

Police constables in Beijing during the Qing period:

The social status of *fanyi* and *buyi*

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This article deals with police functions in Beijing during the Qing period, in particular, the realities facing police constables who made actual criminal arrests (*fanyi* 番役 and *buyi* 捕役) and their position in the social hierarchy. *Fanyi* were affiliated with the office of the commander-general of the metropolitan infantry and *buyi* with the office of the vice-commander and chief of police in the wardens' offices of Beijing's five wards.

Both *funyi* and *buyi* were strictly designated as low caste occupations (*jianyi* 賤役), to the extent that regulations were enacted during the Jiaqing 嘉慶 and Daoguang 道光 eras (1796-1850) to suppress attempts at upward social mobility among the families of *funyi* to pass civil examinations and gain bureaucratic appointments. This extremely low status recognition was one of the reasons for the reduction of recruits for the position of *funyi* and the force's understaffing, while *buyi* also suffered from understaffing and subsequent overwork. This insufficiency in staffing made it necessary for these officers to rely on the support of private collaborators, some of whom proved to be characters using unlawful and brutal tactics. The Qing government attempted to ban their employment in law enforcement, but to no practical avail.

One of the ramifications of the low status accorded to Beijing's police constables was their association with the city's criminal element. During the Daoguang era (1821-1850) in particular, government official decried the worsening of security within Beijing, citing alliances between police constables and local criminals as one of the main causes. However, generally speaking, the association between perpetrators of crimes and those hired to arrest them was assumed to be one of the necessary evils of law enforcement on the ground, and thus to some extent was tacitly recognized with administrative circles.

The need for police constables to rely on private collaborators and their

association with criminals were by no means separate issues, for both reflected the structural problems of persistent understaffing and overwork within their ranks. In other words, in Qing period Beijing the maintenance of law and order on the street relied on the utilization of personal social relationships.

Therefore, rather than indicating a sudden breakdown in law and order on the streets of Beijing, the fuss over the association of police constables with local criminals raised during the Daoguang era brings to light a characteristic feature of governance and the formation of the social order during the Qing period as whole.