

# Characteristics of the Ancient Chinese Bureaucracy and the Cultural Roots--From the Perspective of My Country and My People

**Xiang Chenglin**

*Nanjing Normal University, 210023, China*

**ABSTRACT.** *This essay mainly focuses on the study of the old-fashioned Chinese bureaucracy that has been expounded in My Country and My People. As Lin Yutang commented that the Chinese concept of government is known as a “parental government” or “government by gentlemen” (Lin Yutang, 2009.1), the Chinese-style bureaucracy is men-ruled rather than law-ruled. First, through digging out the dominating defections that inherently exist in the Chinese bureaucracy for thousands of years, our understanding of this kind of political mode can be expected to scratch much deeper. Second, with some research analyzing the deep-rooted cultural and religion elements that have brought about these problems with the combination of Lin Yutang’s remarks in his articles and some professional books concerning this topic and personal experiences, we can reflect upon the current phenomena that occur in the present Chinese officialdom. Still as a society of official standard thought, the Chinese political ecosystem is still encountering many challenges and chronic malady that come from traditional ideas and thoughts. If I have any conclusion in this essay, I am pessimistic about the future of the modern Chinese bureaucracy, because it is Chinese people who make up of the bureaucratic society of China and the deep-rooted Chinese behaving styles are impossible to be removed or wiped out. With the improvements of interrelationships of different communications between the leaders and the masses, however, the bureaucracy with some Chinese characteristics is not necessarily supposed to be negative, but it can thrive and get towards a right direction with appropriate reflections and alertness.*

**KEYWORDS:** *My country and my people; Bureaucracy; cultural roots; Law-ruled government*

## **1. Three obvious problems of the ancient Chinese bureaucracy**

Bureaucrats were dangerous to be talked about because in the past China, if someone said something inappropriate about officials, it could often incur disasters to the whole family. With the born of the People’s Republic China, however, the traditional bureaucracy was abolished and civilians could enjoy the democratic

rights to their fullest. The people now can supervise, criticize and advise the authorities to ensure that their interests have been thoroughly defended. It seems that bureaucracy is far from our current life, but the question is that under the superficial cover of democracy and freedom, is the modern Chinese official environment ultimately healthy and clean? I personally think that the PRC is now moving forward too fast but forgets to stop and reflect upon the mistakes and thus many problems reveal themselves but don't get solved in time. The condition of the Chinese bureaucracy is one of them. After reading *My Country and My People*, especially the part of *Social and Political Life*, I can't help pondering over the undesirable democratic phenomena that happen in my life. I hope through this essay, readers can have fresh insights about the officialdom around us: Have we figured out the disharmonious elements in the bureaucratic system? Can we achieve a compromise between the new times and the old tradition? What is the possible solution to those unpleasant factors?

### ***1.1 The raging official-oriented mentality***

As a Chinese saying goes that, "officialdom is a natural outlet for good scholars", for Chinese people, officials cannot be considered as an occupation, not to say public servants; in their eyes, being an official means privileges and priorities and it is a symbol of social identity. For the old generation, they attach the same importance to the reverence for officials as the filial piety. Though the younger ones have changed a lot in terms of this, I believe that the respect for the authorities is still an important brand in every Chinese.

Why this outcome? In the final analysis, China is an individualism society when it comes to personal interests, while one of the concrete manifestations of individualism is the lack of law and regulations or the sense of it. "The most striking characteristic in our political life as a nation is the absence of a constitution and of the idea of civil rights," remarked Lin Yutang. For me, it is 90% correct. Compared with western society, the phenomena of kissing up, the cult of personality and corruption in the Chinese bureaucratic system are prevalent and widespread, which is partly because most people think highly of individual gains and losses while ignore justice.

### ***1.2 The filthy collusion between the businessmen and governments***

From ancient times, the collaboration between officials and businessmen has been quite common. But in the modern China, this kind of collusion can unconsciously cause great damage to our society. I myself have deep feelings towards it. The government forbids the private educational institutions from giving lessons, but the fact is that many of them still exist and make a full pot of money by illegal teaching. I once worked in one of the educational institutions and my boss told me that she had superiors of the governmental agencies to support her and everything would be OK. My boss demanded very high class fee with low teaching quality. I found it very disgusting and dirty.

When it comes to the old Chinese bureaucracy, we can't avoid talking about its relationship with other social classes and divisions. Its collusion with the business communities is a classic one. In the west, it's a necessity that the political and business communities have deep, extensive communication to cooperate with each other more effectively and efficiently, but for the Chinese officials, it has become sort of the exchange of money and power: businessmen utilize the politician's power to make business, while the politicians need more money to extend their power.

### ***1.3 Noisy political propaganda and cult of personality***

A regime, whether it is welcome or abominable, should and can be judged by the people rather than compulsorily publicize the well-being it has brought to its citizens. Without saying, the cult of personality is so in vogue that many people feel that they have returned to the 1950s and 1960s. Here I want to strengthen that it is totally different between the bureaucrat and the statesman. They are two different definitions that we usually get confused with. Bureaucrats are just lucky dogs who acquire wealth and power in the tides of times while the statesmen are those who are dedicated to his country and people. In the long term, statesmen will have a more profound impact upon the history but in the short run, the bureaucrats may make waves in the current situation. More directly speaking, Yuan Shikai is a bureaucrat but Sun Yat-sen is a statesman. "The bureaucrat can function without the statesman, he will not give much leadership to his country but he can keep it going. The statesman cannot function without the bureaucrat, for without the bureaucrats he would soon have no state to lead."(Dong Junfeng, 2011) But in the Chinese bureaucratic world, the pathetic thing is that we take bureaucrats as statesmen and give them too much praise and flattery. What's more tragic is that now any circle, whether academics, business or other fields, follows after the manners in the officialdom: the blind craziness about a specific person or the authorities. This is a prominent feature of Chinese bureaucracy.

## **2. The hidden deep-rooted reasons for inherent vices**

The above three are the main malpractices that exist in the Chinese bureaucracy. But these ill phenomena also have deep-rooted cultural and religious factors that are hidden inside. Among those different schools of thought in ancient China, no single one of them could compare with Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism in exerting far-reaching influence upon Chinese culture, and the psychological world of Chinese scholar-officials. We can safely conclude that it is the product of the mixed Taoism, Buddhism and the doctrine of the golden means. And those schools of thought, seemingly contradictory, turn out to be complementary to each other fundamentally in shaping the psychological structures of the ancient, even modern Chinese officials. For me, bureaucracy is another kind of religion and belief. The Chinese bureaucracy is, in fact, the classic combination of the Confucius, Lao-Tze and Buddhists. Here I would like to roughly analyze the direct links between the special institutional culture and traditional Chinese religions, that is the thinking "going into the society"

in the Confucianism, the theory “Ruling a big country as you would dry small fish” in the Daoism, the idea “grin and bear it” in the Buddhism.

### ***2.1 The Confucianism in the Chinese bureaucracy***

Where does the official-oriented thinking come from? How can this ideology influence China for more than two thousand years? I think the very root lies in the Confucian spirit concerning the worldly affairs. It was spoken of in Confucian texts and in Legalist arguments, both of which were eventually merged as one by the time the Han Dynasty become enormously powerful. In other words, Confucianism gave the Chinese bureaucracy moral and divine authority, while Legalism gave legitimized its efficiency in the context of the rule of law. Confucianism, as the Chinese mainstream culture, always encourages people to get into the officialdom and participate in social affairs. In the feudal dynasties, the only way to realize attain this ambition is to get into the inside of bureaucratic system. Once you make it, what follows you is numerous wealth and prosperity, and what’s more, the high social status. This point, for a long time, has become Chinese people’s consensus which is hard to convert. Scholars, farmers, artisans and merchants form an orderly social class from top to bottom.

Moreover, the worship of ruling class has deep roots in Confucianism. For Confucius, the source of political harmony on earth is *tian*, the sky or the heaven, an impersonal force that stands over the affairs of humankind as the celestial vault stands over the earth. A ruler who governs justly and wisely in accordance with the principle of *tian* gains thereby the “mandate of heaven”, which will insure stability in politics. Confucius said: “As soon as such a man shall make his appearance in the world, all people will reverence him. Whatever he says, all people will believe it. Whatever he does, all people will be pleased with it. Thus his fame and name will spread and fill all the civilized world extending even to savage countries; wherever ships and carriages reach; wherever the labor and enterprise of man penetrate; wherever the heavens overshadow and the earth sustains; wherever sun and moon shine; wherever frost and dew fall: -- all who have life and breath will honor and love him. Therefore we may say: “He is the equal of God.” Such paragraphs which express admiration to gentlemen (*junzi* in Chinese) are numerous. It is often borrowed by those in power to establish their authority and prestige, and with time going by, the bureaucracy strengthened by the doctrines of Confucianism has become inviolable holiness. Even to today, the official standard thought and its side-effects are poisoning the whole society.

### ***2.2 The Daoism in the Chinese bureaucracy***

Chinese people often turn a blind eye to the public affairs even when it is against their conscience. It is partly influenced by the Taoist culture “No to every question”. It is said by Zhuangzi that Wang Ni was a sage at the time of Yao. Once his student, Nie Que, asked him three questions successively but he always responded with “how should I know?” Finally he told the disciple that “there was no right or wrong

in the world, since there was not one single standard to be applied in evaluating right or wrong” (Gu Wei, 2011). This idea brings up the issue about the diversity of human understanding yet unconsciously provides an excuse of confusing right and wrong. Chinese people often talk about “harmony without uniformity” (Gu Wei, 2011) while on the other side, this ideology makes them more tolerable with the dark side. The seemingly diverse angles to look at things can possibly distort our basic morals and values. Everything has two sides and then in some people’s eyes, it doesn’t matter whether it is moral or immoral. The money that an official embezzles is just used to somewhere else; the transactions between bureaucrats and merchants are merely another kind of resource distribution; blasphemy against the law is no more than an expedient way to escape losses. In such social circumstances, it worsens the illegal corruption and collaboration between the bureaucrats and businessmen, and thus the intensity of social crisis in terms of wealth inequality and stratification is growing more than ever before. Though fallen from official favor in communist China, Daoism and Confucianism remain embedded in the fabric of Chinese behavior, values and society. They remain to the present day the classical expressions and leave their ideology in the deep part of people’s minds.

### ***2.3 The Buddhism in the Chinese bureaucracy***

Different from Confucianism and Daoism, Buddhism is a foreign religion that came from India but later it poses tremendous influence upon the every aspect of Chinese society. As a matter of fact, Buddhism encountered Confucian opposition from the beginning of its spread to China and its development in China originally was not so well. The part of Chinese people’s mentality, however, is compatible with the doctrines in Buddhism. Han Shang had once asked Shi De: “Some people in the world slander me, bully me, insult me, laugh at me, belittle me, look me down, hate me and deceive me. What should I do about it then?” Shi De replied:” You only have to tolerate him, let him win, let him be, avoid him, be patient with him, respect him, and never mind about him and wait for a few years before you see him again!” Buddhism tells people to bear with all the ugly and unpleasant things to earn a next life’s felicity and blessedness. It results in a weird phenomenon: those officials who grasp a great deal of power persuade the law-abiding citizens to suffer poverty and suppression while they themselves utilize all social connections to strive for the worldly enjoyments and pleasures. To exaggerate the absolute sovereignty and strengthen the totalitarian rule, the dominators publicize his dominating power, ruling strategies and favors to his people. Even though people have a stronger sense of democratic sense than before, the “grin and bear it” may more or less still inhabit in the Chinese people’s subconscious minds. Over time, most people lose their critical thinking and judging ability but live in the lies and illusions that the authorities afford to them.

### **3. Potential advantages of a Bureaucratic Structure**

Bureaucracy in organizations has long been associated with clear hierarchies, a

high degree of formality, a rigid division of labor and strict policies that provide consequences to those who disobey. These features tend to get a lot of criticism, but there are plenty of advantages to bureaucracy, especially when the structure is built with an emphasis on equality. Even though the bureaucratic structure has received a lot of criticism, it has some advantages. Accountability, predictability, structure and job security are just a few to mention. Furthermore, a bureaucratic culture is based on impersonal relationships, discouraging favoritism. In this kind of organization, everyone has the same chance to succeed. Despite being viewed as a large system of rules and regulations, the bureaucratic culture requires responsibility and accountability. People who work within this structure often have a high level of education, more self-direction and are more open-minded. They also tend to focus more on the general good compared to those working for other types of organizations. Furthermore, the bureaucratic structure also provides more job security than other organizational structures as long as its employees follow directions. Typically, if a worker does what he is told, abides by the rules and is accountable to his position, he can expect a steady salary and benefits. At last, favoritism is discouraged in a bureaucratic structure. In a successful bureaucracy, the impersonal nature of relationships creates some benefits. Equality is emphasized. This means that friendships don't influence the outcomes that are created. Political pressure is secondary to the clout that comes with doing a good, consistent job. This creates a starting line where everyone has the same chance to succeed. It's generally less challenging for an individual to fit into a bureaucratic culture as compared to a flatter organizational structure. This is because rules and regulations provide clear instructions for job roles and expectations.

#### **4. Conclusion**

Chinese civil service, the administrative system of the traditional Chinese government, the members of which were selected by a competitive examination. The Chinese civil servicesystem gave the Chinese empire stability for more than 2,000 years and provided one of the major outlets for social mobility in Chinese society. It later served as a model for the civil service systems that developed in other Asian and Western countries. It is very clear that Chinese bureaucracy can't get rid of the inherent imperfections that Chinese traditional cultures and religions bring about. Although the Chinese officialdom's overall environment suffers from the raging official-oriented mentality, the filthy collusion between the businessmen and governments and noisy political propaganda and cult of personality, I believe our political world can still improve its service to the people by lifting the standards of its own. Moreover, though the traditional ideas and beliefs are partly responsible for the stains, we can still borrow some beneficial thinking which is helpful to the construction of the people's government in the new-era. For example, the Confucius said that "what you do not want done to yourself, do not do to others". If officials can have this kind of empathy towards the people, many disappointing cases in the public life can be prevented and eradicated.

Besides learning the revealing teachings from the classical works, we should

bear in mind the new requirements that the new times make to us. “The essence of Chinese cultural reform is to establish the free culture of labor socialism, to criticize and eliminate the official culture.” (Liu Yongji, 2011.9) I personally agree with this contention: to build a new China with advanced culture, it is a must to abandon the official culture. China has cast off the decadent and degenerate bureaucracy, but it is still in the charge of that old-fashioned ways of bureaucratic thinking and acting. I hope that China can find its path in constructing its political civilization with the precious past experience, new advanced theories and deep self-reflections. Strictly speaking, it is not so much a conclusion, as it’s more about the great expectations towards the future of Chinese officialdom. In the final, to express my belief I would like to quote the ancient Chinese patriotic poet, Qu Yuan, “the road ahead is long and has no ending; yet high and low I will search with my will unbending.”

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