

## Perceptions of Provincial Officialdom in Early T'ang China

### YÜAN CHIEH'S ADMONITION TO MAGISTRATES

In the mid-eighth century, Yüan Chieh 元結, then a prefect in south central China, expressed succinctly the T'ang perception of a provincial official's powers and duties and the problems associated with provincial service.

Those valued both in ancient times and today were and are local officials. When has their selection been anything but difficult, for their actions decide the good and bad fortune of the common people and their very breath chills or warms the people? When they are officious, the people feel resentful. When they are rapacious, the people fear them and, paying no regard to rewards and punishments, only go along with the local officials' moods. When they are too liberal, everything happens so slowly that the regulations cannot possibly be put into operation. When they are too easygoing, everything is so lax that it is hard to govern through them. But when they are enlightened and skilled in judgment, so upright that they are not swayed by personal considerations, pure and kind, they certainly have a place in administration. Some of them say, "It is all up to my superiors. I am not responsible for anything. Since I am only here temporarily, I can do anything I like. Who wants to cherish the people?"<sup>1</sup>

Although he wrote this admonition in the aftermath of the An-Shih 安史 Rebellion (755-763), when the power structure had undergone drastic changes, Yüan Chieh expressed ideas current from the beginning of the T'ang dynasty. His views are therefore just as relevant to the early T'ang,

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<sup>1</sup> Yüan Chieh, *Yüan Tz'u-shan chi* 元次山集 (Shanghai: Chung-hua shu-chü, 1960) 8, p. 126, *hsien-ling chen* 縣令箴. A note by Sun Wang 孫望 dates this passage to 764 or 765, when Yüan was serving as prefect of Tao-chou 道州 (in present-day southern Hunan); Hiraoka Takeo 平岡武夫 and Ichihara Kōkichi 市原亨吉, *Tōdai no gyōsei chiri* 唐代的行政地理 (Kyoto, 1954), no. 1303.

the century and a half before the rebellion, as to the postrebellion period. Provincial service was traditionally viewed as vital to the welfare of the people, and consequently the selection of provincial officials was deemed of critical importance. As Yüan showed, poor selection could produce provincial officials who, contrary to Confucian ideals, were either uncontrollably officious and corrupt or so easygoing as to be totally inefficient and useless to the government. Moreover, the short period of tenure of T'ang provincial officials made them feel powerless and encouraged them either to neglect their duties or to exploit and prey upon the people in their charge.

Yüan's admonition suggests ways to depict T'ang perceptions of provincial service and to assess how both perceptions and administrative realities colored the selection of provincial officials. The critical role of provincial officials, as well as some of the prerequisites to the fulfillment of that role by candidates, were often idealized. In real life, however, provincial officials failed to live up to their ideal role. The nature and length of tenure of provincial service, the lack of care exercised in their selection as opposed to that of metropolitan officials, and their consequent lack of self-esteem all adversely affected their performance.

Both the imperial pronouncements on provincial administration and the officials' memorials used in this study come mainly from administrative encyclopedias, especially *T'ung-tien* 通典 and *T'ang hui-yao* 唐會要, material collected in the middle of the T'ang dynasty. These sources are supplemented with materials from the standard histories, the Sung chronicle *Tzu-chih P'ung-chien* 資治通鑑, and collections of T'ang literary works. Discussion is restricted to the T'ang dynasty before the outbreak of the An-Shih Rebellion, which completely transformed the power structure in the provinces and complicated the question of provincial selection beyond all recognition.

#### INSTITUTIONAL ASPECTS OF PROVINCIAL BUREAUCRACY

To understand early T'ang perceptions of both provincial service and the selection system for it, it is necessary to know the provincial bureaucracy's structure and function, and how men were chosen to serve in it. Only a brief outline of the institution is given here, as it is treated in detail elsewhere, in European languages as well as Chinese and Japanese.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup>The major primary source for early T'ang provincial administration and selection is the Konoe edn. of *Ta T'ang liu-tien* 大唐六典, Uchida Tomoo 內田智雄, annot. (Tokyo, 1973; hereafter cited as *TTLT*), ch. 30ff. Valuable secondary sources include Huang Ch'ing-lien, "The Recruitment and Assessment of Civil Officials under the T'ang Dynasty," Ph.D. diss.,

Regular provincial administration functioned at two levels — the prefecture (*chou* 州) governed by a prefect (*tz'u-shih* 刺史) and the county (*hsien* 縣) headed by a magistrate (*ling* 令). There were roughly three hundred prefectures and fifteen hundred counties in the empire. They were based on natural geographical areas and patterns of settlement and varied widely in both size and population. An average of approximately 150,000 people inhabited each prefecture and approximately 30,000 each county.<sup>3</sup>

T'ang Chinese prefectures and counties varied quite widely in terms of population and were graded hierarchically. The designations of different grades of prefecture vary somewhat in the primary sources. Grades were decided by distance from the capital (the center of imperial power), strategic importance, and size. Prefectural and county grades decided the ranks of the prefects and magistrates and the size and status of their subordinate staffs. The prefect of an upper-grade prefecture held a rank somewhere between that accorded the president of a metropolitan executive board and the board's vice-presidents and had a staff of just over twenty ranking officials. The magistrate of an upper-grade county had equal ranking with assistant secretaries to metropolitan boards and had four ranking officials under him. At face value, it would appear that chief provincial officials were high in rank. Contemporary sources comment that they were also recompensed with relatively high salaries.<sup>4</sup> Their staffs of regular, centrally appointed subordinates were, however, pitifully small, considering the large number of people in their care.

Tables 1 and 2 show that in addition to the ranking staff members assigned them by the central government, prefects and magistrates were allowed to employ a fixed number of both locally recruited petty officials to carry out routine clerical work and miscellaneous employees (*tsa-jen* 雜人)

Princeton U., 1986; Robert des Rotours, "Les grands fonctionnaires des provinces en Chine sous la dynastie des T'ang," *TP* 25 (1968), pp. 219-332; Denis Twitchett, "Varied Patterns of Provincial Autonomy in the T'ang Dynasty," in John Perry and Bardwell Smith, eds., *Essays on T'ang Society* (Leiden: Brill, 1976), pp. 90-109; Twitchett, "Local Financial Administration in Early T'ang Times," *AM* ns 15 (1969), pp. 82-114; Yen Keng-wang 嚴耕望, "T'ang-tai fu-chou liao-tso k'ao" 唐代府州僚佐考, in *T'ang-shih yen-chiu ts'ung-kao* 唐史研究叢稿 (Hong Kong, 1969), pp. 103-76; Yen, "T'ang-tai fu-chou shang-tso yü lu-shih ts'an-chün" 唐代府州上佐與錄事參軍, *CHHP* 8 (1970), pp. 284-305; and Wang Shou-nan 王壽南, "Lun T'ang-tai ti hsien-ling" 論唐代的縣令, in *Kuo-li cheng-chih ta-hsüeh hsüeh-pao* 國立政治大學學報 25 (1972), pp. 177-94.

<sup>3</sup>Based on T'ang population figures from 740 A.D. in *Hsin T'ang-shu* 新唐書 (Peking: Chung-hua, 1975; hereafter *HTS*) 37, p. 940.

<sup>4</sup>See the decree of 752 cited in *T'ang hui-yao* 唐會要, in *Kuo-hsüeh chi-pen ts'ung-shu* 國學基本叢書 (1935; rpt. Peking: Chung-hua, 1957; hereafter *THY*) 68, p. 1201.

Table 1. Administrative Staff of an Upper-Grade Prefecture  
(Population approximately 250,000+)

No. of officials serving	Chinese title	Translation	Rank	Subordinate staff
1	刺史	prefect	B3	
1	別駕	vice-prefect	B4L	
1	長史	chief administrator	B5U	
1	司馬	senior administrator	B5L	
1	錄事參軍事	administrative officer	B7U	
2	錄事	administrative clerks	B9U	3 clerks
1	司功參軍事	administrator of office of merit	B7L	3 assistants, 6 clerks
1	司倉參軍事	administrator of office of granaries	B7L	same as above
2	司戶參軍事	administrators of registration office	B7L	3 assistants, 7 clerks, 1 accounts clerk
1	司兵參軍事	administrator of military office	B7L	3 assistants, 6 clerks
2	司法參軍事	administrators of legal office	B7L	4 assistants, 8 clerks
1	司士參軍事	administrator of office of works	B7L	3 assistants, 6 clerks
4	參軍事	administrators	B8L?	

SOURCE: *TTLT* 30, pp. 14b-18a.

NOTES: In addition, there were approximately 70 "petty officials" and "miscellaneous employees."

Ranks shown here and in table 2 refer to the nine regular official ranks. Each was divided into two categories, "principal" (*cheng* 正) and "secondary" (*ts'ung* 從), here rendered A and B respectively. Ranks 4-9 were further subdivided into upper and lower, rendered U and L respectively. For example, B7L = seventh-rank secondary lower grade 從七品下.

to do menial tasks. Material on T'ang petty officials is very scanty, but it appears that at least the officials "outside the current" (*liu-wai kuan* 流外官) who performed the clerical tasks mostly came from prominent local families and many held honorific titles (*hsün* 勳). It was relatively easy for these petty officials to progress up through the ranks and eventually gain regular office through the selection examinations. Their status was therefore rather higher and they were less of a social class apart than in later times, but they were

Table 2. Administrative Staff of an Upper-Grade County  
(Population approximately 36,000+)

No.	Chinese title	Translation	Rank	Appointment type
1	令	magistrate	B6U	S
1	丞	assistant magistrate	B8L	S
1	主簿	registrar	A9L	S
2	尉	junior officers	B9L	S

SOURCE: *TTLT* 30, pp. 30b-31b.

NOTE: In addition there were approximately 60 "petty officials" and "miscellaneous employees." S indicates appointment by selection exam.

already despised and sometimes treated as scapegoats by members of regular officialdom.

From the list of officials shown in table 1 we can infer the full range of duties covered by a provincial administration. Magistrates and prefects were responsible, primarily, for tax collection and for maintaining law and order in the areas under their control. They were also supposed to promote public morality, but the exact nature of this duty and the means by which it was to be carried out are kept very vague in the sources and were left to the discretion of the individual provincial official. Many officials probably paid little or no special attention to this duty. Others interpreted it as requiring them to set an example by their personal behavior, while a few exemplary provincial officials vigorously set about promoting Confucian local education.<sup>5</sup> The magistrate carried out the duties of tax collection, law enforcement, and the promotion of public morality within a population of from six thousand to thirty-six thousand. He had a maximum total staff of about sixty regular and minor officials, but was aided in his tasks by a network of subbureaucratic units for levying taxes and maintaining the peace. These units derived from local communities and families and used unsalaried and unranked functionaries from the local population on a long- or short-term basis.

In short, the prefect was the highest regular provincial administrator in early T'ang China everywhere except in special areas around the capital and on the borders. His area, with a population of from one hundred

<sup>5</sup> For example, shortly after the An-Shih Rebellion, Li Hsin-yü 李栖筠 set up schools and actively promoted Confucian moral education while holding a governorship in southeast China; see *HTS* 146, p. 4736.

thousand to two hundred thousand, was staffed by a maximum of just over twenty regular and about one hundred minor officials and miscellaneous employees, for all of whose actions he was held responsible. No superior stood between him and the central government, and furthermore the magistrates of counties subordinate to his prefecture were all under his direction. The divisions of the empire had, however, been so designed as to ensure that no prefect could grow powerful enough to challenge central authority.

In 627 T'ai-tsung 太宗 had divided the empire into inspection circuits (*tao* 道), normally ten in number, and he and his successors from time to time sent out circuit inspectors to examine various aspects of provincial administration. These inspectors, who went under a number of designations, were directly commissioned by the emperor and reported back to him with recommendations for promotions, demotions, rewards, or punishments of individual provincial officials. By the mid-eighth century, the commissioners were being appointed on a more regular basis and their circuits (now fifteen in number) were taking on the aspect of provinces, a regular tier in the administrative hierarchy.

#### THE SELECTION OF PROVINCIAL OFFICIALS

T'ang sources constantly make a clear distinction between metropolitan and provincial officials (*nei wai kuan* 內外官). These were not, however, mutually exclusive groups and, in theory at least, were drawn from the same pool of candidates. Aside from minor officials who were recruited locally, provincial officials were centrally selected in the same way as metropolitan officials of comparable rank. Those belonging to the fifth rank and above, including all prefects and vice-prefects and the chief administrative officers of higher-grade prefectures, were appointed directly by imperial decree on the nomination of high officials at court. Lower-ranking officials in prefectures and all regular officials posted to counties, like metropolitan officials of the sixth rank and below, competed in the selection examinations in order to obtain nomination to their posts.

I have described the selection examinations in some detail elsewhere.<sup>6</sup> In summary, they were open to any holder of official status awaiting his first posting or having completed a tour of duty. Official status could be obtained by passing the doctoral examinations (principally the *chin-shih* 進士 "literary examination" or *ming-ching* 明經 "classical examination"), or through a

close blood relationship to a high official. In most cases it was acquired through long service as a petty official or such prior service as guard officer. Official status was divided into a hierarchy of nine nominal ranks (*pen-p' in* 本品), just as offices were assigned substantive ranks (*chih-shih kuan-p' in* 職事官品) on a nine-grade scale. Nominal rank was decided by one's initial level of entry into the bureaucracy and thereafter by one's service record, largely in terms of seniority.

The annual selection examination administered in the capital by the Board of Personnel (Li-pu 吏部) consisted of a series of tests designed to assess skill and suitability for office. On successful completion of these tests, a holder of official status might hope to be nominated for a post of the same, or similar, substantive rank as the nominal one he held. Unfortunately, the house rules of the Board of Personnel giving guidelines on how men were to be matched to posts have not survived, but many T'ang sources indicate that they were largely concerned with mechanical rank matching and took little account of individual talents. Individual preferences were, however, given some consideration. Candidates nominated to posts were given two chances to refuse posts offered them, but if they refused a third post, they lost their chance of office altogether for that year and were instead invited to compete in the following year's examination.<sup>7</sup>

It has already been pointed out that provincial units of administration were kept small to prevent a buildup of power by local administrative heads. Terms of office were also kept short, four years being considered the norm. As a further safeguard for central authority, nomination to office in one's own or one's spouse's native district was forbidden. In contrast to the minor officials who carried out routine tasks in their administrations, therefore, centrally appointed officials were always away from their homes. They were supposed to respond to the needs of the people under them and to act as a "father and mother" to them, as well as collecting taxes and keeping order for the emperor, but they were not supposed to identify with local interests. Thus ideally they would act as protectors of the poor, needy, and friendless, but would treat the wielders of local power with impartiality.

It might appear that nothing but Confucian moral sanctions ensured the poor and needy the prefect's or magistrate's protection. In theory at least, they had a more substantive form of protection. Like all members of the T'ang bureaucracy, provincial officials were subject to assessments by

<sup>6</sup>P. A. Herbert, "Civil Service Recruitment in Early T'ang China: Ideal and Reality," in *Studies in Language and Culture* (Osaka) 12 (1986), pp. 199-211.

<sup>7</sup>*T'ung-tien* 通典. Sung edn. held in the Kunaichō Library, Tokyo. Facs. rpt. ed. with an introduction by Nagasawa Kikuya 長澤規矩 and Ozaki Yasushi 尾崎康 (Tokyo: Kyūko shoen, 1978; hereafter *TT*) 15, pp. 40a-b; *HTS* 45, pp. 1171-72.

their superiors. Prefects were assessed by circuit inspectors. Assessments were supposed to be made annually and terms of office were computed as a fixed number of assessments, but T'ang sources show that in practice, assessment of provincial service was often carried out irregularly and carelessly. Assessment of prefects and magistrates depended to a large degree on fluctuations in population and land under cultivation within the areas under their jurisdiction. Changes of one-tenth in the taxpaying population or in land under cultivation brought an upgrading or downgrading in assessment.<sup>8</sup> Increased population meant increased tax yield, and it was also an indicator of local satisfaction with official performance. Large fluctuations in population were not usually caused by excessive numbers of births or deaths, although natural disasters and local officials' relief attempts might sometimes affect the population figures. A sudden drop in population usually meant that many peasants had left the district because the tax burden was too heavy, or the local prefect or magistrate was too cruel or grasping. The vagrants would settle on uncultivated land elsewhere and thus another official would earn credit in his next assessment, always assuming that the tax registers had been revised in the meantime.

#### PERCEPTIONS OF PROVINCIAL SERVICE UNDER T'AI-TSUNG

Provincial service imposed heavy responsibilities on officials and provided few legitimate attractions. Already a decade after the founding of the dynasty it was a cause for concern to Emperor T'ai-tsung. "Each night We constantly think about the people and sometimes, thinking things over, We do not sleep until past midnight. Our only anxiety is as to whether or not the governors and prefects are able to take care of the people."<sup>9</sup> After stressing the vital importance of prefects to public welfare, T'ai-tsung went on to tell his courtiers that he had had a screen inscribed with the names of all the three hundred or so prefects in the empire, and that after receiving information about them, he jotted down notes to help decide their future promotions and demotions. Keeping track of all the prefects must have been quite enough for one man, but he was anxious about the magistrates as well. He therefore asked all high officials in the metropolitan and provincial arms of the bureaucracy to recommend men suitable to serve as magistrates.

<sup>8</sup> *TT* 15, pp. 45b-46a.

<sup>9</sup> *Chen-kuan cheng-yao* 貞觀政要 (SPTK edn.) 3, pp. 11b-12a, where the passage is dated 628; and *THY* 68, p. 1197, where it is dated 629. *Tzu-chih i'ung-chien* 資治通鑑 (Peking: Ku-chi ch'u-p'an she, 1956; hereafter *YCTC*) 193, p. 6061, dates it to the very end of 628.

T'ai-tsung's close personal monitoring of prefects and their administrative records and his wish for individual recommendations would suggest that provincial service was very high on his list of priorities. Even under T'ai-tsung, however, there was a hierarchy that made positions and activities progressively more important as they came closer, geographically, to the capital. In 634 commissioners for demotion and advancement (*ch'u-chih-shih* 黜陟使) were sent out to assess officials and their administrations in each of fifteen circuits. The sixteenth circuit was not assigned, for it was to cover the area around the capital (*chi-nei* 畿內) and its holder had to be picked most carefully. Li Ching 李靖 suggested that only Wei Cheng 魏徵, the emperor's closest adviser, was capable of carrying out the commission. T'ai-tsung refused to appoint him because he was indispensable at court. Instead he appointed Li Ching himself.<sup>10</sup> Even if the provinces deserved the best, they could expect only second best, given the emperor's need for court advisers.

Other sources suggest that T'ai-tsung's subjects for the most part placed a lower priority on provincial selection than he did. In 637 Ma Chou 馬周, a man of obscure origins who had direct experience of life as an ordinary commoner, uttered damning criticism of current provincial selection policy.

Now the court only values metropolitan office and pays scant regard to the selection of magistrates and prefects. Prefects are mostly selected from military officers and holders of honorary rank. In other cases, if metropolitan officeholders have proved incompetent, they are sent out to provincial posts. Those military officers who prove their worth in battle and are strong in physique get priority in selection as imperial guard officers, while inferior military officers are appointed to prefectural posts. In employing men for posts in distant border areas, even less attention is paid to ability. When virtue and good behavior are considered, not even one out of ten measures up to the required standard.<sup>11</sup>

Ma suggested that since there were so many magistracies, there was no hope of choosing good men to fill them all, but it should be possible at least to head the provincial bureaucracy with suitable prefects. T'ai-tsung stated he would select the prefects himself and once again called upon high metropolitan officials to recommend men as magistrates.

<sup>10</sup> *THY* 78, p. 1419.

<sup>11</sup> For further biographical information on Ma Chou, see *Chiu Tang-shu* 舊唐書 (Peking: Chung-hua, 1975; hereafter *CTS*) 74, pp. 2612-19; and *HTS* 98, pp. 3894-3901. Ma Chou's comments on provincial selection appear in *CTS* 74, p. 2618; *THY* 68, p. 1197; and *TT* 17, p. 9a. *THY* gives the date 637.

A further decade passed and still all was not well in the provincial bureaucracy. In 646 T'ai-tsung sent out twenty-two inspecting commissioners, who duly submitted their reports. The reports must have caused some consternation at court. T'ai-tsung first had his trusted adviser Ch'u Sui-liang 褚遂良 go over them carefully and then checked them himself. As a result, only twenty prefects or lower provincial officials were selected for promotion, while several hundred were punished or dismissed, and seven were even condemned to death.<sup>12</sup>

T'ai-tsung had begun sending out circuit inspectors in 634, as a useful check on provincial government. Indications are, however, that they were not always as public-spirited as were the commissioners of 646. In the spring of 644 Ch'u Sui-liang had asked the emperor to postpone sending out circuit inspectors to the drought-stricken countryside, on the grounds that they would merely disturb the work of the farming population. "In addition, they will have to welcome the commissioners and provide them with food and drink. In order to stand about wasting time by the roadside waiting for the commissioners, they will have to abandon planting their fields."<sup>13</sup>

Ch'u seems to suggest that visits from commissioners could deteriorate into little more than exercises in ritual, bringing no immediate benefit to the people and disrupting their normal lives. A reference to the dispatch of "commissioners for inquiring after and cherishing the people" (*ts'un-fu-shih* 存撫使) in 691 confirms that this could be the case. The only notable result of this commission was that it generated a ten-*chüan* anthology of send-off poems by court officials, entitled *Ts'un-fu chi* 存撫集.<sup>14</sup>

Although T'ai-tsung stressed the importance of provincial service and took measures to improve the selection and administration of provincial officials, the provincial bureaucracy and its staff remained generally despised. There is evidence that the quality of provincial service was low during his reign.

#### CRITICISM OF PROVINCIAL SERVICE UNDER KAO-TSUNG AND EMPRESS WU

Empress Wu 武后 made no secret of her administrative priorities. In 697 she recalled from retirement the former chief administrator of Ch'eng-tu, Wang Chi-shan 王及善, to serve as prefect of Hua-chou 滑州 in northern Ho-nan, since that area was still suffering in the aftermath of the massive Khitan incursion of 696. However, after hearing Wang discuss policy mat-

ters, she was so impressed that she retained him at court, declaring that "provincial service is a matter of secondary importance. This is a matter of vital importance. You may not leave the court."<sup>15</sup> The empress did, however, send her most trusted minister, Ti Jen-chieh 狄仁傑, to the affected area as "commissioner for pacification and care" (*an-fu-shih* 安撫使). Like T'ai-tsung, she recognized the importance of paying due attention to the provinces.<sup>16</sup>

One possible explanation for poor provincial administration was the brief period of tenure of regular, centrally appointed local officials. As Liu Hsiang-tao 劉祥道 pointed out in the late 650s, it encouraged neglect of their duties.

Present-day officeholders are transferred after four annual assessments. When officeholders know they are about to complete their terms of duty, they know they are bound to be transferred. The people, seeing the officials governing them will be transferred and replaced, are bound to lack proper respect for them. To place men who know they will be transferred over slovenly people is certainly not the way to improve the customs of the people.<sup>17</sup>

Liu points out that in the Golden Age of the ancient sage emperors, officials were promoted or demoted after nine years' service. He suggests extending the present period of tenure in provincial service from four to eight years, to come closer to that classical ideal. Men who proved their worth within four years should be encouraged by upgrading in rank while continuing to hold the same office rather than by promotion and transfer.

Liu Hsiang-tao complained in the 650s that four years' service was too short. By the 690s the situation was even worse. If the famous historian Liu Chih-chi 劉知幾 is to be believed, prefects were rushing in and out of office with scarcely time to draw breath, let alone to carry out their duties properly. Liu, who was then serving in his first post as a county registrar near the eastern capital of Lo-yang, complained:

Today's prefects, . . . suddenly arriving and just as abruptly leaving again, are feckless drifters. In posts near the capital, they are promoted after only a few months and then, holding distant postings, they are

<sup>15</sup> *TCTC* 206, p. 6517. The Khitan invasion is described in R. W. L. Guisso, *Wu-tse-t'ien and the Politics of Legitimation in Tang China* (Bellingham, Wash.: Western Washington U.P., 1978), pp. 138-43.

<sup>16</sup> *THY* 77, pp. 1414-15.

<sup>17</sup> *TT* 17, pp. 10a-b. This comment is contained in the sixth of Liu's seven memorials on the shortcomings of selection, dated ca. 656; see *TT* 17, pp. 9a-10b, and *THY* 74, p. 1334.

<sup>12</sup> *THY* 77, p. 1412.    <sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*    <sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1414.

bound to be transferred after a year or so. They regard their court-houses as wayside inns and put down from their carriages as if to take up temporary lodgings. Sometimes they say that when they go to court next year, they are bound to pass [the selection examinations] and change jobs, or else they say that when this year's accounts are reckoned up, they are sure to be transferred. When they harbor irresponsible intentions, why should they even pretend to achieve merit by following good ways?<sup>18</sup>

To frustrate these carpetbagging prefects, Liu suggested that a minimum tenure of three years be enforced. It should be stressed that this was still one year less than the regular four-year period of office.

If the people regarded their regular provincial overlords, the prefects, with complacency, they were certainly stirred into action when circuit inspectors paid their irregular visits. Liu Ssu-li 劉思立, in a memorial of 677 referring to a proposed commission to Ho-nan and Ho-pei to supply drought relief, gives the following description: "When commissioners are sent out, the people are all anxious and awestruck. They ignore their household duties in anticipation of imperial favor. Their eagerness to welcome the commissioners must needs be difficult to repress."<sup>19</sup> It is debatable how far the medieval Chinese peasantry was genuinely moved by enthusiasm or curiosity to welcome the great men from the capital. Their welcome was probably in part motivated by self-interest and in part stage managed by the local provincial officials to make a good impression on the commissioners. Later in the same memorial, Liu leaves us in no doubt as to the result of such welcoming celebrations: "The original intention [of the commissions] is to give the people relief, but they actually put them to additional trouble." Liu therefore made the practical suggestion that the prefectures and counties set up their own arrangements for relief and that the commissioners go out in the winter to assess what they had done. That way, farming activities would not be disrupted and the new harvest would not be adversely affected. Liu's memorial implies that ill-timed commissions were detrimental both to the welfare of the people and to the tax yield, thus doing a disservice at once to the two fundamental principles of provincial service.

Commissions, even if well timed, could not always fully serve their purpose. As mentioned, superhuman demands were placed on provincial officials in return for scant recognition. In a memorial of 696 Li Chiao 李嬌 showed that however capable and conscientious they might be, it was not

humanly possible for circuit inspectors to carry out their duties thoroughly in the time allotted.

The time restriction is too pressing. They must gather the registers and hurry day and night in order to meet the deadline. Yet in every circuit, the civil and military officials they have to check are at most something over two thousand in number and at least still in the region of a thousand. In every case they must weigh up and grade their talent and conduct, making a critical appraisal of their strengths and weaknesses. If Your Majesty wishes them to investigate every official's behavior and ability in detail, they will have to work ceaselessly, not daring to slack in their duties.<sup>20</sup>

#### CH'EN TZU-ANG'S MEMORIALS ON PROVINCIAL OFFICIALS

Some of the most valuable insights into late seventh-century provincial service are contained in a pair of memorials written by Ch'en Tzu-ang 陳子昂 in 685. Ch'en, an accomplished scholar and *chin-shih* graduate from a rich provincial family, was at the time in the low-grade post of corrector of characters in the Imperial Library (*mi-shu-sheng cheng-tzu* 秘書省正字).<sup>21</sup>

Unabridged translations of Ch'en's two memorials are given below, with brief introductions. Both are written with refreshing candor from the provincial point of view. They show the provincials' attitude toward the worthless officials foisted on them by the central government. Magistrates, in particular, are shown to be totally incompetent because of the mechanical selection policy of the Board of Personnel. It may be noted in passing that Ch'en was writing at a time when selection of officials had sunk to its most inefficient and corrupt under examiners like the notorious "Diabetic Teng" (Teng Hsüan-t'ing 鄧玄挺).<sup>22</sup> Ch'en called for a better selection of provincial officials at all levels, namely commissioners, prefects, and magistrates.

Ch'en's first memorial was written in response to a decree appointing circuit inspectors, who at the time of writing were about to leave the capital

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1414.

<sup>19</sup> The memorials are contained in *Ch'en Tzu-ang chi* 陳子昂集 (Peking: Chung-hua, 1960) 8, pp. 183-87. An abridged version of the memorial on circuit commissioners is also contained in *THY* 77, pp. 1413-14, and two extracts from the memorial on prefects and magistrates are given in *THY* 68, pp. 1197-98, and *THY* 74, p. 1337. *THY* dates both memorials to 685 and gives Ch'en's office. For further biographical information on Ch'en Tzu-ang, see *CTS* 190, pp. 5018-25, and *HTS* 107, pp. 4067-78.

<sup>22</sup> See P. A. Herbert, "Civil Service Selection in China in the Latter Half of the Seventh Century," in *Papers on Far Eastern History* 13 (1976), pp. 1-40, esp. p. 22.

<sup>18</sup> *THY* 68, p. 1198.    <sup>19</sup> *Ibid.* 77, p. 1412.

for their circuits. Ch'en felt that if these men were sent to the countryside, they would do more harm than good to the newly established rule of his patroness, Empress Wu.

Ch'en here exposes the paradox at the heart of T'ang perceptions of provincial service. Ultimately he pleads that the empress select her best court officials to be commissioners of inspection and grant them full prestige.

The full text of the first memorial (concerning circuit inspectors) is as follows:

I humbly observe that Your Majesty is concerned about the people of the empire,<sup>23</sup> but I fear they do not reap any benefit. Your Majesty has also issued an enlightened decree<sup>24</sup> that You are about to send circuit commissioners to go on a tour of inspection of all the prefectures of the empire, with concurrent powers to recommend promotions and demotions and to aid the people in their distress. Indeed the people of the empire are fortunate to receive Your Majesty's great favor! While I consider this action praiseworthy,<sup>25</sup> it is not altogether suitable. Why do I express this opinion? Is not Your Majesty's reason for sending out enlightened commissioners to show the masses of the empire the constant concern which You feel for them day and night? To show the worthy and good, loyal and filial, that Your Majesty thinks day and night of how to employ them? And to show the wicked people and rapacious officials of the empire that Your Majesty strives day and night to get rid of them?<sup>26</sup> Surely Your Majesty's sage intention must be thus that You send out commissioners.

Yet I, in my blind stupidity, am aware that Your Majesty's commissioners are not altogether suitable.<sup>27</sup> If the commissioners are to be what I would call <sup>28</sup> commissioners, let them first of all match the expectations of the times<sup>29</sup> and win the praises of the masses. Then their humanity<sup>30</sup> and love will be great enough to cherish sympathy for the orphan and the friendless, their wisdom and virtue will be great enough to promote those with hidden talent, their firmness and honesty will be sufficient to avoid covering up tyrannical oppression, and their clear-sighted intelligence will be sufficient to recognize corruption and

wickedness. Then and only then will the evil people of the empire so fear their clear-sightedness that they dare not commit evil acts, the bullies of the empire so tremble before their firmness that they do not overstep their authority, the outstanding men of the empire so admire their virtue that they are happy to serve [in the administration], and the orphans and friendless people of the empire place so much reliance on their humanity that they rejoice to live under [imperial] benevolence.<sup>31</sup> Only in such circumstances is it proper to talk about sending out commissioners.

Formerly, before the imperial carriage left the capital, the empire was filled with excited anticipation. Now Your Majesty's commissioners, in the same way, have not yet left the court, yet the townspeople on their routes all say they are not worthy of their appointments,<sup>32</sup> and officials at court likewise have nothing good to say of them. Before Your Majesty's commissioners have left the palace gates, the people at court all already<sup>33</sup> despise them, so how much less will the masses think of them? If You wish to receive recommendations for promotions and demotions and seek out the sufferings of the people,<sup>34</sup> how can You possibly achieve this (with these men)?

The reasons for this oversight in Your Majesty's administration are inattention to the selection of suitable men and contempt for these commissions. They are not regarded as high offices of the empire, so Your Majesty has made this grave oversight. {The chief ministers merely regard their selection as a routine matter, accept Your command, and put it into action (without giving the selection of the commissioners due thought).} <sup>35</sup> If they merely go through the motion of sending out commissions and do not choose men of the proper caliber to hold them, the more commissioners that are sent, the worse state the empire will be in, and the more numerous the commissioners, the more unsettled the empire will be. Why is this? Because the empire despises these posts. {The posts are despised, so suitable men are not chosen. Suitable men are not chosen, so the commissioners are not of the proper caliber. The commissioners are not of the proper caliber, so the recommendations for promotion and demotion that they make are unwise and the penalties they impose are ill-judged, so opportunists are

<sup>23</sup> *THY* (see n. 21, above) omits *t'ien-hsia* 天下.

<sup>24</sup> *THY* omits *yu fa ming chao* 又發明詔. <sup>25</sup> *THY* omits *mei i* 美矣.

<sup>26</sup> *THY* omits the previous two sentences.

<sup>27</sup> *THY* gives *yu* 又 for *yu* 有, a typographical error.

<sup>28</sup> *THY* gives *ch'ing* 請 for *wei* 謂.

<sup>29</sup> *THY* omits *chieh* 皆 and gives *ch'ang* 常 for *lang* 當, a typographical error.

<sup>30</sup> *THY* gives *tz'u* 慈 "benevolence" for *jen* 仁.

<sup>31</sup> *THY* gives *te* 德 "virtue" for *en* 恩. <sup>32</sup> *THY* omits *jen* 任.

<sup>33</sup> I accept the reading *i* 己 from *THY*.

<sup>34</sup> *THY* gives *ch'iu-hsien* 求賢 "seek out worthy men."

<sup>35</sup> *THY* omits the sentence in braces here, as well as the passages in braces below.



advanced and pure and upright men retreat.) All that happens is that the people of the empire decorate the roads and streets and [throng to] welcome and see off the commissioners, but without benefiting from Your sage instruction. I have lived for a long time as one of the common people and am very much aware of this.

{[While pursuing this policy,] if Your Majesty wishes to show the masses that You labor conscientiously day and night to bring about good government, You cannot achieve this aim. So I feel that the grave oversight in Your Majesty's administration lies in this. Now it is obvious that if You want to correct the result, You must first remedy the cause. This blight on the state has already existed for a very long time. Unless Your Majesty lays more emphasis on selecting these commissioners and values getting the right sort of men, the people of the empire are bound to think that You are continuing to pursue the usual administrative routines and cannot correct this abuse. Thus worthy men will not come forward and rapacious officials will achieve their aims; the friendless will be sure to utter their laments and the people of the empire will place no reliance on Your Majesty's commissioners.

I have an overriding wish.} That wish is that Your Majesty and the chief ministers may make a more careful selection from among the court officials and give the commissions to grave men of reputation whom the masses will respect. May Your Majesty, on the day<sup>36</sup> of the great court assembly, personally preside over the main palace hall and assemble all the officials and great ministers and treat [the chosen men] with the ceremony due to imperial commissioners. Then, having received their orders as commissioners, they will be diligent and attentive to Your admonitions and will not dare transgress,<sup>37</sup> but having received their insignia and been sent on their way, they will first make [surprise] calls on the ravenous wolves among officials in the capital and then seize the reins and mount their carriages to cleanse the empire. In these circumstances, I am certain that within ten days to a month, Your Majesty's sage influence would be seen by every family in the empire and would be the customary experience of<sup>38</sup> every household.

{In ancient times, the Emperors Yao and Shun did not leave their thrones, yet the empire was well governed, for recommendations for promoting the wise and demoting the unworthy were well judged. Now

Your Majesty is seeking to revive the greatness of the empire<sup>39</sup> and to establish an everlasting reputation for merit, and the people look to You to establish sage government.} This one commission is the foundation of Your Majesty's administration. As the saying goes, "If you wish to know the man, observe whom he sends as his representative," so care [over this matter] is essential. If Your Majesty is certain You cannot obtain suitable men, it would be better not to send out commissioners, for sending out [such] commissioners causes a great deal of inconvenience and brings no benefit in the form of civilizing influence. On the contrary, in putting the people to more effort, it is like stirring the pot too much when cooking small fish.<sup>40</sup> I hope Your Majesty will pay attention to this matter.

In his second memorial, concerning prefects and magistrates, Ch'en employed rather less strong language, but he made his message no less clear. The selection of prefects and magistrates was as important as the selection of chief ministers. Without giving any details, Ch'en made a heartfelt plea for reform of current practices.

The full text of the second memorial follows:

It is my humble opinion that surely among those with whom Your Majesty governs the empire, those who may be instrumental in bringing great peace are the chief ministers and the provincial officials.<sup>41</sup> If You stress the importance of these officials, may You govern the empire well? I think that the empire will [then] be well governed. May You govern the empire well if You consider them unimportant? I think [that in those circumstances] the empire will not acquire good government. Why is this? The chief ministers are Your Majesty's bowels and heart. The prefects and magistrates are Your Majesty's hands and feet. There has never been a case of a well-ordered body that functioned alone without bowels, heart, hands, and feet. It seems to me that the present chief ministers are acceptable. Only in the case of the prefects and magistrates has Your Majesty made light of their selection and I observe has not yet obtained the right people. For this reason, although the bowels and heart are untroubled, the hands and feet are still infirm.

<sup>39</sup>Empress Wu had just taken the throne in her own right when this memorial was written.  
<sup>40</sup>Compare *Tao-te-ching*, sect. 60, "Governing a large state is like boiling a small fish." D. C. Lau, trans., *Tao Te Ching* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1963), p. 121.

<sup>41</sup>Literally "prefects and county magistrates of all prefectures" (*chu-chou tz'u-shih hsiien-ling* 諸州刺史縣令).

<sup>36</sup>I accept the reading *jih* 日 from *THY*.

<sup>37</sup>*THY* omits *yin-ch'in ching-chieh wu-kan tuo ch'ien* 殷勤儆誠無敢或愆.

<sup>38</sup>*THY* gives *wen* 聞 for *hsi* 習, hence "will be heard by every household."

This is the reason why up until now the empire has still not received great benefit.<sup>42</sup> <I consider that the duty of prefects and magistrates is truly the cornerstone<sup>43</sup> of Your Majesty's administration and instruction (of the people in civilization).>

When Your Majesty spreads forth Your powerful beneficence and sends down Your enlightened decrees to set forth to the people of the empire, You have to rely upon the prefects and magistrates conscientiously to proclaim them for You. Therefore <when Your Majesty obtains the right kind of men [for these duties], the people may see and hear [the effects of Your beneficence] in their own homes, but if Your Majesty does not obtain the right kind of men [as provincial officials], they delegate their duties to the local officers and [Your pronouncements] are merely posted on walls.<sup>44</sup> If You wish the rites and courtesy to prosper in the homes [of the people] and the petty officials to strive toward pure and conscientious behavior, but do not stress the selection of prefects and magistrates, what way is there to achieve [Your purpose?]> I consider that if Your Majesty wishes to cross a river without boat or oar, You will not be able to do so.

<I lived in the provinces as a commoner for a long time.<sup>45</sup> I certainly understand all about<sup>46</sup> the influence of prefects and magistrates. The rise and fall of states depend on nothing but the way in which they carry out their duties. Why is this? When a worthy and enlightened prefect is appointed [to serve in] one prefecture, he governs well in such a way as to serve the common good, so that thousands<sup>47</sup> of families are the recipients of good fortune. If a greedy and cruel prefect is appointed, he governs according to his own interests and is rapacious, so that thousands<sup>48</sup> of families suffer calamity. Now if the good or bad fortune of one prefecture [depends on] this [factor], how much more is it true of the empire as a whole and how can a better method [of ensuring good government] be found? Thus I consider that the cornerstone of Your administration and enlightening influence and the rise and fall of the state depend upon this duty.><sup>49</sup>

<In my humble opinion, if Your Majesty strives to bring about good government, wishing to bring peace to the people of the empire and cause them to be without troubles,<sup>50</sup> but still does not pay attention to [the selection of] prefects and magistrates, how can Your wish be achieved?<sup>51</sup> How do I know that Your Majesty has paid no attention to [the selection of] prefects and magistrates? By observing how the Board of Personnel selects officials. It simply fills a vacancy for a magistrate in the same way in which they fill one for a county junior officer. According to seniority and assessment grading, they follow the pattern of official service in placing a man in an official position instead of deciding whether [the candidates] possess worth, virtuous conduct, and the power to influence people to goodness, and then promoting one who is worthy of the post. Even when sometimes vice-presidents of the Board of Personnel have recognized this deficiency and have wished to employ someone, promoting him beyond his appropriate grade, the petty men of the empire have raised their voices in a chorus of criticism. That being the case, they have followed the usual practice and feared deviating from it. Therefore any common fellow<sup>52</sup> in the empire can obtain the post of magistrate. Once common fellows become intermingled [in the ranks of magistrates], worthy and unworthy cannot be distinguished. I consider that when magistrates are common fellows and are chosen according to seniority and are not employed according to ability, so that there is stagnation in [the administration of] the empire, the people lack the means to be made aware of Your Majesty's virtuous striving, day and night, but [instead] feel frustrated that their sovereign should bring this upon them.

Ever since the beginning of Your reign, this deficiency has been very serious and has not been corrected.> Is this not a matter for grave concern? Formerly, Emperor Hsüan of Han 漢宣帝 said, "Those with whom I govern the empire, are they not the worthy provincial officials?"<sup>53</sup> Therefore in the time of Emperor Hsüan, [officials] could be chosen correctly. I would like Your Majesty and Your chief ministers to give deep consideration to the selection [of provincial officials] made with insight in order to remedy this deficiency and to cause the people of the empire to acquire some measure of peace. I have formed my opinion [on the matter], but it is very shallow and I am not capable of

<sup>42</sup> The next three passages in angle brackets are quoted in *THY* 68 (see n. 21, above).

<sup>43</sup> Literally "head" (*shou* 首). <sup>44</sup> Compare *HTS* 107, p. 4071.

<sup>45</sup> *Ch'en pi tsai ts'ao-mao wei po-hsing chiu i* 臣比在草茅為百姓久矣.

<sup>46</sup> I accept the reading *hsi* 悉 given in *THY*.

<sup>47</sup> *Ch'en's* collected works give *ch'ien-wan* 千萬 "thousands or tens of thousands." *THY* gives *shih-wan* 十萬 "a hundred thousand." Both numbers are used conventionally.

<sup>48</sup> See note 84, below.

<sup>49</sup> This marks the end of the quotation in *THY* 68, which merely summarizes the rest of the memorial. The long passage in angle brackets immediately below is quoted in *THY* 74 (see n. 21, above).

<sup>50</sup> *THY* omits *yü an t'ien-hsia po-hsing wu-shih chi-k'u* 欲安天下百姓無使疾苦.

<sup>51</sup> The phrase *ho k'o te tsai* 何可得哉 is omitted in *THY*. <sup>52</sup> *Yung-liu* 庸流.

<sup>53</sup> Literally "good enough for two thousand *shih* 石 of grain." This was the annual salary of prefects and other grades of officials in the Han dynasty. By the T'ang dynasty, it normally referred conventionally to prefects only.

setting it down clearly in writing. I should like Your Majesty to give [the matter] full consideration and plan it out with Your enlightened chief ministers in order to bring peace to the empire. I should consider myself most favored.

#### DETERIORATION UNDER CHUNG-TSUNG AND REFORM UNDER JUI-TSUNG

Ch'en Tzu-ang's memorials paint a sorry picture of provincial administration and officialdom in the late seventh century. There was a growing tendency to use provincial service as a dumping ground for the incompetent and work-weary. When talented officials were sent to the provinces, their postings were usually a form of exile, engineered by their enemies at court. Many of the famous officials and poets of the time spent periods in exile in the provinces and, ironically, sometimes their sojourns proved fruitful for the political and cultural life of the capital, since they recognized and patronized men from the districts where they were sent to serve. Chang Yüeh 張說, for instance, when in exile in the far south of China, met Chang Chiu-ling 張九齡, whose career he later fostered. Chang Chiu-ling was to prove an accomplished poet and competent chief minister. Had it not been for Chang Yüeh's exile, Chang Chiu-ling would probably have stayed in his native Ling-nan.<sup>54</sup>

One reason the Board of Personnel had to scrape the bottom of the official barrel in selecting magistrates and subordinate provincial staff was that the number of posts at court had been greatly expanded with the creation of supernumerary offices under Empress Wu and Chung-tsung 中宗.<sup>55</sup> There is evidence that the provision of supernumerary posts in the metropolitan bureaucracy actually drew talent away from the provincial service. For example, a decree of 681 makes praiseworthy magistrates the priority group from which to select supernumerary secretaries, censors in attendance, and the people to fill other offices normally reserved for men of promise who were destined to go far.<sup>56</sup> This provision may have raised the status of the individuals concerned, but it is doubtful whether it improved the status and morale of county officials in general. In the latter part of Empress Wu's reign, some attempts were made to reform selection and to

keep the metropolitan bureaucracy within bounds,<sup>57</sup> but serious abuses arose in selection again under Chung-tsung when Empress Wei 韋后 and her associates were trying to win favor and support at court.

The fact was that no one wanted to serve outside the capital. Increasing numbers of men competed for selection from Empress Wu's period in power onward,<sup>58</sup> but they were actually trying for posts in the capital, where the political prospects were more promising and cultural life more interesting and rewarding.

There is clear evidence from the early eighth century that provincial service was unpopular. In 707 Hsiao Chih-chung 蕭至忠, vice-president of the Secretariat, claimed that early in the dynasty the sons and younger brothers of higher officials frequently served in provincial posts. He wanted the families of high officials to be subject to a restriction of no more than two family members serving at court at any one time.<sup>59</sup>

At about the same time, Lu Huai-shen 盧懷慎 echoed the complaints of Liu Chih-chi about provincial officials who could not wait to leave their postings and consequently did nothing to promote material or moral welfare or to win the respect of the people under them.

I have observed recently cases of prefects, magistrates, and their assistants, where in one or two years at the most, or at least three to five months after taking office [they] are promoted regardless of their assessment record. Or in other cases, time and again they receive no transfer and strain their ears to hear of promotion and stretch up on tiptoe to see it, fighting for promotion without scruple or shame. How can time be found for promoting civilization or bringing comfort to the people on behalf of Your Majesty? Consequently, the population scatters, the granaries stand empty, and the people suffer more and more as time goes by. How is it that public service has reached such a point? The people know that officials do not serve for long, so they do not obey them. Officials know that promotion is not far from their grasp, so they do not exert their talents, but make expeditious plans and toady to their superiors.

It is clear from Lu Huai-shen's remarks that transfer and promotion depended not on ability and successful administration but on political influ-

<sup>54</sup> P. A. Herbert, *The Life and Works of Chang Chiu-ling* (Ann Arbor: U.M.I., 1982), esp. pp. 8-10, 23-25, 77.

<sup>55</sup> Herbert, "Civil Service Selection in China." The interrelationship between the provision of supernumerary offices at court and deterioration in the provincial bureaucracy was recognized by Hsüan-tsung in his edict of February 2, 714; see note 66 below.

<sup>56</sup> *THY* 81, p. 1501.

<sup>57</sup> *TT* 15, p. 42a.

<sup>58</sup> See the figures given in memorials by Liu Hsiang-tao 劉祥道 (dated ca. 656) and, less reliably, by Wei Hsüan-t'ung 魏玄同 (dated 685-689) in *TT* 17, pp. 9a-10b, and 11a-12a, respectively.

<sup>59</sup> *THY* 53, p. 921.

ence and manipulation. Like earlier critics of assessment and promotion policy, Lu wanted the strict enforcement of a fixed period of tenure. Men must serve four assessment periods and, if they proved their worth before that time, be given rewards rather than be transferred.<sup>60</sup>

From the beginning of the eighth century, a series of attempts was made to improve the image of provincial service and to reverse the trend started when supernumerary offices at court began to cream off the best available talent. These attempts appear to have been largely ineffective, for complaints and calls for further action of the same kind recur constantly throughout the first half of the eighth century.

Shortly before the end of Empress Wu's reign, in 704, Li Chiao and T'ang Hsiu-ching 唐休環 had complained about the reluctance of men to serve in the provinces.

We see that the general opinion of the court and popular feeling far and near consistently esteem metropolitan appointment and despise service in the provinces. Every time that people are appointed as prefects, they decline such appointments two or three times. Recently, those who have been sent out to serve in the provinces have for the most part been men exiled in disgrace.

Li and T'ang called for court officials to be appointed prefects of the most important prefectures in order to raise the tone of provincial administration. It should be noted, however, that the prefectural appointments made in answer to their request were not substantive but honorary and were held concurrently (*chien* 兼) with the appointees' court offices.<sup>61</sup>

One court official named Wei Ssu-li 韋嗣立 actually volunteered to undertake a prefectural appointment following Li and T'ang's memorial of 704. Wei appears to have taken his concurrent appointment seriously, for in 709 he expressed further concern about the caliber of provincial officials and made a practical suggestion for improvement. Rather than appoint court officials to provincial offices, the emperor should require a period of provincial service as a prerequisite for high office at court.

Moreover, as to prefects and magistrates, in recent years a careful selection has not been maintained. When officials in the capital have committed some misdemeanor or lack fame and promise, they are sent

out to govern prefectures. The Board of Personnel in its selection of men fills the posts of magistrate with men in their declining years whose handwriting has deteriorated. When the people are governed in this way, how can one hope to lead them to civilization? I hope to see henceforth all high-ranking officials destined for greatness, from the Three Departments (*san sheng* 三省) and two sections of the Censorate, of the fifth grade and above, first chosen to serve in the ranks of prefects and magistrates. Then the empire will be well governed.<sup>62</sup>

The Sung historian Ssu-ma Kuang 司馬光 comments curtly that Wei's suggestion was ignored. Court politics during Chung-tsung's reign were in a highly volatile state, with the emperor under the domination of Empress Wei and her ladies, so the time was not ripe for reform. The only serious attempt to improve provincial administration that seems to have been made in Chung-tsung's reign came just about a year after his accession, early in 706, when twenty high officials were selected to act as circuit inspectors, rotating duties on a biennial basis. A number of famous officials held these commissions at some time during their careers, including men known for their concern for the quality of provincial service, such as Lu Huai-shen and Yüan Ch'ien-yao 源乾曜.<sup>63</sup>

The political climate was more conducive to reform after the accession of Jui-tsung 睿宗 in 710. In that year and the following year he issued two pronouncements designed to improve the caliber of provincial service.<sup>64</sup> The second, an edict issued late in 711, declaring categorically that metropolitan and provincial officials were equal in status, required interchange of personnel between the two arms of the bureaucracy. They had never been completely separate entities in law, but clearly they had taken on the de facto nature of two separate bureaucracies, one honored and one despised. Attempts to bring them together again continued vigorously in the early years of the reign of Jui-tsung's successor, Emperor Hsüan-tsung 玄宗.

<sup>60</sup> *TCTC* 209, pp. 6633-34. Wei's memorial is given in full in *Wen-yuan ying-hua* 文苑英華 (1567 edn.; rpt. Taipei: Hua-wen shu-chü, 1967) 696, pp. 9a-b. Extracts appear in *THY* 67, pp. 1177-78, and 68, p. 1199.

<sup>61</sup> *TCTC* 208, p. 6598, and *THY* 77, p. 1415.

<sup>62</sup> The first is a decree dated the 11th month of 710, contained in *T'ang ta chao-ling chi* 唐大詔令集 (Peking: Shang-wu yin-shu-kuan, 1959; hereafter *TTCLC*) 100, pp. 3b-4a. The second is the edict that follows it in *TTCLC* 100, pp. 4a-b, where it is dated the 10th month of Ching-yün 景雲 2 (711). A decree with almost identical wording, but dated 10th month, 16th day, of Ching-lung 景龍 3 (November 21, 709), is quoted in part in *THY* 68, p. 1200. I can find no corroborating evidence elsewhere, but the historical context suggests that a decisive declaration aimed at reforming provincial selection is more likely to have come at the beginning of Jui-tsung's reign (i.e., 711) than at the end of Chung-tsung's.

<sup>60</sup> *TT* 15, pp. 46a-b; *THY* 68, pp. 1199-1200.

<sup>61</sup> *Ts'ü-fu yüan-kwei* 册府元龜 (1643 edn.; rpt. Peking: Chung-hua, 1960; hereafter cited as *TFYK*) 671, pp. 25a-26a (p. 8025); *THY* 68, p. 1198. A shorter version appears in *TCTC* 207, p. 6570, where Li and T'ang's memorial is dated April 12, 704.

## PROVINCIAL SERVICE UNDER HSÜAN-TSUNG

At the beginning of his reign Hsüan-tsung showed a marked enthusiasm for reform in many areas of administration, including provincial service. Like T'ai-tsung, he was anxious to take a hand personally in the selection and direction of his officials. His early actions with regard to provincial administration were already moving tentatively toward the tight centralized imperial control that was to characterize his later policy and that backfired so disastrously in the An-Shih Rebellion.

In 713, after he had been on the throne less than a year, Hsüan-tsung issued an order to newly appointed prefects and to governors of frontier districts. He pointed out that although good men were now being assigned to such posts, they were given little or no direction in their administration except when the emperor sent commissioners on circuit inspection, with all the commotion and disturbance that this entailed. Hsüan-tsung therefore proposed to hold briefings for the new prefects and governors on their duties and the policies they were to adopt in their administrations before they left the capital. The decree also regularized tenure, assessment, and promotion procedures, abuses of which had come in for so much criticism over the past decades. The proper term of four years' service and thorough assessment were to be required before prefects and governors could be transferred, and promotions and demotions were to be based on performance.<sup>65</sup>

In the following year, on February 2, 714, Hsüan-tsung issued an edict designed to carry out in practice the interchange of metropolitan and provincial officials called for in 711. The credentials of metropolitan officials were to be checked and those "with great talent and penetrating understanding, capable of bringing good government and promoting civilizing influence," were to be listed with a view to assigning them as prefects. Men who had served long and well in the provinces were likewise to be brought into the metropolitan bureaucracy. The stated aim of the edict was to equalize and balance the metropolitan and provincial services.<sup>66</sup>

Little seems to have come of the edict of 714, for the following year Chang Chiu-ling, then a junior adviser to the emperor, complained that the provincial bureaucracy was virtually a separate and second-class service staffed by incompetent or corrupt men. Chang, himself a dedicated Confucian from the far south who had risen through merit and hard work, explained

<sup>65</sup> *TTCLC* 100, pp. 4b-5b; *THY* 69, p. 1213. Both sources date the decree August 19, 713. (Kuang-t'ien 光天 in *TTCLC* should read Hsien-t'ien 先天.)

<sup>66</sup> *TTCLC* 100, pp. 6a-b; *TCTC* 211, p. 6694.

with scorn why provincial service was unpopular with the younger members of the establishment:

I marvel that of late common prejudice scorns provincial service as unimportant. At present, court officials, having entered the metropolitan bureaucracy, do not go out to the provinces. As far as their own wishes are concerned, this accords very well with their plans. Why is this? It is in the capital that the mass of officials are crowded. Among the scions of great families, they advance in position and gain fame. They can join groups without effort and achieve their purpose without working hard. Once they go out to serve as provincial officials, it is a different matter.<sup>67</sup>

Self-interest dictated that promising young men serve in the capital, yet the interests of state and public welfare would best be served if they could be drafted into the provincial bureaucracy. Chang therefore repeated Wei Ssu-li's suggestion that service as a provincial chief should be a prerequisite for assignment to metropolitan executive posts of equivalent or nearly equivalent rank.

The fixing of a proper order of service really ought to depend on the regulations of law. All those who, even if they gain a high grade, have not seen service as governors-general or prefects, should not gain entry to the metropolitan bureaucracy as vice-presidents of ministries or presidents of courts. Those who, even if they are good at administration, have not seen service as magistrates should not gain entry to the metropolitan bureaucracy as vice-presidents or undersecretaries of boards or secretaries of the Chancellery or Secretariat.

Terms of provincial and metropolitan service should not exceed ten years. Thus talent would be shared equally and fairly throughout the bureaucracy, which would be unified in fact as well as on paper.

Several measures taken in 715 and 716 to improve provincial administration may have been inspired by Chang's memorial. A decree dated July 13, 715,<sup>68</sup> called for a careful annual check on provincial administration by circuit inspectors (here designated *an-ch'a-shih* 按察史, "commissioners for ex-

<sup>67</sup> Chang's confidential memorial of 715 is contained in *Ch'ü-chiang Chang hsien-sheng wen-chi* 曲江張先生文集 (SPTK edn.) 16, pp. 5a-9b; *Wen-yüan ying-hua* 676, pp. 1a-5a; *TT* 15, pp. 13b-15a. At the time of writing he served as remembrancer of the left (*tsu-shih-i* 左拾遺).

<sup>68</sup> *TFYK* 635, pp. 22b-23b (pp. 7621-22) and partial quotations in *THY* 75, p. 1360, and 81, p. 1501. The full date is from *THY*. *HTS* 45, p. 1176, also mentions an edict inspired by Chang Chiu-ling's memorial calling for metropolitan officials to be selected to serve as prefects.

amination and inspection"), including a meaningful assessment of leading provincial officials. Magistrates who had been especially commended twice, presumably by their prefect and inspector, were to be eligible for metropolitan posts. Deserving prefects were also to receive metropolitan posts or, if their postings were of critical importance, material rewards. Men were not to be employed in high metropolitan office unless they had served in the provinces.

In 716 Hsüan-tsung learned from one of his advisers, possibly Chang Chiu-ling himself, that all the competent men selected that year as magistrates had declined their postings and only the incompetent were left. The emperor decided to look into their qualifications himself. He set an essay examination on administration for the men who had accepted postings as magistrates. Only one man passed the emperor's examination with credit. Over two hundred scraped through ungraded, and forty-five were "allowed to return home to study." The examiners who had appointed these incompetents to magisterial posts were demoted. Ironically, the universal attitude of regarding provincial service either as a punishment or as a scrap heap for the inept, was so deeply engrained that Hsüan-tsung sent the disgraced examiners out to serve as prefects.<sup>69</sup>

Late in the same year, Hsüan-tsung issued a decree aimed at improving the caliber of magistrates. Any magistrates who brought about an increase in population through their benevolent administration, whose counties yielded a bountiful harvest, or who won a reputation for honesty or for conscientious and equitable distribution of the tax burden, were to be granted exceptionally high assessment ratings.<sup>70</sup> Another edict issued at about the same time pointed out that magistrates of the counties around the two capitals, Ch'ang-an and Lo-yang, had been transferred to other offices after minimal tenures of only one or two annual assessments. This made for poor government and disturbed the peasantry, who were constantly required to turn out to welcome new officials. The statutory posting for four assessments was required to be enforced more strictly, after which magistrates might be considered for metropolitan posts.<sup>71</sup>

In 720, it was decreed that governors and prefects holding low nominal ranks were, while in office, to be temporarily granted the insignia of the rank assigned to their substantive offices.<sup>72</sup> A T'ang official's insignia depended on his own basic nominal rank (*pen-p'in*) rather than on the substantive rank of his office (*chih-shih kuan-p'in*). Many T'ang provincial officials held (*shou* 守) offices ranked higher than their nominal rank, a sign of the contempt

with which provincial service was regarded. The decree was therefore aimed at raising their de facto status and boosting their morale.

Despite these moves, provincial service remained unpopular. In about 720, Yüan Ch'ien-yao, in a public-spirited gesture, offered to have two of his three sons serve as provincial officials. Like many members of prominent families, they were currently serving alongside their father and brother in the capital. Yüan suggested that high officeholders' family members were cornering all the attractive metropolitan posts for themselves, for he contrasts the "members of influential families seeking office in the capital" with the "many outstanding scholars serving in the provinces." Hsüan-tsung enthusiastically accepted Yüan Ch'ien-yao's offer of his two sons and urged other metropolitan officials to follow suit. As a result, over one hundred men were sent into provincial service.<sup>73</sup> It is interesting to speculate as to how the two young Yüans and their companions felt about their new jobs.

In 741 Hsüan-tsung again called on members of the bureaucracy to recommend relatives who they felt were fit to serve as prefects or magistrates. He urged them not to be modest in recommending either senior or junior members of their own families if they were suitably qualified.<sup>74</sup> Presumably, suitable men were still not coming forward of their own accord.

A decree of 720 had made further provision for the interchange of metropolitan and provincial officials, which in spite of earlier legislation does not seem to have been practiced. "Recently court officials have not been willing to go out as provincial officials, so the dregs of officialdom have been appointed to these posts. Even if they receive them as extraordinary promotions, most metropolitan officials still feel ashamed to accept such offices."<sup>75</sup> Secretaries in the central organs of government were to be selected from among the senior administrative officers (*shang-tso* 上佐) of the prefectures and magistrates, while "pure and important officials" (*ch'ing-yao-kuan* 清要官) in the central administration were to be chosen from the prefects. Similarly, vital governorships and postings as prefects were to be filled from within the metropolitan bureaucracy. Since, however, the latter provision contains the term *chien* ("concurrent appointment"), mentioned above in connection with the appointment of court officials as prefects in 704, it may be assumed that the appointments were again honorary. They thus made no practical contribution to provincial administration, although they may have raised its tone. Similar legislation requiring prior service in the prov-

<sup>69</sup> TCTC 211, p. 6740, where the incident is dated 720, and THY 53, p. 921, which gives the date 717.

<sup>70</sup> THY 68, p. 1201.

<sup>71</sup> TTCLC 100, pp. 9b-10a (dated the 7th month of 720). See also THY 68, p. 1200 (dated 720, 6th month, 28th day; August 6, 720).

<sup>68</sup> TCTC 211, p. 6717.

<sup>70</sup> THY 69, p. 1216.

<sup>71</sup> TFK 630, p. 3a (p. 7551).

<sup>72</sup> THY 69, p. 1213.

inces for eligibility to serve in high metropolitan offices was issued in 724.<sup>76</sup>

The previous year, a decree had prohibited the employment in ranking county posts of the sons of important officials who were still young (*shao-nien* 少年) and inexperienced, for such posts carried responsibility for public welfare.<sup>77</sup> Presumably, since the emperor had begun demanding provincial service as a prerequisite for service at court, establishment families had decided to get this unpleasant and demeaning experience out of the way for their sons before they reached maturity.

Attempts to raise the status and prestige of provincial officials sometimes led to apparent contradictions. In 736, for instance, P'ei Yao-ch'ing 裴耀卿 requested that dispensation from corporal punishment be granted in cases like that of Yang Chün 楊潛, prefect of the remote prefecture of I-chou 夷州, who had recently been sentenced to sixty strokes of the heavy rod and to exile to Annam for financial malfeasance. P'ei argued that such a shameful punishment inflicted on one prefect at his post could undermine public respect for provincial heads of administration in general, for "prefects and magistrates are rather different from other officials. They are 'fathers and mothers' of the people and are looked up to for their moral influence."<sup>78</sup>

On the other hand, in 752 a decree pointed out that since provincial officials held responsible posts for which they received generous financial recompense, they should behave seemingly and set a good example for their subordinates. If they did not, they were to be punished one degree more severely than other offenders.<sup>79</sup> Thus, although the arguments of 736 and 752 apparently reach opposite conclusions, they both in fact begin from the premise that prefects and magistrates were uniquely close to and responsible for the people and that everything should be done to ensure that they continued to command the respect necessary to govern their charges.

Attempts to raise the status and morale of provincial officials by using them as a pool for filling court offices continued. In 750 it was decreed that magistrates who had received three or more good assessment reports were to be placed at the top of the waiting list for court appointments and posts as censors.<sup>80</sup>

#### HSÜAN-TSUNG'S PROVINCIAL COMMISSIONERS

Hsüan-tsung approached the reform of provincial administration through the regularization of appointment of circuit inspectors as well as through careful selection and scrutiny of prefects and magistrates. Early in

his reign he reestablished the commissions of examination and inspection (*an-ch'a-shih*) that had been set up in Chung-tsung's reign and had evidently fallen into abeyance.<sup>81</sup> The decree reviving the commissions points out that prefects had previously been inspecting their own districts and assessing their own staffs. Now an independent assessor was to be brought in to monitor their administration.

Ma Chou had argued back in the early seventh century that, since magistrates were too numerous for them all to be talented and worthy, a premium should be placed on choosing the relatively small number of prefects. In 715, following accusations of misconduct by circuit inspectors, there was a suggestion that such posts be abolished. Yao Ch'ung 姚崇 argued that it was easier and more efficient to select ten good circuit inspectors than to hope to recruit hundreds of good prefects and magistrates.

Now even when selecting only ten inspectors, we are concerned that we have not been able to obtain the right men for the posts. How much less is it possible to obtain prefects and magistrates who are all worthy of their posts for the over three hundred prefectures and the counties throughout the empire which are even more numerous.<sup>82</sup>

Hsüan-tsung agreed with Yao's suggestion and retained the commissions, since it would be easier to keep tight control of direct imperial nominees functioning outside the regular bureaucratic structure.

In 734 chief minister Chang Chiu-ling, the southerner who at the beginning of his career had complained about the caliber of provincial officials, was instrumental in a major reform. He increased the number of circuits in the empire from ten to fifteen and placed over each of them "commissioners for inspection and organization" (*ts'ai-fang ch'u-chih-shih* 採訪處置使). These commissioners had duties similar to those of the former circuit inspectors, but they were given permanent appointments rather than being sent on brief tours of their circuits. They also had greater powers of discretion. They became, in effect, governors of provinces, forming a bureaucratic stratum between the prefectures and the court. In most cases, experienced prefects of proven worth were chosen to fill the commissions.<sup>83</sup>

<sup>81</sup> The decree reestablishing the commissions is quoted in *TTCLC* 100, pp. 7a-b, where it is dated 714. *THY* 77, p. 1415, states that the commissions were reestablished in 720, but a subsequent passage dated 713 refers to the recent establishment of commissions for examination and inspection for the ten circuits. They must have existed in 715, for they are referred to in the decree of July 13, 715, cited above. I suggest, therefore, that the date given in *TTCLC* represents their formal reestablishment and that they already existed informally in 713.

<sup>82</sup> *TCTC* 211, p. 6714.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.* 213, pp. 6803-4; *TFYK* 128, p. 7b (p. 1534); *TTCLC* 100, pp. 11b-12a.

<sup>76</sup> *THY* 68, p. 1200. <sup>77</sup> *Ibid.* 75, p. 1364, and *TFYK* 630, pp. 4a-b (p. 7551).

<sup>78</sup> *THY* 68, p. 1201. <sup>79</sup> *Ibid.* <sup>80</sup> *Ibid.* 69, p. 1217.

The commissioners for inspection and organization and the new "provinces" (*tao*) were set up to remedy the ills of provincial administration by placing it under tighter central control. In particular, the decree establishing these new provincial commissions refers specifically to the twin evils of unregistered vagrant population and the uneven distribution of the tax burden, which bedeviled the economy in Hsüan-tsung's reign.<sup>84</sup> It is impossible to assess whether the commissions would have had any beneficial effect on provincial administration under "normal" conditions, because two decades after they were established China was plunged into the An-Shih Rebellion. The aftermath of the rebellion saw a totally different administrative situation in the provinces, since in many areas military governments became semi-autonomous. There is evidence, however, that even before the rebellion, the commissioners for inspection and organization simply proved to be yet another problem within the provincial administration they were supposed to reform. In 737 the commissioners were ordered to assess provincial officials, but two years later an Act of Grace rescinded that duty on the ground that they had abused it by making too many recommendations for promotion.<sup>85</sup> This measure suggests that the commissioners harbored the sinister motive of building up their personal influence and power.

#### IDEAL VERSUS REALITY

Primary sources that reveal perceptions of provincial service and the selection of provincial officials are full of Confucian moral clichés representing the provincial officials as guardians of the people and the emperor's helpers. They exalt the good qualities provincial officials should possess and the good influence they should have on the people. In the words of one imperial pronouncement on prefects:

When it comes to "those with whom We share the government of the empire, the worthy provincial officials," the chief ministers should choose them from among those metropolitan and provincial officials who show talent and promise and are particularly public-spirited and especially pure and who can propagate good influence and guide the vulgar masses.<sup>86</sup>

<sup>84</sup> For the economic background of the establishment of the commissions, see D. C. Twitchett, *Financial Administration under the Tang Dynasty*, 2d edn. (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 1970), pp. 1-48.

<sup>85</sup> *TT* 15, p. 46b.      <sup>86</sup> *TTCLC* 100, p. 4a.

The sources on the other hand give a very different picture of the realities. The provinces were a dumping ground for the inefficient, the out of favor, and the corrupt. Provincial officials frequently had no regard for their office and its duties. Commissioner Li Chih-jou 李知柔, writing in 740, complained that many magistrates who had technically completed their terms of office took leave of absence and sneaked off without waiting to hand over their posts to their successors.<sup>87</sup> Worse still, other provincial officials exploited their positions for personal gain. These included a prefect in Annam who wanted to search out the legendary copper pillars said to have been set up during the Han dynasty to mark the limit of Chinese occupation. His intention was to melt them down and sell the copper for his own profit.<sup>88</sup>

Constant repromulgation of almost identical legislation aimed at reforming both provincial administration and the selection system for provincial officials shows that contemporary methods did not work. The image of provincial service remained a negative one, and provincial posts continued to be unpopular. Although chief provincial officials had high status in theory, in reality their status was low. The posts of prefect and magistrate were often held by lower-ranked officials on a temporary or provisional basis and in any case never carried the same social prestige as metropolitan offices of equivalent rank.

The fundamental problem of early T'ang provincial administration was clear to Tu Yu 杜佑, the compiler of *T'ung-tien*. The status of provincial officials was lower than before, and yet was burdened with too many expectations.

The Ch'in house set up forty commanderies. Under Former and Later Han, there were over 100 commanderies and fiefs. Prefects entered the metropolitan bureaucracy to become high officials, and courtiers went out to govern counties. They carried out their tasks in a fitting manner, and they kept their paperwork to the essential minimum. There was no question of what they might and might not do. They were held accountable for the success of local government and were placed under a heavy burden of responsibility, but at the same time, their merit was rewarded with respect. Now there are 350 provincial administrations, and there are eight or nine different grades of commanderies and

<sup>87</sup> *THY* 69, pp. 1216-17.

<sup>88</sup> *Ling-piao lu-i* 嶺表錄異 (Ch'ien-lung era Wu-ying-tien 武英殿 edn. held in the Jimbun Kagaku Kenkyūjo of Kyoto University) 1, pp. 4b-5a. This incident is also mentioned in Edward H. Schafer, *The Vermilion Bird: Tang Images of the South* (Berkeley: U. of California P., 1967), p. 98.



counties. Local worthies cannot hold power in them or take responsibility for their material prosperity or decline. The eight commissioners and ten commanders make recommendations, but their positions are lowly and their ritual status minor. They have little power and their offices are despised.<sup>89</sup>

Another conditioning factor, easier to assess with hindsight, was the nature of early T'ang society. Officials were drawn from, or felt attracted to, an establishment that retained aristocratic attitudes. The political and cultural focus of the establishment in the centralized T'ang empire was the capital. Men therefore tried to avoid service in the provinces and when it was forced upon them, most were unwilling to take their duties very seriously. An analogy should be drawn not with later gentry society in China, but with the aristocratic society of nearly contemporary Heian Japan. There, as *The Tale of Genji* shows, life anywhere but in the capital of Kyoto was considered repulsive. Compare the following passages, the first taken from *The Tale of Genji*, the second an anecdote referring to early eighth-century China:

Of visits or company of any kind there was of course less question than ever, now that he was buried away in the depths of the country. No one indeed came near the house except the few gnarled peasants and rough country people who did the work on his estate; and loneliness lay fast upon him as a mist upon the morning hills.<sup>90</sup>

Pan Ching-chien 班景倩, inspector of Yang-chou 揚州, was selected to enter the metropolitan bureaucracy as vice-president of the Court of Justice. When he crossed Ta-liang 大梁, the prefect of Pien-chou 汴州 and inspector of Ho-nan, Ni Jo-shui 倪若水, feasted him and saw him on his way. Standing for a long time looking after the dust Pan raised in leaving, Ni turned to the officials present and said, "For Pan to be making this journey is no different from his ascending on high as an immortal!"<sup>91</sup>

Given such a perception of the lowly status of provincial service, it is hardly surprising that it was almost impossible to recruit the best men and that when they were forced into it, they often regarded it as a chore from

which to escape at the earliest possible moment. The ideal of provincial service as a task to be performed with Confucian dedication to the good of the common people was never reconcilable with the overwhelming political and cultural importance of the T'ang capital. Tensions were bound to remain so long as a strict centralized system of administration was enforced. Paradoxically, the T'ang dynasty was strong and long-lasting compared with the regimes of the previous few centuries because it emphasized centralization. Centralization, however, inhibited provincial administration, and thus led to the weakening and eventual collapse of the dynasty.

#### LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

CTS	<i>Chiu Tang-shu</i> 舊唐書
HTS	<i>Hsin Tang-shu</i> 新唐書
TCTC	<i>Tzu-chih t'ung-chien</i> 資治通鑑
TFYK	<i>Ts'e-fu yüan-kuei</i> 冊府元龜
THY	<i>T'ang hui-yao</i> 唐會要
TT	<i>T'ung-tien</i> 通典
TTCLC	<i>T'ang ta chao-ling chi</i> 唐大詔令集
TTLT	<i>Ta T'ang liu-tien</i> 大唐六典

<sup>89</sup> TT 18, p. 30a.

<sup>90</sup> Arthur Waley, trans., *The Tale of Genji* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1935), p. 795.

<sup>91</sup> TCTC 211, p. 6716. Note that Ni himself had just recently been exiled after serving in the capital.