

ON THE DUTIES OF AN OFFICIAL
By Chen Hongmou

Introduction

The Qing government employed officials at the imperial, provincial, and county levels to carry out the responsibilities of government. Those qualified for appointments as officials had passed a highly competitive series of examinations based largely on the Confucian classics. Qing officials were responsible for a wide range of duties — in addition, they were expected to be morally upright gentlemen. (Needless to say, they were not always so in practice.)

The following excerpts are from the writings of Chen Hongmou (1696-1771). Chen had a long career as a provincial governor, serving in that post in a number of provinces. The following are excerpts from some of his letters and other writings in which he discusses the duties of an official.

Document Excerpts with Questions (Longer selection follows this section)

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We in official service ought to look at all matters from the point of view of what is good for the people's livelihood. We must plan for the long term, rather than for the moment. We should concentrate on the substantial and the practical, rather than disguising our inaction with empty words. To do otherwise would violate the court's principle that officials exist for the good of the people.

...

As our dynasty has long exercised benevolent rule, the population has continually grown. All available natural resources have been turned into productive assets. I fear, however, that our limited supply of land cannot adequately support our growing population. Under these conditions, officials cannot sit idly by and watch as potentially useful land remains undeveloped, on the excuse that the effort involved would not yield immediate results. Now, feeding the people directly by the government is not as good as developing the means whereby the people can feed themselves.

...

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In governing, good intentions and good policies alone are insufficient. There are those policies that sound admirable but that prove impossible to implement in practice. ... If the local official truly approaches each matter from the standpoint of the people's livelihood, in carrying out any new policy he will first thoroughly canvas local public opinion on the matter. He will then consider every aspect of its implementation, noting in which aspects it is advantageous to the people and in which aspects it will cause them hardship.

Questions:

1. Why might Chen Hongmou think it necessary to offer such advice?
2. What themes does Chen emphasize in his advice? How do these compare to your understanding of the practice of government?

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We in official service ought to look at all matters from the point of view of what is best for the people's livelihood. We must plan for the long term, rather than for the moment. We should concentrate on the substantial and practical, rather than disguising our inaction with empty words. To do otherwise would violate the court's basic principle that officials exist for the good of the people.

...

The Way of shepherding the people involves no more than educating and nurturing them. ... By "nurturing" I mean construction and maintenance of irrigation works, encouragement of land reclamation, and patronage of community granaries. These are all matters of great urgency. If the people can be made to produce a surplus, store it, and allow it to accumulate over the years, their well-being will be ensured. By "education" I mean promoting civilized behavior, diligently managing public schools, and widely distributing classical texts. Schools are the fountainheads of popular customs. If educational practice is correct, popular customs will be virtuous.

...

As our dynasty has ever longer exercised benevolent rule, the population has continually grown. All available natural resources have been turned into productive assets. I fear, however,

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that our limited supply of land cannot adequately support our growing population. Under these conditions, officials cannot sit idly by and watch as potentially useful land remains undeveloped, on the excuse that the effort involved would be too great or that their initiative would not yield immediate results. Now, feeding the people directly by the government is not as good as developing the means whereby the people can feed themselves. This always takes time, however, and results cannot be seen overnight [i.e., during an official's own tenure in a post]. Indeed, results that appear overnight almost never prove to be enduring. Therefore, officials must look to the long term, not the present, and in so doing put the interests of the people ahead of their own [career] concerns.

...

In governing, good intentions and good policies alone are insufficient. There are those policies that sound admirable but that prove impossible to implement in practice. ... If the local official truly approaches each matter from the standpoint of the people's livelihood, in carrying out any new policy he will first thoroughly canvas local public opinion on the matter. He will then consider every aspect of its implementation, noting in which aspects it is advantageous to the people and in which aspects it will cause them hardship. If the advantages outweigh the hardships, implement it. One ideally seeks a situation of absolute advantage and zero hardship, but this is seldom possible, and the possibility of hardships should not cause one to abandon a policy that will prove on balance advantageous. If the policy is a sound one, such hardships as do accrue may be redressed subsequently, so as fully to maximize the advantages.

...

The court appoints officials for the benefit of the people. Officials must cherish the people and exercise their authority to the fullest in their behalf. It is no accident that the formal title of a district magistrate is "one who *knows* the district," nor that he is referred to as the "*local official*" -- there should be no matter within their locality about which he does not know. The common people refer to the magistrate as their "father and mother official" and call themselves his "children." This implies that there is no suffering or pleasure on the part of the people that the magistrate does not personally share. Their relationship is exactly like that of a family. ...

I have drawn up the following list of items a local official should keep in mind in determining how to conduct himself. Superiors are also directed to keep these points in mind when evaluating their subordinates:

1. *Maintain genuine commitment.* This is the basis of everything else. With genuine commitment, your energies will never flag; without it, whatever ability you possess will be wasted. Do not leave things to others, but remain personally aware of all that goes on in your district. ... Officials without genuine commitment give prime consideration to how a policy will appear in

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their reports to superiors, rather than the impact it will have on the people. If local officials are truly committed to the people, all things will fall into place.

2. *Be incorrupt.* An official must act unselfishly and maintain the highest standards of personal integrity. Ill-gotten gains will be discovered in the end, because they will become the subject of popular gossip or because one's corruption will weigh upon one's conscience and be revealed in one's speech and demeanor. One will therefore tend to shrink from the public gaze. ... It may sometimes be possible to fool your superiors, but you can never fool the "ignorant populace."
...

3. *Provide exemplars of civilized behavior.* Because counties are large and populous, people do not routinely see their magistrate. ... But magistrates should make regular tours of the countryside, to investigate local customs, good and bad, and to meet with local community leaders to clarify for their benefit what is considered legal and proper. On these tours, officials should make detailed observations of conditions in villages along the way and make follow-up visits to determine if conditions have improved or deteriorated. Reward or punish community leaders accordingly. ... Local persons who have been models of filiality or chastity, public service or philanthropy, should be rewarded with votive tablets, public rituals of praise, gifts of silver or rice, or tax exemptions. ...

4. *Endure toil and tribulations.* Within my jurisdiction, what affairs do not depend on me? Among daily affairs, those that do not concern popular material well-being inevitably concern local customs and popular morale. There are so many affairs to manage that one is always plagued with anxieties that one has neglected something or that there is not enough time to do it all. How can one in such a post be the sort to shun hard work? ...

5. *Scrutinize subordinate officials carefully.* ...

6. *Keep a tight rein on your clerks.* ... Failure to control their predations will inevitably generate popular resentment. ...

7. *Avoid perfunctory performance.* Human beings have their own natural disposition, and events have their own natural logic. When the time is ripe for something, it cannot be avoided; discussions after the fact are fruitless. How can one suppose that the course of one's official career is due to anything other than public knowledge of one's performance? A bad habit among today's officials is to give little heed to real needs and conditions, but rather, out of selfish careerist motives, simply to imitate in a perfunctory fashion what other officials are doing. Then, when someone is promoted ahead of them, they attribute it to something having unfairly invited their superiors' enmity or someone having spread false rumors about them. Can it really be that higher-level officials do not have the public interest at heart and are led only by their partisan likes and dislikes?

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8. *Prevent harassment of the people.* For an official to impose harassments on the people himself would be the height of stupidity. But, jurisdictions being very broad, evil government functionaries and local tyrants will inevitably come up with ways to harass the people. Consequently, no matter how hardworking the magistrate, and how well intentioned the laws, such harassments can be prevented only through constant and diligent scrutiny. ...

9. *Do not cover up your mistakes.* ... Many local officials today are unwilling to admit their mistakes in judging legal cases. Instead, they arrogantly presume that their own superior ability will allow them to get by, and [they] figure that the people are so stupid that they will not recognize an unjust decision when they see one. ... Such cover-ups do terrible injury to the official's own character, as well as to the locality. ...

10. *Avoid losing your temper.* Officials must remain composed. ... The way to control anger is to overcome oneself. Self-regulation is prerequisite to the regulation of others.

...

Popular attitudes and customary practices vary from locality to locality. It is the duty of the official to promote those that are advantageous and eliminate those that are disadvantageous. ... Magistrates are therefore directed to compile and submit to me a casebook, describing in detail the situation in their counties with regard to each of the following items:

1. Tax and surtax assessments and collections ...
2. Grain tribute assessments and collections ...
3. Government granaries ...
4. Community granaries ...
5. Varieties of crops grown ...
6. Potentially reclaimable land ...
7. Water conservancy and irrigation works ...
8. Local customs regarding marriage and funerary rites and popular religious practices ...
9. Community libation rituals ...
10. Exemplary cases of filiality or virtuous widowhood ...
11. Official temples and sacrifices ...
12. Scholarly trends and fashions ...
13. Academies and public schools ...
14. Incidence of feuds and capital crimes ...
15. Incidence of theft. . .
16. Incidence of banditry ...
17. Incidence of cattle theft and illegal slaughter. . .
18. Tax arrears ...
19. Incidence of gambling and smuggling ...
20. Counterfeiting or melting down of government coins ...

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21. Backlog of civil litigation ...
22. Maintenance and security of cemeteries ...
23. Refugees and vagrants ...
24. Poorhouses and orphanages ...
25. Dikes and flood-prevention measures. . .
26. Market towns and overland or water commercial routes ...
27. Postal depots ...
28. Historical relics ...
29. Pettifoggers ...
30. Leading lineages ...
31. Sales of government salt ...
32. Sub-officials assigned to the district ...