

Fragmentation and Divergence: Career Paths of Local Civil Officials in Late Qing China (1830–1905)¹

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Keywords: China; Qing dynasty; bureaucratic careers; civil servants; career mobility

Preferred Format: Oral Presentation

ABSTRACT

This study examines the structure and determinants of career mobility among local civil officials in the Qing dynasty, focusing on promotion and lateral transfer patterns across the categories of posts: seal-holding, subordinate, and educational. Using 1,328,210 personnel records of 99,674 local officials from 1830 to 1905, drawn from the China Government Employee Database–Qing (CGED-Q), the study reconstructs full career trajectories and analyzes how ethnicity, educational background, governance difficulty, and prior experience shaped the promotion and transfer chances of local officials.

The study finds that career mobility patterns were deeply stratified. Bannermen, though vastly outnumbered by Han officials, held structural advantages in their chances of being promoted and reaching high-ranking posts. Examination-based credentials, especially jinshi and juren degrees, consistently improved chances of promotion and lateral transfer across all three categories of posts. Governance difficulty, measured by the Chongfan Pinan classification, increased promotion rates for seal-holding officials but constrained upward mobility for subordinate and educational officials. Finally, the analysis reveals strong path dependence: officials with prior promotions were more likely

¹ This research was supported by HK RGC General Research Fund 16602621 (Campbell PI) and HK RGC Areas of Excellence AoE/B-704/22-R (Chen Zhiwu PI).

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to be promoted again, and officials who had previous lateral transfers were more likely to experience the same.

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

1. INTRODUCTION & RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The Qing bureaucracy was one of the largest and most institutionalized administrative systems before the 20th century. By the mid-nineteenth century, approximately 13,500 civil officials were responsible for charged with transmitting imperial authority from the central court down to the county level (Metzger 1973). Despite its scale and structural sophistication, the internal mechanisms of bureaucratic mobility, particularly at the grassroots level, remain underexplored. Most existing research has focused on the institutional framework of official selection (Du 1995; Fu 1970), the civil service examination system (Elman 2013; Ho 1962), the official purchase system (Zhang 2022), or the careers of high-ranking officials (Chu and Saywell 1984; Guy 2001). In contrast, lower-ranking local officials, especially subordinate officials (*zuoza* 佐雜) and educational officials (*jiaozhi* 教職), have received relatively little scholarly attention, despite their overwhelming numerical presence in Qing local administration (Shen 2006; Liu 1974).

This study addresses this gap by investigating the structure, determinants, and dynamics of promotion and lateral transfer among local civil officials in the late Qing dynasty. It focuses on officials operating at the prefectural and county levels, particularly those in the subordinate and educational systems, whose careers were often shaped not by meritocratic ideals but by institutional constraints and regional administrative pressures. By doing so, the study aims to provide a more comprehensive and empirically grounded understanding of bureaucratic mobility in the Qing local state.

This paper is guided by three interrelated questions. First, what characteristics of the official or the county or prefecture in which they served influence their chances of promotion or lateral transfer in the late Qing? Individual characteristics of interest include the type of degree that qualified them for

appointment, their Banner affiliation and ethnicity, and their prior work experience. For characteristics of the administrative unit in which they served, we focus on their governance difficulty, as measured in the *Chongfan Pinan* (衝繁疲難). Second, were there systematic differences in mobility outcomes across bureaucratic systems, specifically, seal-holding (*zhengyin* 正印), subordinate (*zuoza* 佐雜), and educational (*jiaozhi* 教職) officials, and across individual characteristics such as ethnicity, examination status, and prior mobility experience? Third, is there empirical evidence of path dependence or long-term segmentation in bureaucratic careers, i.e., did previous promotions or transfers significantly shape future mobility outcomes?

2. DATA & METHODS

This study draws on the China Government Employee Database – Qing (CGED-Q), which compiles nearly all surviving editions of the *Jinshenlu* (縉紳錄) from 1760 to 1912. The full dataset contains over 4.5 million records for more than 330,000 civil officials (Chen et al. 2020). For this research, we focus on 1,328,210 records of 99,674 local officials from 1830 to 1905, covering appointments at the provincial, prefectural, and county levels. Career trajectories are reconstructed by comparing quarterly entries. A change in position or jurisdiction is coded as a transfer, further categorized as promotion, demotion, or lateral transfer based on rank. Exits are defined as the absence of follow-up records within one year.

The analysis proceeds in two stages. First, descriptive statistics and network visualizations map mobility patterns and trends across systems. Second, event history analysis (EHA) with a complementary log-log model is used to measure the influence on the likelihood of promotion or transfer, of ethnicity, educational background, governance difficulty (measured by the *Chongfan Pinan* 衝繁疲難 system), and prior career events. Regional, temporal, and birthplace fixed effects are included.

3. MAIN FINDINGS

The findings of this study reveal several important patterns. These patterns are clearly demonstrated in **Table 1 and Table 2**, which reports the event history analysis results. First, although Bannermen were far fewer than Han officials in absolute numbers (with a ratio exceeding 1:25), they still exhibited structural advantages in career advancement, especially within the seal-holding system and the assistant official category of the subordinate system. Extended to some previous research, which demonstrated the advantages of Bannermen in the bureaucratic system (e.g., Chen 1977; Xu 2009), this study offers more systematic and quantitative evidence of their structural promotion advantages within the local bureaucracy. In the subordinate and educational systems, where Bannermen were a numerical minority, there is no quantitative evidence of promotion advantages for Bannermen.

Second, this study finds that examination-based degrees (especially *jinshi* 進士 and *juren* 舉人) had a significant positive effect on officials' subsequent mobility. The phenomenon of entering office through purchased degrees was very common in the Qing, and existing research has further demonstrated the widespread practice of office purchase in the further career (Zhang 2022). The value of wealth in the Qing bureaucratic system has been well established. This study, following the previous studies, provides quantitative evidence of the large proportion of purchased degrees (such as *purchased gongsheng* and *jiansheng*) among local officials (**Figure 1**). But on the other hand, it also confirms the structural advantage of examination-based degrees in long-term career development. This finding further complements existing understandings of the value of the examination system in late imperial China (Elman 2013; Ho 1962; Man-Cheong 2004): even during the last eighty decades of the Qing, examination credentials remained one of the most powerful signals for promotion. This suggests the need for further research into how capability, wealth, family background, and interpersonal networks jointly shaped officials' success in the Qing bureaucracy.

Third, this study reveals that the level of governance difficulty reflected by the *Chongfan Pinan*

(CFPN) classification had divergent effects on career mobility across different bureaucratic systems. Consistent with existing research (Hu 2024; Hu et al. 2021), this study finds that seal-holding officials in more difficult jurisdictions had higher probabilities of promotion. However, it further finds that this pattern did not hold in the subordinate and educational systems; in fact, the opposite trend generally emerged: the greater the governance difficulty, the lower the likelihood of promotion, and the higher the probabilities of lateral transfer or prolonged time in posts (**Figure 2&3**). This finding contributes to our understanding of CFPN as both a classification of governance difficulty and a determinant for personnel selection (Shen 2006; Liu and Zhang 2025). Specifically, in the subordinate and educational systems, where many appointments were not directly tied to CFPN classifications, increased governance difficulty was generally associated with lower odds of promotion. This suggests that challenging jurisdictions were indeed less conducive to performance and achievement, which aligns with intuitive expectations. It also highlights, by contrast, the promotion advantages enjoyed by seal-holding officials assigned to such regions.

Fourth, this study finds that the career mobility of Qing local officials showed clear path dependence. Across the seal-holding, subordinate, and educational systems, officials who had previously been promoted or transferred were significantly more likely to experience similar transitions in the future. This structural bifurcation led to the differentiation and locking-in of career paths: some officials entered trajectories of upward mobility, while others remained stuck in lateral transfers or eventually exited the system. Although prior research on the Qing bureaucracy has not directly reached similar conclusions, this finding resonates with existing studies of segmented mobility in modern Chinese bureaucracies (Zhou 2016; Zhou et al. 2016) and the dual importance of patronage and performance in political advancement (Jiang 2018; Jia et al. 2015). This study reveals that career path differentiation existed even among lower-level officials in the Qing administration. The underlying causes of this differentiation remain to be explored, for example, whether such tracks were driven by interpersonal networks, and whether certain officials benefited from rapid or even

exceptional promotion mechanisms (Hu et al. 2020; Wu 2022) also remains an open question.

4. MAIN TABLES AND FIGURES

Table 1 Complementary Log-Log Regression Predicting the Likelihood of Lateral Transfer and Promotion

	Seal-holding		Subordinate		Education	
	Lateral	Promotio n	Lateral	Promotio n	Lateral	Promotio n
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Banner						
Civilian			<i>Ref.</i>			
Banner	1.434 (0.288)	4.781** (0.002)	0.695 (0.353)	0.579 (0.240)	0.398+ (0.079)	1.232 (0.605)
Chushen						
Gongsheng-Purchased			<i>Ref.</i>			
Jinshi	1.273** (0.001)	1.462*** (<0.001)	1.635* (0.015)	2.115*** (<0.001)	1.020 (0.893)	2.290*** (<0.001)
Juren	1.072 (0.364)	1.213* (0.023)	2.103*** (<0.001)	2.329*** (<0.001)	1.018 (0.764)	1.254*** (<0.001)
Gongsheng-Regular	1.159 (0.150)	1.076 (0.486)	1.809*** (<0.001)	1.467* (0.015)	1.089 (0.219)	0.847* (0.031)
Jiansheng	1.028 (0.732)	0.895 (0.201)	1.182+ (0.058)	0.891 (0.292)	1.396 (0.290)	1.617 (0.270)
Others	1.049 (0.664)	0.999 (0.993)	1.224* (0.034)	0.829 (0.119)	0.823 (0.214)	1.513* (0.029)
Unknown	0.827 (0.142)	0.492*** (<0.001)	1.157 (0.148)	0.965 (0.775)	1.085 (0.900)	0.525 (0.532)
Geographic Importance Level						
Simple			<i>Ref.</i>			
Ordinary	1.355*** (<0.001)	1.107+ (0.098)	1.397*** (<0.001)	0.760*** (<0.001)	1.340*** (<0.001)	1.008 (0.898)
Important	0.561*** (<0.001)	2.418*** (<0.001)	1.240*** (<0.001)	0.751*** (<0.001)	1.282*** (<0.001)	0.981 (0.800)
Most Important	0.484*** (<0.001)	4.389*** (<0.001)	1.119 (0.181)	1.096 (0.337)	1.104 (0.470)	1.093 (0.478)
Experience						
Current Pinji	1.673*** (<0.001)	0.618*** (<0.001)	1.072** (0.002)	0.888*** (<0.001)	0.994 (0.939)	7.118*** (<0.001)
Total Years of Service	1.000	1.004	1.000	1.017***	0.998	1.020**

	Seal-holding		Subordinate		Education	
	Lateral	Promotio n	Lateral	Promotio n	Lateral	Promotio n
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
	(0.927)	(0.221)	(0.915)	(<0.001)	(0.664)	(0.002)
Years at Current Position	1.040*** (<0.001)	1.056*** (<0.001)	0.955*** (<0.001)	1.031*** (<0.001)	0.882*** (<0.001)	1.085*** (<0.001)
Prior Promotion	0.650*** (<0.001)	1.256*** (<0.001)	0.571*** (<0.001)	3.570*** (<0.001)	0.385*** (<0.001)	10.564** *
Prior Lateral Transfer	2.805*** (<0.001)	1.499*** (<0.001)	6.003*** (<0.001)	1.298*** (<0.001)	21.982** *	1.571*** (<0.001)
(Intercept)	0.001*** (<0.001)	0.056*** (<0.001)	0.017*** (<0.001)	0.076*** (<0.001)	0.013*** (<0.001)	0.000*** (<0.001)
Region FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Time FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Place of origin FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Num.Obs.	281819	281819	499927	499927	486911	486911
	-	-	-	-	-	-
Log.Lik.	28115.62 0	18360.08 9	38322.84 9	17493.45 8	20616.79 1	17269.77 4
RMSE	0.15	0.12	0.13	0.08	0.09	0.08

Note: The models control for the region where the events occurred, the officials' place of origin (*jiguan* 籍貫), and five-year time periods. Reported coefficients are risk ratios estimated from complementary log-log models. The standard errors are clustered at person level. P-values are shown in parentheses. * $p < 0.1$; ** $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.01$. In Models 5 and 6, which involve education officials, some odd ratios (particularly those associated with prior promotion and prior lateral transfer) are notably large. Upon examination, we believe this may be related to the very low overall proportion of officials who received promotions within the education system (less than 5%). Under such conditions, the model becomes highly sensitive to repeated promotion cases. As there is no compelling reason to exclude these promotion records, we choose to retain the results despite this issue.

Table 2 Complementary Log-Log Regression Predicting the Likelihood of Lateral Transfer and Promotion (Subordinate Officials)

	Assistant		Chief		Miscellaneous	
	Lateral	Promotion	Lateral	Promotio n	Lateral	Promotio n
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Banner						
Civilian			<i>Ref.</i>			
Banner	0.250* (0.027)	5.122*** (<0.001)	0.999 (0.998)	0.122*** (<0.001)	4.356+ (0.066)	1.238 (0.749)
Chushen						

	Assistant		Chief		Miscellaneous	
	Lateral	Promotion	Lateral	Promotion	Lateral	Promotion
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Gongsheng-Purchased	<i>Ref.</i>					
Jinshi	1.088 (0.792)	2.268** (0.003)	1.575 (0.169)	2.634** (0.005)	2.196* (0.015)	1.557 (0.259)
Juren	2.201*** (<0.001)	1.642+ (0.076)	0.318 (0.150)	3.591*** (<0.001)	1.265 (0.596)	6.967*** (<0.001)
Gongsheng-Regular	2.210*** (<0.001)	1.376 (0.127)	1.261 (0.631)	1.042 (0.909)	0.900 (0.734)	1.943+ (0.093)
Jiansheng	1.102 (0.467)	0.820 (0.230)	1.053 (0.750)	1.025 (0.895)	1.411* (0.046)	1.070 (0.812)
Others	1.009 (0.958)	0.901 (0.592)	1.025 (0.888)	0.937 (0.749)	1.619** (0.006)	0.952 (0.871)
Unknown	0.823 (0.277)	0.893 (0.583)	0.978 (0.901)	1.181 (0.417)	1.531* (0.023)	1.087 (0.796)
Geographic Importance Level						
Simple	<i>Ref.</i>					
Ordinary	1.387*** (<0.001)	0.624*** (<0.001)	1.337*** (<0.001)	0.852+ (0.054)	1.396*** (<0.001)	0.576*** (<0.001)
Important	1.253* (0.032)	0.587*** (<0.001)	1.063 (0.472)	0.862 (0.141)	1.217** (0.008)	0.668** (0.001)
Most Important	1.247 (0.161)	0.827 (0.198)	0.984 (0.922)	1.512* (0.012)	1.055 (0.659)	0.849 (0.391)
Experience						
Current Pinji	0.945 (0.503)	1.390*** (<0.001)	1.249*** (<0.001)	0.889* (0.011)	1.828*** (<0.001)	1.444+ (0.093)
Total Years of Service	1.003 (0.636)	1.006 (0.312)	0.998 (0.665)	1.020*** (<0.001)	0.998 (0.764)	1.016** (0.007)
Years at Current Position	0.977+ (0.052)	1.058*** (<0.001)	0.946*** (<0.001)	1.043*** (<0.001)	0.966*** (<0.001)	0.985 (0.169)
Prior Promotion	0.510*** (<0.001)	1.695*** (<0.001)	0.557** (0.001)	4.002*** (<0.001)	0.706* (0.020)	6.571*** (<0.001)
Prior Lateral Transfer	4.093*** (<0.001)	1.346** (0.004)	7.922*** (<0.001)	1.682*** (<0.001)	4.731*** (<0.001)	0.832 (0.139)
(Intercept)	0.168+ (0.053)	0.000*** (<0.001)	0.003*** (<0.001)	0.113*** (<0.001)	0.000*** (<0.001)	0.001** (0.002)
Region FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Time FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Place of origin FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

	Assistant		Chief		Miscellaneous	
	Lateral	Promotion	Lateral	Promotion	Lateral	Promotion
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Num.Obs.	91373	91373	252316	252316	156238	156238
Log.Lik.	-7161.953	-4935.667	15911.74	-7751.017	14856.77	-4393.012
RMSE	0.13	0.10	0.11	0.07	0.15	0.07

Note: The models control for the region where the events occurred, the officials' place of origin (*jiguan* 籍貫), and five-year time periods. Reported coefficients are risk ratios estimated from complementary log-log models. The standard errors are clustered at person level. P-values are shown in parentheses. * $p < 0.1$; ** $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.01$.

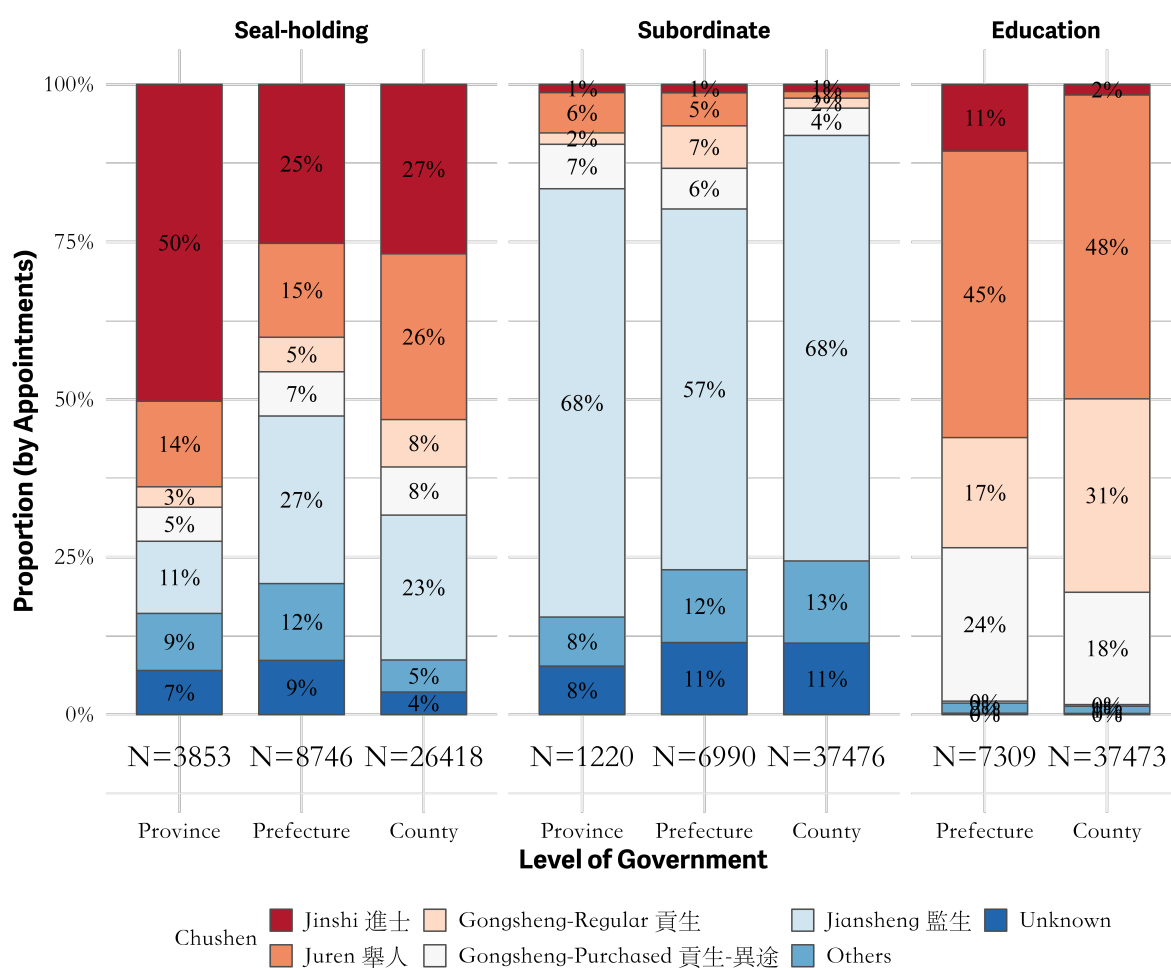


Figure 1 Distribution of *Chushen* Types across Systems and Government Levels

Notes: N and proportions are calculated based on appointments, as described in Table 1. Gongsheng-Regular includes bagong 拔貢, gongsheng 貢生, fubang 副榜, suigong 歲貢, engong 恩貢, yougong 優貢, fugong 副貢, suigong 歲貢, and aigong 挨貢. Gongsheng-Purchased 貢生-異途 included fugong 附貢, lingong 廩貢, zengong 增貢, fusheng 附生 and ligong 例貢. In this figure, the official's chushen, bureaucratic system, and administrative level are defined based on the characteristics of the appointment at the time it was received; for detailed classifications, see Figure 1. If an official has experienced multiple appointments, each appointment is counted separately in the analysis.

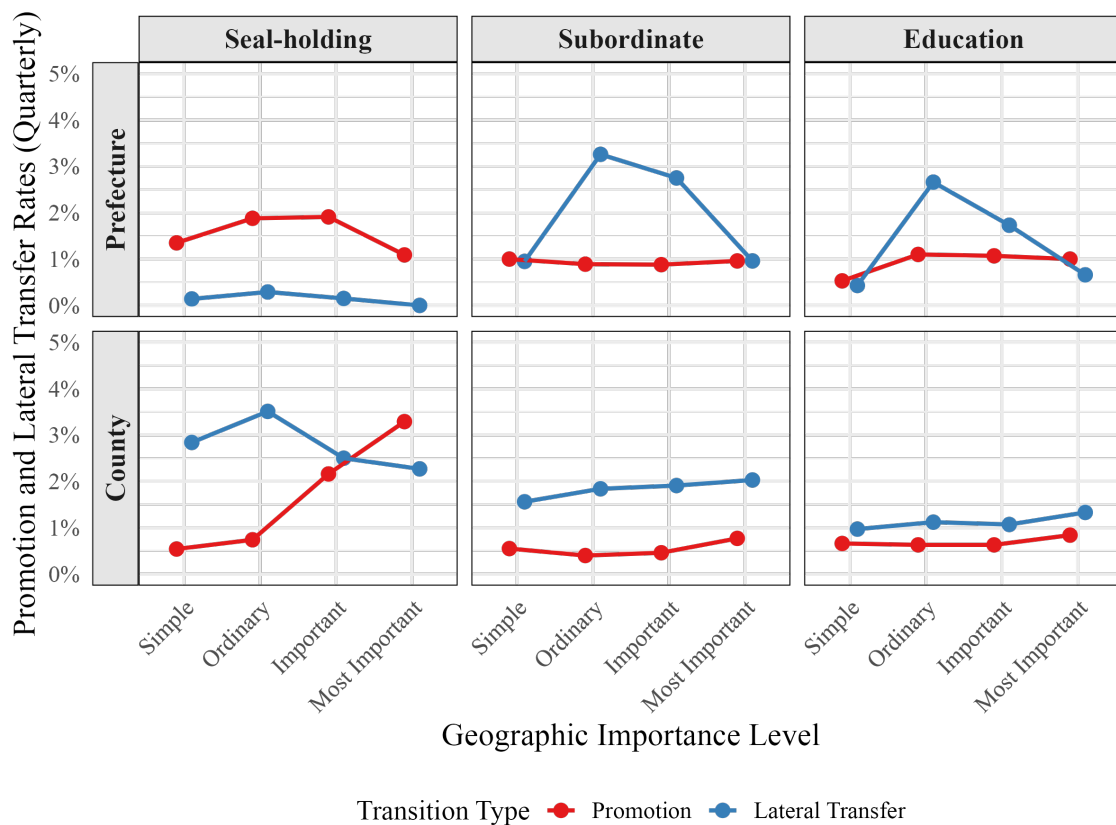


Figure 2 Quarterly Promotion or Lateral Transfer by Geographic Importance Level Across Administrative Systems and Government Levels

Notes: The Geographic Importance Level is determined based on all *Chongfan Pinan* (CFPN) descriptors recorded in *Jinshenlu*, with counties classified as Simple (0–1 character), Ordinary (2 characters), Important (3 characters), or Most Important (4 characters).

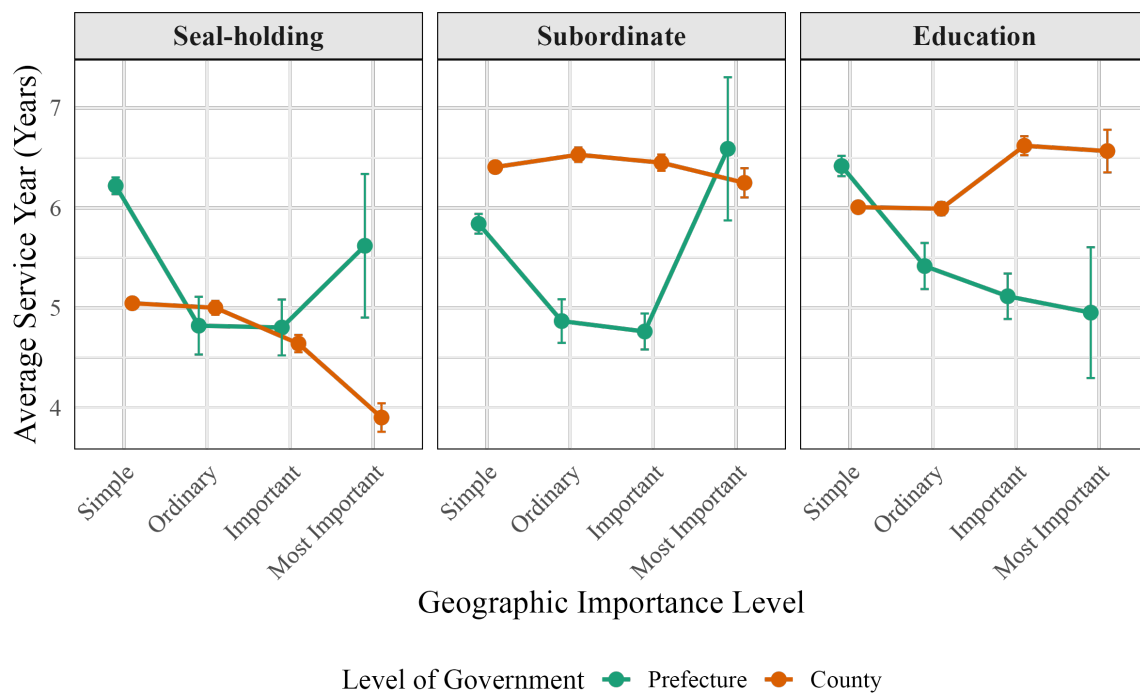


Figure 3 Average Service Years of by Geographic Importance Level Across Administrative Systems and Government Levels

Notes: Service Years is calculated by appointments. Service Years is calculated based on appointments. Each dot represents the mean value, and the vertical lines indicate the standard deviation. Due to the small sample size in the "Most Important" regions, the associated margins of error are very large, making it difficult to draw definitive conclusions from these comparisons.

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