

CHINESE LOCAL ELITES AND INSTITUTIONAL CHANGES: THE LOCAL SELF-GOVERNMENT MOVEMENT IN JIAXING, 1905-1914

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ABSTRACT

To facilitate a comprehensive understanding of the local self-government movement, this article examines the case of Jiaxing prefecture from 1905 to 1914. It argues that the emergence of professional associations was part of the local self-government movement. There were widespread links and connections between local self-government institutions and other contemporaneous professional associations, especially the Chamber of Commerce, Education Association, Agriculture Association, and the Anti-Opium Bureau.

My research on Jiaxing also provides corrective to traditional interpretations of Chinese local elites. Traditional degrees and lineages were still important, but they were no longer major factors for the elite to form establishments, seek support, and construct identity. By participating in various professional associations, Jiaxing elites gradually began to organize themselves along with associations and take action in the name of these associations.

KEYWORDS: Local self-government, professional associations, elites, Jiangnan, Jiaxing.

INTRODUCTION

Scholars who research the local self-government movement usually tend to evaluate it from the perspective of the state, only focusing on whether the

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state succeeded or failed in controlling local elite through self-government bodies (Kuhn, 1975; Esherick, 1976; MacKinnon, 1980). However, this is merely one side of the picture. For local society where state policies were actually practiced, the local self-government movement had more complicated meanings.

This article examines the implementation of local self-government movement in one prefecture during the later years of the Qing 清 (1644-1912), hoping to facilitate our understanding of the institutional changes of late Qing local society and the way local elites organize themselves. Local self-government, as part of the topic of local governance, is still relevant in today's Chinese society.

LOCAL SELF-GOVERNMENT AS A STATE POLICY

It was commonly believed that the Cantonese diplomat Huang Zunxian first introduced the term 'self-government' (*zizhi* 自治) to China. In 1897, Huang Zunxian delivered a speech in Hunan and appealed to the Hunanese local elite to "govern your own persons and your own localities" (*zizhi qishen, zizhi qixiang* 自治其身, 自治其鄉) and manage school reform, water control, commerce, agriculture, industry, and security (Liang, 1954: 138-141). Yet the idea of local self-government did not get popularized until 1902, when Kang Youwei published his important treatise "On Citizen Self-Government" (*gongmin zizhi* 公民自治). Kang (1974: 103-130) proposed a multilevel deliberative assembly system from county administration and above. By participating in these self-government bodies, people could advance their learning and practice their political skills. Besides, local energy and resources could be directed towards modernizing tasks and building the nation. Therefore, local self-government, from Kang's perspective, was an indispensable preparation for the establishment of a constitutional government in China.

In 1908, the Qing government released its constitutional program and included local self-government as part of the preparatory schedule. The schedule suggests that every district (*xian* 縣), municipality (*cheng* 城), market town (*zhen* 鎮), and township (*xiang* 鄉) should establish local self-government bodies. One year later, specific regulations followed. According to the 1909 decree (Dongguan *guihua*, 2016), local self-government was defined as supplementary institutions to official government (*guanzhi* 官治) and should limit its role to managing local public welfare. To better

perform these tasks, each district and market town should establish its own council (*yishi hui* 議事會) and board of directors (*dongshi hui* 董事會), and the township level should also set up councils (*xiangdong* 鄉董) and deputies (*xiangzuo* 鄉佐).

LOCAL SELF-GOVERNMENT AS LOCAL PRACTICES: THE JIAXING CASE

Jiaxing is a prefecture in the northern part of Zhejiang province, bordering Hangzhou to the Southwest, Huzhou to the West, Shanghai to the northeast, and the province of Jiangsu to the north. It is necessary to first mention that, during the late Qing, Jiaxing was the name of both a prefecture and a district. Most of its districts were highly commercialized, so there were few core-periphery differences within Jiaxing prefecture. Closely related to economic prosperity were its success in producing degree holders and the presence of many prestigious families, which equipped Jiaxing with a strong elite basis. Many lineages had their family branches scattered across different districts. For my research, I will focus on Jiaxing prefecture as a whole.

In the last years of the Qing dynasty, there were three kinds of organizations: professional associations like chambers of commerce, agriculture associations, and education associations; local self-government assemblies and executive boards; and voluntary associations promoting things like physical fitness. To research the local self-government movement in Jiaxing, one needs to pay special attention to the functional delineation and interaction between these three kinds of institutions. In fact, it was the competition and cooperation between them that constituted and to a large extent shaped the movement.

NEW INSTITUTIONAL CONTEXT: THE EMERGENCE OF PROFESSIONAL ASSOCIATIONS

As part of the New Policies, the Six Boards in the capital were replaced by Western-style ministries of commerce, agriculture, education, and so on. Accordingly, on the local level, a series of professional associations emerged, such as the chamber of commerce, agriculture association, and education association. As stipulated in the government decrees, the professional associations should perform their specific functions in promoting trade, education, and agriculture.

Here, my focus is mainly on their public endeavors. For example, one of the major tasks of the education association was to promote social enlightenment among common people. A special target group was the district assemblymen. As I will elaborate below, the Qing government set some criterion regarding wealth and educational background for the candidates of district assemblies. For candidates who were qualified on the basis of property but were illiterate, the education promotion office would formulate short reading courses for them (Schoppa, 1982: 32). From here, we can see the close linkage between the self-government organs and educational associations. During the last years of the Qing dynasty, the lecturing office was a major channel for the circulation of knowledge and ideas from the elite to the general public (Li, 1992: 60). Some lecturing offices were set up by individuals, while quite many were organized by the educational associations and conducted by their members. In Xiushui district, members of the education promotion office were also responsible for giving public lectures (Chongxiu Xiushui Xianzhi: 1092). These activities directly put its educated members into contact with the general public. Professional associations were also at the forefront of nationalistic or anti-governmental activities, which drew them into wider political movements (*Shen bao*, 1907/02/23, 1907/11/07, 1910/10/04). Examples of such nationalistic activities include the anti-American goods boycott movement in 1905 and the Zhejiang railway controversy.

From scattered local gazetteer records, we can see that members of the professional associations in Jiaying were local elites with double backgrounds of degree ownership and wealth. For example, the education promotion office of Xiushui district first selected Shen Junru as their president. Shen obtained his imperial examination degree (*jinsshi* 進士) in 1903 and later spent several years studying politics in Japan. But during 1906 Shen worked mainly in Beijing and promoted the national constitutional movement, so he did not assume office. The president replacing Shen was Zhang Wengao, a provincial degree holder (*juren* 舉人) (Chongxiu Xiushui Xianzhi: 1071-1074).

Designed by the Qing government as a means to control the local elite, the professional associations were subordinate to the government, but it was not always clear exactly to which level of government they were subordinate. Sometimes, contradictions between the association and local government might arise. In 1910, leaders of the Affiliated Chamber of Commerce in Jiaying prefecture (Jiaying ACC) issued an open letter addressed to Dong Jiyou, the Zhejiang official for industrial affairs circuit (*quanye dao* 勸業道), as well as to the Hangzhou and Ningbo General Chamber of Commerce

(GCC). In the letter, the Jiaxing ACC accused Dong of attempting to stand in the way of the regular communication between local chambers of commerce and the central government by using bureaucratic formalities and thus turning respectable chamber gentry-merchants into official runners. The letter then urged the two GCCs to oppose Dong's order immediately, or organize a general meeting of chambers of commerce in the whole province to discuss countermeasures. It turned out that a few days before, the Jiaxing ACC received from Dong an order (*zha*) in red ink in which Dong claimed that the Ministry of Agriculture, Industry and Commerce had granted him the right to supervise all chambers of commerce in Zhejiang province. Therefore, the regular correspondence of the chambers of commerce with the ministry had to go through his office. This order made the Jiaxing ACC leaders very indignant, because during that time the national chambers of commerce were all directly under jurisdiction of the Ministry of Agriculture, Industry and Commerce, instead of the local government. Therefore, they thought they were supposed to receive plain "orders" from the Zhejiang government rather than ones in red ink. They also feared that this move was the beginning of more intensive official control and a loss of autonomy (Chen, 1998: 200).

Jiaxing ACC's confrontation with provincial officials indicates its relative independence and autonomy, which had much to do with its financial sources. Generally speaking, like other professional associations, the chamber of commerce had to seek money for themselves. As for the chambers of commerce, money came mainly from member merchants (*Pinghuxian Xuzhi*, 2:52).

PUBLIC BENEFIT OFFICES, DISTRICT ASSEMBLIES AND EXECUTIVE BOARDS

The local self-government movement, as part of the New Policies, was officially initiated in 1909 with the release of two local self-government decrees. However, on the local level, members of the elites began to prepare for it and established similar organizations as early as 1906, when the Qing government first listed the goal of local self-government on the schedule of constitutional reform. Created with a clear goal of promoting and preparing for local self-government, these organizations were often called 'public benefit offices' (*gongyi hui* 公益會), or 'self-government offices' (*zizhi hui* 自治會).

One of the earliest such kind of organizations in Zhejiang was established in the Xinli town of Jiaxing district in September of 1906. Ji

Tingba, a local member of the gentry with the provincial degree, was the major founder. At first, Ji Tingba, together with several other gentry members, submitted a quite ambitious proposal to the Zhejiang Provincial Governor, naming the organization a ‘local self-government office’ (*zizhi hui* 自治會) and planning to divide Jiaxing district into twenty electoral boundaries to facilitate local public management. The Provincial Governor gave an overall positive reply, yet suggested two major changes to be made. First, considering official regulations for local self-government had not been issued yet, the organization should be called ‘public benefit office’ (*gongyi hui* 公益會) like the Ningbo one, instead of ‘local self-government office’. Second, according to the Ministry of Education, the division of electoral boundaries was the responsibility of educational associations. Although a Japanese model showed that different boundaries might serve different purposes, a unanimous agreement had to be reached among the majority of Jiaxing district’s gentry before an electoral boundary division proposal could be sent to the government. It was doubtful whether Ji Tingba and several other gentry could represent other Jiaxing gentry. Considering Ji was a native of the town of Xinli, the organization should be established in Xinli instead of Jiaxing district. The Provincial Governor in the end ordered that the Xinli public benefit office should be authorized and supervised by the Jiaxing district magistrate (*Shen bao*, 1906/09/26).

The proposal made by local elites and the rather tricky reply from the Provincial Governor reveal some interesting points about the local self-government movement. First, Jiaxing local elites began to strive for local self-government in 1906, demanding for self-government of the whole Jiaxing district. Second, by 1906 the future of local self-government was still largely unclear, which could partly explain the Provincial Governor’s suggestion of calling the organizations “public benefit office” instead of “self-government office”. The “public benefit office”, which had been used for many years in describing local public institutions, was a much milder term. Third, the Japanese political model seems to have been quite influential in late Qing Chinese politics.

Following the Xinli Public Benefit Bureau, another two towns of Jiaxing also established similar bureaus. It was not until 1908, when local self-government was officially included in the constitutional program, that the name “self-government office” was used for such organizations.

Scattered local gazetteers show that these public benefit bureaus were mainly gentry-led voluntary associations. Their responsibilities—education,

commerce, local security, hygiene, and social morality—were to a large extent within the traditional roles of the local gentry. However, established in the social context of constitutional movement, these voluntary associations represented a new development of elite organizations, adapting to new needs in new times. They were also precursors of the officially-authorized local self-government organs—assemblies and executive councils—that would assume a wide range of responsibilities in local public affairs and provincial politics. From the very beginning, local self-government was closely related to provincial politics and the constitutional movement. With the opening of the Political Consultative Council in 1908, an urgent need for the establishment of provincial assemblies emerged. This greatly promoted the development of local self-government because candidates for the Political Consultative Council needed to be selected within the provincial assemblymen, while provincial assemblymen came from district-level elections.

Since October of 1908, most of the seven districts of Jiaying prefecture had begun to prepare for the elections. More often, it was mainly the professional associations that led and promoted this process. The education promotion office of Jiaying district, for example, gave out leaflets and called upon members of the gentry, merchants, and students to hold a meeting for the elections. More than one hundred people attended the meeting at the education promotion office (*Shen bao*, 1908/10/25). A few days later, another meeting was convened by the chamber of commerce and the educational association. More than two hundred representatives of various associations attended the meeting; among them were Chu Fucheng and the incumbent president of the Jiaying Affiliated Chamber of Commerce, Gao Zixin. The meeting ended with clear rules for the elections and qualifications for the candidates. It was also decided that Jiaying and Xiushui district were to manage the investigation together. The former had its office in the government office while the latter managed the investigation in the chamber of commerce (*Shen bao*, 1908/10/27). It is noteworthy that these rules and arrangements were decided by the meeting attendees instead of government officials.

By July of 1909, all the seven districts of Jiaying prefecture had already finished their elections. In July of 1909, eight district assemblymen were further selected to enter the Zhejiang provincial assembly (*Dongfang Zazhi*, 1909, 6.11; *Shen bao*, 1909/07/20, 07/26). At the same time, the assembly and executive board of districts and towns also elected their directors (*Pinghuxian xuzhi*, 2:51; *Wu-Qing zhenzhi*, 1936, 9:20b-22a). There seemed to be few differences in education and degrees between assemblymen of town and

district. Local self-government organs were not necessarily dominated by lower-degree holders. Gentry with lower degree could be elected provincial assemblymen. In a town assembly, there were provincial-degree holders and Japanese returnees.

Noticeable is the fact that many assemblymen were also participants of the various professional associations mentioned above. Before being elected the Jiaying provincial assemblymen, Shen Junru was the president of provincial anti-opium bureau and Tao Baolin actively participated in the Xiushui education promotion office. Chu Fucheng was even more active, involving himself with the Jiaying Anti-opium Bureau and the Jiaying Education Association. He was also the president of the Jiaying Affiliated Chamber of Commerce in 1909 (*Chongxiu Xiushui xianzhi*: 1082, 1092).

An interesting episode occurred during the elections. A Jiaying native, Zhu Songxiang, initiated a Zhejiang people's proposition organization (*Quanzhe Renmin Jianyi Xiehui* 全浙人民建議協會) in Hangzhou in 1909 on the basis of the decree on provincial assembly. The intention of Zhu and other co-founders was to assist and supervise the provincial assembly in the name of the people. It was quite popular and attracted many members. Zhu Songxiang then planned to found an affiliated organization in Jiaying. Many people attended its first conference, among whom wealthy merchants and local gentry were the majority (*Shen bao*, 1909/10/05).

Apart from the elections, local assemblies and executive boards also began to carry on other tasks. Councils and assemblies began to supervise public functions. The Jiaying district assembly, for example, discussed the problem of prostitution, improving public toilets, and methods of protecting crops from insects in 1911 (*Shi bao*, 1911/02/18, 03/21). These were all within the traditional elite concerns which had already been addressed by Jiaying elites in various other associations. Besides, the self-government organs were so recently established that they probably had little impact on Jiaying before the 1911 Revolution took place. These were the major reasons why scholars tend to neglect the impact of the late Qing local self-government movement on Chinese society. This is a misunderstanding of both the late Qing local self-government and local society. By the time the local self-government was formally implemented in Jiaying, public functions had already been clearly delineated among various professional associations from the chambers of commerce, educational associations, to agriculture associations. In other words, the tasks that the local self-government organs failed to carry out, or did not have enough time for, had to a large extent been performed by

the professional associations with considerable enthusiasm for several years. With a substantial overlap in membership between the assemblies and councils and the existing professional associations, the former was more likely to cooperate than to compete with the latter, thus confirming the power structures, managerial methods, and social hierarchies (Rankin, 1986: 210). The Qing town agriculture association, for example, had its office space in the town self-government office (*Wu-Qing zhenzhi*, 1936, 9: 28b).

CONCLUDING REMARKS

In 1907, *Dongfang Zazhi* (12 April 1907: 528-537) published an article named “Explaining the Meaning and Category of Local Self-government” which originally appeared in the *Zhongwai ribao*. In this article, the author argued that social organizations were also part of self-government, as long as the regulations they drafted and the independent activities they carried out were acknowledged by the state. However, the author tended to distinguish organizational self-government from local self-government because unlike the latter, the former were often macro-regional endeavors beyond a certain locality. It is unclear whether and how this article reached and influenced the nation-wide local elites who were at the forefront of professional associations and local self-government, but its arguments are noteworthy for my present analysis of the late Qing local self-government movement.

To sum up, although late Qing professional associations, as illustrated above, followed the administrative hierarchy from prefectures to districts and towns, they were also part of their macro-regional networks. Their emergence was a significant political development in modern Chinese history. Although they were originally organized by the government, they had independent financial systems, systematic methods of running affairs, and free election rights for their leaders, who were mainly chosen from local elites. They performed many local works independently and often advocated for public benefits, local self-government and a constitutional government, whether alone or together with other associations.

Participating in various associations greatly influenced the way elites organized themselves in Jiaying. Traditional degrees and lineage were still important, but they were no longer the major factors through which the elites formed establishments, sought support, and constructed identity. Local elites began to take action in the name of associations. When some

public issues occurred, Jiaying elites often sent telegraphs in the name of their associations like the Chamber of Commerce, Education Association, and Agriculture Association. Sometimes they also sent joint telegraphs with other associations. In fact, during that time, newspaper reports were more likely to use the term ‘all associations in Jiaying’ (*Jiaying ge tuanti* 嘉興各團體) than the traditional ‘the gentry, merchant, and student circles of Jiaying’ (*Jiaying shen shang xue jie* 嘉興紳商學界) to indicate the combined will of the Jiaying elites (*Shen bao*, 1908/12/08, 1910/10/11, 10/30).

The close cooperation between professional associations and the local self-government institutions could be seen from the very beginning to the formal implementation period. When Jiaying prefecture was preparing for the provincial assembly in 1908, it was the professional associations that led and promoted the election process. For the Jiaying elites, local self-government was merely one among many organizations for them to participate in local affairs and exert influence.

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