

Government Offices and Ranks in China

China has a very long history of highly organized government. The bureaucratic structure developed over time, and after the third century B.C. all dynasties adopted an essentially centralized bureaucratic system. Although some Chinese political theorists did long for the pristine days before bureaucratic government, the utility of the system ensured its durability. When you are reading Chinese literary and historical texts (or scholarly writing about them), you will certainly come across references government bureaus, offices, and official ranks. The remarks below are designed to give you some familiarity with the basic terminology associated with traditional government in China. We will not here deal with the terminology of the modern period.

Unfortunately, the very success of the bureaucratic system in China makes this topic quite complicated. Unlike Japan, where the bureaucratic ranks presided over by the imperial court quickly became primarily formal status markers, the Chinese bureaucracy actually functioned as a government. It therefore continued to evolve throughout its history. Official posts were created as necessary and occasionally unnecessary ones were eliminated. Sometimes bureaus and posts were renamed or the responsibilities were shifted between them. The result is that it is not really possible to construct a chart of bureaucratic ranks that would cover the entire imperial period. Nevertheless, there are some general principles that will make the system somewhat more comprehensible.

The Rank System

Generally speaking, Chinese officials were ranked according to the relative prestige and importance of their duties. Such a system had already appeared by the third century B.C. but reached maturity in the seventh century under the Tang dynasty (A.D. 618-907). Officials worked their way up through nine ranks (*pǐn* 品) with rank 9 designating the lowest and rank 1 the highest. The nine ranks were further divided into two classes, *a* (*zhèng* 正) and *b* (*cóng* 從). Each class of ranks 4 through 9 was further divided into upper (*shàng* 上) and lower (*xià* 下) grades. There were thus 30 separate grades with the highest rank was thus designated 正一品 (1a in common notation) and the lowest 從九品下等 (9b2). The specific offices held by government officials all had a corresponding rank in the 30 grade system.

Noble Ranks

All of China's imperial dynasties had a system of noble titles with which it recognized the status and contributions of important individuals. There were five noble titles that were particularly important. These were Prince (*wáng* 王), Duke (*gōng* 公), Marquis (*hòu* 侯), Viscount (*zǐ* 子), and Baron (*nán* 男). The first is a bit tricky since it changed over time. In ancient times *wáng* was the title of the ruler of a state. It is therefore often rendered as "king." However, after the creation of the centralized imperial system, it was used instead as a title for an Emperor's (*huángdì* 皇帝) sons. Only occasionally was it given to very special officials outside of the imperial family.

Other Rank Systems

Although the military was never as prestigious in China (at least among the political elite) as it was in Japan, the imperial system did include a complex set of ranks for the military and its administrative offices. There were also ranks that were used specifically for women. The Emperor's wives, for example, all had titles with ranks as did their servant women. There were also noble titles that were given to wives of worthy officials. In other words, the idea of indicating status with ranked bureaucratic offices and titles was pervasive in traditional China.

The Central Government Organs

The complexity of the Chinese imperial bureaucracy at any given time and the continual evolution that it experienced make it almost impossible to give a brief description of the bureaus and their key officials. Nevertheless, there are some organs that are so important that you are likely to run across them even in casual reading about China's traditional period.

Emperor: Prior to 1911, China had a monarchical government. With the establishment of the Qin 秦 dynasty, absolute power was theoretically vested in the Emperor. The Emperor's title was formally *huángdì*, but it was also common to refer to him as the "Son of Heaven" (*tiānzi* 天子) since he was believed to possess the "mandate of Heaven" (*tiānmìng* 天命) to rule.

Prime Minister: During most reigns, there were one or more high-ranking officials who were the Emperor's close advisors. They held a variety of official posts in the administrative hierarchy, but were informally designated as *xiāng* 相 or *zǎixiāng* 宰相.

Six Ministries: The core of the traditional imperial system was the so-called Six Ministries. These were responsible for the administration of important aspects of government. Designated as *bù* 部, they included the ministries of Rites (*lǐ* 禮), Personnel (*lì* 吏), Revenue (*hù* 戶), War (*bīng* 兵), Public Works (*gōng* 工), and Justice (*xíng* 刑). The ministries were headed by a Minister who was assisted by Vice Ministers. The ministers were ranked between 1b and 3a depending on the period, while the Vice Ministers fluctuated between 2a and 4a. Each of the ministries supervised subordinate bureaus that handled specific tasks associated with the area of the ministry's responsibility. The ministries themselves were classified in various ways that emphasized their relative prestige during the different dynasties.

Censorate (yùshǐtái 御史臺): This was another famous (and important) wing of traditional government. Its main job was to provide oversight of the bureaucracy. It was charged with notifying the Emperor of any misbehavior among officials. Over time it evolved an elaborate structure that included provincial branch offices

to investigate officials outside of the capital. It was generally headed by one or two Censors-in-Chief (rank from 1a to 3a) assisted by two Vice Censor-in-Chiefs (rank 2a to 5a).

Hanlin Academy (hànlínyuàn 翰林院): This was only one of a number of imperial academic institutions. The Hanlin Academy was established in the eighth century and thereafter was a prestigious appointment. It was not a school; the Academicians provided the Emperor with a staff of academically talented individuals he could call on as the need arose.

The Civil Service Examination System

One other area of government titles you are likely to run into concerns the examination system that was used to recruit officials into the imperial bureaucracy. The system had more or less reached its mature form by the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644). From that time, the system consisted of three levels of examinations that were repeated every three years. Passing the local examination earned the candidate the “degree” (or status) of *shēngyuán* 生員 (often rendered as “licentiate”). The next examination was taken either in the provincial capitals or the national capital and conferred the degree of *jǔrén* 舉人 (literally “raised person”). Finally, the *jǔrén* could take examinations in the capital. If they passed those, they would become *jìnshì* 進士 (“presented scholars”).

The Problem of Translation

I hope that it will already be obvious to you that there is a lurking problem you will encounter when you deal with official ranks and government offices in China: the problem of translation. Different scholars have adopted different translations for the same Chinese term depending on the characteristics of the period they study, the discipline in which they are writing, and their own personal translation proclivities. Let me give a couple of examples:

The Six Ministries are routinely translated as the Six Boards by scholars of the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911) because during that time the leadership of each *bù* was shared between ethnic Manchu and Chinese officials. Thus, to early Western scholars, they looked more like boards than ministries. That usage has stuck.

The position of Prime Minister is even more complicated. Depending on the period and scholar, you may run across Prime Minister, Grand Counselor, or other variations. In general, you will have to read the context carefully to figure out if the reference is to the high level imperial advisor known as *xiāng*. If you have doubts, you can read Hucker’s introduction (see below) to the period in question.

Let me say one last thing on translation. Official titles in China generally attempt to balance three different impulses: tradition, utility, and poetic sensibility. In other words, while some official titles make the function explicit (e.g., District Magistrate, literally “district commander”), others preserve earlier usage even though their function has

changed. For example, the term for the Censorate (*yùshì*) is an old term meaning “royal scribe.” One has to choose the translation based on the functions of the office thus designated during the period being studied. There are also terms that have always been poetic. In these cases, the choice is between rendering the title literally (and therefore risking a certain silliness) or choosing some more mundane translation to convey the bureaucratic feel of the office (think here about the distinction in English between the titles judge and justice). An example from China is the Hanlin Academy. Its Chinese title translates literally as the “forest of writing brushes courtyard.” Such a translation, however, is neither elegant nor conveys the function of the office, thus it is common to simply use Hanlin.

Resources

By far, the most accessible source in English for figuring out what offices did during which periods is the following dictionary:

Hucker, Charles. *A Dictionary of Official Titles in Imperial China*. Stanford: Stanford University Press. 1985.

This work contains brief introductions to government organization for each dynastic period. The main body of the dictionary then lists, by pronunciation in the Wade-Giles romanization system, many of the offices and official titles used during China’s imperial period. A particularly useful feature of the work is Hucker’s decision to indicate the way the usage of each entry changed over time. His English translations attempt to capture the functional evolution of the titles. However, he also provides the translations that earlier scholars have used. Although it is not absolutely complete and flawless, it is a remarkably useful achievement.

Government Offices and Ranks in Japan

When we read Japanese history and classical Japanese literature, we read of emperors, retired emperors, empresses, ministers, regents, lords, etc. Sometimes there are multiple empresses, and certainly multiple ministers. Later on, during the medieval and Tokugawa periods, we read of shōgun, daimyō, and various ranking samurai. What do all these ranks mean? Without an appreciation of who stands where, it is hard to understand the gravity of any situation (those of you who have spent any time in a Japanese environment know that this is true even today). There is a very detailed description of ranks in Miner's *Princeton Companion to Classical Japanese Literature*, which you are encouraged to read, although it is easy to get lost in the explanations. There is also a bilingual chart available from the course web site at <http://www.albany.edu/eas/205/rank%20chart.htm>. This is a quick-and-dirty summary of that information:

There was a formal system of ranking in the government, designated in a series of promulgations beginning with the Taihō Code in 701. The men who held these positions were usually members of the nobility. There were some positions integral to the function of the nobility that were NOT part of this system, though, so although the two systems overlap, they are not concentric.

Nobility

- Emperors/Sovereigns (*tennō* 天皇): This is the person who was actually “on the throne” at any given time. This rank was NOT obtained through primogeniture, it was appointed. That said, often it was the son of the emperor who followed in the imperial line. The emperor was also a shintō shaman, so his position was both political and religious.
- Cloistered Emperors (*insei* 院政) : this is the general term which refers to the retired emperors. There were, however, categories of retired emperors. Abdicated emperors were called *daijō tennō* 太上天皇 or *daijōkō* 太上皇 or *jōkō* 上皇. If an emperor abdicated to take religious vows, he would be called *daijōhōō* (太上法皇 or 太上法王).
- Empresses/consorts (*kōgō* 皇后 or *chūgū* 中宮): As Miner notes, “Marriage customs were extraordinarily complex and varied over the centuries,” so you have to be careful about what you’re reading and when it was written when making judgment calls on empresses or consorts. There could be more than one empress at a time, but they would be ranked nonetheless (often by seniority). There could also be more than one consort. Both empresses and consorts would produce children for the emperor. Empresses of retired emperors (often called “empress dowagers” in English) had the title *kōtaigō* 皇太后 or *taikōtaigō* 大皇太后.
- Regents (*sesshō* 摂政): the regent tutored, advised, and administered for a child emperor/empress. The regent was usually a relative of the emperor/empress.
- Chancellors (*kampaku* 関白): the chancellor was similar to the regent, but usually was not related.

- Princes (*shinnō* 親王)/princesses (*naishinnō* 内親王): Not all children of the emperor were given this title. A child of the emperor could be designated a member of the Minamoto 源 family, or the Taira 平 family instead. These clans were created as spin-offs, if you will, of the imperial line. More on the creation and use of surnames will be covered in the unit on names.
- High Nobility (*kugyō* 公卿 or *kuge* 公家): a small group of men (less than 30). These men attended the emperor. They held the top governmental ranks (see below).
- Attendant Nobility (*tenjōbito* 殿上人): a larger group (between 25 and 100) who were attendants or courtiers to the emperor. They held the lower governmental ranks.
- Lesser Nobility (*jige* 地下): They held the lowest governmental ranks (see figures 9-1 and 9-2 in the *Companion*). There were hundreds of these, and they really did the bureaucratic work of the government.

Governmental Ranks

There was a ranking system in place before the one described below: first there was the *Kan'i jūnikai* system 冠位十二階 (603), then the *Yakusa no kabane* 八色の姓 “System of eight cognomens” (684), but these were short-lived. These ranks described below were determined for the most part by the Taihō Code 大宝律令(701) and the Yōrō Code 養老律令(718). Overall, the system is categorized under the Ritsuryō system (律令制), i.e., if you want to research it further, that is where you would begin. The Ritsuryō was more than just the divisions of ranks, though—it was Japan’s attempt to organize the country and emulate Tang China, and included a tax structure based on geopolitical units determined by the system.

Unfortunately, Japan did not have the infrastructure and political organization to maintain this system past the mid-Heian period. So, although the ranks discussed below still existed, the real people in charge after 1185 are either the regents or the samurai (the shogunate).

Major ranks in court, in descending order, are:

- Emperor (*tennō* 天皇)
- Prime Minister (*daijōdaijin* 太政大臣)
- Major Counsellor (*dainagon* 大納言)
- Middle Counsellor (*chūnagon* 中納言)
- Lesser Counsellor (*shōnagon* 小納言)
- Senior Secretary (*daigeki* 大外記)
- Junior Secretary (*shōgeki* 少外記)

There are often divisions within these ranks, designated “left,” “right,” and “center” in that order. For example, in the Prime Minister’s office, there was a Great Minister of the Left 左大臣, a Great Minister of the Right 右大臣, and a Great Minister of the Center 内大臣.

There were eight general rank divisions, with further sub-divisions (see chart). The top three divisions were held by members of the upper aristocracy (*kuge*), and those positions were coveted.

Ranks were not gained through the sort of extensive examination system promulgated by the Chinese and Koreans. Members of the aristocracy could be “promoted” for any number of reasons (but usually meritorious deeds). Promotions were generally signed off on by the emperor or regent.

Ministries (*shō* 省)

There were eight ministries, four on the “right” and four on the “left,” each of which had subdivisions of bureaus (*ryō* 寮) or offices (*tsukasa* 司). These covered both issues dealing with the care and management of the imperial family, and also governmental/academic concerns.

Military Ranks

After the Heian period, the samurai class became much more prominent, eventually eclipsing the power of the imperial family. The samurai, being a military organization, naturally had ranks. The top rank was the *shōgun* 將軍, under whom served many *daimyō* 大名. The power wielded by the *shōgun* over the centuries varied widely, and cannot be dealt with here. See the *Companion* pp. 471-473 for details.

Eventually, the samurai class infiltrated even the top three tiers of ranks, thus effectively taking over the power structure of the country. The ranking system, along with the class divisions of the Tokugawa period (samurai, peasant, artisans, and merchants) were abolished in the Meiji Restoration.

Resources

One can find charts of the Ritsuryō ranks in the *Princeton Companion to Classical Japanese literature* along with an accompanying prose explanation. However, putting the two together in your mind can be quite difficult. There are also charts in most dictionaries of classical Japanese (*kogo jiten* 古語辞典), but they are not bilingual. There is no equivalent in Japanese studies to Hucker’s work on ranks in China. The online course chart (see above) is the only bilingual chart I know of.

Government Offices and Ranks in Korea

Koreans have historically based much of their political structure on the Chinese model. However, as the Chinese model changes much over time (see above), so does the Korean. This means that we can't easily produce a chart like the Japanese can of important governmental ranks that is applicable across eras.

The first notable event was the centralization that was promulgated in 520 AD. According to Ki-Baik Lee, “although its provisions are not known with certainty, it is believed to have included such basic regulations as those delineating the seventeen-grade office rank structure.”¹ This system instituted the “bone-rank” (*kolp'um* 骨品) system. The “bone-rank” system was based on hereditary bloodline. As Lee described, “There were two levels of so-called bone-rank itself, ‘hallowed-bone’ (*sōnggol* 聖骨) and ‘true-bone’ (*chin'gol* 眞骨), and in addition six grades of “head-rank” existed, “head-rank six” down through “head-rank one.”² As in Japan, being a member of the nobility was not the same as holding an official rank, but being the former entitled one to certain ranks (and excluded one from others). Below is a chart of the Relationship of Bone-Rank Gradations in Silla to Office Rank and Post, from *A New History of Korea* by Ki-baik Lee:

| | | | | | | | | | |
|-------------------------|---------------------------|---------|----------|---------|------|------------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|
| 1. Ibōlch'an 伊伐漚 | | | | | | | | | |
| 2. Ich'ōkch'an 伊尺漚 | | | | | | | | | |
| 3. Chapch'an 迎漚 | | | | | | | | | |
| 4. P'ajinch'an 波珍漚 | | | | | | | | | |
| 5. Taeach'an 大阿漚 | | | | | | | | | |
| 6. Ach'an 阿漚 | | | | | | | | | |
| 7. Ilgilch'an 一吉漚 | | | | | | | | | |
| 8. Sach'an 沙漚 | | | | | | | | | |
| 9. Kūppōlch'an 級伐漚 | | | | | | | | | |
| 10. Taenama 大奈麻 | | | | | | | | | |
| 11. Nama 奈麻 | | | | | | | | | |
| 12. Taesa (Taesaji) 大舍知 | | | | | | | | | |
| 13. Saji 舍知 | | | | | | | | | |
| 14. Kilsa 吉士 | | | | | | | | | |
| 15. Taeso (Taeoji) 大鳥知 | | | | | | | | | |
| 16. Soo (Sooji) 小鳥知 | | | | | | | | | |
| 17. Chowi 造位 | | | | | | | | | |
| The 17 Office Ranks | Yōng 令 | Kyōng 卿 | Taesa 大舍 | Saji 舍知 | Sa 史 | True- bone | Head- rank 6 | Head- rank 5 | Head- rank 4 |
| | Posts (in the Ministries) | | | | | Bone-rank Grades | | | |

¹ Ki-Baik Lee, *A New History of Korea*, Edward Wagner, trans. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1984), p. 49.

² *Ibid*, p. 49.

In the late 10th century, during the Koryŏ era, the administrative structure of the government was based on the “Three Chancelleries” (Samsŏng 三省) system. Note here that the character translated as “chancellery” (省) is the one that Japanese translate as “ministry” and Chinese translate as “province.” Be careful about this confusion in terms! Two of the chancelleries were merged and “consisted of directors holding rank two or above who made policy decisions, and undersecretaries of rank three or below who were entrusted with the functions of proposing policy.”³ The third chancellery the “Secretariat for State Affairs” (*Sangsŏsŏng* 尚書省) had six boards: Personnel, Military Affairs, Taxation, Punishments, Rites and Public Works. On the same level as the three chancelleries was the Royal Secretariat (*Chungch’uwŏn* 中樞院) which both transmitted royal commands and handled some military matters. Members of a small aristocracy populated the positions in these chancelleries and boards, much like was the case in the bone-rank system. The Three Chancelleries and the Royal Secretariat together were known as the “Privy Council” (*Chaech’u* 宰樞).

A notable event in terms of ranks in Korea is the promulgation of the National Code (*Kyŏngguk taejŏn* 經國大典) in 1471. This marked the beginning of Yangban 兩班 culture and society of the Chosŏn period. The Yangban state included a much larger aristocracy than the Bone-rank system or the Three Chancellery system. It was under the Yangban state that civil examinations became key to obtaining a governmental post—one couldn’t just get such a post through one’s bloodlines. In this system, the top office was the State Council (*Ŭijŏngbu* 議政府). The State Council was the successor to the Privy Council (see above), although it was smaller and its role in the government eventually declined.

Also an important body during this time were the Six Ministries (*Yukcho* 六曹). Once again, note that the term translated here as “ministry” is NOT the same as the “ministry” we saw in Japan. These ministries covered the same areas as the Six Boards in the Koryŏ era, but were politically much more influential. The Royal Secretariat during this time had a different title, the *Sŭngjŏngwŏn* 承政院, but was still a conduit of information for the royal family.

Much changed in the modern era, specifically during the reign of King Kojong (1864-1907). The new governmental organization differed dramatically from any of the traditional, Sinic models. One of the appendices of Kyung Moon Hwang’s manuscript (forthcoming from Harvard Univ. Press) charts these changes—it is available at <http://www.albany.edu/eas/205/korean%20govt.pdf>.

Resources

Perhaps the most comprehensive source is James Palais’ *Confucian Statecraft and Korean Institutions* (University of Washington Press, 1996). This has a glossary that contains translations of government offices.

³ Ibid, p. 113.