A Review of Dissertations: The revisionist debate of foreign policy in late Qing China

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China’s resurgence as an economic powerhouse in recent years has engendered a flurry of research and journalism, which tries to pinpoint the elusive cause for such a steady and methodical growth of their GDP. China’s consistent yearly growth has stunned and awed the world. Westernized nations, who continually struggle with the cyclical – boom and bust - nature of modern economics, have found a contemporary miracle in the rapid growth and development of China. Furthermore, Westernized nations have recently turned to China for financing as their own economies teeter on the verge of global meltdown. It is evident, through historical analysis, that this is not the first time China has been an economic powerhouse; history certainly has a tendency to repeat itself.

At the height of the Qing Dynasty, 250 years ago, China had its first formal contact with European nations. The Qing ruled over the most economically prosperous empire of that time. Through sheer size, the Qing was able to expand its sphere of influence throughout Eastern Asia. The Qing, an established military and ruling dynasty, were the purveyors of fine silks and spices, coveted by Europeans. However, these initial economic transactions set into motion a domino effect of change, that no Qing magistrate or political figure could have anticipated – the permanent end of the dynastic cycle.

A recent influx of research into the developments of information and attitudes towards foreign policy, towards the end of the Qing dynasty, questions the traditional assumptions that the Qing were delayed in responding to the foreign threat of Western nations, as previously believed. In fact, these new revisionists’ arguments posit that the Qing adapted creatively, considering the

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confines of an age-old system. Through the use of four primary dissertations that highlight cutting edge research in this new revisionist camp, this paper will analyze Qing relations with India and Korea, and the ground breaking establishment of the Zongli Yamen – the first foray in establishing effective methods of foreign policy.

The four primary dissertations addressed in this paper all touch upon the new school of thought that analyzes the late Qing through a revisionist lens. Each paper focuses not on the inevitable collapse of the Qing, but instead on the success within the last period of their reign. Traditionalist views of history seem to be constrained around a winner-loser system, and furthermore are meant to be a linear progression of events. Though it is impossible to say that history is not without winners and losers, or that basic historical events seem to follow a linear progression; I believe that it is presumptuous to disregard the advancements that took place in the late Qing period. Arguably, if it were not for these improvements and additions perhaps the Qing dynasty would have ceased to exist fifty years earlier. All four dissertations generate new discussion, as well as shed positive light upon late Qing China’s foreign policy efforts.

**Historiographical Concerns and Debate**

Historians, such as John K. Fairbank, have credited the demise of the Qing to its inability to adapt to an ever changing global environment, and a heavy reliance on the traditional Chinese tributary system. Fairbank, along with other traditionalist Chinese historians, addressed several factors that played a role in the Qing’s inability and ineptitude in addressing the growing threat posed by encroaching European powers. The Qing have been described as uninformed and uninterested in the dealings of nations outside the immediate scope and influence of their own empire. This general attitude can be described as Sinocentrism – a model that attributes the demise of the Qing dynasty based on the cultural perception that China views itself as the center of the universe. Traditionalists have relied on the Sinocentric model to express the various reasons for the overall demise of the great Qing Dynasty for years, however, new revisionist historians are championing the claim that the Qing’s overall

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5 Ibid., 148.
demise was not caused by Sinocentrism, but instead was able to survive despite it.

Analysis of the Qing’s perspectives on India helps shed light on how China interacted with nations prior to European contact, while also establishing precedence for their foreign policy methods. Matthew Mosca, analyzes the various informational channels through which the Qing learned and processed information in their relationship with both Ottomans and Indians. Mosca’s research, highlights the bureaucratic bottlenecks that led to misinformation in the higher ups of the Qing government.7 Whereas traditionalists view these inefficiencies as a foreshadowing of the Qing’s inability to properly transfer information up through the political system, Mosca instead emphasizes the ability in which these path ways adapted to meet their respective shortcomings. As the Qing began to internally address problems of information dissemination, they also began to restructure their ongoing relationship with Korea.

While Mosca’s work emphasizes the internal changes, contrastingly Kirk Larsen’s research of the Sino-Korean relationship, during the late Qing period, highlights an adaptation to the traditional Sinocentric model. Larsen’s study focuses on the developments of the time, which helped to transition the Sino-Korean relationship, towards the direction of an autonomous nature.8 Stressing the importance of the development of the ZongliYamen, as well as emphasizing the cultural differences in economic practices between the Chinese and Japanese, within Korea, establishes the underlying patterns that created a shift in the overall foreign policy relationship. Pinpointing the influences of key individuals and underlying economic reasoning, Larsen challenges age old views that the Sino-Korean relationship was merely a model of the tributary system. The implications of this argument in context with the other works help in establishing a new model of internal change prior to the demise of the Qing dynasty.

Perhaps no change was more dramatic or influential than the establishment of the ZongliYamen. The formation of the ZongliYamen, the formalized political department in charge of foreign relationships, signifies an amazing shift in cultural views – beyond the scope the Qing – of the Chinese culture. The ZongliYamen was originally intended to be a temporary

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7 Matthew William Mosca, "Qing China's Perspectives on India, 1750--1847." Diss. Harvard University, 2008. 508.

organization, created to address the growing domestic and foreign issues that plagued the empire. However, through careful diplomacy, the Zongli Yamen was able to generate an astounding sphere of influence, that truly exemplified the remarkable adaptive nature of the Qing. Both, Richard Horowitz and Jennifer Rudolph, express in their dissertations, the truly remarkable nature of the Zongli Yamen. Horowitz, approaches the Zongli Yamen through the perspective of Western analysis, relating the milestone developments and acts carried out by the Zongli Yamen through the lens of European political models. Rudolph, takes a more revisionist stance, arguing that the analysis of the Yamen, through Western viewpoints, is ineffective in truly understanding the momentous nature of the establishment and growth of the Yamen. Rudolph’s examination addresses the success of the Yamen, not the inevitable failure in rescuing the Qing.

These three revisionist viewpoints express the overarching idea that the Qing were able to adapt – both internally and externally – to spearhead the changing world landscape. Neo-traditionalist historians have addressed the shortcomings which hindered the Qing to accurately and effectively relay information. Ultimately, they believe the Qing succumbed to the influence of European power due to their persistent clinging to past foreign policy models, such as the tributary system, and the ineffectiveness of the Zongli Yamen. However, the works of Mosca, Larsen, and Rudolph depict a contrasting image, in which the Qing were in fact able to address these shortcomings and adapted in a remarkable fashion.

Qing and India

To establish a stage for the transformative period in Chinese history, and most notably under the Qing reign, an examination of the practices and methods in place, prior to the intervention of European powers is necessary. The Qing’s interactions and information gathering of India from 1750 to 1847 provides a unique glimpse into the bureaucratic establishments that helped to collect, translate, validate, and disseminate information to higher authorities. The term India is used loosely as the Indian subcontinent at the time was a conglomeration of rival states. The focus, however, is not on the states, but instead on the growing power and influence the British East India trade

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9 Jonathan D. Spence, The Search for Modern China (London: Routledge, 1997) 199.

company had over the entire subcontinent. Though the term India is being used, it would be fair to substitute British India.

Research of Qing relationships with India is fairly scarce, in fact Fairbank’s seminal work on the topic, from his opening section titled, “Aims and Means in China’s Foreign Relations,” has no mention of India or India’s various kingdoms. Furthermore, the traditionalist perspective tends to groups the cultures of India and China together as societies that had reached a level of military and political consolidation – the sheer size of these societies had eliminated opposing or rivaling factions, which so predominantly influenced European history. Due to China’s large scale and scope, they had become accustomed to influencing and dictating the terms of their environment, not through military means, as the Europeans had so heavily relied on, but instead through a political system – the tributary system. The tributary system gave birth to the larger principle of the Sinocentrism – a China centered world order. Traditionalists also view the failure of addressing the encroaching influence of the British as a telltale sign of Sinocentrism.

Mosca’s research on the Qing’s perspective of India helps establish precedence for how foreign policy was developed. Once again, the term foreign policy is used loosely as the Qing had no formal stance towards India for a substantial period of time. Mosca’s dissertation is not a judgment on the failure of the Qing to recognize the changing landscape of India, but instead it focuses on the advantages and disadvantages of the Qing system in understanding and addressing the growing reach of British power. Organic changes that were occurring within the system are also highlighted to show both preemptive and reactionary steps taken to cope with the growing threat. Communication and perception of India, as well as the Ottomans, hinged on two main points: geographical knowledge and inherent frontier bureaucracy.

The largest disadvantages to developing an accurate and actionable plan for the Qing came from inefficiencies in geographical knowledge and frontier politics. Geographic information at the time was extremely abundant, yet often

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13 Mosca, 483.
14 Mosca, 88.
was contradictory or inaccurate. Similar to other information of the time, geographical information was slanted by the views of the author, which further added to the difficulty in compiling a true set of data. Geographic scholars of the time were not opposed to examining and incorporating information from Western sources. However, Qing scholars were hesitant to accept any information without being able to fully analyze the entirety of the information available. After thorough analysis, scholars were able to resolve issues of contradictory information, misinformation, and false information — in order to arrive at the most accurate set of information possible.  

The confusion and inaccuracy of geographical information was only worsened by the governmental structure in place. The Qing government had established frontiers with officials responsible for respective areas. As a representative structure, officials would only communicate actionable, short term concerns to superiors as in-actionable, long term concerns were beyond the scope of the officials’ tenure. Historically, the frontier system was useful in maintaining boarders, however, was ill suited for larger change. Put another way, the British conquest of India per se was not a ‘problem’ that could be articulated and debated within the institutional framework designed to handle the outside world. 

Though the disadvantages may seem daunting, the increased information from the expanded empire had given birth to a new grassroots scholarly group. A sudden increase in popularity of statehood scholarly research is responsible for spawning individuals such as Wei Yuan and Gong Zizhen. It is important to note that these scholars were generally independent, outside the confines of politics; their unofficial status allowed them the opportunity to pursue larger scale work that fell outside the scope of local regents and officials. Their analysis of all information available allowed them to be the first to suggest a shift from the old frontier policy system to a more comprehensive system of analyzing facts as a whole. 

Mosca’s work into the frontier structure and the influences it had on the informational channels provides insight into why large scale problems were ineffectively communicated up the political chain, yet also addresses how non-governmental scholars were meeting this problem. A primary source of

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15 Mosca, 484-487.  
16 Ibid., 492.  
17 Ibid., 492.  
18 Ibid., 498-500.
misinformation listed by Mosca was the lack of accurate and reliable geographic maps, however, I argue that perhaps the quality of information available at the time was the best possible, given the technological disadvantages of the time. Furthermore, better geographic understanding, would have helped the Qing to realize the reach of British power and influence; however, knowing the scope of British power would not have been sufficient in leading to change of Qing policy. Mosca clearly states that the Qing rarely referenced geographic maps; “…Qing bureaucrats saw the outside world through the lens of their local frontier, generally in isolation from either scholarly geography or official reports from elsewhere.” 19

Overall, Mosca’s argument asserts the revisionist perspective, that the Qing were not unwilling or uninterested in appreciating the daunting risk the British posed by expanding throughout India, but due to inherent factors, they were unable to identify the problem as a result of extraneous circumstances. The ineptitude of geographic information was not caused by a Sinocentric view the Qing held, but instead due to unreliable information. The Qing were not unwilling to act on potential threats, but their governmental hierarchy did not provide a window of opportunity for these concerns to be heard. Luckily, the Qing were able to change rapidly and react differently when approaching Korea.

Qing and Korea:

As Fairbank has noted, Korea was a key example of the tributary system. From the traditionalist perspective, Chinese foreign policy is based around Sinocentrism, which manifests itself through the tributary system. The traditionalists are not incorrect in their assumptions of the long standing tributary nature between Korea and China, however, as Larsen’s research shows, the Qing were able to reverse long standing traditions for a new blend of foreign policy. From the 1860s, onward until 1894, the Qing took a drastically different approach towards foreign policy in Korea and, though ultimately unsuccessful, the significance of their shift in views is noteworthy.

Qing policy, towards Korea, under the stewardship of Li Hongzhang and the Zongli Yamen was a far cry from the former isolationist view. Through a new policy of informal imperialism, the Qing tried to block out rival groups from securing and imperializing Korea. 20 The plan consisted of a multifaceted

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19 Ibid., 491-492.
approach and employed economic stimulus, trade agreements, and military support – all contradictory to traditional policies. This sharp contrast to traditional Qing views helps to strengthen the argument that, prior to the collapse of the Qing, there was an actual paradigm shift in views.

Through dealings with European powers and modernizing Japan, the Qing understood that a drastic shift in foreign policy would be required. Traditionally, Korea has always operated within China’s sphere of influence and was considered part of the informal Qing Empire. However, this informal practice of, ‘suzerainty’ would no longer prove to be adequate as Japan and European powers contested for control of Korea.\(^{21}\) The Qing’s primary reassertion of a modernized suzerainty was through the treaty port system, which allowed the Qing to strengthen trade relations with Korea. Learning from past foes and mistakes, the Qing partnered with the British to expand trade to Korea and even adopted several trade policies from Europeans, which had previously been used against them – such as the most-favored nation privileges.\(^{22}\) Though Japanese traders would eventually overcome Chinese traders, the financial practices and systems established by the Qing remained in place for years to come.

Qing “planners [once] considered any one state potentially as dangerous or docile as any other” but after shifting from their traditional view point of military support they then hoped “a stable relationship with all of them” could be achieved.\(^{23}\) This traditional perspective had changed in favor of a more adaptable system. This would allow the Qing to send military troops in support of Korea, and to address problems of internal strife. Eventually, the Qing would be driven out of Korea by the Japanese, prior to suffering a defeat in the Sino-Japan War; yet the commitment of military soldiers was another strategic move in an attempt to build alliances with Korea.

Larsen’s analysis of the development of Sino-Korean relationship focused around the age old practice of the tributary system to that of a modernized indirect imperialism focus, which helped in establishing slight in-roads, but overall proved to be ineffective against Japanese imperialistic claims. Larsen highlights this significant change to address the shift in foreign policy and

\(^{20}\) Larsen, 345.
\(^{21}\) Ibid., 3.
\(^{22}\) Ibid., 103.
\(^{23}\) Mosca, 496.
perspective, from the traditional, to a more agile hybrid system. The new structure still carried the traditional name, ‘suzerainty’ yet for all intensive purposes mirrored Western imperial practices. Larsen’s classifying of the Qing’s new policy in Western terms or even by addressing it as a ‘foreign policy’ seems to place inapplicable labels to a society that is foreign to these terms. Mark Mancall’s opening passage of, “The Ch’ing Tribute System: An Interpretive Essay” highlights my concerns.

Any attempt to describe the tribute system immediately encounters certain intellectual problems. First, the system cannot be explained in terms of Western usage and practice….Rather, the tribute system must be understood, in all its ramifications, in terms of the vocabulary and institutions of traditional China. Second, the analyst must constantly bear in mind that the concept of “tribute system” is a Western invention for descriptive purposes.  

The analysis of Sino-Korean relations should be done with a focus on the evolution of the ‘suzerainty,’ or any political concept that is inherently Eastern Asian concept.

Overall, Larsen is quick to note that the adaptive changes made by the Qing to claim influence in Korea were met with failure. However, the influential nature of the Qing, in Korea, has left an indelible mark. Furthermore, these changes were a drastic modification from the tributary system, in which nations would send embassies to present gifts to the emperor. This was drastically different from traditional practices. The Qing were now sending soldiers, resources, and establishing trade ports to secure their sphere influence. Coupled with this, the Qing were also establishing preliminary trade agreements and mimicking European financial practices of loans and tariffs. One of the driving factors for these drastic changes of the Qing government was the newly established ZongliYamen.

The Establishment of the ZongliYamen

The establishment of the ZongliYamen is often criticized by historians as a change that was too late in the game to create a meaningful impact in rescuing the Qing from inevitable demise. However, the ZongliYamen is truly a remarkable and forward-thinking achievement. The formation of the Zongli Yamen in 1861 signifies the only significant change to the institutionalized Six Board bureaucracy in over a hundred years. Despite beginning as a temporary

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institution, the Zongli Yamen lasted until 1901 and established the precedent for a formalized foreign policy of China.²⁵

The creation of the Zongli Yamen, in and of itself, was a revolutionary action on the part of the Qing; yet most traditional historical research has placed a heavy blame on the organization as a cause for the Yamen’s inability to effectively change. As Rudolph is quick to point out, many of these historians see failure in the Zongli Yamen due to comparisons with European counterparts, which is simply unfair and incorrect. The Zongli Yamen must be analyzed within the contexts of the Qing, and cannot be expected to follow the steady progression of, “linear development consistent with Western experience and expectations.”²⁶ Horowitz and Rudolph both take stances in defining the expressive benefits and triumphs of the Zongli Yamen. Horowitz’s analysis is still fairly traditional, and expresses the progression and success of the Zongli Yamen in terms of the European state building models. Rudolph, however, establishes a more revisionist argument and claims the focus on the Zongli Yamen should not be placed on their failure (as some see it) but instead on the success of establishing itself as a legitimate and powerful branch of government.

Paralleling the Zongli Yamen with the European states model proposed by Charles Tilly, Horowitz’s research was able to examine multiple similarities in the two organizations. Tilly examines the growth of states in perpetual military competition or battle, and hence requires an elaborate funding operation to continue this perpetual state. The model suggests that for this to be feasible an established bureaucracy must develop, to drive the military and manage the taxation.²⁷ The Zongli Yamen’s three significant early contributions were military modernization, financial administration, and bureaucratic development.²⁸

In terms of bureaucratic development, the Zongli Yamen was the first of its kind. The truly innovative nature about the diplomacy of the Yamen was in the manner with which they handled communications with provincial officials. Traditionally, the boards had relied on memorials, but the Yamen chose instead

²⁵ Spence, 199.
²⁶ Rudolph, 3-18.
²⁸ Ibid., 3.
to use letters and address officials as equals. This created an open dialogue of information, which allowed the Yamen to get accurate field information. The military improvements were carried out in similar groundbreaking fashion. The Zongli Yamen quickly assessed that the true culprit in their military weakness was that China’s armies were spread too thin - between fighting foreigners and domestic rebels. As a result, they choose to strengthen relations with foreigners through trade, to acquire modern weapons in return for goods, which they then used to squash domestic rebellions. Finally, to fund these military expansions a new source of revenue needed to be found. The current practice of agriculture taxes was already burdensome enough for individuals. Instead, the Zongli Yamen decided to profit by establishing the Imperial Maritime Customs service – by charging customs and duties on all maritime trade goods.

The remarkable nature of the Zongli Yamen is undeniable. Their ability to placate British and American interests by providing lenient trade policies, in exchange for military technology, was just the thing the Qing needed to stay in control of an empire on the verge of collapse. However, Horowitz’s examination of these factors is in an effort to build an argument for a parallel to the European state building model proposed by Tilly. The conflict with this proposition, as Rudolph points out, is that China, and specifically the Qing’s empire, does not fall into the parameters prescribed by such a model. China was immense geographically, culturally diverse, and had a very decentralized system of control – all contrary to European counterparts.

Rudolph’s examination of the Zongli Yamen provides no Western model in which she tries to neatly package the Zongli Yamen into; instead the focus is on the natural power struggles that plagued the establishment and growth period of the Zongli Yamen. Rudolph notes the political organizational chart of the time, and the Zongli Yamen’s place within the hierarchy. The new found organization was able to react effectively to changes, due to their ability to make actionable decisions (unlike the six boards) and their possession of direct and complete information from the sources. Furthermore, the Zongli Yamen

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29 Ibid., 84-87.
30 Horowitz, 138-142.
31 Ibid., 188-190.
32 Ibid., 3-11.
33 Rudolph, 90-92.
took advantage of their ambiguous chartering to gather more political power over time.\textsuperscript{34}

Horowitz and Rudolph provide amazing details into how the Zongli Yamen established itself from infancy, and went on to provide programs that truly helped sustain and restore the Qing from chaos on numerous occasions. The details provided in Horowitz dissertation is amazing, yet it seems Horowitz’s application of Tilly’s model of European state formation is incorrectly applied to the late Qing dynasty. The accomplishments of the Zongli Yamen are astonishing, especially when the overall deteriorating state of the Qing is taken into account, but I do not believe that this warrants the labeling of a European state building model. Also, if the model were to be extended and the Qing did succeed in creating the ground work for a future unified state through the establishment of the Zongli Yamen, then why does China fall into a period of continual turmoil with rival factions? I believe an interesting approach to future research for the Zongli Yamen and their influential nature in the Qing dynasty would be tracing the extent of their power throughout China. Initially established with little to no direct power, the Zongli Yamen was able to acquire power through working with the established political framework, eventually becoming one of the highest organizations. How influential did their power become, and what actionable choices did they make? Perhaps great success or failures of the late Qing can be traced back to decisions or viewpoints of the Zongli Yamen.

Overall, Horowitz and Rudolph, provided insight into the one of the most meaningful change plans enacted by the late Qing – the establishment of the Zongli Yamen. Regardless of their slightly differing perspectives, both agree that the Zongli Yamen played a significant role in rescuing the Qing from an early demise. Contrary to the traditionalist argument, the Zongli Yamen was extremely effective, within the confines of the system created long before their own establishment. After their creation they were able to garnish enough power and influence to sustain a positive change plan.

Conclusion

The four dissertations analyzed in this essay clearly show the growing, albeit small, group of historians who believe that analysis of the late Qing should be taken into consideration through a revisionist perspective.

\textsuperscript{34} Ibid., 208-211
Traditionalist, such as Fairbank, focus on the Qing's inability to assess the growing threats of European power primarily due to the stagnated views of a traditionalist society. A society in which the Sinocentric model is supreme and opposing viewpoints are unwelcome and 'barbaric'. The Sinocentric model which establish supremacy through the age old practice of the tributary system.

This walled off, inflexible portrayal of the Qing dynasty, however, is fairly inaccurate as these historians have shown. It is true that the expansive nature of the Qing dynasty created inefficiencies in their bureaucratic system; however, the Qing response rate to a changing geopolitical landscape is fairly commendable. As Mosca has shown, independent scholars were already fitting themselves into niche markets of nation based scholarly work – work that was not possible within the confines of the established system. Similarly, the Qing as a whole were swift to act in changing political attitudes and approaches in relation to Korea. Historically relying on minimal interaction, the Qing learned and adapted from indirect European imperialism, and attempted to mimic a similar informal imperialistic approach in Korea through an economically driven approach. Furthermore, the Qing created the Zongli Yamen, an additional branch of government. There had been relatively no changes in political organizational chart since the initial foundation of the original six boards. And as Horowitz and Rudolph have shown, the Zongli Yamen was not ineffective in creating and sustaining a nationwide change in addressing foreign and domestic conflicts.

Though the Qing adapted fairly well, given the circumstances, they still were unable to sustain the dynasty. Perhaps, though, this was not a fault of these remarkable change initiatives but instead an inevitable result. The highlighting factor in each of these revisionists debates is not a focus on the overall outcome, but instead the success of each of these programs. An unbiased study of events in isolation provides a greater understanding when they are not made to fit into a predetermined model.

China has once again skyrocketed, and is quickly approaching the largest economy in the world.\(^{35}\) Regardless of its ability or inability to adapt to change during the Qing, it has unlocked the knowhow to strive in the current world stage. Ironically enough, it seems that Western nations are now under the

gun in-terms of innovation. Hopefully, Westernized countries will be able to adapt as successfully as the Qing did, but with a more optimistic outcome.