

## Reflections on Qing Institutions of Governance: Chinese Empire in Comparative Perspective

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It is difficult for scholars to settle on a common definition of empires since the term has been deployed in multiple ways by scholars seeking to make sense of diverse historical experiences. This was very visible at the beginning of this millennium with the spate of books about empires that aimed to put contemporary exercises of American military and political power into a global history perspective. I admit to have contributed an essay, “China’s Agrarian Empire: a different kind of empire, a different kind of lesson”, to one of those volumes, *Lessons of Empire*, edited by Craig Calhoun, Frederick Cooper and Kevin W. Moore. I suggested that the institutions of government in late imperial China differed from those in other empires with well over 90 per cent of the subject population under a single system of direct bureaucratic rule. The distinction between the Chinese case and other empires (including both contiguous territorial or overseas empires) matters I believe because some of the strategies of rule developed in late imperial times have proved potent in the twentieth century and thus help us understand the institutional possibilities contemplated by Chinese rulers who have conceived their purposes and legitimacy in terms seemingly divorced from those of an earlier era. Other empires have largely or completely disappeared from the early twenty-first century global scene, and their logics of rule no longer command our curiosity for their imprint on present-day political practices.

Empire is a recurring form of rule on the Chinese mainland for some two millennia. No other world region has witnessed the repeated appeals to a common repertoire of ideologies and institutions extended and elaborated upon in multiple ways over many centuries. No territorially significant set of rulers in world history made claims for legitimacy and succession from previous regimes in an as coherent and insistent fashion as those ruling the Chinese mainland, whatever their particular geographical origins or initial identities. Alien regimes are

thus a fundamental feature of dynastic history. As the only historian invited to the meeting from which these essays have been gathered who lacks any plausible claim to expertise on the “alien” elements of these regimes, I want at the outset to affirm my conviction that such regimes are intrinsic to what became known in the twentieth century as Chinese history. Nicola Di Cosmo’s work on early imperial history, *Ancient China and its Enemies*, persuasively shows the formation of ancient China within the political context of nomadic powers; subsequent regimes and the political competition they faced repeatedly involved peoples from beyond the sedentary soils composing the agrarian empire’s early heartland and key portions of its subsequent expansion and development of areas to the south. The multi-state system that Morris Rossabi memorably called “China Among Equals” was succeeded by the Mongols whose Yuan dynasty enabled the subsequent possibilities for some form of agrarian empire to dominate the Chinese mainland, which in turn created an institutional legacy that survived dramatic ideological changes to become a usually unacknowledged resource for the political priorities and some of the strategies pursued by a government in the second half of the twentieth century able to rule almost all of the territory controlled by the Qing empire at its height. The contemporary Chinese state is perhaps more than any other state in the world the descendant of an empire. This fact can lead us to ponder the collection of traits in late empire that made it possible for a territorially and demographically large polity possible to be created once again after the mid-twentieth century.

The tradition of empire on the Chinese mainland matters for historians of China aiming to locate their topics and periods in the longer run of Chinese history and it matters for those interested in the kinds of empires that have existed in world history and their legacies for later eras. Specialists on Chinese history have labored at length to alert the larger community of historians against assuming Chinese history to be an unbroken tradition of continuous imperial rule. The current volume includes a marvelous example of such work in Evelyn Rawski’s analysis of multiple regimes in north and northeast Asia, which encourages us to locate Chinese history in different regional contexts, which allows us to observe diversity and multiplicity of practices. Naomi Standen’s essay presented at the workshop on the same region makes the important argument that an earlier division

between steppe and sown is less significant than that between wet-rice and mixed regimes that would divide the agrarian geography of the Chinese empires further south at the Huai River. Nicola Di Cosmo's essay presented at the workshop on the Xiongnu reframes early Central Asian history to reach both eastward and westward, thereby extending the terrain of some of his earlier work on the Xiongnu, which evaluated the importance of the Xiongnu to the political dynamics of sedentary empire on the Chinese mainland. The comparison between Xiongnu relations with sedentary people in West Asia to their relations in East Asia helps us, much as Naomi Standen's essay does, to advance the displacement of an earlier historiography that exaggerated the differences between "barbarians" and settled states.

Thanks to a developing scholarship on "alien regimes" and relations among numerous polities, we are able to formulate a more nuanced appreciation of the multiple ways in which peoples engaged each other within spaces occupied by dynastic regimes and beyond. In his article for this volume Hans van Ess captures a number of possibilities in early imperial history for relations between the Han empire and its neighbors; relations could be more or less hierarchical or reciprocal with the symbolic expressions of engagement often reflecting relative political strength and sometimes subject to competing expectations for proper form. The flexibility of forms to stretch across different concrete situations alerts us to a more complex world of political possibilities than we sometimes imagine there to have been. For the Qing empire, Veronika Veit's article shows the way in which Manchu relations with the Mongols were formulated to reflect both shared sensibilities and political hierarchy in terms very different from those utilized to formulate Qing administration over Han Chinese. The paucity of material allowing us to appreciate how Mongols viewed their relations to Manchus contrasts sharply with the information scholars have assembled about Manchu perceptions of their relations to Han Chinese.

The issue of how Manchus defined their relationship to Han Chinese and their own identity is discussed by Pamela Crossley in her essay on the Qianlong Emperor's suppression of the Yongzheng Emperor's self-presentation. The Yongzheng Emperor located himself in a large and long line of rulers who had achieved through education and effort the abilities to rule and the Qianlong Emperor buried that

image in favor of his own alternative affirmation of a distinctive identity as a Manchu with a cultural past different from and not inferior to what Han Chinese shared as a social identity. The Qianlong Emperor substitutes his promotion of a distinct Manchu identity for his father's emphasis on developing the abilities to rule. Yet, we could imagine a fictional Qing Emperor who made claims to having an identity distinct from Han Chinese and believed his preparation for ruling depended on a course of education and effort. In other words, the choice the Qianlong Emperor made to suppress the Yongzheng Emperor's self-representation may not have been logically necessary for him to have the conceptual space to promote his own ideas of Qing identity even if it turns out to have been cognitively appealing to him.

The essays at the June 2011 workshop and those in this journal volume also encourage us to think about the ways in which different parts of what is sometimes a unified empire span several distinct regional contexts that are themselves connected in changing ways through history. In contrast to the relations with regimes and peoples along the northern reaches of what we conventionally label as Chinese dynastic regimes, another set of relations characterizes the maritime realm between China's southern and southeastern coasts and Southeast Asia. That region in turn is further connected to maritime circuits that run among ports in northeast Asia. Geoffrey C. Gunn's *History Without Borders*, a 2011 synthesis of literature on this region placed in a far larger Asian world region, persuades us that China was not simply an agrarian empire, but had areas that were components of a larger cultural and material world through which different kinds of knowledge and taste traveled, again, in ways hard to see through the lens of a political and social order defined by Confucian ideas and institutions.

Scholars have de-centered and regionalized in multiple ways what was formerly thought of as the Chinese empire to undermine successfully any remaining notions of seamless continuity present in the textbook images of empire for Chinese history that once prevailed among specialists as well. But as we continue to move forward to destroy images of Chinese empire that once filled textbooks within and beyond China, what kinds of new pictures can we draw that place the Chinese mainland's repeated experience of large-scale political regimes in a broader perspective of world history? In an essay first published

in the French journal *Annales* in 2001 entitled “Entre monde et nation: Les régions Braudélienne en Asie” I noted the plausibility of expanding the inspirational influence of Fernand Braudel’s work on the Mediterranean in Asia from maritime regions that included the Chinese coast to a consideration of late imperial northwest China as a Braudelian region. What distinguished the Europe about which Braudel wrote from the China that is the subject of the essays in this journal is the recurring presence of a large-scale territorial polity claiming authority over multiple Braudelian-like spaces. By the standards of historical experience at the western end of Eurasia, which have bequeathed to us a certain set of expectations about many types of historical change, Braudel’s Mediterranean regional world dissolved as Europe shifted to an Atlantic focus and competing European states forged new political and economic relations to the Americas, Africa and Asia. In contrast, some regional spaces in Asia that span political boundaries also contain the common figure of a Chinese empire. Indeed, these regional spaces and the large territorial state that rules portions of them historically still exist or exist again today. They therefore constitute a history different from that followed within and beyond Braudel’s Mediterranean Europe.

The balance of this brief essay explores further the multiple ways in which space can be constructed and analyzed by considering some ways in which the new Qing history helps us understand Qing strategies of governance and political leadership mindful of experiences of earlier regimes ruling the Chinese mainland, other empires, and European states. Relating the new Qing history to other times and places will, I hope, help us appreciate how Qing experiences confirm themes raised in the revisionist historiography sketched above. Comparisons to Europe are especially useful both for gaining a more global perspective on the Qing dynasty and for clarifying our assumptions about governance, which derive much of their logic from a distillation of European history. Political science makes a basic distinction between domestic and foreign that reflects the basic organization of an idealized political order associated with the Treaty of Westphalia which political scientists sometimes refer to as a document creating the logic of sovereign states treating each other as diplomatic equals. Concretely this treaty was an agreement resolving a large number of political and religious disputes and the affirmation of a principle of

peaceful relations among European regimes. In short, the Treaty was a document to improve relations within Europe; only in the second half of the twentieth century was it retrospectively celebrated as the symbolic starting point for modern international relations.

Within the China history field, the different sensibilities of Qing officials and Western diplomats has long been a major subject of study, from John K. Fairbank's impact/response model of nineteenth-century Chinese history through the revisionist interpretation of the MacCartney Mission by James Hevia in his *Cherishing Men from Afar* to Lydia Liu's more recent *Clash of Empires*, the differences between the sensibilities and expectations of the Qing dynasty and Western, especially British, officials has been a major subject. Indeed, the historiographical fixation on foreign relations with Western powers promoted by John Fairbank was an approach against which some of us trained in the 1970s and 1980s rebelled as graduate students by looking for domestic themes in our dissertation research. The new Qing history has been a key area of scholarship that moves us beyond the dichotomy between domestic rule and foreign relations.

Two of the great contributions of historians of the Qing dynasty in the past two decades have been to: (1) suggest multiple ways in which the Manchus contributed new and distinctive elements of political rule and social control that expanded the repertoire of strategies available to officials as they extended the effective reach of the state; (2) have shown ways in which the Qing was one of several empires relying on shared technologies, such as mapping, to compete with each other for territory in the nineteenth century. The new Qing history examines the ways in which Manchu leaders created a political integration of steppe areas into an agrarian empire with the elaboration of new institutions and effective appeal to older religious beliefs they shared with Mongols and Tibetans. The institutional distinctiveness of rule over Inner Asian territories contrasts with the spread of the civilian bureaucratic system of rule along the southwestern frontier. It also contrasts with the logic of tributary relations under the Board of Rites which provided a framework for political relations and at least some of the contexts within which economic relations with foreigners were pursued.

Earlier characterizations of what Fairbank called the Chinese world order contrasted Chinese practices implicitly (when not ex-

plicitly) with an idealized version of diplomatic relations preferred by Europeans (largely ignoring what kinds of relations they in fact pursued). We can reframe this older contrast by comparing the kinds of political relations basic to Qing era history to the political relations typical of Europeans during the same set of centuries. The Qing state pursued three largely distinct kinds of relations: (1) relations with those subjected to civilian bureaucratic rule; (2) relations with others, mainly in northeast and southeast Asia until the 1830s and 1840s when British gunboats ushered in a new kind of diplomacy; (3) relations with people of Inner Asia.

We can also distinguish three distinct sets of relations that major European states sought to manage during the Qing dynasty: (1) relations with their subjects; (2) relations between European regimes; (3) relations to peoples and authorities they encountered overseas. Making comparisons among these relations allows us to make some unconventional but potentially useful observations.

The taxonomies of relations for the Qing state and European states of the same era do not create simple correspondences. Instead, they help highlight the differences in the scales of independent polities in two world regions and the character of relations among polities in East Asia and Europe. First and most obviously, what are domestic and bureaucratically defined political relations in the Qing empire are a combination of domestic relations with subject populations and diplomatic relations with other rulers in Europe. The issues addressed in the Treaty of Westphalia concern relations among rulers that would be faced between provinces or even within provinces under the Qing dynasty. Of course the substance of the issues discussed between Chinese provinces or within them was structured within a vertically integrated framework of authority absent for inter-regime relations within Europe. I have offered one comparison of domestic governance issues in late imperial China and early modern Europe in *China Transformed*, the main elements of which stressed the contrasting ideological and institutional relations between rulers and elites and between rulers and common people which enabled different strategies for creating local order and demanded different policies to meet the distinct priorities regimes in China and Europe faced. Other contrasts one could explore concern the reconfiguring of administrative boundaries in the Ming and

Qing dynasties compared with the changing composition of territories ruled by a particular royal family in Europe. To point out one of the differences that upsets one conventional distinction between empires and modern states, the Ming and Qing dynasties rule large populations under a single bureaucratic system while early modern European regimes typically have no coherent bureaucratic system covering their varied and often non-contiguous domains brought together by marriage—they resemble far more the separate institutions of rule encountered in empires to Europe's east.

When we turn to the second group of relations for the agrarian empire, namely relations with northeast and southeast Asian polities, all of which were organized under the Board of Rites, as they often had been under earlier dynasties as well, we encounter what some scholars have considered to be a “tributary system”. The concept has fallen on hard times because it is very clear that there was no clear and consistent structural framework within which all of the relations of the empire were contained. But this subjects a history of diplomatic relations to a very high bar of conceptual consistency. Real relations between regimes under the Westphalian ideals of European-defined international relations hardly provides coherent and constant empirical support for the principles and protocols promoted by Europeans only some of the time and for some of the regimes they encountered and subsequently engaged outside of Europe. If we turn to the political practices pursued by Europeans when they initially entered Asian settings (a part of the third category for Europeans noted above), they were basically ad hoc reactions to opportunities they created or forced into existence and largely driven initially by desires to establish positions of commercial privilege for trade in goods taken back to Europe. The tributary principles may not have yielded a real system but it created more powerful conventions and norms than any European practices did with respect to the spaces into which both the Qing and the Europeans entered.

Tributary norms have been criticized for their explicit hierarchy and they have been criticized for being inconsistently applied. Yet, we might also argue that tributary norms recognized that some dimension of hierarchy exists in political relations however varied that hierarchy might be and despite the degree of hierarchy open to competing interpretations. In contrast, a set of norms that claims the diplomatic

equality of sovereign states focuses on a narrow band of meaning and tells us nothing about how differences of economic wealth and political power are in fact expressed through relations among regimes. Thus, if we judge a set of principles by their conceptual clarity and the practices they help construct empirically, there is at least as much and typically far more connection between principles and practice in the agrarian empire's relations with northeast and southeast Asia than there is for European relations beyond Europe itself.

When we turn to the Qing state's relations with inner Asia, the third set of relations important to this state, we encounter a set of relations with no obvious parallels in European terms and we find ourselves in an area of the world into which Europeans would not enter in a major way until the late nineteenth century when the so-called Great Game was played. The new Qing history has done much to explain the nature of relations achieved by the Manchus with Mongols, Tibetans and Uighurs. The means of social and cultural engagement, especially through Tibetan Buddhism, combined with the elaboration of political institutions, most importantly the banner system, made the Qing state into a polity significantly different from earlier dynasties. The Qing elaboration of symbolic and institutional resources to govern inner Asia created in East Asia a kind of empire in important ways different from any preceding it. And it is here that the European-inspired distinction between domestic and international, enshrined in the concepts of sovereign states engaging each other according to Westphalian principles, is least helpful. Are the relations forged by the Qing in inner Asia going to tip toward the "domestic" or become clearly "international"? The imposition of civilian bureaucratic rule in late nineteenth-century Xinjiang suggests a tipping toward domestic, while the separation of Mongolian territories between "inner" and "outer" Mongolia shows the line between domestic and foreign could be drawn through a territory that was not clearly either in an earlier period. Of course the pressure to redraw East Asian political spaces more clearly and cleanly into domestic and foreign in the nineteenth century was not simply a Qing challenge. The transformation of the Ryūkyū kingdom from a tributary state of the Ming and Qing into Okinawa prefecture of the Meiji state signals changes in East Asian politics more generally under European pressures in the late nineteenth century.

The significance of inner Asian relations under the Qing for the twentieth century is obviously large even if complex and therefore not entirely clear. The desire and ability of the People's Republic to make claims over and devise systems of rule for areas of the former Qing empire that partially echo the institutional distinctions previously employed under the Qing tell us that the People's Republic inherits the possibilities and problems of an earlier empire in ways not found elsewhere in world history. The particular constellation of possibilities and problems faced by the People's Republic is itself a "success" of sorts, not in an ethically normative sense, but in the practical political sense of grappling with a history of empire that in other world regions becomes fragmented alongside the formation of far smaller and usually weaker states than the empires that preceded them. Perhaps one of the reasons that the Qing empire provided such a durable legacy to the People's Republic is that it infused some Chinese bureaucratic principles and political priorities into its practices of rule over some of its Inner Asian subjects.

Our reading back from the modern era to the pre-history of national states has been widely recognized to be a dubious enterprise and the general point has been taken seriously within the historiography on Chinese history. There never has been a single and continuous historical subject popularly known as "China", any more than any other state in the contemporary world has a necessary pre-history leading fatefully to the present. Yet this sensible insight doesn't help us account for the fundamental fact that state transformations at either end of Eurasia have followed intersecting, yet distinct, arcs over the past millennium. The distinct spectrums between "domestic" and "foreign" created by states in early modern Asia and Europe remind us of the different contexts within which modern states were formed in these two large regions of the world. What counts as "domestic" under the Qing imperium is a population and territory that are beyond the scales of most contemporary states in Africa, the Americas or Europe. We readily acknowledge that China is big without pondering either how this situation was created historically or how it influences present and future possibilities, let alone how to compare its transformations to the more familiar European cases. Accounting for the variety of ways in which today's states more generally have been put together has typically been conceived in one of two ways. On the

one hand, we have enriched our empirical grasp by multiplying the number of case studies that now exist. Yet, we have no new arithmetic to add them up into some coherent sum. On the other hand, we continue to imagine an idealized set of traits being added to a political regime in order to make it modern and normal which derive from European experiences. This works well for some white settler societies, but does less well for other places in the world. We need a new math to work out the significance of different paths of state transformation into the contemporary world. Unless and until we can create a new taxonomy of experiences of state transformation we cannot effectively join the scholarship historians of China, among many others, have produced, to the aspirations to explain political change championed by a variety of scholars, especially in political science and sociology.

Rather than grapple with these challenges it seems the limits of the European national state as the singular “end of history” is often appreciated by seeing such states transcended by the European Union. The EU thus becomes a new norm against which to evaluate other regional groupings of states. Somewhat akin to the case of European national states, the EU supplies a set of metrics of integration that no other regional association can reasonably aspire to achieve, even if they wished to do so. Yet, looking at the EU from a Chinese perspective, it was only in the late twentieth century that Europe, for the first time since the fall of the Roman Empire, is striving to attain the spatial scale of political integration achieved repeatedly in Chinese history by empires. Of course Brussels is a far weaker political center than Beijing in all manner of policy making and institutional operations. In fact, Brussels is not only weaker with respect to the EU than Beijing is to China, but it finds itself in a country that is itself threatened with dissolution! Reflecting upon the Qing Empire’s place within a longer history beginning before and continuing long after Manchu rule may also help us think in fresh ways about how Europe has moved historically from empire through periods of fragmentation and national states to its present era of aspiration toward regional integration amidst threats of undermining by monetary and fiscal challenges. Such exercises may in turn help those of us who specialize on Chinese history to think about some of the topics we can and perhaps should talk about with people interested in and working on other parts of the world.

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