State, Salt, and Society in Late Imperial China: A Study of Lianghuai

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Abstract

This is a study of the reforms of Lianghuai salt administration in Ming (1617) and Qing times (1830-70). It draws force from Weber’s discussion on patrimonial state and its liturgical method; and the theories on principal-agent relationships. It shows that the liturgical arrangements combining burdens with privileges was a feasible way of generating short-term revenue in circumstances where the state was confronted with an ineffective bureaucracy and a battered economy. However, the liturgical arrangement also created a multi-layered principal-agent relationship characterized by the existence, in between the central state and merchants, of strong low-rank officials and local powers. Their abuse of power and extraction of revenue frustrated the efforts of bureaucratic rationalization on the part of the central state, and thus led to the failure of state-making in pre-modern China.
### Table of Contents

Abstract .................................................. i

Acknowledgement ........................................ ii

Chapter One.
Theoretical Framework: Liturgical governance, revenue generation, and principal-agent relationships .............................................. 1
   The State: a series of questions-two broad approaches ................. 2
   The state as a corporate actor .................................... 4
   The patrimonial state ......................................... 11
   Liturgical governance ..................................... 13
   Principal-agent relationship and liturgical governance ............ 20
   The traditional Chinese state ................................ 24
Further models of the administrative process in Ming-Qing China ........ 27
Notes to Chapter One .................................... 30

Chapter Two.
Salt administration in late imperial China ................................ 36
   The organization of salt administration .......................... 36
      The Ming salt bureaucracy .................................. 36
      The Qing salt bureaucracy ................................. 41
   Salt administration: the terms of service ....................... 43
      The Ming state’s payroll .................................. 43
      The Qing state’s payroll .................................. 46
   Internal disciplinary and evaluation ............................. 47
      The Ming state’s disciplinary and evaluating system ....... 48
      The Qing state’s disciplinary and evaluating system ...... 49
Conclusion ................................................. 53
Notes to Chapter Two ...................................... 54

Chapter Three.
The organization of salt production ................................... 59
   The organization of salt production in Chinese history ........... 59
   The organization of salt production in late imperial China .... 63
      The lijia system ............................................ 64
      The foremen ................................................. 67
   Organizing salt production .................................... 68
      The collapse of regiment system ............................ 69
      The "fire shift" system in Qing times ....................... 71
   Conclusion .................................................. 76
Notes to Chapter Three ...................................... 78

Chapter Four.
The distribution of Salt ......................................... 79
   The "Equitable Exchange of Grain for Salt" [kaizongfa] .......... 79