

The Board of Rites and the Making of Qing China, by Macabe Keliher. Oakland: University of California Press, 2019. xvi + 266 pp. ISBN: 9780520300293

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In *The Board of Rites and the Making of Qing China*, Macabe Keliher makes a crucial contribution to the historiography of the Qing empire, highlighting important historical processes that took place in the seventeenth century when most books on Qing in the past few decades have focused on the later High Qing period. As he states in Chapter 1, Keliher does this by showing that “an articulated system of social domination and political legitimization” (9) developed together with the Qing state from 1631 to 1690. This system was known as *li* 禮 in Chinese and *doro* or *dorolon* in Manchu, and while it is typically glossed as “rites” in English, Keliher chooses not to use this translation. *Li* was a Qing innovation that was distinct from the Ming model in three major ways: the more prominent power and position of the sovereign, the integration of disparate social groups, and the distinct structure of the administrative apparatus. In Keliher’s view, this creative process of structuring domination and legitimizing authority built the stable basis from which the spectacular success of the eighteenth century arose. The rest of Part One (Chapter 2), with its focus on the internal power struggles from which Hong Taiji and his supporters emerged as victors, provides the historical context for Part Two.

Part Two of the book (Chapters 3–5) focuses on the formation of *li* from 1631 to 1651. Throughout these chapters, Keliher meticulously analyzes the often terse accounts scattered across various types of historical sources: court records, memorials, edicts, regulations, and legal codes. Of particular interest to the readers of this journal is Keliher’s masterful comparison of Chinese- and Manchu-language sources in this reconstruction. In Chapter 3, he focuses on the New Year’s Day ceremony in 1632 as the beginning of the Qing system of *li*. Even though the ceremony was most likely celebrated annually beforehand, the 1632 ceremony marked a clear departure from precedent by putting the sovereign (Hong Taiji) in a central position and clearly establishing the hierarchy among the imperial relatives and high Manchu officials. This point is supported most convincingly by Keliher’s analysis and reproduction of a page from

the *Manwen yuandang* (49), which shows additions and edits to the record of the 1632 ritual. As Chapter 4 shows, the central place of the sovereign was further consolidated through the representation and legitimization of the emperorship. The grand ceremonies and court ceremonies allowed Hong Taiji to perform as an emperor while stipulating how his subordinates should act toward him. Moreover, the Qing rulers embarked on tomb building projects and performed ancestor worship rituals to legitimize the new Qing emperorship. The formation of this distinctly Qing system of *li* was completed by the 1640s. In Chapter 5, Keliher shows how the Qing administrative order was systemized and enacted through four key components: “clothing to reflect the level of rank of political actors; rites for greeting each other; the size of one’s entourage; and the organization of personnel in ceremony” (91). The end result was the integration of the imperial relatives and the nonrelative bureaucrats within a single Qing political system.

Part Three focuses on *li*’s institutionalization from 1651 to 1690. Chapter 6 brings us to the factional struggles among imperial relatives throughout the 1640s. By building on the work of Japanese scholars such as Isobe Atsushi 磯部淳史, Keliher carefully reconstructs the succession crisis of 1643 as a compromise between the Yellow Banners and the White Banners. While this political struggle took place within the framework established by Hong Taiji, factionalism continued and even intensified during the early years of the Shunzhi reign (1644–61). It was not until the regent Dorgon’s death in 1650 that the Shunzhi emperor and his allies from the Plain Blue Banner such as Langkio took the step of institutionalizing the imperial relatives by establishing the Imperial Clan Court (Ch. *zongrenfu* 宗人府; Ma. *uksun be kadalara yamun*). Here again, Keliher benefits from carefully comparing the Chinese and Manchu versions of Langkio’s spring 1652 memorial. Most importantly, Keliher shows that the Qing Imperial Clan Court, unlike the Ming institution, focused on transforming the imperial relatives from independent political actors into a service nobility. Chapter 7 continues to explore this theme of creative and selective adoption of Ming precedents. The Qing imperial dress, as Keliher shows through textual and visual evidence from the Shunzhi period and the Qianlong period (1736–95), represented the amalgamation of Ming and Manchu precedents. The Qing rulers thus achieved their distinct model of how the emperor should be represented and legitimized through his clothing. To show the climax of the institutionalization of *li*, Chapter 8 turns its attention to the promulgation of the *Da Qing huidian* 大清會典 (*Collected Statutes of the Great Qing*), a collection of Qing administrative law, in 1690. In line with his analysis throughout the book, Keliher takes pains to illustrate how the Qing *Huidian* was more than a copy of the Ming *Huidian*. He does so by distinguishing between the general concept of *li* and the Qing-specific practices of *li* found in the three different layers of the *Huidian*. Although he does not engage explicitly with the scholarship on Chinese law, this way of reading the *Huidian* is in line with China legal historians’ general distinction between the statutes, which

represent the general concept of law that may even seem unchanging, and substatutes of imperial codes, which changed over time to answer specific needs of the day.

In the Conclusion, Keliher reiterates his views on *li* and Qing state formation (193–200). In my opinion, he has given ample evidence throughout the book that the Board of Rites played a key role in forming and institutionalizing *li* as a political and administrative order of the emerging Qing empire. In doing so, Keliher has also demonstrated that the Qing state practiced *li* in different ways from the Ming state. Although his analysis of *li* in imperial Chinese history is brief (200–1), his observations are generally supported by the rest of the book. Keliher’s attempt to situate the Qing example within early modern Eurasia (201–3), however, does not delve as deeply as it could. Though he compares the Qing case with the Bourbon, Ottoman, Russian, and Spanish cases briefly in the introduction (8–9), Keliher rarely engages in this comparative analysis in his main chapters before this two-page-long section in the Conclusion. Even then, he does not elaborate on which early modern Eurasian states he is using as comparisons except for noting the common problems that early modern states generally faced: “how to build political order, discipline diverse actors with divergent interests, legitimize rule, and establish authority” (201). These do not strike me as problems unique to either the early modern period or Eurasia.

This leads me next to the issue of the Sinocentrism that I think emerges from Keliher’s analysis. By Sinocentric, I am not referring to the debate on the “Sinicization of the Manchus” thesis that Keliher addresses briefly (21–2). What I mean is the China-centered history—and here I am taking China to include the Inner Asian possessions that the Manchus added to it in the Qing period, but exclude now-independent neighboring states—that Paul Cohen advocated, which in turn was criticized by James Hevia for its singular focus on endogenous factors in explaining historical changes in China.¹ To give one example, Keliher does not consider the role of the tributary states in the Ming-Qing transition as well as in Qing empire building. Yuanchong Wang’s 2018 monograph has shown that the Qing’s legitimacy as an empire needed to be acknowledged in a new multistate system that we commonly call the “tributary system.” (Wang prefers to use the term “Zongfan system.”²) For that reason, the Qing empire invaded Chosŏn soon after its founding and incorporated it as the founding member of the new Qing tributary world. Likewise, Kathlene Baldanza ends her monograph on Ming-Vietnam relations with a poignant analysis of Vietnam’s place in the Ming-Qing

1. Paul A. Cohen, *Discovering History in China: American Historical Writing on the Recent Chinese Past* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), 149–98; James L. Hevia, *Cherishing Men from Afar: Qing Guest Ritual and the Macartney Embassy of 1793* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995), 7–9.

2. Yuanchong Wang, *Remaking the Chinese Empire: Manchu-Korean Relations, 1616–1911* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2018), 21–85.

transition.³ Considering that the Board of Rites oversaw Qing relations with Korea and Vietnam, in which *li* certainly played an important role, the exclusion of these interstate relations is even more striking. In the past few decades, Qing historians have demonstrated the multicultural characteristics of the Qing empire by focusing on its Inner Asian and southwestern frontiers. Still, the analytical framework of Qing history often seems to stop at today's Chinese borders with Vietnam and North Korea. We need to consider the connections and comparisons between Qing and its neighboring states more seriously to avoid this type of Sinocentrism.

Nevertheless, Keliher's book remains a resounding success. It is a convincing statement on why Qing historians need to take the early decades of the Qing empire more seriously. Along with R. Kent Guy's 2013 book, it also demonstrates to Qing historians the relevance of institutional history in the study of early modern China.⁴

3. Kathlene Baldanza, *Ming China and Vietnam: Negotiating Borders in Early Modern Asia* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 204–10.

4. R. Kent Guy, *Qing Governors and Their Provinces: The Evolution of Territorial Administration in China, 1644–1796* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2013).