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We encourage submissions by all AAS members. Preference will be given to essays related to the study of, and teaching about, Asia, though essays on public policy also may be accepted. Essays should e-mailed to E. Taylor Atkins, etatkins@niu.edu.

The Great Qing and the "Third Frontier" in the Eighteenth Century

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By the middle of the eighteenth century the Qing Empire ranked among the most powerful polities in the world. In addition to governing China proper and the northeastern homelands of the Manchu ruling house, High Qing emperors expanded their territorial sovereignties to Tibet, Mongolia, Taiwan, and the vast tracts of Inner Asia through a protracted process of strategic alliances and military conquests. Peter C. Perdue, Huri Islamoglu, James A. Millward, and Piper Rae Gaubatz have explained how the Qing Empire marched to the West by spending considerable efforts on frontier expansion. Compared with the previous dynasties in the history of China, except the Pan-Asian *Pax Mongolica*, the expansive Great Qing was the largest political entity to govern the piece of earth known today as Central Eurasia. This (re) conceptualization of Qing history is often framed as the "Inner Asian frontier approach," which depicts the Qing Empire as one of the imperialistic powers throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The Great Qing, in other words, is similar to other empires like the Muscovite-Russian, the Mongolian Zunghars, the Ottoman, and the Romanov in patterns of administrative centralization, deliberate multinational inclusion, and aggressive land settlement.

The "Inner Asian thesis" is no doubt a shift away from a view of China as an exception to imperialistic powers in world history to conceiving it as expansionist and thus similar to other ambitious empires in the "Great Game." But the thesis at the same time leaves us an impression that the Qing Empire, especially before the First Opium War, only paid attention to its Inner Asian frontier. The German sinologist Bodo Wiethoff defined the maritime world embracing China as the "Third Frontier," and that the Qing government was not interested in incorporating the monolithic sea space into its empire. However, I would argue that the Great Qing, albeit commonly stereotyped as a continental realm similar to the Napoleonic land-based powers, did not ignore the maritime world even before the advent of Euro-American battleships in the nineteenth century. The Manchus did not isolate themselves from the maritime world even though they were keener on marching to the West with horses and bows. They were practical and conscious enough to stabilize the coastal region and to keep the East Asian Sea under its strict control.

One reason for overlooking the maritime awareness of the Qing court is that the "dragon navy" was often defeated by foreign trespassers in sea battles. Even if the late-Qing rulers picked

up their courage to launch a campaign at sea, they often ended with failure. The Qing Empire is thus commonly characterized as the victim of Western imperialism in a "Mahanian maritime-power dimension." Success at sea had thus become a mark of national pride, and failure at sea a symbol of national humiliation. Nevertheless, did those defeats in sea-battles necessarily mean that the Great Qing was ignorant of the sea? In fact, the three High Qing emperors—Kangxi, Yongzheng, and Qianlong—like their Ottoman counterparts, also focused on the political-administrative control of the coastal region in terms of "practical geo-politic strategy" (in the words of Prof. Jane Kate Leonard).

The "practical geo-politic strategy" of the Qing court acting on the maritime world was to stabilize its "inner sea-space," namely the Yellow Sea, the Bohai Gulf, the East China Sea and the South China Sea. After suppressing the Ming restorationists in Taiwan in 1681, the Qing government was unwilling to allow many disturbances across the ocean. They preferred an unwavering situation. Similar to Queen Elizabeth I, who asserted "imperial control" over the waters surrounding England and Ireland, Emperor Kangxi and his successors were aware that for security reasons they needed a strong military presence along the coast. At the same time, they realized that profitable maritime businesses between domestic traders and a pocket of overseas trades within China, Korea, Japan and the Southeast Asian countries were important. The connection between maritime strategies and state power, hence, had a close relationship with maritime trades over East Asia and the world. In order to maintain a sound and stable maritime condition to shelter the interests of various types of seafaring activities, the Qing Empire worked to combine economic and military considerations in a comprehensive and deliberated order. They structured naval settlement, revenue accumulations in harbors and coastal map makings. To recapitulate, the Manchu rulers did not ignore the so called "third frontier." They simultaneously created an optimal spatial sea-space in a political climate of short-term crisis and long-term transformation. As such, if we want to complete a thorough picture of maritime history in a global context, the interaction between the Great Qing and the maritime world can never be ignored.

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