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Bureaucratic Corruption in  
Nineteenth-century China

Chong-chor Lau and Rance P. L. Lee

**SOCIAL RESEARCH CENTRE**  
**THE CHINESE UNIVERSITY**  
**OF HONG KONG**

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by

Chong-chor Lau

and

Rance P.L. Lee

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Dr. Chong-chor Lau (1948- ) received his B.S.Sc. from the Chinese University of Hong Kong in 1971 and his Ph.D. from the University of Pittsburgh in 1978. Currently he is Lecturer in Sociology, Chung Chi College, The Chinese University of Hong Kong.

Dr. Rance P.L. Lee (1943- ) received his B.S.Sc. from the Chinese University of Hong Kong and Ph.D. in Sociology from the University of Pittsburgh, U.S.A. in 1968. Currently he is Senior Lecturer in Sociology, Chung Chi College, The Chinese University of Hong Kong.

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## BUREAUCRATIC CORRUPTION IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY CHINA

### INTRODUCTION

Hong Kong is situated on the southeastern coast of Mainland China. Before colonization by the British in 1841, it was part of the Chinese Empire under the Ch'ing dynasty. The object of this paper is to investigate the corrupt practices within the Ch'ing bureaucracy in order to provide a historical context for an understanding of the problem of corruption in Hong Kong. In a way, this paper is an extension of Kuan's research on the history of anti-corruption in Hong Kong.<sup>1</sup>

The Ch'ing was the last imperial regime in China, lasting for over two and a half centuries, i.e., from 1644 - 1911. The regime had an elaborate bureaucratic system governing the people in various regions of China. Administrative offices performing different functions were located at various levels of the graded authority, ranging from the central, through the provincial and prefectural, down to the county levels.<sup>2</sup> At the top of the hierarchy was the emperor. Officials at the various levels were appointed by the emperor largely, though not entirely, on the basis of educational qualifications. Officials were expected to have personal loyalty to the emperor. Such an organizational set-up, which has been conceived by Max Weber as a form of "patrimonial bureaucracy," had existed

in China for over two thousand years.<sup>3</sup> It had contributed to the enduring stability and integration of the Chinese state until the modern era. Nevertheless, this administrative bureaucracy, like its counterparts in other countries, had been plagued by the problem of corruption since it came to existence. To delimit the scope of discussion, this paper shall focus on the problem of corruption during the last six reigns of the Ch'ing regime, i.e., from 1796 to 1911.

The key questions in this paper are: How was corruption defined by the legal authority? What were the main types of corruption by government officials? How prevalent were corrupt practices during the period under study? Why did corruption occur? What kinds of anti-corruption measures were used? And how did corrupt practices affect the political stability of the state?

To shed some light on the above questions, we shall mainly rely on documentary data compiled by Professor C.K. Yang and his associates at the University of Pittsburgh, U. S. A. The data were taken from the Ta-Ch'ing Huang-ti Shih-lu (大清皇帝實錄, i.e., The Veritable Records of the Ch'ing Emperors) during the period 1796-1911. The source consists of 2,247 volumes (集) or about 140,000 pages of materials concerning events of national significance within the Ch'ing Empire. C.C. Lau, an author of this paper, has participated in Yang's project since 1972, and is thus familiar with the data.

The Shih-lu is believed to have a relatively complete coverage of all the punishments on corruption and other offenses committed by government officials. After 1727, every case of punishment on official offenses including corruption required the approval of the emperor and was thus recorded in the Shih-lu.<sup>4</sup> However, some limitations of using this source should be recognized. First, the data represent only the tip, rather than the whole iceberg, of the corruption phenomenon during the period under study. The Shih-lu recorded those cases which were detected and punished, ignoring those which were covered up and were thus not punished. Second, the reliance on the Shih-lu as the only source of data poses the problem of reliability and validity. Without cross-checking the data with other sources, we are uncertain about the extent to which our findings can be trusted. This paper, therefore, offers suggestive rather than conclusive statements about bureaucratic corruption under the Ch'ing. Third, the description of each corruption case in the Shih-lu is often cryptic and quite brief. We are thus unable to go into details about the process of corruption. In spite of these various limitations, we believe that the Shih-lu data would at least provide us a rough understanding of the problem of bureaucratic corruption in the Ch'ing administration. In this paper, we shall attempt to quantify the data and, wherever appropriate, present some of the case materials.

## TYPES & PREVALENCE OF BUREAUCRATIC CORRUPTION

In the Ch'ing bureaucracy, corruption was legally defined as the misappropriation of public funds and supplies, and the misuse of official power for private gain.<sup>5</sup> Corrupt practices by officials were classified into eleven categories (see Table 2) in the Ch'ing Penal Code, and were subsumed under the general heading of "accepting improper money or properties."<sup>6</sup> An objective of the classification was to specify the corrupt act so that different punishment measures could be applied. For instance, the act of accepting or demanding money by improper performance of official duties ( 枉法貪財 ) was differentiated from the act of accepting or demanding improper fees without involving any performance of official duties ( 坐贓致罪 ). The penalty was heavier on the former than on the latter offense.<sup>7</sup>

In view of the legal definition, how prevalent were corrupt practices in the Ch'ing administration? According to the Shih-lu, a total of 36,656 offenses by government officials were discovered and punished during the period 1796-1911. About 7.3 per cent (N = 2,669) of these offenses were classified as corruption. From Table 1, it is obvious that corruption as defined by the Ch'ing legal code was by no means the least prevalent type of offense. Among the eleven major forms of offense, corruption ranked number 7 in terms of frequency.

Table 1. Numbers & Proportions of Ch'ing Officials Punished for Various Types of Offense, 1796-1911.

Types of Offense	Officials Punished*	
	N	%
1. Laxity	5,615	15.3
2. Military Mistakes	5,401	14.7
3. Misconduct	5,345	14.6
4. Misadministration	4,614	12.6
5. Low Ability	3,577	9.7
6. Inappropriate Behavior	2,927	8.0
7. Corruption	2,669	7.3
8. Misadministration of Public Finance	2,258	6.2
9. Judicial Errors	1,870	5.1
10. Dishonesty	937	2.6
11. Indirect Involvements	1,443	3.9
Total	36,556	100.0

Source: The Veritable Records of Ch'ing Emperors, 1796-1911.

\* The figures consist of multiple entries as a result of the fact that one official might commit more than one offense. The actual number of officials punished for all offenses should be 32,304.

Table 2. Numbers & Proportions of Ch'ing Officials Punished for Various Forms of Corruption, 1796-1911.

Forms of Corruption	Officials Punished	
	N	%
A. People-directed		
1. Extortion of money by improper performance of official duties	667	25.0
2. Extortion by creating new taxes	367	13.8
3. Accepting or demanding improper fees	306	11.5
4. Accepting or demanding customary fees	192	7.2
5. Allowing family members, servants or aides to demand improper fees	132	4.9
6. Extortion of money by torturing	16	0.6
Subtotal	1,680	63.0
B. Government-directed		
7. Embezzling public funds	631	23.6
8. Embezzling money from public works	133	5.0
9. Embezzling military funds	96	3.6
10. Embezzling public properties	76	2.8
11. Misuse of government properties (e.g. Making false coins)	53	2.0
Subtotal	989	37.0
Total	2,669	100.0

Source: Same as Table 1.

Table 2 shows the frequency of each specific form of corruption over the century. Extortion of money from the public by improper performance of official duties was found to be the most frequent form of corruption (25%), followed by embezzlement of public funds (23.6%). Together, they accounted for nearly a half of all the corruption cases. On the other hand, the extortion of money by torturing suspects was the least prevalent form (0.6%)

Using the source of corrupt money or properties as a criterion, the eleven forms of corruption can be grouped into two general types: the people-directed and the government-directed corruption. The people-directed corruption referred to the demand and acceptance of improper fees from the people. It included the embezzlement of money by improper performance of official duties, extortion by creating new taxes, accepting or demanding improper customary fees, allowing family members or subordinates to demand improper fees, and extorting money by torturing the criminal suspects. From Table 2, about 63 per cent of the corruption cases belonged to this type.

The government-directed corruption referred to the embezzlement of government funds and properties. It included the extortion of public funds, the embezzlement of money from public works, military funds, and public properties, as well as the coinage of false currency.

Table 2 shows that about 37 per cent of the corrupt practices were of this type.

The above classification by source of corrupt money and properties indicates that the burden of bureaucratic corruption was mainly on the people, as the people-directed corruption cases greatly outnumbered the government-directed cases. It, of course, does not mean that the people were not affected by the government-directed corruption. As a Chinese saying goes, "the wool ultimately comes from the sheep" (羊毛出自羊身上). Nevertheless, the data suggest that it was the people, rather than the government, who were more likely to suffer directly from corruption by officials.

On the whole, there were more people-directed than government-directed corruption cases. Table 3 shows that this was the case mainly among civilian officials at the provincial, prefectural and county levels. Among the central government officials and the military heads and staff, there was little difference between the numbers of people-directed and government-directed cases.

Table 3 also shows that corruption tended to concentrate on the lowest level of the bureaucracy. Among the various categories of government officials, the county magistrates were most likely to be punished for corruption. Should we exclude the unknown cases (N = 43), the county

Table 3. Numbers of Cases Punished for Corruption and Other Offenses by Positions of Officials, 1796-1911.

Positions	Corruption			Other Offenses
	People-directed	Government-directed	Total	
Central Government Officials	183	171	354	6,246
Provincial Civilian Heads	40	8	48	1,732
Provincial Military Heads	36	33	69	1,199
Provincial Civilian Staff	158	56	214	1,678
Provincial Military Staff	342	317	659	6,401
Prefectural Magistrates	85	64	149	1,354
Prefectural Staff	67	55	122	903
County Magistrates	547	216	763	7,764
County Staff	195	53	248	1,873
Unknown	27	16	43	485
Total	1,680	989	2,669	29,635

Source: Same as Table 1.

magistrates constituted about 29.1 per cent of all the corruption cases (i.e., 763 out of 2,626 cases) over the century. It is interesting to note that these magistrates were most likely to be punished not only for corruption but also for other offenses. Table 3 indicates that should the unknown cases be excluded (N = 485), 26.6 per cent of all the officials punished for non-corruption offenses (i.e., 7,764 out of 29,150 cases) were county magistrates.

The county magistrates were much more likely to commit the people-directed than the government-directed corruption. We can see from Table 3 that 71.7 per cent of the corrupt county magistrates (i.e., 547 out of 763 cases) got improper fees or properties from the people, whereas only 28.3 per cent embezzled money from the government. The proportional difference between people-directed and government-directed corruption ( $71.7 - 28.3 = 43.4$ ) among the corrupt county magistrates was substantially larger than the proportional difference ( $63 - 37 = 26$ ) among all the corrupt officials in the period. The prevalence of people-directed corruption among county magistrates was probably due to the fact that they were at the bottom of the administrative hierarchy and were thus usually in close contact with the local people.<sup>8</sup>

To make an appropriate estimate of the prevalence of corruption, it is necessary to take into consideration the size of the base population. In other words, we should

calculate the percentage of corrupt officials among the total number of government officials during the entire period 1796-1911. Unfortunately, we have failed to find the statistics about the total number of corrupt officials nor those of all government officials. What we could do is to rely on the Shih-lu data about the number of officials who were punished for corruption, and to use the statistics suggested by Lee and his associates about the total numbers of official appointments to the prefectural and county offices.<sup>9</sup> It was estimated that there were a total of 6,831 appointments of prefectural magistrates and 68,136 appointments of county magistrates during the period 1796-1911. Since 149 prefectural magistrates and 763 county magistrates were punished for corruption during the period (see Table 3), we may say that the prevalence rates of corruption among prefectural and county magistrates were 2.2 per cent and 1.1 per cent, respectively. These two figures appear to be rather small, but it should be underscored that they might have seriously underestimated the "true" prevalence rates. As many, though not all, corrupt deals were secret in nature and were of benefit to both givers and receivers, a significant portion of the corrupt cases might have been covered up and were thus not recorded in the Shih-lu. Moreover, the statistics from Lee and associates were about the numbers of official appointments, not the numbers of officials. Since the term of office in a given post was in

principle three years and was in practice often less than three years,<sup>10</sup> the total number of prefectural and county magistrates should be smaller than the total number of appointments to the offices. As we have underestimated the numerator but overestimated the demoninator, the above percentages (i.e., 2.2 and 1.1) apparently under-represented the true prevalence rates of corruption among the prefectural and county magistrates. Corruption was, in fact, so widespread in the local offices that it had caused deep concern to the emperors and their high-ranking officials in the Ch'ing dynasty.<sup>11</sup>

#### CONTROL MEASURES

An important weapon employed by the Ch'ing government to fight against corruption was the emphasis on moral education. For a person to obtain a qualification for official appointment, the most appropriate channel was to go through a series of public examinations held at the county, provincial, and central levels.<sup>12</sup> A major part of these examinations was based on the Confucian classics. It was expected that after many years in preparation for the examinations, the officials would have already absorbed, and would thus observe, the moral values of the Confucian literature, such as benevolence to the people, loyalty to the emperor, honesty, fairness and uprightness. The officials were often addressed to as "parent-officials"

by the people. As "parents", they were expected to behave as a model of morality for the governed to follow. Many people today may question the effectiveness of moral sanctions as an anti-corruption measure. But to the elites and masses in traditional China, corruption could not be brought under control unless the officeholders were persons of moral integrity. It was deeply believed that the elimination of corruption through moral indoctrination was a realistic approach.

The Ch'ing administration did not rely solely on the moral approach. Structural measures were also developed to control bureaucratic behavior.<sup>13</sup> One of the structural measures was the system of accountability. A superior official was required to see to it that his subordinates were performing their duties properly and to prosecute them for any misconduct. An official was required to report regularly to his immediate superior on the performance of his official duties and on the important events in the district. In many cases, the superior was held responsible for the offense of his subordinates. The punishment was made in proportion to the severity of the offense and the rank of the superior. In general, the more severe the offense committed by the subordinate and the more immediate the superior official, the greater was the responsibility and the punishment. The penalty was usually in the form of dismissal, demotion, or loss of salary.

In principle, the system of accountability would subject the local officials to the close surveillance of their superiors and would thus make them think twice before committing offenses such as corruption. However, as will be pointed out later, the Ch'ing officials at the various levels usually found it a necessity to make corrupt money. Under such circumstances, the system of accountability might lead to the development of organized corruption networks involving officials at various ranks. The superiors demanded improper payments from their subordinates, whereas the latter were delighted to yield to the demands in order to have their own corruption deals covered up by the superior officials.

Another structural measure against corruption was the rule of avoidance. Under the Ch'ing administrative regulations, an official was not eligible for appointment to an office in his native district. He was not even permitted to marry a woman of the district in which he was serving. In addition to the rule of avoidance, there was also the principle of periodical transfer. An official was not allowed to serve continuously for an extensive period in a particular district. In principle, the term of office was three years. According to the data collected by Lee and his associates, an average term of office for a prefectural magistrate during the period 1796-1911 was actually 2.2 years while the average for a county magistrate

was 1.9 years.<sup>14</sup> The rationale behind the rules of avoidance and frequent transfer was to make the officials free from the pressures of kins and friends and thus have fair and impartial attitudes toward local affairs.

It should be noted that the rule of avoiding the native district and the principle of frequent transfer were integral parts of the general theory of centralism that had dominated Chinese political thinking for many centuries. From the standpoint of the imperial regime, these rules not only prevent corruption but also carry political implications. As the local officials were unable to develop close and enduring ties with the people in the districts, they were unlikely to organize and lead any local disturbance that might threaten the legitimacy of the imperial authority. However, as will be pointed out later, these rules made the officials very much depend on the office clerks and, as a result, create fertile grounds for corrupt practices.

Corruption and other offenses by bureaucrats were also controlled by the system of punishments. In the Ch'ing dynasty, heavy punishments were often imposed on corruption cases. From Table 4, we find that should the unknown cases be excluded (N = 36), 87.5 per cent of all the corruption cases were severely or drastically punished, while the remaining 12.5 per cent received moderate or lenient penalties. The severe punishments mainly included

Table 4. Numbers of Corruption and Other Offenses by Degree of Punishment

Degree of Punishment	Corruption			Other Offenses
	People-directed	Government-directed	Total	
Drastic	44	53	97	403
Severe	1,436	771	2,207	15,995
Moderate	176	129	305	14,677
Lenient	4	20	24	2,481
Unknown	20	16	36	431
Total	1,680	989	2,669	33,987

Source: Same as Table 1.

imprisonment, exile, and dismissal, while the drastic punishment referred to the death penalty. The moderate punishment included fines, reduction in salary, demotion and transfer, while the lenient penalty was mainly public condemnation and criticism. Table 4 indicates that corruption cases were more heavily punished than were other forms of offense. We find that, excluding the unknown cases (N = 431), only 48.3 per cent of the non-corruption offenders were beheaded or severely punished. Obviously, the law was quite harsh toward corruption. In general, the penalty was heavier on corruption than on other offenses.

Table 4 also shows that the people-directed corruption cases were somewhat more heavily punished than were the government-directed cases. Excluding the unknown cases, 89.2 per cent of the people-directed cases, as compared to 84.7 per cent of the government-directed cases, were severely or drastically punished.

In the Ch'ing dynasty, the acceptance of improper money from the people was regarded as one of the worst crimes and the punishment was in fact quite heavy. For instance, if the sum was as little as 20 taels, the penalty was 60 strokes of the bamboo and a year of penal servitude. When the sum was 80 taels, the punishment was detention for strangling. As a rule, the sentence could be mitigated only by imperial pardon, not the regular procedure of redemption.<sup>15</sup> In the case of embezzling government funds,

the sentence was more lenient. If the sum was as little as 7.5 taels, the punishment was 60 strokes of the bamboo and a year of penal servitude. Punishment for 40 taels was five years of servitude. If the sum was 1,000 taels or more, the sentence was detention for beheading. Looking at these punishment measures, it appears that the government-directed corruption was more heavily punished than the people-directed corruption. However, it should be noted that in the case of government-directed corruption, if the corrupt money was paid back to the government within a time limit, the penalty could be canceled.<sup>16</sup> But this was not the case for the people-directed corruption.

The law was harsh toward corruption, and was harsher toward the people-directed than the government-directed corruption. Nevertheless, corruption remained prevalent throughout the Empire and the people-directed corrupt practices were more prevalent than the government-directed corruptions (see Tables 1 & 2). These facts suggest that the system of heavy penalty was not an effective deterrent of corruption in the Ch'ing administration. Moreover, upon further analysis, we find that among the eleven specific forms of corruption (listed in Table 2), the extortion of money by improper performance of official duties and the embezzlement of public funds were more heavily punished than were other forms of corruption. But again, these two specific forms of corruption were more prevalent than the others (see Table 2).

In short, the Ch'ing administration used both moral and structural approaches to combat corruption. Government officials had had years of education in moral principles and their performance was under the control of some structural measures such as the system of accountability, the rules of avoidance and periodical transfer, and the imposition of heavy punishments. The question arises: Why were corrupt practices still so prevalent, especially among local officials, over the century?

#### SOURCES OF BUREAUCRATIC CORRUPTION

In his paper on the congruence between social and legal norms on corruption in Hong Kong, Rance P.L. Lee has suggested some of the social attitudes which might have led to the prevalence of corruption in traditional China, such as the value-orientation of particularism and the culture of tolerance.<sup>17</sup> While these attitudinal or cultural forces in traditional Chinese community might have given rise to corruption, the present paper would like to focus upon the structural forces within the government bureaucracy. In other words, this paper proposes that the bureaucratic structure itself might be conducive to corruption among officeholders. Listed below were some structural conditions of the Ch'ing administration, which might lead to bureaucratic corruption:

1. the unrealistic salary scale;

2. the great dependency of government officials on office clerks; and
3. the general nature of the law and the discretion power of the officials.

In the following pages, let us analyze each of these structural conditions in some length. Whenever appropriate, we shall present some case materials to exemplify the discussion.

### Unrealistic Salary Scale

Wright has attributed the fact that the officials were too poorly paid to devote themselves wholeheartedly to honest administration as a basic cause of corruption in the Ch'ing administration.<sup>18</sup> Sir Robert Hart has also pointed this out in his "spectator's memorandum" in 1865.<sup>19</sup> To exemplify the problem, the following is a case taken from the Shih-lu:

"Fu Shiu-pu was a military officer. His family was so poor that he was unable to meet the expenses of the happy (e.g., wedding) or sad (e.g., funeral) things that happened to him and his family members. He cheated a total of 56 taels from government funds. Upon discovery, the official was sentenced to exile to the province of Sinkiang." (Source: Shih-lu, 1818, Vol. 349, p. 5137.)

It does not mean that the Ch'ing government did not know the fact and its consequence. The need for a realistic salary scale was long recognized. It was an effective solution to this problem which was not found.

A partial solution to the problem was devised by the Yung-cheng (雍正) Emperor. In 1724, he set up a system of yang-lien (養廉) as a form of supplementary salary to nourish the integrity of officials. An official's income from yang-lien could be many times of his regular salary. For instance, in 1851 the regular annual salary of a Kiangsu county magistrate was 45 taels and his yang-lien ranged from 1,000 to 1,800 taels. The Kiangsu governor received 155 taels for regular salary and his yang-lien was 12,000 taels.<sup>20</sup>

The yang-lien system was characterized by its irregularity. First, the amount of payment was made in accordance with the post rather than the rank. For instance, three county magistrates in Hupeh (Chihli) province received a yang-lien of 600, 800, and 1,000 taels, respectively, despite the fact that they were on the same rank.<sup>21</sup> Second, a part or all of the yang-lien could be held back as a form of compulsory contribution to public needs.<sup>22</sup> Third, a part of the payment was in kind -- mostly in grain -- rather than in cash, making it difficult to calculate the exact amount of income from the yang-lien system. Nevertheless, the yang-lien system had played an important part in compensating for the unrealistically low salary scale of government officials. In addition to the regular salary and the yang-lien payment, the officials would also receive a certain amount of government fund --

ranging from one to several hundred taels -- for administrative expenses. Putting together these three legal sources of income, an average county magistrate could draw an annual income of approximately 1,000 taels.<sup>23</sup> This was not bad if we consider the fact that six to ten taels around the year 1830 would allow a person to purchase enough rice to feed himself for a year.<sup>24</sup> For a provincial governor, the yang-lien alone could sometimes be as high as 20,000 taels per annum.<sup>25</sup>

Whether or not an official's income was enough depended on a number of factors. The personal character of an official may play an important part. When Sir Robert Hart pointed out that the income of Ch'ing officials was inadequate, both the governor-general of Kwangtung and Kwangsi and the governor of Kwangtung retorted that whether an official was scrupulous or corrupt depended on his own character, and that a small sum was enough for a frugal man while no sum was enough for an extravagant person.<sup>26</sup> The personal character of government officials could be important, but there were social and administrative forces which would make an official consider it a matter of necessity to misuse his power for personal gain. One of the salient forces was the requirements for social and administrative expenses on the part of the officials.

It was normally an expensive operation for an official to assume and run his office in the Ch'ing dynasty. The cost involved both administrative and social expenses. Let us, first of all, take a look at the administrative expenses for running the office. For a county magistrate to run his office, for instance, he had to hire several personal secretaries and, as will be elaborated later, he also had to heavily count on his office clerks. The personal secretaries were not on the government payroll. The magistrate had to pay them out of his own income. The office clerks were paid by the government, but the salaries were so miserable that they were not even able to meet the basic necessities. A clerk in charge of the prison, for instance, was paid six taels per annum which was not enough to buy rice to feed himself. His family members would, of course, have to starve. Such was also the case for many other underlings of the county magistrates, such as the receptionists, firemen, the policemen, and the coachmen.<sup>27</sup> The magistrate, therefore, had to subsidize his office clerks out of his own income in order to keep his office clean and honest. As a result, the total expenses to keep the county office running would well exceed the total income of the magistrate from all the legal sources.

The social or non-administrative expenses were also sizable. First, the social status of government officials

in traditional China was very high. They were ranked on the top of the social prestige scale, followed in sequence by the peasants, industrial workers, and businessmen. As men at the top, they were expected to maintain a prestigious way of life, consuming high-quality goods and giving out generous gifts. The social pressures were always there to push him toward an increasingly high level of consumption. Second, the officials had to fulfill a number of social obligations, such as entertaining superior officials and civic elites, making contributions to public charities, subsidizing projects of their native communities, and helping out friends and relatives. Third, the acquiring of an office often required a sizable amount of money. In the Ch'ing dynasty, a local office could be acquired either by examination or by purchase. The purchase route to office was instituted for the purpose of increasing the state's revenue. In 1798, for instance, the price of purchasing a county magistrate office was 5,090 taels. Toward the end of the dynasty, the purchase route was expanded and the price became lower: it was 999 taels for a county magistrate office.<sup>28</sup> Obviously, it would take many years for a buyer to earn his money back if he merely depended on the regular salary. Passing the public examinations was another route to office. However, to go through the examination route, one had to concentrate on studies for many years or even decades. Moreover, passing the examinations only meant

that the person was qualified for official appointment. The period between qualification and appointment was seldom less than a year and could even be over 30 years.<sup>29</sup> Thus, by the time a graduate got his first official appointment, most probably he had incurred sizable debts to those who supported him throughout the years of preparing for the examinations and waiting for the official appointment.<sup>30</sup> To be fair to the parties involved, the official had to pay these debts soon after his assumption of duties. Failing to do so, he might be labelled as someone who "forgot the patronage and neglected the righteousness" ( 忘恩負義 ), which was a very serious stigma in traditional Chinese society.

The requirements for social and administrative expenses constitute a heavy burden on the officeholders. Since in most cases, the legal sources of income were limited and the terms of office were short, the magistrates would have no choice but to exploit the irregular sources of income as much and as fast as possible. The most important irregular source of income for a county magistrate and his underlings was in the form of ts'ao-kuei ( 漕規 ), i.e., customary fees or surcharges derived from grain tribute. On the average, it amounted to an extra income of 30,000 taels per annum for a county head. Hence, as an old Chinese saying goes, "even a clean magistrate would gain an improper income of one hundred thousand taels of

silver from his three year term of office" (三年清知府，  
十萬雪花銀)。As will be discussed later, the exaction  
of fees from the people as a way of financing the adminis-  
tration was widely practiced and, if within limits, was  
openly accepted by the local community. However, the cost  
of acquiring and running the office was often so high that  
most officials were tempted to misuse power and collect  
fees beyond the limits accepted by the local people.  
Corruption thus emerged as a major problem in the Ch'ing  
administration. Every official knew that corruption would  
yield heavy punishments, but corruption was considered a  
matter of necessity. A corrupt official was no good, but  
to resist corruption one could not survive and thus could  
not be a good official either. "Either corruption or  
perishment" seems to be a reality in the Ch'ing bureaucracy.

#### Dependency on Clerks

In carrying out the administrative duties, the  
Ch'ing officials often depended very much on office clerks.  
There were at least three reasons for such a great dependency.  
First, the officials were selected through the system of  
public examinations which required familiarity with Confucian  
classics and historical literature. The officials were thus  
generalists by training, but the conduct of administrative  
duties inevitably required specialized know-how.<sup>31</sup> Second,  
as a member of the scholar community, the official tended to

conform to the "amateur ideal" of the Confucian tradition.<sup>32</sup> He was proud of his calligraphy, painting skills, and writing styles, but was not motivated to devote his time and energy to learning and doing practical administrative matters. Third, even if the official was willing to dwell himself in his official duties, he was unable to oversee the sizable population and the wide range of works under his official responsibility. The county magistrate, for instance, was the lowest in the administrative hierarchy. But it was estimated that in the mid-nineteenth century, the total population of China was around 400 million persons and the total number of counties was around 2,000. On the average, the population size per county was about 200,000. Such a sizable population apparently required a lot of works to be done by the head of the county office. He had to personally manage all the judicial and fiscal affairs in his county, such as regulating labor services, collecting taxes, handling legal suits, promoting education and cultural activities, and directing local customs.<sup>33</sup>

The last but very important reason for the official's dependency on clerks was the side-effect of the rules of avoidance and transfer. These rules were meant to control bureaucratic corruption and other offenses, but they would reinforce the dependency of the official on his office clerks. At the time an official from another district got appointed to a district office, he was ignorant of the

local conditions. After some years of service he might have become rather familiar with local affairs, but then he had to be ready for transfer to another district. Consequently, in every district the official had to depend heavily on the office clerks who were permanently attached to the office and were thus better informed about local matters. Moreover, unlike the officials who were usually Confucian scholars and were trained as generalists, the office clerks were more capable of dealing with technical problems. As unofficial permanent staff of a local office, the clerks were typically organized into six divisions: (1) civil and administrative affairs, (2) census and taxation, (3) protocol and ceremonies, (4) militia, (5) crime constabulary, and (6) public works. To run the office and manage the entire district, the official needed the technical skills of these clerks as much as their knowledge of local affairs.

It was estimated that in the second half of the nineteenth century, there were over one million clerks serving the Empire. Because of the excessive dependency of government officials, these clerks were often in a position to sabotage official policies and blackmail the people. As the reformer Wang K'ang-nien once declared, it was the office clerks, rather than the emperor, the officials or the people, who held the real power in China.<sup>34</sup> Upon assumption of office, the magistrate usually entered

into some kind of understanding or contractual relationship with his clerks. The clerks received little payments from the magistrate. But, they were allowed and sometimes even encouraged to exact fees and surcharges from the people or from officials at a lower level, whenever they were requested to do certain things. These fees and surcharges were generally known as "lou-kuei" ( 陋規 ), of which the previously mentioned ts'ao-kuei was a special type. The clerks were required to hand over a pre-fixed amount of their collections to the official while keeping the rest for themselves.<sup>35</sup>

As a result, the local clerks became de facto governing bodies and the practice of lou-kuei became institutionalized. The amount of fees and surcharges was defined and regulated mainly by the local custom, and was known to the people living in the district. The payers would raise no objection as long as the fees were within the customary limits. However, if the clerks demanded higher fees or introduced new ones, the people might refuse to pay and sometimes a riot might arise. Obviously, custom was the force that kept the fees and surcharges within limits. Presumably, the magistrate should follow the local custom and should not allow his clerks to exact fees beyond the limits. Unfortunately his clerks were so powerful and their salaries were so much lower than the cost of living that they rarely conform to the customary limits.

The de facto power of the subadministrative personnel invalidated the premises on which the whole theory of Confucian government rested. It was assumed that the conduct of officials was controlled by the Confucian morals they had internalized. The scholarship and the social prestige were major sources of reward for the government officials. However, the clerks working under the officials were men with little prestige, and they were not required to have a thorough understanding of the Confucian moral principles. Yet they had a great deal of power and influence. Material reward became the primary incentive for this group of workers.

The corrupt practices were not restricted to the clerks at local offices. According to Feng Kuei-fen, there were at least one thousand clerks in every Department of the central government. In every Department the clerks exploited their position. In the Department of Revenue, for example, the clerks demanded a fee from every official who came to collect his salary. One of them became so rich that he was referred to as "Board Member No. 7", the statutory number being six.<sup>36</sup>

#### The Law and Official Power

The legal codes were largely laid down in two compilations: (1) Ta Ch'ing Hui Tien (大清會典), i.e., the Administrative Statutes of the Great Ch'ing Dynasty, and (2) Ta Ch'ing Lü Li (大清律例), i.e., the Penal Code

of the Great Ch'ing Dynasty. These two compilations defined the administrative roles of all offices throughout the Empire and specified the punishments for the misconduct of officials and people.<sup>37</sup>

Under the great influence of the Confucian thinking, however, the imperial regimes in China tended to place a greater emphasis on moral sanction, rather than legal control.<sup>38</sup> As a result, the legal codes were general in nature, making it difficult for the people to follow and meanwhile permitting considerable freedom for interpretation and application by the officials. In addition, the power of the local officials was by nature both judicial and executive. As there was no cross-checking at the same level, whether or not an official would misuse his power depended largely on his own moral character. He could do whatever he wanted, as long as his moral consciousness was put aside and his misconduct was not known to or interfered by his immediate superior.

As he had so much freedom to interpret the law and had so much power over the people, an official could hardly resist the temptation of corruption. The following case illustrates the problem:

"Chang Shao-ching, the magistrate of Hoi-yang County, Shantung Province, used his underlings to demand improper payments from the people involved in lawsuits. Whenever one of the parties was rich, bribery was sought. The greater the sum, the greater was the judgment

in favor of the giver. If both parties in a lawsuit were poor, the magistrate would try to entice money by getting some rich families to get involved with the lawsuit. In some cases where no bribery could be solicited, all persons involved would be put in jail. Due to these corrupt practices, nearly all rich families of the county emigrated to neighboring areas, and Chang was nicknamed as the 'money bag'." (Source: Shih-lu, 1830, Vol. 181, p. 3292.)

The discretion power was a contributive factor to corruption. Of no less importance was that the likelihood of misusing the power for personal gain was increased by the pressures from both within and without the administrative office. As noted, the official was under pressure to finance his office, which was normally much more than his legal income. In addition, there were pressures from outside the office, such as the maintenance of a prestigious way of life, the entertainment of superior officials, the payment of debts resulting from many years of studies or from purchasing the office, and the taking care of his relatives and friends. The end result was to misuse his discretion power and misappropriate the general law for personal gain.

As the officials corrupted, so did their office clerks. The officials at lower levels of the administration were corrupt, and so were their superior officials. Members of each office, including both the official and his clerks, demanded illegal payments not only from the people, but also from the officials and clerks at a lower level. As a

result, the lower the office, the greater was the pressure toward corruption. That is why the people-directed corruption was so prevalent, especially in lower levels of the administration. The system of collecting fees and surcharges, i.e., lou-kuei, was an important base of corruption. The whole system was beyond the control of the central government. There was no way of even knowing the different types of customary fees being practiced in various districts, let alone any way of checking them.

Of more importance was the emergence of organized corruption. In principle, an official was controlled by his immediate superior. As suggested by the following case, however, corruption might involve officials at different levels:

"In 1806, a network for embezzlement of public funds in Chihli province was cracked down. Two county magistrates and their underlings, fifteen high ranking officials, and the governor of the province were found to be involved in the case. The network had been established for many years, and the greatest amount of embezzlement was by a former prefect who evaded 200,000 taels. The official who handled the case said that under this network of corruption, no one in this provincial government could be clean."  
(Source: Shih-lu, 1806, Vol. 166, p. 2413.)

The organization of officials at different levels into a corruption network made it difficult for the system of accountability to work. On the contrary, the system would force the officials to cover up each other and to

recruit as many officials as possible into the network. As a result, bureaucratic corruption existed almost in every corner of the Chinese land under the Ch'ing dynasty.

Members of the administration as well as the subadministration were so used to corruption that they tended to take it as a way of life. Corrupt acts were legally prohibited, but were socially legitimized as an indispensable ingredient in the functioning of the bureaucratic machinery. The organization and the culture of bureaucratic corruption in the late nineteenth-century China had been vividly pictured by some well-known novelists such as Wu Wo-yao ( 吳沃堯 ) and Li Po-yuan ( 李伯元 ).<sup>39</sup>

In summary, bureaucratic corruption under the Ch'ing was resulted from some structural conditions of the government bureaucracy. As (1) the salaries of officials and their clerks could not meet the required expenses, (2) the law was general and official power was great, and (3) the officials were heavily dependent upon members of the subadministration, corruption inevitably prevailed over the entire Empire. Should we take into consideration the particularistic orientation and the cultural tolerance discussed in Rance P.L. Lee's paper,<sup>40</sup> the prevalence of corruption in the late nineteenth-century China became more obvious. Under these structural and cultural conditions, corrupt practices could hardly be rooted out by moral education, the accountability system, the rules of avoidance and transfer, and the heavy punishments.

## BUREAUCRATIC CORRUPTION AND DEVELOPMENT

Bureaucratic corruption would, of course, have multiple implications for national development. There are costs as well as benefits in the social, political, and economic spheres.<sup>41</sup> To shed light on this general issue, we shall again rely on the Shih-lu data. Because of the availability of data, however, the present paper would have to focus on a rather specific issue: the impact of bureaucratic corruption on political stability and integration. The question to be examined on the basis of the Shih-lu data is: Was bureaucratic corruption a source of social unrest in the nineteenth-century China? It should be underscored that this is a significant issue in the context of the Ch'ing dynasty, as the imperial regime was far more concerned with political stability than economic growth and social justice.

Table 5 shows the distribution of corruption cases in five-year periods from 1796 to 1910. Note that toward the closing days of the Ch'ing regime, both the people-directed and the government-directed corruption increased rapidly. Moreover, the Product-moment correlation coefficient ( $r = .84$ ) was found to be quite high, indicating that over the century both types of corruption tended to go up and down together. The question is: How did they affect political stability?

Table 5. Numbers of Corruption Cases and Social Unrest in 5-year Periods

Time Period	Corruption		Social Unrest
	People-directed	Government-directed	
1796 - 1800	8	10	44
1801 - 1805	39	12	45
1806 - 1810	39	38	41
1811 - 1815	21	12	90
1816 - 1820	9	5	51
1821 - 1825	34	31	68
1826 - 1830	41	32	77
1831 - 1835	23	22	129
1836 - 1840	41	51	109
1841 - 1845	19	36	148
1846 - 1850	40	9	209
1851 - 1855	41	41	746
1856 - 1860	111	36	850
1861 - 1865	136	125	1,622
1866 - 1870	75	30	722
1871 - 1875	31	24	287
1876 - 1880	117	68	208
1881 - 1885	92	50	182
1886 - 1890	38	39	121
1891 - 1895	4	3	194
1896 - 1900	114	84	272
1901 - 1905	317	107	143
1906 - 1910	238	118	135
Total	1,628	983	6,493

Source: Same as Table 1.

According to the Shih-lu, there were a total of 6,493 events of social unrest from 1796 to 1910. The distribution of social unrest events in five-year periods was also presented in Table 5. It was found that social unrest was positively associated with both the people-directed ( $r = .22$ ) and the government-directed corruption ( $r = .42$ ). More important, the multiple correlation coefficient of social unrest with both types of corruption was found to be .50, which indicates that the people-directed and the government-directed corruption together could account for 25 per cent of the variations in social unrest for every five-year period over the century. It could thus be concluded that the more widespread the corrupt activities, the larger was the number of social unrest events.

The above quantitative analysis merely reflects an association between corruption and political instability. It does not tell which is the cause and which is the effect. It could be the social unrest that produced corruption, rather than the other way around. However, we have found many cases in the Shih-lu, which tend to support the thesis that bureaucratic corruption caused social unrest in the late Ch'ing dynasty. Let us present four cases as follows:

Case 1. "When Tai Yu-feng was serving as the magistrate of Ta-chow, he was so corrupt that many people were very dissatisfied with him. Later on he was transferred to Chung-ching and was in command of a personal army of five thousand police. He allowed his underlings to solicit improper fees from the members of a Heaven-and-Earth sect. This was a direct cause of the uprising of this sect in Szechwan province." (Source: Shih-lu, 1800, Vol. 72, p. 947.)

Case 2. "Chang Chung-si, the magistrate of Ping-kiang county, Hunan province, used his father and brothers to take bribes from the people involved in lawsuits. He was so hated by the people that when in a trip to the countryside he got beaten up by the peasants. After returning to his office, he dared not report the incident." (Source: Shih-lu, 1851, Vol. 37, p. 477.)

Case 3. "In 1862, family members of an official at the Internal Revenue Department demanded improper payments from merchants in Peking. The corrupt practices provoked widespread protests and a few tax revolts at the capital." (Source: Shih-lu, Vol. 44, p. 1160.)

Case 4. "A military officer, Chou Yu-chang, was assigned to supervise the transportation of salt in Kwong-fa county. He demanded so much improper fees that the salt merchants were very dissatisfied with him. One day the officer even encouraged his underlings to rob the merchants. This incident immediately gave rise to a general strike at the county seat." (Source: Shih-lu, 1875, Vol. 3, p. 26.)

The first case shows how a corrupt official provoked the uprising of a secret society. The second case indicates how much a corrupt official was hated, and consequently beaten, by the peasants. The third and fourth cases illustrate that bureaucratic corruption was a cause of

popular protests and general strikes. All these cases suggest that corruption was conducive to social unrest.

As argued previously, in both the people-directed and the government-directed corruption cases, people were the ultimate victims. In the case of people-directed corruption the people were directly affected, whereas in the case of government-directed corruption the people might suffer in some indirect ways such as inefficient administrative services and poor quality of public works. Moreover, the bribery between officials or clerks would force those at a lower level to collect more improper payments from the people. Corrupt practices including both the people-directed and the government-directed would thus make the people dissatisfied with the government and make them question the basic premises of law and order. Consequently, they would react in violent ways such as beating up the corrupt officials, provoking uprisings, or organizing massive protests and strikes.

In China under the Ch'ing, political stability was regarded as the primary objective of the state. Most of the time, it was the maintenance of the status quo which was emphasized by the imperial regime. As suggested by the empirical evidence, however, bureaucratic corruption was a stumbling block against the attainment of such an important goal of the state. The data lend support to the common belief that the problem of corruption was a major

factor in causing the decline of the Ch'ing dynasty. The Empire was ended in 1911, and in its last ten years the corruption rate was unprecedentedly high.

To sum up, our data about corruption and social unrest in nineteenth-century China lend support to the general hypothesis that corruption is dysfunctional to political development. J.S. Nye once suggested that whether or not corruption is harmful depends on cultural tolerance.<sup>42</sup> The greater the tolerance by the people, the less harmful would be the corrupt practices. In the late nineteenth-century China, the cultural tolerance was quite high but yet corruption was found to be harmful to political integration and stability.

#### SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION

In this paper, the problem of corruption in the imperial bureaucracy of China during the last six reigns (1796-1911) of the Ch'ing dynasty were examined on the basis of the data from the Ta-Ch'ing Huang ti Shih-lu (i.e., the Veritable Records of the Ch'ing Emperor). It should be noted that the Shih-lu recorded only the convicted cases. The present paper faces the same limitation as those studies using court cases. Some cases might have been covered up and were thus not detected and punished. The research findings in this paper should be treated as suggestive rather than conclusive. To defend the methodology,

we like to point out that it is difficult, if not impossible, for any study on corruption to avoid facing the problem of relying on soft or incomplete data.

In order to describe the corruption phenomenon and analyze its causes and consequences, this paper has made attempts to quantify the documentary materials excerpted from the Shih-lu. No statistical test of significance was attempted, because we dealt with all the convicted cases throughout the entire period of 1796-1911, instead of dealing with a sample of cases.

It was found that corruption, as defined by the legal authority, was widespread in the Ch'ing bureaucracy, especially at the lower levels of the administrative hierarchy. About seven per cent of all the convicted offenses (N = 31,656) over the century was classified by the Shih-lu as corruption cases. As many corrupt deals involved secrecy and mutual benefit, the percentage suggests that corruption in the Ch'ing administration was quite widespread. Further analysis shows that the corrupt payments were more likely to come directly from the people than from the government revenue, and that this was particularly the case among local officials such as the county and prefectural magistrates.

The Ch'ing government used both moral and structural approaches to combat corruption. Officials were required

to thoroughly study the Confucian moral principles and were expected to observe them in the performance of official duties. Structural measures included the system of accountability, the rules of prohibiting any official to serve in his native district or to serve in a district continuously for more than a few years, and the imposition of heavy penalty on corrupt officials. In spite of these moral and structural measures, corruption remained prevalent throughout the Empire.

The emphasis on particularistic relationships and tolerance might be some of the cultural or attitudinal forces that were conducive to the prevalence of corruption. The present paper, however, has emphasized the possibility that corruption was a product of some structural conditions within the Ch'ing bureaucracy. First, the salary scales were unrealistic. With the limited amount of income from legal sources, the officials and their clerks were unable to meet the required social and administrative expenses. It was not only desirable but also a matter of necessity for them to embezzle public funds and to receive illegal payments from the people. Second, the law was general in nature, giving officials a great deal of discretion power. It was difficult for the official who normally assumed both judicial and executive duties to resist the temptation of misappropriating the general law for personal gain. Third, the officials were generalists by training and were

in favor of an "amateur" style of life. Meanwhile, the rules of avoidance and periodical transfer made them unable to get familiar with the local conditions. Consequently, the officials were both unwilling and unable to do his job. They became heavily dependent upon their office clerks for carrying out the various official duties. The great discretion power of the officials were often left to the clerks. The clerks became lords on the local scene and were in a good position to demand improper fees. The officials corrupted and so did the clerks. They received illegal payments not only from the people, but also from the subordinate officials and clerks. Networks of corruption thus emerged, and corrupt practices became widespread in the Ch'ing administration.

The Ch'ing regime placed a great emphasis on political stability and integration. But the quantitative data together with the case materials suggest that despite the existence of a culture of tolerance, corruption was a source of social unrest over the century. This finding lends support to the general proposition that corruption was dysfunctional to political development.

Implications of the above research findings from the nineteenth-century China are multifold. Let us suggest a few as follows:

1. Heavy penalty has been widely regarded as an effective measure against corruption. In the case of Hong Kong, for instance, the law has been increasingly harsh toward corruption.<sup>43</sup> As suggested by the data in this paper, heavy punishments alone can hardly deter corruption. Its effectiveness would have to depend not only on the cultural attitudes but also on the structural conditions of the bureaucracy. Under certain cultural norms (e.g., particularism and tolerance) and structural conditions (e.g., unrealistic salary, overdependency on supporting staff, and great discretion power), the officials may deem it both desirable and necessary to gain improper income. The penalty is heavy, but the temptation is greater. The bureaucratic structures and the cultural climate should therefore be carefully examined and reformed so as to reduce the pressures toward corruption.

2. Unrealistic salary scale is one of the structural conditions conducive to corruption. Whether or not the salary scale is realistic depends not only on the absolute amount of payment but also on the social and administrative requirement. In many societies including Hong Kong, attempts have been made to increase the salaries of government officials and their supporting staff, but what is also needed is the attempt to reduce the social and administrative requirements. No matter how sizable is the salary, an official has to corrupt if (1) he cannot

meet the administrative expenses for running the office and (2) he is expected to maintain a high level of consumption and to fulfill a number of social obligations.

3. In many developing countries including Hong Kong, the officials are generally regarded as governing elites and are thus expected to maintain a prestigious way of life. On the other hand, their regular salaries are relatively low, thus creating a discrepancy between social prestige and economic status. To reduce the status discrepancy, the officials tend to raise the economic status by getting money from illegal sources. Perhaps, what should be done is to cut down the social prestige of government officials, making them "civil servants" in the true sense of the term.

4. Discretion power provides opportunities for the officeholders to corrupt. Such was the case in the Ch'ing bureaucracy. Legal codes, especially those dealing with corruption, should therefore be made as specific as possible, and the administrative procedures should also be standardized and made known to the public. As Kuan and Wong have reported, the anti-corruption ordinance in Hong Kong has become increasingly specific, and the Government's Independent Commission Against Corruption has been making attempts to examine and reform the administrative procedures in various government departments and public bodies.<sup>44</sup> Such efforts are important and should be continued.

5. Overdependency of officials on their subordinates is conducive to corruption. The local and particularly the high-ranking officials should make efforts to keep themselves familiar with the local affairs under their jurisdiction and with the specific jobs performed by their subordinates. They should not lock themselves up in their offices. Instead, they should walk around, get the feelings, and if possible, get some direct experiences. Moreover, the transfer of officials from one district to another, or from one service unit to another, should be minimized.

6. The moral integrity of officials, particularly the high-ranking officials, is important, but so is that of his subordinates. In many countries including Hong Kong, school education tends to emphasize technical knowledge while the mass media tend to emphasize entertainment. What is badly needed is the promotion of moral education. A technically competent person without moral sanctions can do more harm than good to society.

7. Both moral and structural approaches should be employed to combat corruption. The former stresses moral integrity of the bureaucrats, while the latter stresses structural refinement. "Good" rules need "good" people to carry out. Bad people would try hard to misuse the good rules, while good people can hardly resist the temptation of using the bad rules for personal gain.

8. The "lubricating function" of corruption is a myth. The data in this paper suggest that corruption threatens the legitimacy of the political regime and would, as a result, cause social unrest. Such a message should be conveyed to the public, as social stability is of vital concern not only to the government but also to the people. If the public are well aware of the ill-effects of corruption upon the social order, they would be more supportive to the anti-corruption programs.

FOOTNOTES

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