The magistrate's "tael" of the title of Madeleine Zelin's study refers to the exchange unit of one ounce of silver that was used during the Ch'ing dynasty as the official currency for paying tax assessments. The "magistrate" was the official in charge of county administration, whose duty it was to supervise the collection of local taxes from the landowners in his jurisdiction. There were some fourteen hundred counties in the 1730s, and their magistrates were the crucial link in the chain that drew a percentage of the profits of China's farms to the treasuries of the court in Peking. Most magistrates had passed the highest levels of China's state examinations system, so they may be considered learned men, at least in the intricacies of Confucian textual history, even if they did not necessarily have much financial or administrative experience before taking office.

Professor Zelin concentrates on the period of the emperor Yung-cheng, who ruled China from 1723 to 1725. Like other scholars before her, she sees Yung-cheng as a talented and vigorous imperial reformer, with a passion for administrative detail and efficiency; she has little to say about the emperor himself, but she goes far beyond these scholars in her financial analysis, since she was able to make extensive use of the financial archives of the period that are stored partly in the Palace Museum collection in Taipei and partly in the Number One Historical Archives in Peking. The result is a meticulous and, to the specialist, wholly engrossing study of the interconnections between imperial decision making and the rural revenue collection system.

Far from accepting any clichés about a stagnant China, Zelin writes that we "must learn to look at China in the late-imperial period as a dynamic state, struggling to devise its own formula for rational and efficient bureaucratic rule." She finds evidence for this dynamism in the relationship between emperor Yung-cheng and financial specialists like T'ien Wen-ching, and their decision to work out a system that would impose a standard surcharge on the basic land tax. Though this may not sound dramatic to us today, Zelin argues persuasively that it had the greatest importance in the 1720s. What was at issue was the creation of a workable tax base for China's separate provinces, so that they would have sums of money available to pay adequate salaries to the magistrates, and to undertake important local work projects for irrigation, land improvement, communications, and education. By retaining...
this money in the provinces, peasant proprietors would be spared a myriad special levies and illegal exactions, while local administrators would be freed from the delays and dishonesty of the centralized bureaucracy, and be able to devise imaginative and independent programs which—cumulatively—would strengthen the country as a whole.

The changes were carried through most effectively in the northern and northwestern provinces, particularly Shansi, Honan, Chihli, and Shensi; here the landholdings were on a small scale and tax collection and supervision were relatively simple. In the southwest, and on the southeast coast, things were more difficult: the provinces had low tax bases to begin with, and a number of special costs to bear, including the pacification of aboriginal populations and the maintenance of coastal defense. And especially in Kiangnan—comprising the two east Yangtze provinces of Kiangsu and Anhwei, traditionally the richest area of China and one with powerfully entrenched landlord special interests—the emperor and his staff ran into virtually insuperable problems of local resistance.

In The Magistrate's Tale Professor Zelin describes the types of resistance and the efforts of the imperial squads of over seventy skilled bureaucrats to push through fair reforms. Her chapter on these matters is a splendid example of sustained investigative scholarship, as she leads the reader into the realms of proxy and overlapping registrations, manipulation of famine rice and timber sales, clerical embezzlement, false flood reports, secretly coded tax record books, jiggled receipt stubs, and crooked mortgage documents. (It should be assigned reading for anyone seeking to reform tax systems today.)

In her conclusion to this chapter, which sets the scene for the failure of the tax reforms later in the eighteenth century, Zelin notes that the Ch'ing reformers could never have got their way "without a vastly expanded bureaucracy capable of supplanting the informal networks of local power." This the society could neither tolerate nor afford. By the end of the eighteenth century in China "rational fiscal administration was dead, and informal networks of funding once again became the hallmark of the Chinese bureaucracy," though now the population was over 300 million, and the fragmentation of peasant holdings and the commercialization of the economy were proceeding apace.

Professor Philip Huang's analysis of the peasant economy enlarges on this story and gives it a rather different emphasis. Like Zelin, Huang, a professor at UCLA, sees major changes occurring in eighteenth-century China, most importantly in the development of a growing distance between the rich peasant managerial farms that hired labor, on the one hand, and, on the other, the poor peasants and agricultural workers who sold their labor. Huang sets his changes against the background of a growing population, inheritance that was divisible, changing crop patterns, and selective development of commercial farming, particularly of cotton. He concludes that there is "no question that the small peasant economy of North China underwent dynamic change long before China's contact with the modern world economy."

In several ways Professor Huang's analysis is richer than Professor Zelin's, since he concentrates on a far longer period and goes into immense detail about a number of rural communities in north China—specifically in Hebei province and western Shandong. (Huang prefers the new "pin-yin" romanization. These provinces were originally rendered as Hopch and Shantung.)

He was able to extract such detailed information by an ingenious use of sources. Starting with the extremely thorough surveys made under the auspices of the Japanese South Manchurian Railway Company between 1915 and 1942 (the "Manetsu surveys"), Professor Huang compiled data on thirty-three villages which could be classified into seven different categories according to their levels of commercialization. He then received permission to go to several of the same communities in the early 1980s, to study the land-use patterns under the People's Republic, and to interview peasants about the details of past landholding and cropping patterns. In the Ch'ing dynasty archives in Peking he examined the cases presented before the Board of Punishments involving homicides related to land use and tenancy for the region during the eighteenth century (most especially during 1736, 1737, and 1796) as well as the Baodi (Paoli) county punishment office archives as these related to problems of rural tax collection between 1800 and 1911.

Professor Huang's book is extraordinarily rich, and I believe it to be the best sustained study of rural north China yet written. He is interested in a great many theories concerning peasant production and entrepreneurship, and he leads us through the technical literature on these topics with clarity and fairness. He evokes the ecological setting of the region from dry upland to marshy lowland, noting the wells, the irrigation works, the patterns of settlement, and the strength (or lack of it) of lineages. He analyzes the effectiveness of labor use on managerial farms in the 1930s, and then backtracks to study the development of such farms in the early Ch'ing dynasty, the relationship of "hired worker-serfs" on great estates to freeholders, and the class composition of the landholding class as a whole. He looks at the steady growth of tenancy, the parceling out of holdings, the social relations between small landlord and landowning agricultural workers, the development of sharecropping contracts, and the contrasts in efficiency between managerial farms and small family farms. Central to this analysis is his careful study of human and animal productivity, in an agricultural environment where—as Professor Huang illustrates in detail—one laborer's daily wages were precisely equal to the cost of one day's donkey fodder.

The survival of millions of uneconomic, even below-subsistence, tiny farms into the 1930s leads Professor Huang to pose some of his most searching questions on the interconnections of farming with local handicrafts and partial commercialization, the hiring out of labor in the busiest seasons, at the very time when, of course, it was needed on its own farm, and the downward spiral that resulted from such practices when the farmers also became disastrously linked to a depression-prone world economy with violent price fluctuations in certain cash crops. As Huang summarizes the process in one of his many succinct and effective formulations:

The combined workings of population pressure and social stratification on a stagnant peasant economy thus resulted in a tenuous system that was particularly vicious in human terms. Poor peasants came to be locked into a dual dependence on family farming and hiring out, unable to do one without the other, and compelled to accept below-subsistence incomes from both. Their cheap labor, in turn, propped up a nonproductive landlordism and a stagnant managerial agriculture. Poor peasants, more than anyone else in the rural society, had to labor under the mutually reinforcing pressures of overpopulation and unequal social relations.

A good part of Professor Huang's discussion also concerns the relations of the village and the state; here he sees considerably more isolation and insularity than most recent analysts of rural China have tended to do, and he also notes how the post-Ch'ing state tried to penetrate below the county level, but only succeeded on an extensive scale after the revolution.
in 1949.

Did this "success" bring great change? In
general welfare, yes, but, as Professor
Huang points out, his central finding con-
cerns the "formation over several cen-
turies of a poor-peasant economy and so-
ciety under the twin pressures of invol-
ution and social stratification, without the
relief of dynamic economic growth." As a
consequence, the shape of collectivization
in the People's Republic was more prede-
termined than we might have realized.
The Communist production brigades and
teachs, like the old, desperate farms, were
units "of both production and consump-
tion, which under severe subsistence pres-
sures will tolerate agricultural involu-
tion [i.e., retrogression in productivity]
to an extent unthinkable for a capitalist
type. Like the family farm, the col-
lective does not fire its surplus labor."

One might add, parenthetically, that
Professor Huang's work has not lost
topicality with the promulgation of new
reforms in the People's Republic which
are abolishing much of the collective
farming system. To the contrary, his work
will be essential background reading to understanding what choices the
Chinese now really have, and what the
greatest dangers confronting them are.
As he shows in chapter ten of The Pea-
sant Economy, many of the achievements
in the People's Republic are the result of
new developments made possible by the
scale of socialist investment, especially in
state-financed irrigation works that
allowed for more vegetable growing and
intercropping, the drainage and regrading
of waterlogged land previously restricted
only to sorghum growing, tractors that
allowed faster plowing and sowing and
thus altered the small work-to-land ratios
of earlier times, and state hog-raising
policies that boosted fertilizer supplies.
The challenge will be to see if newly en-
trepreneurial farmers can build on these
foundations a pattern of prosperity that
does not drive new generations of workers
back onto the downward slope of subsistence farms and forced sale
of their own labor.

In discussing the "underdevelopment"
of managerial farming in Ch'ing China,
Professor Huang suggests that the wealth-
lier Chinese had generally understood
that even the most successful farming could
lead to only limited profits, and that the
big money was to be made either in com-
merce and loan operations or especially
by passing the state examinations and
entering the imperial bureaucracy. Land-
owning as a source of ultimate wealth
was quite different from managerial
farming for one's own sake, and "in this
upper tier, a family needed to secure an

office only once in several generations to
be able to own land on a scale unthinkable
for the average managerial farmer."

That this gives an excessively rosy pic-
ture of Ch'ing bureaucratic life is, I think,
convincingly shown by Professor Zelin's
analysis of the difficulty of getting ade-
quate salaries in the provincial bureau-
cracy, by the unstable conditions of rural
office holding, and by the constant risks
of dismissal or fines for actual or alleged
incompetence. Huang's view also suggests
a continuity in the intellectual world of
the bureaucracy and in the Confucian
components of the state examination.

In fact, as Professor Benjamin Elman
expertly demonstrates in From Philos-
ophy to Philology, the eighteenth-century
intellectual world of Ch'ing China was a
turbulent place in which major shifts
were occurring. In particular, Confucian
scholars were beginning to use the "exact
sciences" of linguistics, philology, and
mathematics to analyze their own cul-
natural life. The Ch'in or Ta-hsin's revealing comment 
that "in ancient times, no one could be a Confucian who did not know mathematics," whereas later generations "usually deni-
grated those who were good mathe-
maticians as petty technicians." By default,
this left the field to Westerners, wrote
Ch'en, for in their computations "there
will not be the most minute discrepancy." Just as Professor Huang leaves us thinking
about Deng Xiaoping's dismantling of
China's recent collectivization, so does
Professor Elman force us to reflect on
the new "seeking truth through facts"
that is allegedly at the center of China's
new pragmatism and modified Marxism.

Mr. Elman places his eighteenth-
century thinkers in a richly evoked set-
ing. In a series of deft and original chapters we are told not only what they thought, but also how and where they thought: about their academics and schooling, their economic backgrounds (many were from merchant stock), their libraries and their diaries and their social
conventions. We also learn how books
were printed and by whom, and the
arguments for use of movable type as op-
oposed to xylography on wood blocks.
In a useful corrective to accepted beliefs
about printing, Professor Elman points out that in China movable type was the
more expensive option—woodblocks could
be stored easily, and small runs of a given
gem printed as needed, whereas with
movable type one had to gauge the
needed print run accurately and face the
high costs of dismantling and reordering
the type. But the destruction of so many
sets of the woodblocks in the major
foreign and civil wars of the mid-nine-
teenth century was one of the reasons for
the decline of the research centers of the
literati in Kiangnan and the shift to new
centers in the south, such as Changsha
and Canton.

Historians of science have long since
explained to us how shifts appear in
fields of knowledge and how new "par-
digms" are slowly formed from a number
of apparently disconnected investiga-
tions, so that eventually what seemed to
be "anomalous" becomes the expected.
My guess is that we are now witnessing
something similar in Western studies of
eighteenth-century China, as China's
last great period of independent growth
and strength is assessed afresh, free from
hindsight, that ties indigenous develop-
ments either to foreign imperialism or to
Maoist ideas of the necessity of rural
revolution.