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## Frontier Stories: Periphery as Center in Qing History

**Abstract** Since at least the 1960s, the importance of the tremendous territorial expansion under Qing rule to the modern history of China has been generally acknowledged. Indeed, one can say that the frontier story is one of the things that makes the Qing “Qing.” However, only in the last twenty years has the study of what is now termed the “borderlands” come into its own as a sub-field. This essay begins by describing some key concepts and terms in the study of the Qing frontier, including the Manchu word *jecen*. It then raises the problem of narrative frameworks, asking how we might best contextualize the growth of the empire, before going on to explore the implications of the discursive shift represented by the “New Qing History” and the extensive research on Qing borderlands associated therewith. A poem by the Mongol poet Na-xun Lan-bao provides the focus for a concluding discussion of a distinctive Qing frontier sensibility.

**Keywords** frontier, borderlands, New Qing History, Lattimore, Inner Asia

It seems impossible to begin without a reference to Owen Lattimore. For the beginning student of the Chinese frontier, Lattimore is often still the first author we read. His early writings on Manchuria, Mongolia, and Xinjiang—all places he knew personally from extensive travel there in the 1920s and 1930s—give us a captivating glimpse of an Inner Asia that, in his day, remained as yet little changed from the late Qing. Laying out before us an extraordinary world both alluring and strange, Lattimore seems to be saying to the novice that, despite appearances, this is in fact a knowable world. Which it is.

Though today outdated in some respects, Lattimore’s writings continue to provide an intellectual context in which to think about the frontier in general, both across a broad temporal sweep and in comparative terms. Indeed, as William Rowe has pointed out in a recent essay, Lattimore is one of the few Asianists of the twentieth century whose influence continues to be felt widely across all fields of history, in large measure because he pioneered an approach to the study of the

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frontier that went beyond national histories.<sup>1</sup> In that, and in his readiness to identify the actions of China-based states as “imperialist” in nature, he stands as the intellectual godfather of all historians of China who have sought to find ways to escape the deadening hand of doctrinaire nation-centered narratives and who look instead for the other histories that lie neglected along the geographical periphery of the modern Chinese state. This group includes not only those scholars who study the Inner Asian frontier—the area where Lattimore’s influence has been the greatest, and which will provide the focus of this essay—but also those who work on the maritime frontiers of the east and southeast coasts and on the mountainous highland frontiers of the southwest.

As Rowe reminds us, Lattimore was a man of the field, not of the archive. He was a Big Idea Hunter, always searching for deep structure and ultimate causes. His intimate knowledge of the people and landscapes of the frontier kept him from making easy assumptions and incautious generalizations, even if he sometimes lapses into what we might label essentialism, at least as regards China itself. In this respect, Lattimore’s intellectual profile differs from that of Joseph Fletcher, probably the other most influential American scholar of Chinese frontier studies in the twentieth century. Fletcher’s name must be mentioned, not only because his contributions to the *Cambridge History of China* volumes laid the foundation of all subsequent work done on the Qing frontier (at least concerning the north and west), but also because, unlike Lattimore, Fletcher was as much at home in the archive as he was on the road, and possessed a formal training in history and language that Lattimore never had. Few of us born after 1930 had any hope of enjoying the same sorts of experiences as did Lattimore and his intrepid wife, Eleanor: traipsing in the forests and rivers of northern Manchuria, traveling the high roads of Mongolia on ponies and camels, riding sledges through the Siberian snow to Turkestan. But we *could* aspire to the sort of preparation that Fletcher had received, even if, inevitably, we failed to match him in what we achieved. For this reason, Fletcher was a model as much as he was an inspiration for those entering the field in the later twentieth century; Lattimore, on the other hand, was an oracle.

We know that as a rule Lattimore did not hold “book learning” or philological expertise in high regard.<sup>2</sup> Be that as it may, he and Fletcher (who were

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<sup>1</sup> Noting that Lattimore anticipated many of the developments that constitute the theoretical underpinnings of the “global history” that has emerged in the last couple of decades, Rowe writes “[T]he fact is that Lattimore remains one of the very few historians of the non-Western world to have helped shape the larger historical discipline in the West to any degree whatsoever.” William T. Rowe, “Owen Lattimore, Asia, and Comparative History,” 782.

<sup>2</sup> As Rowe observes: “Positively glorying in the fact that he was *not* a trained historian, [Lattimore] scoffed throughout his life at both the textual scholarship and the topical specialization conventionally demanded by that discipline; with characteristic pugnacity, he equated overreliance on textual sources with giving in to ‘authoritarian attempts to control opinion’ rather than relying on his own rough-and-ready ‘commonsense kind of reasoning’.” Rowe, “Owen Lattimore,” 761, n1.

friends<sup>3</sup>) clearly agreed upon the importance of writing history in such a way that it reached a broad audience and made connections to the wider world. Fletcher's "airplane ride" was of course a famous illustration of what he called "integrative history."<sup>4</sup> One wonders if Fletcher would acknowledge that this was what Lattimore was doing when he wrote his well-known essay, "The Frontier in History," or whether Fletcher would go along with Lattimore's insistence in seeing world history in such strongly civilizational terms, perhaps the one dimension of his approach that seems least useful today. But at a minimum we can say that in setting out the development of China's frontiers as a type against which other frontiers might be compared, Lattimore was operating according to the same basic assumptions as Fletcher, namely, that the history of China was by no means exceptional, that the study of the frontier provided a key to that history, and that anyone seeking to establish patterns and connections in world history would at least want to include China, if not in fact begin there.<sup>5</sup>

The present essay is thus of course an *hommage au maître*. It does not attempt anything nearly so ambitious, however, as Lattimore did in his famous 1955 paper, "The Frontier in History." Its more modest goal is to briefly outline some of the ways in which research on the Inner Asian frontier occupies a place of special significance for Qing studies, and, conversely, to describe what I see to be the significance of the Qing for the study of the frontier in Chinese history. What I would like to argue is that the frontier story is essential to any account of China during the last three and a half centuries; not only is it one of the things that makes the Qing "Qing," it is one of the things that has made China what it is today.

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## Defining the *Jecen*

Perhaps the best place to begin is with the meanings of the term, "frontier" —a word that figures in the very title of this journal. In English, as is well known, the word comes from a Latin military term, *fronteria*, indicating a front line of soldiers.

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<sup>3</sup> Despite Lattimore's long residence in the United Kingdom after 1963, the two men were on good terms. Fletcher hosted Lattimore at Harvard on at least one occasion in the early 1970s (Ho-dong Kim, personal communication), and among Lattimore's papers at the Library of Congress are letters exchanged with Fletcher between 1966 and 1975.

<sup>4</sup> Joseph Fletcher, "Integrative History: Parallels and Interconnections in the Early Modern Period, 1500–1800," 37–57.

<sup>5</sup> "For an extremely regular, strongly patterned record of the processes of specialization and their consequences in the shaping of frontiers, the history of China may be taken as a standard—an experimental, not an absolute standard—for estimating relative frontier values in the history of other societies and other parts of the world." Owen Lattimore, "The Frontier in History," 472.

In this sense, *fronteria* should be contrasted to another Latin word, *limes* (pl. *limites*), originally a boundary in a field, or a fortified line guarding a marchland.<sup>6</sup> The meaning of “frontier” as a line, or border, seems to have entered English only in the fifteenth century, perhaps from French, to mean “a political barrier between states or peoples, often militarized.”<sup>7</sup> In French, *frontière* continues to have this meaning, like Italian *fronterra*, German *Grenze*, Russian *граница*, or Chinese *jie* 界. In English, however, “frontier” has over time acquired a different sense, and for well over a century now has carried the meaning of a peripheral zone, an unexplored area or region, perhaps very large, giving it a sense more akin to later meanings of the Chinese word *jiang* 疆.<sup>8</sup> On this point, we may as well quote Lattimore, who played with both senses of the word: “The linear frontier as it is conventionally indicated on a map always proves, when studied on the ground, to be a zone rather than a line.”<sup>9</sup> Comparing this view to that of Frederick Jackson Turner, whose interpretation of the frontier had a great influence upon Lattimore, one can not only see the effect upon the latter’s thinking, but also the moment (1893) at which the word “frontier” began to acquire this broader sense:

The American frontier is sharply distinguished from the European frontier—a fortified boundary line running through dense populations. The most significant thing about the American frontier is, that it lies at the hither edge of free land. In the census reports it is treated as the margin of that settlement which has a density of two or more to the square mile. The term is an elastic one, and for our purposes does not need sharp definition. We shall consider *the whole frontier belt*, including the Indian country and the outer margin of the “settled area” of the census reports.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Fulmer Mood, “Notes on the History of the Word Frontier,” 78–83.

<sup>7</sup> Daniel J. Power, “Introduction: Frontiers: Terms, Concepts, and the Historians of Medieval and Early Modern Europe,” 2.

<sup>8</sup> While the etymology of the word *jiang* points to an original meaning of a boundary, by the late imperial period it is frequently employed to mean a frontier region.

<sup>9</sup> Lattimore, “The Frontier in History,” 469–70. It should be said that scholars by no means agree on the interpretation of the English words “frontier” and “border.” Though he allows that they may coexist, or transform from one to the other over time, Peter Sahlins clearly sees the two as distinctive kinds of spaces, whereas Diana Lary suggests that the difference between frontier and border is “not a hard and fast one,” and that border may be taken to mean, not a fixed line, but a “permeable, flexible, and interpenetrable” zone between two entities, a place of gradual transition. See Peter Sahlins, *Boundaries: The Making of France and Spain in the Pyrenees*, 4; and Diana Lary, ed., *The Chinese State at the Borders*, 5–6.

<sup>10</sup> Frederick Jackson Turner, “The Significance of the Frontier in American History.” Emphasis added.

Lattimore, of course, adopted none of Turner's ideas about the frontier as a crucible of rugged individualism, democracy, and progress, nor did he espouse the celebratory tone of continual outward expansion of "civilization." Quite the contrary: Lattimore saw the Inner Asian frontier much more from what Turner might have called (had he stopped to consider that such a thing existed) the "native" point of view—that is, a zone of contestation—which is one of the things that continues to make his analysis of the frontier so relevant.<sup>11</sup> Even if the word "frontier" is now largely being supplanted by "borderland," it is hard to see how the difference between these terms in English can easily survive the translation into Chinese, or any other language, for that matter. Indeed, to the degree that "borderland" implies a colonial dynamic, this introduces a further complicating element, which as far as I am aware has yet to be adequately addressed.<sup>12</sup>

To speak of the "native" viewpoint requires us to consider native terms. While grossly undertheorized, much has been written of Chinese-language terms such as *bianjiang* 邊疆,<sup>13</sup> but what of the Manchu word *jecen*? Since this

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<sup>11</sup> This is especially so in the mainland, where numerous articles on Lattimore have appeared in recent years. Cf. the comment by Fudan historian Yao Dali: "Many of the succinct and astute observations written down several decades ago by Lattimore remain a source of inspiration for creative reflection by those who today research the history of the Chinese frontier." Cited in Huang Dayuan, "Bianjiang, minzu yu guojia: dui La-tie-mo-er 'Zhongguo bianjiang guan' de sikao," 41.

<sup>12</sup> In their now-classic article, Adelman and Aron seek to differentiate "frontier" and "borderland" in an effort to avoid the problematic overtones of Turnerian triumphalism. Referencing the major revisions in US history led respectively by Bolton and Limerick, they argue that, "By frontier, we understand a meeting place of peoples in which geographic and cultural borders were not clearly defined." Borderlands, on the other hand, are formed around "the contested boundaries between colonial domains," such that it is "the conflicts over borderlands [that] shaped the peculiar and contingent character of frontier relations." Jeremy Adelman and Stephen Aron, "From Borderlands to Borders," 815–16. However useful this terminological distinction may be for the study of the American West, I do not know of an extended consideration of its applicability to the Inner Asian case. If we understand the frontier as a zone of interpenetration and interaction, then it would appear that the primary point of differentiation between frontier and borderland is the overlap, and contestation, of the claims of different political authorities *qua* colonial powers. Setting aside the question of whether the Inner Asian frontier actually lacks this aspect, the fact is that the same Chinese word, *bianjiang*, is used to translate both "frontier" and "borderland" in much contemporary scholarship.

<sup>13</sup> One place to start is Zhang Shiming and Gong Shengquan, "'Bianjiang' yici zai shijie zhuyao faxizhong de jingxiang: yige yuyuan jiaodu de kaocha," especially pages 3–5. Another is Fang Tie, "Gudai zhili bianjiang lilun yu shijian de yanjiu gouxiang." Elsewhere, Fang has written that, in China, basic research on theoretical aspects of the frontier is notably behind the times. See Fang, "Shilun Zhongguo bianjiangxue de yanjiu fangfa," 21.

word is necessarily part of the object of any study of the Qing frontier, it is perhaps justified to offer a short etymological and discursive parsing of this key term.

Let us begin with the dictionaries. In her authoritative comparative dictionary of Tungusic languages,<sup>14</sup> Tsintsius gives several original meanings of *jecen*: *межа* “boundary”; *крепость* “fortress”; *защита* “defense, shelter, protection”; *ограда*, *стена* “fence, wall”; *рубеж*, *грань*, *граница* “boundary, border.” In addition, she notes the existence of an attested Jurchen word, *jece*, which she defines as “border” (*граница*) or “periphery” (*окраина*). So we can say with some confidence, first of all, that *jecen* is in fact a native Manchu word, and not a borrowing from Mongolian; and second, that its original sense was highly military in nature, very much along the lines of Latin *limites*.

Looking at dictionaries compiled on the basis of Qing-period usage, however, we can also see that the meaning of “defensive boundary” underwent significant expansion and adaptation after the seventeenth century. In his *Comprehensive Manchu-English Dictionary*, Jerry Norman gives “border, frontier” as the baseline definition of *jecen*. He gives other compounds as well: *jecen akū* “limitless,” *jecen dalin* “shoreline,” *dubei jecen* “outer limit, farthest boundary,” *jase jecen* “frontier, border region,” and *oyonggo jecen* “important border area.”<sup>15</sup> Hauer provides the same basic definitions as Norman (*Begrenzung* [“delimitation”], *Grenze* [“border”]), along with a few other uses, such as the translations of the five zones that formed part of the classical Chinese worldview: “zone of [royal] residence” (甸服, *gemungge jecen*), “provincial zone” (候服, *golonggo jecen*), “zone of pacification” (綏服, *bilungga jecen*), harnessed zone (要服, *siderilengge jecen*), and “zone of wilderness” (荒服, *lampangga jecen*).<sup>16</sup> Further clues are provided by Hu Zengyi, the author of the definitive Manchu-Chinese dictionary, who defines *jecen* in many different ways: *bian* 邊, *bianyuan* 邊緣, *bianji* 邊際, *bianjie* 邊界, *bianjing* 邊境, *bianjiang* 邊疆, *biansai* 邊塞, all of which are synonymous, or nearly so—but of course it is the “nearly so” that is troublesome.<sup>17</sup> In addition, he provides a multitude of compounds drawn from his reading of original materials. These can be broken down into four basic families of meaning:<sup>18</sup>

<sup>14</sup> V. I. Tsintsius, *Sravnitel'nyi slovar' tunguso-man'chzhurskikh iazykov*.

<sup>15</sup> Jerry Norman, *A Comprehensive Manchu-English Dictionary*.

<sup>16</sup> Erich Hauer, *Handwörterbuch der Mandschusprache*, 2nd revised ed.

<sup>17</sup> Hu Zengyi, *Xin Man-Han da cidian*.

<sup>18</sup> An additional compound, *jalan jecen* (= Ch. *shi jie* 世界, “the world”), is obviously a calque from Chinese, and should be held apart.

1. administrative boundary, whether provincial, national, or other,<sup>19</sup>
2. a military line,<sup>20</sup>
3. the frontier generally,<sup>21</sup>
4. a particular frontier zone, especially one inhabited by a non-Han people.<sup>22</sup>

My own search of Qing-era documents suggests that the last of these meanings could apply to parts of China itself. The quotation below is from a palace memorial of the Kangxi reign:

*Si Ning, Liyang Jao, Si An ci juwe minggan ba funceme giyalabuhabi. uttu be dahame. ilan jecen i cooha ci tulgiyen. dorgi ba i dzungdu. siyün fu se. tidu. dzung bing guwan sei fejergi moringga cooha be emu minggan ekiyenyebufi.*<sup>23</sup> (emphasis added)

<sup>19</sup> Cf. the following examples: *adaki jecen* 領疆 “adjacent border”; *Šansi G’ansu i jecen* 陝西甘肅地界 “border of Shaanxi and Gansu”; *jecen obumbi* 做為邊界 “make a boundary”; *jecen i dolo/dorgi* 境內 “within the borders”; *jecen ci tucibumbi* 出境 “to leave/cross the border”; *jecen be dosimbi* 入境 “to enter the border”; *jecen [be] daba[na]mbi* 越境 “to cross the border illicitly”; *meni jecen i ergi karun be kadalara hafasa* 我主管哨所官員 “the officials managing the guardpost on our side of the border”; *juwe gurun i jecen i urse* 兩國邊境之人 “people in the border area of the two countries.” To this may be added other uses: *jorhon [jorgon sic] biyai ice duin de. jecen de isinjiha inenggi ci. Šandung ni golo de. amba nimanggi nimaraha.* “On the fourth day of the twelfth month, from the day you arrived at the border, there was a big snow in Shandong province.” From Kangxi Manwen zhupi zouzhe 康熙滿文硃批奏摺 (hereafter KXMaZPZZ) no. 149, memorial of Foron, KX 28.12.9. This and other documents cited from these collections are held in the First Historical Archives, Beijing. It is worth pointing out also that in the Manchu version of the 1727 Treaty of Kiakhta, *jecen* is the word used to describe the border between Russia and China, seen in such phrases as *juwe gurun i jecen i ba umesi oyonggo*, “the border between the two countries is very important; *juwe gurun i jecen hešen toktobuhangge*, “establishing the boundaries of the two countries.” British Library OMS/Add. 18106, “Treaty between China and Russia, 1727–28, in Manchu.”

<sup>20</sup> Cf. the following examples: *amban be hūlhai jecen de beye nikenjihe*, “The official personally got up close to the bandits’ lines”; *gabsihiyan be gafi batai jecen de šuwe dosifi* “taking the vanguard, he pushed straight into the enemy line.”

<sup>21</sup> Cf. the following examples: *jase jecen* 邊陲 邊疆 “border area”; *jecen i ba* 邊界 “frontier”; *wargi jecen* 西域 “western frontier”; *ice jecen* 新疆 “new frontier”; *goro/goroki jecen* 遠疆 “distant frontier”; *lakcaha jecen* 閉塞之地, 絕域之邊 “remote [lit. cut-off] frontier”; *mederi jecen* 海疆 “maritime frontier”; *jecen be bolgo obumbi* 靖邊 “pacify the border.” Another example, from the Qianlong era: *jecen i hafan de inu sain niyalma bahaci ombi*, “It is important to select truly good men as frontier officials” (Qianlong Manwen zhupi zouzhe packet 72, memorial of Uhetu, QL3.4.9).

<sup>22</sup> Cf. the following examples: *Tanggūt/Tubet jecen* 唐古特/土伯特邊境 “Tibetan border”; *Miyoodz jecen i ba* 苗疆 “Miao frontier”; *Oros jecen* 俄羅斯境 “Russian frontier”; *Jun gar jecen* 準噶爾境 “Dzungar frontier”; *Hoise jecen* 回疆 “Muslim frontier.”

<sup>23</sup> KXMaZPZZ 355, memorial of Boji 博濟, KX 41.5.21.

More than two thousand have already been seconded from Xining, Liangzhou, and Xi'an. Following this, apart from the soldiers of the three frontiers, a thousand mounted soldiers under the governors-general and governors, or under the military supervisors and provincial commanders of the interior provinces, have been used up.

To judge from the distinction drawn here between *ilan jecen* (= Ch. *san jiang* 三疆, “three frontiers”) and *dorgi ba* (= Ch. *neidi* 内地, “inner lands”) and from its use in other documents,<sup>24</sup> the term *ilan jecen* seems to have been shorthand for the western border zone constituted by Xining, Gansu, and Ningxia. Much later, of course, the word is applied to the newly incorporated territories of Dzungaria and Kashgaria (i.e., Altishahr), called in Manchu *Ice toktobuha jecen*, “newly fixed (or “pacified”) frontier,” and in Chinese simply as “Xinjiang” 新疆, “new frontier,” in which phrase the notion of *jecen* as a region of some considerable size is quite unequivocally expressed.

In thinking about the many ways in which *jecen* was used in Manchu documents, not to speak of the nuances in the Chinese terms for “frontier,” what we find is that providing a single, neat definition is impossible. Its meanings—like the meanings of so many terms used in what might seem to us today “inconsistent” ways—obviously varied considerably, depending on context. It would appear that the meaning changed somewhat over time, acquiring more and more a sense akin to that of the English “frontier,” but this is a question that will require further research. Another question worth consideration is whether and how *jecen* differs in its meaning from the words used to express similar ideas in Chinese, especially when it comes to the translation in the Qing of documents originally in Manchu. Though I do not investigate this problem in the present essay, the question is important because it points to the issue of the distinctiveness of the Qing frontier, a problem to which I would now like to turn.

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## The Qing in Frontier History

Any discussion of the place of the frontier in Qing history leads us to recall Ping-ti Ho's famous 1967 essay, in which he considered the larger significance of the

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<sup>24</sup> “Si An i ba. wargi ergi ilan jecen be alihabi. seremšeme tebuhe jakūn gūsai hafan. cooha holbobuhange umesi oyonggo” (“Xi'an has supported the three western frontiers. Everything related to the Eight Banner officers and soldiers garrisoned [there] is of the utmost importance”). Yongzheng Manwen zhupi zouzhe 雍正滿文硃批奏摺, 165, memorial of Jalangga, YZ 7.11.22.

Qing era for Chinese history.<sup>25</sup> Many readers will be familiar with one of Ho's main conclusions (repeated by Joseph Fletcher in his chapters for the *Cambridge History of China*), which is that the geographical framework of modern China was determined in the Qing, notably via the expansion, conquest, and consolidation of imperial territory on the frontier, particularly in Inner Asia, but also in Taiwan and in the southwest:

[G]eographically China could never have reached its present dimensions without the laborious, painstaking, and skillful work of empire building carried out by Manchu rulers between 1600 and 1800. Since much of present-day China's impact on the outside world is due to its size and the location of its frontiers, the contribution of the Ch'ing period to the formation of modern China as a geographic and ethnic entity is of the greatest significance.<sup>26</sup>

If it has taken some time to fully realize the implications of this conclusion—namely, that the history of the Qing periphery is in no way peripheral to our understanding of the Chinese past (or present, for that matter), and that its frontier experience is what makes Qing history distinctive when compared to other eras of dynastic rule—doubtless this has much to do with the fact that for a very long time we lacked access to the primary sources necessary to undertake this research, and training in the relevant languages was also undervalued. Nonetheless, as the next section of this essay will show, it seems now that we may be arriving at a point predicted nearly twenty years ago by James Millward, who wrote that while the implications of the territorial expansion under the Manchus had yet to be fully understood, a Qing-centered approach to policy and practice on the frontier would lead the field to realize “that the periphery can be central after all.”<sup>27</sup>

Perhaps it is wise, then, to first step back to consider a slightly different matter—not the significance of the frontier for the Qing, but the significance of the Qing for Chinese frontier history, and whether, or in what sense, we should even be thinking of it as “Chinese” frontier history at all.

This is clearly a sensitive question, since it touches directly on how one chooses to interpret the Qing imperial project: Was it, as has been suggested by some, the restoration of the classical ideal of “grand unity,” the *dayitong* 大一統, a gathering

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<sup>25</sup> Ping-ti Ho, “The Significance of the Ch'ing Period in Chinese History,” 189–95. In light of the discussion in the pages below of the “New Qing History,” it is worth noting that Ho's essay appeared along with two others, by Harold Kahn and Jonathan Spence, as part of a forum on “New Views of Ch'ing History.” All three papers were originally presented at a panel at the 1966 AAS meeting in New York, sponsored by the Society for Ch'ing Studies.

<sup>26</sup> Ho, “The Significance,” 189.

<sup>27</sup> James Millward, “New Perspectives on the Qing Frontier,” 129.

together of all of “all under Heaven,” *tianxia* 天下, in a culminating manifestation of the two-millennia-old Chinese imperial state?<sup>28</sup> Was it rather the re-creation of a universal order along the lines of the Mongol empire, another *yeke ulus*? Or was it instead an early modern state in the mold of the Ottoman, Mughal, Safavid, and Romanov empires, all also sprawling continental domains encompassing an array of peoples, lands, languages, and faiths within the sovereignty of a single ruler, himself—like the Qing emperor—sometimes the representative of a minority group, as in the case of the Ottomans and Mughals? In other words, was the Qing a Chinese dynasty (*chao* 朝), was it a compound, pluralist Inner Asian state (*gurun*<sup>29</sup>), or was it an “empire” in a more universal sense?<sup>30</sup> And how do we tell these apart?

Up to now, one way to do this has been to evaluate the things that the empire-builders themselves said about what they were doing on the frontier, since conquest—which of necessity happens at a distance from the center—is one of the areas where policies that are recognizably “imperial” are most in evidence.<sup>31</sup> By this logic, in the Qing, if, as they sometimes did, ruling elites said that they believed they were restoring unity, then this meant they were operating in a Chinese register. On the other hand, if they made references to Yuan-era precedents, or brought out symbols of Buddhist kingship, this meant they were thinking along different lines than those of orthodox succession (*zhengtong* 正統). But behind such conclusions lies an important question: How much attention ought we to be paying to the rhetoric of Qing empire-builders, anyway? Not that what they thought they were doing is not important, but their view of the business of conquest and consolidation on the frontier was no less a matter of discursive window dressing than what participants in imperial projects in other parts of the world have said to legitimate their actions. Mere antiquity of rhetoric, or invocation of hallowed claims to old territories, does not in itself make that rhetoric apolitical or in some sense neutral or “true.” Tropes of imperial unity, say, or the transformative power of civilization, or of chakravartin-hood are insistently political, even if people believed in them, as doubtless they did. That is what gives them their power. But the historian cannot settle for this alone.

We would be naïve indeed if we took Qing imperial discourse—which, it should be said, notably lacked any word that meant “empire”—at face value. One pitfall facing the historian who would go beyond Marxist-Leninist or standard nation-centered narratives to recover what was “imperial” about the Qing expansion into, or conquest of, the frontier is that she ends up simply

<sup>28</sup> See, for example, Guo Chengkang, “Qingdai huangdi de Zhongguo guan,” 1–18.

<sup>29</sup> The Manchu term *gurun* is as liable to at least as many varying meanings as *jecen*. See Mark Elliott, “Manchu (Re)Definitions of the Nation in the Early Qing.”

<sup>30</sup> See Mark Elliott, “Chuantong Zhongguo shi yige diguo ma?”

<sup>31</sup> Cf. Jane Burbank and Frederick Cooper, *Empires in World History*, 28–30.

repeating—and by repeating, reenacting on a certain level—the ideologies espoused by contemporary actors. Refreshing as these might be when put alongside older interpretations, we gain little, I would argue, by substituting an analysis based on eighteenth-century notions of “impartial imperial benevolence toward all people” (or any other formulation) for twentieth-century ideas of “oppression by the landlord class” or “reunification of the great Chinese nation.” Such notions only help us understand at most one element of the center’s point of view. Even if we grant that the gradual extension of Qing power into Mongolia, Tibet, and Turkestan was part of a grand plan of imperial unification—and Matthew Mosca’s work cautions against doing so<sup>32</sup>—from the point of view of those on the frontier, it hardly seems likely that a group such as the Dzungars would have welcomed such a spin on their incorporation into the empire of the Great Qing, at least not without many qualifications. We want to know how Ortai or Agūi or Fuk’anggan thought, but we do not want to limit ourselves to thinking like them. In other words, “What did the Qing elite say about the dynasty’s policies on the frontier?” is not the only question we should be posing; we also should be asking the corollary question, “What did frontier elites say about Qing policies? How did they view the imperial center?” Answering such questions is a vital step toward disrupting the monopoly of Sinocentric narratives. Not that Sinocentric narratives are not important—they most definitely are—but we must not mistake them for the sole, solitary interpretation of events.

Apart from its place within the long history of the Chinese frontier, then, what might be another useful framework for thinking about the frontier and (to borrow a phrase from Russian history) the gathering of the Great Qing lands? Carolyn Cartier and Tim Oakes broached this issue recently when they observed that, “Problematizing the idea of territorial unification in China over the *longue durée*, and under the contemporary government of the People’s Republic, prioritizes understanding the state through processes of geographical formation.”<sup>33</sup> That is to say, to make sense of how China got to its present shape, it is essential to make clear just what was entailed in the exercise of sovereignty and to investigate the different means by which the spaces we call the frontiers of China, and the people living in them, were brought under the control of the imperial state, and how the process was carried out again in the twentieth century. In short, it is essential to historicize the frontier and to approach the frontier enterprise as a case of state-led, pragmatically driven territorialization. In this project, elites from the imperial center collaborated with local elites on various peripheries, with varying degrees of success. To understand the sorts of processes that unfolded on

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<sup>32</sup> “For most of the period studied in this book [18th–19th c.], Qing statesmen and scholars never conceived a comprehensive ‘grand strategy,’ even at the loosest and most abstract level.” Matthew Mosca, *From Frontier Policy to Foreign Policy*, 11.

<sup>33</sup> Carolyn Cartier and Tim Oakes, “Vast Land of Borders.”

the frontier, and to better position ourselves to parse the discursive construct of the frontier, we would be better off looking closely at the movement of populations, the creation of maps, the selection of administrative and military personnel, the conduct of negotiations with non-Han actors, the fate of captives, the creation of trade networks, the working of legal systems, and the spread of “frontier knowledge,” among other problems.

This is not something that can be done as easily or equally well in all periods of history, but the Qing case, with ample documentation of all kinds, provides a fine opportunity to push forward with such an agenda. Its proximity to the modern era and the birth of the two modern Chinese republics, moreover, invests it with immediate relevance, as the energetic response to the New Qing History that has emerged in recent years attests.<sup>34</sup> Thanks to new work on the political and ideological structures of Qing rule, it is now difficult to sustain the argument that imperial expansion—in the Qing, or indeed, at any time in the past, was a natural process that “just happened.” In this case, the iterative process of making and unmaking “China” over the centuries appears in a different light.<sup>35</sup> One can see in this development the emergence of new approaches to the distinctive history of the Qing frontier.

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## The Frontier and the New Qing History

From the Han dynasty on, the frontier was obviously important to all unified Chinese states. What does it mean to say that it was distinctive in the Qing? Answers to this question have begun to emerge in the work that began to appear in the late 1990s that goes under the name of the “New Qing History” (*xin Qingshi* 新清史).<sup>36</sup> This school of analysis (if indeed it can be called a “school,” which is doubtful, given that some of those most closely associated with the New Qing History reject that association), places a strong value on the importance of non-Chinese language sources and a comparative approach to understanding the Qing empire. Emphasizing the fact that the Qing state was founded and ruled by a

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<sup>34</sup> A summary of these responses is found in Dang Wei, *Meiguo xin Qingshi sanshinian (1980–2010): jujue Hanzhongxin de Zhongguo shiguan de xingqi yu fazhan*, and in Ding Yizhuang and Mark Elliott, “Ershiyi shiji ruhe shuxie Zhongguo lishi: Xin Qingshi de yingxiang yu huiying.”

<sup>35</sup> A similar point is elaborated in far greater detail by Ge Zhaoguang in his influential book, *Zhaizi Zhongguo: chongjian youguan “Zhongguo” de lishi lunshu*.

<sup>36</sup> The earliest introduction to the New Qing History is Joanna Waley-Cohen, “The New Qing History.” See also Kishimoto Mio, “The Ch’ing Dynasty and the East Asian World,” and, more recently, Laura Newby, “Pax Manjurica.” In Chinese, the literature on the New Qing History is now quite extensive. For a summary, see *inter alia*, Li Aiyong, “‘Xin Qingshi’ yu ‘Zhonghua diguo’ wenti: you yici chongji yu fanying?” and Dang, *Meiguo Xin Qingshi sanshinian*; see also the essays in volume 1 of Liu Fengyun et al., eds., *Qingdai zhengzhi yu guojia rentong*. For a response to critics, see Ding and Elliott, “Ershiyi shiji.”

non-Han people with strong connections to Inner Asia, the New Qing History calls into question one of the central tenets of twentieth-century Chinese historiography, namely, that the “secret” to Qing dynastic success lay in the near-complete absorption—or “Sinicization”—of the Manchus. Rather, the persistence of a separate Manchu identity through to the end of the dynasty, and the creation of a particular hybrid imperial style, are seen as having played a crucial role in sustaining the Qing socio-political order, both at the center and at the margins.<sup>37</sup>

One consequence of this shift of paradigm is the recognition by many scholars associated with the New Qing History of the existence of a distinctive historical identity and an orientation toward the frontier—most pronounced in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, altered somewhat in the nineteenth—that was, if not wholly free, then at least partly liberated, from the highly charged assumptions inherent in Chinese ideas of the “barbarian” and the whole *weltanschauung* encapsulated in the *Hua-Yi zhi bian* 華夷之辨. Adopting a more flexible approach thanks to their non-Han background, Manchu elites developed institutions and policies toward managing the frontier different from those of preceding regimes; in so doing, they effected a far greater measure of control, and a much more ambitious program of sovereignty, resulting in the successful incorporation of the territories of Inner Asia into the empire.<sup>38</sup> Significantly, while the Chinese rhetoric of “grand unity” (*dayitong*) was undeniably present in the Qing approach to governance, the Manchus did not rule solely as Chinese, or so the argument goes. Rather, they developed different strategies of rule for the different

<sup>37</sup> Evelyn S. Rawski, “Reenvisioning the Qing: the Significance of the Qing Period in Chinese History.” Rawski’s article drew a sharp response from Ping-ti Ho; see “In Defense of Sinicization: A Rebuttal of Evelyn Rawski’s ‘Reenvisioning the Qing.’” This “Great Sinicization Debate” provoked the initial interest in the New Qing History among mainland scholars.

<sup>38</sup> A representative list of works contributing to this revised interpretation of the Qing would include the following: Evelyn Rawski, *The Last Emperors: A Social History of Qing Imperial Institutions*; James Millward, *Beyond the Pass: Economy, Ethnicity, and Empire in Qing Central Asia, 1759–1864*; Pamela Kyle Crossley, *A Translucent Mirror: History and Identity in Qing Imperial Ideology*; Edward J.M. Rhoads, *Manchus & Han: Ethnic Relations and Political Power in Late Qing and Early Republican China, 1861–1928*; Philippe Forêt, *Mapping Chengde: The Qing Landscape Enterprise*; Mark C. Elliott, *The Manchu Way: The Eight Banners and Ethnic Identity in Late Imperial China*; Laura Hostetler, *Qing Colonial Enterprise: Ethnography and Cartography in Early Modern China*; Nicola Di Cosmo and Dalizhabu Bao, *Manchu-Mongol Relations on the Eve of the Qing Conquest: A Documentary History*; Patricia Berger, *Empire of Emptiness: Buddhist Art and Political Authority in Qing China*; Hodong Kim, *Holy War in China: The Muslim Rebellion and the State in Chinese Central Asia*; James Millward, et al., eds. *New Qing Imperial History: The Making of Inner Asian Empire at Qing Chengde*; Peter Perdue, *China Marches West: The Qing Conquest of Central Eurasia, 1600–1800*; Laura Newby, *The Empire and the Khanate: A Political History of Qing Relations with Khoqand*; Johan Elverskog, *Our Great Qing: The Mongols, Buddhism, and the State in Late Imperial China*; Pamela K. Crossley, Helen Siu, and Donald Sutton, eds., *Empire at the Margins: Culture, Ethnicity, and Frontier in Early Modern China*; Michael Chang, *A Court on Horseback: Imperial Touring and the Construction of Ethno-Dynastic Rule in China*.

parts of the realm that fell to them and were not bothered by what might appear to us today as inconsistencies or asymmetries.<sup>39</sup> Indeed, the asymmetrical structure of the Qing empire helped make it what it was. In this respect, the Qing was much like other early modern empires, whether or not it was “early modern” itself.<sup>40</sup>

Now, it is one thing to point to the success of the Qing state on the frontier and another to say that it was *because* the Qing approached the frontier differently that it was successful, or that it was successful because the people in charge were themselves from the frontier. Perhaps they followed the same policies as the Ming, but just did a better job of executing them? (After all, in one form or another, a system of “tribute” relations remained in place for much of the Qing, even if it was not applied uniformly.) If the argument for the singularity of the Qing frontier is to be successfully put, it would seem to follow that the case must be made that a) Qing policies and institutions were indeed different from those of the Ming or other regimes and that b) the reason they were different was because the people in charge of formulating those policies and institutions thought not strictly according to Chinese imperial precedents but were open to novel methods of governance based either on other biases traceable to the Inner Asian world or on a familiarity with local conditions based on intimate knowledge of the frontier.

In recent years, these and many other aspects of the Qing imperial imagination have attracted the attention of a younger generation of historians, whose work is just now beginning to be published; some is available as articles, but much of it remains in dissertation form. Broadly speaking, the scholarship of this “New Qing History 2.0”<sup>41</sup> is characterized by a deep immersion in Qing-era archives, including not only Chinese- and Manchu-language materials, but also those written in Mongolian, Tibetan, and Chaghatay. Consciously reflective of the theoretical and historiographical issues raised by the New Qing History—in particular those relating to the specificities of Manchu rule and its implications for modern Chinese history—this new scholarship is helping to bring out the distinctive aspects, not just of the Qing frontier style (marked, among other things, by a sustained, deep engagement on the part of imperial actors at all levels), but of a Qing imperial style more generally conceived. In doing so, this work seeks to

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<sup>39</sup> Cf. Waley-Cohen: “Central to this revised understanding is the new Qing history’s revelation that at the height of their power, the Qing regarded China not so much as the center of their empire, as only a part, albeit a very important part, of a much wider dominion that extended far into the Inner Asian territories of Mongolia, Tibet, the Northeast (today sometimes called Manchuria) and Xinjiang, or Chinese (Eastern) Turkestan.” “The New Qing History,” 194–95.

<sup>40</sup> Confirming Matthew Mosca’s argument that, “no political, cultural-ideological, or economic factor fundamentally divided the reasoning of Qing strategists from that of their peers in other contemporary Eurasian empires.” See Mosca, *From Frontier Policy to Foreign Policy*, 9.

<sup>41</sup> Credit for this formulation goes to Liu Wenpeng of the Qing History Institute of Renmin University. See his comments at a talk presented by the author at Central Minzu University in Beijing in August 2013, available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GQcDr7LzHSs>.

integrate the history of the Qing with broader trends in global history,<sup>42</sup> economic history,<sup>43</sup> environmental history,<sup>44</sup> legal history,<sup>45</sup> cultural studies,<sup>46</sup> history of the book,<sup>47</sup> art history,<sup>48</sup> population history,<sup>49</sup> and history of science and medicine.<sup>50</sup> This work is complemented by ongoing research by younger scholars writing in Japanese and Chinese, such as Sugiyama Kiyohiko, Cheng Zhi, Onuma

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<sup>42</sup> Loretta E. Kim, “Marginal Constituencies: Qing Borderland Policies and Vernacular Histories of Five Tribes on the Sino-Russian Frontier”; David Brophy, “Tending to Unite? The Origins of Uyghur Nationalism,” and “The Junghar Mongol Legacy and the Language of Loyalty in Qing Xinjiang”; Matthew W. Mosca, “Empire and the Circulation of Frontier Intelligence: Qing Conceptions of the Ottomans,” and *From Frontier Policy to Foreign Policy*; Benjamin Levey, “Jungar Refugees and the Making of Empire on Qing China’s Kazakh Frontier, 1759–1773”; Mario Cams, “The Early Qing Geographical Surveys (1708–1716) as a Case of Collaboration between the Jesuits and the Kangxi Court.”

<sup>43</sup> Seonmin Kim, “Borders and Crossings: Trade, Diplomacy and Ginseng Between Qing China and Choson Korea,” and “Ginseng and Border Transpassing Between Qing China and Chosŏn Korea”; Elif Akçetin, “Corruption at the Frontier: The Gansu Fraud Scandal”; Kwangmin Kim, “Saintly Brokers: Uyghur Muslims, Trade, and the Making of Qing Central Asia, 1696–1814”; Yulian Wu, “Tasteful Consumption: Huizhou Salt Merchants and Material Culture in Eighteenth-Century China”; Devon M. Dear, “Marginal Revolutions: Economies and Economic Knowledge in a Chinese-Russian Borderland, 1860–1911.”

<sup>44</sup> Jonathan Schlesinger, “The Qing Invention of Nature: Environment and Identity in Northeast China and Mongolia, 1750–1850.”

<sup>45</sup> Pär Cassel, *Grounds of Judgment: Extraterritoriality and Imperial Power in Nineteenth-Century China and Japan*; Xiangyu Hu, “The Juridical System of the Qing Dynasty in Beijing, 1644–1900”; Huan Tian, “Governing Imperial Borders: Insights from the Study of the Implementation of Law in Qing Xinjiang”; Max Oidtmann, “Between Patron and Priest: Amdo Tibet under Qing Rule, 1792–1911”; Eric Schluessel, “The Muslim Emperor of China: Everyday Encounter in Law and Ritual in Xinjiang, 1877–1933.”

<sup>46</sup> Andrea Goldman, *Opera and the City: The Politics of Culture in Beijing, 1770–1900*; Elena Chiu, “The Origins and Original Language of Manchu Bannermen Tales (*zidishu*),” and *Bannerman Tales (Zidishu): Manchu Storytelling and Cultural Hybridity in Late Imperial China*.

<sup>47</sup> Devin Fitzgerald, “Manchu-Language Textbooks as a Qing Technology of Empire,” and Mårten Söderblom Saarela, “The Manchu Script and Information Management: Some Aspects of Qing China’s Great Encounter with Alphabetic Literacy.”

<sup>48</sup> Tsultem Uranchimeg, “Ikh Khuree: A Nomadic Monastery and the Later Buddhist Art of Mongolia”; Kristina Kleutghen, *Imperial Illusions: Crossing Pictorial Boundaries in Eighteenth-Century China*; Wen-hsing Chou, “The Visionary Landscape of Wutai Shan in Tibetan Buddhism from the Eighteenth to the Twentieth Century”; Kevin Greenwood, “Yonghegong: Imperial Universalism and the Art and Architecture of Beijing’s ‘Lama Temple’.”

<sup>49</sup> Shuang Chen, “Where Urban Migrants Met Rural Settlers: State Categories, Social Boundaries, and Wealth Stratification in Northeast China, 1815–1913”; Yi Wang, “Transforming the Frontier: Land, Commerce, and Chinese Colonization in Inner Mongolia, 1700–1911.”

<sup>50</sup> Cathérine Jami, *The Emperor’s New Mathematics: Western Learning and Imperial Authority in the Kangxi Reign*; Beatriz Puente-Ballesteros, “Jesuit Medicine in the Kangxi Court: Imperial Networks and Patronage”; He Bian, “Too Sick to Serve: The Politics of Illness in the Qing Civil Bureaucracy”; Carla Nappi, “Listing Bodies: Early Modern Manchu Medicine and the Inventory as Epistemic Form”; Sare Aricanli, “Plurality in Qing Imperial Medicine: Examining Institutional Formations beyond the Imperial Medical Bureau.”

Takahiro, Erdenchulu Khohchahar, Qiu Yuanyuan, Lin Shixuan, Tsai Wei-chieh, and Zhao Huanxi, among others.<sup>51</sup> While not all of this work is necessarily focused on the frontier as such, the cumulative effect of this new wave of scholarship is the ineluctable reshaping of our overall understanding of Qing political, intellectual, cultural, linguistic, spatial, and social developments, in which the periphery—in one sense or another—serves as the center of attention. The resulting transformation of the framework within which the history of Qing China is being written means the integration, to an unprecedented degree, of the people, languages, beliefs, and material culture of the imperial frontiers into the stories we tell.

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## Conclusion

To conclude, I would like to consider the question of Qing frontier identity from an entirely different angle, that of subjective affect, which as yet has been little studied. For this, I turn to a poem from the middle of the nineteenth century, written by the bannerwoman Na-xun Lan-bao 那遜蘭保 (1825–73). Born in Khuree (Manchu *Kuren*, Chinese *Ku-lun* 庫倫, modern-day Ulan Bator), Lan-bao belonged to the Borjigit clan of the Khalkha Mongols. Her father, Dorje Wangchuk, was a minor official in the service of Tushiyetu khan, one of four khans descended from Dayan khan and the first Khalkha leader to come over to the Qing in 1686.<sup>52</sup> In 1828 Dorje Wangchuk was summoned to Beijing to serve in the imperial guard, and moved with his family to the capital, taking up residence with the family of his wife, of the Feimo clan. Lan-bao was then four *sui*. Raised by her Manchu grandmother, of the Wanyan clan, she spent the rest of her life in Beijing, eventually marrying a Manchu bannerman, an undistinguished member of the imperial clan. Her son, Shengyu (*jinshi* 1877), however, had a distinguished career, and published a compilation of his mother's poems under the title *Preserved Poems of the Hall*

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<sup>51</sup> Sugiyama Kiyohiko, “Dai Shin teikokushi kenkyū no genzai: Nihon ni okeru gaikyō to tenbō,” and “Dai Shin teikoku no shiai kōzō to hakkisei: Manju ōchō toshite no kokusei shiron”; Cheng Zhi, *Daichin gurun to sono jidai: teikoku no keisei to hakki shakai*; Onuma Takahiro, “250-Year History of the Turkic-Muslim Camp in Beijing”; Erdenchulu Khohchahar, “Shindai Haruchin Mongoru no yugiki ni okeru saihan”; Qiu Yuanyuan, *Qingqianqi gongting liyue yanjiu*; Lin Shixuan, “Shiba shiji Man-Meng yuwen jiaoliu chutan: yi Man-Meng-Han santizhishu yinxie Mengwen wei zhongxin”; Tsai Wei-chieh, “Zhimin dang’an yu diguo xinggou: lun Qingchao Manwen zouzhezong dui Taiwan shufan de biaoshu”; and Zhao Huanxi, “Qingdai Beijing qimin fencheng er ju zhengce de shishi ji qi yingxiang.”

<sup>52</sup> Dorje Wangchuk's mother was Manchu, a grandniece of Qianlong, and one of his grandmothers was a grandniece of Kangxi. So Dorje Wangchuk, legally a Mongol and with a Tibetan name, was in fact more than half Manchu, but he was not a bannerman.

of *Fragrant Rue* (*Yunxiangguan yishi* 芸香館遺詩) in 1874.<sup>53</sup>

The following verse, written by Lan-bao to her brother when he took up an assignment to serve in Khuree, probably some time in the 1850s, is taken from that collection. It presents an unusual combination of longing and dread, pride and shame, lifting a veil on the conflicted identity of one individual, and simultaneously on the complex identity of the empire in which she lived at a time when the glorious days of conquest were but memories.

瀛俊二兄奉使庫倫，故吾家也，送行之日率成此詩

四歲來京師，卅載辭故鄉。故鄉在何所，塞北雲茫茫。  
 成吉有遺譜，庫倫余故疆。彎弧十萬眾，天驕自古強。  
 夕宿便氈幕，朝餐甘湮漿。幸逢大一統，中外無邊防。  
 帶刀入宿衛，列爵襲冠裳。自笑閨閣質，早易時世妝。  
 無夢到鞍馬，有意工文章。綠窗事粉黛，紅燈勤縹緗。  
 華夷隔風氣，故國為殊方。問以啁嘶語，遜謝稱全忘。  
 我兄承使命，將歸畫錦堂。乃作異域祝，舉家心彷徨。  
 我獨有一言，臨行奉離觴。天子守四夷，原為捍要荒。  
 近聞頗柔懦，醇俗醜其常。所愧非男人，歸願無由償。  
 冀兄加振厲，舊業須重光。勿為兒女泣，相對徒悲傷。

*A Poem Dashed Off the Day I Said Good-bye to My Second Elder Brother, Yingjun, Who Was Appointed to Kuren, Our Former Home*<sup>54</sup>

At the age of four I came here to the capital;  
 Thirty years I've been away from our old hometown.  
 Where is that hometown?  
 North of the passes, lost in the clouds.  
 We are descendants of Chinggis Khan,  
 So Kuren has long been our domain.

A hundred thousand who draw the bow—  
 Of old we are strong, the proud children of Tenggeri!  
 At night we sleep simply in felt tents;  
 For breakfast we'll happily have frozen milk.

<sup>53</sup> For this information on Na-xun Lan-bao, I rely on Du Jiaji, "Qingdai Mengguzu nüshiren Na-xun Lan-bao ji qi xiangguan wenti kaozheng." Also Ding Yizhuang, "Qingdai Menggu nüshiren Na-xun Lan-bao de shenshi yu xiezuo," and Wilt Idema, "A Mongolian Li Qingzhao?" I am grateful to them for permission to quote from their work.

<sup>54</sup> This translation is based upon that in Idema, "A Mongolian Li Qingzhao?" with minor editing based on my reading of the original. My thanks to Ding Yizhuang for her contributions and guidance.

Today, we are fortunate to live in an age of imperial unity,  
 Where no borders divide within and without.  
 Carrying his sword, [our father] served in the guard,  
 And was ennobled with an inherited rank.  
 I'm just inner-quarters material—it's funny how  
 For so long now I have dressed fashionably.  
 I've never dreamed of riding a saddled horse,  
 All my ambition is focused on high literature.

By day I busy myself with cosmetics in my chamber,  
 And at night I devote myself to my books.  
 Chinese and Barbarian are distinguished by manner and style:  
 My old country is now an unfamiliar place to me.  
 When you speak to me in that chirruping language,  
 I have to confess I have forgotten it completely!

Now you have received this appointment,  
 And you will return home, covered in glory.  
 But we look upon the place as a strange land,  
 And the whole family is filled with fear.

As I offer you this parting drink, now that you are leaving,  
 The only thing I want to say to you is this:  
 The emperor rules the four barbarians,  
 Just so they may protect us against the wasteland beyond.  
 Recently, I hear, they are very docile and submissive,  
 And their honest customs are better than normal.

To my regret, I am not a man, so my desire  
 To go back there will never be fulfilled.  
 I hope that you, brother, will make an extra effort  
 To restore our inheritance to its former glory.  
 Let us not cry sentimental tears like women,  
 And vainly indulge in sadness and grief.

There is much to reflect on here as far as the interiorization of the frontier is concerned: the reference to imperial rule; the absence of borders dividing the center from the periphery; the distinction between Chinese (*Hua*) and Barbarian (*Yi*); Mongolia both as erstwhile home and at the same time as a “strange land,” its people speaking a “chirruping tongue” no longer intelligible to the author. And while there is something of the flavor of the Tang frontier poem about it—“the

four barbarians... are very docile and submissive,” not to mention the typical “parting drink” farewell to one departing for distant lands—the dominant tone is marked by the author’s nostalgic pride in her frontier heritage (“We are descendants of Chinggis Khan... the proud children of Tenggeri”), combined with a poignant recognition of alienation from her roots in the steppe with its simple ways, where one sleeps in tents and awakes to a bowl of fresh milk.

To analyze this poem fully is not my purpose; rather, I offer it as evidence of the emergence of a distinctive Qing sensibility on the northern frontier. For surely this is a composition that could not possibly have been written under a native Chinese dynasty: no one associated with Ming (or Song) court culture would ever have composed a wistful verse in Chinese about her “old home” in Mongolia. A Mongol poet (if there were one) living in China in the Yuan might have waxed longingly about the lost pleasures of nomadic life, but he probably would have been a man, and would probably not have been able to write in Chinese. Lan-bao’s poem encourages us to think critically about the many different ways in which the frontier territories of the Qing state were given a truly different meaning under Manchu rule, a meaning that they would not have had under the Jin or Liao, when the southern lands remained beyond their grasp.

Lan-bao’s words show that the frontier, as a site of empire-making in the Qing, was at once familiar and alien, known and unknown. For her and for other members of the conquest elite, regardless of gender, the frontier was a place of close personal identification, in which one might both find oneself and lose oneself. As such, Lan-bao’s poem can be said to be a site of empire-making itself—one reason why it is important for us as modern-day historians to take the literary and personal as well as the archival measure of the Qing frontier/*jecen/bianjiang*, if we are to incorporate the frontier’s full range of meanings in our work and place it in proper context within the stories of China and of empire that are now being written.

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