This is a tremendously ambitious study, one that aims at nothing less than resetting the paradigm by which historians approach the Qing state and its bureaucracy (1644-1911). Maura Dykstra argues that from the mid-seventeenth century forward, Qing emperors employed increasing numbers of regulations relating to provincial reports to the center designed to provide central ministries with ever-greater amounts of information and control over the territorial bureaucracy. At the same time, increased demands for information were linked to greater levels of accountability as provincial authorities were made responsible for all actions and reporting of officials beneath them at the county and prefectural levels. This was a slow process, built on series of administrative steps and paperwork requirements unfolding over a century. But if individual steps only were seen as mundane, in the aggregate, the author claims, these regulations had, by the mid-eighteenth century, produced an “unexpected, unintended, and heretofore overlooked administrative revolution” (p. 3). A remarkable feature of this revolution was that changes were so subtle that the “tectonic effects on the bureaucracy were imperceptible” to both historical actors and subsequent historians, until now (p. 4). The outcome was no less than “one of the most dizzyingly sophisticated mechanisms of principle-agent control in the history of bureaucracy” (p. 18). If true, one can only marvel that generations of historical scholarship have missed this.

The greatest irony of the “administrative revolution,” however, was that the massive amount of information now flowing to the central ministries, particularly in the Qianlong era (1735-96), resulted in what Dykstra refers to as an “information trap.” Greater information did not result in greater control and imperial confidence. Quite the opposite, the author argues. As increased information and reporting revealed greater evidence of corruption, malfeasance, and collusion, Qing emperors became engulfed in uncertainty, anxiety, and a sense of failure, leading to a conviction that the dynasty had entered a period of decline.
Fundamental to the author’s argument is that perceptions of mounting crises were but “a paper ghost” born from the throne’s insistence on greater amounts of information (p. xxii). This “paper ghost,” she continues, has gone on to skew how Qing historians have approached their subject. “Thus the same information that triggered the Qing’s own crisis at the turn of the nineteenth century has supported historians’ portrayals of dynastic decline that are more or less in line with the story as Qing actors, themselves, understood it. The radical epistemological shift of the eighteenth-century Qing state has, therefore, been reproduced in the background of histories today without being recognized as an outcome of the eighteenth-century regime’s administrative revolution. This is a critical problem, precisely because it operates below the surface of historical inquiries and constantly influences the evidence used to answer them” (p. 4). Accordingly, Dykstra admonishes historians that they must “overcome the problem that the Qing could not: distinguishing between problems and information about problems” (p. 226).

The argument here is bold, at times breathless over the discovery of aspects of the Qing state Dykstra claims to have been overlooked by more than a century of historical work.[1] It is also deeply flawed in its conceptual, evidentiary, and methodological bases. The problems run so deep that it is not possible to enumerate them all in a short review. I will, therefore, confine myself to several of the more egregious problems.

The first question comes with the book’s subtitle, *The Administrative Revolution of the Eighteenth-Century Qing State*. There is a broad literature on the use of information by states, from historical empires to the modern day, to increase control over populations and bureaucracies. In most cases, these efforts at control focused on specific policies aimed at increasing the legibility of society or attempts by authoritarian states to cut short bureaucratic discretion. Here, however, instead of increasing state control, Dykstra’s “administrative revolution” resulted in, well, nothing, nothing other than increased imperial anxiety and a sense of crisis, while also steering historians to the apparently wrong-headed assumption that the crises of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were in fact quite real. As revolutions go, this one appears to have been rather idiosyncratic and decidedly pernicious in its effects.

A more serious shortcoming is that of sources. Despite its focus on archives, this work is not itself based on archival research. Rather, it relies primarily on two imperial compilations, various editions of which are now available online: the *Veritable Records* (*Shilu*) and the *Collected Statutes* (*Huidian*). The *Shilu* is a heavily edited collection of what were deemed the most important edicts of each reign period, compiled, edited, and revised during subsequent reign periods. Individual edicts might quote from memorials submitted to the throne, but this is not the same as examining the original memorials, nor does it provide any basis to the claim that memorials on any given topic were increasing in number. The function of the *Shilu* was commemorative, not archival. As a historical source, it cannot be accepted at face value but must be interrogated for bias and selective presentation of facts. Such interrogation has been the approach of most historians for decades. Dykstra, however, simply accepts assertions made in the edicts as fact. The *Huidian*, for its part, is a collection of statutes and regulations governing the administration of the empire. But like commands flowing from edicts, promulgated regulations do not necessarily reflect actual practice in the field. Essentially, this marks a return to the now abandoned supposition that reading central-level documents provides an accurate depiction of local-level practice. Testing this assumption by examining local archival documents has been at the heart of the growth of legal and administrative history from the 1980s onward. Careful archival work is necessary, yet there is very little sign of such work here. Other sources include a smatter-
ing of documents from the Ba County archive, the First Historical Archive in Beijing, and several advisory handbooks for field officials written by private secretaries.

Dykstra tends to shun engagement with the wealth of secondary scholarship on topics directly relevant to her study. The Qing state, after all, is a well-trodden field of inquiry. Beatrice Bartlett, for example, widely recognized as one of the foremost scholars of Qing bureaucracy (*Monarchs and Ministers: The Grand Council in Mid-Ch'ing China, 1723-1820* [1991]), is given scant attention outside comments she made about opportunities for archival work in the seventies. The seminal work of Ch'u T'ung-Tsu on local administration (*Local Government in China under the Ch'Ing* [1962]) is not mentioned nor is that of John Watt's *The District Magistrate in Late Imperial China* (1972). Groundbreaking work on administrative reform by Madeleine Zelin (*The Magistrate's Tael: Rationalizing Fiscal Reform in Eighteenth-Century Ch'ing China* [1984]), William Rowe (*Saving the World, Chen Hongmou and Elite Consciousness in Eighteenth-Century China* [2001]), and Evelyn Rawski (*The Last Emperors: A Social History of Qing Imperial Institutions* [2001]) goes without mention as well. My own work on clerks and runners in the Ba County yamen is cited but erroneously (p. 234). [2] Nor does Dykstra draw on the numerous monographic studies of the efforts of emperors from the Song dynasty onward to control officials both at the center and in the provinces. For a study of empire and bureaucratic routinization, the absence of any mention of Max Weber or S. N. Eisenstadt is also striking.

Dykstra’s initial focus is on the anxiety of early Qing emperors over the quality and accuracy of information they received from the provinces. Key here is their certainty that provincial and county-level officials were colluding to cover up administrative errors as well as malfeasance, a certainty that Dykstra seems to have adopted from her sources. This problem, according to Dykstra, initially centered on legal case reporting from the provinces to the center.

This is rather surprising given that legal case reporting was but a small part of the total flow of information being transmitted up and down the bureaucratic hierarchy on a daily basis. In the Qing judicial system, only legal cases involving homicide or those warranting capital punishment were required to be memorialized to the Ministry of Punishments for review and final determination. As Dykstra notes, what was forwarded was not the entirety of a case file but a narrative report that elided many details to present a clear linkage between crime, statute, and requisite punishment. This report was drafted by the county magistrate, the court of first instance, and then sent to superior offices at the prefecture and then the provincial government, which, upon approval, would send a memorial to the Ministry of Punishments in Beijing. Demands by superior provincial offices that a magistrate revise the draft memorial were not uncommon.

For Dykstra, the importance of these judicial case memorials is that they served a dual purpose—legal and bureaucratic discipline. Historians, she claims, have largely ignored the latter function of legal case reporting. Focusing on the disciplinary threat to which provincial- and county-level officials were exposed should a case report reveal malfeasance or incompetence, she argues that provincial and county officials were incentivized to collude in order to “fudge the facts” of cases so as to cover errors of administration. As evidence, Dykstra presents a 1684 advisory handbook from a former legal secretary, Pan Biaocan, which offers model templates on the composition of reports that Dykstra assumes were designed as a form of subterfuge (p. 66).

There are several problems here. First, it is patently untrue that historians have ignored the bureaucratic aspect of the judicial process during the Qing. Even a cursory review of recent literature on the subject of case reporting and review
shows ample evidence to the contrary. In fact, legal and bureaucratic discipline as embedded in judicial memorials were not distinct elements. The correct, transparent, and timely processing of capital cases and the correct identification of an applicable statute and punishment were fundamental to late imperial concepts of justice.

Second, Dykstra has no evidence to support imperial suspicions of collusion among provincial officials in the process of legal case reporting, in large part because we have no provincial archives from which to draw legal case records. Everything she states in regard to provincial archives is surmise. County-level case records reveal no evidence of such collaboration to “fudge facts.” Advice from administrative handbooks, moreover, was not aimed at collusion, falsification, or otherwise obscuring facts. Handbooks were instead designed to provide rhetorical strategies to help magistrates thread their reports past provincial courts as well as review by the Ministry of Punishments. In addition, the textual basis and narrative construction of case reports is hardly a new discovery. Conference volumes and articles have raised the issue of how the narrative structure of case reporting may have influenced upper-level perception of facts at the local level. None of this work is cited here. There is no evidence, however, that narrative structure equates to fictionalization.

Chapter 3, focusing on reforms made during the Yongzheng reign (1722-35), is in many respects the core of the text as these reforms served as the apex of the “administrative revolution.” Efforts from the Kangxi reign onward had centered on demands for greater amounts of information by increasing the number of regulations attached to case reporting, deadlines for submission, and greater levels of liability for provincial-level officials for the actions of their subordinates. The critical step in the “administrative revolution,” however, came with the Yongzheng emperor, whose “administrative stroke of genius” was to demand that every yamen in the empire be made responsible for its documentary records and that such archives be synchronized with reports on all activity sent to superior yamens, which were to compose summaries of such reports in their own reports to the center (p. 104). The result of this synchronization was what Dykstra refers to as the “Qing distributed archive.” Use of the singular archive here is important as it suggests a seamlessly unified body of “data” that could be used by central ministries to track information and triangulate cases of aberration. The author goes on to state that as part of the routinization of reporting from the provinces, governors in the second half of the eighteenth century were required to submit a dozen summary reports in a single “mega-memorial” as part of the sealing up of the yamen and its archive at the end of each year. If these megamemorials, submitted from provinces across the empire, exist, they could provide a trove of valuable information. Dykstra, unfortunately, provides neither example nor citation. Instead, she claims that in the process of reorganization and digitization, the First Historical Archive in Beijing separated these memorials from the packets in which they had been contained and scattered them among all documents. The result is that they “have been lost forever to historians” (p. 157). Again, there is no evidence provided for this claim.

Fundamental to the Yongzheng emperor’s “administrative coup” was what Dykstra refers to as the “case-ification” of Qing administration. What she means by “case” (an) is never clearly defined, but it seems to mean any document, legal or otherwise, that was subject to regulations on routine reporting that demanded the sort of interlocking documentary records and summaries described above and submission for central review. Such rules and the language used in processing documents now spread to ministries beyond that of the Ministry of Punishments. By the Qianlong reign, the language and “logic” of the case had “colonized administration” (p. 183). Dykstra supports this claim by running a statistical concordance for the term “case” across the Shilu for successive
reign periods, interpreting an increase in occurrence as proof of a creeping procedural homogenization of administration.

There are problems here as well. As mentioned above, the Shilu was not a repository of historical records; it was a selective compendium of imperial edicts and as such reflected the chief concerns of individual emperors. It cannot be taken as a representative sampling of administrative documents. Also, the term an has multiple meanings, either alone or in combination with other characters, not all of which are administrative. Furthermore, her concordance does not distinguish the context in which the term occurred or to which of the six ministries the documents were related. Dykstra provides no examples outside of the Shilu of the term being used in anything other than legal cases, so we are left to accept her claim on faith. Finally, Dykstra does not consider the possibility that an increased usage of “case” in the Qianlong Shilu was the result of an actual increase in social unrest and corruption in the latter eighteenth century. Nor does she consider the Qianlong emperor’s growing, near paranoid concern that provincial officials were concealing information, so vividly documented in Philip Kuhn’s study of the sorcery scare of 1768, Soulstealers: The Chinese Sorcery Scare of 1768 (1990). Her sweeping claims of “colonization” clearly demand further explication. Until then, the concept of “caseification” remains unsubstantiated.

As suggested by her term “the Qing distributed archive,” Dykstra has created here an image of a unified imperial administration capable of tracking information and official actions from the county to the center, and thus able to hold officials at all levels accountable.[3] As the author claims: “The handing over of the registers, accounts, and property of the yamen entailed an opportunity and a responsibility to pore over every facet of the administration. Every debt, every kernel of grain stored, every purchase or sale of grain, every expense passed down by the provincial offices, every type of fund passed up by subordinate yamen, every surcharge, every tax scheme, every conversion rate, every physical office, every street, every bridge, every horse, and every postal station were subject to scrutiny” (p. 132). This is the realm of fantasy. There is absolutely no evidence that this detailed level of inspection and reporting ever took place in the field on a sustained basis.

Even the present-day People’s Republic of China, with its vastly larger bureaucracy and technological resources, has not come close to this level of control. To take but one counterexample drawn from my own work: by statute (i.e., in the Huidian), every yamen in the empire was allowed a modest quota of between thirty and forty-five clerks, who were recruited locally to work for a maximum of three years without pay and then return to their previous profession. In reality, county yamens employed hundreds of clerks, who held their positions for extended periods of time. These men made their living through fees charged to anyone having business with the yamen, either voluntary or involuntary. Though technically illegal, at the local level, such fees were an expected part of doing business with the yamen and were so standardized as to sometimes be posted outside the yamen gates. If the level of scrutiny that Dykstra claims were real, informal aspects of county government such as these could not have existed. Yet, as I have argued, it was precisely this informal level of practice that enabled the dynasty to continue. Dykstra’s portrait also suggests a free flow of information laterally across central ministries. Most studies of which I am aware, however, maintain that restrictions on such lateral transfer of information were built into the system as a safeguard against collusion among ministries.

Additionally, in a study of imperial efforts to attain certainty and control, the omission of any discussion of the formation and function of the Grand Council (junjichu), formed by the Yongzheng emperor to increase control over the central bureaucracy, is astonishing. The author here
gives no attention to the well-noted tension between the throne and the central government officials of the “outer court.” Equally surprising is a lack of attention to what is usually regarded as one of the Yongzheng emperor’s most important innovations, the further development of the secret palace memorial system devised by his father that allowed provincial officials to memorialize directly to the throne. The result was the creation of two flows of information: the palace memorials (zouzhe) sent directly to the emperor and the routine memorials (tiben) processed by the respective ministries. The function and purpose of these two types of documents were fundamental to the ability of the throne to administer the empire and secure the information necessary to control both central- and provincial-level officials. Given that palace memorials were usually written to impart the sort of extraordinary information for which the throne was increasingly hungry, it is likely that edicts recorded in the Shilu were exercised by scandalous reports delivered through the palace memorials rather than by routine administrative summaries. In short, the central ministries were not the homogenous instruments of imperial authority as Dykstra portrays but were instead crisscrossed by divided loyalties and machinations.

In her final chapters, Dykstra turns to the greatest irony of the “administrative revolution,” that efforts to attain greater amounts of information and certainty ultimately led to uncertainty and a foreboding sense of growing crisis. By the Qianlong period, massive amounts of reporting occasioned by previous reforms revealed what was seen as increased instances of malfeasance and corruption. Equally disturbing was the conviction that local- and provincial-level officials were submitting pro forma reports, suggesting that obfuscation and omission of local realities remained endemic. In other words, she states, officials were using the tools of the state to thwart state interests, so much so that the bureaucracy was coming to be seen as “the enemy within” (p. 233). In this milieu, a sense of failure and decline of the dynasty began to take hold and would remain the dominant narrative until the end of the imperial system in 1911.

How, where, and by whom was this sense of failure expressed? Dykstra cites no examples of imperial concern other than the Qianlong emperor’s aggravation over not receiving any reports for three days. Other than this, she cites a passage from Philip Kuhn’s The Origins of the Modern Chinese State (2002) regarding a growing sense of national decline among intellectuals from the 1790s forward. But Kuhn was not here attributing such perceptions to an increase in reporting. He was referring to actual events and crises of the period that led to a rethinking of the constitutional basis of the imperial state by classically educated elites in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Or, perhaps, Kuhn himself had fallen victim to the “information trap.”

This brings us to one of the most troubling elements of Dykstra’s text: the claim that the well-noted problems of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries were perceptual artifacts of the state’s search for more information—one sees what one looks for. As hinted at by her citation of Kuhn, historians have by and large fallen into line by taking these perceptions to construct a narrative of dynastic decline and failure.[4] This leads to the most glaring shortcoming of this study: the author’s utter blindness or indifference to historical context. The “administrative revolution,” the new “data ecology,” and the “epistemological shift” in relations between center and province all seem to have unfolded in a vacuum, untouched by events and developments that had decisive effects on the viability of the Qing state. There is no mention here of the Manchu-Han tension, the growing economic crises (created in no small part by the Qianlong emperor’s military campaigns and the worldwide shortage of silver), the massive increase in corruption occasioned by the Heshen affair, or the effects of population growth—land hunger, administrative overload, and the emergence of a rur-
al poverty and social crisis that would continue well into the twentieth century. Nor does the source or effect of rebellion by heterodox religious groups or ethnic minorities warrant discussion.

As stated above, the problems I have discussed in this review are but a sampling of the methodological, conceptual, and evidentiary shortcomings of this book. Along with these problems, the work is prone to misspellings, repetition, clever section and subsection titles having nothing to do with what is subsequently discussed, a thin index, and a works cited section with references that do not appear in the text, all of which should have been caught, if not by the author, then by the copyeditors at Harvard. Ultimately, the most serious shortcoming of the book is the overambitious posing of grand theoretical constructs without adequate grounding in evidence, historical context, or conversation with previous scholarship.

Notes

[1]. On page 24, for example, she states that the paperwork reforms of the Yongzheng reign were “so subtle that they have never before been discussed in scholarship” and that the Yongzheng emperor’s innovation regarding archival accountability “has gone entirely unnoticed.”

[2]. Nowhere did I state that county yamen clerks served as a personification of the evils of bureaucracy in general. Excoriation of county yamen clerks by local gentry as well as by officials was based on a number of factors, but their personification as bureaucrats was not one of them.

[3]. Dykstra further claims that such practices stretched to every corner of the empire, despite the well-known degrees of administrative autonomy granted to such regions as Xinjiang, Tibet, and Mongolia.

[4]. The author seems unaware that the traditional term “dynastic decline,” with its assumptions of cyclic patters of decay, has long been superseded in the literature by frameworks employ-
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