

## FATE AND FORTUNE IN CENTRAL EURASIAN WARFARE: THREE QING EMPERORS AND THEIR MONGOL RIVALS

Peter C. Perdue

Military history is the oldest form of history writing, in both Asian and Western traditions. The natural human fascination with the bloody fates of soldiers and kings has inspired epics and dramatic narratives everywhere. Somewhat derided by professional historians in recent times, military history has begun to regain ground. One reason is that the future of the contemporary world looks much more uncertain than it used to, and conventional paradigms have lost their persuasive power. Wars and states can no longer be dismissed as epiphenomena of underlying socio-economic determinants, when sudden shifts in the power and stability of states occur every week. The well-defined nineteenth-century structures of capitalism and the nation-state seem much more precarious now; this leaves more room for human agency, but also a disturbing awareness of the constant presence of sharp, sudden change.

Historians have always tried to balance the influences of fate and fortune, or, in modern terminology, structure and agency.<sup>1</sup> While we recognize that long-term economic and environmental processes condition human behavior, we also know that these factors never absolutely determine particular outcomes. Studying military conflict highlights such dramatic interactions between necessity and contingency, because the results of strategies, tactics, and individual battles cannot be firmly predicted in advance. After the battles have been lost and won, it is tempting to search for definitive causes of one side's victory, but it is equally important to recapture the sense of uncertainty that the protagonists experienced during the fog of war. New military historians try to avoid merely looking at the paper plans of generals in

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. James Z. Lee and Cameron Campbell, *Fate and Fortune in Rural China: Social Organization and Population Behavior in Liaoning, 1774-1873* (Cambridge, England, 1997), reviewed by Peter C. Perdue in *Journal of Asian Studies*, 57, no. 3 (August 1998) 854-6.

district administration. All of these were indirect results of the need to control and finance frontier administration.

An overall evaluation of Yongzheng as a military strategist, on the other hand, would not be favorable. The successes of Qing armies in this period were due to the leadership of his generals, Nian Gengyao and Yue Zhongqi. Both were highly talented holdovers from the Kangxi reign; both labored under a cloud of suspicion under Yongzheng. Yongzheng repeatedly degraded generals who succeeded on the frontier. Yinti (1688–1755), Kangxi's fourteenth son, had been the presumptive heir to the throne because of his successes in Tibet in 1720, but he was put under house arrest immediately after Yongzheng's succession. Nian Gengyao, as mentioned above, was impeached and allowed to commit suicide in 1726. Yue Zhongqi lasted longer, but also fell into disgrace. As Nian's deputy, he helped to repress Lobzang Danjin's rebellion, but he turned against Nian in 1725, helping to substantiate the charges against him. He was rebuked in 1730 for failing to protect Hami, degraded in rank, and recalled to the capital. Yue was imprisoned, had his property confiscated, sentenced to decapitation, and then let off with a commuted sentence. He was finally released under Qianlong in 1737.<sup>36</sup> Furdan lost a major battle, but he was effective on defense. Still, he was also condemned to execution in 1735, although the Qianlong emperor commuted his sentence to imprisonment.

Thus the Yongzheng emperor left a trail of disgraced and executed generals, who were punished despite considerable military achievement. Dispassionate observers might note that many of the military failures resulted from Yongzheng's refusal to follow his generals' advice. For example, after rejecting Yue Zhongqi's impressive proposal to fortify Turfan, he blamed the general for not being able to hold off Zunghar raids on Turfan with his main troops at Barkul, which was a week's march away. The emperor's hand clearly marked this decision, and he should have borne responsibility for its consequences.

On the other hand, the Qing still faced severe limits on their supply lines during Yongzheng's reign. The colossal forces requested by Yue Zhongqi would have heavily burdened both the oasis agriculturalists of Turfan and the peasantry of Gansu. It is the common practice of emperors and politicians to ask military commanders to

achieve unreasonable tasks with insufficient supplies, only to blame them for the inevitable failure. The constraints on military supply made the defense of these oases against raids extremely difficult, once the emperor had ruled out a large aggressive campaign.

Furdan's rash attack is less defensible. He fell into a classic trap that nomadic warriors had sprung on armies of settled empires for centuries. As the Zunghars withdrew from open battle, the Qing forces extended their supply lines too far. The Zunghars lay in ambush and surrounded the Qing troops, forcing them into a desperate retreat. Furdan had been rash, but the emperor had not tried to restrain him. The contradictory aims of Yongzheng's policy became apparent. On the one hand, he wanted to surpass his father's achievements by "exterminating" the Zunghars with a bold, aggressive stroke. At the same time, he knew that logistics and expenses constrained Qing capabilities. Caught between the hope of sudden success and the more prudent counsels of reason, he urged his general into a situation that had recurred repeatedly in history. Perhaps the emperor's pardon of Furdan tacitly admitted his complicity in the decision.

Thus the curious personality of the emperor interacted with logistical constraints to permit the continued survival of the Zunghar state. Autocratic yet vacillating, a disciplined, careful domestic reformer, but a rash military adventurer, the contradictory facets of the ruler reflected the hybrid nature of the Qing state, as it attempted to embrace both the Han Chinese interior and the radically different environment of the Eurasian steppe.

#### *Qianlong's Final Blows, 1755–1760*

Furdan's defeat brought about a thirty-year stalemate in the Qing-Zunghar struggle. In the last year of his reign, Yongzheng entered into negotiations to fix the boundary between Zunghar and Khalkha Mongol lands. Frustrated by the failures of his commanders, he tacitly abandoned his ambitious aims to exterminate the rival state. The Qianlong emperor, in the early years of his reign, confirmed the agreement to leave the Zunghars alone in the Altai, while the Zunghars promised not to raid the Khalkhas to their east. They agreed to leave vacant lands between the Mongol territories as a buffer zone.<sup>37</sup> Tsewang Rabdan's assassination in 1727 did not shake centralized

<sup>36</sup> Hummel, ed., *Eminent Chinese*, p. 958.

<sup>37</sup> Chiba, *Kara Būran*, Vol. 2, Chapter 2; Fuheng, ed., *Pingding Zhungar*, juan 37 Yongzheng 13/4.

rule; his successor Galdan Tsereng still maintained control.

Galdan Tsereng's death in 1745, however, led to an outbreak of internecine strife that ultimately doomed the Zunghar state. Tsewang Dorji Namjal, the second son of Galdan Tsereng, succeeded as khan, but he was a violent, perverse ruler, who failed in an attempt to kill his elder brother, Lama Darja. The high ministers of the state then deposed Tsewang Dorji Najal, blinded him, and exiled him to Aksu, where he died in 1750.<sup>39</sup> Lama Darja then took over the khanship, but he in turn was killed by an alliance of the princes Dawaci (d. 1759) and Amursana (d. 1757) in 1753. Dawaci drove out Amursana in 1753 and named himself khan, while Amursana turned to the Qing to restore him to power. The turbulent succession in Zungharia, in sharp contrast with the stability of Qianlong's reign, provided the Qing with an excellent opportunity to launch a new military campaign. Qianlong decided to back Amursana's claim to Zungharia by sending out the first of his three major military expeditions to Eastern Central Asia. In 1754, Amursana, as assistant commander, led 30,000 men from Uliyasutai, and 20,000 men left from Hami and Barkul. Dawaci was quickly defeated the following year and delivered alive to Qianlong in Beijing. Amursana, however, after being appointed khan, attempted to free himself from Qing control. Qianlong's second campaign, begun late in 1755, ended in 1757, when Amursana fled across the Russian border. Qianlong's third campaign, from 1757 to 1759, sent Qing armies against the Khojas, Turkic Muslim leaders of the oases of southern Xinjiang.

These three campaigns followed closely upon each other and included many of the same commanders and soldiers. Because they lasted much longer and covered much greater distances than any of the preceding ones, supply lines were even more critical to moving an army so far beyond the Gansu corridor. Qianlong carefully prepared supplies in advance of the first campaign and left surpluses in garrison storehouses when it was over. In the second campaign, Amursana's rebellion caught the Qing commanders off guard, and their armies suffered several near disasters until they could put supply routes in order. The third campaign, unlike the first two, essentially involved siege warfare against the cities of Turkestan. Slow, steady transport of supplies to the Qing garrisons was more critical

<sup>39</sup> Fuheng, ed., *Pingding Zhungeer*, juan 52 *Qianlong 14/4*.

than rapid provisions to troops on the move. But in all three campaigns, supply routes stretching back to northwest China were the vital links in the chain of wagons bringing food, animals, weaponry, and clothing to the far-flung Qing garrisons.

I will only summarize the supply issues in Qianlong's campaigns, which I have discussed elsewhere.<sup>40</sup> The commanders of both armies prepared a chain of magazine posts (*taizhan*) extending along the Gansu corridor into the oases of Turkestan. For the twenty thousand men of the West Route Army, six months of supplies were stocked in advance, including 11,200 *shi* (ca. 745 tons) of grain plus noodles, bread, mutton, and live animals. The main sources of supply were the markets of northwest China, primarily Gansu, but also the provinces of Shaanxi, Shanxi, and even Henan. Lands cleared by military garrisons in the Turkestan oases of Hami and Barkul also provided significant grain reserves, which were transported to the army using oxen imported from the northwest. By contrast to the Yongzheng emperor's experience thirty years earlier, when the commanders could not even support their own garrisons in Turfan, the grain network linking the oases and the northwest could provide enough for local guard troops and large campaign armies. They also brought with them extra grain to feed surrendered Mongol tribes, and tea to initiate trade relations.

Transport costs were extraordinarily high, but the treasury had a large enough surplus to pay them. The total cost of Qianlong's three Xinjiang campaigns was 33 million taels.<sup>40</sup> To move 100,000 *shi* (ca. 6650 tons) of grain from the nearest production region in western Gansu to Hami cost one million taels, about ten times the cost of purchasing the grain itself. Furthermore, all the mules, camels, carts, porters, and their fodder and rations also had to be purchased on interior markets. The only alternative was to exact levies on the subject Mongol tribes. When the Qing put pressure on the Mongols, however, these levies became so severe that they incited a brief

<sup>39</sup> Peter C. Perdue, "Military Mobilization in Seventeenth and Eighteenth-century China, Russia, and Mongolia," *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol. 30, No. 4 (October 1996), pp. 757-93; See also Lai Fushun, *Qianlong Zhongyao Zhanzheng zhi Junxu Yanjiu* (Studies on Military Supplies in Qianlong's Major Campaigns) (Taipei, 1984).

<sup>40</sup> Chen Feng, *Qingdai Junfei Yanjiu* (Military Expenses in the Qing Dynasty) (Wuhan, 1991), p. 261.

rebellion by the Khalkha chieftain Chinggünjav in 1756-7.<sup>41</sup> But the sparse population of Mongols alone could not feed the Chinese troops, and they were unreliable allies.

Despite these extraordinary challenges, Qianlong's commanders succeeded in delivering continuous flows of military supplies to the distant armies. It was this constant routine support that guaranteed success in the end, where Kangxi and Yongzheng had failed. The mid-eighteenth century victories resulted from a very different approach to warfare in the steppe, one which finally overcame the millennial balance between the rulers of China's core and their rivals in Central Eurasia. Ever since the Xiongnu nomadic confederation rose alongside the Han dynasty, steppe empires and settled Chinese empires had coexisted in hostile proximity. The rulers of the settled states had never been able to eliminate the nomads permanently, because they could not overcome the logistical barriers. Qianlong and his commanders devised the successful strategy, but it was only possible because of the unprecedented commercialization of the eighteenth-century economy. The successful linkage of agrarian commercial growth and military supply explains why the Qing by 1760 had become the largest empire in the world in both size and population.

#### *Warfare in the Steppe: Chinese and Nomadic*

I will conclude with some general observations about the development of imperial strategy. The three Qing emperors responded creatively to the persistent obstacles of warfare in the steppe. Nomadic warrior armies were usually much smaller than the armies of the settled empires they confronted. Classic nomadic military tactics were to attack by ambush, provoking the lumbering enemy army into motion, then to retreat quickly into the steppe, inducing the enemy to overextend himself in pursuit. Either the enemy gave up when he outran his supply lines, or he became vulnerable to a devastating counterattack on his famished troops by nomadic raids. From the days of the Parthians to the ambush of the Ming emperor in the Tumu incident (1449), many large armies of settled bureaucratic empires had been destroyed by these tactics. Even if the nomads did

not win these battles, they could still escape into the steppe beyond the reach of the settled army's supply lines. Nomadic armies could only be eliminated if their retreat were cut off, a strategy that required several armies to conduct an encirclement campaign, which is why Kangxi sent three separate armies against Galdan in his second campaign, and Qianlong divided his army into two wings.

Mobilizing such large forces, of 30,000 to 50,000 men per army, put great strains on the agrarian economy, especially the peasantry of the poor northwest through which the army usually had to pass. Demands for food from local peasantry could drive grain prices up to dizzying heights: prices quadrupled in Gansu when Qianlong's armies crossed the region. Kangxi avoided this problem during his second campaign by sending two of his armies directly across the Gobi desert into Outer Mongolia. Only the Western army, under Fiyanggû, set out from Guihua, in Ningxia. Galdan was crushed at the battle of Jaomodo two and one half months after Kangxi led his army out of Peking. Even so, supplying this expedition required an enormous mobilization of supplies from interior China.

Each of Kangxi's expeditions led him farther away from Beijing; each required larger logistical mobilization, and caused constant worry about supplies of grain and water. The Qing economy in the late seventeenth century had recovered significantly from the Ming-Qing transition wars, but it was not yet well integrated commercially or highly productive agriculturally. By contrast, Qianlong in the 1750s could take advantage of a century of growing market activity, regional specialization, improvements in agricultural yields and overall gains from economic integration. His three expeditions into the steppe went much farther than Kangxi's, reaching beyond the current Sino-Soviet border, and Qianlong supported larger armies for much longer periods of time. He was only able to do this because of the great growth both of the Chinese economy and of the fiscal and bureaucratic apparatus of extraction from the late seventeenth to mid-eighteenth centuries.

I have provided only a few examples of the extensive demands made by the Qing armies on the resources of interior China and the high costs of transport and provisioning in the steppe. The shifts in strategy pursued by the leaders of these campaigns reflect increasing Qing awareness of these costs. Kangxi's campaigns were personal acts of valor and endurance, directed at a single enemy—Galdan himself and his purported treachery—and had the sole purpose of

<sup>41</sup> C.R. Bawden, "The Mongol rebellion of 1756-1757," *Journal of Asian History*, Vol. 2, No. 3 (1968), pp. 1-31.

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NICOLA DI COSMO



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