

Description of the triennial evaluation process, which helped to determine which officials were fit for office and which should be impeached. Divided into two types: (1) the Capital Investigation (*jingcha*), which evaluated all capital officials except those in the highest three ranks (who memorialized their self-evaluation directly to the emperor), and (2) the Grant Accounting (*daji*), which evaluated all provincial officials except for the governor-general and governor, who memorialized a self-evaluation, and the commissioners (financial, judicial, and educational), who submitted a self-evaluation to the governor or governor-general for transmission to the Emperor.

### *Surveillance of Efficiency and Conduct*

At the heart of monarchic control lay the evaluation of officials: estimating their qualifications for appointment, surveying their conduct in office, and periodically evaluating their fitness for service.

The history of Hungli's reign suggests how hard it is to force a bureaucracy to discipline itself. His despair at the system he inherited led him to seek alternative means of control.

The essence of the official control system was the distinction between crime and administrative failure. Criminal penalties, for corruption or worse crimes, were handled by the Board of Punishments after the culprit had been impeached and removed from office. Administrative sanctions (*ch'u-fen*) were handled by the Board of Civil Office. These penalties, which involved demotion in rank, transfer to a less desirable post, and monetary fines, covered a broad range of misdeeds, of which most were failures to meet deadlines or quotas (for solving criminal cases or collecting taxes), concealment of information, or other breaches of standard operating procedure. No official dossier was without its record of *ch'u-fen* offenses. Here are some examples of typical offenses and their penalties, drawn from the 1749 edition of the *Regulations of the Board of Civil Office, Administrative Sanctions*:

An official who fails to report the fact of a grain-transport boat's sinking: to be reduced one grade and transferred.

If an official supervising the collection of the land tax falls short [of the quota] by an amount less than one-tenth, he is to be blocked from promotion and fined a year's [nominal] salary. If he is short a tenth or more, he is to be reduced in rank by one grade . . . and if he is short five-tenths or more he is to be dismissed from office.

If a local official, fearing to be disciplined for laxity in arresting criminals, under some pretext intimidates a plaintiff and forces him to avoid

using the word “robbery” and not report it as such, . . . he is to be removed from office.<sup>16</sup>

Although Chinese government has long included special organs to investigate and impeach officials for incompetence and wrongdoing, their history since medieval times has been one of decline. The branch of government generally called “the Censorate” (under the Ch’ing, *tu-ch’a-yuan*) historically had duties of both remonstrating with the emperor about his conduct and keeping an eye on the bureaucracy. At least as early as the seventh century A.D., “remonstrance” upward was secondary to surveillance downward. But over time even the independent surveillance function was eroded. The Manchu conquerors inherited from their Ming predecessors a Censorate that had largely lost its ability to supervise field administration. “Surveillance offices” (*an-ch’a-ssu*) in the provinces had, by the late sixteenth century, already assumed the regular judicial work of provincial government. The Manchus completed their incorporation into the provincial bureaucracy, and we now refer to these officials as “provincial judges.”<sup>17</sup> Although there were censorial offices in the capital to check on the work of metropolitan officials, they were largely engaged in combing documents for irregularities. And although there were “provincial censors” charged with overseeing provincial administration, these men were actually stationed in Peking, which meant that the “eyes and ears” of the sovereign were considerably dimmed outside the capital. Accordingly, the job of surveillance in both capital and provinces mainly fell to line bureaucrats, each of whom was responsible for watching the conduct of his subordinates. To symbolize how administration and surveillance were melded, a provincial governor bore the brevet title of vice-president of the Censorate, to indicate his special responsibility to scrutinize the conduct of his subordinates. In effect, the bureaucracy was really watching itself.<sup>18</sup>

This kind of in-house bureaucratic surveillance followed two modes: *ad hoc* impeachment (for both incompetence and criminality), and periodic evaluation leading to triennial fitness reports for all officials, reports that also served as the basis for impeaching standard officials. In both these modes, the process relied largely on the work of line bureaucrats and rather little upon the Censorate. Of 5,151 impeachment cases in the Ch’ien-lung reign, less than 8 percent were initiated by the Censorate, with the rest by line officials in Peking

or the provinces.<sup>19</sup> Though Hungli believed that both modes worked badly, he identified the problem most clearly in the triennial fitness reports.

### *The Triennial Evaluations*

Periodic evaluation of officials has a history as long as that of Chinese government.<sup>20</sup> The Manchus inherited the system from the Ming and had installed it even before the conquest.<sup>21</sup> By the mid-eighteenth century the basic elements of the evaluation for civil officials<sup>22</sup> were the Capital Investigation (*ching-ch'a*) which included all Peking officials except those of the three highest ranks, and the Grand Accounting (*ta-chi*), which included provincial officials except for governors-general, governors, and provincial treasurers and judges.

For both the capital and provincial systems, the cumbersome procedure was that every year an official would be rated (*k'ao-ch'eng*) by his superior officer. These ratings served as raw material for the triennial evaluations. In the capital, the triennial registers would be aggregated by the heads of the Six Boards, and in the provinces by the governors. The registers (bound traditionally in imperial yellow) were then forwarded to a review commission consisting of officials from the Board of Civil Office and the Censorate, along with one Han and one Manchu grand secretary. The commission would then review the "yellow registers" and decide who should be promoted, demoted, or retained in office. The cases of men due for promotion or demotion would then be the subjects of separate memorials to the Throne from the Board of Civil Office. Men whom the Throne approved for promotion as "outstanding" (*cho-i*) still had to be recommended in separate memorials by their superiors. Strict accountability applied in these cases of promotion for merit. In the case of lower-level officials, recommendations had to note whether there were any outstanding treasury shortages or unresolved court cases that might block promotion. If any were subsequently found after promotion, the recommender himself would be punished by demotion and transfer.

The apparent rigor of this system seems less impressive when we examine the actual documents used in it. To begin with, the format was extremely stereotyped. The registers, sometimes known as "four-column books" (*ssu-chu-ts'e*), contained, for each man, a single page with four headings: "integrity" (*ts'ao-shou*), "executive performance"

(*cheng-shih*), “native talent” (*ts'ai-chü*), and “physical fitness” (*nien-li*), listed in that order. Under each heading, one of three standard ideographs would be filled in:

*Standard Format for Triennial Evaluations*

Category	Integrity	Executive Performance	Talent
Highest	Incorrupt	Assiduous	Exceptional
Middle	Careful	Diligent	Good
Lowest	Ordinary	Ordinary	Ordinary

Based on their ratings, officials would be grouped into three ranks. The criterion for ranking was the number of categories in which an official received better-than-average ratings. For instance, an official who received ratings of “incorrupt (*ch'ing*),” “assiduous (*ch'in*),” and “exceptional (*yu*)” in the first three categories was ranked in group one. (“Physical fitness” seems not to have played a part in the group rankings. If age or illness made the official unfit, he was impeached in a separate procedure.) Those with two above-average ratings were grouped in group two; and those with one or none comprised group three.<sup>23</sup> All three groups, however, were considered fit for duty. Those in group one might be recommended for promotion, which was done in separate memorials attesting to their “outstanding” (*cho-i*) qualities. Also in separate memorials, those whose general fitness was below standard were impeached (*ch'iu-ho*). The provincial triennial evaluation (*ta-chi*) used substantially the same format but added, for each official, a four- or eight-ideograph evaluation (*k'ao-yü*) that offered an overall assessment of performance.

How little latitude these fitness reports permitted the evaluating officer! The scale of qualities was hardly fine enough to make careful distinctions among officials. Hardly more revealing were the four- or eight-ideograph evaluations on each man's file in the “Grand Accounting.” An examination of numerous eighteenth-century yellow registers suggests that evaluators were choosing their comments from standard phrasebooks. The specificity is still crude, the result bland. Here are a few examples from a 1751 list of magistrates from Chihli ranked in the middle grade (*erh-teng*). One is reminded of a third-grader's report card, prepared by a teacher who is strug-

gling for something special to say about each of her charges (“participates actively in class, written work neat”).

- “Conduct perceptive, executive performance conscientious”
- “Executive performance diligent and careful, fit for his post”
- “Official conduct careful, management diligent”
- “Talent perspicuous, management diligent”
- “Official conduct careful, management conscientious”
- “Conduct sincere, management diligent”<sup>24</sup>

One would expect that in the subsequent recommendations for promotion there would be more to say. Indeed the ratings are more complimentary, but the format is just as confining and stilted:

- “Intelligent and clever, administration very capable”
- “Perceptive and skillful, administration resolute”
- “Mature and honest, administration diligent and careful”
- “Bright and able, administration wholehearted”
- “Talent outstanding, administration resolute”<sup>25</sup>

Although one finds minor differences of vocabulary among provinces (suggesting that each provincial yamen had its own handbook of such stock phrases), the impression left by these registers is of officials who were struggling to differentiate subordinates whose records seemed generally acceptable but of whom they had little or no personal knowledge.

Such stilted, conceptually cramped procedures grew naturally from bureaucratic life and reflected the mentality of the men who applied them. First, there was the need to avoid risks. Recommendation of a man who later turned out to be disappointing (or worse) could incur penalties for the recommender. Perhaps the more closely the criteria of merit hewed to a narrow, unexpressive format, the more likely were officials to risk making recommendations, on the principle that the less said, the better. Furthermore, descriptions of *acts* rather than analyses of *character* were more easily defensible, should anything go wrong. Second, the evaluations probably were adequate to describe what bureaucrats themselves considered a “good” official. In a rule-ridden environment, the best official was the one who caused the fewest problems—that is, who exemplified largely negative virtues by avoiding trouble. In any bureaucratic system, to excel can be risky.

Nor are whistle-blowers and boat-rockers appreciated. The over-zealous official trips over rules more often than does the cautious plodder. Hence prudence, circumspection, and diligence were prominent values in the routine evaluations.