Imperialism and Colonialism in Comparative Perspective

One of the more prominent symptoms of the persistence of Western-centrism in the conceptualization and writing of global history is the tendency to equate colonialism with European expansion and European domination of overseas peoples and cultures. Thus, with rare and usually neglected exceptions, studies of imperialism, colonialism, post-colonialism, and colonial societies focus on European enterprises, institutions, and representations as well as indigenous responses in Africa, Asia, and, to a lesser extent, Oceania and the Americas. The term ‘colonialism’ itself has come to refer almost exclusively to historical processes involving western Europeans, or their settler progeny in areas as disparate as North America, South Africa, and New Zealand. The Chinese, Zulus, or Sikhs, by contrast, build empires: they conquer neighbouring peoples and states, and add their territories to their own imperial domains.

These largely unnoticed terminological distinctions reflect key presuppositions that inform current scholarship on global and comparative history. Colonialism suggests processes that are global in scope, of relevance to human societies everywhere. By contrast, empires, whatever their size and influence, are regional, or at best intracontinental entities, whose history is assumed to merit serious concern from only specific and more restricted portions of humanity. Colonialism is deemed to be one of the global forces that has defined the modern age; empires are seen as modes of state expansion with an ancient lineage, increasingly anachronistic in an era of industrialization and high technology.

The authors of these essays on Manchu colonialism challenge such conceptualizations and the assumptions that underlie them by employing the lexicon and concepts of colonialism and imperialism often reserved for the study of European or American domination. In addition, they decentre our notions of imperial expansion in the early modern and modern eras. China, not Great Britain or France, is the metropole for colonial initiatives that span centuries and numerous, diverse cultures across a great swath of Central, East, and South-East Asia. As the Qing dynasty had its origins in the realms of the (originally, at least) predominantly nomadic Manchu...
peoples living north of the Han Chinese heartlands of East Asian civilization, a double centring occurs.

This alternative perspective is most evident and explicit in Peter C. Perdue's discussion of the convergence of empires in early modern, central Eurasia. He traces several key patterns in a vast region, long dominated by nomadic cultures, which, from the viewpoint of those who advance modern world-systems approaches to global history, was peripheral to an East Asian 'periphery' after 1500. In Perdue's rendering, however, Central Asia is reconceptualized as a zone of pivotal cross-civilizational encounters central to the global transition to the modern age. This shift in perspective not only renders problematic, if not untenable, the core/semi-periphery/periphery hierarchy of world-systems advocates, it suggests alternative, non-Eurocentric ways of conceptualizing transformations of global significance in the early modern era and into the centuries of industrialization. Although the spread of mercantile capitalism, from Europe and other centres of civilization such as India, China, and the Islamic heartlands, remains one of these transformations, it can now be analysed as part of a larger constellation of interacting processes that includes not only a global 'military revolution', but also the inexorable decline of nomadic societies in the face of the colonial advance of sedentary states from Central and South-East Asia to North America and the Argentine pampas. As important recent comparative work suggests, these and related political, military, and sociocultural transformations were occurring across Eurasia in this era. They have not as yet been systematically tested for states and societies in sub-Saharan Africa and the Middle East.

In varying degrees, all of the essays directly challenge our preoccupation with the Western variants of colonialism by explicit comparisons between Manchu approaches and institutions and contemporaneous European techniques. Although some of the comparisons are too abbreviated or partial to establish fully convincing parallels, the essays leave little doubt that, at least in the early modern period, the Qing were engaged in ventures strikingly similar to those of expanding western and eastern European states, and thus as deserving as their Western counterparts of


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being studied as examples of imperialism or colonialism in the sense in which these terms are currently employed.

Nonetheless, when more fully developed and contextualized, the apparent similarities between the Manchus and Europeans frequently obscure significant differences that may suggest the need for subtypes within the larger category of imperialism and colonialism. In addition, as the motives, means, and effects of European, and eventually United States and Japanese expansionism were modified in the nineteenth century by the process of industrialization, the nature of modern colonialism diverged in significant and multiplying ways from the modes of dominance exhibited by the Manchus, various European powers, and any other expansive state of the early modern period. In this regard, the conflation in recent decades of the terms colonialism and imperialism, and the often indiscriminate use of the former, has resulted in the obfuscation of the linkages between imperialism and industrialization, thus all but nullifying the most cogent contributions of both radical and Marxist critics of the hegemonic nature of the modern international order.1

Extended comparisons between the Manchus and the English or Dutch East India Companies and the French, British, German, or American empires of the late nineteenth century may establish differences in kind in addition to degree of colonial domination. If this is the case, a major overhaul of our current terminology and conceptualizations relating to colonization might well prove essential. The parallels and contrasts between Qing and Western imperialism that this collection of essays highlights, both implicitly and explicitly, point up differences from or variations on what appear to be patterns of colonial expansion that parallel those of the Qing.

The second half of the essay explores several more fundamental differences between Qing colonialism and its Western counterparts, and explains the ways in which such differences were magnified by the effects of industrialization on the imperialist expansion of the great powers of western Europe and the United States in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

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1 However problematic their specific arguments and supporting evidence may have been, the connections between industrialization and imperialism that Hobson, Lenin, and other turn-of-the-century writers sought to establish remain essential for understanding late nineteenth-century patterns of expansionism and global hegemony. The best account of the changes in the meaning of both imperialism and colonialism that political and socio-economic transformations compelled remains Richard Koehner and H. D. Schmidt, Imperialism: The Story and Significance of a Political Word, 1840-1960 (Cambridge, 1964), esp. chs. 8 and 9. For a more recent and perceptive survey of the very large literature on these issues, see Winfried Baumgart, Imperialism: The Idea and Reality of British and French Colonial Expansion, 1880-1914 (Oxford, 1982), ch. 4.
Some of the techniques employed by Qing colonizers in their efforts to assert hegemony over the vast regions surrounding the Manchurian-Han Chinese core of their empire have been common to virtually all expansive polities from ancient times. As Elliot Sperling, Joanna Waley-Cohen, and Nicola Di Cosmo demonstrate in some detail, Qing military commanders and political strategists were adept at exploiting political, ethnic, and religious differences, as well as clan and lineage rivalries, among the peoples of Tibet, Central Asia, south China, and other areas that they strove to bring under imperial rule. As was the case with the territorial advances of the Dutch in Java, the British in India, and the French in Indo-China, local and regional divisions often left critical weaknesses for Manchu military forces to exploit, opportunities to crush indigenous resistance, and openings to establish the administrative apparatus vital to long-term control. Allies recruited in zones targeted for colonization either enhanced the size and strength of advancing imperial armies, or remained above the fray, thus allowing the Manchus and their European counterparts to concentrate their destructive force on those implacably opposed to alien domination (or very often those who offered less favourable terms to the imperial aggressors).

Once an area was conquered, co-opted indigenous lords and notables served at widely varying levels of the colonial bureaucracy, all but monopolizing positions in the middle and lower ranks. As Di Cosmo and Dorothea Heuschert explain, the Qing were often content to rule indirectly through tributary systems with some resemblance to those the British established in tandem with defeated or allied princes over much of India from the middle decades of the eighteenth century. The evidence they provide suggests, however, that Qing officials sought to penetrate the administration of colonized areas to a greater depth than was attempted by the British in the princely states of India, the Dutch in central Java, or the French in Tonkin, Annam, Cambodia, and Laos.¹

In each of these European colonial sites, local potentates formally acknowledged the suzerainty of the alien colonizers. Once fully subjugated, the local lords allowed British, French, or Dutch advisers an often decisive role in deliberations on important issues of state, and effective control over some areas of decision-making, particularly foreign affairs. But

the indigenous clients of princely leaders remained in charge of the day-to-
day administration of the tributary dependencies. The persisting control of
local notables in areas colonized by the Qing can also be inferred—it is
explicitly demonstrated by Di Cosmo—from the evidence provided in
these essays. This meant that although a portion of the taxes and natural
resources of the subjugated region could be skimmed off by the imperial
overlords, a substantial share was garnered by local lords and notables or
retained by village and pastoral communities using long-standing tactics of
collusion, concealment, and deception.1

As Di Cosmo emphasizes throughout his analysis of the Qing imperial
structure, and Emma Jinhuateng notes in comparisons of Manchu represen-
tations of the society and culture of Taiwan with those of the nomadic
peoples of the north, the Qing pursued different forms of expansion and
employed different techniques and institutions in the diverse areas they
sought to bring under their control. In the predominantly nomadic and
sparsely populated zones to the north and west of the Manchurian-Han
Chinese metropole, the Lifan Yuan, or court for the administration of the
outer provinces, established structures of indirect rule, governing through
a mix of Qing officials and Mongol or other tribal élites. Though
Manchurian military forces were stationed in these regions, and Han
Chinese merchants were allowed to expand trading links in some areas,
large-scale migration by Han Chinese was prohibited.

By contrast, the Qing actively promoted the migration of Han Chinese
peasants and townsmen into the more densely populated regions to the
south and in such coastal or island areas as Taiwan, which were brought
directly under the dynasty’s control. Though reminiscent of techniques of
territorial aggrandizement employed by empires in the classical era, such
as Rome, the military-agrarian colonies established in these areas by the
Qing have no counterpart in either early modern or post-industrial West-
ern colonization overseas, as distinct, for example, from German expan-
sion into eastern Europe.

This mix of colonial systems within the same empire has striking
parallels with the overseas enterprises undertaken by the European powers

1 Most of these essays deal with Manchu initiatives and views rather than the responses of subjugated
populations; but see the remarks on these themes by Di Cosmo. For sample treatments of these pat-
terns in European imperial contexts, see Clive Dewey, 'Patwari and Chaudhars: Subordinate Officials
and the Reliability of India's Agricultural Statistics', in The Imperial Impact in Africa and South Asia,
Imperial Control: Colonial Contradictions and the Origins of Agrarian Protest in South and Southeast
Asia', in Global Crises and Social Movements: Peasants, Populists, and the World Economy, ed.
Edmund Burke III (Boulder, 1988), pp. 89-116; and Allen Isaacman, 'Peasants and Rural Social Protest
in Africa', in Frederick Cooper et. al., Confronting Historical Paradigms: Peasants, Labor, and the
beginning with the Iberian invasions of the Americas in the sixteenth century. But the pattern of European expansion into different kinds of ecosystems and culture zones was the reverse of those characteristic of Qing colonialism. In the case of the European empires, substantial migration was encouraged to make possible the establishment of settlement colonies in areas with relatively sparse populations, congenial temperate climates and disease environments, and apparently abundant but underutilized resources. The catastrophic fall in population in Spanish conquest zones in the Americas provided both a significant impetus for Iberian immigration and a rationale for the forced importation of massive numbers of African slaves, particularly in many of the Caribbean islands where the autochthonous peoples were all but eliminated by disease and Spanish excesses.

In the same period, the British and French vied to expand their settlement colonies in eastern North America, where much lower levels of indigenous population were also reduced, primarily through disease but also through warfare and deprivation, in the centuries after first contact. Beginning in the eighteenth century, but intensifying significantly in the nineteenth century, European states also nurtured settlement colonies in sparsely populated areas, most notably Australia, and regions, such as Algeria and highland, temperate regions in sub-Saharan Africa, which were represented as both severely underpopulated and undeveloped. At the same time, most of the colonies that made up the European and American empires, which were mainly products of nineteenth-century imperialism, were tropical dependencies. In these colonial enclaves, tiny élites of European officials and merchants dominated relatively dense indigenous populations of agriculturists and, to widely varying degrees, townpeople.

Differences in ecology and disease environments largely explain the contrasting patterns of colonial expansion and the opposite mindsets that shaped them. The lands to the north and west of the Chinese core regions had long been dominated by nomadic peoples, in part because these regions received too little rainfall to support sedentary agriculture, thus limiting the spread of the Han Chinese pattern of civilization. The well-watered river valleys to the south and the lowlands of Taiwan were well suited to the cultivation of grains, particularly rice, that allowed the steady extension of the Han Chinese formula for sedentary society and culture.

By contrast, the Europeans had the technologies to settle and extensively farm the temperate prairie lands in areas such as the American West, western Canada, and Argentina that indigenous peoples occupied mainly as hunters and gatherers, in part because they lacked the heavy ploughs to cultivate them. Most of the tropical regions that came under European colonial control not only possessed climates and disease environments that
the Europeans and their livestock found (often with good reason) inimical, if not lethal, but they were also already densely populated. Thus, migration to ‘tropical dependencies’ was usually restricted to administrative, military, mercantile, and missionary personnel, and only rarely ended in permanent residence.¹

Although none of the essays focuses on finance, several provide evidence that suggests that Qing colonial expansion, and the persisting and substantial military campaigns it required, proved a significant drain on the imperial treasury. The extraction of minerals and forest products or the provision of Central Asian-bred horses for Manchu armies may have compensated somewhat for heavy expenditures on colonial enterprises, but one can surmise that, taken as a whole, and like its Western counterparts, Qing colonialism resulted in a net loss in terms of state revenues.² Also like its Western counterparts, Manchu conquest proved highly profitable to selective social groups, especially officials who served in conquered territories; merchants and moneylenders who supplied the imperial armies and extended their trading and financial networks into conquered territories; and settler-farmers who were granted extensive holdings of fertile land on easy terms.

Because the territories colonized by the Qing were contiguous with the Manchurian-Han Chinese core areas of the empire, the financial drain of expansionism may have been more justified in terms of security considerations in the Chinese case than in the European, and certainly the American. Different combinations of Mongol alliances posed at least a potential threat to the Qing domains, which, given a long history of nomadic incursions, including those by the ruling Manchus themselves, was a matter for ongoing and pressing concern on the part of imperial officials. Though numerous advocates of Western imperialist expansion also vigorously, even stridently, contended that the continuing power and prestige of modern states depended on their ability to acquire and draw resources from overseas empires, none of the dependencies acquired in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries posed a direct military threat to any part of western Europe or the United States, except perhaps the northern borderlands of Mexico annexed by the United States in the mid-nineteenth century.

In addition, until the widespread use of petroleum by naval and land

¹ Good introductions to these diverging patterns can be found in Alfred Crosby, Ecological Imperialism: The Biological Expansion of Europe, 900-1900 (New York, 1986) and Philip Curtin, Death by Migration: Europe’s Encounter with the Tropical World in the Nineteenth Century (New York, 1995).
² The fullest accounting of the balance sheets of imperialism to date is provided for Britain’s Indian Empire in Robert A. Huttenback and Lance B. Davis, Mammon and the Pursuit of Empire: The Political Economy of British Imperialism, 1860-1912 (New York, 1986).
forces in the years before and during the first World War, little in the way of strategic natural resources was drawn from colonial territories anywhere on the globe. In this regard, it is noteworthy that Germany held a coalition of allies, supplied by extensive colonial empires, at bay for over four years, despite being denied access to its own, rather limited colonial dependencies by the blockade of the Entente powers.

In an essay on the legal system that evolved in Mongol areas brought under Qing rule in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Heuschert argues that a pluralistic system of law with strong parallels to those found in European tropical dependencies was a key feature of Qing colonialism. As in British India, Dutch Java, or British and French Africa, this pluralism consisted of a mix of laws and institutional precedents gradually transferred from the Han Chinese and western European metropoles to conquered areas in each of these empires, and the preservation, with varying degrees of modification, of the legal codes and courts of subjugated peoples. In both Qing and European imperial systems, these modifications were introduced only after extended negotiations between colonizers and the elites and religious and legal experts in the conquered areas. Very often the mix of imported and indigenous legal codes and practices involved three or more coexisting systems, as in India, where family law was largely left to Hindu pundits and Muslim qādīs, with British courts exercising appellate jurisdiction and hearing criminal cases. The mixture in Java of European, Muslim, and adat (or animist) legal systems was perhaps most closely paralleled in the Qing domains by areas where Muslim, animist, or Buddhist legal codes and procedures worked in tandem with Manchu-Han Chinese tribunals and legal codes. The evidence provided by Heuschert also suggests that the influence of Han Chinese statutes and precedents became more pronounced the longer a conquered area was under Qing rule, a pattern strongly in evidence in European colonies, particularly those in Asia, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.1

As with other comparisons between Qing and western European colonialism, closer examination of apparent similarities in the preservation of indigenous legal systems in conquered areas and the transfer of precedents and statutes from the metropoles reveals important differences. The legal pluralism that characterized both Qing and European colonial domination

1 For British India, see Marc Galanter, Law and Society in Modern India (Delhi, 1989) and the essays in Anand Yang, Crime and Criminality in British India (Tucson, 1985). For colonial Africa, see Martin Chanock, Law, Custom, and Social Order: The Colonial Experience in Malawi and Zambia (Cambridge, 1985) and the contributions to the history of colonial law in various parts of British and French Africa in Law in Colonial Africa, ed. K. Mann and R. Roberts (Portsmouth, NH, 1991). The fullest exploration of these complex systems in comparative context is the focus of Lauren Benton’s forthcoming study on ‘Law and Colonial Cultures’.
was often codified and exercised in rather distinct ways. To begin with, there were fewer commonalities between European law and that, both indigenous and imported, found in African and Asian colonial territories than was the case in at least the Mongol areas ruled by the Qing. European efforts to modify indigenous laws, by legislation and successive recodifications, as well as the steady extension of the jurisdiction of European courts and precedents, was also more persistent than those of the Qing.

These divergent patterns produced yet another key difference. European colonizers permitted varying numbers of the colonized peoples, usually drawn from the elite and emerging middle classes, to study Western law and practise in European courts. In addition, litigants in European colonies could insist that their cases be tried in British, French, or Dutch courts, an option that was not available to Mongols. Furthermore, in Qing domains it was possible for Han Chinese migrants, both traders and farmers, to be judged according to Mongolian law. Europeans, by contrast, were always tried in European courts, in accordance with European legal codes. Even attempts to allow Western-educated judges among the colonized to preside at trials involving Europeans, whether planters, merchants, or missionaries, were vociferously resisted by the great majority of the European expatriate community in all colonial settings.1

Some of the more intriguing similarities between Qing and European imperialism involve the colonizers' representations of women and gender roles in conquered societies, which are explored in considerable depth by Teng in her analysis of travel accounts of Taiwan. Although Teng sometimes conflates sex with gender, she convincingly demonstrates that many of the key tropes found in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century European travel and missionary accounts and official correspondence, also preoccupied Manchu and Han Chinese emissaries of the Qing empire who visited Taiwan as well as areas of expansion in the south of present-day China. She argues that the roles and status of women took on great importance in overall Qing evaluations of the society and culture of subjugated peoples. Though these gauges were also important to European observers in both the early modern and post-industrial periods,2 the mix of other standards of evaluation, which increasingly stressed material achievement, may have been rather different from that of the Qing.

Differences between colonizing and subject peoples in areas as diverse

1 For one of the most notorious and revealing instances of colonizer overreaction, see Mrinalini Sinha, 'The Politics of Gender and Race in the Ilbert Bill Controversy, 1883-4', in Western Women and Imperialism: Complicity and Resistance, ed. Nupur Chaudhuri and Margaret Strobel (Bloomington, 1999), pp. 98-118.

2 See, e.g., the stress placed on the position of women in the very different colonial contexts of Algeria and India, in the essays by Julia Clancy-Smith and Sinha respectively in ibid., pp. 69, 100.
as female fashions, marriage patterns, and sexual relations were judged as signs of the inferiority of the colonized. But for Qing as for European colonizers, condescension was decidedly tempered by ambivalence. The colonizer’s representations of women in subjugated societies as exotic, promiscuous, and immodest fed the fantasies and informed the attitudes and activities of male travellers and settlers in occupied areas. In both Qing and European empires, colonial sites came to be associated with sexual opportunity for male colonizers. But it is not clear from Teng’s essay how complicit Taiwanese women were in cross-cultural sexual liaisons, how Taiwanese men responded, and to what extent colonial dominance led to sexual exploitation rather than mutual and meaningful liaisons. Another area of gender interaction between colonizers and colonized worth exploration is the extent to which the position of women became a key site of contestation between conquerors and subjugated peoples in the Qing empire, as a number of recent studies have established was the case in European colonies.¹

One of the more striking tropes shared by Qing and European representations of the gender conventions of the colonized, mentioned by both Teng and Di Cosmo, was the tendency to categorize subject peoples as martial/masculine or submissive/feminine. In comparison with British India at least, there was also a geographical parallel, with peoples represented as martial mainly those, such as the Sikhs, Gurkhas, and Jats, located in the north-west of the subcontinent like the Mongols and other nomadic peoples from the regions to the north and west of the Chinese heartlands. Furthermore, in both cases, these essentializations were grounded in environmental determinism: societies in tropical zones were associated with lascitude, sensuality, and eroticism; those in colder climates with industry, modest dress, and decorum, and with more strictly regulated relations between the sexes. In both Qing and European empires, special efforts were made to recruit soldiers from peoples seen to exemplify manly virtues and physical strength, and there is evidence of official concern that this martial stock might be degraded by too great an exposure to softer, more submissive peoples in other parts of the empire.

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All of these essays implicitly suggest that, at the most general level of global historical patterning, Qing and European colonization in the early modern era was representative of an age of unprecedented growth in state systems

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and intensification of political control over subject peoples. As Perdue argues explicitly, whether undertaken by Qing or European bureaucrats, this project involved both a fundamental reconceptualization of spatial and temporal assumptions and a systematic rationalization of the ways in which states and societies were organized. Boundaries, both frontiers and internal administrative divisions, were rigidified and physically delineated with increasing rigour; imperial territories were explored, mapped, and measured with increasing precision; the discovery and enumeration of natural resources became a primary task of state administrators; and censuses and cadastral surveys greatly advanced the state’s knowledge of subject populations and its ability to control them. All of this was made possible by the growing sophistication of both the tools and techniques that state officials could employ to measure and demarcate, to count and classify, and to apply lethal force when required.2

For the subject populations of early modern empires – Qing and European or Ottoman and Russian – this great elaboration of the apparatus of state meant more frequent and effective bureaucratic interventions in their daily lives, though, in colonized areas at least, these were by no means as effective as most official accounts would have one believe. The effects of the changes varied considerably, depending on the nature of the social group in question. For nomadic groups that are the focus of many of these essays, for example, the space in which herds might be pastured or shifting cultivation practised could be confined and patterned differently. Peasants were restricted in still different ways. Their yields were more closely calculated and recorded, and their rents and taxes more systematically collected. At the same time, class and ethnic divisions – especially within colonized areas – rigidified, and subject groups experienced a diminution in the effectiveness of time-tested defences, such as concealment, flight to frontier regions or forest refuge zones, and collusion with local officials.3

Although the history of Qing and European colonialism provides com-

1 Building primarily on the theories, arguments, and underlying presuppositions of Max Weber, there has been a tendency to see this rationalizing project as a key dimension of the Western exceptionalism that ultimately resulted in European global hegemony. For a cogent critique of this approach and an extension of rationality in the Weberian sense to China, India, and other Asian cultures, see Jack Goody, The East in the West (Cambridge, 1996).

2 For pioneering analysis of these patterns, see Bernard S. Cohn, Colonialism and Its Forms of Knowledge: The British in India (Princeton, 1996).

parable examples of many of these early modern processes, as the essays considered thus far demonstrate, important differences between the practice and impact of imperialism exemplified by each type of expansionism are revealed by a closer look at the apparent similarities that are stressed in contributions to the collection as a whole. These contrasts were grounded in deeper, contextual divergences in the processes of Qing and European colonialism, which are underscored, at least implicitly, by the patterns explored in the essays by Teng, Waley-Cohen, and Perdue, even though Teng and Perdue in particular are concerned to demonstrate important similarities between Manchu and European concerns and responses. In making these comparisons, there is a need to distinguish pre-industrial or early modern patterns of colonial expansion from examples of the process involving industrializing societies, such as Great Britain, France, Germany, the United States, and Japan in the last decades of the nineteenth century. Contrasts between European and Qing (or Ottoman, Mughal, and Russian) colonialism in the early modern era are significant, but they become even more pronounced and profound once industrializing states are compared with pre-industrial empires.

In terms of underlying sources of difference between Qing and western European patterns of colonial expansion in the pre-modern era, two factors need to be stressed that Di Cosmo explicitly seeks to refute: the non-contiguous, overseas nature of European empires and the absence of a prior history, in the case of the European empires, of extensive cross-cultural contacts and exchanges between the peoples and cultures of Asia and Africa and those of the West that came to exert hegemonic control over them.

Sea communications and the sheer distances involved in early modern European expansion made for a number of differences from patterns exhibited by its Qing counterpart. In the pre-steamship era, which meant in effect into the early nineteenth century, the trip from London to Calcutta, the epicentre of the largest of the European colonial empires, took at best from five to eight months, and with inclement weather could last as long as fourteen months. Given delays in England and India, the round-trip was known to take as long as two years. Even with the advent of the steamship after industrialization was under way in Europe, mail steamers, which usually provided the most rapid communications, still needed a month to travel between the British capital and Calcutta well into the 1830s. Though Di Cosmo's caution that we not underestimate the very considerable distances and geographical barriers that separated the core regions of the Qing empire from areas like Mongolia and Tibet is well

taken, travel overland by horse was a good deal faster than sea transport in
the pre-steamship era. Before the introduction of the telegraph, relay
systems for official communications enhanced this advantage considerably
for land empires like the Qing. The British in particular also made use of
horse relay systems to speed the transmission of official dispatches, but the
vast distance between, say, London and Calcutta, still meant much longer
delays than was the case in the Qing empire. This meant that until indus-
trial communications technologies further shrunk the distance between
European metropoles and colonized areas, the Qing bureaucracy probably
exceeded the British, French, Spanish, or Dutch in the extent to which it
could control different portions of its vast empire. Though detailed com-
parative studies are needed to test the impact of these communications
differentials, it is likely that the legendary ‘men-on-the-spot’ in the Euro-
pean empires exercised a good deal more autonomy and initiative than
their Qing counterparts. This would also have been true of indigenous
leaders in areas colonized or under assault, both those collaborating with
the invaders and those leading resistance to them at different levels of local
society.

The advantage enjoyed by the Qing in terms of effective imperial control
from the capital and metropole was greatly enhanced by the fact that the
Manchus could move far larger numbers of troops, particularly cavalry
which was the mainstay of their banner forces, much more quickly into
conquered or contested areas than the Europeans. It is noteworthy that
there were no military-agrarian colonies in European overseas empires
comparable with those that were one of the mainstays of the Qing imperial
presence in disparate parts of the empire. The same advantages of more
rapid personnel transfer would have applied to the dispatch of imperial
bureaucrats and their retinues. Though again more thorough research is
needed to document comparisons, one critical consequence of these differ-
ences was a greater European dependence on soldiers and administrative
personnel recruited from peoples indigenous to colonized areas. And if
India in the eighteenth century is a reliable test case, there was also a
greater reliance on indigenous bankers, merchants, and moneylenders to
finance military expeditions, bribe allies of adversary princes, and organize
local peasant and artisan production of goods the European colonizers
sought to export in order to turn a profit on their overseas adventures.1

The fact that European communications with their colonies were over-
whelmingly by sea and that whatever military advantages they possessed in

1 These patterns are explored in depth in successive volumes of The New Cambridge History of India:
P. J. Marshall, Bengal: The British Bridgehead, Eastern India, 1740–1898 (Cambridge, 1987) and C. A.
the early modern era were vested in their naval forces does much to account for the mercantile cast of most early European empires. In fact, with the possible exception of New Spain and the Spanish Philippines, European overseas colonization until at least the late eighteenth century focused on the establishment and maintenance of trading-post empires. As this designation suggests, European expansion in Asia and Africa was largely confined to coastal, fortified entrepôts such as Bombay, Calcutta, Malacca, and Batavia, which were centred on ‘factories’ or warehouses for overseas trade; on well-armed ships to control access to vital, but limited, sea routes; and on the accumulation of profits to enrich investors in London, Amsterdam, or Nantes.

This pattern contrasts sharply with Qing colonialism, which was oriented to territorial expansion and the extension of the control of the Manchu-Han Chinese bureaucracy. Though opportunities opened up for Chinese merchants and moneylenders in conquered areas, they were more or less incidental to the imperial enterprise. Even if the Europeans had nurtured similar imperial designs, until the late eighteenth century they did not have the means to carry them out, except in island and exposed coastal areas or previously isolated regions such as the Americas, which were vulnerable to the technologies, diseases, and modes of warfare of the alien invaders. The conquest of land empires was seen by the directors and factors of the trading companies that dominated European colonial expansion in all but Iberia in the early modern era as a costly, and futile, diversion of resources that ought to be devoted to trade. In any case, the distances involved and the European dependence on naval power rendered challenges to even rather minor kingdoms and principalities beyond the means of even the most prosperous of the trading companies that spearheaded European expansion in the early modern era.¹

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Even more critical than the land-sea contrasts between Qing and European patterns of colonialism were the deeper historical and cultural links between the Manchu-Han Chinese core areas of the Qing empire and conquered territories as compared to those between the European metropoles and their overseas possessions. Though Di Cosmo is again correct to warn against overstating the duration and extent of the historical interaction between the Chinese core areas and colonized areas such as Mongolia, Tibet, and the south, these were unquestionably much more ancient and

¹ For recent contributions to a substantial literature on these patterns, see Sanjay Subrahmanyam, Improvising Empire: Portuguese Trade and Settlement in the Bay of Bengal, 1500-1700 (Delhi, 1990) and Anthony Reid, Southeast Asia in the Age of Commerce, 1450-1680 (New Haven, 1988).
Imperialism and Colonialism

substantial than those between the Europeans and any of the overseas regions they came to rule beginning in the sixteenth century. For millennia, the regions that made up the vast Qing empire had been a zone in which human populations, diseases, inventions, crops, religions, and a diverse array of other cultural artefacts had been circulated and exchanged through invasion and warfare, trade and exploration, pilgrimage and proselytization, migration and travel. Though no previous dynasty based in China had ruled all of the territory conquered by the Qing, metropole and colonies shared a good deal in the way of culture and historical connections. Distance and ecological frontiers may have impeded contacts and assimilation among the myriad ethnic groups and local cultures in the regions that came to make up the Qing empire, but there had been interaction between them for centuries, and in some cases millennia, that had no counterpart in any of the European empires.1

Although western Europeans had shared in the circulation of diseases, crops, and technology with most of the regions in the Afro-Eurasian ecumene for millennia before they began to colonize in Africa and Asia, direct contacts had been rare and confined to small numbers of traders, missionaries, and adventurers. Substantial contacts had existed only with the Muslim kingdoms and empires that ringed Europe to the south and east, and effectively blocked direct exchanges with most of Africa and Asia until the outburst of Iberian-led expansion got under way in the fifteenth century. Whether in terms of trade or the transmission of technology, Muslim peoples established themselves as the middlemen between Europe and the rest of the African and Asian portions of the old world ecumene.2 Therefore, the overseas territories that the Europeans came to colonize were terra incognita to a degree inconceivable in the interaction between the core areas of Chinese civilization and the regions that surrounded it. This meant that the ethnic and cultural disparities between the European conquerors and the peoples they colonized were much greater than between rulers and subjects in the Qing empire.

In varying ways, and often implicitly, these essays illustrate important differences between European and Qing approaches to colonization that were rooted in the more pronounced cultural and ethnic distinctions between the Europeans and the peoples they colonized than was the case among the Manchus and the Han Chinese and the peoples administered

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1 For a recent overview of these exchanges, see The Cambridge History of Early Inner Asia, ed. Denis Sinor (New York, 1990).
by the Lifan Yuan. Waley-Cohen, for example, discusses the ways in which Manchu emperors and Qing officials drew upon religious beliefs, institutions, and symbols that they shared with colonized peoples and peoples or sects hostile to the regimes in Tibet, western Sichuan, and elsewhere to establish or affirm the legitimacy of Qing rule. With rare exceptions, there was no commonality in faith or ritual for the Europeans to appeal to in establishing hegemony over conquered African or Asian peoples. In fact, as Waley-Cohen notes, quite the reverse. Expansionist Europeans with a religious mission, such as the Spanish and Portuguese, aggressively, sometimes forcibly, sought to convert indigenous peoples to their own alien beliefs and practices. Other colonizers, particularly the British and Dutch, stressed commercial profit and viewed conversion as a potentially costly impediment to that end, at least in Asia and well into the nineteenth century. As a consequence, colonial officials serving in both the English and Dutch East India Companies played down their own religious affiliations, actively discouraged the proselytization of Christianity, and generally sought to accommodate the religious sensibilities of subject peoples, unless these were believed to be catalysts for resistance and rebellion.

Although some European officials cvinced a genuine intellectual interest in indigenous faiths and philosophies, few doubted that both were inferior to Christianity. European colonial administrators also actively manipulated religious differences between subject peoples, sought to co-opt religious leaders and institutions deemed amenable to their rule, and adopted indigenous symbols and rituals of political legitimacy with decided associations with indigenous faiths. As many experienced European bureaucrats feared, the growing links between missionary proselytization and the advance of colonial control in the latter half of the nineteenth century often intensified indigenous resistance to what were increasingly seen as alien, hostile, and disruptive interventions into largely non-Christian, non-Western societies.¹

Significant differences in the degree of ethnic and cultural distance between rulers and subject peoples in Qing and European colonics were also major factors in determining the nature and intensity of discrimination against subject peoples within imperial systems. As most of the essays make clear, the peoples of the Qing empire were identified and demarcated primarily on the basis of cultural criteria. As Sperling illustrates, civilized

¹ Two of the most revealing explorations of the interplay between colonial bureaucrats and indigenous religious belief systems and sectarian groups are James T. Siegel, The Rope of God (Berkeley, 1969) and Richard G. Fox, Lions of the Punjab: Culture in the Making (Berkeley, 1985). On the contest over symbols of legitimacy, see Laurie Sears, Shadows of Empire: Colonial Discourse and Javanese Tales (Durham, 1996).
status was judged not by colour or race, but by the mastery of Chinese culture, especially language, dress, and decorum. In all of the European empires, race came to supplant culture as the dominant marker of difference, of superiority and inferiority, and, by the late nineteenth century, as an intrinsic impediment to full assimilation into Western civilization. The divergence in policy and ruler-subject interaction that emanated from an emphasis on culture rather than race is dramatically underscored by the Qing policy of promoting intermarriage between colonizers and colonized that is discussed in a number of the essays. Though sexual liaisons and even marriages across this divide did, of course, occur in Western domains, they were rarely promoted as a matter of policy by any of the European colonizers, and then only in the early centuries of overseas expansion. By the latter half of the eighteenth century, this sort of interaction was increasingly disapproved of and proscribed by colonial regimes, taboo for members of European communities in the colonies, and forbidden in regulations promulgated by metropolitan authorities.1

As industrialization spread in western Europe, the gap not only between metropole and colonies but also between European colonizers and Qing or Ottoman and Russian steadily increased. In many respects, the fate of the Qing with its Han Chinese base is the most revealing of all of Europe’s rivals in this regard. In size, resource base, scale and effectiveness of bureaucracy and military forces, and technological sophistication, the Qing empire in its early stages surpassed any of the European colonial powers. By the end of the eighteenth century, it was clearly matched by Great Britain, and was surpassed and humiliated in the early decades of the nineteenth century. In the late 1800s, this pattern was repeated by France, Germany, the United States, and the emerging Asian industrial power, Japan.

It is noteworthy that Perdue’s essay implicitly suggests key sources of this reversal centuries earlier. For as early as the seventeenth century, Qing maps – and cannon and other implements of war – owed much to Jesuit savants and Scandinavian adventurers. And though Perdue is correct to see all maps as constructed ideographs, which reflect specific epistemologies and cultural conventions, some maps are better than others for directing military campaigns, exploiting natural resources, or just coping with the wider world. The most advanced neolithic and modes of transport have proved no match for industrial weaponry and communications systems. Ultimately, all non-industrial, non-Western

1 For recent comparative treatments of these patterns, see Ann Laura Stoler, ‘Rethinking Colonial Categories: European Communities and the Boundaries of Rule,’ Comparative Studies in Society and History, xxxi (1991), 134–61 and Scott Cook, Colonial Encounters in the Age of High Imperialism (New York, 1996).
colonizers (with the possible exception of Japan) fell victim to the expansive European powers, which brings us back to the misrepresentation of colonialism as something distinctively Western, a process involving far-flung possessions across the seas. Ironically, for decades this perception abetted Soviet and Chinese Communist efforts to obfuscate their perpetuation of tsarist and Qing legacies of colonialism. As the essays in this collection so effectively demonstrate, by decentring and genuinely globalizing the ways in which the process of colonialism is conceptualized, we can better understand both past and continuing systems of imperialist hegemony.

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