

# Reassessing Qing provincial power

In recent years historians began the process of diverging from traditional, imperial-centric narratives within the historiography of China to address political, economic, social, and cultural variations at regional, local, and individual levels. The works that came out of this reassessment highlight how a singular, grand account of Chinese history overlooks peculiar and unique events that often do not fit precisely into the traditional mold. At the same time many of these 'bottom-up' works often failed to provide any historiographic relevance to larger historical patterns and events, leaving historians to debate the value of seemingly esoteric contributions to the scholarship. In *Qing Governors and Their Provinces*, R. Kent Guy attempts to bridge the imperial-local divide by studying the creation, maintenance, and flexibility of provincial bureaucracies – particularly the role of governors – during the early to mid-Qing dynasty.

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HIS WORK FOCUSES ON ADDRESSING the disconnect between state-level demands and local-level events through the analysis of the appointment of and actions by governors, thereby creating a richer and much more detailed explanation of Qing governance through broad statistical analysis and a selection of specific examples.

## Defining the development of bureaucratic practice and protocol

Utilizing official records and imperial biographies, *Qing Governors* is divided logically into two parts. The first half of the text looks at the process of provincial administration itself – its adaptation from Ming to Qing dynastic protocols and boundaries; the procedures by which emperors and/or bureaucrats selected, maintained, promoted, and demoted provincial leadership; the impact of 'unexpected' events on this system; and the overall movement from gubernatorial selection via imperial preference to a more bureaucratic system mostly free from the whims of Beijing. The second half breaks China into four distinct regions based on larger trends in imperial governance. These distinctions are defined by their 'spatial diversity', or the differences in the needs and methods of appointment to the regions and the practices within provincial governance (352). Guy shows how political requirements initially necessitated strong, more direct imperial influence in the north and northwest – the symbolic centers of Han and Manchu power. The lower Yangzi river region and the eastern coast underwent brief periods of micro-management, but their economic and geopolitical importance led them to be rapidly incorporated into the larger Qing polity.<sup>1</sup> Guy describes the upper Yangzi and the southeastern regions as important linchpins in Qing rule. He illustrates how stability resulted in provincial administration and promotion being based mostly on routine rather than imperial intervention as areas with fewer social or environmental problems (or with more economic clout in the case of Guangdong) experienced less outside interference from authorities in the capital. In the final chapter the author shows how direct influence, in the usage of the palace memorial system, allowed emperors to create unique relationships with governors through more frequent and detailed communications. These relationships aided in the expansion of Qing authority to the southwest through the transfer of knowledge that the memorial system facilitated.

## Qing control vs. bureaucratic flexibility

The author positions his book within a similar provincial-level analysis to that found in Philip Kuhn's *Soulstealers*.<sup>2</sup> But whereas Kuhn sees an epidemic of sorcery accusations in the late eighteenth-century northeast as an example of an organizational breakdown within the system of imperial control over its provincial appendages, Guy presents a picture of a much more organized and dynamic structure, capable in most instances of overcoming the challenges posed by the 'spatial diversity' of each posting. He shows how this organization even extended to machinations of officials through unofficial channels of influence. Guy highlights a fascinating array of statistics showing how officials feigned illness, or caught the 'bureaucratic flu', when they wanted to get out of a troublesome appointment and still maintain their prestige. This tactic also worked when officials wanted to remain temporarily un-appointed in hopes of a promotion when a more desirable position was about to be vacated (141).

Guy identifies and utilizes shifts in bureaucratic protocol surrounding the assessment and transfer of provincial governors as a barometer for understanding the broader history of China during the Qing dynasty. He illustrates how the means and timing of provincial appointments reflected not only traditional bureaucratic systems and imperial prerogative, but also how local needs, national emergencies, and the whim of the emperor tested the built-in flexibilities of Qing rule. He concludes his text – by his own design – before the turn of the 19th century, as he admits that the shifts in the capability of the Qing to manage their empire declined significantly for a number of internal and external reasons. Perhaps one of the author's more striking conclusions is how he attributes this decline partially to that of crises forcing mid-Qing emperors, who relied more heavily on established bureaucratic procedure, to assign and promote officials utilizing the older method of emergency, individual appointments, thereby disrupting the status quo of the system.

Painting by Giuseppe Castiglione -  
The Qianlong Emperor in Court Dress.