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An extended review of Maura Dykstra, *Uncertainty in the Empire of Routine: The Administrative Revolution of the Eighteenth-Century Qing State*. (Harvard East Asian Monographs Series.) Cambridge: Harvard University Asia Center, 2022. xxxv, 262 pp. ISBN 978 0 674 27095 4.

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Abstract

Maura Dykstra's 2022 monograph *Uncertainty in the Empire of Routine: The Administrative Revolution of the Eighteenth-Century Qing State* (Harvard Asia Center, 2022) has attracted controversy in the academic community. This paper analyses the book's use of documents from the Ba County Archive, held in the Sichuan Provincial Archive. While reviewing the monograph's arguments drawn from these materials, the paper also introduces the Ba Archives and the methodologies that may be employed to interpret them.

Keywords: Qing Dynasty; Chinese law; Chinese history; Ba County Archive; Chinese administration

Introduction

Maura Dykstra's monograph *Uncertainty in the Empire of Routine: The Administrative Revolution of the Eighteenth-Century Qing State* (Harvard Asia Center, 2022) has attracted controversy in the academic community.¹ Earlier critical reviews focused on materials from published sources and central government archives, or on the broader historical context of the Qing period. However, *Uncertainty in the Empire of Routine* also draws from 13 documents stored in the Ba County Archives, held in the Sichuan Provincial Archive. Admittedly, I was initially reluctant to comment on the book. But as someone who has worked with the Ba County archives extensively, I came to believe that my analysis of the book's use of these sources might be useful to the global academic community.² It is my hope that this article will not only serve as a review of Professor Dykstra's book, particularly its use of these sources, but also present an introduction to the Ba Archives and a tool for scholars hoping to hone their methodology in interpreting them.

¹ George Zhijian Qiao, "Was there an administrative revolution?", *Journal of Chinese History* 8/1, 2024, 1–20. See also Bradley Reed, "A review of Maura Dykstra, *Uncertainty in the Empire of Routine: The Administrative Revolution of the Eighteenth-Century Qing State*", H-Net Reviews (September 2023).

² This book review was initially published on the social media platform Zhihu (知乎), https://zhuanlan.zhihu.com/p/656109323?utm_id=0. This edition retains most of the previous content, but adds a brief introduction to the Ba County Archive and discusses how to use county-level archives of the Qing Dynasty in research work.

The Ba County Archive is the largest collection of Qing Dynasty county-level government documents. Ba County is in the present-day Provincial-level Municipality of Chongqing, which in Qing times was part of Sichuan province. The archives of the Ba County government span from the seventeenth year of the Qianlong reign (1752) to the final year of the dynasty, 1911. The collection contains 113,066 volumes, including lawsuits, official documents, contracts, daily records of local government affairs, and the materials of various civic organizations. The Ba Archives offer an invaluable window into late imperial local governance, as well as into the commercial and social life of a thriving upper-Yangtze River port city. The archive is arguably the most important local archive surviving from late imperial China, and a treasure trove for those who study Chinese administration and local society in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

An overview of the cases cited

My examination reveals that while *Uncertainty in the Empire of Routine* uses the Ba County archival documents in some impressive and creative ways, of the 13 documents cited in the book, 12 are misinterpreted. The following analysis goes through the book's use of Ba County Archives systematically one by one. My interpretation of these documents differs from Professor Dykstra's to a significant degree. [Table 1](#) lists the documents discussed in Dykstra's book.

From my point of view, of the 13 cases, one is properly used (6-01-00255), three correctly read the text of case files, but misinterpret their production process and institutional context (6-01-03750; 6-06-08671; 6-23-01368), eight are incorrect in both their readings and interpretations (6-01-00023; 6-01-00021; 6-07-00051; 6-07-00057; 6-07-00059; 6-01-03640; 6-01-03674; 6-01-03710), and one is completely unrelated to the issue being discussed (6-01-03654). In the following pages, I offer a detailed analysis.

1. 6-01-00255: A detailed report on the case of Rao Xizhen's physical assault on Lady Zhu and four others (1759)

The book under review cites this case accurately. However, some of the inferences made from the case are questionable. This case file is cited in chapter 2, "The case in the County: the yamen of first instance". On pp. 66–7, fn 11, the author writes:

The development of standards for autopsies has been a subject of considerable scholarship, since forensic science proliferated in China from a very early date, as demonstrated by the thirteenth-century publication of the forensic manual by Song Ci, *Washing Away of Wrongs*. For one example of how forensic procedure and reporting were standardized during the Qing, see the coroner's form that was designed and promulgated by Beijing for use in local yamen – and which survives in hundreds of cases in the Sichuan Provincial Archives – at SPABX (Qing) 006-01-00255: 5-22. The form retained in the Sichuan county archive is based on the format circulated by the Beijing government in 1712.

In the original text of this case file, there is indeed an autopsy form promulgated by the Ministry of Punishments as well as a standardized autopsy report. These archives can support the author's conclusion that the writing of forensic reports became more standardized with time.

However, the author also claims that there are hundreds of cases with relatively standardized autopsy reports in the Ba County Archive. I do not know how the author obtained this number, since the Ba County Archive of the Qing Dynasty is massive,

Table 1. The list of Ba County Archive documents used in *Uncertainty in the Empire of Routine* (13 documents in total)

Archival no.	Chinese title	Translated English title	Date
6-01-00255	清巴县详报饶锡珍砍伤朱氏等四命一案	A detailed report on the case of Rao Xizhen's physical assault on Lady Zhu and four others.	乾隆二十四年Twenty-fourth year of the Qianlong reign (1759)
6-01-00023	巴县前知县卫移交任内经管城垣衙署奉行案件贮库银两清册卷	Detailed lists of silver reserves, documents related to the management of the city wall and local yamens, and legal cases transferred by the former county magistrate Wei.	乾隆四十八年七月 Seventh month, forty-eighth year of the Qianlong reign (1783)
6-01-00021	清巴县令叶移交任内经管支过监犯棉衣工料、银两和军流犯一案清册卷	A detailed list transferred by the former county magistrate Ye, which recorded the silver reserve, exiled criminals, and the cost of making cotton clothes for prisoners.	乾隆三十一年十一月 Eleventh month, Thirty-first year of the Qianlong reign (1766)
6-07-00051	清巴县令区拔熙移交任内经管之驿站、夫马、救生船、水旱塘房及支过正佐各衙门役食银两监盘等卷	A detailed list transferred by the former county magistrate Ou Baxi, which recorded the post stations, postal horses, postal workers, the security checkpoints on water and land routes, and the cost of hiring yamen personnel.	道光十三年九月 Ninth month, thirteenth year of the Daoguang reign (1833)
6-07-00057	清巴县移造前县觉罗祥庆任内经管驿站马匹及马夫姓名, 并交各项银两清册卷	A detailed list of the postal horses, name of grooms, and the expenses of various affairs during the tenure of the former county magistrate Jueluo Xiangqing.	道光三十年 Thirtieth year of the Daoguang reign (1850)
6-07-00059	清巴县申赉前署道宪杨等任内督管卑县驿站、马铺、救生船、水旱塘房清册卷	Detailed lists of the post stations, postal horses, security checkpoints, and lifeboats managed by Ba County yamen, during the tenure of several former circuit intendants.	道光十五年至三十年 From fifteenth year of the Daoguang reign to thirtieth year of the Daoguang reign (1835-1850)
6-01-03654	清巴县为查缉匪徒稟报	A report on security patrols and the arrest of thieves.	乾隆三十三年二月 Thirty-third year of the Qianlong reign (1768)
6-01-03640	清监犯名册	A name list of prisoners.	乾隆三十二年十月 Thirty-second year of the Qianlong reign (1767)

(Continued)

Table 1. (Continued)

Archival no.	Chinese title	Translated English title	Date
6-01-03674	清旧管人犯名单	A name list of prisoners in Ba County jail during the past whole year.	乾隆三十四年十一月 Thirty-fourth year of the Qianlong reign (1769)
6-01-03710	清巴县现禁人犯备造清册	A name list of prisoners currently in Ba County jail.	乾隆三十六年七月 Thirty-sixth year of the Qianlong reign (1771)
6-01-03750	巴县刑房案件簿	The annual report of criminal cases compiled by punishment office of Ba County.	乾隆三十九年十一月 Thirty-ninth year of the Qianlong reign (1774)
6-06-08671	金汤坊民王怀仁以逆唆导害具首王永珍等一案	The resident of Jintang Block Wang Huairen sued Wang Yongzhen for personal injury.	嘉庆二十二年正月 Twenty-second year of Jiaqing reign (1817)
6-23-01368	四川重庆府巴县刑房听讯簿	The register of the punishment office of Ba County.	同治十三年五月 Thirteenth year of Tongzhi reign (1874)

including 113,066 volumes of documents (every volume contains several files). It would be impossible for a researcher to know whether such an autopsy report exists simply by examining the archive's index, let alone whether the report was drafted in the format prescribed by the Qing court in 1712. The author needs to explain how she estimated "several hundred cases".

II. Five cases concerning document transfers between the tenures of local officials

The cases under consideration include:

- 6-01-00023:** Detailed lists of silver reserves, documents related to the management of the city wall and local yamens, and legal cases transferred by the former county magistrate Wei (1783).
- 6-01-00021:** A detailed list transferred by the former county magistrate Ye, which recorded the silver reserve, exiled criminals, and the cost of making cotton clothes for prisons (1783).
- 6-07-00051:** A detailed list transferred by the former county magistrate Ou Baxi, which recorded the post stations, the condition of postal horses, the number of postal workers, the security checkpoints on water and land routes, and the cost of hiring yamen personnel (1833).
- 6-07-00057:** A detailed list of the postal horses, names of grooms, and the expenses of various affairs during the tenure of the former county magistrate Jueluo Xiangqing (1850).
- 6-07-00059:** Detailed lists of the post stations, postal horses, security checkpoints, and lifeboats managed by Ba County yamen, during the tenure of several former circuit intendants (1850).

These five cases are used in chapter 3 in the section entitled "The transfer of a county archive after the Yongzheng reforms". These documents address a Qing administrative

procedure called *jiaodai*, or *jiaopan* (交代 交盘 Office Transfer), which Dykstra translates as “transfer audit”. Dykstra defines “transfer audit” in the following terms:

By the second half of the eighteenth century, the complexity of transfer reports reflected the piling up of expectations on the occasion of the transfer audit (p. 129).

This level of documentary accountability opened a new door: the opportunity to govern dimensions of local state activity that were not commonly subjected to central review but suddenly became discernible through summary reports on local archives. Careful attention to problems or inconsistencies in later reports about the same practices could flag local administrative problems for officials higher up in the provincial administration, and supervising officials could be required to review these summary reports to keep tabs on local administrations. Censorial officials could also be required, during their roaming investigations, to audit the claims in these reports against original archival information. From the eighteenth century forward, the archival reckoning associated with transfer thus reduced the complicated problem of overseeing local officials to a question of archival integrity and consistency between summary reports and thorough audits upon transfer of office (p. 133).

The five documents that Dykstra uses are the transfer reports of ten officials during the Qianlong (1736–95) and Daoguang (1821–50) reigns. Five of them were outgoing county magistrates, while the other five were circuit intendants (道員) who were responsible for supervising the financial affairs of Ba County.

Dykstra calls the process of handing over offices as “transfer audit”. My understanding is that there was no concept of independent “audits” in Qing China, but due to the length limit of this review, I will not explore in depth whether the use of the term audit is appropriate here. What we can say confidently is that, according to the Qing documents, this process is called *jiaodai*, which I would render literally as “office transfer”.

These five cases all, indeed, record the items that outgoing local officials transferred to the care of their successors, such as information about silver reserves, government resources, buildings, city walls, horses, ships, legal cases, jailers, construction projects, and personnel. The key problem is that Dykstra does not realize that there are different types of documents within this group. Three of the five (6-01-00023; 6-01-00021; 6-0-00051) are noted as *yiwen* 移文 (horizontal documents), documents used between offices and officials of equal status.³ The intended recipients of these three documents are the incoming magistrates. The other two documents (6-07-00057; 6-07-00059) are noted as *shenwen* 申文 (upward documents), which were submitted from lower-level administrators to their superiors.⁴ In other words, only the latter two documents were sent to the supervising offices for verification.

Even if we do not take the different nature of these documents into consideration, they could not serve as effective means of supervising and controlling local officials for the Qing state. Much existing research has demonstrated that the “four pillar” accounting methods (四柱式记账法) used in these reports are not precise and prone to manipulation. Outgoing magistrates, incoming magistrates, supervising officials, provincial officials, and even clerks could fabricate data, and there are plenty of records showing such fabrications were frequent and common. Because such fabrications require specialized

³ Ni Daoshan 倪道善, *Ming Qing dang'an gailun* 《明清档案概论》 (Chengdu: Sichuan daxue chubanshe, 1990), 146.

⁴ Ni Daoshan, *Ming Qing dang'an gailun*, 143.

knowledge and bureaucratic insights, outsiders can rarely discern what kind of fabrication and embellishments had gone into these accounts.⁵

Even more seriously, after the Qianlong and Jiaqing (1796–1820) period, these office transfers became a mere formality. Even as early as in the Kangxi reign (1661–1722), when Huang Liuhong (黄六鸿) took up the post of magistrate of Tancheng (郟城) county, he saw that “the previous four magistrates did not conduct a transfer procedure for over ten years”.⁶ During the Xianfeng reign (1851–61), when Zhang Jixin (张集馨) became the provincial administration commissioner (布政使) of the Gansu Province, he noted that “the unfinished local transfers amounted to two–three hundred”.⁷ Such problems also exist in the Ba County documents. For example, while Document 6-07-00059 records a series of transfer items submitted by departing circuit intendants for inspection between 1835 and 1850, the information it records is cursory. The transfer records list only a general number of postal horses, postal workers, soldiers, and public pools, and the document fails to record the most crucial information such as taxes, government resources, buildings, construction projects, etc. In fact, these documents were compiled in an extremely perfunctory manner, avoiding the really important information. Moreover, since the document is a record of several transfers over a 15-year period, doesn’t it mean that as many as five circuit intendants during these 15 years failed to conduct “transfer audits” in a timely manner?

The provincial administration and central ministries probably never took these documents seriously. I am left to conclude that Dykstra’s claims – such as “Careful attention to problems or inconsistencies in later reports about the same practices could flag local administrative problems for officials higher up in the provincial administration, and supervising officials could be required to review these summary reports to keep tabs on local administrations. Censorial officials could also be required, during their roaming investigations, to audit the claims in these reports against original archival information” cannot be grounded in the archival evidence she presents. The cited archives could equally be interpreted as evidence in the opposite direction, suggesting that routine procedures were often not taken seriously by the Qing bureaucracy over extended periods of time.

On close examination, such transfer documents were not created, as Dykstra asserts, for the central state or provincial administration to control and supervise local officials. Instead, they were a type of bargaining between officials. Their actual function was more likely horizontal – and not vertical. For instance, in a late Qing diary written by a scholar-official Du Fengzhi (杜凤治), during an office transfer, Du privately received 1,200 taels of silver from his predecessor.⁸ In other words, office transfers were a profit settlement amongst several stakeholders in the officialdom. Based on the sources currently available, these transfer documents were created to conceal the real exchanges, thus mattering more to the stakeholders than to the central state.

In sum, the five documents that Dykstra cites are not used in an appropriate manner. The book confuses different types of documents. It also fails to grasp the institutional

⁵ Wei Guangqi 魏光奇, *Youfa yu wufa: Qingdai de zhou xian zhidu ji qi yunzuo* 《有法与无法：清代的州县制度及其运作》 (Beijing: Shangwu yin shu gua, 2010), 356–62.

⁶ Huang Liuhong 黄六鸿, *Fuhui quan shu*: 《福惠全书》, cited from Wei Guangqi 魏光奇, *Youfa yu wufa: Qingdai de zhou xian zhidu ji qi yunzuo* 《有法与无法：清代的州县制度及其运作》 (Beijing: Shangwu yin shu gua, 2010), 359.

⁷ Zhang Jixin 张集馨, *Dao-Xian huan hai jian wenlu* 《道咸宦海见闻录》, cited from cited from Wei Guangqi 魏光奇, *Youfa yu wufa: Qingdai de zhou xian zhidu ji qi yunzuo* 《有法与无法：清代的州县制度及其运作》 (Beijing: Shangwu yin shu gua, 2010), 359.

⁸ Zhang Yan 张研, *Qingdai zhouji zhengquan kongzhi xiangcun de juti kaocha: Yi Tongzhi nianjian Guangning zhixian Du Fengzhi riji wei zhongxin* 《清代县级政权控制乡村的具体考察——以同治年间广宁知县杜凤治日记为中心》 (Zhengzhou: Daxiang chuabnshe, 2011), 112–16.

context and bargaining between officials that underlies the creation of these texts. Dykstra's use of these documents as proof of effective auditing and state supervision is, to a large extent, a misuse of the sources. Her claims are not substantiated by these cited documents. That said, we still know little about the secrets of office transfer in Qing times – it is a subject that requires further research.

III. Four documents on county jail management

6-01-03640: A name list of prisoners (1767) (1768).

6-01-03674: A name list of prisoners in Ba County jail during the past year (1769).

6-01-03710: A name list of prisoners currently in Ba County jail (1771).

6-01-03654: A report on security patrol and the arrest of thieves (1768).

Dykstra cites these four documents (6-01-03640, 6-01-03674, 6-01-03710, 6-01-03654) to discuss Ba County's jail management during the Qianlong reign. They appear in a section titled "The prison problem" in chapter 3. Here Dykstra claims that to improve prison management, the Qing court required counties to submit standardized regular reports, creating "a large-scale plan for auditing the entire prison system" (p. 140). She concludes the following:

This information, when sent up to superior yamen, was compiled, reviewed, and integrated into reports sent higher up the administrative ladder. The new streams of data arriving at supervising provincial offices linked daily accounts – information about the quotidian affairs of local administration – to summarizing registers. Superiors could easily skim these registers and apprehend patterns over time or across jurisdictions. On the basis of these new information streams generated by each yamen in the territories, provincial superiors could be held accountable for keeping their administration on track beyond a case-by-case approach (p. 146).

Among these documents, 6-01-03654 concerns a county clerk, Lu Shijun, inspecting various rural markets and towns under the order of the magistrate. This document has nothing to do with prison management, and I am unclear as to why it was cited.

Document 6-01-03640 records that in the tenth month of Qianlong 32 (1767), there was only one prisoner in the Ba County jail; 6-01-03674 is a day-to-day account of the number of prisoners in the eleventh month of Qianlong 34 (1769), which shows a reduction from three prisoners to two; and 6-01-03710 records that in the sixth month of Qianlong 36 (1771), there were 23 prisoners in the county jail.

The information contained in these documents is suspicious. The first two are particularly strange. According to existing research on the Qing legal system and prison system, in populous Ba County which was filled with sojourners and migrants and had a bad reputation for crimes, it would be impossible for the county jail to have had only one to three inmates. Plenty of evidence leads us to conclude that the identification of two or three inmates must be a substantial undercount.

For example, Japanese historian Fuma Susumu pointed out that legal disputes were very frequent in Ba County during the Qing period. He conducted a quantitative study of the Tongzhi reign situation. There were between 1,000 and 1,400 legal cases launched at the county yamen each year, and one in every 40–60 households was involved in a lawsuit every year. Fuma said that "anyone who had read the Ba county documents would consider that using 'lawsuit society' to describe the situation was an understatement. In Susumu's terms, lawsuits were like a black whirlwind that engulfed the whole society".⁹

⁹ Susumu Fuma 夫马进 (author), Fan Yu 范愉 (translator), "Zhongguo susong shehui shi gailun" 《中国诉讼社会史概论》, in *Zhongguo gudai falü wenxian yanjiu* 《中国古代法律文献研究》 6, 2012.

Of course, not all defendants in a lawsuit were put in jail. But in the Ba County Archives we see numerous cases in which the defendants were jailed when a lawsuit was established. Admittedly, the Qianlong-era situation might be different from the Tongzhi reign (1861–1875), but the local population and socioeconomic conditions were not remarkably different between these two eras. It is extremely unlikely that the Ba County jail would have only one to three inmates during a given month. Even the number 23, as presented in Document 6-01-03710, is unlikely to be a truthful reflection of the actual number of inmates.

According to the memoir of Zhang Jixin (张集馨), who was a competent official in the Daoguang era (1821–1851), “in Sichuan province, *kafang* (卡房 informal jails) were particularly cruel. In a big county, a *kafang* could keep hundreds of inmates; in a small county there were dozens of inmates in a *kafang*. Even witnesses in minor disputes about marriage, land, and debts were kept in these *kafang*, where they received a pot of porridge every day. They were kept there without seeing the sky, and their suffering was a hundred times worse than in formal prisons.”¹⁰ This source tells us that in a big county like the Ba County, its *kafang* would keep hundreds of inmates. The reason that *kafang* existed was that there were too many inmates to fit in the formal jails. If the informal jails were overcrowded, the conditions in a formal jail were likely to be similar or worse.

During the Qing period, clerks, runners, and legal practitioners often colluded to frame innocent people and extort money from them. There are numerous such cases. For instance, legal historian Wu Yue (伍跃) discovered a case from the twelfth year of the Tongzhi reign (1873) in Ba County Archive; a rich member of the gentry, Zhu Youchen, was framed by a junior military officer and kept in jail for over ten months. He was also extorted by the clerks and runners working for the county yamen. He ended up paying 500 taels of silver to be released.¹¹ If a rich member of the gentry could be framed and jailed like this, it is impossible that the county jail would have only a few inmates in the same month.

Moreover, it is also impossible that the Qing state could effectively supervise the Ba County jail through routine reporting procedures. Let us look at an extreme case. In the fourth year of the Tongzhi reign, 1865, porters from the Sichuan guild (川帮) and those from the Chaling association (茶帮)¹² engaged in a street brawl. Li Hongyi, a porter from the Chaling association, was arrested by the Ba County yamen and thrown into the jail. One month later, the Chaling association managed to get him out of the jail on bond. Nevertheless, on the day after Li’s release, runners reported that he had died. The magistrate did not even send anyone to examine the corpse.¹³ It is very clear that the Chaling association had bribed the magistrate and the clerks, who colluded to release Li from the county jail, and they might even secretly send him away. According to existing research on the Qing prison system, such collusion and corruption had been commonplace. There is no evidence suggesting that the Qing was ever able to use reporting procedures to stop such things from happening.

Therefore, the three documents that Dykstra cites fail to substantiate her claims that standard routine reporting could be used to supervise local administrations effectively.

¹⁰ Zhang Jixin 张集馨, *Dao-Xian huan hai jian wenlu* 《道咸宦海见闻录》 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1981), 95–96.

¹¹ Wu Yue 伍跃, “Bi ye shi you song hu: Ba xian dang’an suo jian Qingmo Sichuan zhou xian sifa huanjing de yige cemian” 《必也使有讼乎——巴县档案所见清末四川州县司法环境的一个侧面》, in *Zhongguo gudai falü wenxian yanjiu* 《中国古代法律文献研究》, 7, 2013.

¹² Chaling association means the porters from Chaling (茶陵) County of Hunan Province.

¹³ Sichuan Province Archives (Ba County Collection) 四川省档案馆藏清代《巴县档案》: (1864) 6-27-08568 (“Chuqi fang fang Chuan Cha lifu Liao Xijiu Yang Kunshan deng wei zheng shengyi dijie dou’ou an” 储奇坊川茶力夫廖锡九杨坤山等为争生意地界斗殴案).

On the contrary, they demonstrate how the county government were able to manipulate such reports and make up false data to conceal information from their superiors. Moreover, Dykstra says that “examples of county-level account books documenting prisoners can be found in local archives from immediately after the Yongzheng era when their wide-scale use was required, attesting to their sudden proliferation” (p. 141). The three documents she cites cannot prove that there was a “sudden proliferation” of such reports. Moreover, I fail to see evidence in the form of local documents from immediately after the Yongzheng era to substantiate this claim.

IV. The annual report of criminal cases compiled by punishment office of Ba county (1774)

Dykstra correctly reads the texts in this document but fails to consider its institutional context. This document is cited in a section called “A Forest of Registers and Reports” in chapter 3. This is a report on homicide and robbery cases of this year compiled by the county’s office of punishment. Ten copies were made and submitted to superiors. Dykstra uses this document to illustrate this point:

In each of these fields, a similar cycle led to the accretion of paperwork, higher-level scrutiny, and disciplinary action. Regulations from earlier eras were, after the Yongzheng era, linked to regular reporting requirements in multiple yamen. Consistent summary information connecting active and archived accounts and documents in subordinate offices with registers and reports in supervisory ones allowed the provincial administration to perform basic auditing functions that would have been impossible in previous eras. Tasks that had never been scrutinized before could now be audited in the territories by the provincial administration itself. The provincial bureaucracies duplicated a host of censorial audits that were previously conducted only in Beijing and without routine access to county-level archives (pp. 147–8).

This is a detailed document that contains reliable, high-quality information. This document was indeed made for submitting to superior administrations. That is to say, Dykstra read the texts in this document accurately. However, the fact that these documents were submitted to superior administration was not a result of Yongzheng archival reforms, but, because this report concerned homicide and robbery cases, the final judgments were beyond the pay-grade of the county magistrate. By Qing regulations, they always had to be reported to superior administrations.

According to Qing regulations, when a homicide or robbery occurred, the county magistrate had to inspect the location and corpse. When such inspections were complete, the county magistrate had to report the contour of the case to superior administration within a short period; these types of documents are called “tongbing” (通禀, communicated reports) or “tongxiang” (通详, communicated details). The county yamen would investigate and interrogate the suspects, but whether the suspects agreed to the county’s judgment or not, the case would be reported to superior administration for another round of interrogation.¹⁴ Therefore, the reporting procedure demonstrated in this document was part of this fixed routine, which had been the convention throughout the Qing. The production of this document has little to do with the Yongzheng reforms.

¹⁴ Na Silu (author) 那思陆著, Fan Zhongxin 范忠信, and You Chenjun (annotators) 尤陈俊校, *Qingdai zhou xian yamen shenpan zhidu* 《清代州县衙门审判制度》 (Beijing: Zhongguo zhengfa daxue chubanshe, 2006), 6–7.

V. *Account books of running notes on legal cases*

6-06-08671: The resident of Jintang Block Wang Huairen sued Wang Yongzhen for personal injury (1817).

6-23-03168: The account book of the punishment office of Ba County (1874).

Dykstra correctly reads the text in these documents, but misinterprets their production process.

These two documents appear in the section entitled “The register as a documentary link” in chapter 3. They record the legal cases that the Ba County yamen processed in the fifth month of Jiaqing 22 (1817) and the fifth month of Tongzhi 13 (1874). The clerks in the Office of Punishment record the magistrate’s court verdict regarding how to establish liabilities and how to punish the guilty parties. By citing these two documents, Dykstra aims to illustrate the following point:

The critical difference introduced by the Yongzheng emperor’s innovations was the regulated uniformity of the streams of information out of which register reports could be extracted. As a result of these reforms, an increasing number of provincial registers began to conform to the conventions and standards established in Beijing. This made provincial documentary (and administrative) practices legible and accessible to the central state en masse for the first time (p. 138).

And:

From the Yongzheng era forward, the communication of summary reports based on myriad local archival data streams introduced the possibility of synchronizing information in offices from the county to the capital. New forms of scrutiny and new realms of regulation were exposed to the intervention of the central state. Each claim in each register was – by statute and definition – traceable to some original account. Thus every line item represented an opportunity to demand that some provincial official review and take responsibility for the actions of a subordinate; every new opportunity for documentation was an opportunity for control and discipline (p. 139).

These two documents are indeed the running accounts of legal cases that were recorded daily. Dykstra discovered the fact that county yamen did have such informal, day-to-day information in draft form. It should be noted that document 6-23-01368 is a carefully compiled and highly informative text.

However, judging from their content, we can be certain that these two documents are unlikely to be presented to administrative superiors. Instead, they are memoranda kept within the county yamen. Most of the cases recorded are minor disputes. But there are also several homicide cases, which were not reported, per Qing law, to the superior administrations. Instead, the magistrate concluded such cases by demanding reparations from the guilty party. In other words, the magistrate did not handle the cases according to law, and it is impossible that he would submit such records to his superiors.

Then why did they make such daily accounts? Their intention probably was to remind the magistrate and clerks which cases had been concluded and how they were concluded. The magistrates had very short tenures in the Qing (in Ba County, two years was the norm in the mid-Qing, a year-and-a-half in the late Qing. In a few exceptional cases, the magistrates were only in the job for a few months),¹⁵ and Ba County was a particularly litigious

¹⁵ 王笛 Wang Di, *Kuachu fengbi de shijie: Changjiang shangyou quyu shehui yanjiu (1644-1911)* 《跨出封闭的世界——长江上游区域社会研究（1644-1911）》 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1993), 374-5.

place. Many plaintiffs or defendants might reverse their confessions after the conclusion of their case, especially after new magistrates took office.¹⁶ Therefore, by making such a memorandum, the yamen could keep track of these cases, and new magistrates would have records to rely upon. This is a measure that prevents the yamen from wasting time and administrative resources.

Therefore, what Dykstra claims cannot be proved by these two documents. The closed information cycle that she charts (original archive of the county → the streamlined reporting in the provincial administration → the central ministries receiving information → central ministries supervising provinces → provincial officials supervising county officials) could not be supported by these two documents. In fact, these documents were kept at the county level, unlikely to be submitted upwards. Moreover, it is unlikely that such memoranda only came into existence after the Yongzheng reforms. They might have existed in local administrations in various previous dynasties. Local officials and clerks developed this working habit to handle administrative affairs more efficiently, not to respond to the Yongzheng reforms.

Some observations on the book's content and methodology

Dykstra's attempt to use the production and movement of administrative documents to analyse the Qing information ecology and to study the Qing political system is a creative approach. Dykstra investigates various types of administrative documents and discusses the operation of both the central state and local government, which makes the book's research framework ambitious and novel. She tries to extract the underlying logic of a huge document system and thereby the political ecology of the whole empire.

The problem is that the book's use of Ba County archival documents is flawed. To be clear, all the documents Dykstra cites exist. Except 6-01-03654, all contents are related to the subjects of discussion. However, Dykstra fails to carefully select her sources. Some of the sources are filled with boilerplate and fake information. Dykstra takes these documents at face value. She also fails to differentiate different types of documents, and neither does she consider the institutional context in which these documents were produced. Moreover, Dykstra consistently over-interprets these documents, and many of her claims are not rooted in what the texts say. At least, her understanding and use of Ba County Archive documents do not match the ambition of the book.

Moreover, the book's conclusion is unsubstantiated in fact. The argument may be summarized as follows: during the Yongzheng period of the Qing Dynasty, an "administrative revolution" emerged silently. This revolution was characterized by the standardization and sharp increase of government documents, and meanwhile, these documents were widely used in administrative affairs. These changes accelerated the upward flow of information from county-level yamen to provincial administration, and then to the central court. With all these routine reporting procedures, the administrative activities previously concealed from the view of the central state became discernible and accountable, the local officials could then be supervised by their superiors. But the surge of documents caused information overload, exposing more and more problems. The court's panic and anxiety increased day-by-day as the whole empire sank into an "information trap".

This is a genuinely appealing thesis. However, after carefully analysing the Ba County Archive documents cited in this book, I conclude that the Ba County Archive files cited cannot prove that local administrations established real and effective information

¹⁶ 尤陈俊 You Chenjun, "Guan bu jiu ren yu jiansong zhi feng: Zhou xian guan shiji renqi dui Ming-Qing defang yamen lisong nengli de yingxiang" 《官不久任与健讼之风：州县官实际任期对明清地方衙门诉讼能力的影响》，*Shehui kexue* 《社会科学》 4, 2022.

exchange with their superiors after the Yongzheng period. In fact, they prove that the local officials were not so easily supervised and controlled by their superiors.

Herein lies perhaps the biggest contribution of Dykstra's book: it unintentionally uncovers a history at odds with its own thesis. Rather than an entrenched routinization of imperial administration, the Qing state survived over the 1700s and 1800s by relying upon the secret palace memorial system, non-routine procedures, elite gossip networks, personal connections between officials, and yamen backroom deals. If routine paperwork played a critical role in these processes, it was often to paper over – with a thin veneer of legitimacy – what was happening behind the scenes.

Conclusion: How to use the Ba County Archive – my experiences

I want to conclude this review by sharing some experiences on how to use county-level archives in the study of Qing history, based on 15 years of experience.

First, at the very beginning, students need to empty their minds. The most interesting aspect of county-level archive research is that one always has the opportunity to uncover facts and problems that have never been noticed before. So, on entering the archives, one should keep an open mind. The documents usually present many unexpected facts, as well as issues that could never be anticipated.

For example, when I started to study the Ba County Archive, I thought that what I wanted to search for were the legal cases of merchants, stores, business organizations, and data on local trades. But several years later, I realized that some people and events – such as porter gangs, secret societies, and street brawls – seemingly unrelated to my research topic, played an important role in the commercial development of this city. I never thought I would deal with them, but the fact is, my research on these problems makes up the most interesting and unique part of my book on commercial institutions of Qing Dynasty Chongqing.¹⁷

Second, at the document collecting stage, students must be greedy. This stage is the most difficult and important part of the whole research process. Although some documents may not be useful in the end, more is better than less. The existing county-level archive of the Qing Dynasty is massive, and these archive documents contain abundant and very complicated facts. In particular, most of the county-level administrative documents were not submitted upwards for inspection (such as 6-23-03168). Their contents would be surprisingly “honest”, containing many conflicting facts unavailable in central-level archives. We should never assume that a few documents can illustrate universal principles. Only when a considerable number of documents show the similar narrative construction, can we verify a particular thesis.

Based on my experience, a monograph mainly relying on the county-level archives, should use at least a few hundred, or even thousands of case files. A similar journal paper should also use at least dozens, or even more than 100 case files. Besides that, these case files should be informative, carefully compiled, and cautiously selected. Of course, it does not mean that the more archive documents used, the higher the research quality. But if a researcher has not been exposed to enough case files, s/he would be incapable of identifying the really important information, let alone making comparisons between conflicting texts, and fully aware how complex things could be. Professor Dykstra uses only 13 case files of Ba County archive to discuss many important questions in her monograph. I do not think this is sufficient.

¹⁷ 周琳 Zhou Lin, *Shanglü an fou: Qingdai Chongqing de shangye zhidu* 《商旅安否：清代重庆的商业制度》 (Beijing: Shehui kexue wenxian chubanshe, 2021).

Third, students must be cautious of the unreliable information in the archives. The so-called unreliable information includes deliberately fabricated information. Natalie Zemon Davis's influential book tells us that people involved in the production of archives will distort the content of the archives for various purposes, telling a story that is far from the truth.¹⁸ This is common knowledge among contemporary historians. However, people from different historical times, different cultural backgrounds, or different ethnic groups, tend to fabricate their archives in different ways.

The county yamen of the Qing Dynasty hired many clerks, they are the main producers of county-level archives. The research of Bradley W. Reed and Ono Tatsuya (小野达哉) uncovered many secrets about this group, and how they fabricated or distorted the administrative documents.¹⁹ The three above-mentioned documents on jail management in Ba County are the most obvious examples (6-01-03640; 6-01-03674; 6-01-03710). Besides that, to win, the litigants of the lawsuit would lie in their petitions. They would do everything they can to defend themselves and attack (or even slander) the opposite party. In another example, the statistical data on population, land, shops, residents' occupation and property in the Ba County Archive cannot be easily trusted. Therefore, we must be very careful about this kind of information when we read the county-level archives of the Qing Dynasty.

To summarize, the county-level archive is filled with lies, fabricated data, and misleading information, as are many other material sources. Misinformation may, of course, be just as revealing of historical reality as the truth – but only when properly understood as misinformation. Therefore, researchers must remind themselves repeatedly that the text of the archives is not equal to fact. They need to acquire the ability to identify fake information, knowing who was likely to be the creator of fake information, how it was done, and why they did it. They also need to understand the social and institutional context of archive documents, knowledge of which will be the compass leading us out of the information jungle. Qing archival research is difficult, and this review is not by any means intended to discourage students from taking up the challenge; rather, it is intended to help them succeed in this difficult but rewarding journey.

¹⁸ Natalie Zemon Davis, *Fiction in the Archives, Pardon Tales and Their Tellers in Sixteenth-Century France* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1990).

¹⁹ Bradley W. Reed, *Talons and Teeth: County Clerks and Runners in the Qing Dynasty* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000); 小野达哉著, 薛云虹, 吴佩林译: 《清末巴县胥吏谭敏政》, 《四川大学学报》2020年第2期。

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