We are so accustomed to hearing of the autocratic, highly centralized, bureaucratic character of governments in imperial China, that it is extremely difficult to view them in any other way, except during those periods of disintegration or disunion when serious talk about a central government is clearly impossible. The Yuan dynasty of the Mongols, in particular, has been pointed out as a “tightly centralized régime” with a “centrally controlled bureaucracy.” One writer has even said that the Yuan was a state in which “power was absolutely lacking at the local level; it lay only at the center. . . .” Centralizing and bureaucratic tendencies certainly existed in the Yuan government, but that is different from saying that the imperial government was a central government by design. In this essay I intend to examine the structure of this government, to discover its character and functions in the administration of the empire.

At first glance, the imperial government seems well served by the centralized model: it proclaimed itself superior over all local governments, chains of successively smaller units, each with its own chief officers; it was huge, complex, and rationally organized, and it seemed to cover every conceivable aspect of governing; it used laws and regulations, which it purported to generate for the entire empire; and most of its chief organs, if not all, had “constitutions” summarizing their purposes and functions and laying down their complements of officers and clerks.

These constitutions, perhaps more than any other single factor, have influenced our conception of the nature of Chinese imperial governments. When we read in our sources that a certain organ of government was responsible for all governmental ordinances relating to the registration of the population, to taxation, and to land throughout the entire empire; that the management of the receipt and expenditure of tribute and tax revenues, the rules concerning the circulation of currency, the verification of stocks in government warehouses and treasuries, the regulation of the prices of goods, and the auditing of records of receipt and disbursement to determine their correctness—all of these—lay within the purview of that organ, the need to understand it as a modern national ministry of finance becomes overwhelming. When we discover that the staff overseeing these far-reaching charges consisted of only ten senior officers, eight service officers (shou-ling-kuan 首領官, who supervised the clerks and the office routine), and 136 clerks and other sub-officials, we might be inclined to change our assessment, but reading a bit further and noting this organ’s twenty-one subordinate agencies with their numerous subordinate granaries, yards, treasuries, works, banks and convoys, confirms
us in our original impression. After one has read a hundred such constitutional descriptions, the only analogues to fourteenth-century Ta-tu seem to be twentieth-century Paris or Tokyo.

I. ORGANS OF THE IMPERIAL GOVERNMENT

To begin a critical examination of this impression, it may be useful to give a survey of the Yüan imperial government’s chief organs. The most important systematic source is the treatise on the official system in the Yüan History (Yüan shih 元史) (1370), which was based on the “institutes” of the Yüan dynasty, the Ching-shih ta-tien 經世大典 of 1332, now mostly lost.6 By 1332 the Yüan government may be said to have reached its mature form, having evolved very substantially since Emperor Khubilai (Shih-tsu) began to build a Chinese-style government in 1260, and it changed thereafter very little until the disintegration of the last few years of Mongol rule.7 In 1332, the imperial government consisted of 121 principal agencies which might be called independent or quasi-independent, to which were subordinated 474 other agencies, under which, in turn, were 398 and 211 agencies at a second and third level of subordination.8 I have organized the independent agencies and a very few of the more important subordinate ones under five rubrics, which in some measure reflect modern analytical requirements, the way in which people in Yüan times envisaged the functions of government, and the way in which the government is presented in the Yüan History. As in all governments, many organs had overlapping or dual functions and could be listed under two rubrics. Brief characterizations are given where the translated title seems insufficiently suggestive.

I. THE IMPERIAL ESTABLISHMENT

The emperor (huang-ti 皇帝, M. khaghan) was the capstone of the state, with the nominal authority to decide most political, administrative, legal, and moral questions. To rule and reign over such a huge empire with the proper magnificence required enormous resources of people and treasure. Agencies to dispose these can be divided into two groups:

A. Agencies which met the physical and creature needs of the emperor, his court, the government buildings in the capitals at Ta-tu and Shang-tu and the capital cities themselves

1. The Bureau for Imperial Household Provisions, hsüan-hui yüan 皇儀院. An enormous organization responsible for feeding the court.9
2. The Bureau for Imperial Manufactures, chiang-tso yüan 將作院. Supervised workshops making textiles, clothing, jewellery and other precious things for imperial use.10
3. The Court of the Imperial Stud, t’ai-p’u ssu 太僕寺. In charge of the state horse herds and provider of the emperor’s mare’s milk wine.11
4. The Court for the Imperial Tack, shang-ch’eng ssu 尚乘寺.12
5. The Imperial Treasuries Directorate, t’ai-fu chien 太府監.13
6. The Directorate for Animal Feeds, tu-chih chien 度支監.14
7. The Directorate for Leathers and Furs, li-yung chien 利用監.15