


REVIEW ESSAY

Response to George Qiao's Review of *Uncertainty in the Empire of Routine: The Administrative Revolution of the Eighteenth-Century Qing State*

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A review published in this journal claims that my first academic monograph, *Uncertainty in the Empire of Routine: The Administrative Revolution of the Eighteenth-Century Qing State* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2022), fails to meet “basic academic standards” (George Zhijian Qiao, “Was There an Administrative Revolution? Review Essay on Maura Dykstra, *Uncertainty in the Empire of Routine: The Administrative Revolution of the Eighteenth-Century Qing State*,” *Journal of Chinese History* (2023), doi:10.1017/jch.2023.19). The reviewer makes this remarkable claim not by demonstrating any egregious or particularly damning fault, but rather with an argument of preponderance, claiming that the book contains “hundreds of errors” (2). The review also contains several dubious and disturbing arguments about what constitutes good history. The flaws of those larger methodological and historiographical assertions are serious and compelling enough that they must be treated at length, separately. In this, my initial response to the review, I will constrain myself to rebutting the reviewer's false claims that the book is full of errors and that I have committed academic malfeasance.

This response first acknowledges and assesses the errors in the book successfully identified by the reviewer. It then analyzes several examples of the reviewer's many incorrect claims to illustrate how the reviewer's own mistakes, misrepresentations, and rhetorical tactics are responsible for the false attributions of faults in my work. I will demonstrate how, in order to accomplish the appearance of academic authority with no sure-footed basis in reality, the review relies upon an argumentative sleight-of-hand I call the “quibble-to-innuendo cycle.” This argumentative pattern substitutes ridicule for rigor; it is bereft of authoritative substance and stifles, rather than promotes, academic debate.

The Mea Culpa

Following the publication of the review, while the reviewer was personally sending copies of it to luminaries of the field (including an email sent to my PhD adviser with a note of apology), I immediately re-allocated time designated for other projects to investigate its claims. I would like to express an enormous debt of gratitude to the colleagues in the field of late imperial history who supported my effort to distinguish between the valid claims of

error and the false ones. I am especially thankful to the two Qing historians, neither of whom were involved in the writing or publication of my work, who volunteered dozens of hours to independently double and triple check the allegations in the review. A third colleague, just days before the draft of my response was due, reached out to offer their assessment and subsequently volunteered several hours offering feedback on “Example Four.” The generosity of these three scholars, the two other China historians who offered targeted feedback on particular sections, and the half a dozen colleagues who offered their own readings of the review and my response to it, all came together to make what would have otherwise been impossible feasible. I would also like to thank the scholars who reached out to me during this time with notes of support. Your collegiality provided morale in a moment when I felt isolated from my intellectual community.

I was able to confirm the following factual mistakes cited in the review:

- The reviewer’s re-translation of the memorial translated on page 13 of my book accurately corrects my rendering. Although the source does not contradict the point that I am making in that section, my text incorrectly characterizes what is being proposed in the original memorial. One could simply eliminate this block quotation, since the source incorrectly translated here obscures the simple assertion being offered in this paragraph, which is accurate and needs no correction.
- On page 111, I incorrectly write that the Henan Circuit was in the Grand Secretariat. It was a sub-office of the Censorate (as I remark on page 156).
- On page 122, I should have written “In each case when a suspect is transported from a neighboring province” instead of “Every time a banditry case is encountered.” This was a notetaking error in which the referenced text should have been double-checked after the paragraph was drafted.
- On page 156, I incorrectly credit Peng Zhaozhu with proposing to require provinces to submit summary memorials to the throne. In fact, he was proposing that the ministries should compile summary data based on provincial reports. This was another notetaking error on my part. A correction would involve re-writing the sentence in which this passage is cited, but would require no further emendations.
- On page 161, I accidentally wrote “Grand Council” where I should have written “Grand Secretariat.”
- On page 164, I mistakenly wrote “Grand Council” instead of “Nine Dignitaries.”
- The reference to ASMQL on page 221 should be changed to NGDK, and the references to NGDK in the footnotes on pages 207–223 should be corrected: the source is the database of the National Palace Museum. I made a global error transcribing the citations of these texts because this section was drafted in several different documents and then transferred into the body of the chapter.

I take full responsibility for the above-listed errors, and I thank the reviewer for pointing them out.

But none of these faults has any bearing on the arguments of *Uncertainty in the Empire of Routine*. Each could be corrected without disrupting the claims that come before and after. They are insubstantial mistakes.

Non Mea Culpa

I now turn to the remainder of the “hundreds of errors” that the reviewer claims to have spotted. Put simply, they are not errors introduced by the book. They are errors

introduced by the review. The space allotted to this response prohibits an exhaustive exegesis of the problems of the review. But a few examples will suffice to illustrate how the reviewer's false claims adhere to a fixed pattern I call the "quibble-to-innuendo cycle." This pattern of argumentation repeats over and over throughout the review, generating thousands of words claiming to disprove things that I never argued.

Each instance begins with a minor quibble: a problem of translation or a factual error. The reviewer then frames this quibble as conclusive evidence that I have made an inexcusable fumble that invalidates the entire book and its intellectual project. From this point in the cycle, the review claims that existing histories of Qing administration have already resolved the questions that I raise in the book. In spite of the fact that most of these interpretations can be considered true *alongside* the book's claims, the reviewer asserts that these interpretations invalidate my own.

The cycle culminates with innuendos about the limits of my mental capacity or accusations about violations of professional ethics. In these moments, ridicule and insinuation substitute for engaging critique. At the conclusion of each iteration of the cycle, then, when the reviewer's accusations reach their highest pitch, the review departs most wildly from the actual text of *Uncertainty in the Empire of Routine*. What the reader of the review confronts is not an army of facts mobilized in service of truth, but rather a legion of straw men propped up by the reviewer to illustrate the absurdity of positions that I do not take.

Example One: Straw Man Fallacy and Ridicule

Straw man argumentation is the reviewer's cornerstone bad-faith tactic. One long, elaborate example of this fallacy is the entire four-paragraph section titled "Censorial Duties in the Provinces" (12–13), which spends roughly two pages outlining the early Qing dissolution of roaming censors in the provinces. The reason that the reviewer elaborates this history appears to be an insistence that the book overlooks these early institutional innovations, incorrectly attributing the integration of censorial duties into the provincial bureaucracy solely to the Yongzheng reign. However, the book makes no such claim.

This section so fundamentally misrepresents the portion of the book being discussed (108–115, from what I can discern) that it is impossible to even identify which of my claims the author is arguing against. All of the facts and claims presented in this section of the review as corrections are already explicitly acknowledged in the text of *Uncertainty in the Empire of Routine* (44n18 and 108–109).

After purporting to refute an argument that the book does not make, the reviewer offers an alternative explanation for the phenomena being discussed by pronouncing that "Yongzheng Emperor's solution to the problem ... was *not* to standardize documentary streams of routine reporting, but rather to expand the coverage of the non-routine, secretive palace memorial system—a system with which Dykstra is apparently unfamiliar" (13).

This statement exemplifies two defining tactics of the review. First, ridicule. Every graduate student with even just a sub-field exam in Qing history is aware of the existence of the palace memorial system. Accusing me of being unfamiliar with it is absurd. It is a ridiculous and cheap insult that fails to actually impugn my credibility (since nobody could genuinely doubt that I have heard of the palace memorial system), but succeeds in setting a tone of ridicule that makes a series of jokes about my ineptitude and incompetence possible, where straightforward and direct accusations would have been immediately dismissed by discerning readers.

Second, the reviewer proclaims triumph over their own straw man by pointing out that other explanations for the eighteenth-century evolution of the Qing administration exist. To which I say: yes. The Qing operated one of the largest and most sophisticated bureaucracies in the early modern world. A full understanding of the history of the empire must take many facets into account, and the palace memorial system is one. But the fact that the development of this system of secret communication has been invoked by other historians to explain several features of Qing governance does not mean that other subjects, such as the *en masse* incorporation of in-province reporting into empire-wide routines of scrutiny, should not be studied. The reviewer is certainly entitled to their opinion that the palace memorial system explains every question that *they* have about the history of Qing administration. But it does not answer all of *my* questions, which is why I wrote *Uncertainty in the Empire of Routine*.

This combination of straw man argumentation and ridicule is the bread-and-butter offensive strategy of the reviewer (who, in another example of this tactic on page 5 of the review, concludes from a typo on page 164 of the book that I do not know how to distinguish between the executive and legislative branches of the United States government). We will see this combination deployed again in the examples to come.

Although this tactic repeatedly invokes the authority of established research in the field to lodge claims of error and incompetence, these straw man fallacies and bursts of ridicule offer no critical engagement whatsoever with the arguments of *Uncertainty in the Empire of Routine*. The reviewer's effort to invalidate rather than engage my research leads us away from dialogue or debate.

Example Two: Whataboutism

Another commonly used tactic of the review is whataboutism: the demand that I cannot be granted enough credibility to say anything without having demonstrated expertise about everything. For example, in the section "Problems and Overall Assessment" (3) the reviewer raises the concern that I do not fully and precisely describe the location of all of the component parts of the Qing central archive from the fall of the dynasty until the second half of the twentieth century. The accusations in this section suggest that, like a chain of custody for evidence in a police investigation, I should be required to account for the exact location of every imperial dossier from the fall of the dynasty until the present day if I would like scholars to treat anything I say about the history of early Qing archival practices as valid.

What is the reviewer's basis for making such an extraordinary demand? It is certainly not any claim that I have made. The prologue of the book does not pretend to provide a comprehensive survey of the provenance of the Qing imperial archives. On the contrary, this section of the introduction sketches the twentieth-century history of the Qing archive to argue that this period was an aberration in a much longer history of state control over archival documents.

The insistence that I should fully recite the provenance and possession of every document that was preserved, lost, re-acquired, collected, collated, digitized, indexed, and later made available (or made unavailable) for study before being able to say anything about the history of the Qing archive constitutes an unreasonable demand that I demonstrate expertise in affairs that are not my subject of study before being allowed to contribute my own research observations to a larger conversation. Like the straw man fallacy and ridicule noted in the first example, this tactic of whataboutism prevents academic engagement rather than promoting it.

Example Three: Misrepresentation

While the two examples above, if the reader takes the most generous possible position, may be attributed to the reviewer's failure to closely read and understand the arguments of *Uncertainty in the Empire of Routine*, the third example (11–12) shows the extent to which the claims of the review rely upon active misrepresentations of the arguments explicitly made in the book. Importantly, in this example and the other instances like it, it is the reviewer's incorrect characterization of what was and was not said in the book that serves as the foundation of false accusations of academic misconduct.

The most flagrant example of the reviewer's failure to seriously grapple with the claims of my work as it was written is their insistence that the summary memorials I describe "seem to exist only in Dykstra's imagination; she offers no proof that the paperwork that provincial administrations submitted to the central ministries had indeed proliferated during the Qianlong reign" (11). To be clear, the documentary phenomena I discuss are not discoveries of my own, but commonly observed features of Qing administration to which I am applying a new analytical language. I do not claim to have discovered that the Qianlong era witnessed an exponential growth in the size and frequency of reports; this is simply a known fact. This section of the book, then, was not trying to prove something that everyone knows. It merely uses the summary memorials of the eighteenth century as an example to illustrate how these "reports of reports" (158) both reflect and obscure the increasingly sophisticated routinizing information-gathering standards mandated by the central court.

In making the accusation that I have hallucinated or invented historical materials, the reviewer ignores the three pages of the book (157–159) that describe the methods and reasoning by which I reconstructed the reporting processes and digitization choices that led first to the creation of "mega-memorial" packets and then to their disambiguation into single digitized documents no longer linked to their original bundles. The reviewer's claim that these documents exist only in my imagination is made by expressly ignoring my recapitulation of this reconstruction of archival practices and failing to engage my transparent explanation of the reasoning behind it. Actively ignoring the text of a book under review to lodge false accusations is not simply a failure to engage work in an academic manner. It is dissembling.

Example Four: Translation Quibbles

Now that we have noted some of the most common tactics of the review—straw man argumentation, substituting ridicule for rigor, whataboutism, and misrepresentation—we will delve into two longer, more involved examples to show how these elements combine with other questionable choices of the reviewer to convey the appearance of academic authority without the substance of it.

The first example (13–15) tackles one of the most prominent themes of the review: quibbles about translation. This section will examine one of the passages critiqued by the reviewer to make two main points. First, that the reviewer's chastising remarks cannot be mistaken for justified condescension because the reviewer's own attempts to correct my translations introduce multiple errors. Second, that the review fails to shed any light on fundamental problems of translating Qing administrative texts because it chooses not to engage worthwhile questions about method and convention, instead launching false or frivolous accusations. Like the examples discussed above, the reviewer emphasizes minor technical issues for cheap (usually hollow) victories at the

cost of neglecting interesting and substantial discussion. Opportunities for thoughtful critique are passed over so that a few underwhelming quibbles can serve as fodder for innuendos of wrongdoing where no proof of such exists.

I have broken down the passage discussed on pages 13 to 15 of the review into five tables so that my original rendering and my own corrections to that original rendering are documented in the leftmost column. The middle column, “Original,” contains the Chinese text of the source as produced in the review (minus the emphasis added by the reviewer). The final column, “Review,” quotes the reviewer’s comments (Table 1).

Table 1. Differences of Translation, Section One

<i>Uncertainty</i>	Original	Review
An edict to the yamen of every metropolitan ministry and office regarding every single dossier and every single case in every one of the [capital] yamen,	諭部院各衙門。凡一應衙門卷案。	First, pay attention to the “every,” “every single,” “all,” and “each individual” in her translation, only one of which appears in the original.

The reviewer accuses me of “adding ... words” to “change ... the tone of the text” (14) by specifically pointing out my use of the terms “every,” “all,” and “each.” The reviewer is here suggesting that I have introduced content not in the original by translating a sentence-opening condition—the terms *fan* (in each case) and *yi ying* (every)—at the beginning of each object it qualifies. Other translators may have made other decisions, but my decision to carry over a condition applying to all elements of the sentence by reiterating it before each individual instance of those objects is valid. Furthermore, I do not believe that so minimal a choice of wording could do much to influence a reader’s understanding. This quibble is especially minor.

In spite of this, the reviewer uses this choice of mine to claim that I have falsified the contents of this source text to make it “sound like an urgent, passionate command” (14). But the problem with this accusation is that my book repeatedly and explicitly disavows an interest in ferreting out the motivations or feelings of individual historical actors in shaping the evolution of the empire of routine.

In the introduction to *Uncertainty in the Empire of Routine*, I warn readers that my quest to highlight routine over innovation requires me to frame the principle-agent problems of empire in aggregate rather than as millions of single choices made by tens of thousands of actors over the course of a century. This leads me to posit that, while each actor has his own ambitions and intentions, each individual’s agency aggregates in a field of textual representation bounded by the demands of standardization and legibility. As I explain:

The emperors and high officials who often take center stage in the history of the dynasty are, therefore, present in this story, but in a narrative of these dimensions, they are only partial and imperfect agents, responding to immediate needs in ways that seem reasonable enough, and yet also responsible for later unforeseen and seemingly unconnected developments. In this narrative, then, what any historical actor wanted to achieve, or was capable of, or accidentally inspired, or discovered, was the product of not only that particular individual’s action but also the further actions and reactions of myriad others with conflicting interests and working in widely differing contexts. Because these interactions could be simultaneous or

delayed and could involve other actors near or far, the responses to decisions by historical agents are necessarily contradictory. This key point—that the empire of routine emerged from a cacophony of responses to differently played roles in prolonged and large-scale administrative processes—requires that the historian’s habit of pinpointing the motivations, actions, and frustrations of each individual be set aside for a more pluralistic representation of each action and the responses to it. (20–21)

As I summarize earlier in the introductory chapter, “Although the narrative of administrative transformation at the heart of this story is full of the cat-and-mouse games played by some historical actors in their attempts to monitor and curtail the actions of others, the proper subject of this story is the mousetrap itself” (5).

Having explicitly stated that the narrative of *Uncertainty in the Empire of Routine* is not concerned with any particular individual rationale for institutional change, what motivation could I possibly have to modify texts so that they give a false impression of the passions of the Yongzheng emperor? The answer is: none. I have no motivation to have modified the original text to suggest what the reviewer claims I am suggesting. This is a minor quibble used by the reviewer to fuel an insupportable claim. An accusation as serious as fraudulently characterizing historical texts to suit an argument should not be levied without certain proof. Here there is none at all.

Table 2. Additional Text

Tentative Translation	Original	Review
<p>each of which is subject to investigation and citation by the officials responsible for maintaining [them]. All [these actions and the officials using them] entirely depend upon the existing archive as their basis. Therefore [because these stored dossiers are used in such a manner, they can be regarded as] the canonical documents that define the institutions of the dynasty and the foundation of [the operation of] the six ministries. [These archives] cannot be taken as empty letter [i.e. meaningless texts]!</p>	<p>各有典守之官稽查引據。全以舊檔為憑。此固一代之典冊。六官之掌故。不得視為具文也。</p>	

Table 2 provides a rough translation of the section of the passage that I elide from the middle of my translation. I offer this text and a tentative translation merely for the sake of completeness, in case its contents bear on readers’ interpretations of related points.

The review makes the following claim about the text featured in **Table 3**: “Dykstra misreads a string of sentences in the middle of the passage, making her translation contradict the meaning of the original” (14). The reviewer is correct that I have missed a subtlety that changes the translation of the passage. I took the verb *tuo* (脫) in the sense of “to separate from or leave,” rather than the more accurate “to be entrusted to” in this case, and *neng* (能) as “to be able” instead of “to be permitted,” which is the proper sense here. In **Table 3** I have modified my original translation by striking out the less accurate portions of the original and producing, in bold text, my own emendation. The change

Table 3. Differences of Translation, Section Two

Uncertainty	Original	Review
<p>Stored dossiers must not only be sealed—when opened up for examination and review they cannot leave the hands of the responsible scribe. Even when case dossiers are stored and safely sealed, they must be [retrieved to be] read and examined, [the result of which is that officials] cannot escape the[ir reliance upon the] handling of [documents by] clerks. Any Theft, any misplaced documents, any changed characters, might and manifold malfeasances result. And furthermore [in case of such actions] there is no basis for discovering [the malfeasance] and punishing it!</p>	<p>收貯卷案。封禁雖嚴。而翻閱查對。不能脫書吏之手。盜取文移。改易字跡。百弊叢生。莫可究詰。</p>	<p>A more accurate translation of the original should read: “Although [we] strictly closed off the archived case files, ministries have been relying on scribes to read and check them. This [the scribes’ access to documents] leads to theft and manipulation of documents. It has resulted in numerous ill effects and becomes impossible to investigate.”</p>

makes no difference to the argument being made in the book, but the reviewer’s rendering of this clause is closer to the original.

The reviewer’s translation of this passage, however, introduces new errors. The subject of this command is the archive. It is a statement with multiple clauses that spans the first and second tables, concluding only with the phrase “各有典守之官稽查引據。” Failing to have correctly parsed the sentence, the reviewer has inserted an unaccounted-for “we” in their translation. This “we” is credited with having “strictly closed off the archived case files.” Because “we” denied the ministries access to their own archives, ministerial officials are supposed—in the reviewer’s translation—to be relying on clerks for access because, for some unspecified reason, clerks are able to access the sealed archives that officials cannot themselves access.

The reviewer’s translation paints a nonsensical picture by inserting actors and assigning them agency beyond the scope of the text.

On the basis of their own inaccurate translation, the reviewer claims that “By omitting crucial information” in this passage about the Yongzheng emperor’s motivations for this reform “in the original text, Dykstra distorts the meaning and purpose of this policy to make it fit her story” (14–15). The reviewer is once more accusing me of committing academic malfeasance by modifying materials to suit a thesis that the book explicitly disavows. This is an insupportable claim.

In Table 4, I have amended my original translation of this section of the passage based on the recommendation of one of the scholars who volunteered their time to double-check my work, to apply the qualifier “new and old” (*xinjiu* 新舊) to modify the incoming and outgoing officials, rather than the archival dossiers. The reviewer missed this mistake, instead accusing me of two errors that spring from their own ignorance.

First, the reviewer asks which of these words mean “audit.” The answer is “*jiaopan* (交盤).” This common administrative term is short for *jiaodai pancha* (交代盤查) and

Table 4. Differences of Translation, Section Three

Uncertainty	Original	Review
Henceforth upon the occasion of the transfer of any administrators (incoming or outgoing) working in the ministries, all of the case dossiers for which he was responsible (both those he inherited and those he created) will be audited and transferred. Each individual [the outgoing and the incoming officials] will sign a pledge, read it aloud before his superiors, and append it to a dossier in the archive.	嗣後司官遷轉。將所掌卷案。新舊交盤。各具甘結說堂存案。	Second, there is nothing in the original about “all of the case dossiers for which he was responsible (both those he inherited and those he created) will be audited and transferred.” Which word suggests “audit” here? Furthermore, there is nothing indicating that each individual will read his pledge aloud “before his superiors.” Which characters point to the presence of a superior?

means “to interrogate and examine [upon the] transfer of office.” Audit is the most common translation of this term.

Second, the reviewer asks why I translated “*shuo tang*” (說堂) as “read it aloud before his superiors,” where no character meaning “superior” can be found in the sentence. Indeed, none of the words for “superior” appear in the text. A word-for-word rendering would read something like: each (各)—provide (具)—pledge (甘結)—proclaim (說)—hall (堂), which, if we translate it simply, would read “prepare a pledge and proclaim it in the hall.”

Why did I determine that these pledges were read in front of superiors? The word “hall” (*tang* 堂), here, refers to a space inside of a *yamen* where official business is handled. Since the decree requires that both the incoming and outgoing official must present these pledges and announce their contents in an official hall, it struck me as common sense that this scene wasn’t being played out between the incoming and outgoing officials, alone. Someone had to receive these pledges. That someone should be a superior official. I presumed (and still do) that the pledges were handed over and their contents recited in the hall of whatever superior officer(s) received them. We may yet learn that my assumption was wrong, but my original translation remains most likely, not least because the formal drafts of case files pertaining to the transfer of office would be archived (*cun’an* 存案)—the last two words of the passage—in superior offices. It stands to reason, until we uncover evidence to the contrary, that this edict requires officials to take their pledges and registers to a superior office to submit them while making a formal declaration.

Table 5. Differences of Translation, Section Four

Uncertainty	Original	Review
	如有疏失換易等弊。一經發覺。與受同罪。爾各部院衙門。急宜查核清楚。設法封貯。永杜弊端。不得因卷案浩繁。畏難退沮。其交盤事例。爾部院諸臣。公同確議具奏。尋議。各衙門卷案。俱應呈堂用印收貯。遇有查閱。滿漢司官。親身驗看。陞轉之日。出結交代。并請揀發專寫檔案筆帖式。三年無誤保送補用。從之。	On the other hand—as shown in the latter part of the original that Dykstra does not quote—the existing documents should be sealed off and kept off limits from scribes. When they are needed, the Manchu and Han officials should personally read and verify them. Why would Dykstra focus on a pledge during office transfers?

Table 5 does not include my own translation because the final sentences of this passage are not translated in the book. The reviewer claims that this text supports their own theory about the motivations of the Yongzheng emperor (which revolves around the employment of clerks). But the reviewer has inserted the word “scribes” into their translation although the original text is not specifically about these actors, being instead a general statement about malfeasance.

The reviewer then demands to know “Why would Dykstra focus on a pledge during office transfers?” (14). The short answer to this question is that the transfer of office is the subject of that section of the book. But further, in this passage we can clearly see that the transfer of office procedures is mentioned not once, but twice (although admittedly one of these mentions uses the term *jiaopan*, with which the reviewer is apparently unfamiliar).

I do not consider spotting minor errors in a translation to be proof of academic excellence. But if the reviewer wants to impugn my credibility on the basis of their own translations, those translations should be accurate.

This is my first claim regarding the reviewer’s arguments about translation: that the reviewer is not expert enough to serve as arbiter of the quality of my renderings. The second claim is even more important. The reviewer’s very definition of quality is not compelling. Differences of translation are not points to be racked up in a winner-takes-all game of expertise. The translations offered in the book were not presented as exacting character-for-character renderings and there is no reason they should be judged as such. Nothing is proven by simply demonstrating that the passages quoted in my book are not the most literal translations possible. Perhaps the problems of translation raised in this review could have been much more productively critiqued as the product of the choice I made to not render the texts as closely as possible to their literal, surface meaning. This is a choice that I still stand by, but it is a choice with a trade-off that a skilled reviewer could have teased out some of the surrounding nuance to offer up for readers’ contemplation. Instead of a rewarding discussion about the types of precision or equivalence desirable in translating administrative regulations, however, the reviewer merely picks at unimportant details to introduce their own misreading.

As this quibble-by-quibble review of just one passage illustrates, the translation of these administrative texts is a technical art whose practice relies upon a combination of linguistic precision as well as basic and sometimes provisional understandings of administrative processes, in addition to a dose of common sense (which, in spite of the name, is never commonly held). I can be accused of not treating my texts with enough precision to extract every subtle detail from the characters assembled. Be that as it may, I would assert that even though multiple of my translations might contain mistakes if they are evaluated on their merit as precise literal renderings (which is not the spirit in which they were offered), the reviewer has, once more, passed up a chance for interesting intellectual engagement to take a few pot shots.

Example Five: Smoke and Mirrors

The first four examples each highlighted specific tactics, fallacies, and types of error found throughout the review. This fifth and final example will take a different approach. Instead of demonstrating one particular trait using a specific example, it surveys a roughly three-page section of the review to demonstrate how these already highlighted features combine into a profusion of misleading claims. This section will show how, while the accusations of the review might initially seem overwhelming, what appears

at first sight to be a remarkable amount of evidence of error can be revealed, upon closer examination, as nothing more than smoke and mirrors. For this purpose, we will examine the section titled “Archival Turn in the Provincial and Local Administrations,” (15–18) which, in spite of its length, contains not a single substantive critique.

The first quibble spans the second and third paragraphs of the section. The reviewer claims that I have inadequately proved a documentary proliferation in the provinces for having given only one example in a sentence that explicitly claims to offer only a single example (“A 1723 regulation, *for example*, required that personnel hired in gubernatorial *yamen* be documented with pledges from their superior officials,” 121, emphasis added). Like the instance of whataboutism in Example Two, here the reviewer is making an extraordinary demand for proof where the text is merely offering an example.

At the conclusion of the third paragraph, the reviewer further accuses me of having “simply added” content to the regulation under discussion because “the original text never mentions ‘pledges from their superior officials.’” (15) This portion employs the tactics reviewed in Example Four: the reviewer uses a small quibble related to translation to introduce a much larger claim that I have tampered with evidence.

It is true that the command contains neither the term *ganjie* (甘結) nor the term *baojie* (保結), which are the phrases most commonly translated as “pledge.” The practice to which I am referring is the filing of registers with central ministries by the recommenders (*tuijianzhe* 舉薦者) of *yamen* underlings. If a reader takes issue with glossing this practice as filing “pledges from superior officials,” the text of the passage might be rewritten as something like “be documented with reports from their superior officials.” Regardless of which translation someone may prefer, the point being made in the text of *Uncertainty in the Empire of Routine* remains the same: the Yongzheng administration was requiring more documentation of administrative actions and personnel in the provinces.

The fourth paragraph is spent correcting an error (my translating “Every time a banditry case is encountered” where I should have translated “In each case when a suspect is transported from a neighboring province”) which was a simple mistake that in no way alters the point being made. The reviewer makes extraneous remarks about how I have “mistranslated a passage in a way that supports [my] claims” (15) but, as discussed above in Example Four, the reviewer’s claim pertains to the motivations for the regulation and does not bear on the arguments made in the book.

The fifth, sixth, and seventh paragraphs of the section accuse me of failing to understand that local protocols for the transfer of office (*jiaodai* 交代) predate the Yongzheng era, and failing to understand that these procedures could be extremely rigorous even before the eighteenth century. In fact, the point of this section of the book is that “Many innovations from [the Yongzheng] period required the documentation or formalization of local standards for administrative processes that were not determined or supervised by the central state.” (*Uncertainty*, 121) The argument is about a proliferation of standardizing central regulations about local reports, not the invention of rigorous transfer procedures at the local level, which I explicitly remark already existed prior to the Yongzheng era (124–125). This entire section of the review purports to disprove something I never claim by introducing facts that are already attested to in the text of the book. This is yet another example of the straw man fallacy.

The eighth paragraph of this section is another example of ridicule substituting for rigorous engagement. The reviewer quotes what they describe as “most puzzling paragraphs in the book,” (17) accusing me of taking “artistic liberty” when I write that:

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. (132)

To this claim, the review responds with a series of pointed questions:

Did magistrates really have the opportunity to inspect every kernel of grain? Every horse? Every street? Was it even within the magistrate's responsibilities to inspect the streets? Moreover, Dykstra never considers another significant question: did Beijing—or even provincial administrations for that matter—know anything about the contents in these transfer registers? Did all these registers compiled for the transfers ever end up in the central or provincial governments? Or did they just remain in the localities? The latter is most likely. If that was the case, how did this help the central state to gather information about the local administration? (17)

Rather than addressing a substantive issue for critique, the reviewer merely poses a series of misdirecting questions. Some are completely beyond the matter at hand; others are the main subject of discussion in the entire second half of the book.

I stand by my assertion that filing reports on local conditions made each and every one of the claims in those reports *subject to scrutiny*. Being held accountable for reports is quite distinct from the question of whether or not magistrates went to extraordinary lengths to ensure their accuracy (although many did, in spite of the fact that the reviewer finds this ridiculous).

The last several paragraphs of this section of the review illustrate two basic features of the quibble-to-innuendo cycle. First is whataboutism: the reviewer complains that in a sentence in the book summarizing several changes in the eighteenth century, I should have offered citations to more materials (specifically, to materials from the nineteenth century and later) to illustrate the assertion being made. The aims of the quibble-to-innuendo cycle are accomplished by turning a minor complaint into a sinister plot or a scandalous failure. Not every sentence in every history book contains references to every phenomenon discussed in the sentence, least of all the synoptic statements at the beginnings and endings of sections and chapters. A summarizing sentence without references is a common occurrence. It is not a smoking gun.

Furthermore, even if multiple references to eighteenth- and nineteenth-century manuals could be useful to readers, the fact that those citations are not attached to the sentence does not invalidate its claims, and certainly does not support the reviewer's accusation that the book "builds major claims almost entirely on misrepresented sources." (18) Here, as elsewhere, the reviewer demands that I prove every single statement I make to earn the privilege of offering my observations. This bad-faith assumption defines the review: it sets standards for dialogue so high that it refuses, rather than promotes, debate.

Conclusion

The review repeatedly twists minor matters of execution into insupportable accusations of academic malfeasance. Throughout, differences of interpretation and method that could have been the basis of a productive conversation about the choices and conventions that generate historical narratives are not seriously discussed, and serve merely as opportunities for derision and wild speculation.

Time and again, the reviewer fails to offer damning evidence of error or wrongdoing, resorting instead to untenable speculations and fictitious plots. The result is that the review so fundamentally mischaracterizes the book it purports to critique that it is impossible to tell from the prose of the review which arguments are actually made in the text of *Uncertainty in the Empire of Routine* and which are straw men lined up by the reviewer to stand in as easy targets of attack.

The only claims of error that can be confirmed are a handful of unremarkable mistakes. None of the central arguments or new interpretations offered in *Uncertainty in the Empire of Routine* is accurately represented, much less challenged. All that the reader (or the author of this response) has to grapple with is a confusion of underwhelming and often inexpert quibbles that fail to support the ambitious claims of the reviewer to have ferreted out an imposter among us. Frivolous argumentation takes up space that could have been dedicated to serious challenges and vigorous disagreements about the relationship between historical sources, the systems within which they evolved, and the historians who work with them that *Uncertainty in the Empire of Routine* was intended to inspire.