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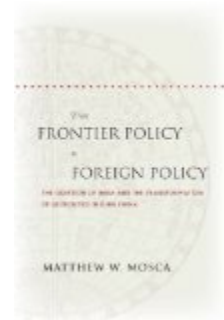
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Matthew W. Mosca. *From Frontier Policy to Foreign Policy: The Question of India and the Transformation of Geopolitics in Qing China*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013. 408 pp. \$60.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8047-8224-1.

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Matthew W. Mosca has made a graceful and substantial contribution to our understanding not only of late imperial China (the expansive and multicultural Qing Empire in particular) but also of Inner Asian politics, the growth of “British” India, and the nature of global interactions during the period from 1750 to 1860. His basic interest is in the way that China’s rulers, officials, and scholars interpreted the rising power of the British in India, and how their understanding of the unfolding geopolitical situation on China’s remote southwestern borders influenced Qing policymaking. In the process, he traces, as the title of his book suggests, the transformation of China’s “frontier policy”—one based on “regionally specific” political and military strategies—into a genuine “foreign policy,” predicated on the idea of “a single hierarchy of imperial interests framed in reference to a unified outside world” (pp. 2-3).

Ultimately, the author argues that “this shift in outlook led to a revolution in how Qing rulers and subjects perceived their position: no longer unique, the Qing empire became one among several large entities locked in [international] competition” (p. 3). One may question, however, how truly “revolutionary” this transformation was—especially since the author’s chronological framework ends at a point where China’s engagement with “modern” Western diplomacy had just begun. From that time onward, it seems to me, there remained significant vestiges of a “frontier” mentality on the part of many Qing officials and even some “progressive” scholars. Perhaps the subtitle of Mosca’s conclusion—“Between Frontier Policy and Foreign Policy”—would be a more apt description of the period covered by his book than the actual title. Still, there can be no question that significant

changes took place during the time under discussion, and these changes had important implications for China’s foreign relations throughout the remainder of the Qing period.

Mosca’s introduction lays out with admirable clarity the historiographical and interpretive issues that frame his study. He addresses, for example, the debate surrounding the idea of a Chinese “tributary system,” as well as the question of the degree to which the vast Qing Empire was truly integrated. Mosca’s approach to these issues, based on a careful analysis of Chinese policy toward British India from the mid-eighteenth to the mid-nineteenth century, involves judicious compromises between contending poles of scholarship.

With respect to the tributary system, for instance, he shows that in most spheres of Qing policy toward India the formalized features and ritual procedures associated with tribute giving had little to do with either the decisions that were made or the actions that were taken. But he also recognizes that tributary relationships were not entirely irrelevant to the conduct of Qing foreign relations. His discussion of the Anglo-Nepal War of 1814-16 sheds important light on the way the tributary system often worked in practice, with each party attempting to use the formalized relationship to its own advantage.

At this particular time, the Gurkhas, as rulers of Nepal and tributaries of the Qing, were threatened not only by the British but also by a tribal group known as the Pileng people. The Gurkhas, viewing their relationship to the Qing in terms of a strategic alliance, sought assistance from the Jiaqing emperor against both adversaries. The Qing government, however, did not credit the

claims of the Gurkhas and refused to help. In fact, the Jiaqing emperor rebuked the Gurkhas for their narrow self-interest and their apparent deceit, informing them that failure to deliver their tributary products on time would be considered “treason” (*beipan*). In short, from the Qing government’s standpoint, tribute was exclusively bilateral. As long as it was submitted on schedule, “the Qing [rulers] would neither constrain their agreements with other states nor [necessarily] support them in their quarrels” (p. 179). To be sure, there were occasions when the Chinese state gave substantial military assistance to its tributaries (notably to Korea in the late sixteenth century), but it did so almost exclusively in defense of its own strategic interests.

As to the issue of the degree to which the Qing Empire was “integrated,” Mosca argues that “before 1800, the Qing realm was an amalgamation of diverse conquered peoples united by common subordination to the same ruling house. Although the emperor and a small cohort of high advisers had a panoramic view over the entire domain, on the ground the administration of different regions relied heavily on indigenous power holders following their local political traditions” (p. 3). But around 1800, as the capabilities of the imperial court began to diminish, networks of Han Chinese literati (as opposed to Qing bureaucrats) eventually produced a relatively coherent vision of the threat posed by European imperialism. They also devised a more or less coordinated strategy for dealing with it.

Mosca’s first chapter 1 (“A Wealth of Indias: India in Qing Geographic Practice”) demonstrates vividly that information about the world beyond China’s borders was abundant but extremely varied in quality. It is not quite correct to assert (as the author does, probably for rhetorical effect) that in the early Qing, “Chinese geographers had too much information about the outside world” (p. 26). It is perhaps more accurate to say that they had too much *bad* information about the outside world, and they lacked mechanisms by which to sort it out effectively. This produced what Mosca calls “geographic agnosticism”—the idea that “some claims [about the outside world] might be preferred and others doubted, but none could be absolutely endorsed or eliminated” (p. 26).

The author goes on to recount some of the problems and confusions that this situation produced for Qing policymakers. One of the main difficulties was a lack of consistency in the transliteration of foreign names. In the absence of any clear conventions, and complicated by the problem of several different dialects (for an example

in Western transliteration, compare Beijing [Mandarin pronunciation] and Peking [Cantonese pronunciation]), there might be any number of names for the same place. “India,” variously rendered as Tianzhu, Shendu, Yindu, Xindu, Xindusi, Yingdiya, etc., is a case in point. Traditional Chinese mapmaking produced similar problems. Although Chinese cartographers were capable of making mathematically precise renderings of space, a great number of different types of maps circulated in Qing times, many produced for reasons that had little to do with calibrating precise distances or conveying accurate proportions.

Chapter 2 (“The Conquest of Xinjiang and the Emergence of ‘Hindustan,’ 1756-1790”) does a splendid job of recounting and explaining Qing political and military policy in Central Asia at a time that coincided, more or less, with the decline of the Mughal Empire (conventional dates: 1526-1857). Mosca’s discussion is extraordinarily nuanced and, as with several other sections of the book, it is not designed for people who describe themselves as “not good with names.” In addition to detailing military operations and diplomatic negotiations, Mosca explains—both in this chapter and the next (“Mapping India: Geographic Agnosticism in a Cartographic Context”)—why it was that, despite the Qianlong emperor’s earnest efforts to acquire and “synthesize” knowledge of India during the course of his campaigns in Xinjiang (the “New Territory”), the Qing court failed to achieve a meaningful degree of data coordination. As Mosca puts it: “the centrifugal force of an influx of new terminology and information overpowered even the centripetal pull of the court’s ordering efforts” (p. 70).

The great achievement of chapter 3 is its cogent analysis of the vast surveying projects undertaken by the Qing court under the Kangxi, Yongzheng, and Qianlong emperors. This discussion, which emphasizes the understudied mapping projects of the Yongzheng reign, nicely complements the cartographically oriented work of scholars such as Laura Hostetler (*Qing Colonial Enterprise, Ethnography and Cartography in Early Modern China* [2001]). It also indicates with new research both the achievements and the limitations of the Jesuit missionaries who were employed as technicians by the Qing court. A point of particular interest in this chapter is the way that certain inherited assumptions about the shape of the Chinese Empire—Tibet in particular—influenced maps of India. Mosca asks and answers: “would the imperially approved image of Tibet, made by trusted Qing surveyors, yield to the latest European data? It would not” (p. 115).

Chapter 4 (“Discovering the ‘Pileng’: British India Seen from Tibet, 1790-1800”) describes the place of Tibet in Chinese strategic calculations at a time (the 1760s) when the British “began to eye the Himalayas as a potential route of trade with China” (p. 129). Here we see how the Qing government’s decisive conquest of the Junghars (aka Dzungars), which took place from 1755 to 1759, lured the Manchus into a false sense of security. As Mosca indicates in his introduction, “Qing policy diverged from that of its neighbors, ultimately at great cost to its security.” Why? Because after this resounding victory, the Manchus “had a completely different perception of prevailing geopolitical dynamics and the extent of foreign threats” (p. 9). One of the most interesting sections in chapter 4 is Mosca’s analysis of the possible influence of the Gurkha Wars (1788-93) on the outcome of the famous mission of Lord George Macartney to China in 1793-94. Although the evidence is both ambiguous and contradictory, it is possible that Lord Macartney was at least partially correct in surmising that the negative Qing reaction to his embassy “was conditioned by the court’s knowledge of British power in India” (p. 150).

Although virtually every page of Mosca’s book brings new information to light, and in many of these pages we find sharp and valuable insights, chapters 5 (“British India and Qing Strategic Thought in the Early Nineteenth Century”) and 6 (“The Discovery of British India on the Chinese Coast, 1800-1838”) seem particularly fresh and illuminating. In them, Mosca examines the dramatic rise of British power in Asia from three perspectives: the eastern seacoast, Tibet, and Xinjiang. In the case of the China coast, Great Britain’s presence in the early nineteenth century was not only economic (as is well known), but also military (for example, the British made two attempts to occupy the Portuguese port of Macao). And yet, as Mosca points out, officials in south China, including the strategically important area of Guangzhou (aka Canton), had little interest in learning about British India.

Meanwhile, on the Tibetan frontier, as discussed earlier, the Qing government evinced no real concern with the British role in the Anglo-Nepal War, and felt “no moral or strategic need to defend the Gurkha regime by force,” despite its tributary status (p. 184). The same was true for Central Asia (Xinjiang), despite British efforts to extend their influence into the area (for example, the so-called Moorcroft Expedition). Mosca concludes: “Seen in Eurasian perspective, the most striking feature of official Qing strategic thought between 1790 and the 1830s is that it remained unaltered by the rise of British power in

Asia” (p. 191). The author ascribes this situation less to inadequate intelligence gathering than to a lack of centralization in the process.

Chapter 6, which more or less parallels chapter 5 chronologically, shifts the focus of inquiry from official policies and procedures to the new role assumed by Han literati after 1800. Here we see evidence of the emerging “private” study of India on the maritime frontier. Many of the names are familiar to students of nineteenth-century Chinese history—Ruan Yuan, Chen Lunjiong, Li Zhaoluo, Li Mingche, and Bao Shichen—but many are not, including figures such as Yan Ruyi, Xie Qinggao, Yi Kezhong, and Xiao Lingyu. In any event, Mosca sheds new light on their ideas and influence. Taken together the writings of these scholars “began to corrode the three major pillars of the frontier policy”—the uncritical accumulation of local data, the loose link between geographic research and strategic policy proposals, and the tendency to focus on individual cases or “units of responsibility” rather than a broader perspective (pp. 232, 233).

Chapter 7 (“The Opium War and the British Empire, 1839-1842”), like chapter 6, covers familiar territory, but again presents new perspectives. Here, Commissioner Lin Zexu naturally looms large, but the emphasis, to a much greater extent than in previous Western-language studies of the man, is on the remarkable and previously underappreciated mechanisms of intelligence gathering during the first Opium War. Of particular interest in this chapter is the author’s description of Commissioner Lin’s efforts to acquire information from China’s southern and western frontiers. “By 1842,” Mosca writes, “lines of intelligence gathering using multiple sources in different places had underscored India’s key role in British power” (p. 269). And yet within the Qing bureaucracy, the empire’s strategic position was still seen through the prism of frontier policy.

Chapter 8 (“The Emergence of a Foreign Policy: Wei Yuan and the Reinterpretation of India in Qing Strategic Thought, 1842-1860”) revisits the much-studied career of Wei Yuan (1794-1856) and his famous book, *Haiguo tuzhi* (Illustrated treatise on the maritime kingdoms (1844)). Here, too, Mosca makes a valuable contribution by focusing in particular on Wei’s analysis of British India, and the problems he faced in deciphering and correlating vast amounts of geographical and other data for his book. Mosca also sheds useful light on such individuals as Wei’s collaborator and fellow researcher, Yao Ying, who assisted in intelligence gathering in Tibet.

In placing Wei in broader perspective, Mosca points

out that “a cause and consequence of Wei’s geographic achievement [the *Haiguo tuzhi*] was a growing rapprochement between text and map” (pp. 279-280). Indeed, his work marked a “watershed” in the history of Qing geographic research on the “outside world” because it “succeeded in bringing into dialogue elements from virtually all geographic traditions within the Qing empire” (p. 285). And on the basis of his careful research, Wei devised a foreign policy that “put him on common ground with at least some Russian, Nepali and British geo-strategists” (p. 301). This policy, as Mosca convincingly demonstrates, did not involve any of the traditional “ideological ties binding tributary states to the Qing emperor” (p. 302).

As indicated above, I believe that Mosca has somewhat overstated the degree to which, by the mid-nineteenth century, “multiple sources of intelligence, once virtually incommensurable, were now coordinated and interpreted with relative ease even if certain details remained problematic” (pp. 308-309). It is true, of course, that the conduct of Qing foreign relations became in-

creasingly coordinated after 1860, “buttressed by new institutions” (such as the Zongli Yamen, a proto-foreign office created in 1861 as a subcommittee of the Grand Council) (p. 309). We should remember, however, that the Zongli Yamen was an ad hoc institution essentially forced upon the Qing government by the Conventions of Beijing (1860), which mandated official diplomatic representation at the Chinese capital. Moreover, the presence in Beijing of foreign diplomats (such as Frederick Bruce) and foreign advisers (such as Robert Hart) during the remainder of the Qing period did much to shape official Chinese perceptions of the world.

Mosca ends his book with a number of useful research suggestions, one of which is a plea for further investigations into “the way information circulation had a differential impact on various groups within the Qing empire between 1860 and 1911 as they interpreted how external trends impinged upon the continued viability of its internal political order” (p. 310). This sort of research, if carried out as carefully and creatively as Mosca has done, would be most welcome indeed.

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