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Heard on the Wind:

The Kangxi Emperor and the Qing Censorate

ABSTRACT:

In 1688, the Kangxi emperor (r. 1661–1723) signaled that he was willing to receive impeachments against officials that were based on hearsay. Guo Xiu 郭琇 (1638–1715) responded to this signal with impeachments of some of the most important figures at court. The history of these impeachments demonstrates specific priorities of the Kangxi reign.

KEYWORDS:

Censorate, Kangxi, hearsay, Guo Xiu, Mingzhu

If any institution stood at the nexus of culture and power in the Chinese empire, it was the Censorate. Embodying the cultural tradition that men of learning spoke truth to power, censors throughout Chinese history tried to guide or constrain the exercise of power as their moral and political visions dictated. Rulers concurred or resisted, depending on the issue, the times and their political strength; censors' proposals and rulers' responses formed the warp and woof of imperial politics. Different dynasties instituted the Censorate in different ways. Manchu leaders of the Qing dynasty (1644–1911) in China discovered the Censorate as they discovered Chinese culture, by fits and starts, with equal parts condemnation and acclamation.¹ This paper argues that the Kangxi emperor made sophisticated use of the Censorate in the 1680s to achieve his political ends.

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¹ The earliest reference to the Censorate in Qing discourse dated from 1634. In a very early charge, censors were encouraged to report on Manchu princes who were alcoholic, abusive or predatory; *Qing huidian shili* 清會典事例 (rpt. Beijing: Zhonghua, 1986) 998, p. 1.

Very little has been written about the Qing Censorate, largely because, with the exception of a handful of famous episodes, censors were not deeply involved in Qing politics.² This was in contrast, and likely in reaction, to the history of the Censorate in the Ming dynasty (1368–1643), where a storm of accusations and counter accusations paralyzed the court and contributed to the fall of the dynasty.³ Wary of the chaos that late-Ming impeachments had created, Manchus in the early Qing emphasized prerogatives to channel and limit the impeachment process. The Kangxi emperor (r. 1661–1722) was familiar and comfortable with these prerogatives. The discussion, below, will first examine censorial procedure during the Qing, highlighting the role of the emperor in each stage of the process. Then, the article will trace an effort by the Kangxi emperor to guide censorial focus to matters of concern for him. A subsequent section will document the censorial responses to the emperor, and their impact on lives and careers. The outcomes, traced in the conclusion, may not have been just, as we measure justice in the contemporary world, but they served the political purposes of the court.

THE EMPEROR AND THE CENSORATE IN THE QING

The Censorate was a very old institution; the title *yushi* 御史, rendered in English as “censor,” may be one of the oldest political terms in China, appearing first in oracle-bone texts. Associated with the term, and the role, was a complex of assumptions and understandings of which any Chinese scholar-administrator would have been aware. At the same time, specific developments in the mid-seventeenth century modified these assumptions and created the specifically Qing institution.

The term “censor,” as the English translation of *yushi*, is based on an analogy between the Chinese office and an imperial Roman office; both of those polities imagined politics to be rooted in a notion of virtue, and provided space for an official who pointed out the differences between ideals and realities.⁴ The Chinese office was likely more

² In *The Censorial System of Ming China* (Stanford: Stanford U.P. 1968), p. 28, n. 64, Charles Hucker found relatively little written about the Qing Censorate. A search under ‘*yushi*’ in the China Academic database turns up no articles on the Qing. Aside from the accusations of Guo Xiu, considered below, the most active censors during the 17th and 18th cc. were Wei Xiangshu 魏象樞 (1617–1687), Wei Yijie 魏裔介 (1616–1686), Xie Jishi 謝濟世 (1689–1756) during the Yongzheng reign (1722–1735), and the censorial opponents of Heshen 和珅 (1750–1799) in the Qianlong reign (1736–1796).

³ There have been several accounts of these events, including Hucker, *Censorial System*, pp. 152–234, and John Dardess, *Blood and History in China: The Donglin Faction and Its Repression* (Honolulu: U. Hawaii P., 2002).

⁴ Hucker, *Censorial System*, p. 1, finds this to be a ‘misleading’ analogy, though he doesn’t

heavily bureaucratized, and, because it existed for a longer period of time, was associated with a more complex range of assumptions and procedures than the Roman office. Chinese censors traditionally had two tasks, impeachment and remonstrance. These were conceived as opposing functions: in impeachment the censor pointed to things that should not be, or officials who should be removed; in remonstrance, he pointed to things that should be done, policies that should be implemented. For much of early-imperial Chinese history, different officials engaged in these different functions, though by late-imperial history the two roles were merged.

Charles Hucker has pointed to four characteristics of the Chinese censorial heritage. First, censors were officials of high prestige and autonomy; they represented an ideal that the Confucian political order cherished. It was important that the avenues of criticism be perpetually kept open, and from “a very early time, the censorial agencies seem to have gained a reputation for being fearless defenders of the unwritten constitution upon which the state system and the Chinese way of life were based.”⁵ Second, censors had considerable independence of action. Their writings were meant to proceed directly to the emperor, not be passed through bureaucratic channels, and they were traditionally allowed to address such subjects, and employ such evidence, as they felt necessary. Third, censors were relatively young and of low rank. As men advanced in their careers, it was feared they would come to love their position more than principles, and thus advocate compromise, and be unable to perform the tasks expected of them. Fourth, there were no specialists in censorship. Censors were always expected to perform non-censorial tasks, and to be able to move between the censorate and other institutions.⁶ To Hucker’s four principles, a fifth may be, indeed must be, added if the case of Guo Xiu 郭琇 (1638–1715) is to be understood: censors were vulnerable, because there were never any whistleblower laws, or rules protecting censors from the sort of accusations they leveled at others. The models for the censor were the sages of antiquity, intellectuals who spoke truth to power regardless of consequences, and who stood to lose, or gain, based on the value of their advice. While it was considered bad form for an emperor to dismiss a censor, it was done when circumstances and charges seemed to merit it.⁷

elaborate. Unlike their counterparts in Rome, Chinese censors had no responsibility for the census.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 20–23.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

The Censorate took various institutional forms during Chinese history. In the Ming and the Qing, it was headed by two censors-in-chief of the left and right, assisted by four assistant censors-in-chief, two each of the left and right. During the Qing, half of the leadership, one of the two censors-in-chief and two of the assistant censors-in-chief were Manchus. Under this leadership, the Qing Censorate had two branches, one for supervising officials at the capital, and one consisting of what Hucker called “investigating censors.” The censors responsible for the capital were divided into six groups, with each one responsible for overseeing the activities of one of the six ministries. Investigating censors bore titles that contained a geographical element, but had the authority to investigate any matter, regardless of where it occurred. Guo Xiu, whose impeachments will be discussed below, was one of these, the investigating censor for Jiangnan circuit (*Jiangnan dao yushi* 江南道御史). In the Qing, there were regularly forty-four investigating censors at any time.

The Qing developed a regular procedure for handling impeachments that placed all power in the hands of the emperor, but allowed him to implement procedures that provided some protection for the accused.⁸ A foundational rule of impeachment, preserved in the *Great Qing Code* (*Da Qing lüli* 大清律例) was: “In all cases where high and low officials in the capital or outside commit an offence,” the impeaching official will “send a memorial under seal, with a statement of the facts requesting an imperial order, known as a rescript (*zhi* 旨). The impeaching official may not himself, without authorization, proceed to investigate the case.”⁹ On receipt of a memorial of impeachment, the emperor had first to characterize the accusation. For less serious matters, the ruler could call on his officials to “examine and advise (*cha yi* 察議)”; where the ruler envisioned that punishments would be assessed, he could call on officials to “recommend administrative punishment (*yi chu* 議處)”; and on the most serious matters, he could ask officials to “advise on severe administrative punishment (*yanjia yichu* 嚴加議處).”¹⁰ After the emperor had received and characterized an impeachment, he could order an investigation and appoint an investigating committee, sometimes of one or two, but more often of three, persons, at least in serious cases. If the alleged infraction took place outside the capital,

⁸ I translate *can* 參 here as “impeachment,” because the process only accused an official of misdeeds. “Indictment” would reflect a charge with evidence.

⁹ *The Great Qing Code*, trans. William Jones (Oxford: Clarendon, 1994), p. 40.

¹⁰ *Da Qing Huidian* 大清會典 (rpt. Beijing: Zhonghua, 1968) 11, p. 5a–b. Thomas Metzger, *The Internal Organization of Ch’ing Bureaucracy: Legal, Normative and Communicative Aspects* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard U.P., 1973), p. 115.

these individuals travelled to the site of the offense and carried out such investigation as they saw fit. The investigators' role was limited to fact finding; when their report was submitted, it was reviewed by the monarch. If the ruler judged that guilt had been established, he could refer the case to the Ministry of Punishments for criminal sanctions, or to the Ministry of Personnel for administrative sanctions. Administrative sanctions could include fines, demotions or removal from office, and were assessed according to a manual, the *Regulations on Administrative Punishments* (*Chufen zeli* 處分則例). The deliberations of the ministries were only advisory; it was the ruler who decided the sanction; in fact, the sanctions were often reduced as a mark of imperial grace.¹¹

Obviously, the procedures of the Censorate did not produce a rule of law, but they were not meant to do so. Instead, the goal was a rule of virtue, and the assumption was that a ruler could best achieve such a rule when properly advised by an alert, morally informed officialdom. Historical assessments of the Censorate in China have gone to extremes, with some seeing the censor as nothing more than a disciplinary official, responding to the orders of an absolute monarch. Others have seen the Censorate as embodying a sort democratic principle, with the censor speaking in the voices of the masses. Neither of these perspectives is valid: a more balanced perspective would see the censor as part political commissar, part ombudsman, and part moralist. As Charles Hucker concluded: "Neither representatives of the imperial will, nor representatives of the majority will, they were spokesmen for the general will – that is to say, guardians of the Confucian governmental heritage handed down from the past. In this manner alone can their prestige and their influence be accounted for."¹²

KANGXI AND THE CENSORATE

As suggested above, the Qing emperor played a decisive role in the disposition of impeachments once they were made. The account, below, will demonstrate that rulers could also play a role in eliciting impeachments, and thus will also show how the Kangxi emperor came to call for censors' review of his court in the late-1680s. The early years of his reign had been dominated by warfare: the Qing defeated the Rebellion of Three Feudatories, an event that engulfed South China and required most of the resources and attention of the dynasty. A group

¹¹ On *Chufen Zeli*, see Metzger, *Internal Organization*, pp. 351–56.

¹² Hucker, *Censorial System*, p. 296.

of advisors had emerged during the war to manage the finances and logistics of the Qing armies. Successful in war, they became dominant in peacetime and guided most decisions and expenditures in the 1680s. The leader of this group was the Manchu aristocrat Mingzhu 明珠 (1635–1708). In his eleven years as grand secretary, he had constructed an elaborate system of alliances that collected corrupt fees for his services in recommending appointments and managing political outcomes.¹³ When the emperor began to suspect Mingzhu and those around him can only be a matter of conjecture, but certainly by the summer of 1687, he had his doubts.

A memorial that reached the emperor through a rather random sequence of events likely resonated with ideas the emperor had developed earlier. There was a drought in the early summer of that year in northeast China; taxes were remitted in large areas of Zhili 直隸 (Hebei province), and the emperor prayed for rain both at the Altar of Heaven and in the Baohe (保和) Throne Hall.¹⁴ Lest the acts of his government be out of harmony with the principles of Heaven, the emperor called on officials to inform him of problems they saw in the state. Most of the responses were anodyne assurances that the state was in accord with heavenly principle. One memorial from Dong Han 董漢 (n.d.), an official in the Court of Astronomy, caught the emperor's attention. The emperor commented:

In My view, people today do not emphasize the basics; their behavior is frivolous and untrustworthy, and they have too many luxuries. Even though the institutions of government have been roughly established, the avenues for airing views seem to be blocked. Now, in this memorial of Dong Han, an official of the Court of Astronomy, there are several observations that many people, being afraid, might not have dared to write. But Dong has written them. The ancients said, "We should not reject an opinion because of the speaker."¹⁵ Although Dong Han is an official of low rank, his

¹³ Mingzhu was from the Yehonala clan and the Plain Yellow Banner. See *Qingshi liezhuan* 清史列傳 (Shanghai: Zhonghua shuju, 1928) 8, pp. 12b–16b, and Arthur W. Hummel, ed., *Eminent Chinese of the Ch'ing Period* (rpt. Taipei: SMC, 1991), pp. 577–78. See also Yan Chongnian 閻崇年, "Mingzhu lun" 明珠論, *Gugong bowuyuan yuankan* 故宮博物院院刊 (1987.1), p. 13.

¹⁴ *Shengzu Renhuangdi shilu* 聖祖仁皇帝實錄 (in *Qing Shilu* 清實錄; rpt. Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1985, vols. 4–8. Mukden, 1937; rpt: Zhonghua shuju, 1987; hereafter, *KXSL*) 130, pp. 394–95, 399.

¹⁵ The allusion was to *Lunyu* 15/22, "The superior man does not promote a man simply on account of his words, nor does he put aside good words because of the man" (James Legge, trans., *The Chinese Classics* [Oxford U.P., 1892]), vol. 1, p. 300. See No. 1 Historical Archives, ed., *Kangxi qijuzhu* 康熙起居注 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1984; hereafter, *Diary*).

words are telling. Among the issues he has addressed are matters that were established by Our Ancestors that cannot be changed. He is an official of low rank; how could he have known of such matters? Nonetheless, in my own reading several elements that could be implemented stand out. Let the grand secretaries and court minister take [the memorial] and deliberate.¹⁶

Dong Han's rank was to be an issue throughout the case. Dong was supervisor of the Imperial Observatory (*lingtai lang* 靈臺郎), an unranked position responsible for making actual astronomical observations.¹⁷ The observatory was one of divisions of the Court of Astronomy, with the others responsible for preparing the calendar, selecting auspicious days, interpreting anomalies, and the like.

It did not take long for the grand secretaries to respond to the imperial order to deliberate, and they were not pleased. Mingzhu was said to be alarmed at Dong's memorial, which some characterized as an attack on him.¹⁸ The emperor offered his observation at the end of a morning audience, and by the afternoon Mingzhu was prepared to respond on behalf of his colleagues. The claim that received the most attention was the notion that the emperor should "open the avenues for airing opinion 開言路," a standard Chinese expression for allowing junior officials, and particularly censors, to offer their comments on, and criticisms of, state policy. Mingzhu wrote:

Your officials have copied out several passages of Dong Han's memorial on which the Emperor commented, and deliberated about them, one by one. As for his recommendation that the emperor should abandon his [private] desires and follow the suggestions of the many 舍己從人, although his language comes from the classics, from the beginning of your reign, there have been few relevant episodes. You have ordered those at court to deliberate and have sought above all what was appropriate. There has never been a case in which you relied only on your own judgment alone, and ignored the counsel of the assembled officials.¹⁹

¹⁶ *Diary*, p. 1627.

¹⁷ Charles Hucker, *Dictionary of Official Titles* (Stanford: Stanford U.P., 2000), pp. 301, 315–16; H. S. Brunnert and V. V. Hagelstrom, *Present Day Political Organization of China*, trans. A. Beltchenko and E. E. Moran (Shanghai: Kelly and Walsh, 1912), pp. 63–64.

¹⁸ Yang Chun 楊椿, "Tang Bin zhuan" 湯斌傳, in *Guochao qixian leizheng* 國朝耆獻類徵 (Xiangyin, Hunan: Li Yuan's Family, 1884–1890) 48 p. 31b. Dong's memorial is not extant. Yang claims that it had ten points.

¹⁹ *Diary*, p. 1627.

Dong's call to the emperor to "abandon his own desires, and follow the suggestions of the many" was an allusion to the counsels of Yu in the *Book of Documents*.²⁰ Mingzhu's comment took the form of an assurance that the emperor had never acted in an autocratic manner. Thus, on Mingzhu's telling, the emperor had no need to hear the opinions of lower officials in the empire, because he had the advice of the senior counselors:

As for the expression, "to hear with the ears of all 達四聰, it too comes from the classics. In the administration of the empire, you have met officials every day at court, encouraged each of us to express our own views and to deliberate. Because we are weak and incapable, we have not always been able to carry out the imperial will. There has been, however, no obstacle [to communication] between the emperor and his counselors.²¹

The passage to which Dong alluded here was an account in the *Book of Documents* regarding the behavior of the sage-king Shun when he took power after the death of Yao: "He deliberated with the chiefs of the four mountains, regarding how to throw open all the doors of communication between the court and the empire, and sought to see with the eyes and hear with the ears of all."²² Mingzhu's assurance that in the emperor's daily interaction with his immediate courtiers, he had listened to what they had to say may have been true; however, it also might have (deliberately) missed Dong's point that not only the emperor, but also the court as a whole was closed to opinions from below. Certainly, the prospect that opinions from below could reach the monarch generated substantial anxiety among those who advised him most closely.

Nonetheless, Mingzhu continued; if the emperor was not autocratic, and open to the opinions of all, there was really no need for additional arrangements to secure the opinions of lower officials and censors:

As for the recommendation that the emperor open avenues for the expression of opinion, you receive opinions with an open mind.

²⁰ *Shang shu* 尚書, book 2, chap. 3, trans. Legge, *The Chinese Classics*, vol. 3, p. 53: "To give up one's own opinion and follow others. ... It was only the emperor Yao that could attain to this."

²¹ *Diary*, p. 1627.

²² *Shang shu*, book 1, chap. 5, trans. Legge, *The Chinese Classics*, vol. 3, p. 41. Mingzhu may have been simply making sure that the emperor caught the allusion here. More likely, he was asserting that this was a standard use of the classical passage that didn't reflect any special ability on Dong Han's part. Mingzhu, a Manchu aristocrat, did not have a degree, but he patronized many Chinese scholars.

There has never been a case when an official has been punished for submitting a memorial. Moreover, fearing that censors on duty at imperial audiences were afraid to speak, and did not dare say what they thought, you have instructed the court to suspend their required presence at audiences. Now Dong Han is an extremely low ranking official, and his memorial, on which you have asked us to deliberate, [is in error because] the avenues for the expression of opinion have never been closed.²³

The possibility that lower officials would be critical generated much anxiety among the emperor's closest councilors, but it did not seem to have alarmed the emperor. Mingzhu's reference to suspending the requirement that censors be on duty at imperial audiences referred to an order that the monarch had given approximately three months earlier. Therein, the emperor observed that censors' contributions at imperial audiences were indeed infrequent. Fearing they were afraid, or too embarrassed, to speak, or that they were uncomfortable in unaccustomed surroundings, he had ordered that they no longer needed to attend audiences. However, he continued: "It is My desire that their contributions be treated as important matters. If there are small errors, I won't blame them."²⁴

Although the matter of openness to lower officials' opinions received primary attention among imperial advisors, Dong's memorial made other recommendations, which the grand secretaries deemed to be equally ill advised. Dong had commented that the Qing expended too much effort in recapturing escaped bandits, and advised that, as life at court had become too luxurious, sumptuary laws needed to be more firmly enforced.²⁵ Both these matters were discussed at some length at court; in the matter of escaped criminals, the emperor especially requested the opinions of those who had served as provincial governors.²⁶ No action was taken on either matter.

This might have been the end of the matter, as Mingzhu no doubt hoped. Nevertheless, the emperor remained unconvinced that the pathways were open for younger officials to offer criticisms and suggestions. Several months elapsed, after the Dong Han case, before further ac-

²³ *Diary*, p. 1628. There was no reference to Dong's memorial, or Mingzhu's comments on it, in the *Veritable Records*.

²⁴ *KXSL* 130, pp. 394-95.

²⁵ The first sentence of the emperor's comment on the memorial may have been a response to this recommendation: "In My view, people today do not emphasize the basics; their behavior is frivolous and untrustworthy, and they have too many luxuries."

²⁶ For discussion of pursuing bandits, see *Diary*, pp. 1631, 1633.

tion was taken; however, this delay was not because of the urgency of the situation. Rather, because of the summer heat, the court dispersed. Ministries were ordered to forward only the most urgent matters to the court. The emperor and his family moved first to the southern hunting park, where he and his counselors devoted themselves to the education of the heir-apparent. When the court returned from the southern hunting park to Beijing, the emperor embarked on his annual journey to the Summer Palace in Rehe 熱河, which was followed by a hunting expedition in Inner Mongolia.

When he returned to the capital in late autumn, the emperor issued an edict:

There have been many cases in which censors indicting corrupt officials have been afraid to speak because they have not personally observed the receipt of bribes. At present, there is a law against indictments based only on hearsay (*fengwen* 風聞). But has there ever been a case where the recipient of a bribe has been willing to [say he was bribed and] be impeached? In the past, there has been a regulation allowing indictments based on unattributed sources. But the [Oboi 鼈拜, 1610–1669] regents suspended this procedure. Let us restore the procedure. The corrupt fear such a rule. If there are cases of censors' bearing grudges, and on investigation the grudge is proven, then there is a mechanism for reversing the charge. Let this edict be promulgated to the court, the censors, and imperial advisors.²⁷

The crucial expression here was the notion of *fengwen* 風聞, or “things heard on the winds.” This expression had been a part of the imperial Chinese political vocabulary for most of imperial times, together with the related, but somewhat more ominous expression, *fengyan* 風言, which meant “rumors” or “gossip.” During the Six Dynasties, regulations encouraged censors to collect *fengwen*, i.e., “folk songs and street talk that reflected popular opinion of the government.” There were multiple examples of censorial use of *fengwen* during the Wei, Southern Qi, and Liang dynasties. In the Tang Code, making an accusation without sources was illegal; in the Song, only censors were permitted to make accusations without a source.²⁸ In a modern context as a technical, legal

²⁷ *KXSL* 231, p. 417. Min Lu has usefully argued that Guo Xiu's impeachments need to be read against the background of the emperor's earlier interactions with censors. See Min Lu 旻路, “Guo Xiu danke Jin Fu an zhong an” 郭琇彈劾靳輔案中案, *Manzu yanjiu* 滿足研究 (2001.4), pp. 57–61.

²⁸ See Chen Song, “‘Short Scrolls’ and ‘Slandorous Reports’: Political Culture and Political Communications in Early Southern Sung,” *Journal of Song and Yuan Studies* 47 (2017–18), p. 156.

term, *fengwen* is probably best translated as “hearsay evidence.” Censors were not required, in fact they were explicitly prohibited from, proving their allegations; nevertheless, they could be required to provide the names of their sources. With sources named, charges could be more easily investigated, and unreliable sources readily eliminated; moreover, there was the perception that when censors were not required to name sources, they could more easily make charges based on their own private grievances, rather than on harm to the body politic.

What the emperor envisioned here was not so much a change in the law, but a signal to censors. In 1679, ministers had outlined to the emperor the laws governing impeachment. Censors could always make charges based on rumor; if the charges were found to be true there was no penalty, but if they were false, the censor could himself be impeached.²⁹ There was no indication in 1687 that the emperor sought to change these laws. Censors needed to judge the importance of the case, the reliability of their evidence, and the likely receptivity of the court to their charges before they submitted them. The 1687 edict merely signaled that the court would be open to more loosely sourced allegations – if they were of benefit to the state.

In his edict, the emperor attributed suspicion of unattributed impeachments to the Oboi regents, who controlled power during first eight years of his reign. They were a plausible scapegoat, since they had shown themselves suspicious of censorial activity from the earliest days.³⁰ In fact, in the *Qing huidian shili* 清會典事例 account of the development of the Qing Censorate, there is no mention of an Oboi-era edict concerning censors and sources. There was, however, a long and forceful edict that the Kangxi emperor himself issued in 1679, eight years after he had purged the regents:

Recently the number of cases in which censors have pursued private interests, and sought [only] to make a name for themselves have been too numerous to count. ...

In many cases, they have based their requests on *fengwen* and have been vague in their description. When we come to implement their suggestions, although censors do not say they are based in *fengwen*, how can this not be the case. As for charges based on *fengwen*, if the author is truly speaking in the public interest with-

²⁹ See the discussion of *fengwen* in early October of 1679: *KXSL*, 83, pp. 1064–65, and *Diary*, pp. 428–29. This discussion occurred one month after the fall of Songotu 索額圖 (d. 1703), who was accused of building a faction.

³⁰ R. Kent Guy, “Governing Provinces,” in Willard Peterson, ed., *Cambridge History of China*, vol. 9, pt. 2 (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 2015), p. 30.

out private interest, has proof, and is speaking on principle, why is it necessary to adduce gossip in accusations?³¹

Issued shortly after the emperor had purged Songotu 索額圖 (d. 1703), Mingzhu's predecessor as head of the Grand Secretariat, this edict was likely meant to calm factional accusations against Songotu's followers. The emperor seemed to change his attitudes toward loosely sourced allegations based on his own political needs: when he wished censors to be quiet, he accused them of using the cover of *fengwen* to make charges in their own interests; when he wanted censors to make charges, he asserted that they could use gossip as necessary.³²

The significance of Kangxi's 1687 signal that more loosely sourced allegations would be entertained was not lost on the imperial favorite. As grand secretary, Mingzhu was obligated to promulgate the imperial edict, but he made clear that he did not approve of it:

We have promulgated to the court and to the censors an edict restoring the right of censors to impeach based on unattributed sources, but we respectfully memorialize our opinions. The members of the court, imperial advisors, and censors note that prohibiting corruption and eliminating abuse is an end of good government. In virtue and enlightenment, your majesty can be compared with Yao and Shun. Since the beginning of your reign, you have devoted yourself to managing personnel and assuring the peoples' livelihood. You have daily thought about government, and all-under-heaven is prosperous. This is an extraordinarily flourishing age, but there are inevitably one of two evil people and corrupt officials. Even though they have escaped your imperial vision, they cannot avoid the scrutiny of the various officials.

In ancient times, there was never a rule that censors could impeach based on unattributed sources. It only existed during the late Ming, when there were the several [bad] eunuch courts and offices. Worthless characters banded together in factions, attacking each other and exacting revenge. Taking advantage of the right of making accusations based on unattributed sources, they made wild accusations, which led to disasters along the border. Now with the practice of making accusations based on unattributed sources restored, we fear that worthless characters will once again use the

³¹ *Qing huidian shili* 998, p. 3.

³² In the Song, as Chen Song has argued in "Short Scrolls," the right to use gossip was also contested. The Kangxi case is remarkable only in that the same emperor at two points in his reign took opposite positions.

pretext of unattributed accusation to stir up trouble and falsehood. Who can tell whether bearing grudges and seeking favors from each other will become general practice? This practice cannot be permitted. The current law (i.e., the prohibition of unattributed sources) should be maintained.³³

Mingzhu's observation that *fengwen* had never been permitted was in error; nevertheless, his charge that allowing censors more license could bring about chaos, as had happened in the late Ming, was potent in the early-Qing context. In almost no regard was the late Ming a positive example for the Qing in the seventeenth century. However, Kangxi was prepared to ignore Mingzhu, so he responded, "Noted," and the audience ended. No change was ordered. Frustrated by the perception that he was being manipulated, and suspecting that in the prosperity of the post Sanfan 三藩 era, corruption was becoming more common, the Kangxi emperor gave a signal to his officialdom that he was willing to receive accusations and would not be troubled by their sources.

A CENSOR'S RESPONSE

It did not take long for the Kangxi emperor to receive impeachments. In the late autumn of 1686, a little-known official from Shandong named Guo Xiu 郭琇 (1638–1715) arrived at the Qing court in Beijing from Jiangsu, where he had served as district magistrate, and took up his newly assigned post as imperial censor for Jiangnan.³⁴ Carrying out the Chinese censor's duty of reviewing officialdom, Guo presented the emperor in early 1688 with powerful impeachments that called into question the probity and efficacy of two of the most important officials of the day, the governor-general for River Conservancy, Jin Fu 靳輔 (1633–1692), and the grand secretary, Mingzhu 明珠 (1635–1708). These accusations shed a bright, but harsh, light on the Kangxi court by revealing a web of connections and collusions that undergirded the politics of the era. One year later, Guo Xiu submitted a third impeachment of Gao Shiqi 高士奇 (1645–1703), Wang Hongxu 王鴻緒 (1645–1723), and Chen Yuanlong 陳元龍 (d. 1736) – three officials who served in the emperor's private Southern Study (Nanshufang 南書房) as intellectual mentors and scholarly advisors to the monarch.

³³ *Diary*, p. 1683.

³⁴ There is a *nianpu* for Guo, as well as a collection of his state papers compiled by his son, Guo Tingyi 郭廷翼, in *Guo Huaye xiansheng nianpu* 郭話野先生年譜; and one in *Guo Huaye xiansheng shugao* 郭話野先生書稿 (rpt. as a single title, Taipei: Wenhai, 1983). See also Hummel, *Eminent Chinese*, pp. 436–37, and Zhao Erxun 趙爾巽 et al., eds., *Qingshi* 清史 (Taipei: Guofang yanjiuyuan, 1961; based on 1927 *Qingshi gao* 清史稿) 271, pp. 3936–37.

Guo's impeachment of the Director General of River Conservancy, Jin Fu, was in some respects the most troublesome for the emperor. The project that Jin supervised – which reconstructed the infrastructure that guided the lower Yellow River to the sea and provided a water-borne transport route for grain shipped from the southeast to the capital – was one of the largest and most expensive projects of the Kangxi reign. It was made particularly challenging by the nature of the Yellow River. Because it bore such an enormous load of silt, the river built up its own bed and had to be restrained by levees as it flowed through the plain. Unrestrained, it could change its mouth from the south to the north of the Shandong peninsula. The last radical change began in 1288.³⁵ Because the river had been flowing toward its southern mouth for more than 350 years when the Qing was established, the river's deposits of mud and silt were particularly difficult to manage.³⁶

Jin Fu, a Han Chinese bannerman, was appointed to manage the river in 1676.³⁷ With the advice of his private secretary, Chen Huang 陳黃 (d. 1689),³⁸ he set out to reconstruct the lower Yellow River and Grand Canal infrastructure. By 1681, with an enormous investment of revenue from the capital, he had restored the river to its banks, and gotten the Grand Canal flowing smoothly. But by the mid-1680s, Jin became vulnerable for four reasons. First, despite his best efforts and the money he expended, flooding was inevitable, particularly during the summer monsoon season, and with floods came the destruction of crops and livelihoods. Second, the longer Jin remained in office, the more rigid he and his secretary became in their understanding of the hydraulic structure of northern Jiangsu, a rigidity which led them to contest the emperor's orders that the east-flowing rivers, parallel to the Yellow River, be dredged to prevent damage to farmlands along their

³⁵ Joseph Needham notes that the shift of the river to a southern mouth was a gradual process, beginning in 1288, and continuing through 1324. See the useful chart, "Changes of Course of the Yellow River," in "Hydraulics," *Science and Civilisation in China*, vol. 4 (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 1981), pp. 242–43.

³⁶ The Yellow River flowed to the sea from its southern mouth from 1288 to 1852. One index of the increasing problem the river posed the longer it flowed to the southern mouth was that works on Yellow River management first appear in the late Ming, and continue through the early-18th c. See Ji Yun 紀昀 et al., eds., *Siku quanshu zongmu tiyao* 四庫全書總目提要 (rpt. Taipei: Commercial Press, 1971), j. 69.

³⁷ Six biographies of Jin Fu are extant in Li Yuan 李垣, ed., *Guochao qixian leizheng*, juan 155. The most useful, and the only one by a contemporary, is a *muzhiming* 墓誌銘 by Wang Shizhen (1634–1711). I have translated this biography, which will appear in an anthology of *muzhiming* under the title *Chinese Funerary Biographies*, ed. Patricia Ebrey, Ping Yao, and Zhang Cong (Seattle: U. Washington P., 2019).

³⁸ Hou Renzhi 侯仁之, "Chen Huang zhi he," 陳黃治河, in *Hou Renzhi yanyuan wenxue ji* 侯仁之燕園問學集 (Shanghai: Shanghai jiaoyu chubanshe, 1991), pp. 65–82.

banks. Third, in an effort to develop his own sources of revenue, Jin Fu proposed and implemented a scheme to create military/agricultural colonies (*tuntian* 屯田). Jin claimed that he created these out of lands reclaimed from the riverbeds, but Jiangsu landlords angrily declared that their lands had been expropriated. Fourth, Jin may have become corrupt and shared his revenue with Mingzhu.

In his initial impeachment, Guo touched on all four of these vulnerabilities, portraying Jin Fu as ineffective, arrogant, greedy and corrupt. Jin Fu's projects, in Guo's view, had long ceased to be directly related to needs of the situation, and had ceased to serve any purpose:

Today, they propose building a dike, and tomorrow, they propose digging a channel; millions are spent, but the river is as worrisome as always. Today, they propose appointing a river intendant, and tomorrow, they propose appointing a river submagistrate; they take positions and ranks created by the court and award them as acts of private charity, so there is no end to their underlings.³⁹

Jin Fu's arrogance was apparent in his cavalier dismissal of the emperor's concerns, particularly Jin's invention of "a hundred schemes" to prevent the emperor's goal of dredging the east flowing rivers in Jiangnan. For Guo, Jin's creation of military/agricultural colonies in Jiangsu was evidence of Jin's greed, an unjustified land-grab. All this rendered Jin Fu and Chen Huang "worms of the state and thieves of the people 國之蟲, 民之賊."⁴⁰

Guo Xiu submitted his second impeachment just ten days after his first one. Therein, he described the corruption of the grand secretary Mingzhu. This was an act of courage on Guo's part, since Mingzhu represented the military aristocracy that surrounded the emperor and defended and exercised the imperial prerogative.⁴¹ Mingzhu was a product of this order, but was not situated at its center. He was from the Yehenala 葉赫那拉 clan, one of the last to be incorporated into the Manchu confederacy. The Yehenala were granted high status to encourage their surrender, and thus Yehenala women had been married to Qing rulers; however, Mingzhu's ancestors had not distinguished themselves during the conquest period as had many of the most prominent Manchu aristocrats during the Kangxi reign.⁴² Not having automatic

³⁹ Guo Xiu, "Te can he chen," 特參河臣, in his *Guo Huaye xiansheng shugao*, p. 80.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 82.

⁴¹ Mark C. Elliott, *The Manchu Way: The Eight Banners and Ethnic Identity in Late Imperial China* (Berkeley: U. California P., 2001), p. 8.

⁴² See the biographies of Yehenala clansman by George Kennedy, in Hummel, *Eminent*

access to the throne, Mingzhu availed himself of a post-conquest route that had opened up for Manchus who had mastered the Chinese language; he occupied administrative positions reserved by ethnic quota for Manchus within the Qing state. Mingzhu rose through the Imperial Bodyguard to the Ministry of War and then to the Grand Secretariat. During his twelve years in that position, he became the most vocal and active of the grand secretaries and their effective leader. A suave and sophisticated politician, he stood at the pinnacle of power in the late-1680s, and the dangers of impeaching him were illustrated by an anecdote preserved in *Qingshi* 清史. In 1687, one of the emperor's favorite officials informed him confidentially of Mingzhu's corruption. Startled, the emperor asked his calligraphy tutor, Gao Shiqi, whether the charges were true. When Gao answered that they very likely were, the emperor asked, "Why has no one told me of this?" To which Gao answered, "Who wants to die?" Gao may have been engaging in rhetorical excess, but Guo Xiu might have shared the sentiment.⁴³

Guo Xiu's impeachment of Mingzhu was his most detailed, and has received the most attention from historians. A grand secretary's responsibilities included writing up edicts of imperial orders that had been given by the monarch orally in his morning audiences. Guo charged Mingzhu with changing the emperor's orders when he wrote the edicts, so as to the benefit his protégés in the central administration. He claimed that Mingzhu dominated the Censorate by controlling both the appointment of censors and the decisions regarding which censors would be assigned to specific cases. Mingzhu was also said to collect bribes from candidates for appointments, particularly those in the provinces where officials had access to flows of revenue. Finally, Guo charged Mingzhu with being in league with Jin Fu and dividing the fat 分肥, that is, sharing the corrupt revenues that the river director was able to extract. He portrayed Mingzhu as a suave and sophisticated operator actively engaged in selling his influence:

In cases when Mingzhu receives imperial orders 奉旨, if the orders are praised, he tells people, "This is because of my advocacy." If the orders are not called good, he says, "The emperor was displeased. I had to gently persuade him." Moreover, he freely exaggerates in order to appear gracious. By this means, he ties many people to himself in order to extract bribes (from those wanting

Chinese: Bujai, pp. 17–18; Gintasi, pp. 269–70; and Narimbulu, pp. 583–84. Kennedy argues that the Yehenala were Mongols who adopted Manchu terminology in their names.

⁴³ *Qingshi* 272, p. 3941.

favors). Every day when the court finishes considering memorials, as Manchu and Han officials of the various offices stand to the left of the main gate waiting sincerely and reverently, he reveals secrets, and there are none of the emperor's thoughts that are not divulged.⁴⁴

A year passed before Guo submitted his impeachment of Gao Shiqi,⁴⁵ Chen Yuanlong,⁴⁶ and Wang Hongxu,⁴⁷ three scholars who were employed in the Kangxi emperor's Southern Study. The latter was a new Qing institution, founded in 1677, in which the emperor could consult with literati experts on matters of Chinese culture. In what could be envisioned as a long-running seminar, the emperor and his literati councilors read and wrote poetry, practiced calligraphy, and read and edited classical texts. The products of the Southern Study included a long series of books published by imperial commission on Chinese philosophy and classical philology. Men were invited into the Southern Study based on their intellectual and literary abilities; they were expressly ordered not to interfere in outside political affairs 無得干預外事, which proved to be an especially difficult command.⁴⁸ In fact, the emperor's life could not be divided into two parts, literary and political, with firewalls between them. Politics inevitably made their way into the Southern Study. The dialogue between the emperor and Gao Shiqi quoted above (in which Gao remarked that someone would have to want to die to inform on Mingzhu) would surely have taken place in the Southern Study, at the emperor's initiative.

Like Mingzhu (and perhaps those in league with him), Gao Shiqi was accused of selling his influence on the emperor by collecting fees for recommending people to be appointed and/or courses of action to be taken by the monarch. Gao was a relatively poor man, and Guo alleged that Gao used his ill-gotten gains to purchase real estate: houses in the capital, commercial property and estates in Jiangnan. Accord-

⁴⁴ Guo's second impeachment, titled "Tecan dachen," 特參大臣, is more widely known than his first. It appears in *Guo Huaye xiansheng shugao* 1, pp. 83-91; quotation pp. 85-86. The impeachment was reprinted by order of the Qianlong emperor in the State Historiographical Commission biography of Mingzhu prepared by the Guoshiguan office, *Qingshi liezhuan* 8, pp. 12b-16b.

⁴⁵ On Gao, see *Qingshi* 271, p. 3936, and Hummel, *Eminent Chinese*, pp. 413-14.

⁴⁶ On Chen, see *Qingshi* 291, pp. 4043-44.

⁴⁷ On Wang, see Zhang Boxing 張伯行, "[Wang Hongxu] muzhiming" [王鴻緒]墓志銘, in *Zheng yitang xuji* 正誼堂續集 (rpt. Taipei: Yiwen, 1968) 7, pp. 1a-9a; *Qingshi* 272, pp. 3939-40; and Hummel, *Eminent Chinese*, p. 826.

⁴⁸ Zhu Quanfu 朱全甫, "Lun Kangxi shiqi de nanshufang" 論康熙時期的南書房, *Gugong bowuyuan yuankan* (1997.02), pp. 27-37.

ing to Guo, Gao was in league with Chen Yuanlong, with whom Gao claimed a largely fictive kinship,⁴⁹ as well as with Wang Hongxu, who was said to collect rents on the property the group owned. Gao Shiqi was unique among the Chinese officials who surrounded the emperor in that he did not have a Chinese civil service degree; he was recommended to the emperor because of his skill as a calligrapher. Guo Xiu's impeachment repeatedly emphasized the sheer effrontery of Gao's actions. Here was a man, the censor alleged, who owed everything he had to an act of special grace on the emperor's part; moreover, having been raised to an office for which he was not qualified, he rewarded his monarch with corrupt disservice.⁵⁰

Responding to a signal from the emperor, Guo Xiu had submitted memorials that outlined a system of corruption that pervaded the Kangxi-era court. The problem was not just a few bad apples but a whole pie, a pattern of systematic corruption likely instituted during the Rebellion of the Three Feudatories and developed over the years that followed. During these years, prosperity had returned to the Qing, so money flowed more freely and the possibilities for corruption had grown more numerous and lucrative. At the same time the Kangxi emperor had himself grown from a late adolescent, dominated by duties as a wartime commander, into an adult monarch confident in his powers. The Guo Xiu impeachments were a sign of changing times, a new peacetime order emerging in Qing China.

OUTCOMES

With Guo Xiu's impeachments, the Kangxi emperor achieved what he said that he wanted in encouraging his censors to present him with words on the winds, that is, vivid and detailed impeachments of corrupt men in his administration – impeachments that, at least from a distance of 330 years, seem likely to have been accurate. Yet, there were few long-term consequences for those who were charged. While in the short run all of those accused of corruption lost their offices, most returned within five years either to their posts, or to offices of comparable rank. Remarkably, Guo Xiu himself was dismissed from

⁴⁹ The Chens and the Gaos were both from Zhejiang. The Chens were originally surnamed Gao, but their ancestor was adopted into the Chen family. A kinship was therefore possible, but the adoption took place during the Song dynasty, some 500 years before Chen Yuanlong and Gao Shiqi met in the capital. See Meng Sen 孟森, "Haining Chen jia" 海寧陳家, in idem, *Qingdai shi* 清代史 (Taipei: Zhengzhong shuju, 1971).

⁵⁰ Guo Xiu, "Te can jinchen" 特參近臣, in his *Shugao*, pp. 99–107.

office following his third impeachment and remained out of office longer than most of those he had impeached.

The reason for these counter-intuitive results had to do with the nature of the accusations themselves. Centering on corrupt individuals, impeachments could also highlight the institutional limitations that made corruption possible. In his impeachments, Guo Xiu had identified three of the most important activities of the mid-Kangxi reign. The restoration of infrastructure in the lower Yellow River basin was crucial for the emperor and his dynasty; therefore, the monarch worried, as he dismissed Jin Fu, about whether he could find another official who understood the underlying hydrology of the region as well as Jin Fu. While individual Manchu aristocrats like Mingzhu could be temporarily shelved, the Manchu aristocracy could not be attacked because of the history of the Qing conquest. Moreover, Mingzhu had been the emperor's most vocal counselor in the matter of appointments during the 1680s. Because he dismissed Mingzhu, the emperor felt obliged to issue a special edict to assure officialdom that appointments made at Mingzhu's suggestion had represented the Kangxi emperor's own selections. Therefore, his dismissal of Mingzhu did not mean that the emperor disavowed the post-war personnel structure that Mingzhu had built. Patronage of Chinese arts and letters was becoming a pillar of Qing rule, a critical element in Manchu rule; thus, Gao, Chen and Wang were too valuable to the monarch to be permanently dismissed. However justified Guo Xiu's attacks were, they could not stand against the hard realities of Qing rule in China.

Restorations to official service roles were therefore the rule for those condemned and dismissed in the late 1680s. The fates of those impeached, summarized in tabular form, were as follows:

*Table. Fates of Those Impeached by Guo Xiu*Source: *Qingshi*

NAME	DISMISSED	REAPPOINTED	POSITION
Chen Huang	1688		Died in prison
Jin Fu	1688	1689	Dir.-General, River Conservancy
Mingzhu	1688	1694	Commissioner, Grain Transport for Expeditionary Forces
Gao Shiqi	1689	1694	Southern Study
Chen Yuanlong	1689	1691	Southern Study, Gov. of Guangxi
Wang Hongxu	1689	1694	Editor of <i>Mingshi</i>
Guo Xiu	1689	1700	Gov.-general of Huguang

Only Chen Huang, who was Jin Fu's private secretary, held no degree and had no immunity from imprisonment and physical punishment, and so suffered irreparable harm. The careers of the others were delayed – and of course one couldn't know the length of the delay at the moment of impeachment – but all found their way, sooner or later, back to the emperor's side.⁵¹ Ironically, the official who was rusticated for the longest period was Guo Xiu himself, who faced serious charges after his third impeachment that he lodged. In 1689, Foron, governor of Shandong and protégé of Mingzhu, accused Guo of being from a family that had resisted the Manchu conquest. There was truth in this claim: Guo's kinsman Guo Erbiao 郭爾標 had raised a militia and attacked the county capital at the time of the conquest. Nevertheless, Guo Xiu's immediate family fled from the chaos caused by their relative. The emperor, confronted with several other complaints about Guo Xiu, met with the censor and encouraged him to retire.⁵² Guo returned home to Shandong and waited there eleven years until 1700, when he greeted

⁵¹ Under the tentative title, "Three Impeachments: Guo Xiu and the Kangxi Court," my current book project deals with the details of their return to office.

⁵² There were also memorials alleging that Guo Xiu had brought about the downfall of a previous governor from Shandong in order to seek vengeance of the governor's failure to appoint men Guo had recommended. In Jiangsu, where Guo had served before coming to the capital, there were investigations into tax arrears in the county he had governed. The emperor showed no inclination to defend Guo on these charges. See Guo, *Guo Huaye xiansheng nianpu*, pp. 529–33.

the emperor's carriage as it passed through Shandong on a southern tour, and was reappointed to office.

Was it naïve of Guo Xiu to imagine that his impeachments would bring about the disgrace of the five or six individuals closest to the emperor in the late 1680s? It is tempting to think so. Guo's first two memorials were submitted in rapid succession shortly after he arrived in the capital. But his third memorial was submitted after a year and a half in the capital, when he should have been aware of the lay of the land. Moreover, Guo was not a young man; he was fifty-two *sui* when he submitted his impeachments. He had served as an official in Jiangsu for ten years, and earned a reputation there for brutal honesty – even shoving an underling of a superior into a canal when he demanded a bribe. Guo's impeachments were not so much naïve as they were blunt, but he had every reason to believe that he was doing his Confucian duty in calling out corruption he saw surrounding the emperor.

The outcomes in the Guo Xiu cases shed more light on the nature of the Kangxi emperor than on Guo Xiu's motives. A casual reading of the Guo Xiu case might suggest that the Kangxi Emperor was willing to tolerate corruption, but further consideration suggests a more complex reality. The Censorate had developed in an era when emperors dwelt apart from the day-to-day concerns of administration. The censor pointed out corruption to the monarch, expecting that he would use his absolute authority to correct the situation. But an activist monarch like Kangxi interacted with his officials daily, and knew, in some cases intimately, of their strengths and limitations. The emperor had entrusted his highest priority projects to the officials Guo impeached, and had monitored them closely. Nothing Guo wrote in his impeachment of Jin Fu was entirely new to the emperor – except perhaps the fact that an official was bold enough to express it. It was likely that the emperor knew of Mingzhu's activities and had already been told about them by another official. The imperial skepticism in the Dong Han affair suggested that he was open to the accusations directed at the immediate circle around him. The accusation of the emperor's advisors in the Southern Study may have been new to him, but he was certainly aware of their social position and political connections, but was still willing to meet them informally.

If the emperor was aware, at some level, of the charges Guo was making, was it fair of him to ask Guo Xiu, or censors like him, to risk personal attacks and career stumbles by speaking out? Here the question was: how much knowledge was enough? Could the emperor ever

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know that he knew everything? Would a new impeachment include new information? The monarch perceived his need for information about his administration, as well as how it was seen, to be more important than the career of any single censor. The Censorate was the institution within Chinese government that was expected to provide rulers with information about those who served them. Censors were never guaranteed immunity; like the ancient advisors on whom their role was modeled, they spoke truth to power at their own risk. Emperors could certainly be unfair: they were, after all, emperors.

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

- Diary* No. 1 Historical Archives, ed., *Kangxi qijuzhu* 康熙起居注
KXSL *Shengzu Renhuangdi shilu* 聖祖仁皇帝實錄