

Chinese Price and Wage Data of the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries:
Availability and Problems

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Abstract

In this report on work in progress I will outline heuristic problems with Chinese wage and price data. Since I participated in a research project on state and handicrafts in Peking in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the price and wage information I have gathered mainly concerns the urban crafts.

State manufactories

In Chinese craft historiography, the crafts in the service of the state and those producing for the private market are treated separately. I will follow this convention because the material and the quality of the respective sources differ considerably. For the Ming (1368-1644) and the Qing (1644-1911) dynasties, the first compendia for inquiry into administrative matters of the state are the **Collected Statutes** (*huidian*). I will discuss show the basic information contained in both concerning wages of artisans in the state service to highlight the following problems:

1 - In the Ming dynasty, the age-old system of registration of the artisans as households with specific corvée obligations gradually declined and was replaced by tax payments. In consequence, much space in the Statutes is devoted to the statement which region owed the central government corvée service in which quantity of time and manpower, and what it cost to feed the artisans if they arrived in the capital for their one-month to three-month shifts. After the mid-sixteenth century, we find specifications of the tax rates the central government expected from the artisans. However, at least in the Ming Statutes, information on the wages of artisans hired on the free market or those in the state workshops are scarce.

2 - The Qing statutes are more specific about the wages of the individual artisans, either those hired by the state for single projects or those with lifetime positions. These data give clues about high-end wages for artisans between 1659 and 1736.

3 - In the Qing statutes before 1723 the wages were given in silver only, but were most probably converted and paid out in copper. However, from 1723 on, the exchange rate is mentioned as well as the exact amount of copper cash paid for each workday.

More specific information than in the Collected Statutes is contained in the **Regulations and Precedents** (*zeli*). This type of official compilations was set up for all branches of the central government. These regulations were norms that were first and foremost set up for the officials who controlled production and construction at court and for the state. They set up quality standards and specifications of the constructed or produced objects, and the work time required for certain work processes, sometimes for skilled and unskilled labour. Prices for materials and wages can be found here and there. The most systematic statistics of this type is the 1769 *Wuliao jiazhi zeli* (Regulations and precedents on the prices of materials).¹ The prices and wages mentioned here were those which provincial administrations could get reimbursements for from the Ministry of Finance. The preface states that these were market prices at medium market activity, but comments in the text suggest that the market prices actually were higher.

Other regulations and monographs on government manufactories that include price and wage information concern, for example, the Suzhou silk weaving and dyeing manufactories (*Jiangnan zhizao ju zhi*, 1686), the government mints (*Hubu guzhu zeli*, 1766), several works on dike building of the early nineteenth century (*Hegong zeli zhangcheng*), or shipbuilding (*Qinding Zhejiang sheng waihai zhanchuan zeli*) around 1790.

Similar works have existed in the Ming dynasty, and one of them, the *Gongbu changku xuzhi* (What should be known about the storehouses of the Ministry of Public Works) from 1615, is still extant and contains price and wage data, too. As far as I know it has never been analyzed and might prove a worthwhile field of enquiry.

Archival materials for the greatest part still await exploration. So far, mainly grain price reports have been used and analysed by a fair number of Chinese and international researchers. But the First Historical Archives in Peking also harbours wage accounts for the government manufactories, and perhaps also for private enterprises.

Prices and wages in private enterprises

For exploring wages and prices in private enterprises, the obvious approaches are either **regional** or **sectoral**.

China has a rich tradition of **local and regional gazetteer** writing. The newest editions of gazetteers are being written presently. Unlike the Ming and Qing dynasty gazetteers, modern editions generally contain wage and price data. Most of these are confined to the period after

¹ *Databases on Materials, Wages, and Transport Costs in Public Construction in the Qianlong Era*. <http://www.uni-tuebingen.de/sinologie/project/shp/databases.html>. The provinces included so far are Zhili, Gansu, and Hunan.

the founding of the People's Republic of China, but especially for provincial gazetteers, specialized compilers also collect and sometimes edit historical price and wage materials, as in the case of Sichuan. Regional or provincial archives may contain further unpublished accounts, but as a rule, the use of **regional or provincial archives** is more restricted than that of the First Historical Archives. Personal networks are of great importance for gaining access to unpublished material in local archives.

For a sectoral approach, **materials in guild houses** contain price and wage regulations in varying concentration. Published editions of stele texts are available for the guild houses in Peking, Shanghai, Suzhou, and Foshan; most of these concern the nineteenth century, but some data from the eighteenth century may also be available. Moreover, it will be useful to consult **modern craft monographs**, which may again be concentrated to one region and therefore be considered to be „local monographs“ in the widest sense.

To date, there are few **published collections** of relevant wage data. One of those is Peng Zeyi's 1962 collection *Zhongguo jindai shougongye shi ziliao*, 1840-1949 (Materials for modern Chinese craft history, 1840-1949). Its title notwithstanding, it also contains about 130 wage data for the seventeenth and eighteenth century for 14 craft sectors and for all Chinese regions.

To sum up, rice prices and the prices and wages in public construction form well-known and easily available series. Prices and wages from private enterprises can be culled from present-day collections, gazetteers, and guild materials. However, they do not constitute uninterrupted series. It can be surmised that the national and local archives have more in store than is known at present, and that in the course of intensified regional and national historiography, these materials will come to light in the near future.