

The Qing Empire as a Central Eurasian State: From the Manchu Khanate to the Early-modern Eurasian Empire

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The Ming and Qing dynasties are usually referred to as “late imperial China,” and the period of their rule is regarded as the period when China’s imperial administration was brought to its full maturity. However, we should notice that these two dynasties did not altogether have the same characters, because the Qing dynasty was not only China's last imperial dynasty, but also the “conquering dynasty” of the Manchus. That being the case, into what sort of political organization were the Manchus organized and what influence did this have on the character of the empire? Where did its distinctive features originate and to what system did they bear a resemblance? In this presentation I wish to examine the distinctive features of the structure of rule under the Qing as a Manchu dynasty, focusing on the Eight Banner system.

The structure of Qing imperial rule was combined with the order of a Manchu dynasty, based on the Eight Banner system as its basic framework. The Eight Banner system embodied the political-social-military organization of the Manchus and was considered to constitute the basis of Manchuness. Before the Manchu conquest of China in 1644 it corresponded to the state itself; even after 1644 it constituted a separate society from Han-Chinese society and functioned as a source of personnel for official civil and military posts. This character of military and state organization bore a very close resemblance to the nomadic and semi-nomadic states of Central Eurasia, especially the Mongol empire and its successors, even though the Manchus were not nomads. Therefore, it could be said that the Qing empire was not only the successor to the Ming dynasty, but also a successor to the Mongol empire and was a parallel state to other contemporary (early-modern) empires like the Safayid, Mughal, and Ottoman empires. In the other words, regardless how large Han-Chinese society under its rule may have been, the Qing empire can be regarded as a type of Central Eurasian state, and the Eight Banner system can be described as a Manchu form of Central Eurasian political and military organization.