

Impersonating a Policeman in Qing China

The night before he died in October of 1802, Wanyun 萬雲, the abbot of the Vulture Peak Monastery (Jiufeng an 鷲峯庵) in Jingde 旌德 county, Anhui, told a fellow monk that he had been accosted by three constables (*buyi* 捕役; literally, “arresting runners”) who accused him of stealing some clothing.¹ He protested his innocence, but they threatened to take him before the magistrate and extract a confession unless he paid a fee of six thousand cash.² A friend advanced four thousand on his behalf, and the constables released Wanyun under the condition that he come up with the rest. He had no means of doing so, and the fellow monk, Shanghua 尚華, tried to console him. Later that night the distraught Wanyun hanged himself. Shanghua informed the authorities, and the three constables were soon arrested – but it turned out that they were not constables at all. The confrontation with Wanyun had been a masquerade.

Based on the culprits’ confessions and Shanghua’s deposition, the magistrate’s report reconstructed the events leading to Wanyun’s death as follows: Cheng Kui 程魁 and Cao Bin 曹斌 had formerly served as county constables. Cheng, who was in his sixties, had resigned two

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In the notes, I indicate document dates using reign-name abbreviations: KX (Kangxi, 1662–1722), YZ (Yongzheng, 1723–1735), QL (Qianlong, 1736–1795), JQ (Jiaqing, 1796–1820), and DG (Daoguang, 1821–1850), followed by the reign year, month, and date. For the overall system of citation, see the explanation at table 1, below.

¹ Information on this case comes from a memorial submitted by Anhui governor Alinbao 阿林保 in July of 1803. *Neige xingke tiben, qita* 內閣刑科題本, 其他 (Routine Memorials of the Grand Secretariat’s Office of Scrutiny for Punishments, Other) (Beijing: First Historical Archive; hereafter cited as XKQT), JQ 8.6.12 (j. 140).

² Conversion rates between silver, measured in Chinese ounces (*liang*), and copper coins, measured in *wen* or “cash,” fluctuated over time and varied with the purity of the silver, but the official baseline for much of the Qing period (1644–1911) was 1 ounce of silver = 1,000 *wen*; Zhang Yan 張研, *Qingdai jingji jianshi* 清代經濟簡史 (Zhengzhou: Zhongzhou guji chubanshe, 1998), pp. 325–26.

years previously due to illness, and Cao had recently been dismissed for failing to appear for roll call. The third man, a young cousin of Cheng's, was a manual laborer. On October 9, 1802, the three met and "got to talking about poverty" (*shuoqi pingqiong* 說起貧窮). Cheng remarked that the abbot Wanyun was wealthy and generous; if they posed as constables, they could accuse him of a crime and then extort some spending money. The others agreed, and as dusk approached Cheng stationed himself at a quiet spot beside a bridge while they went to fetch the monk.

They found him standing in front of the monastery, and lured him away by saying the "constable" Cheng Kui wanted a word with him. Wanyun accompanied them to the bridge, where Cheng told him that some clothing had been stolen in town. A culprit had been apprehended and named Wanyun as his accomplice. Wanyun naturally denied this charge, but the retired policeman replied ominously, "When you're brought before the magistrate, there's no worry that you won't confess." He made a grab for the monk, who sat down on the ground and refused to move. Cheng started dragging him, and at this point the two accomplices pretended to intervene, offering to let Wanyun go in exchange for six thousand cash. They accompanied him to a general store where the owner, a friend of the monk, gave them four thousand. Shanghua's deposition provided the rest of the story as Wanyun had told it to him.

The crime was posing as a yamen runner and committing extortion that resulted in the victim's suicide.³ Accordingly, the provincial governor recommended that Cheng Kui be executed by strangulation after the autumn assizes and his accomplices both be sentenced to a hundred strokes of the heavy bamboo and exile to a distance of three thousand *li*.

This case record is not unique, and the crime of posing as a constable – impersonating a police officer, in today's terms – was not rare in the Qing period. My sampling of crime reports in central government archives has brought up no fewer than sixty-four such cases from the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, and a full search would

³ Article 361, substatute 2 of the Qing code; Xue Yunsheng 薛允升, *Duli cunyi chongkanben* 讀例存疑重刊本, ed. Huang Tsing-chia [Huang Jingjia] 黃靜嘉 (Taipei: Chinese Materials and Research Aids Service Center, 1970; hereafter cited as *Duli*) 5, p. 1072. The Qing code comprised 436 articles (*lü* 律), each including one or more basic statutes (also called *lü*) plus varying numbers of substatutes (*li* 例) added over time. I follow the numbering system in Huang Tsing-chia's typeset edition of the *Duli cunyi*.

yield many more. See table 1, “Archival References for the 64 Cases” (below), which is a list of the primary memorials consulted.⁴ Cases 25–33 in the table were all carried in one aggregate report (*huiti* 彙題) from Guangdong; that is, there were at least nine cases of extortion by phony yamen runners in that province alone, for the single year of 1774.⁵ Thus, although less common than such perennial favorites as theft, adultery, land encroachment, and homicide, police impersonation was in fact a regular feature of the Qing criminal landscape.

How and why was this so, and what can these crimes tell us about Qing China? This study seeks to explain the police impersonation phenomenon by focusing on perpetrators, victims, and the institutional contexts in which the crimes unfolded. Case records yield insights in two interrelated areas. One is the world of crime, and especially the confrontation between perpetrators and their intended victims. The other is the relationship between state and society, and particularly the institutional and conceptual frameworks in which common people encountered local government and frauds were able to operate. The cases reveal not only a lively arena of popular criminal activity but also a range of openings in Qing government and society that made it possible, even at the “High Qing” peak of administrative order and efficiency in the eighteenth century. Specifically, I argue that a loose administrative structure combined with popular expectations of police behavior to make the phony constable an attractive play for the criminally inclined.

⁴ Drawn from my research for a larger project on forgery and impersonation in the Qing period, the sample comprises a core of documents on 44 cases, supplemented with basic information on 20 more. The records come from 1) the First Historical Archive in Beijing, 2) the National Palace Museum in Taipei, and 3) the Grand Secretariat Storehouse Archives (*Neige daku dang'an* 內閣大庫檔案) at the Institute of History and Philology, Academia Sinica, in Nankang (Taipei). Thirty-five of the 64 cases are from routine memorials (*tiben*), and twenty-eight from palace memorials (*zhupi zouzhe* 硃批奏摺) or their Grand Council file copies (*lufu* 錄副 *zouzhe* or *zouzhe lufu*). My system of citation is spelled out in the text of table 1. At the First Archive I focused on the “Violations of prohibitions” (*weijin* 違禁) and the “Other” (*qita*) categories in the *Neige xingke tiben*, sorting through the Qianlong and Jiaqing bundles at five- and ten-year intervals, respectively. The research also covered published palace memorial collections for the Kangxi, Yongzheng, Qianlong, and Jiaqing reigns, plus Qianlong and Jiaqing Grand Council file copies at the Palace Museum and in two “Law” (*falü* 法律) subcategories in Beijing: “Other” (*qita* 其他) and “Theft, Robbery, and Swindling” (*toudao, qiangjie, zhapi-an* 偷盜, 搶劫, 詐騙). During a subsequent visit to the First Archive in the summer of 2011, I was able to conduct a few brief keyword searches in several categories, finding eighteen more cases including eight from the Daoguang period. Altogether, then, my sources represent not a comprehensive count but a broad sample of police impersonation cases across China proper in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

⁵ *Neige Xingke tiben, weijin* 內閣刑科題本, 違禁 (Routine Memorials of the Grand Secretariat’s Office of Scrutiny for Punishments, Violations of Prohibitions) (Beijing: First Historical Archive; hereafter cited as XKWJ), QL 40 (no month or day) (j. 9979).

Table 1. Archival References for the 64 Cases

CASE	ARCHIVE DOCUMENT(S)
1	<i>Kangxichao Manwen zhupi zouzhe quanyi</i> , p. 1597, no. 3953, no date (submitted between KX 53.8.14 and KX 61)
2	<i>Kangxichao Manwen zhupi zouzhe quanyi</i> , pp. 1030-31, no. 2625, KX 54.6.16
3	<i>Neige tiben, xingfa</i> , 2322-9, YZ 3.4.16
4	<i>Gongzhongdang Yongzhengchao zouzhe</i> 4, p. 52, YZ 3.3.16
5	<i>Neige tiben, xingfa</i> , 2385-18, YZ 8 (no month or day)
6	<i>Yongzhengchao Hanwen zhupi zouzhe huibian</i> 19, pp. 845-46, YZ 9.1.21
7	XKQT, QL 1.11.11 (<i>j.</i> 295)
8	ZP, QL 2.1.11
9	NGDK 054321, QL 15.11.5
10	NGDK 54859, QL 15.12.17
11	<i>Gongzhongdang Qianlongchao zouzhe</i> 4, pp. 198-99, QL 17.10.29
12	<i>Lufu zouzhe, weijin anjian</i> , QL 22.6.13
13	ZP, QL 23.4.6
14	ZP 28-002-012, QL 23.11.29
15	ZPFQ, QL 24.3.3 (<i>j.</i> 55, <i>bao</i> 20)
16	ZP 01-0251-004, QL 26.5.28; LFFQ 1391-005, QL 26.5.28.
17	LFFQ 1391-013, QL 26.9.25; ZP 01-0251-017, QL 26.11.23.
18	LFFT 1399-017, QL 31.4.1.
19	XKWJ, QL 31.12.4 (<i>j.</i> 9923[2]), Udasan
20	XKTZ 06492-006, QL 34.6.1
21	JJD 12274, QL 35.7.2; NGDK 081477, QL 36.2.4
22	JJD 14190, QL 36.5.20; ZPFQ, QL 36.5.27 (<i>j.</i> 56, <i>bao</i> 19)
23	XKTZ 06653-005, QL 36.10.29
24	XKQT QL 40.2.13 (<i>j.</i> 340)
25	XKWJ, QL 40 (<i>j.</i> 9979)
26	XKWJ, QL 40 (<i>j.</i> 9979)
27	XKWJ, QL 40 (<i>j.</i> 9979)
28	XKWJ, QL 40 (<i>j.</i> 9979)
29	XKWJ, QL 40 (<i>j.</i> 9979)
30	XKWJ, QL 40 (<i>j.</i> 9979)
31	XKWJ, QL 40 (<i>j.</i> 9979)
32	XKWJ, QL 40 (<i>j.</i> 9979)
33	XKWJ, QL 40 (<i>j.</i> 9979)
34	XKTZ, 14007-017, [QL 42]

- 35 XKQT, QL 45.2.29 (j. 269)
- 36 *Gongzhongdang Qianlongchao zouzhe* 55, pp. 234-35, QL 48.2.25
- 37 XKTZ, 14016-013, [QL 48]
- 38 *Gongzhongdang Qianlongchao zouzhe* 74, pp. 109-11, QL 54.11.12; JJD 43657, QL 55.2.20
- 39 JJD 43697, QL 55.2.9
- 40 JJD 45616, QL 55.9.2
- 41 JJD 45768, QL 55.10.20 (rescript)
- 42 XKQT, JQ 3.1.28 (j. 187)
- 43 XKQT, JQ 3.4.7 (j. 187)
- 44 XKQT, JQ 5.12.11 (j. 227)
- 45 XKQT, JQ 8.6.12 (j. 140), Alinbao
- 46 XKQT, JQ 8.11.29 (j. 140); XKTZ 09070-019, JQ 9.5.20
- 47 XKQT, JQ 11.12.10 (j. 217)
- 48 Xingbu Jiangsu si 07057, JQ 13.6.10
- 49 XKWJ, JQ 13.7.10 (j. 10037)
- 50 *Qing Jiachengchao Xingke tiben shehui shiliao jikan* 3, pp. 1791-92, JQ 16.2.[n.d.]
- 51 ZP JQ 16.5.20; *Lufu zouzhe* JQ 16.6.8
- 52 JJD 50007, JQ 21.12.13
- 53 XKTZ 10105-016, JQ 24.run 4.2
- 54 *Lufu zouzhe* DG 3.11.2, DG 3.11.30
- 55 *Lufu zouzhe, falü, jingji anjian*, 4029-027, DG 4.run 7.15
- 56 JJD 57252, DG 7.10.23
- 57 *Lufu zouzhe*, DG 12.12.13; NGDK 168394-001, DG 12.12.29
- 58 JJD 069320, DG 14.9.12
- 59 XKTZ 11169-022, DG 15.7.4
- 60 XKWJ 14383-012, DG 15.9.4
- 61 *Gongzhongdang Daoguangchao zouzhe* 4, pp. 440-43, DG 18.1.19
- 62 XKTZ 11391-006, DG 19.2.6
- 63 XKTZ 11456-007, DG 20.8.8
- 64 XKTZ 11617-024, DG 22.9.25

Note on Sources

The system for documents at the National Palace Museum and the Institute of History and Philology cites collection title and document number, followed by date of submission. In the First Archive's *xingke tiben* and *zhupi zouzhe* collections, 20th-c. archivists sorted each year's memorials into topical subcategories and physically grouped them, without individual doc. numbers, in numbered bundles (*juan* 卷 or *bao* 包). I cite each memorial by the Chinese date followed by the bundle number. For those given unique doc. numbers in the archive's recent digitization project, I cite the doc. number and date. Grand Council file copies at the First Archive are also cited by doc. number and date. Memorials in published collections are cited by vol. and page numbers, followed by the date.

Local and provincial officials submitted criminal case reports for very specific purposes: either to report that a crime had taken place and the investigation was under way or to precisely identify the crime, perpetrators, and victims and recommend sentences in accordance with the relevant statutes in the Qing code. Factors influencing the sentence determination included the precise nature of the offense, whether one was a principal or an accessory, the relationship between perpetrator and victim, methods employed in commission of the crime, and the extent of the damage done (amount of wealth acquired and number of offenses committed, for example).⁶

The administrative requirement for precise information and careful distinctions thus generated detailed descriptions of the crimes and surrounding circumstances, descriptions that drew explicitly and extensively on criminal confessions and other depositions. (In some instances, the full confessions were submitted as enclosures with the reports.⁷) Case records therefore contain much that can be useful for the historian. Most important for this study, they provide detail about perpetrators, methods, and victims that helps to explain why police impersonation was so common in Qing China.

THE CRIMES: AN OVERVIEW

Local policing in the Qing period operated for the most part on three legs. One was the *baojia* 保甲 neighborhood surveillance system, which registered households in ascending groups of ten, one hundred, and one thousand. Each group chose a head from among its number, members were responsible for reporting unregistered persons and criminal activities to their respective heads, and the latter were required to report the same to the local authorities.⁸ A second leg comprised soldiers from local military districts (*xundi* 汛地) of the Green Standard armies “defending the posts.” In the eighteenth century their policing

⁶ For more on this “routinization of reporting,” see Thomas Buoye, “Suddenly Murderous Intent Arose: Bureaucratization and Benevolence in Eighteenth-Century Qing Homicide Reports,” *Late Imperial China* 16.2 (December 1995): 66–67.

⁷ I do not assume that such records were unmediated, verbatim transcripts; probably few, if any, were. (On the rhetorical shaping of official reports, see Robert E. Hegel and Katherine Carlitz, eds., *Writing and Law in Late Imperial China: Crime, Conflict, and Judgment* [Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2007].) But the fact-finding imperative was real, and case narratives can be richly informative. See Alison W. Conner, “True Confessions? Chinese Confessions Then and Now,” in Karen G. Turner, James V. Feinerman, and R. Kent Guy, eds., *The Limits of the Rule of Law in China*, University of Washington Asian Law ser. 14 (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2000), pp. 144–45.

⁸ Kung-chuan Hsiao, *Rural China: Imperial Control in the Nineteenth Century* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1960), pp. 43–45.

duties included catching major criminals, guarding the official courier routes, protecting travelers, and investigating or patrolling for criminal elements.⁹ However, most police work (patrolling, arresting criminals, delivering summonses, and so on) was performed by errand runners working out of local government offices (yamens). It was these runners (*chaiyi* 差役), and especially the subgroup known as constables, who inspired most of the impersonations that we encounter in the present study.¹⁰

Table 2. Distribution of Police Impersonations by Province

PROVINCE	NUMBER OF CASES	PROVINCE	NUMBER OF CASES
Zhili ^A	11	Yunnan	3
Jiangsu	6	Guizhou	2
Sichuan	5	Shandong	1
Guangdong ^B	13	Henan	1
Guangxi	4	Shaanxi	1
Shanxi	4	Jiangxi	1
Gansu	4	Hubei	1
Fujian ^C	3	Hunan	1
Anhui	3	Zhejiang	0

Note on Sources

Sample of routine and secret memorials from the First Historical Archive (Beijing), National Palace Museum (Taipei), and Institute of History and Philology (Taipei). See table 1 for a full list of documents consulted.

^A Includes 6 cases from the dynastic capital.

^B Includes 9 cases listed in an aggregate tally for 1774.

^C Includes 1 case from Taiwan.

Distribution and Motivations

The cases in the sample were fairly evenly distributed over time, and generally dispersed across China. As table 2 shows, the sample includes at least one case from every province but Zhejiang, and most

⁹ Dai Yi 戴逸 and Zhang Shiming 張世明, *18 shiji de Zhongguo yu shijie: junshi juan* 18 世紀的中國與世界, 軍事卷 (Shenyang: Liaohai chubanshe, 1999), p. 66; Robert J. Antony, "Sub-county Officials, the State, and Local Communities in Guangdong Province, 1644–1860," in *Dragons, Tigers, and Dogs: Qing Crisis Management and the Boundaries of State Power in Late Imperial China*, ed. Robert J. Antony and Jane Kate Leonard (Ithaca: Cornell East Asia Program, 2002), p. 43.

¹⁰ *Buyi* (constables): less common variations include *bukuai* 捕快, *jiankuai* 健快, and *yingbu* 應捕. Qu Tongzu translated all of these terms as "policeman"; T'ung-tsu Ch'ü, *Local Government in China under the Ch'ing* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard U.P., 1962), p. 57.

provinces saw three or more. The large number from Zhili (including six cases from Beijing) is probably the result of greater political vigilance and more complete record-keeping in the capital region. The even higher figure for Guangdong is a revealing anomaly, as it includes nine cases from the abovementioned aggregate report for 1774. Similar reports from other provinces would no doubt raise the overall case count significantly. The sample does not, of course, represent all or even most cases that would have come to the state's attention.

The purpose of almost all runner impersonations was extortion; the posers were looking for money.¹¹ Crime narratives are clear on this point, often beginning with conspirators "talking about poverty" or stating that an offender was poor or had no regular source of income. The amounts ranged from less than one ounce of silver to more than a thousand. These were extremes, however, and most fell between one and one hundred ounces. Approximately half of the victims paid, or agreed to pay, less than ten ounces or its equivalent in cash, and about one third paid between ten and a hundred. Some posers took commodities such as salt, cloth, alcohol, grain, or poultry, or a combination of goods and money.

Perpetrators

Perpetrators came from a variety of occupational backgrounds. Many are simply identified as commoners (*minren* 民人) or persons without steady employment. About one third were former yamen runners, retired or dismissed. The next largest group was laborers (*yonggong* 傭工), followed by petty merchants and former yamen clerks. Others appearing more than once in the sample were seal carvers, priests and monks, currently-serving yamen clerks (who helped with document forgery), robbers and thieves, itinerant medical practitioners, soldiers, messengers, servants, and beggars. There was also one farmer, a bricklayer, a riverboat pilot, and a wood-gatherer. Figuring prominently in

¹¹ There are only two clear exceptions in the sample. In one case a merchant hired two men to pose as runners to help him collect a debt. In the other, a dismissed county runner assumed his old role again to arrest a man who had injured him when he tried to press payment for overdue taxes. The memorial reporting the case stated that the ex-runner was exacting revenge for his injury in the previous encounter, but it is also possible that he hoped to get his old job back by delivering the wanted man to the yamen. *Neige xingke tiben, tudi zhaiwu, tanwu, weijin* 內閣刑科題本, 土地債務, 貪污, 違禁 (Routine Memorials of the Grand Secretariat's Office of Scrutiny for Punishments, Land Debts, Corruption, and Violations of Prohibitions) (Beijing: First Historical Archive; hereafter cited as XKTZ), 14007-017 [QL 42, no month or day]; and *Gongzhongdang Daoguangchao zouzhe* 宮中檔道光朝奏摺, ed. Guoli gugong bowuyuan 國立故宮博物院 (Taipei: Guoli gugong bowuyuan, 1995), vol. 4, pp. 440-43, DG 18.1.19.

the role of assistant runner were principal offenders' friends, neighbors, relatives, and, less commonly, hired hands.

Our posers thus came from various walks of life. At least sixteen had some sort of yamen experience, and at least eleven others were literate as well. (These included three unsuccessful examination candidates, the abovementioned seal-carvers, and a scribe.) At the other end of the spectrum, quite a few were manual laborers or men with no vocation. Many of them led very humble existences. Cai Qifeng 蔡起鳳 graduated to phony-runner work after starting out as a highway robber, donkey thief, and jail escapee.¹² Liu Gou 劉狗 was a Shandong villager with no regular employment who had been planning to serve as a constable but had not yet enrolled.¹³ (Doing so probably would have required nomination by a currently serving runner and payment of an entry fee.¹⁴) Yang Tingyi 楊廷一 was a poor scholar who had failed in the exams and barely eked out a living by selling eagle feathers he collected in the forest in western Yunnan.¹⁵

These diverse backgrounds suggest a certain sort of divide in the types of people who attempted police impersonation. One was the insider, the former runner. He had resigned or, more often, been dismissed, but retained the occupational knowledge and experience. The other was the outsider, who lacked the insider's experience but brought certain talents to the task. He might be literate and a competent seal-carver, or physically strong and imposing. He was bold. An impersonator could be a local fixture, but more often he was uprooted and mobile, committing the crimes away from his home county or province.

Methods

There were three basic strategies. One was falsely accusing an innocent person of criminal activity. Charges included theft, harboring fugitives or otherwise associating with known criminals, smuggling, and purchase of stolen goods. In the simplest instance a boatman took sudden inspiration to pose as a constable when he saw a man pick up (and thus "steal") a tobacco pouch lying on the street in Ba 巴 county,

¹² *Neige tiben, xingfa* 內閣題本, 刑罰 (Grand Secretariat Routine Memorials, Punishments) (Beijing: First Historical Archive), 2385.18, YZ 8 (no month or day).

¹³ *Neige daku dang'an* 內閣大庫檔案 (Grand Secretariat Storehouse Archives) (Institute of History and Philology, Academia Sinica, Taipei; hereafter cited as NGDK), no. 054321, QL 15.11.5.

¹⁴ On nominations, see Bradley W. Reed, *Talons and Teeth: County Clerks and Runners in the Qing Dynasty* (Stanford: Stanford U.P., 2000), p. 135. For an example of paying a "gift" in order to gain employment as a yamen clerk, see XKWJ, QL 1 (no month or day) (j. 9973), Yunli.

¹⁵ *Junjidang zouzhe lufu* 軍機檔奏摺錄副 (Grand Council Archive Palace Memorial File Copies) (National Palace Museum, Taipei; hereafter cited as JJD), no. 45616, QL 55.9.2.

Sichuan.¹⁶ The most elaborate involved a phony governor-general's deputy with guards and attendants storming into a farmer's home to arrest him on false smuggling charges.¹⁷ The most common ruse, however, was of the sort that ensnared the monk Wanyun: two or three men posing as local runners to extort a few thousand coppers. And as in that case, the setups often featured "good cop, bad cop" dynamics, with one aggressive runner feigning eagerness to drag the victim off to the yamen and another interceding to negotiate a more amicable resolution – freedom in exchange for cash.

A second strategy was to confront an actual or suspected law-breaker. Here the latter's crimes ranged from theft to smuggling, operating illegal distilleries, possession of guns and other weapons, gambling, adultery, and land encroachment. For example, two cousins walking by a house in Shangcai 上蔡 county, Henan, in 1807 noticed three men playing cards inside. Gambling was illegal in late imperial China, and the pair decided on the spot to extort some money.¹⁸ One hurried home and brought back an old chain used for tethering livestock. They then barged into the house and declared that they were sub-prefectural runners sent to arrest gamblers. One seized the cards and the other secured the homeowner with the chain. They led him away, releasing him only after he promised to pay fifteen ounces of silver.¹⁹

The third strategy was to conduct a phony inspection or patrol, in the course of which the posers could either discover something illegal or simply demand fees, traveling expenses, or services (*gongying* 供應) such as lodging and transport. One example of the former is the salt police squad that preyed on fishing boats moored along the Yangzi in Taixing 泰興 and Jingjiang 靖江 counties, Jiangsu, in the spring of 1724. The fishermen had salt on board to preserve their catches, and the fake patrollers used this as a pretext to accuse them of smuggling.²⁰ An example of the fee- or expense-charging ruse is the case of a laborer and two friends who posed as county runners in Lushan 蘆山, Sichuan, in 1802. Pretending to be "patrolling the locale" (*xuncha difang* 巡查地方), they entered a shop and demanded "traveling expenses" (*panfei*

¹⁶ NGDK 54859, QL 15.12.17.

¹⁷ *Junjichu lufu zouzhe, falü; toudao, qiangjie, zhaphan* 軍機處錄副奏摺, 法律; 偷盜, 搶劫, 詐騙 (Grand Council File Copies of Palace Memorials, Law; Theft, Robbery, and Swindling) (Beijing: First Historical Archive; hereafter cited as LFFT), 1399–017, QL 31.4.1.

¹⁸ For gambling prohibitions see *Duli* 5, pp. 1100–6; Jiang Yonglin, trans., *The Great Ming Code/Da Ming lü* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2005), p. 418 (Article 402); and William C. Jones, trans., *The Great Qing Code* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1994), p. 354 (Article 378).

¹⁹ XKWJ, JQ 13.7.10 (j. 10037).

²⁰ *Neige tiben, xingfa* 2322.9, YZ 3.4.16.

盤費) from the shopkeeper, threatening to take him away in chains if he did not oblige.²¹ In other cases false patrollers compelled illiterate victims to provide written guaranties that they were not harboring criminals – and charged a fee to do the writing for them.²² In a final variation revealed in two reports, gangs of thugs posing as patrollers did not even bother with extortion; they simply engaged in strong-arm robbery.²³

It was also under the patrol type of imposture that government offices came into play as victims. Four cases in the sample featured a “registration” scam, wherein frauds moving across the countryside visited local yamens to register (*guahao* 掛號) for escorts or simply to get their bogus warrants stamped with an official seal before moving on to the next jurisdiction. Three of the schemes worked quite well, making use of the administrative network to facilitate wide-ranging extortions.²⁴

Alongside these basic strategies, resourceful posers also tapped into current events. One method was to take advantage of official prohibitions to mount inspections or searches. In 1735, when a struggling itinerant medical practitioner tried to borrow money from an old acquaintance in Gui 貴 county, Guangxi, the latter had none to give but proposed a scheme: of late the authorities were confiscating guns and other weapons. Why didn’t the good doctor fabricate a warrant and pose as a county runner to extort some money in the nearby mountain villages? The medical practitioner agreed and they managed to forge the warrant, but he was arrested soon after setting out to conduct the extortions.²⁵ In 1824 an itinerant laborer, an unsuccessful grain-huller who had closed his business, and four accomplices used the opium prohibition to sting a Cantonese sojourner lodging at the Huizhou native-place hall (*huiguan* 會館) in Beijing. Learning that the man had opium in his possession, one of the gang bought some and the other five, posing

²¹ XKQT, JQ 8.11.29 (j. 140); XKTZ 09070–019, JQ 9.5.20.

²² *Gongzhongdang Qianlongchao zouzhe* 宮中檔乾隆朝奏摺, ed. Guoli gugong bowuyuan (Taipei: Guoli gugong bowuyuan, 1982–1989), vol. 4, pp. 198–99, QL 17.10.29; JJD 12274, QL 35.7.2; NGDK 081477, QL 36.2.4; JJD 14190, QL 36.5.20; and *Zhupi zouzhe, falü, qita* 硃批奏摺, 法律, 其他 (Imperial Rescripted Palace Memorials, Law, Other) (Beijing: First Historical Archive; hereafter cited as ZPFQ), QL 36.5.27 (j. 56, *bao* 包19).

²³ ZPFQ, QL 24.3.3 (j. 55, *bao* 20); JJD 57252, DG 7.10.23.

²⁴ *Junjichu lufu zouzhe, falü, qita* 軍機處錄副奏摺法律其他 (Grand Council File Copies of Palace Memorials, Law, Other) (Beijing: First Historical Archive; hereafter cited as LFFQ) 1391–005, QL 26.5.28; LFFQ 1391–013, QL 26.9.25; *Zhupi zouzhe* 硃批奏摺 (Imperial Rescripted Palace Memorials) (Beijing: First Historical Archive; hereafter cited as ZP), 04–01–01–0251–017, QL 26.11.23; JJD 12274, QL 35.7.2; and NGDK 081477, QL 36.2.4.

²⁵ XKQT, QL 1.11.11 (j. 295).

as yamen runners, stormed into the hall to “arrest” the dealer. They relieved him of 170 strings of cash.²⁶

Imposters also availed themselves of manhunts relating to specific criminal cases. In 1761 in Guangxi, three “villains” (*jiantu* 奸徒) from neighboring Hunan forged a warrant and posed as county runners sent to track down the rebel Ma Chaozhu 馬朝柱 and his associates.²⁷ Later that year two beggars in the Lingling 零陵 county seat, Hunan, saw a wanted poster naming five thieves. Inspired, they recruited two accomplices and, posing as runners searching for the fugitives, proceeded to extort money and rice from the residents of various townships and villages in neighboring Guilin 桂林 prefecture, Guangxi.²⁸ In 1766, an unemployed teacher forged a warrant naming a wealthy Jiangsu farmer as a disgraced official’s partner in crime.²⁹ And in 1789 a dismissed Taiwan prefectural runner and two accomplices forged an arrest warrant and extorted a total of 197 silver dollars from six wealthy men they falsely accused of being followers of the Jiayi 嘉義 county “traitor” (*jianmin* 奸民) Li Xiaochang 李効倡, whose case was being tried that very month.³⁰ Social disorders and local criminal cases thus provided opportunities for resourceful posers, who used familiar events to assume the cloak of official legitimacy and intimidate their victims.

One of the chief distinguishing characteristics of police impersonation cases was the use of threats and physical violence. Records suggest that about two-thirds featured some form of physical aggression, whether beating, grabbing and tying up, or leading a victim away as if to take him to the yamen. Imposters also relied on *implicit* violence: in many cases they carried chains, ropes, or whips, and victims’ depositions describe their carrying or bringing them out. Implicit violence

²⁶ *Junjichu lufu zhouzhe, falü, jingji anjian* 軍機處錄副奏摺, 法律, 經濟案件 (Grand Council File Copies of Palace Memorials, Law, Economic Cases) (Beijing: First Historical Archive), 4029–027, DG 4.run 閏 7.15. A string (*diao*) of 1,000 cash was theoretically equivalent to one ounce of silver, less during the Daoguang period; Zhang, *Qingdai jingji jianshiu*, pp. 317, 326.

²⁷ LFFQ 1391–005, QL 26.5.28. Ma Chaozhu was a rebel leader active in the mountains along the Anhui-Hubei border in the early 1750s. Officials had been hunting for him since 1752, when they discovered his conspiracy and snuffed out a hastily-called uprising. They never found him, and the Qianlong emperor would finally give up on the case in 1771, after nearly twenty years of fruitless pursuit. *Qingdai quanshi* 清代全史, ed. Wang Rongsheng 王戎笙 (Shenyang: Liaoning renmin chubanshe, 1991–1993) 4, pp. 214–15; *Qing shilu* 清實錄 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1985–87; hereafter cited as *QSL*) 14, pp. 399–400, QL 17.4.18, *jiyou* day (*Gaozong shilu*, j. 413) and 19, pp. 1007–8, QL 36.10.3, *gengwu* (*Gaozong shilu* 894).

²⁸ LFFQ 1391–013, QL 26.9.25.

²⁹ LFFT 1399–017, QL 31.4.1. Several months previously, the Suzhou tax circuit official Duan Chenggong 段成功 had been impeached and dismissed for conniving with underlings to commit extortion; *QSL* 18, p. 279, QL 31.1.13, *guiwei* (*Gaozong shilu* 752).

³⁰ *Gongzhongdang Qianlongchao zouzhe* 74, pp. 109–11, QL 54.11.12; JJD 43657, QL 55.2.20.

also came verbally. This could be a simple threat to chain a victim up (*shuansuo* 拴鎖) or take him to the yamen in shackles, or the ominous suggestion of what would happen should he fail to comply. (“When you’re brought before the magistrate, there’s no worry that you won’t confess.”) In two instances the posers simply “made a commotion” (*chao-nao* 吵鬧) when money was not forthcoming.³¹ And in six of the nine cases listed in the Guangdong aggregate memorial of 1775, the official summary identified the crime as *hezha* 嚇詐 (to extort with threats) or, in one case, *hepian* 嚇騙 (using threats to swindle).³² Both terms emphasize the use of threats or intimidation (*he*).

Often phony yamen runners supported their claims with physical symbols of official status. Warrants figured in at least twenty-four cases, most commonly authorizing their bearers to search for lawbreakers such as thieves, purchasers of stolen goods, rebel partisans, or Han Chinese stirring up trouble in minority areas. Chains, shackles, or ropes appeared in another twelve. A few perpetrators used other props such as horses, sedan-chairs, lanterns, official-looking hats, robes, and shoes, a command arrow,³³ a musket, and an umbrella. At least five arrived with entourages including runners or attendants; among them, a resourceful bondservant in Beijing employed both regular thugs and actual runners recruited from an outlying county.³⁴

OPENINGS FOR FRAUD

What inspired all of these adventures? First and foremost, police impersonation was common because the nature of local government made it possible. The heart of the problem was personnel, the rank and file of what moderns call the police force.

Personnel: The Policemen of Qing China

Although there were variations from place to place and elaborations over time, county and department runners typically operated in hierarchies running from heads (*touyi* 頭役) based in the yamen to

³¹ JJD 43697, QL 55.2.9; JJD 45768, QL 55.10.20 (rescript).

³² XKWJ, QL 40 (no month or day) (j. 9979).

³³ Command arrow (*lingjian* 令箭): “All provincial governors and governors-general as well as high-ranking army commanders are given flags and arrows each bearing the word ‘command.’ These are used as proof of authority when ordering the transfer [or deployment] of troops”; Sun, *Ch’ing Administrative Terms*, p. 243, no. 1550.

³⁴ *Kangxichao Manwen zhupi zouzhe quanyi* 康熙朝滿文硃批奏摺全譯, ed. Zhongguo diyi lishi dang’anguan 中國第一歷史檔案館 (Beijing: Shehui kexue chubanshe, 1996), p. 1597, no. 3953 (no date, submitted between KX 53.8.14 and KX 61).

local runners (*sanyi* 散役) and their assistants (*bangyi* 幫役 or *baiyi* 白役) stationed in the field. Constables worked out of the arrest or thief-catching section (*buban* 捕班), one of the four main subgroups of yamen runners.³⁵ As the term *buyi* suggests, their chief duty was catching criminals.³⁶ They received their missions and warrants from either a head runner or the magistrate himself. In Ba county, Sichuan, common practice by the 1820s was for a head runner to give an assignment to an intermediate chief, who would go out and complete the task with a local runner or constable.³⁷ Beneath them, however, was the additional stratum of unregistered and mostly illegal assistants, *bangyi* or *baiyi* for regular runners and *baibu* 白捕 (literally, “white constables”) for the constables. One eighteenth-century official observed that regular runners typically had three or four assistants. In Ba county, Bradley Reed notes, a runner “might take along several friends, associates, or family members to assist him.”³⁸

The ranks were large and their membership fluid. Probably no one knew exactly how many runners and assistants there were, even in small jurisdictions. The Complete Books of Taxes and Labor Services (*fuyi quanshu* 賦役全書) for the various provinces set small quotas, but these were woefully inaccurate fictions. Qing-era estimates of actual runner numbers ranged from several hundred to more than 1,500 per county.³⁹ For constables, provinces set their own quotas. These, too, bore little relation to reality, as they did not include the extra-statutory regular constables or the far more numerous assistants. In Ba county, and probably elsewhere, head constables represented the official quota and chiefs and local constables were extranumerary but enrolled in unofficial registers at the yamen. (One such register from 1835 listed 319 men.) There were no such registers for the assistants, however.⁴⁰ One nineteenth-century magistrate reported well over a hundred of these in the rural precincts surrounding his county seat in Shaanxi. In 1818 another official noted that in counties across Sichuan they frequently

³⁵ Ch'ü, *Local Government*, pp. 57–58; Reed, *Talons and Teeth*, pp. 125–28; Zhou Baoming 周保明, *Qingdai difang liyi zhidu yanjiu* 清代地方吏役制度研究 (Shanghai: Shanghai shudian chubanshe, 2009), pp. 195–96. For the runner hierarchy Ch'ü used the terms chief, regular, and extra runners. I follow Reed's usage of head, local, and assistant.

³⁶ In some locales they shared this task with other runners, particularly the “swift hands” (*kuaishou* 快手) group of horsemen and foot messengers and the commoner guards (*minzhuang* 民壯); Ch'ü, *Local Government*, pp. 237n39, 238n48.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 61; Reed, *Talons and Teeth*, pp. 127–28.

³⁸ Ch'ü, *Local Government*, pp. 58–59; Reed, *Talons and Teeth*, p. 129.

³⁹ Ch'ü, *Local Government*, pp. 57–60; Reed, *Talons and Teeth*, pp. 142–43.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 128–29, 145, 294n11.

numbered more than a thousand.⁴¹ With such large numbers and the occasional, even ad hoc, nature of the assistants' work (Bradly Reed likens them to "a large pool of occasional laborers"),⁴² there was no one, from the magistrate to the local constables, who could have known the precise number and identities of all the men conducting police work in a given county.

There were ongoing efforts, or professed efforts, to eradicate the largely illegal but ubiquitous assistant runners. A prohibition of 1725, for example, noted that local officials circumvented the statutory runner quotas by adding assistants, sometimes hundreds of them, bringing harm to the common people. Cunning assistants "connived with officials' servants and secretaries to engage in swindling without restraint."⁴³ Regular runners who took unregistered assistants with them and magistrates who condoned it were both subject to punishments.⁴⁴ Regulations allowed magistrates to temporarily employ additional runners when workloads became excessive, but in reality many were never dismissed. Prohibitions were issued periodically, but to little or no avail.⁴⁵ In the nineteenth century officials would still be reporting that assistant runners teemed across individual jurisdictions in the hundreds and even thousands, and empire-wide their numbers only grew during the late Qing.⁴⁶

Statutory runners (those within the official quotas), including constables, typically drew token annual salaries of about six ounces of silver. This was not enough to live on, and the real money came through division of various fees exacted from the populace in the course of daily business. For the much larger number of extrastatutory runners and assistants, such fees appear to have been the only remuneration.⁴⁷ In Ba county, whenever constables made an arrest or escorted a prisoner from one yamen to another, they would collect a fee from the prisoner and divide the amount evenly among the head who handed down the

⁴¹ Ch'ü, *Local Government*, p. 57; Reed, *Talons and Teeth*, p. 144.

⁴² Ibid., p. 129.

⁴³ *QSL* 7, p. 522, YZ 3.7.24, *jiwei* (*Shizong shilu* 34).

⁴⁴ Ch'ü, *Local Government*, pp. 59–60; Reed, *Talons and Teeth*, p. 143. See *Duli* 2, p. 188 (Article 50, statute 1) and 5, p. 1034 (Article 344, substatute 6).

⁴⁵ Reed, *Talons and Teeth*, pp. 142–43, 294n10.

⁴⁶ Ch'ü, *Local Government*, pp. 58–59; Reed, *Talons and Teeth*, pp. 128, 142–45.

⁴⁷ Ch'ü, *Local Government*, pp. 64–66, 236n9; Reed, *Talons and Teeth*, pp. 132–33; John R. Watt, *The District Magistrate in Late Imperial China* (New York: Columbia U.P., 1972), p. 154.

warrant, the chief who went out to do the job, and the local constables who joined him in the errand.⁴⁸

Given these circumstances, it is not surprising that runners in general and constables in particular were notorious for practicing extortion. Qu Tongzu argued that when a crime was reported the constables' first order of business was to extort the victim. Next was extracting maximum profit from perpetrators and suspects, real or conveniently imagined. This could involve ransacking a home on the pretext of looking for contraband or forcing a confession from an innocent person, be it a former thief or just some poor soul who happened to be at hand. Another method, specifically aimed at multiplying the sources of profit, was to have a criminal name innocent people as co-conspirators; the police could then go after them as well. In the Chongqing area this practice was so common it had its own colorful name: "opening the blossom" (*kaihua* 開花).⁴⁹

It is possible that the grimness apparent in Qu's landscape is overdrawn, but the persistence of some abuses is suggested by successive elaborations on Article 344 of the Qing code ("When an official or clerk receives consideration"), prescribing punishments for miscreants and for the magistrates who condoned or failed to detect their extortions.⁵⁰ In addition, an edict of 1741 prohibited local magistrates from stationing constables in subdistricts and outlying areas in their jurisdictions. The edict followed deliberations on a censor's proposal that, in order to keep them from becoming ensconced with local criminal elements and collecting all sorts of illicit fees, constables should not be permitted to even *leave* the yamen until ordered to make an arrest.⁵¹ The Board of Punishments conceded that most constables were "not good types" (*fei liangshan zhi bei* 非良善之輩), but argued that keeping them inside the yamen would violate the principle of guarding local jurisdictions (*fangfan difang* 防範地方). It therefore recommended that while stationing should be forbidden, patrolling was an unavoidable necessity.⁵²

⁴⁸ Reed, *Talons and Teeth*, p. 205.

⁴⁹ Ch'ü, *Local Government*, pp. 69–70; Reed, *Talons and Teeth*, p. 231. See also Zhou, *Qing-dai difang liyi zhidu yanjiu*, pp. 458–63.

⁵⁰ Duli 5, pp. 1029–37; Ch'ü, *Local Government*, p. 71.

⁵¹ ZP 04-01-01-0070-024, QL 6.5.1.

⁵² ZP 04-01-01-007-023, QL 6.5.14; *Da Qing huidian shili* 大清會典事例 (1899; rpt. Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1991; hereafter cited as *HDSL*) 9, p. 1034 (j. 830).

Finally, in outward appearance there appears to have been little to distinguish constables, and especially their assistants, from ordinary people.⁵³ Constables were reputedly the poorest and most despised of all yamen runners.⁵⁴ Like most runners, they were legally classified as “mean people” (*jianmin* 賤民), and sumptuary regulations limited them to light blue fabrics of ordinary silk, wool, hemp, and cotton.⁵⁵ Official robes were thus out of the question, though one case record and some literary evidence suggest that runners wore “red and black caps” (*honghei mao* 紅黑帽), and a witness’s deposition in the same case expressed surprise at the absence of dark clothing (*qingyi* 青衣).⁵⁶ It is likely that assistant runners in particular wore no special clothing or accouterments. As for other markers of official status, runners were expected to carry a warrant when making an arrest, but observance of this requirement was uneven. Often they would carry chains, but this was not always the case as magistrates tried to limit their use.⁵⁷

In sum, Qing policemen were on the whole a lowly, amorphous, and predatory bunch. Most were not even formally registered, and might well have been unknown even by head runners. A runner might wear dark clothing and a red-and-black cap, bear a warrant authorizing his errand, or carry chains or shackles – but then again he, and even more so his assistants, could appear without any of these official markers. Constables in particular came from humble backgrounds, most of them poor and many being experienced lawbreakers themselves.⁵⁸ They invariably collected customary fees to cover their expenses and often availed themselves of the opportunity to extort more, from guilty and innocent alike.

⁵³ The dynastic capital may have been an exception. Regarding Beijing in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Allison Dray-Novey notes that gendarmes and policemen on patrol “were, in effect, in uniform. They had variously at hand whips, knives and swords, and a long hooked pole used to catch thieves around the neck... [T]he distinctive trappings of the gendarmerie and other policemen made the men immediately recognizable”; Alison Dray-Novey, “Spatial Order and Police in Imperial Beijing,” *JAS* 52 (November 1993): 897.

⁵⁴ Ch’ü, *Local Government*, pp. 62–63, 66; Reed, *Talons and Teeth*, pp. 153–54.

⁵⁵ Ch’ü, *Local Government*, p. 62; T’ung-tsu Ch’ü, *Law and Society in Traditional China* (Paris: Mouton and Co., 1961; rpt. n.p.: Journal of Asian Legal History, 2000), pp. 137–39.

⁵⁶ Runners appear as “red and black caps” in chapters 1, 18, 25, and 49 of *The Scholars*; Wu Jingzi 吳敬梓, *Rulin waishi* 儒林外史 (Taipei: Wenhua tushu gongsi, 1994), pp. 5, 111, 15, 145, 201, 383.

⁵⁷ Ch’ü, *Local Government*, pp. 68–73, 245nn163, 164.

⁵⁸ Indeed, in the Ming and Qing there were legal precedents for *compelling* convicts to assist in police functions, and a statute of 1740 required that certain convicted thieves serve as patrolmen (*xunjiing* 巡警) in their native places. It is not clear, however, whether the new rule was widely observed; Fu-mei Chang Chen, “Local Control of Convicted Thieves in Eighteenth-Century China,” in *Conflict and Control in Late Imperial China*, ed. Frederic

All of this made runner an attractive role for imitation by those looking to make quick money. It required few skills and little or no capital outlay, and made extortion easier by giving it an aura of state power and authority. The constable was, after all, a government agent deputed by the local yamen. As an eminent eighteenth-century official observed, runners (along with clerks, relatives, and servants) “do not have officials’ responsibilities, but do have officials’ authority” (*quanwei* 權威).⁵⁹ In addition, the lower levels of the runner hierarchy were shifting, illicit, and nearly beyond the control of the typical magistrate, and the runner’s outward appearance was easily replicated. Virtually any able-bodied adult male could serve, or pose, as a runner or one of his assistants. It was not too difficult to blend in for a moment or an afternoon.

Warrants and Pursuit between Jurisdictions

A second set of openings, or invitations to imposture, in the official policing apparatus came in the area of procedural controls. These are most clear with regard to two activities, the issuing of warrants and the pursuit of fugitives across jurisdictional boundaries.

The warrant had a checkered career in the eighteenth century. One problem was its frequent absence. A magistrate was required by law to issue an order or warrant (variously termed *xinpai* 信牌, *chaipiao* 差票, *paipiao* 牌票, or *qianpiao* 簽票) when sending a constable or other runner to make an arrest, summon a witness, or conduct other business such as collecting taxes.⁶⁰ The warrant was to be stamped with a seal over both the character *xing* 行 (“approved” or “enforce”) and the name of the constable assigned to make the arrest.⁶¹ Reality often fell short of this theory, however, for there is evidence that many officials took documentary shortcuts or ignored the warrant requirement altogether. In 1741 a censor reported that runners from the Beijing Gendarmerie often made arrests without warrants, which easily led to “evil practices.” The Board of Punishments drafted a new requirement that

Wakeman, Jr. and Carolyn Grant (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1975), pp. 122–28.

⁵⁹ Ji Yun 紀昀 (1724–1805), *Yuewei caotang biji* 閱微草堂筆記, j. 6, quoted in Jing Junjian 經君健, *Qingdai shehui de jianmin dengji* 清代社會的賤民等級 (Hangzhou: Zhejiang renmin chubanshe, 1993), p. 131.

⁶⁰ Jones, *Great Qing Code*, p. 82, Article 51; *Duli* 2, pp. 190–91; Wu Tan 吳壇, *Da Qing Luli tongkao jiaozhu* 大清律例通考校注, ed. Ma Jianshi 馬建石 and Yang Yutang 楊育棠 (Beijing: Zhongguo zhengfa daxue chubanshe, 1992), p. 353. See also Ch’ü, *Local Government*, p. 72; and Reed, *Talons and Teeth*, p. 214.

⁶¹ Ch’ü, *Local Government*, p. 79.

each runner making an arrest must carry a warrant endorsed with an official seal and clearly indicating the name of the person or persons to be arrested. Those who made arrests without them were to be handed over to the Board, and the responsible officials would be subject to administrative sanctions.⁶²

At about the same time the president of the Board of Punishments reported an even more widespread practice: instead of issuing proper warrants on preprinted forms and endorsed with the official seal, magistrates throughout the provinces were simply using little handwritten “tickets” (*xiaopiao* 小票) and memos (*dan* 單) endorsed only with red dots.⁶³ Such documents were easily forged, and their use was leading to all kinds of abuse by yamen clerks and runners – and perhaps even by outsiders. These included forging summonses “to extort the naïve or avenge private wrongs, seizing people and beating them [to force confessions].” The emperor approved the memorialist’s proposal that “henceforward all warrants use the official seal . . . and little handwritten warrants and yamen memos shall be forever forbidden,” so that officials would “use seals in trembling obedience and the problem of extortion with bogus warrants can be removed.”⁶⁴

Nearly a century later, the celebrated magistrate Liu Heng 劉衡 (1776–1841) drew special attention to warrants in a list of ten “gong-sounding articles” (*mingluo tiaokuan* 鳴鑼條款) publicly posted in his jurisdiction. Under any of the ten circumstances on the list, the people of the county could bypass the regular petitioning procedure and go straight to the yamen to make an oral complaint before the magistrate, who promised to come out when he heard the gong.⁶⁵ Third on the list was “Report runners who recklessly make arrests without warrants.” An accompanying public notice stated:

When constables go to the rural neighborhoods you people must ask to make clear the reason and inspect to see whether there is a

⁶² QSL 10, p. 1028, QL 6.4.18, *renzi* (*Gaozong shilu* 141); *Duli* 5, p. 1122, Article 387, substatute 7.

⁶³ For a brief overview of yamen procedures for endorsing documents, see Ch’ü, *Local Government*, pp. 78–79, 249–50. For more extensive descriptions, see Cai Shenzhi 蔡申之, “Qing-dai zhouxian gushi” 清代州縣故事 (1941; rpt. Hong Kong: Longmen shudian, 1968), pp. 44–47 (originally published serially in issues 9–12 of *Zhonghe yuekan* 中和月刊 [1941]).

⁶⁴ ZP 04-01-01-0063-079, QL 6.6.18; QSL 10, p. 1147, QL 6.8.30, *renxu* (*Gaozong shilu* 149).

⁶⁵ Liu Heng 劉衡, *Yongli yongyan* 庸吏庸言, j. 1, pp. 5a-b (1868; see rpt. *Guanzhen shu jicheng* 官箴書集成 [Hefei: Huangshan shushe, 1997], vol. 6). Liu was an extremely competent magistrate noted for his legal expertise and ability to restore peace and stability to bandit-infested jurisdictions. He rose to the ranks of prefect and intendant, and was the author of several magistrate’s handbooks; Watt, *District Magistrate*, pp. 256–57, 267n53.

warrant stamped with a seal. If the runners do not have a warrant stamped with the seal of this county yet recklessly arrest someone and confiscate property, the victims are permitted to send someone to the county seat to sound the gong and make an oral report.⁶⁶

These dynastic and local policies were clearly a response to procedural shortcuts that, for the sake of convenience, were exposing the populace to abuse. Officials' failure to issue proper warrants facilitated the use of bogus warrants and summonses (or none at all) to victimize "ignorant people." The warrant system had obviously been compromised by official laxity and popular ignorance.

A second problem was not failure to issue warrants but, quite the opposite, "handing them out" so freely that they fell into the wrong hands. In 1760 the governor of Jiangxi reported that regular runners commonly avoided the onerous duty of pursuing criminals into neighboring provinces by giving their warrants to assistants or hirelings, who then used them to commit extortion. Worse still,

There is even fabricating of warrants and falsely claiming to have been sent on official errands, presenting the warrants for registration at the departments and counties they reach. Local officials carelessly affix their seals, confusing the false with the real.⁶⁷

The law subsequently enacted to prevent these problems included punishment for officials who set abuses in motion by giving warrants to untrustworthy runners. Seventy years later, however, an addition to this statute suggested that it had not been uniformly obeyed in the intervening decades. The revision of 1832 added the words "irresponsibly give seal-endorsed warrants" (*langei yinpiao* 濫給印票) to emphasize that punishments should be meted out not only to the runners who transferred their warrants to surrogates but also to the magistrates who issued them in the first place.⁶⁸

Another variety of "handing out" warrants was banned in 1764. This was the custom of issuing warrants to victims of theft so that they could pursue the criminals themselves. The governor who requested the prohibition observed that this was a long-standing practice among department and county magistrates and one that "easily gives rise to problems."⁶⁹ Thus, in addition to the ubiquitous runners' assistants,

⁶⁶ Liu Heng, *Yongli yongyan* 1:6b-7.

⁶⁷ *QSL* 16, p. 937, *QL* 25.7.14, *bingchen* (*Gaozong shilu* 616).

⁶⁸ *HDSL* 9, p. 1031 (j. 830); *Duli* 5, pp. 1122-23, Article 387, statute 8.

⁶⁹ *QSL* 17, pp. 809-10, *QL* 28.10.23, *bingwu* (*Gaozong shilu* 697), and 17, p. 889, *QL* 29.3.7, *wuwu* (*Gaozong shilu* 706).

local policing in the eighteenth century also featured theft victims obtaining warrants to “personally pursue” (*ziqu* 自緝) the culprits. The policing waters were murky indeed.

Warrants presented special problems in connection with the pursuit of criminals across jurisdictions, and especially across provincial boundaries. These problems revolved around both the warrants themselves and the requirement that runners register at local yamens. In the early Qing, if a pursuit led runners into a neighboring prefecture or province they had to register for assistance at the local yamen before arresting the criminal. This requirement was eliminated in 1740, allowing runners to catch their quarry first and then inform the local authorities.⁷⁰

There was another policy shift twenty years later, in 1760, when the Qianlong emperor approved a prohibition on issuing traditional warrants for the pursuit of major criminals across provincial boundaries. This was in response to the abovementioned abuses involving assistants and other troublemakers who committed extortion and counterfeited warrants to register for assistance in distant jurisdictions, where all too often the authorities did not closely inspect their credentials. The solution adopted was to require that instead of issuing warrants, officials should notify the relevant provinces and simultaneously give their deputed runners travel passes (*tongguan* 通關), allowing them to pursue the criminals in secret and present the passes for assistance when they found them.⁷¹

The new policy was designed to combat extortion by runners’ assistants, hirelings, and outright posers. However, three cases from the years following its promulgation cast doubt on how well it was working. One case concerned the three men who, as mentioned above, forged a warrant and pretended to be county runners from Hunan hunting for the rebel Ma Chaozhu. They registered at various civil and military yamens in eastern Guangxi, where local officials, failing to detect the forgeries and seemingly oblivious to the new travel-pass rule, provided assistance and escorts as they worked their way through five counties and three prefectures over a two-month period. The governor recommended impeachment for all officials who had failed to inspect the seals and, “like puppets,” allowed the scoundrels to register at their yamens.⁷² In another case nine years later, authorities in Guangdong

⁷⁰ *QSL* 10, pp. 697–98, QL 5.4. [no day] (*Gaozong shilu* 115); *HDSL*, 9, pp. 1033–34 (j. 830).

⁷¹ *QSL* 16, p. 937, QL 25.7.14, *bingchen* (*Gaozong shilu* 616).

⁷² *LFFQ* 1391–005, QL 26.5.28.

reported the arrest of one Rao Yuan 饒元, a dismissed constable from She 歙 county, Anhui, who had forged a warrant authorizing himself to pursue escaped convicts. He used it to register at seventy-seven yamens in seven provinces.⁷³

Thus, lax enforcement of official policies left openings not only for unscrupulous clerks, runners, and runners' assistants, but also for enterprising posers. This was especially the case across provincial boundaries, where official communications grew sluggish and local magistrates could be less than attentive to runners from outside jurisdictions.

Popular Susceptibilities

Although the chief purpose of the case reports was to identify criminals and recommend appropriate punishments, they also afford us glimpses of the victims and their responses to imposture. Such information shifts our gaze from the official policing apparatus to the common people and reveals vulnerabilities to runner impersonation in the society at large.

According to the confession of Hua Wenzhao 華文昭, who schemed to defraud an innocent but wealthy farmer,

I figured that when we got to his house and seized him, he would naturally start pleading. I would then allow him to avoid arrest on account of illness, cheating him of a few hundred ounces of silver.⁷⁴

This statement not only reflects one of the basic strategies employed by police impersonators, but also speaks to the other side of the encounter. The runners' extortions that inspired imposters also conditioned popular expectations, and imposters were able to carve out spaces between local government and local society by capitalizing on common perceptions of the yamen and its underlings.

In fifty reports involving more than a hundred extortions, I have found only seven people who simply refused to pay. At least nine times that number complied, paying the fee or ransom or agreeing to pay it in a short time.⁷⁵ Even the clearly innocent, those falsely accused of imaginary crimes, submitted to the extortions. Why the acquiescence? Fear seems to have been the main factor, with many case reports referring to it explicitly. Some victims were simply intimidated by the

⁷³ JJD 12274, QL 35.7.2; NGDK 081477, QL 36.2.4.

⁷⁴ LFFT 1399-017, QL 31.4.1.

⁷⁵ This often involved appealing to friends or acquaintances to advance part of the sum or serve as guarantors; only then would the imposters release their prey.

imposters' violent behavior. After a couple of *jiansheng* 監生 (imperial university students) from Jiangnan were framed in a pleasure-house sting in Beijing in 1757, one of the victims deposed that, "The two of us, pressed by them, were extremely afraid (*haipa buguo* 害怕不過) and could only agree" to pay hundreds of ounces in silver to avoid being arrested for consorting with a prostitute.⁷⁶ A man who had sold some land in a shady deal outside the capital defied his accusers at first but was frightened (*haipa*) and agreed to pay thirty ounces of silver after one of them struck him in the face.⁷⁷ An innocent simpleton tied to a pillar in an empty temple and roughed up by his accusers "was frightened and confessed to stealing."⁷⁸

There was another object of fear: what might happen at the yamen if the victim failed to cooperate. A Shanxi *jiansheng* confronted at his home by a phony provincial runner claiming to be under orders to arrest him, for example, "was terrified (*huangju* 惶懼), not knowing what crime he had committed."⁷⁹ The two *jiansheng* who were set up in the abovementioned pleasure-house swindle had gone to the capital to await minor appointments. Their case prompted the Qianlong emperor to issue an edict in which he noted that provincials serving as officials in the capital were frequent victims of such blackmail, since they were always willing to pay up rather than have their careers ruined by a trip to the yamen. "This is why they willingly endure [swindlers'] intimidations. This is how scoundrels setting traps are able to succeed in their schemes."⁸⁰

Fear of the yamen was not limited to men with ambitions for government service. When a Shanxi beggar chief posed as a department runner and threatened to arrest a man for marrying a woman who already had a husband (absent for four years and given up for gone by his own mother), the groom "didn't have the money and was afraid of getting caught up at the yamen" (*dao guan shoule* 到官受累).⁸¹ Similarly, a farmer falsely accused of receiving stolen goods, "terrified of going

⁷⁶ *Junjichu lufu zouzhe, falü, weijin* 軍機處錄副奏摺, 法律, 違禁 (Grand Council File Copies of Palace Memorials, Law, Violations of Prohibitions) (Beijing: First Historical Archive), 1388-011, QL 22.6.13.

⁷⁷ ZP 04-01-28-0002-012, QL 23.11.29.

⁷⁸ Xingbu 刑部, Jiangsu *si* 司 (Board of Punishments Archive, Jiangsu department), no. 07057, JQ 13.6.10, First Historical Archive.

⁷⁹ *Yongzhengchao Hanwen zhupi zouzhe huibian* 雍正朝漢文硃批奏摺彙編, comp. Zhongguo diyi lishi dang'anguan (Nanjing: Jiangsu guji chubanshe, 1989) 19, pp. 845-46, YZ 9.1.21.

⁸⁰ QSL 15, pp. 838-39, QL 22.6.13, *guiyou* (*Gaozong shilu* 540). The edict was also appended to the file copy of the memorial.

⁸¹ XKQT, QL 45.2.29 (j. 269).

to the yamen (*weiju daoguan* 畏懼到官), broke free and ran outside” of his house to escape the phony runners’ clutches.⁸² A Canton money-changer falsely accused of “gathering gamblers and keeping prostitutes” deposed that, “I was afraid of getting involved (*weilei* 畏累) and agreed to give them 160 dollars.”⁸³ And a “terrified” (*jupa* 懼怕) salt-shop proprietor in the metropolitan prefecture surrendered 3,300 cash when a phony runner threatened to arrest him for illicitly brewing alcohol.⁸⁴ Indeed, I have only seen one case in which the victim said that he did not mind going to the yamen.⁸⁵

The prospect of suffering at the yamen also loomed in eleven cases in which the victims committed suicide.⁸⁶ Five hanged themselves, like the abbot Wanyun described at the beginning of this study. Two drowned: a monk named Song Yue 松月 jumped into a pond when confronted by phony runners hired to collect a debt, and Wu Fuyun 武伏云, the man who married a woman whose husband had disappeared, threw himself down a well.⁸⁷ Two men cut their own throats, one after being falsely accused of stealing a cow, the other when a former runner tracked him down to avenge an injury.⁸⁸ When three men happened upon an adulterous couple at an inn and posed as runners to extort them, the lovers poisoned themselves.⁸⁹ Whether these tragic suicides stemmed from fear of extortion or judicial torture or reflected some other motivation (shame, for example), they illustrate the anxiety that the threat of yamen justice could cause; some victims literally preferred death to a trip to the yamen. Thus, it was the nature and reputation of local government itself that set the stage. The imposture could be crude and simple; it was the victim’s expectations that gave it depth and caused panic.

⁸² XKQT, JQ 5.12.11 (*j.* 227).

⁸³ XKQT, JQ 11.12.10 (*j.* 217). There were no gamblers, and the “prostitute” turned out to be his wife.

⁸⁴ ZP 04-01-28-0002-012, QL 23.11.29.

⁸⁵ When Liu Gou told his fellow villager Wang Keren 王克仁 that he had become a constable and was going to take him to the county yamen for stealing door panels and millet stalks, Wang retorted, “I haven’t broken any law, so there’s no harm in going with you.” NGDK 054321, QL 15.11.5.

⁸⁶ Given this substantial number (eleven out of sixty-four cases), one wonders how many impostures came to official attention only because they had resulted in a victim’s death, and how many others went unnoticed or unreported.

⁸⁷ XKTZ 14007-017 [QL 42, no month or day]; XKQT, QL 45.2.29 (*j.* 269).

⁸⁸ XKTZ 06653-005, QL 36.10.29; *Gongzhongdang Daoguangchao zouzhe* 4, pp. 440-43, DG 18.1.19.

⁸⁹ XKTZ 11617-024, DG 22.9.25.

Inexperience and gullibility also played a part in leading people to cooperate with extortionists. Although it was not generally salient for interrogation and sentencing, a few case records specifically state that a victim or witness believed the posers were legitimate: After getting caught with a counterfeit warrant he had used to extort nearly 200 silver dollars from six wealthy men in the Taiwan countryside, the phony prefectural runner Lin Yiquan 林益全 said of his victims, “They are all bumpkins (*xiangyu* 鄉愚), and when they saw the seal they figured it was real.”⁹⁰ The card player Fan Yongnian 范勇年 deposed that when two men burst into his home and secured him with a chain, “I just thought they really were runners and went along” as they led him away.⁹¹ We can add to the list victims whom case narratives state were afraid of going to the yamen, and also the scores of oblivious yamen clerks who failed to detect the forgeries when phony runners came to register with bogus warrants.

The most telling example is the case of Liu Gou, the abovementioned villager in Dan 單 county, Shandong. He accidentally clubbed his victim to death while pressing him for money. Liu wanted to be a constable and had already bought an old set of manacles when he began to suspect that fellow villager Wang Keren 王克仁 was a thief.⁹² Seizing Wang in the marketplace one day, he declared, “You have committed a crime. I am a constable now, and I’m taking you to report to the authorities. You still dare to deny it?” Later, when he led Wang to a friend’s shack outside the village, the friend asked, “Have you really become a constable?” Liu promptly replied, “If I weren’t really a constable, would I dare to arrest a thief?” (*buzhen chong buyi gan nazei ma* 不真充捕役敢拿賊嗎)

This flippant response satisfied the host and allowed Liu to proceed with his interrogation and extortion.⁹³ More than that, it spoke to the heart of the imposture phenomenon. In assuming the yamen runner’s role, impersonators were playing into common expectations of runner behavior. There was an insidious logic to Liu’s rhetorical question: only a true constable would dare to arrest a thief; therefore, he who arrested a thief was obviously a constable. The act of arresting confirmed his identity. What is more – and here was the allure of runner impersonation – the extortion following the arrest also made per-

⁹⁰ *Gongzhongdang Qianlongchao zouzhe* 74, p. 110, QL 54.11.12; JJD 43657, QL 55.2.20.

⁹¹ XKWJ, JQ 13.7.10 (j. 10037).

⁹² NGDK 054321, QL 15.11.5. Liu’s confession contained the verb *xiang* 想 (thought about, wanted), and the official summary used *yu* 欲 (desired, wanted).

⁹³ Ibid.

fect sense because, as everyone knew, that is what constables *did*. Liu might as well have responded: If I weren't really a constable, would I dare to take money from my prisoner?

The handful of cases in which intended victims rebuffed the imposters are also revealing, because they indicate the difference that a little knowledge or experience could make. Clerks who detected forged warrants naturally fell into this category, their skill or vigilance prevailing over the posers' counterfeit documents. So, too, could local policing or surveillance agents. In 1790, for example, the impoverished scholar Yang Tingyi, described previously, used his seal-carving skills to forge a governor-general's order to arrest bandits (*feilei* 匪類) in western Yunnan. When he demanded travel expenses from a rural district head, however, the latter grew suspicious because it had never been the practice for deputies or runners to approach headmen for travel money.⁹⁴ He asked to see the warrant, at which point Yang lost his nerve and refused to hand it over. Resorting to bluster, he puffed himself up and struck his inquisitor in the face. Doubly suspicious now, the headman put him up for the night and gave him 2,000 cash for expenses – but promptly reported the fraud to county authorities the next day.⁹⁵ The scholar could write and carve seals, but the headman knew the official system better.

There were also a few cases of common people seeing through impostures. When a former salt constable sent two fake patrols to chase smugglers in the Jiangsu countryside in 1724, one of them encountered an experienced smuggler named Yao Er 姚二, who tossed his bag of salt in the river and strode right up to the patrollers. Declaring that the latter were phonies, the smuggler Yao asked which yamen they came from and demanded to see their orders.⁹⁶ We will never know what made Yao so certain, as he was killed in the ensuing altercation, but his words and actions suggest good knowledge of the salt policing business.⁹⁷ The second group of phony patrollers preyed on a different class of victims, fishermen who happened to have salt on their boats to help preserve their catches. None of these victims challenged

⁹⁴ "Rural district head" (*xiangyue* 鄉約): Not to be confused with the identical term meaning "community compact," this title referred to a neighborhood surveillance head who reported to the magistrate and in some areas of the southwest also mediated disputes; Ch'ü, *Local Government*, p. 203n14.

⁹⁵ JJD 45616, QL 55.9.2, Fugang 富綱.

⁹⁶ *Neige tiben*, *xingfa* 2322.9, YZ 3.4.16.

⁹⁷ Yao knew what he was doing when he dumped his salt in the river: in order to secure a conviction, authorities had to seize both the smuggler and the salt. *Duli* 3, p. 375; Jones, *Great Qing Code*, p. 155, Article 141, statute 1b.

the patrollers or asked to see their warrant. Rather, they simply acquiesced; bluster sufficed, and over the course of two weeks the imposters extorted the equivalent of sixty ounces of silver in salt, rice, wheat, cloth, silver, and cash.

This case neatly illustrates the importance of the intended victim's knowledge or ignorance of official procedures. In the first instance, the smuggler's knowledge protected him and laid the foundation for a confrontation. The former constable knew where smugglers could be found, but the smuggler knew where constables should be and what credentials they should carry. His knowledge neutralized that of the imposters. In the second case, the victims' ignorance paved the way for easy extortion.

Another imposture in Jiangsu ended with a dramatic unmasking. This was the abovementioned case of Hua Wenzhao, who organized a ten-man party to invade a farmer's home in Changshu 常熟 county. A neighbor observing the scene perceived that all was not right with the official party. The guards and attendants were dressed quite shabbily, an attendant seemed to be doing most of the talking, and the local magistrate who should have escorted them was nowhere to be seen. Convinced that the raid was a sham, the neighbor went upstairs and began throwing roof-tiles down into the courtyard, shouting at the same time for others to come seize the intruders.⁹⁸ The fraudster had made careful preparations, but met his match in someone who knew what an official entourage looked like and how its members should speak and behave.

In each of these cases, the imposters' skills and audacity were outweighed by the intended victims' (or a witness's) knowledge of proper official procedures. These were the exceptions, however. Most people lacked such knowledge or experience (even clerks could be duped), and most impersonators targeted members of the general populace. Fooled by the imposter or afraid of the yamen, or both, these were the people who were most susceptible to extortion.

Qualifications: Experience Desirable, Audacity Required

Posing as a runner did not require much in the way of job qualifications. The runners' "mean" status meant that most imposters would be stepping down socially, not reaching up, when they assumed the role. As we have seen, moreover, there was little in the way of "uniforms" or accouterments. As for technical skills, literacy conferred clear advan-

⁹⁸ LFFT 1399-017, QL 31.4.1.

tages but was not indispensable. As noted above, the archives suggest that approximately half of all posers used warrants. Producing one required a combination of literacy, access to a template, and the ability to carve or replicate the image of an official seal. These qualifications were beyond most of the population, but still the literate numbered in the millions and many impostures featured men who had practiced seal carving or character engraving (*kezi* 刻字) since youth, and the illiterate or insufficiently skilled could recruit partners to execute forgeries. In addition, nearly half of the imposters conducted their extortions without a warrant, bypassing these special needs altogether.

If socioeconomic status, outward appearance, and educational level were no obstacles, practical experience was certainly beneficial, as evidenced by the fact that many impersonators had previously served as runners or assistants. Cheng Kui and Cao Bin, who drove the abbot Wanyun to suicide, were both former constables.⁹⁹ Two of the “registration” cases featured former runners as well. One of them began his escapade assisting another runner in the pursuit of criminals. Subsequently they parted ways, but he used the original warrant as a template for a new, counterfeit one.¹⁰⁰ Clerical experience was also useful, particularly when it came to fabricating warrants, as attested by the presence of five clerks or former clerks in the case records.

Knowledge of policing procedures was not limited to men who had served as yamen underlings. The archival sample includes a highway robber who had subsequently joined yamen runners in two thief-catching missions, a neighborhood surveillance head, and a boatman who had served as a pilot for official patrols.¹⁰¹ For those lacking such backgrounds, moreover, everyday knowledge of the basic law of the land could suffice. The cousins who broke up Fan Yongnian’s card game knew that gambling was illegal, for instance, and other frauds used prohibitions on smuggling, prostitution, and opium smoking to advantage.¹⁰²

It should also be noted that in a job for which duties included extracting fees, issuing threats, roughing people up, and dragging them away, physical strength or imposing stature surely conferred advantages. This may help to explain, in part, why so many laborers appeared

⁹⁹ XKQT, JQ 8.6.12 (j. 140).

¹⁰⁰ LFFQ 1391-005, QL 26.5.28.

¹⁰¹ *Neige tiben, xingfa* 2385.18, YZ 8 (no month or day); XKTZ 06653-005, QL 36.10.29; JJD 069320, DG 14.9.12.

¹⁰² XKWJ, JQ 13.7.10 (j. 10037); *Neige tiben, xingfa*, 2322-9, YZ 3.4.16; XKQT, JQ 11.12.10 (j. 217); *Junjichu lufu zouzhe, weijin*, 1388-011, QL 22.6.13.

in the impersonators' ranks. The only occupational group that took to it in larger numbers was former yamen runners.

What did it take, then, to pose as a policeman in Qing China? Experience, literacy, a fake warrant, and the odd length of chain or rope could all be helpful, but the chief ingredient was audacity, which the archives suggest was in good supply. Perpetrators had the nerve to step into their roles. Once under way, moreover, the performance itself could be empowering. Cao Bin walked up to Wanyun's monastery and led the monk away by declaring that "the constable Cheng Kui was waiting to speak with him," and Cheng then told him he had been identified as an accomplice to theft.¹⁰³ The former constables were no doubt playing familiar roles: tracking down a suspect or targeting an innocent victim, leading him to a quiet spot, starting with an accusation, and continuing with threats and a little roughing up to facilitate the extortion. They were well rehearsed, and the monk fell for the act.

Cai Qifeng (introduced previously) was an outlaw who, together with two associates, robbed some travelers on the road to En 恩 county, Shandong. He was eventually caught but escaped from jail and fled north, begging for food as he went. Early in 1728 he reached Tongzhou 通州, on the outskirts of the dynastic capital. A soldier spotted him sitting in front of a temple and began questioning him, and in order to avoid further trouble Cai volunteered, ironically, to help pursue an escaped jail-breaker. He spent the next six weeks as a participant in two fruitless thief-catching missions, one led by subdepartmental yamen runners. Then he fled and took to the road again. One day soon afterwards, he saw a cart with three travelers. In a similar situation two years previously, Cai and his fellow brigands had physically "blocked" (*lanzhu* 攔住) a cart and menacingly told its occupants that they had no traveling money. This time, alone but fresh from a stint of government service, Cai "called the cart to a halt" (*jiaozhu* 叫住). Identifying himself as a subdepartmental runner, he asked the occupants if they knew of a certain fugitive's whereabouts. When they said they did not, he led them to an inn, tied one of them up, and began extorting money and valuables.¹⁰⁴ Thus, Cai had progressed from robbing travelers without pretense to detaining them while posing as a policeman. The model provided by the Tongzhou runners had inspired him to grow into a new role.

¹⁰³ XKQT, JQ 8.6.12 (j. 140).

¹⁰⁴ *Neige tiben*, *xingfa* 2385.18, YZ 8 (no month or day).

Hua Wenzhao (above) was bolder still. After losing his teaching job in Jingui 金匱 county in 1765, Hua ended up staying with a relative who was a monk in Changshu, and tagged along when a wealthy farmer named Cheng Erzhong 程爾仲 invited the monks to recite sutras at his home. There he noticed that Cheng was not only rich but also lived in an isolated neighborhood; he would make a good target. Inspired, Hua worked out a plan involving counterfeit arrest warrants, a phony governor-general's deputy, and an entourage including runners and guards. He dared not play the deputy's role himself, lest the farmer recognize him. Instead he persuaded a gullible acquaintance to do it, first recruiting him for a fictitious bridal procession and subsequently letting him in on the "secret" that he was on assignment from the governor-general's yamen. The boatmen and hired helpers who formed the rest of the entourage were also dupes, recruited on the day of the heist under the pretense of assembling a bridal escort. It was only when the boats were nearing their destination that Hua told them his "master" (the gullible acquaintance) was actually an official deputy on a confidential arrest mission. Since he had not brought runners, he would need to borrow the helpers and four boatmen. The recruits kowtowed before their new master, and Hua handed out caps, ropes, and whips he had bought at shops in Suzhou the day before. Then he gave his "master" his final instructions:

When we get to Cheng Erzhong's home, you sit in the center [of the courtyard] and call him forward. Just ask him, "Are you Cheng Erzhong?" When he answers that he is Cheng Erzhong, you order us to seize him. Don't say another word, lest you be seen through. I'll take care of everything.¹⁰⁵

The victim's deposition describes what followed:

When my servant opened the door, guards with lanterns led in an official and another man holding a command arrow. They entered my courtyard and the official took a seat in the center, wearing official robes and cap. He called me forward and demanded, "Are you Cheng Erzhong?" I said, "Yes, I am," and he said, "Seize him!" The men on either side bound me with ropes. I asked on what account, and the man with the command arrow brought out a vermilion document, stating that I had [illegally] sold rice overseas.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁵ LFFT 1399-017, QL 31.4.1.

¹⁰⁶ LFFT 1399-017, QL 31.4.1. The red notations on the "vermilion document" (*zhudan* 硃單) denoted the authority of the endorsing official.

The assistant with the command arrow was Hua Wenzhao, who took over at this point and began closing in for the extortion. It was a daring ruse, and might have succeeded if not for the intervention, with roof-tiles, of an observant neighbor. Hua later confessed, “I don’t know how they saw through it.”

Impersonation Falsified

Runner impersonation was a real crime. The statutes were in the code, distinct from those governing corrupt yamen underlings, and the archives hold cases that clearly involved common scoundrels rather than actual runners. Alongside the rich vein of authentic impostures, however, there was probably an additional layer of deceptions. In 1771 the acting governor of Hunan, Udasan 吳達善, received a report that a dismissed yamen underling had been arrested for forging a county seal. The man had collected a landowner’s tax payment and pretended to remit it on his behalf, stamping the phony seal on the official stub attached to the land deed. Interrogated by county authorities, the forger declared he had only swindled this one time, destroying the seal afterwards. Udasan was skeptical:

[I] find that when the various departments and counties handle seal-forgery cases, they always allow the criminal to make a cunning confession... Some [reports] even falsely turn clerks into commoners, scheming to avoid administrative sanctions and close the case lightly. Such abuse is widespread.¹⁰⁷

In other words, in some case reports magistrates turned corrupt clerks into criminal commoners in order to avoid punishment for failing to control their underlings. Viewing matters in this light, how many of the archive’s runner impersonation cases might not have been impersonations after all?

Crime reports were a genre of Qing writing, and recent scholarship has shown that officials (or, more likely, their legal secretaries) deployed various devices to steer their narratives in the proper direction. Broadly speaking, the proper direction lay in describing competent and conscientious officials and a generally harmonious local society. This could help a magistrate to avoid negative performance evaluations and also reassure higher authorities that all was well under Heaven. What narrative devices might mark a contrived impersonation, then?

¹⁰⁷ LFFT 1417-003, undated memorial of QL 40. The year QL 40 (1775) is undoubtedly an error in the archive catalog; Udasan’s known dates of tenure (and death in 1771), combined with internal evidence from the memorial itself, suggest a date sometime in the second or third month of QL 36 (1771).

I would suggest that two types of report invite attention, one for a detail it provided and the other for information it withheld. As mentioned above, in about one-third of the cases in my sample the perpetrators are identified as former yamen runners. The most common designation is “dismissed runner” (*geyi* 革役), and it was just such a dismissed runner case that caught Udasan’s attention and prompted his complaint to the throne. Former runners were well placed to use the tricks of their old trade, but for those who were still in service a small slip of the brush could protect the responsible magistrate, distancing him from the troublemaker by recasting him as a common scoundrel posing as a government underling. It was probably a temptation that some magistrates could not resist.

The other suspicious type of case record is that which is strangely silent on the matter of the perpetrator’s background. Most case reports identify miscreants by name, age, marital status and family size, and occupation. In these odd cases, by contrast, the wrongdoers are only identified by name. Two young cousins named Cao Li 曹歷 and Cao Qun 曹羣 (we learn nothing more about them) were simply walking down a street when they saw a card game and decided to pounce.¹⁰⁸ Similarly, two men named Wang Fengshan 王鳳山 and Wang Da 王大 (again, that is all) were walking to the county seat when they saw a suspicious-looking fellow standing by a clump of trees and decided to accost him.¹⁰⁹ These perpetrators seemed to spring into existence just in time to commit their crimes. It would be a mistake to assume that all case reports featuring dismissed runners or street phantoms hid actual constables, but such records are reasonable candidates for suspicion.

To whatever extent such falsifications occurred, they brought the imposture dynamic full circle. Impersonation requires a human template, someone to be impersonated. Throughout the High Qing various actors found yamen runner to be an attractive role to imitate, and in doing so they created a new template – the imposter – that some magistrates found to be attractive for purposes of falsification. Thus, real yamen runners inspired fakes, and the existence of fakes made it possible to declare real runners false.

¹⁰⁸ XKWJ, JQ 13.7.10 (j. 10037).

¹⁰⁹ Xingbu 刑部, Jiangsu *si* 司 (Board of Punishments, Jiangsu department), no. 07057, JQ 13.6.10.

CONCLUSION: OPENINGS AND REFLECTIONS

Police impersonation reveals a special kind of audacity with regard to official authority. The protagonists were rogue actors in the state-and-society relationship, not local elites, comfortable landowners, or successful merchants, but dismissed yamen underlings, struggling artisans, unemployed laborers, and vagrants. Stepping into the foggy space at the lowest reaches of the government apparatus, they appropriated official authority for their own material gain. They were not seizing power (this was not rebellion), but borrowing and diverting it for their own purposes. The power was a conduit to money.

The state was well aware of this. When officials included impersonation in their discussions of warrant and registration problems, brought punishments more closely in line with those for “verminous underlings” (*duyi* 蠹役),¹¹⁰ and even recast abusive underlings as common criminals in their case reports, they were tacitly recognizing that imposters were feeding off the chain of official moneygrubbing and corruption. None of this addressed underlying causes, however. In the early 1820s the prefect of Taian 泰安, Shandong, admonished his subordinate magistrates on how to control their constables:

Among the methods for repressing robbers, nothing is more difficult than making use of the people who pursue and arrest them. . . . If they are not used well, not only will you not obtain their efforts, but also there will be nowhere that the abuses of nourishing thieves and framing the good do not reach. For this reason, those who use constables must first raise the funds for pursuit and arrest. If [you] can nourish their bodies, then [you] can use their strength.¹¹¹

In other words, the first requirement for effective policing, and for effective control of the police, was to cover the expenses required for police activities. Unfortunately, the Qing state as a whole never came close to meeting this need, and as a result it was left to the general populace to bear the burden.¹¹² This basic economic fact was the root cause of

¹¹⁰ *Duli* 5, pp. 1032–33, Article 344, substatute 3.

¹¹¹ Li Wengeng 李文耕, “Yu Taian geshu” 與泰安各屬, in *Huangchao jingshi wenbian* 皇朝經世文編, comp. He Changling 賀長齡 (1886 Sibulou 思補樓 edn.; rpt. as *Qing jingshi wenbian* 清經世文編 [Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1992]) 22.47b [vol. 1, p. 568].

¹¹² The Yongzheng emperor’s reforms concerning “return of the meltage fees to public coffers” (*huohao guigong* 火耗歸公) might have had salutary trickle-down effects, but they were undermined by his immediate successors. In particular, the “nourishing virtue silver” (*yanglian yin* 養廉銀) funds were compromised and effectively ruined by 1825. See Madeleine Zelin, *The Magistrate’s Tael: Rationalizing Fiscal Reform in Eighteenth-Century Ch’ing China* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1984), pp. 283–89, 298–301.

runner depredations and their mirror image, runner impersonation. Without reliable revenue streams at the local level, the extraction of fees from common people was necessary for the daily operation of local government. It was institutionalized. It was also conducive to corruption, since the lines between legitimate collection and abusive extortion were indistinct and in negotiations the extractors had recourse to state-sanctioned violence.

Police impersonation, then, was an extension of the “verminous underling” problem, which stemmed from the limited financial and administrative resources of local government. These limitations were a function of basic principles and mechanisms underlying the imperial state. Philosophical values and political prudence combined to prevent significant expansion of government size and capacities at the local level. Court and officialdom could strengthen the provisions of the penal code and try to tighten administrative controls, but without basic fiscal restructuring the state could no more eliminate police impersonation than eradicate fee-collections made by true runners. The one was a direct reflection of the other, inspired and facilitated by it.

From the impersonator’s viewpoint, the temptations were considerable. Yamen runners were everywhere, and easily imitated. Perpetrators and their victims shared a common understanding of the official world, moreover, and particularly of the local yamen and its minions. The fact that the inspiration struck so many men, over decades and even centuries in towns and villages across the empire, points to an environment in which extortionate runners were an integral part of the government apparatus and, just as important, common folk were wont to pay them off. Indeed, the one indispensable precondition for a successful impersonation was the victim’s hope that paying a bribe or fee would make the runner go away. The imposter was aided by the fears and expectations of his victims.

Imposters thus occupied a murky middle ground between an incomplete official apparatus above and a vulnerable populace below, exploiting both sides to carve out fleeting spaces in which they could assume the face of the state to extract money from isolated victims.

This is not to say that state and society were defenseless. Warranting and other procedural requirements clearly prevented some fraud, and some victims saw through the deceptions and even helped catch the offenders. But the official structure created an arena in which imposters could try their luck, and each crime played out as a test of knowledge, wit, will, and even physical strength. The aggressors held

visions of yamen injustice over their prey, and this tended to achieve the desired result. The state could not have eliminated the arena or altered those visions without transforming local government, both inside and outside the yamen. In this respect, at the lowest level where the government dealt with its populace largely through an informal service class beneath the regular officialdom, state and society were systemically vulnerable to police impersonation.

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

<i>Duli</i>	Xue Yunsheng 薛允升, <i>Duli cunyi chongkanben</i> 讀例存疑重刊本
<i>HDSL</i>	<i>Da Qing huidian shili</i> 大清會典事例
<i>JJD</i>	<i>Junjidang zouzhe lufu</i> 軍機檔奏摺錄副
<i>LFFQ</i>	<i>Junjichu lufu zouzhe, falü, qita</i> 軍機處錄副奏摺, 法律, 其他
<i>LFFT</i>	<i>Junjichu lufu zouzhe, falü; toudao, qiangjie, zhapian</i> 軍機處錄副奏摺, 法律; 偷盜, 搶劫, 詐騙
<i>NGDK</i>	<i>(Neige) daku dang'an</i> (內閣) 大庫檔案
<i>QSL</i>	<i>Qing shilu</i> 清實錄
<i>KKQT</i>	<i>Xingke tiben, qita</i> (內閣) 刑科題本, 其他
<i>KKTZ</i>	<i>Xingke tiben, tudi zhaiwu, tanwu, weijin</i> (內閣) 刑科題本, 土地債務, 貪污, 違禁
<i>KKWJ</i>	<i>Xingke tiben, weijin</i> (內閣) 刑科題本, 違禁
<i>ZP</i>	<i>Zhupi zouzhe</i> 硃批奏摺
<i>ZPFQ</i>	<i>Zhupi zouzhe, falü, qita</i> 硃批奏摺, 法律, 其他