



County Archives and the Study of Local Social History: Report on a Year's Research in China

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*County Archives and
the Study of Local
Social History*

Report on a Year's Research in China

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I am going to make a general report on my year's research in China, and focus some of my comments on the uses of county government archives in the study of local social history.

There were four main parts to my activities in China last year. About one-third of my time was spent in the Ming-Qing Archives, where I sampled the massive collection of Board of Punishments reports—the *xingke tiben*. All cases involving a loss of life had to be reported to the board. The heart of these reports was the magistrate's report, which generally included the testimonies of the murderer and immediate family, witnesses, neighbors or employers, a coroner's report, and the magistrate's summary and recommended action. As the report went up the judicial ladder, it would be jacketed by the opinion of the provincial judge (*anchashi*), then the governor, and finally the board, with an abstract for the emperor's quick perusal. Rather like a bunch of Van Gulik mysteries.

Why did I read these materials? I wanted to get a feel of the texture of social relations at the basic levels of Chinese society in the eighteenth

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *I was in China from December 1979 to December 1980, under the "Senior Scholar Program" of the Committee for Scholarly Communication with the People's Republic of China, of the U.S. National Academy of Sciences. This report was*

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and nineteenth centuries. I was especially interested in the relations between agricultural wage workers and their employers, between landlords and tenants, and creditors and debtors. I therefore concentrated on one subcategory of these reports: "land and debt related cases." There is a massive run of these from the first year of the Qianlong reign (1736) down to the end of the dynasty (although the reports get thinner in the nineteenth century, becoming more and more just summaries and abstracts that left out the crucial magistrate's report). The number of such cases stored in the archives ranges from a low of 300 odd (308 cases in 1739) to as many as 1500 (1495 in 1836) each year. I sampled four years: 1736, 1737, 1796, and 1896, or a total of about 3000 cases. Out of these, there was a total of 362 cases that pertained to Hebei and Shandong, which I read in detail for materials relating to my book on the changing political economy of this area from the seventeenth century to the eve of the Revolution.

These materials confirmed, for one example, that there was considerable spread of a rich peasant and managerial farmer economy in the eighteenth century. Agricultural laborers were generally hired by commoner peasants moving up the social economic ladder rather than by gentry owners of big estates. On hindsight, I am glad that I failed to gain access to the enormous sample (of nearly 60,000 cases) that a group of Chinese historians had handcopied. That sample, and the selections from it that are being published now, is in fact far from representative. Under the academic atmosphere of the last decade and a half, this group of Chinese historians selected only cases involving exploitative class relations, and thereby give a rather skewed picture of the sources of social conflict in the normal course of things. My sampling of four years shows that a majority of the cases in fact involved disputes resulting from informal loans made between friends and relatives, from social relations between fellow village commoners rather than across class lines.

The second main part of my work was village investigations. I asked to restudy the same villages that had been investigated by the South Manchurian Railway Company's field researchers. I had the opportu-

read at the annual meeting of the Association for Asian Studies in Toronto, March 1981. It is being published here, in its original orally presented form, because of the wide interest in county archives shown by colleagues in the profession. The materials discussed here will be a part of my forthcoming book on Agriculture, Society, and the State in North China, from the 17th Century to the Eve of Revolution.

nity to visit three of these and to restudy one of them in some detail: Shajing village in Shunyi county, about 45 kilometers northeast of the center of Beijing, the most thoroughly documented of the Mantetsu studied villages. I had based a good part of my first-draft manuscript (completed before I went to China) on this village, and the chance to study it in some detail was in many ways the high point of my year. I was able to talk at length with the former village head, Zhang Rui, who had been Hatada Takashi's principal informant in 1939-1942. Zhang Rui's hired worker of the time is now the brigade head. The 17-year-old young man who drove Hatada and his team back to the county seat by horse-drawn cart on rainy days turned out to be the most clear-headed of the old men in the village and my principal informant during my stay. These people remember Hatada and his team rather fondly for the favor that Hatada had done them: There was a riff-raff element in the neighboring village of Shimen named Fan Baoshan, who found himself a powerful connection in the county government and was plotting to gobble up Shajing's 20 *mu* of village temple land. That land was being rented out and the proceeds were used to fund the community's government. The village leaders appealed to Hatada for help, and Hatada managed to intercede on the village's behalf with the county authorities to prevent Fan from moving to take over the land. Zhang Rui asked me to be sure to give Hatada his fond regards.

The villagers were all rather excited to see their, or their father's name in print in the household survey, their houses and their former plots mapped out, and they marvelled at the accuracy of the survey data on them. They quickly assumed that I knew even more than I did about them and about the village, which was a help in getting questions answered. My purpose in Shajing was to check out the Mantetsu data and to supplement those materials. Being there physically helped me, for example, to appreciate more the extent to which the village was an insular community. To this day, the villagers consider it quite unthinkable to stop and chat with an outsider, even from neighboring Shimen village, separated from Shajing by just a vegetable plot. I also developed a keener appreciation of the importance of the interplanting of corn and winter wheat for this part of the North China plain, of the extent to which waterlogging had dictated that low-yield sorghum would dominate the old agrarian regime. . . . I was also given the individual household data for land reform in this village—that helped to round out the picture given in the Mantetsu survey.

The third part of my academic work in 1980 was fairly extensive interaction with the world of Chinese historians and economists,

especially those working in Ming-Qing and modern social-economic history. During the year, I got in the habit of meeting individually with scholars whose work I was interested in. You know how Chinese appointments go: half-day appointments that run at least two hours at a stretch. What I did in these meetings was to ask first in detail about what the scholar had done and was doing, and then proceed to matters of mutual interest to us. Like scholars everywhere, Chinese scholars are usually happy to talk about their work at length with someone showing genuine interest. I found these sessions educational, and got in the habit of doing this weekly throughout the year, not only during my time in Beijing but also during the total of three months or so when I traveled around: to visit the major universities, research institutes, archives and libraries, and to attend four academic conferences. The fact that I was with a central-level unit such as the Academy of Social Sciences helped me greatly in making these contacts. A university's network of contacts tends to be limited to the city and province where it is located. The fact that I had prepared a substantial three-hour-long lecture-report on American historiography on modern China also helped. Chinese scholars responded to my questions more readily, to reciprocate. In all, I met individually in 1980 with a total of about 70 Chinese scholars. Some of them I got to know quite well in Beijing or at the week-long conferences.

Let me make a few very brief comments on my overall impressions. The mainstream, middle-aged scholars, the ones who are doing most of the work, tend to place great emphasis on collecting source materials. It's a predilection born of instincts for self-preservation. The ideas of most of these scholars are rather predictable. But, even among them, there are stirrings of new tendencies and ideas (though generally within the boundaries of what scholar-bureaucrats have defined as acceptable rethinking): on the sprouts of capitalism, on Chinese capitalism in the modern century and the role of the bourgeoisie, and a whole slew of reevaluations of personalities that proceed from the basic reassessment of the role of capitalism in Chinese history. If past research emphasized the vantage point of popular movements, against imperialism and the imperial state, a new body of scholarship is being written from the point of view of capitalism as a major progressive force for modernization in China's modern history. There is a good deal of tension and argument between these two tendencies, as for example over the questions of how to evaluate the Boxers, the Self-strengtheners, the 1911 revolution, and so on.

The most interesting scholars I met are the unorthodox ones. I think of people like Fu Zhufu, who is finally getting his say on Chinese landlordism, which he distinguishes sharply from European feudalism (Fu, 1981, 1980); his former co-worker Wang Yuhu, who is probably the most knowledgeable historian of Chinese agriculture and water-control (Wang, 1980a, 1980b)¹; Ning Ke, who stops just short of calling population cycles *the* crucial variable in China's social-economic history since the Han (Ning, 1980a, 1980b) . . . I could go on here at some length.

The main subject I want to report on is the fourth part of my work in China: with the fragments of a county government archive that I happened onto. This was unexpected and was not in my original research proposal. But it is very much related to my research project. The county is Baodi, east of Beijing, in the Jidong area, which, luckily for me, also happens to be the main area of focus of the Mantetsu surveys (an interest understandable from the point of view of Japanese militarism). The fragments are from the archives of the Office of Punishment (*xing fang*) of the county government, from 1800 to 1911. There are cases on marital and inheritance disputes, credit disputes, and also some material on the suppression of popular movements. The main body of these fragments, and the portion that interested me the most, are 300-odd cases pertaining to the selection, appointment, and dismissal of subcounty quasi-bureaucrats.² Most of these concern a quasi-bureaucratic post called the *xiangbao*.

The term *xiangbao*, it turns out, is short for *xiangyue* and *dibao*, combining in one term what had been two distinct and separate positions: one for ideological control and the other for tax collection and police control. It was not a village-level office, but rather oversaw an average of 20 villages. Baodi county in the nineteenth century had 46 *xiangbao*, overseeing a total of 900 villages.

In theory, the *xiangbao* was to nominate to the county government village-level *paitou* and *jiazhang* under his jurisdiction. In practice, however, most *xiangbao* simply worked with the natural leaders of village communities, and did not even go through the ceremonial gestures of nominating village-level *paitou* and *jaizhang* to the county government. The *xiangbao* was in fact the lowest level to which county authority actually reached.

Even at this level, the county yamen did not so much appoint as confirm the nomination from local leaders. The standard procedure was for a group of local leaders to nominate together a *xiangbao* to the

county yamen for formal appointment. The xiangbao thus nominated would make an appearance at the county yamen, there to take a pledge of office.

Once appointed, his chief responsibility was to collect delinquent taxes and, on rare occasions, to allocate and collect special levies. There was in theory a kind of collective responsibility on the part of those who nominated the xiangbao. If the xiangbao should fail to perform his job, those who nominated him were in theory liable. In some places of the county, this developed into a practice whereby the xiangbao would advance the tax monies due by borrowing from village leaders and then would set to collecting the monies through these same village leaders. More often, the pattern was that the xiangbao was left to answer to the yamen alone. Those who nominated him did not allow themselves to be held liable; they could only be prevailed upon to nominate another xiangbao to take over from one who failed to meet his responsibilities. Generally speaking, the county yamen managed only to make the xiangbao answerable, not the community leaders collectively.

The xiangbao, then, was very much the crucial locus of contact between the state and the village, the point of intersection between heteronomous state power and autonomous village political structure.

Generally speaking, in studying the changing structure of the political economy of North China, I have found it more useful to focus on the interrelationships between major components of that structure, rather than to study individual components one at a time. That is to say, instead of studying separately the state, and then the village, I have found it more useful to concentrate on the locus where the state met the village—in this case, in tax collection. I think the same is true of studying landlords and tenants, or employers and wage workers: It is important to analyze how rent and wage labor relations changed as a result of commercialization, agricultural development, population increase, and state action.

To return to the xiangbao: He was generally not a member of the elite, contrary to what we might expect from our usual conception of gentry playing a crucial mediating role between state and village. The Baodi cases make clear that the xiangbao was invariably a peasant, usually an owner-peasant, but never a big landlord or gentry figure. We do not have far to look for the explanation: The xiangbao's job was rather a thankless one, caught in the middle between state and village community. The Baodi fragments contain a large number of cases of runaway xiangbao—who failed to impose their authority on the village

and ran away out of fear of reprisal from the county yamen. This was a job that no gentry person would take. We even have one case of an individual using the prerogative of nomination to extort money from those who wanted to avoid the honor at all cost. (In this case, the matter came to the attention of the County Punishment Office when the man blackmailed finally went into hiding on the third round of extortion, and his wife brought suit.)

The gentry in fact played a small role at this crucial point of contact between the state and communities of commoner peasants. In other parts of China, perhaps because of the more powerful presence of lineage organizations, the gentry played a more critical role—as for example in Hilary Beattie's Tongcheng county (Beattie, 1979).

In the triangle of state, gentry, and village, our past research has generally looked more at the relations between state and gentry (e.g., Eberhard, 1965; Chang, 1955; Chü, 1962; Kuhn, 1975, 1979) than between the state and the village. It is to be expected, given the nature of the materials available, be they gentry writings or magistrate's diaries and handbooks. But we need to know much more about how the state and the village community interacted, not just in the idealized theory of control of the state (as outlined in Hsiao, 1960), but in the actual working compromises between heteronomous state power and autonomous village community structure.

In these Baodi fragments, there are scattered and exceptional instances of complete domination of village by heteronomous state power; there are also instances where autonomous village power withstood efforts of the state to curb it. The general pattern, however, landed somewhere in the spectrum between these two poles, and centered on the figure of the *xiangbao*.

Such a picture of tax collection would suggest that collection could proceed smoothly only if the community's sense of justice were not violated and only if the community had the ability to pay. In times of abuse or famine, we can expect greatly added stress on the person of the *xiangbao*. Judging by the frequency of *xiangbao*'s running away, their and the state's power to enforce collection was quite limited.

The Baodi fragments also contain examples of tax abuse and legitimate tax protest. In one instance, two runners of the county government had engaged in extortion and embezzlement. The case came to the attention of the county Punishment Office when the local leaders brought suit against the runners. In this instance, tax protest followed the spatial and leadership lines of tax collection: Those who lead the

protest were the same individuals to whom the yamen normally turned for nominations of *xiangbao*. In another instance, a powerful gentry figure who owned 20,000 mu had been able to evade tax by always choosing the *xiangbao* of his locality. The situation came to the attention of the county yamen when other town and village leaders brought suit against both the *xiangbao* and his backstage boss. The case was still hanging at the close of the dynasty and of the archives.

The reason I have pursued this subject of tax collection and protest in the nineteenth century is to try to get a baseline picture for changes I had noted in the Republican period (on the basis of household-by-household tax payment records of three villages and the budgets of three county governments). In the twentieth century, there was a secular trend toward increased tax demands to meet the expanded needs of county governments, this against a village economy that lagged behind. The result was added stress in state and village community relations.

My purpose here, however, is not to present some of the tentative conclusions of my book in progress, but to raise questions and discuss some of the possible uses of county government archives. I have so far only gained access to a small bunch of fragments. What might a more complete county archive look like?

To date, the most complete county government archive that historians in China have worked with is the one in Baxian, Sichuan. This archive ranges in time period from 1757 to 1941 and contains a total of over 100,000 items. About 80% of those come from the Punishment Office, and include materials such as the fragments I have worked with in Baodi: about subcounty quasi-bureaucrats. In addition, there is something of a goldmine for social-economic history in lawsuits involving family disputes, creditor-debtor disputes, and other kinds of social conflict in the normal course of life. Most of these materials remain untapped; the historians who have worked with them in the past emphasized popular movements against the state and against imperialism.

The Baxian archives surfaced because, during the Second World War, the county government wanted to protect its archives from air raids and moved them to a nearby Guandi temple. You have the usual story: an inestimable portion of the archives were used as waste paper, until they came to the attention of someone who knew their value and was in a position to do something about them—in this case, Feng Hanji of the Southwest Regional Museum (now the Chongqing Museum).³

What might materials of offices other than the Punishment Office look like? To date, the most complete Revenue and Population Office (*hu fang*) archive that has surfaced is that of Huailu (Huolu) county, near Shijiazhuang in Hebei. The materials span the reigns of Kangxi, Yongzheng and Qianlong—most are concentrated in the second quarter of the eighteenth century, a critical time when the poll tax was formally merged into the land tax (*tanding rudi*).

The heart of this particular bunch of fragments is 300-odd cadastral records (called *bianshence*), with detailed information on landholding, recorded every five years. Each entry shows the original landholding of five years ago, the amount of land purchased, and the tax equivalent of the land held. The tax categories, as one might expect, bear no clear or direct relationship to actual population: the cadastral *ding* could be many adult males; the *hu* included anywhere from one to hundreds of ding; the *jia* from several to tens of hu; and the *she* an indeterminate number of jia. There is no apparent calculable correlation with adult males, households, and natural villages. Chinese historians have so far not used these materials for demographic analysis, only for patterns of land distribution and ownership—a pattern very much the same as in the twentieth century, with very few big landowners, a majority of small owners, and large numbers of landless and land-poor.⁴

If we should have a long run of these materials, there is no reason why we cannot do with them what Le Roy Ladurie has done with the *compoix* of Languedoc: to establish clear correlations between population trends and patterns of landownership in gigantic “agrarian cycles” (Le Roy Ladurie, 1974). If we can do that, we will have filled in a major gap in our understanding of late imperial China’s social-economic history.

To take this train of thought just one step further: Feng Huade and the Nankai Institute of Economics in the 1920s and 1930s were able to use the red registers (*hongbu*) of actual tax assessments and collections (the *shizhengce*) of Jinghai county near Tianjin and of Dingxian (Feng, 1935; Feng and Li, 1936). These would be even better sources than the intermediate *bianshence* of Huailu. Such records should give us an even better grasp of demographic and landholding trends, and on state-society relations seen through taxation.

Well, I do not want to turn this into a session in wishful thinking. My intention is to point to some of the exciting possibilities that county archives hold for future research.

NOTES

1. Professor Wang, sadly, passed away on November 27, 1980—a tragic loss to the world of historical scholarship.
2. These Baodi fragments form a major part of the Shuntianfu archive, kept at the Ming-Qing Archives in Beijing.
3. See the detailed report by Wu Shiqian, 1979. After the materials were discovered by Feng, they were turned over to the history department of Sichuan University for sorting and cataloguing. Substantial progress was made, until the new ruling in 1964 by the Party Central Committee to place all pre-Liberation archival materials under the unified management of the State Archival Bureau. The materials were then taken out of the hands of the Sichuan University history department and removed to the Baxian County Archival Office, in Ya'an, where they sit to this day, out of the reach of historians.
4. I am grateful to Pan Jie of the Qing History Research Institute of the People's University of China (Zhongguo renmin daxue Qingshi yanjiusuo) for recounting to me in detail his yet unpublished work with these materials during the past few years.

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Philip C. C. Huang has concentrated on the social and economic history of agrarian China since he finished his first book, on Liang Qichao, in 1970. His most recent publications are in Chinese Communists and Rural Society (Berkeley: Center for Chinese Studies, 1978) and "Sanshi nian lai Meiguo yanjiu Zhongguo jinxindai shi (jianji Ming-Qing shi) de gaikuang," published in Zhongguo shi yanjiu dongtai (1980, 9) and Dousou (41, November 1980).

ERRATA

In the article by Phil Billingsley, "Bandits, Bosses, and Bare Sticks: Beneath the Surface of Local Control in Early Republican China" (July 1981), the following corrections should be noted:

Page 225, paragraph 2: The correct location of Zhoujiakou is near the Anhui border.

Page 286: The proper reading for the author cited as "Notake Shin" is "Osame Takeshi."