

CHANGING SPACES OF EMPIRE IN EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY QING CHINA¹

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A calculated but rarely discussed cultural metamorphosis took place in eighteenth-century China. A deliberate imperial policy infused political life, the physical landscape, and material culture with an assemblage of new meanings intended to draw attention to and command respect for military success and imperial power. The familiar acquired new implications: government adjusted its practical and symbolic orientations; social distinctions were reconfigured; physical surroundings and the ways in which people experienced and interpreted them changed; and literature and art launched in new directions. The new culture of the high Qing (1662–1800) did not replace the vibrant tradition in which “being civilized” (*wen*) reigned supreme, but it dislodged it from its exclusive role at the height of political prestige. The consequence was that a military frame of reference featured much more prominently and significantly in the cultural landscape than had been the case during the Ming dynasty.²

A common theme of much recent scholarship on Chinese political and institutional history is that there was a substantial separation between public pronouncements and actual practice: between what was said and what was done. Among the most famous examples of this dichotomy is the misleading statement from which much of Western (mis)understanding of China has been derived, namely the Qing emperor’s disingenuous 1792 declaration to the ambassador of King George III of England that China was absolutely self-sufficient. This episode indicates how clearly we have become seduced by the authority of language in Chinese culture. That is, in order to understand how things really were, we must look as best we can at what actually happened and at the broader range of evidential materials, and not rely exclusively on what was said or written. When we adopt this approach, many former assumptions about Chinese history and civilization are discredited.³ To give a few examples: we now know that, contrary to what was once believed, traditional China had a thriving civil as well as criminal system of law, and that ordinary Chinese people were quite litigious and often invoked the legal system to enforce their rights against one another. In

foreign relations, despite rigid Chinese assertions that their empire was the center of the world, and a determined insistence that others acknowledge its superiority, the reality was that Chinese foreign policy was highly pragmatic and often adapted to circumstances as necessary. As for commerce, despite professions of disdain for trade, Chinese across the social spectrum have in fact always energetically and enthusiastically engaged in commercial exchange. In military conflicts, notwithstanding much rhetoric about preferring peaceful solutions, China rarely hesitated to use force when necessary to achieve its political ends. Finally, scholars have begun to demonstrate that the traditional view of the perennially overwhelming predominance of the civil, or civilized (*wen*) over the military, or martial (*wu*) is amply due for revision.⁴

The Qing promotion of martial values

Qing China is commonly characterized as the victim of Western imperialism, as the result of its experiences in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Yet in the two centuries before the advent of the West, the Qing itself pursued an ambitious and sophisticated program of imperial expansion that in many respects was not substantially different from the Western version. The seeds of this program had already been sown by no later than 1636, even before the Manchu conquest of China, but it began to take a more clearly demarcated shape under the Kangxi emperor (1662–1722), continued under the Yongzheng emperor (1723–35), and reached its height under the Qianlong emperor (1736–95), a man obsessed by empire and the military power necessary to attain it. With an intensity that increased with time, these emperors underpinned massive military expansion by implementing an ambitious program of cultural transformation. Aiming to create an all-new hybrid Qing culture, indissoluble from the project of empire and founded on the bedrock of Manchu martial ideals, they anticipated that a new shared consciousness of and high regard for military success and its consequences would help mute the chauvinism of Chinese culture, at the same time as it counteracted the partial sinification of the Manchus. We can no longer, therefore, confidently apply to this period two long-held assumptions about Chinese history – namely, the uniform predominance of a civil ethos over a military one, and the completeness of Manchu sinicization.⁵ The two are closely connected, as will become apparent below.

Two principal reasons underlay Qing emperors’ quest to transform the culture of their imperial subjects. First, ever alert to the resonance of history, they wished to avoid repeating the mistakes made by the Ming, whose allocation of excessive powers to the civil arm of government at the expense of the military resulted in such a widespread disaffection and defiance of civil authority as to contribute substantially to the Ming fall.⁶ The Qing rulers, who owed their presence as emperors to military force, wished, in short, to adjust the civil–military balance to give greater influence to the latter, rhetorically as well as actually. This did not, however, entail a necessary devaluation of *wen* values,

because they still intended to keep military elements under firm control and, moreover, they fully appreciated the centrality of civilian culture to the long-term pursuit of their imperial goals. In other words, they understood the relationship between the civil and military principles not in terms of mutual exclusion but as a continuum in which *wende*, scholarly or literary virtue, and *wugong*, military achievement, mutually produced and reproduced one another, to the ultimate advantage of imperial power.

A second, but not secondary, motivation underlying the plan to promote greater attention to martiality and military success was that the Qing emperors aimed thereby to forge a more closely aligned set of cultural preferences among the diverse peoples they ruled – Manchus, Mongols, Tibetans, and Uighurs, as well as Chinese. Rather than seeking to draw their Inner Asian subjects into the orbit of Chinese civilization, the Qing rulers sought to promote values associated with the cultures of Inner Asia among their Chinese subjects, in a process that was just the reverse of the sinicization routinely claimed as inevitable. The purpose was to bring together diverse traditions within a single polity, in other words to unite and rule their multiethnic and multicultural empire.

The long-term Qing strategy to inculcate an awareness of and appreciation for military success into the mainstream of Chinese culture was not constructed in a vacuum, nor did it encounter an unreceptive audience. Not least, it rested on the foundations of a popular tradition that accorded enormous importance to martial values and political loyalty, as attested by the perennial popularity of such epics as *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* (*Sanguo Yanyi*) and *Outlaws of the Marsh* (*Shuihu Zhuan*); the pervasiveness of martial arts; and religious cults centered on such military heroes as Guan Yu (162–220) and Yue Fei (1103–41).⁷ Typically the underlying narratives might include dramatic swordfights, magical fire-weapons, sudden mysterious mists, or storms that rained blood, exploding battlements, deadly rays of light, and so on, often within a context of conflicts fought for such morally uplifting purposes as national preservation.

Such tales, often the subject of story-telling performances, held great appeal to ordinary people, for whom such lore became part of their everyday cultural environment, but they appealed as much to members of the elite, whose literary encounters with warfare began with the classical texts despite the latter's conventional dissociation from high culture. For the elite, furthermore, civil–military interaction in the cultural sphere had long been far greater than is sometimes supposed, taking such forms as the patronage of artists by army generals, and the appreciation of elegantly decorated swords by fashionable aesthetic connoisseurs. From a more practical point of view, scholars often developed a keen interest in military matters as the result of the fact that – as leaders of local communities and as officials – they frequently had to cope with such matters as bandit suppression and combating the threat of rebellion or invasion, latterly including that of the Manchus themselves. Thus, the distaste for military matters often attributed to the traditional Chinese elite has been gravely overstated.

Finally, for many members of the elite the timeliness of the high-Qing imperial project was an important factor in generating a generally favorable reception. The crisis of elite identity occasioned by the Ming fall, combined with the Qing introduction of a hereditary military–administrative elite (the banners, discussed below) into the social hierarchy, had meant that the traditional Chinese elite needed to find new ways beyond education and scholarship through which to legitimize itself. The pride in empire and the new sense of national community fostered by the imperial cultural program offered a new means of self-definition for the elite. On the whole, therefore, it was more expedient for them to cooperate than to resist.⁸

By the late eighteenth century, war itself had become, in effect, a major Qing institution. The successful conclusion of the wars of dynastic consolidation in the 1680s was shortly followed by a series of campaigns, first against Russia and then against the Zunghars, whose imperial ambitions in Inner and Central Asia matched those of the Qing. These wars culminated in the mid-eighteenth century when the Qing assumed political control over what became Xinjiang, and exterminated the Zunghars who had occupied much of its eastern portion.⁹ From this time on, if not even earlier, Qianlong vigorously promoted the notion that military triumphs were one of his reign's central accomplishments. Toward the end of his life, in 1792, he even began to style himself “Old Man of the Ten Complete Victories” (*shiquan laoren*) after an essay enumerating his “Ten Complete Military Victories” (*shiquan wugong*) that, in addition to the wars for Xinjiang, included those in the Tibetan borderlands in the 1740s and 1770s (the Jinchuan wars), campaigns in Burma, Taiwan, and Annam (Vietnam), and the Gurkha wars of the 1790s.¹⁰

Evidence of the intentional reshaping of culture to give prominence to a more markedly military ethos can be discerned throughout the records of Qing China. Areas affected included what we may call the culture of government, dress codes, religion, art, ritual, literature, drama, and landscape. In this chapter I address the two aspects of this cultural recasting that cover both the organization of ideology and its transformation into physical space – namely, the culture and institutions of government, and landscape and its representations.

Militarizing government culture and institutions

As the Qing waged these wars and simultaneously set out to recast culture in a more martial mold, government institutions were one key object of their attention. They introduced two major innovations. The first was the development of the Grand Council (*junjichu*). Created in the early eighteenth century to run military campaigns in the northwest, it became the highest privy council of state, with its members effectively running the country in the emperor's name (although always under his authority). A substantial proportion of grand councilors (*junji dachen*) ran military operations or commanded armies during their tenure – it was usual for them to hold concurrent positions elsewhere in the government

– while some came to the Council fresh from military success. Thus civil government came to be dominated by an originally military agency, one which never altogether lost its primary character. Over the course of time, moreover, increasing numbers of bureaucrats owed their appointments to military exigency, as the sale of degrees and appointments intensified as a fundraising mechanism in wartime.

In such ways, a close interrelationship developed between military and political success in the high Qing, as well as an increase in mobility between civilian and military posts. By the mid-eighteenth century, some connection to military success, whether through soldiering, strategizing, logistics, historiography, or otherwise, was acknowledged to be instrumental – if not prerequisite – to the achievement of a successful political career. Scholars drafting imperially authorized biographies for the official history of the period explicitly noted this, stating, for instance, that “in the middle and later years of the Qianlong reign, many people used military achievement as a means to bring about political success.” This observation comes at the end of a chapter of biographies whose principal subjects were the editors of the *Four Treasuries* imperial bibliographic project (*Siku quanshu*). In other words, the definition of military achievement was ample enough to embrace contributing to the cultural project by recording imperial successes. *Four Treasuries* editor-in-chief Ji Yun (1724–1805) had already endeared himself to the Qianlong emperor by composing a poem on the so-called return to allegiance of the Torguts who had migrated from Russia to Qing China, an episode the emperor regarded as akin to a military triumph.¹¹

Qing rulers did not draw simple equations between, on the one side, Manchus and the military, and, on the other, Chinese and civil government. Emperors were acutely conscious of the political sensitivity of both ethnic and civil–military issues, but they were well aware – Kangxi and Yongzheng perhaps more clearly than Qianlong – that their blanket attribution of great martiality to the Manchus contained an element of wishfulness and was not wholly grounded in reality. More precisely, the collective designation of the Manchus as preeminently martial was a more or less conscious expedient devised for purposes of empire. Thus, while it is tempting to characterize the focus on military success as a bid to make the bureaucracy “more Manchu,” this would be mistaken: the move to militarize the culture of government by no means represented a straightforward attempt by the Qing emperors to downgrade Chinese and promote Manchus within the central administration, even though most high-Qing grand councilors were Manchu. It was martiality, a supposedly Manchu characteristic, rather than ethnic identity as such, that emperors regarded as essential to the cultural project.

This situation sometimes led to unexpected results. For instance, when the Kangxi emperor arbitrated political conflicts, he was increasingly severe towards Manchus and relatively lenient towards Chinese, although the ultimate results of this differential treatment were often indistinguishable. According to modern historian Dai Yingcong, moreover, even within the Qing military establishment

the Kangxi emperor sought to create an ethnic balance between Chinese and Manchus. Certainly he showed marked favor towards Chinese military men, perhaps in part to acknowledge how essential they were to the imperial project. That their role was critical was apparent not only because of their earlier participation in the armies of conquest, but also because Manchu troops had performed quite inadequately in the pivotal Three Feudatories (*sanshan*) rebellion of 1673–81. The Grand Council’s creation by Yongzheng itself derived from some of these ethnic issues. Yongzheng wished to find an effective means of combating the threat posed to the Qing imperial project by the interference in government of certain Manchu princes, although, even so, a majority of those in whom he placed most reliance continued to be Manchu.¹²

The careers of several grand councilors illustrate some of the political and ethnic subtleties involved in militarizing the culture of government. Zhang Tingyu (1672–1755) a rare Han Chinese among the early grand councilors, was said to have been appointed as the result of his display of absolute political reliability, the consequences of which some scholars have likened to a military victory. Zhang had edited the *Veritable Records* (*Shilu*) of the Kangxi reign to conceal Yongzheng’s maneuvering for the succession.¹³ O’ertai (1680–1745), another early member of the Grand Council, was well known for having pacified aboriginal groups in Yunnan in the 1720s when he was governor-general in the region prior to his Council appointment. Later he served as a supervisor of military supplies in the northwest, before concluding his career in civilian work. Bandi (d. 1755), Qianlong’s ethnically Mongol son-in-law, led a number of campaigns in the field, first against Miao rebels in Huguang in 1739–40 and later against the Zunghars in the mid-fifties. In the interim, Bandi served as a grand councilor, and was concurrently quartermaster-general for the first Jinchuan campaign (1746–8), performing similar duties in the northwest in 1754. Liu Tongxun (1700–73), like Zhang Tingyu, was one of relatively few ethnically Han grand councilors in the early years of the agency’s existence. Liu had held civilian jobs prior to his elevation to grand councilor in 1753, but in the following year he was sent west in a staff position relating to the Xinjiang wars. He later served in the quartermaster’s office. Another Chinese councilor, Sun Shiyi (1720–96), was involved first in fighting rebels in Taiwan and later (with rather mixed success) in Annam, before his appointment to the Grand Council in 1789, apparently his only year in the office. Sun’s flair for logistics was a major factor in Qing success against the Gurkhas in the early 1790s. At the time of his death, he was involved in attempts to suppress White Lotus (*bailian jiao*) rebels.

Grand Council military connections were not limited to the grand councilors alone. Grand Council clerks (*zhangjing*) who, in Beatrice Bartlett’s words, “were entrusted with high-level discretionary tasks,” also bridged the theoretical divide between civilian and military roles. One such clerk was Zhao Yi (1727–1814), best known to posterity as a historian. Zhao’s work as a Grand Council clerk in the late 1750s included drafting military communications from the Council to the armies on the northwestern front in the wars for Xinjiang. In 1768, he

POLITICAL FRONTIERS,
ETHNIC BOUNDARIES,
AND HUMAN
GEOGRAPHIES IN
CHINESE HISTORY

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and Don J. Wyatt*

 **RoutledgeCurzon**
Taylor & Francis Group
LONDON AND NEW YORK

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