From FRONTIER POLICY *to* FOREIGN POLICY

The Question of India and the Transformation of Geopolitics in Qing China

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Reign Period Abbreviations

KX	Kangxi (康熙): 1662–1722
YZ	Yongzheng (雍正): 1723–1735
QL	Qianlong (乾隆): 1736–1795
JQ	Jiaqing (嘉慶): 1796–1820
DG	Daoguang (道光): 1821–1851
XF	Xianfeng (咸豐): 1852–1861
TZ	Tongzhi (同治): 1862–1874

Qing empire and its neighbors

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Introduction

In 1638, Hong Taiji, the Manchu ruler of a small state on the northeastern fringe of the Asian continent, made a prophetic boast to a visiting envoy. The Mongol Yuan and other earlier dynasties, he declared, had campaigned as far as India, and his own Qing dynasty was now their equal.[1] Almost preposterous at the time, this assertion was realized by the conquests of his successors, who expanded the empire westward far into Inner Asia and ultimately extinguished their tenacious foe, the Junghar Mongols. In July 1757, Amursana, last pretender to the rule of an independent Jungharia, fled pursuing Qing forces into Russia. When the Qianlong emperor fully absorbed Amursana's domain two years later, the Qing realm reached its greatest extent, and its western border in Tibet and Xinjiang indeed abutted the Indian subcontinent. Never had the empire appeared more secure.

Yet the ramifications of another battle, fought far to the south almost at the moment Amursana fled the field, eventually confronted the Qing with a new and more powerful neighbor. In June 1757 the East India Company and its allies routed the nawab of Bengal, making the first in a patchwork of conquests that would in time establish British rule over virtually the whole of India. For the next hundred years, Company forces expanded their domin-

ion to the south of the Himalayas as effectively as the Qing had done to the north. In addition to the established trade between Guangzhou and Indian ports, agents of the East India Company began to appear on a vast arc of the Qing frontier, from the cities of Central Asia to the coast of northern China. This activity aimed at the expansion of trade with China, the revenues of which were necessary to meet the costs of conquest and rule in India. Ultimately, fiscal need required the defense of this trade by force of arms.

The Opium War of 1840–1842, in which Indian resources were heavily deployed, was an unprecedented military disaster for the Qing. A second war with the British empire erupted in 1856, and proved a still greater catastrophe. Only a century after Qianlong forced Amursana to flee, the emperor's great-grandson saw his own representative, Governor-General Ye Mingchen, captured by the British and taken to Calcutta in forced exile. Once perceiving itself as an empire of matchless power that had decisively settled the major threat to its frontier, the Qing state now found itself engaged in a struggle on a far greater scale.

How did Qing rulers, officials, and scholars interpret the rising power of the British in India between 1750 and 1860, and how did this understanding influence the policies that were proposed or implemented to maintain the empire's security? By considering these intertwined questions, this book identifies two major changes that occurred between the start of this period, when the Qianlong emperor brought the empire to the height of its power, and the end of it, when Qing weakness in the face of European empires became starkly evident. One was a shift in the Qing state's external relations, from a "frontier policy" toward a "foreign policy." In the eighteenth century, the empire was conceived by its rulers to be surrounded by a collection of discrete frontier areas, each to be analyzed and managed according to its own political circumstances. The formulation by the emperor and his ministers of segmented, regionally specific strategies to guide Qing relations with the outside world is what is meant here by "frontier policy." This approach, well suited to flexibly governing the far-flung diversity of the empire's borderlands, became less effective when the Qing confronted European empires that operated simultaneously in multiple, noncontiguous areas and could not be managed, or even fully comprehended, on any single frontier. From the late eighteenth century onward, China's geographers and strategists grappled with the implications of this change. One proposed solution, fully articulated for the first time shortly after the Opium War but drawing on ideas that had emerged earlier, can be termed a "foreign policy," which conceived of a single hierarchy of imperial

interests framed in reference to a unified outside world. Ultimately, this shift in outlook led to a revolution in how Qing rulers and subjects perceived their position: no longer unique, the Qing empire became one among several large entities locked in competition. Older strategies would have to be adapted by investigating, and perhaps imitating, China's rivals.

Although propelled in part by external events, this turn from a frontier policy to a foreign policy depended on an equally significant internal change in the Qing empire's information order.[2] Before 1800, the Qing realm was an amalgam of diverse conquered peoples united by common subordination to the same ruling house. Although the emperor and a small cohort of high advisors had a panoramic view over the entire domain, on the ground the administration of different regions relied heavily on indigenous power holders following their local political traditions. Reports sent to the capital from these regions reflected the language and culture of the inhabitants. For local governance this multiplicity of viewpoints was unproblematic, indeed necessary. However, where informants from around the empire submitted parallel reports about the same events, no common idiom existed in which to amalgamate them. Because descriptions of the outside world drew heavily on distinct local nomenclature, political conceptions, and cosmologies, the Qing central state had access to a rich and growing stock of data, but not a unifying matrix in which to understand and interpret it.

Around 1800, as the capacities of the Qing court diminished, private Han Chinese scholars began to take more interest in reforming the empire's administration. In the process, they broke the court's monopoly on a panoramic view of the empire's frontiers. Using various sources of official and unofficial information, they too began to survey the realm's non-Chinese frontiers, and the world beyond them. The emerging unofficial sphere of policy discussion was more flexible and unfettered than the confines of the bureaucracy. Already in the eighteenth century, the state had synthesized geographic and geopolitical information on a limited scale. Now, the computing power of individual researchers, communicating in letter or print across a scholarly network, was able to reach conclusions that surpassed the single imperial mainframe. By the middle of the nineteenth century, Chinese scholars had succeeded in creating a standardized lexicon for world geography. Through this, the empire's many localized outlooks were for the first time translated into a single language, producing a new global vision and a fresh reevaluation of its strategic interests.

In perhaps no other case was the need for integrated knowledge so great, the difficulties in constructing such a system so daunting, and the

consequences of success so profound as that of China's understanding of British activities in India. Over land and sea, along almost the entire stretch of the Qing empire's southern frontier, commerce and religion sustained contact with India. Through this interaction, much information about India passed from foreign informants to Qing subjects in frontier zones, and then into government documents or private writings. However, because these accounts were filtered through the cultural lenses of those living along the empire's border, activities in India were known to China only in fragments. Among the references to the British conquest of Mughal India received by different arms of the Qing government, for instance, were an oral report from a Kashmiri trader in Yarkand, a petition from Nepal, a letter from a Portuguese Jesuit, and comments from a British envoy in Beijing, each employing different geographic vocabularies and offering contradictory political glosses. Understanding contemporary developments was therefore not a simple matter of passive observation, but an active and sometimes contentious process of analysis and debate. Due to India's wide familiarity and geopolitical relevance for Qing observers, reconstructing these debates offers a glimpse into the empire-wide channels of information circulation, the principles and habits of strategic thought, and the exchange between bureaucratic and scholarly spheres that shaped the geographic and geopolitical worldviews of the entire Qing empire in this period.

As Qing scholars and bureaucrats gained an increasingly clear picture of what was occurring in India, they realized that their own state was vying for power with foes equally formidable. This change is most evident in the field of geography. European maps, which had earlier constituted only a small and controversial niche in the canon of worldviews, came to be accepted as the only valid representation of the world and its constituent parts. Chinese versions of these maps began to use a standardized vocabulary that eliminated the multilingual confusion of names found earlier. As this knowledge became more widespread, the empire's political leaders appreciated for the first time that struggles on a global scale were being carried out on their borders. Instead of dominating and managing a tapestry of small neighbors, the government suddenly had to entertain the possibility of being overcome by larger ones. Together, changes in geographic and strategic thinking allowed a unified foreign policy, which demanded a more active engagement with other states, to emerge as an alternative to a frontier policy. This did not radically alter the conduct of Qing foreign relations after 1840, or even

after 1860. The need to accommodate great internal diversity, more than bureaucratic inertia or complacency on the part of traditionally minded officials, preserved the influence of frontier policy. As will be discussed in the Conclusion, the balance between a frontier and foreign policy was closely tied to the internal politics of the Qing empire.

Qing Foreign Relations Reconsidered

Two factors propelled the adjustment in geo-strategic outlook from a frontier policy toward a foreign policy: prevailing conceptions of the outside world—its basic physical shape and the disposition of the Qing empire and other countries within it—and assumptions about how best to ensure the empire's security within the parameters of this geopolitical context. New information about foreign developments could obviously lead to a reconsideration of imperial strategies. Perhaps less obviously, strategic assumptions themselves could greatly influence the fullness and type of information channeled to officials and scholars concerned with formulating policy. In the Qing case, the ways intelligence was gathered, processed, and interpreted were shaped by intellectual legacies, bureaucratic procedures, and estimates of the empire's security. Proceeding from this basis, it is possible to reconcile two contradictory visions of the Qing empire's relationship with the outside world, and the role of information in forming it.

Until recently, imperial China's approach to foreign relations before 1840 was assumed to have been molded chiefly by ideological preconceptions of an ideal world order. According to the pioneering efforts of John K. Fairbank to construct a general framework for interpreting Ming and Qing foreign relations, there existed a "Chinese world order" founded on a Sinocentric ideology and manifested through institutional procedures collectively termed the "tribute system."[3] This world order was essentially "an outward extension of [the imperial government's] administration of China proper" designed to enforce—or appear to enforce—an emperor-centered hierarchy on foreign peoples.[4] Although in theory the emperor claimed universal authority, the main purpose of the system was less to manipulate actual foreign conditions to China's economic or military advantage, than to give domestic audiences proof that foreigners acknowledged and submitted to the emperor's power. Various measures, including trade incentives, religious and cultural pressures, and occasionally outright military force, were used to produce superficial conformity.

In this interpretation, rulers and officials appeared to possess what was in essence an a priori system for categorizing and managing foreign peoples, one that did not require close scrutiny of actual conditions within, or dynamics between, individual tributary states. Consequently, Fairbank argued, China suffered from a dearth of knowledge about foreign powers that produced fundamental misperceptions and poor policy choices, especially in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. In his classic study *Trade and Diplomacy on the China Coast*, he briefly reviewed some major Qing works of geography, only to dismiss the corpus as scant, "irretrievably confused," and effectively useless: "These examples of Chinese folklore, ignorance, and confusion about the Western barbarians do not strike one as representing a distinct set of ideas and evaluation," and were one factor in China's "intellectual unpreparedness for Western contact."[5]

Subsequent studies, particularly those concentrating on China's political interactions with European countries, have continued to see basic elements guiding imperial China's foreign relations as inimical to a realistic view of the world. Although ideology increasingly yielded to domestic politics in the search for the forces driving Qing foreign relations, Chinese diplomacy was still seen as inward-looking and committed to preserving "appearances."[6] John E. Wills, Jr., has suggested that Qing rulers, especially the successors to the Kangxi emperor, defensively concentrated on ceremonial forms rather than external realities, so that "a dangerous reliance on illusion would be a persistent failure of Chinese foreign policy."[7] James Polachek in particular has highlighted the "'court politics' of foreign policy," interpreting commentary about the outside world as a disguised proxy struggle over domestic agendas, particularly in the decades surrounding the Opium War.[8] Major works of geopolitical analysis produced around that time were "not much more than a polemic" written to score points.[9] If Qing officials and scholars seemed oblivious to dangerous external trends, there was little reason to explore the intelligence sources and strategic thinking actually underlying their policy choices.

Similarly, scholarship on the practice of geography in the Qing period has until recently declined to consider its political and strategic implications. Studies of Ming and Qing cartography, by far the largest subfield within the study of Chinese geography, have devoted considerable attention to elucidating the disputed reception of European maps and techniques of "scientific" cartography in China from the standpoint of cultural and intellectual history.[10] How maps and written sources might have influenced

the strategic outlook of the state or private scholars has been ignored, and even the very notion that cartographic data could have shifted ideologically entrenched worldviews has been disputed.[11] In current scholarship on the maritime sphere, it is only during and immediately after the Opium War that knowledge about the outside world and the evolution of China's strategic thinking have come to be regarded as two facets of the same topic.[12]

It has long been recognized that Qing policy toward Inner and Central Asia differed significantly from that pursued toward maritime European powers, but only in the past two decades has this coalesced into a major reconsideration of the empire's foreign relations.[13] Unlike the study of the maritime frontier, where defeats after 1840 have loomed largest, research into the court's inland policy has instead emphasized the success of sophisticated, realpolitik strategies in the conquest and rule of Tibet, Qinghai, Muslim eastern Turkestan, and virtually all Mongol territories. With vision unclouded by insular and Sino-centric assumptions, the dynasty's Manchu rulers are shown to have used logistical, technological, and administrative innovations similar to the state-building projects carried out by contemporary European and Russian governments. In Inner Asia, the Qing expanded and defended its interests like other "early modern" states.[14]

Manchu policy in Inner Asia succeeded in part because of its emphasis on using information to organize and execute diplomacy and warfare. Within the central administration, as Beatrice S. Bartlett has pointed out, methods of transmitting and filing correspondence and deliberating policies were reformed to meet the logistical requirements of large-scale campaigns.[15] Superior communications and planning, together with a sophisticated knowledge of Mongol political culture, helped the Qing to pacify the steppe.[16] Maps, collected from foreign sources or drafted within the court, were a "weapon in their struggle for control of central Eurasia."[17] In other words, pragmatism, flexibility, and a judicious mix of force, guile, and diplomacy allowed the empire to dominate Inner Asia, an achievement that merits comparison with the conquests of any other contemporary empire.

Thus, current scholarship describes Qing foreign relations as active and engaged in Inner Asia, and more passive and disengaged on the maritime frontier of China proper. Why did the empire show such dynamism in one theater in the eighteenth century, and yet prove unable to replicate this success elsewhere in the succeeding century? One answer is to break Qing foreign relations into smaller and more manageable units along temporal and spatial fault lines, treating Inner Asia and the maritime sphere as essentially