a public of sons and grandsons (and beyond them, of future colleagues) to lecture them on their duties and provide them with practical advice. What Gao and Duan have in common, however, is, first, their very high opinion of themselves as exceptionally able and

<sup>30</sup> This is apparent from the many prefaces and poems found in the various editions of the work

<sup>31</sup> In what follows I am using a 1900 edition printed in Hubei by Gao Tingyao's descendants.

<sup>32</sup> His text implies that he got his assignment not through the drawing-lots procedure but after the imperial audience to which all the candidates having won the first class in the *datiao* examination were taken. See *Jinghu zizhuan nianpu*, p. 7.

<sup>33</sup> See Pierre-Étienne Will, “Views of the Realm in Crisis: Testimonies on imperial audiences in the nineteenth century”, *Late Imperial China*, 29, no. 1 Supplement (June 2008), p. 125-159.

<sup>34</sup> Duan Guangqing, *Jinghu zizhuan nianpu*, Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1960 (1997). The editors brag that they cut many passages devoted to “minor family affairs”, to Duan's self-aggrandizement, or to “feudal superstitions”—in all about one third of the text.

upright officials, and second, an undeniable talent at describing their adventures, and especially their professional milieu, with realism and with the occasional touch of humor.

Zhang Jixing (or Jixin) 張集馨, our third “witness”, had a fairly different sort of career, and his autobiography is also a fairly different piece of work. Because he entered the career directly in the upper rungs Zhang never had to experience the situation of an expectant official. He passed the *jinshi* examination in 1829 in a rank high enough to be sent to the Hanlin Academy, and after a few rather comfortable years there he was directly appointed prefect of Shuoping 朔平 in Northern Shanxi, and this was by special imperial decree (*tejian* 特簡): in other words, he was part of the so-called “tiger class” (*laohu ban* 老虎班) whose academically well-heeled members would be selected by the court to fulfil positions specially selected for them, even on their first appointment in the provinces, instead of being dispatched to a provincial capital without a precise posting and with no plans but having to capture the good will of the governor. From then on and for thirty years Zhang Jixing pursued a fairly distinguished career, mostly in province-level positions, though it had its highs and lows and in the end left him exhausted and rather embittered.<sup>35</sup> In any event, for our present purpose the point is that, if Zhang himself never was an expectant official, he spent much time in provincial capitals where he could see firsthand how expectant officials were selected for more or less interesting and/or lucrative tasks, and also how they were inclined to behave to get desirable assignments. Besides, he had himself many occasions to be assisted by expectant officials. For all these reasons his autobiography is not lacking in interesting information on such people.

This autobiography, like Duan’s, is in chronological form (it is a *zizhuan nianpu*), and it remained a manuscript reserved for family consumption, later becoming an item in a private collection, until it was discovered and published in the twentieth century; but it is much longer, much more detailed on family and private affairs (it starts with Zhang’s birth and has some gripping accounts of his formative years, whereas Duan’s autobiography, at least in its published form, has very little prior to the beginning of his career), less prone to self-glorification, and generally more scathing in its criticism of the “sea of officialdom” and its manners.<sup>36</sup>

### *Assignments and Tasks*

Expectant officials were available for any sort of administrative assignment. Obviously the prize assignment was filling a magistracy—or even a subaltern post (*zuoza*) in the field administration—in an acting (i.e. temporary) capacity, usually for a few months or even a few weeks to fill a gap between two incumbents. As a matter of fact, in certain provinces at least, as early as the Jiaqing years a sizable proportion of the prefecture and county positions at any given time seem to have been in the hands of acting prefects and magistrates who were either incumbents temporarily moved from another place or expectant officials on a special assignment (*weiyuan*).<sup>37</sup> The constant shifting around of magistrates and short-term interims by acting officials (*diaoshu* 調署) during the first half of the nineteenth century, which is apparent even from a casual examination of local gazetteers and biographies of officials,<sup>38</sup> has

<sup>35</sup> Will, “Views of the Realm in Crisis”, *passim*.

<sup>36</sup> It has been published as *Dao Xian huanhuai jianwen lu* 道咸宦海見聞錄, Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1981 (1999), based on a manuscript held at Beijing University.

<sup>37</sup> According to Weiss, “Flexibility in provincial government”, p. 11, during the first half of the nineteenth century there were always between 40 and 70 percent of the officials in Hunan being in acting positions.

<sup>38</sup> Likewise, the three- or even six-year incumbencies which are frequently encountered in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century sources (not to speak of the Ming) seem to have become a rarity by the nineteenth century.

been studied by several authors. In fact it has been variously interpreted: while for at least one historian it illustrated the reactivity and efficiency of the provincial authorities, even at the risk of acting extra-legally,<sup>39</sup> for others it was nothing but the illustration of pervasive influence-trafficking and corruption: provincial administrations had become a market-place where governors were in a position to allocate the more desirable positions in exchange for gifts and services.<sup>40</sup>

In any event, a magistracy *was* a prize assignment because only there, hopefully, was one assured to make a definite amount of money, known in the profession as the “value” of the post, which was a function of the quantity of surcharges and *lougui* that could be collected. But expectant officials were apparently so numerous in the provincial capitals that only a minority of them may have had a chance to enter the acting magistracy circuit, however active the latter appears to have been in the nineteenth century. Perhaps the ones with the more favorable perspectives were those who had already had occasion to demonstrate their capacities and/or had higher academic status (this seems to have been Duan Guangqing’s case). Zhang Jixing, speaking of Sichuan in the late 1840s, mentions “rules on attributing acting positions” (*weishu zhangcheng* 委署章程) whereby the more desirable positions (*youque* 優缺) were kept for the expectant officials who had already achievements they could pride themselves on (this is how he glosses the term *zhuowei* 酌委, probably meaning “to consider the previous assignments”), whereas the less desirable posts (the “middling” and the “bad” ones, respectively *zhongque* 中缺 and *kuque* 苦缺) went in turns to the so-called *lunwei renyuan* 輪委人員, that is, those who served at the provincial yamen on shifting teams (*anban* 接班). (The system had been reversed by a previous provincial treasurer, but Zhang, who was at the time acting provincial treasurer, had it re-established.)<sup>41</sup>

Still, it is clear that the governor’s favor was crucial. As Duan Guangqing says at one point, “When an expectant official arrives at the provincial capital, if he gets a recommendation [from the governor] he can hope for a priority position; after he has obtained a priority position he can hope for an appointment, and after he has gotten an appointment he can hope for a promotion” (候補人員到省，得一保舉，可望儘先，儘先之後，可望補缺，補缺之後，可望題升).<sup>42</sup>

In any case, Duan became an acting magistrate for the first time at the end of 1846 (he was appointed to Jiande 建德 county), only a little more than one year after he had arrived at Hangzhou as an expectant official (p. 13). It turned out not to be a mere stopgap incumbency, as in so many cases in this period, but the start of a fairly regular magistrate career, ending with an important promotion a few years later. This was perhaps because of Duan’s status as a *juren* who had gone through the *datiao* procedure; perhaps also it was due to his efficiency and reputation: as one would expect he insists a lot on the latter as he proceeds with the highly interesting, sometimes even exciting, narrative of his successive posts. In early 1848 he was

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Weiss justly remarks that local gazetteers are not a good source to evaluate this because they only record incumbent officials, not temporary replacements. (I know of a few exceptions, however.)

<sup>39</sup> This is the position of Weiss, “Flexibility in provincial government on the eve of the Taiping rebellion”, a study based on an examination of the archival record for Hunan province in the first half of the nineteenth century.

<sup>40</sup> This is the argument in Suzuki Chūsei 鈴木中正, “Shinmatsu no zaisei to kanryō no seikaku” 清末の財政と官僚の性格, *Kindai Chūgoku kenkyū*, 2 (1958), p. 189-282 (esp. 262-3). Weiss does not deny the corruption and influence trafficking, but considers it more than counterbalanced by the advantages of the system in terms of flexibility.

<sup>41</sup> *Dao Xian huanhai jianwen lu*, p. 104. At the beginning of his service at Hangzhou Duan Guangqing explains (p. 9) that all he has to do is go to the governor’s yamen with his team (*suiban shang yamen* 隨班上衙門) on four appointed days in each ten-day period.

<sup>42</sup> *Jinghu zizhuan nianpu*, p. 11.

moved to Cixi 慈谿 county, from which he was transferred to Haiyan 海鹽 seven months later—on the strength of his reputation, he tells us. There he stayed almost three years, until he was sent to Jiangshan 江山 in 1851. He was put in charge of the post of Ningbo prefect in 1853 and after a few months was confirmed in this function by imperial edict, on the special recommendation of the governor. As I understand it, all the postings before the Ningbo prefectureship were acting positions, and the transfers from one to the other were entirely decided by the Zhejiang governor.<sup>43</sup>

Incidentally, it is interesting to note that Suzuki Chūsei, perhaps the most scathing among the historians who have discussed the nineteenth-century Chinese imperial bureaucracy, remarks at one point that in the late Daoguang period the situation in Zhejiang—the system that Duan joined in 1845—was so confused that less than half the positions were filled with their regular incumbents, whereas the rest kept changing hands. One important consequence stressed by Suzuki was that the so-called *jiaodai* 交代 procedure, whereby accounts had to be carefully audited before a new official was authorized to take over, was in total disarray: because of the pressure from higher up to expedite transfers as fast as possible, positions passed from one official to the next without waiting for the rather cumbersome *jiaodai* auditing operations to be closed. Such practices were obviously an encouragement to fiscal negligence and official graft. Yet Duan Guangqing does not mention these problems. It is in fact quite remarkable how little he discusses the financial aspects of both his private and his official life—it is true that the public image he builds in his autobiography, and which seems to have had some reality, is that of a “pure-sky” (*qingtian* 青天) official for whom, as it were, money problems do not exist.<sup>44</sup>

In any event, as I suggested, entering the magistrate career, and especially staying in it, must have been reserved to only a minority of the many expectant officials present in any provincial capital. But there were many other possible assignments (*chaiwei* 差委). Duan Guangqing, again, provides an interesting enumeration of everything he and his *houbu* colleagues were assigned to do during the period of over a year he spent in Hangzhou before being appointed to be acting magistrate of Jiande. (The orders came not just from the provincial authorities but also from the prefect and two magistrates based in the city of Hangzhou / Qiantang.)

To begin with, it was customary in Hangzhou to assign newly arrived expectant officials to conduct night patrols (*yexun* 夜巡) in the more dangerous areas of the city and its suburbs, where there was a lot of criminality: thus, a half-month after having reached the city Duan was entrusted with a particularly difficult sector in the suburbs (he won the applause of the locals by going with only two attendants and discontinuing the customary rackets for which the patrols served as a pretext). At one point later on he was also sent to inspect (*xuncha* 巡查) the gates of Qiantang in the middle of the night because a party of prisoners had just escaped from the Qiantang county prison. Then, he was regularly entrusted with judiciary investigations (*wen'an* 問案) by the two leading counties of Hangzhou (he discontinued the practice of yielding to the powerful local gentry families whose habit it was to enclose their

<sup>43</sup> For Duan Guangqing's magistracies see *ibid.*, p. 13-88, *passim*.

<sup>44</sup> In this respect Duan is quite different from Zhang Jixing in his own autobiography. At the time of his audiences with the Xianfeng emperor in 1859 he does mention that he had to borrow money to offer the customary “parting gifts” extracted from him by the capital officials (for a total of several thousand taels), but contrary to Zhang in the same circumstances he does not give precise figures, and especially does not say how and where he borrowed and repaid the money. There is one interesting piece of financial information in Duan's text, however (and this comes long after he had been an expectant official): to wit, that after some fifteen years as an official his *huannang* 宦囊 (i.e. his private savings) amounted to no more than 40,000 taels—indeed a modest figure by the standards of the time—which he had recently lost when the pawnshop where he had invested the sum was raided by bandits (*Jinghu zizhuan nianpu*, p. 178-9).

visiting card in their complaints in order to influence the tribunal; as a result such cases were no longer given to him). Duan and his colleagues were also required to escort the Hangzhou higher officials at the time of the spring sacrifices on the second lunar month (文武各廟春祭). At one point they were sent around to audit the conditions in the local prisons (*qingli jianyu* 清釐監獄) in the various prefectures of Zhejiang.<sup>45</sup> Duan also had to read examination papers for the three academies in the city (a task, he says, which is usually entrusted to expectant officials with *datiao* background like him, or with “*liangban*” 兩班 background)<sup>46</sup>; besides, he had to check the drafts of the routine memorials prepared by the clerks at the governor’s yamen—this operation, called *duiben* 對本, was also usually entrusted to *liangban* expectant officials. And finally, he had to work as a copyist (*tenglu guan* 騰錄官) in the provincial examination.<sup>47</sup>

Having participated in all these activities, Duan Guanqing was appointed to his first acting magistracy, and therefore had to concentrate on other tasks. Our other sources considerably enrich the picture, however, and confirm that for every kind of official enterprise outside the routine operations of local government expecting officials were used as a pool of available administrative manpower. For example Gao Tingyao, who in the first decade of the nineteenth century was employed as a trusted agent of several Anhui governors, had, among other things, to oversee the transfer of government monies (10,000 taels in 100 bags) arriving from Jiangsu and to be delivered to Hubei; to direct the rebuilding of Suzhou 宿州 department, which had been devastated by a sectarian rebellion in 1802 (during the four months he spent there Gao had in fact the powers and responsibilities of an acting magistrate, even though he was not formally that); to oversee famine relief in two prefectures with the remarkably large budget of 400,000 taels; to escort grain tribute deliveries, which might involve difficult dealings with tribute transportation crews; to solve a number of judicial cases, notably for the sake of the provincial judge; to investigate cases of local rebellion (he usually finds that it is all wrong rumors); and much more.<sup>48</sup> Famine relief is an interesting case here: it was the sort of non-routine operation that was particularly demanding in manpower because of all the investigating of conditions and distributing of relief that had to be done according to regulation. “Commissioned officials” (*weiyuan*), mostly taken from the ranks of expectant personnel, were a ready resource which does not seem to have been available in the first half of the eighteenth century.<sup>49</sup> More often than not, in fact, such assignments were seen as a source of extra revenue since relief budgets might be vastly exaggerated by the local authorities: in a very striking passage Gao Tingyao explains that after having spent about

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<sup>45</sup> Duan also mentions (p. 8) expecting magistrates being sent around (in this case, to Huzhou prefecture) to expedite the levy of the grain tribute (*cuicao* 催漕).

<sup>46</sup> The meaning of *liangban* in this context is unclear to me.

<sup>47</sup> For all of this see *Jinghu zizhuan nianpu*, p. 9-13. Concerning the last item, Duan says that entrusting licentiates and doctors (instead of ordinary clerks) with copying the examination papers is one of the entrenched “bad customs” specific to Zhejiang, conducive to unlawful arrangements with candidates hailing from influential families. According to Gong Rufu 龔汝富, *Ming Qing songxue yanjiu* 明清訟學研究 (Beijing: Shangwu yinshuguan, 2008), p. 52, Duan Guanqing’s and Zhang Jixing’s autobiographies have “many” examples of expectant magistrate being sent to study law and the judicial procedure for a few months in the “judicial bureaus” (*yanju* 讞局 or *fashenju* 發審局) set up in the provincial capitals. For the case of Zhang Jixing, see below: in fact the expectant officials he put to work in the Chengdu *fashenju* were not apprentices but experienced old hands.

<sup>48</sup> See, respectively, *Huanyou jilüe* (1900 Qishui ed.), 1/1a-2a, 3b-5b, 19b-20a, 20b-21b, 22a-26b, 26b-28a, 28b-30b.

<sup>49</sup> See Pierre-Étienne Will, *Bureaucracy and Famine in Eighteenth-Century China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990), p. 90-91: during the 1743-44 Zhili famine, the officials commissioned to help in the relief effort were mainly subaltern officials from counties and prefectures outside the famine area, not *houbu* personnel in the sense discussed here.



4,000 taels as relief in Suzhou both a local clerk and his own private secretary suggested to report 40,000, which would not surprise the provincial authorities at all—and indeed, later on the governor told him of his surprise that he had not asked for 40-50,000 taels.<sup>50</sup>

Expectant officials also helped in expediting certain routine tasks of the government, notably in the provincial yamens. The mention of *houbu* and *weiyuan* personnel is extremely frequent in Zhang Jixing's account of his work as provincial judge or provincial treasurer in a variety of provinces. For example in 1848, while he was Sichuan provincial judge, he set up a special bureau of investigation (*fashen ju* 發審局) in his offices in order to expedite the backlog of pending cases at the Chengdu prefectural yamen, all the questioning (and torturing) being entrusted to a few commissioned officials (*weiyuan*) working under his supervision: Zhang insists they were experienced and talented men (he cites their names), obviously old hands at this sort of work, and most probably expectant officials for which judicial administration had become a sort of specialty that they practiced in the central offices at Chengdu. In fact Zhang at this point delivers a rather horrendous account of the intensive effort at eradicating the banditry that was rife in the province at the time, during which the so-called Guofei 國匪 bandits who had been captured were routinely submitted to the most cruel and blind acts of torture. This had been a policy encouraged by Zhang's predecessor, and the *weiyuan* in charge of questioning the criminals were all the more involved in it since they were eager to please the provincial judge. Zhang tried to moderate them as much as he could, citing the cases of several *weiyuan*, who presumably had been particularly sadistic in their questioning methods, who met sudden deaths, snatched away, as it were, by the ghosts of their victims.<sup>51</sup>

During the same period Zhang was appointed acting provincial treasurer for several months, and while he was in this position one of his assignments was to disentangle the incredibly confused accounts of the province. As he explains, to accomplish this task he created a Bureau of verification (*qingcha ju* 清查局) which he entrusted to two expectant officials (an assistant prefect and a magistrate) who were helped by several experienced clerks; it took six months of investigations in Chengdu and elsewhere to sort out the accounts.<sup>52</sup> Later on Zhang went through the darker part of his career, after he had been cashiered from his post of Zhili provincial treasurer and deprived of his ranks following a dispute with Governor General Guiliang. Instead of being exiled to Xinjiang (which he had already experienced once, actually) he was sent to redeem himself by serving in the army then combating the northern offensive of the Taiping (this was in 1853). Not only was he in charge of provisioning, he was also closely involved in actual combat, and we can see here and there in his lengthy account of the war that a number of *weiyuan* were serving in the army, not a few of whom lost their lives.<sup>53</sup> (It is a fact that a whole generation of expectant officials, mostly with purchased brevets, rose through the ranks during the wars waged against the mid-century rebellions.)

In another area, Zhang mentions a *weiyuan* who managed to sell grand plans for opening new lands (*kaiken* 開墾) to a gullible Gansu provincial treasurer, Deng Tingzhen 鄧廷楨 (who occupied the post in 1844-45); but this was only a pretext for extra-taxation, and it ended with peasants rioting at the door of the provincial treasurer. In 1857, while Zhang Jixing was provincial treasurer in Lanzhou (his second stint in this post, which he detested), his superior, governor general Lebin 樂斌, who is described by Zhang as totally stupid, also ambitioned to launch a program of land reclamation that would contribute to provisioning the

<sup>50</sup> See *Huanyou jilüe*, 1/4b; see also below on the 1809 Shanyang case.

<sup>51</sup> *Dao Xian huanhai jianwen lu*, p. 91-92, 96-97. See also p. 101-102 for the mention of two expectant magistrates who were particularly adept at torturing bandits and ended with bizarre deaths.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 102.

<sup>53</sup> See e.g. *ibid.*, p. 159, 173.

army. Zhang had to comply and send out a team of *weiyuan* to investigate, even though they knew very well that the governor general's plan was not at all adapted to Gansu's miserable environment. After more than a year of perfunctorily surveying the area they delivered documents which promised that revenue and supplies could be extracted from the reclaimed land after five or ten years of trial, much to Lebin's satisfaction. The official whose investigations had delivered the most results, a Manchu expectant magistrate, was well-known for his talent at extorting resources from the postal relays and local constables, and he could not be refused anything by the local magistrates because they were too much afraid of being slandered by him: in other words, "before reaping any profit they had already seen the losses" (利未獲而害已見). In any event, on verification by Zhang's services it turned out that the land that had been "surveyed" was mostly non-existing land. And despite all of this, concludes Zhang, the commissioners rushed about telling of their accomplishments and were rewarded with appointments to "good posts" (*youque*): "It's really difficult not to have a good laugh at it!" (真不值一噓).<sup>54</sup>

### *The Rush on Money*

The considerations above suggest a somewhat contrasted image of the place and role of the expectant officials and *weiyuan*. They certainly were able to deliver considerable service as a pool of sometimes quite experienced extra personnel from which the provincial administration was free to draw at will. But they were subject to the same defects as the regular field bureaucracy, and these defects could only be enhanced by the career uncertainties that defined their situation.

Obviously the principal worry for expectant officials, who did not earn any salary and had no direct access to the source of revenue, was to make money, not only to survive and maintain the upward circulation of gifts on which their employment depended but also to recoup the expenses they had faced to get where they were—including the litany of contributions that many of them had paid, first to enter the competition and then to be "sent to the provinces" (*fenfa* 分發) without having to wait for years; and beyond recouping their expenses, to start filling their "official purse" (*huannang* 宦囊), in other words, putting money aside (the term *sinang* 私囊 is also found). Getting some assignment from the governor was the only way; and then, the bulk of the revenue made from it would come not from the regular salaries or fees paid by the government, but from the squeeze that was obviously inseparable from most assignments.

I have already alluded to this regarding assignments to temporary magistracies, where making extra-revenue followed well-established practices; but in fact any kind of assignment was the occasion of customary fees or gifts. For example Duan Guangqing tells us that according to "ancient custom" (舊例) whenever a *weiyuan* arrived in a county on an official mission the local officials would offer him a « travel gift » (*chengyi* 程儀): this was obviously one of the expecting officials' important sources of revenue.<sup>55</sup> The strength of the commissioned officials, however temporary their commission was, was that they were the governor's appointees, which by definition gave them some clout in their dealings with local officials; and this was particularly the case with the elite of trusted expectant officials who would serve as the governor's personal agents.<sup>56</sup>

Gao Tingyao, who appears to have been part of this elite, is by far the most vivid in describing practices of which (like Duan Guangqing) he assures us that *he* would never have any part in them. For example, after he had overseen an important campaign of famine relief

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., p. 211-213.

<sup>55</sup> *Jinghu zizhuan nianpu*, p. 12.

<sup>56</sup> See Weiss, p. 12.

in Fengyang and Sizhou in 1804—with the above-mentioned budget of 400,000 taels, which he had to convey there in the first place—he was offered 1,000 taels as a farewell gift (*jinyi* 贐儀)<sup>57</sup> by the local officials. He refused, borrowing instead 24 taels from a colleague (another expectant official) to pay for his trip back to the provincial capital, which earned him the mockery of his colleagues. And he mentions at least one other occasion where he was offered 200 taels after having conducted famine relief.

As a matter of fact, refusing the 1,000 taels (about 35 kilograms of silver!) was not simply a manifestation of uprightness; it was also a means of refusing to grant his local colleagues what would have amounted to a discharge from the governor's representative since, had he accepted the departing gift, it would have meant a commitment to protect them if ever irregularities were brought to light later. Gifts created complicities and networks of mutual obligation. In one of his most interesting passages, Gao explains how people who offer gifts are in the habit of maintaining a careful account of them by writing down each one, with the name of its beneficiary, in a special booklet which they keep as a means of reminding the gift-takers of their debt, possibly as a means of blackmailing them if necessary. But if the donor encountered some problem and was submitted to an official investigation (or sometimes after his death when a posthumous deficit had to be investigated), it might happen that his gift book be found among his things, bringing trouble to the colleagues whose names were written inside. Gao mentions at least two cases where he congratulates himself of having refused a gift, and therefore of *not* being in the booklet of the colleague who had offered the gift, when the latter was investigated some time later. Strikingly enough, after having mentioned his refusal of a gift of 1,000 taels in 1804, Gao recalls the big scandal that occurred “three years later” (in fact, five: it was in 1809) when it was discovered that relief funds had been massively embezzled at Shanyang 山陽 (i.e., Huai'an in Northern Jiangsu): not only were the prefect and magistrate executed, but all the commissioned officials who had been sent to participate in the relief (賑務委員) and who had accepted gifts were arrested and heavily punished.<sup>58</sup> As a matter of fact, it has been remarked that both the prefect and magistrate had started their careers by purchasing ranks of subaltern officials (as *juanna zuoza* 捐納): in other words, in their time they had most probably been part of the world of expectant officials.<sup>59</sup>

## A Non-Conclusion

I do not feel at this point in a position to propose any kind of overall conclusion on nineteenth-century expectant officials. As we have seen, depending on the author their proliferation in the provincial capitals of the empire either contributed to the general degeneracy and commodification of the Qing bureaucracy or, on the contrary, helped the Qing

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<sup>57</sup> There are a variety of terms for “farewell gifts”, e.g. *biejing* 別敬. Another very common term is *kuisong* 饋送.

<sup>58</sup> *Huanyou jilüe*, 1/19b-20b.

<sup>59</sup> There are plenty of sources, ranging from the archival to the novelistic, on the 1809 Shanyang famine relief scandal, whose most sensational feature (not mentioned by Gao Tingyao) was that the corrupt local officials managed to have the relief official who had found out about their embezzlement and was about to report to the court, a certain Li Yuchang 李毓昌, also an expectant official, assassinated. See among others Sun Zihé 孫子和, “Shanyang zhen'an yu Qingdai xingzhi” 山陽賑案與清代刑制, *Jinri Zhongguo*, 118 (1981), p. 98-122 (who makes the remark that since the prefect and magistrate had purchased their posts it is no wonder that they were “used to the smell of copper”); Joanna Waley-Cohen, “Politics and the supernatural in mid-Qing legal culture”, *Modern China*, 19, 3 (1993), p. 330-53.

state to face its new challenges (the mid-century rebellions, the foreign wars) with a new flexibility and a large reserve of administrative manpower.

The picture is so complicated, and it changed so much over time, that it is easy to find arguments pointing in both directions. One suggestion might be that the considerable quantity of personnel represented by the expectant officials staying in the provincial capitals was indisputably an asset to run a local administration that was becoming more and more complicated and demanding, but that it also featured considerable weaknesses: among the latter I would include the fact that, as free agents depending only on the governor's authority and evaluation, expectant officials sent on special commissions were much less controlled and accountable than their tenured colleagues; and I would also include their sheer numbers, whose result was that only part of the hundreds, perhaps thousands of men with official brevets present in the provincial capitals could be put to any useful work, the rest being rather like a population of unemployed workers idling around in the hope of finding some bit of employment, however short-term and lowly-paid.

Among those who did contribute to administrative work, a distinction should probably be made—at least in the late nineteenth century, which I have hardly discussed in this paper—between those who eventually entered the officialdom in substantive positions, on the one hand, and those who found employment in the many bureaus and other semi-public enterprises that proliferated under the protection of a generation of post-rebellion provincial satraps during the *yangwu yundong* years and formed what has been called an “informal bureaucracy”, on the other hand.<sup>60</sup>

The latter are a subject of its own, which I would not tackle here.<sup>61</sup> As far as the former are concerned, it may be interesting to mention in passing that some officials did care about their training. Zhang Jixing recounts in his autobiography that in 1838 he saw a score of newly appointed magistrates turning up at Taiyuan, the provincial capital of Shanxi, where he was acting prefect at the time. These people, all of them “intellectuals knowing nothing about administration” (皆書生不知吏事), were obviously expectant officials—he calls them *fenfa xianling* 分發縣令. Rather than allowing them to idle away their time doing nothing, as it was apparently the custom, he submitted them to intense training in order to prepare them to their future work: ten were sent to study (*xuexi*) at the capital county, ten at the capital prefecture, they were supposed to read the Penal Code every evening and discuss it among themselves the next day, their exercise books were inspected by experienced clerks, and the local personnel checked that they came to the office on time. And indeed, he claims, when later on they were put in charge of magistracies they proved able to master the cases submitted to them and not be manipulated by their underlings. In a sense, Zhang Jixing had succeeded in making expectancies into true internships.<sup>62</sup>

Interestingly, we find several examples in the late nineteenth century (from the 1870s) of governors opening training centers to teach administration, in particular law, to the expectant officials in their provincial capitals who were slated to become local officials. These centers were called *keli guan* 課吏館 or *keli ju* 局 (lit. “bureaus for examining officials”). Such was, for example, the case of Gangyi 剛毅 (1834-1900), also in Taiyuan, who wrote several legal handbooks for his *keli guan* in the late 1880s; or of Fan Zengxiang 樊增祥 (1846-1931) in Xi'an during the *xinzheng* reforms. Others are mentioned, and in fact the court seems to have ordered the generalization of these provincial centers at the beginning of the *xinzheng* decade.

<sup>60</sup> See Kaske, « The Price of an Office », p. 294.

<sup>61</sup> However, I would like to mention an unpublished book manuscript devoted to the Zhang Zhidong informal machine, where expectant officials of all sorts, origins and destinies are featured in abundance: Seungjoo Yoon, *Commissioners, Communication and Confucian Commitment: Zhang Zhidong and the Rise of Modern Press in China, 1880-1910* (2005).

<sup>62</sup> See *Dao Xian huanhai jianwen lu*, p. 42.

They would certainly deserve further research. It seems to me, however, that a trend can be guessed, leading from a conservative project of rebuilding a strong local administration along traditional lines to an effort at building a modernized local administration with the help of Western methods and contents.<sup>63</sup> But in all cases the reservoir of human talent was found among the expectant officials stationed in the provincial capitals.

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<sup>63</sup> Gangyi, an important legal scholar, was a famous reactionary and xenophobe who committed himself with the boxers and their imperial protectors in 1900; Fan Zengxiang was a reformist (he refused to serve the Republic, however) who was closely associated with the enterprises of Zhang Zhidong.