

Muslim Clients and Capitalism in Qing Central Asia, 1759-1864

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From 1759 to 1864, the Qing Empire ruled the Muslim population of Chinese Central Asia through the system of “indirect rule”, heavily relying upon local Muslim clients. On the basis of analysis of the lives of several Muslim governors who worked under the Qing Empire, this paper examines the inner working of the Muslim client regime, i.e., its agendas, structure, and the social tensions it created in the oasis society. This paper examines how the Muslim clients took advantage of the “imperial connections” provided by the Qing, and developed highly profitable capitalistic agriculture and mining, all the while creating serious tension with rural village communities.

The careers of Ūdui (d.1778) and his son Osman provide an excellent opportunity to examine this important transition. Their tenure as governors of the two major oasis districts in the Qing Central Asia (Yarkand and Kashgar,) respectively, are especially interesting, because their relations with their local societies highlight the changing relationship between the begs and the rural villages, and the contradiction inherent in that change. Their stories are relatively well documented, because both of them had to face serious “corruption” charges brought by the oasis populations. By analyzing these cases, one gains substantial insight on their involvement in the violent upheaval that accompanied the transformation of the oasis political economy.

In telling this story, this paper portrays the Qing Empire in eastern Eurasia as a negotiated empire, in which the borderland elites played crucial role. As the borderland process, the Qing Empire was sustained by the voluntary alliance by the Muslim landlords, an alliance predicative upon their interests in gaining secure access to global goods (New World silver in particular), and in promoting their capitalistic agendas. The Qing Empire could sustain itself in remote Central Asia, only so far as they were able and willing to protect the interests of the Muslim landlords.

The borderland view then highlights surprising similarity between the Qing in Central Asia and British empire in India. Established almost simultaneously with the Qing empire in the mid-eighteenth century, the British Empire was also supported by native merchants and commercially-oriented landlords (zamindars) in northern India. The two empires, often understood as the two starkly different political formations, were indeed different only from the perspective of London and Beijing, but not so much from the view point of Yarkand and Bengal.