



Macabe Keliher. *The Board of Rites and the Making of Qing China.* Oakland: University of California Press, 2019. 288 pp. \$80.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-520-97176-9.

Reviewed by Jennifer H. Day (Skidmore College)

Published on H-Asia (November, 2021)

Commissioned by Bradley C. Davis (Eastern Connecticut State University)

State ritual in late imperial China has been a familiar topic to Qing historians, but Macabe Keliher's new book brings a fresh and important perspective to our understanding of the subject. In many ways, this book represents the most recent scholarship belonging to the "New Qing History" school, signaled by its extensive use of Manchu-language archival and printed materials. The subject concerns one of the most controversial aspects of Qing practice in the debate between New Qing historians and their critics: the fact that the Manchu rulers borrowed Chinese ritual and institutional framework even in the earliest stage of state formation. Critics of the school, such as Ping-Ti Ho, and more recently, Li Zhiting and Pei Huang, have all pointed to it as evidence of the Qing's sinicization.[1]

Keliher's book provides a new way of looking at Qing rites that goes beyond the debate about sinicization and renders the whole question somewhat irrelevant. Yes, the Manchus indeed used the Ming ritual framework, but the context and purpose of their adaptation set their practice apart from the Ming precedent. Previous scholarship has documented Hong Taiji's adoption of Chinese rites and institutions in collaboration with Han advisors. Frederick Wakeman, in particular, also highlights Hong Taiji's exhortations to prevent the Manchus from sinicization, adding more nuance

to the story of sinicization.[2] And yet such a framework (sinicization vs. resistance) tends to treat ritual (*li*) in generalized terms, as if its meaning and form were predetermined and timeless, to be accepted or rejected wholesale. Although few historians today would accept an unchanging view of ritual, scholarship has largely presented the content of the ritual in a static, fixed form, and few have looked at how the ritual evolved and why.

Keliher takes his inspiration from sociologist Steven Luke's concept of the three-dimensional power, and sees *li* as a means to acquire consent by reshaping subjects' beliefs and desires instead of exerting raw domination. Such an understanding of *li* in fact conforms to the original purpose of ritual—as conceived by early Confucianist Xunzi—seeing it as constitutive of the social and political order. The goal of the book, then, is to explain how the Qing recast of the *li* changed the nature of the Manchu sovereignty, how *li* was used to integrate different social and ethnic groups, and finally, how this recast ritual worked to construct the Qing administrative apparatus.

To do this was no easy task. After all, to inspire awe and reverence, state ritual was purposefully designed to appear timeless and unchallengeable. To contextualize ritual as a process of state formation required extensive archival work in

Manchu and Chinese, comparisons between different editions of statutes, and a careful contextualization of the memorials, edicts, and statutes. The work was doubly challenging due to the extraordinary complexity and detail in the *Da Qing huidian*, which can appear dull and monotonous to non-experts. Given all these challenges, the author has done an admirable job at organizing his materials and presenting them in a readable, interesting, and visually compelling way.

The book consists of three parts, following a chronological order. Part 1, in two chapters, lays out the book's theoretical and methodological approaches (chapter 1), and problematizes the early Manchu state's transition from tribe to state as nothing but inevitable (chapter 2). Here the analysis focuses on the challenges Hong Taiji faced from senior and junior relatives, with their competing imperial visions and different ideas about Manchu strategies and social compositions. How did Hong Taiji's vision come to be accepted without a war among contenders?

Part 2, "Formation, 1631-1651," proceeds to answer this question. In three chapters following a roughly chronological order, the author provides a detailed analysis of the New Year's Day Ceremony of 1632, the institutionalization of the emperor, and the construction of a new administrative order. Chapter 3 argues that the key in understanding the unfolding of a new political order was in how an emperor-centered hierarchy was played out in the New Year's Day ceremony, which then imbued the new political relation with real and symbolic form. A careful comparison with the Ming New Year's Day ceremony, in which the Ming emperor appears as a secondary actor overshadowed by the professional bureaucracy, highlights the innovation of the Manchu rite. Chapter 4 focuses on how the emperor came to be represented in the various court ceremonies, and how an imperial genealogy, complete with tomb building and ancestral sacrifice, was manufactured to legitimize a particular line of ancestors to justify the

Hong Taiji's rule. Chapter 5 takes up the issue of how Qing ritual regulates the interactions between imperial relatives and officials, "demonstrating how the names, ranks, and positions fit together in a cohesive political system" (p. 113). This chapter is one of the best studies of Qing court ranks, styles of clothing, greeting rites, and entourage available in the English language, and will be of great interest to art historians and scholars of Qing literature.

Part 3, "Institutionalization, 1651-1690," brings the story up to the reigns of Emperors Shunzhi and Kangxi. Chapter 6 describes how the imperial relatives' power struggle gave shape to new rites and institutions regulating their conduct, culminating in the establishment of the Imperial Clan Court to oversee imperial relatives. This chapter highlights the great divergence between the Qing and previous dynasties in dealing with imperial relatives. In contrast to the Ming practice of exclusion and exile, the Qing provided them a unique space in the bureaucracy in service of the state. Chapter 7 turns to the design of the imperial dress to examine how the Qing sovereign should look like—an amalgamation of Chinese symbols and Manchu cut. Chapter 8 completes the study with an examination of how the court codified Qing rites in its own distinct *Da Qing huidian* (the collected statutes of the great Qing).

To this reviewer, the chapters in part 2 are the most innovative and informative, and the last two chapters (7 and 8) appear somewhat weaker and less developed in their argument. While it is easy to understand how the Qing emperor's dress signifies an integration of Chinese symbolism and Manchu martiality, this insight is less startlingly new. Chapter 8 argues persuasively for how a *Da Qing huidian* was instrumental to the new political order, but it is relatively brief on how the new *huidian* differs from the previous models in style and purpose. The examples given in the book on where the *Qing huidian* differed seem like neces-

sary and minor tweaks, not a major restructuring as the readers have been led to expect.

Aside from these small caveats, *The Board of Rites and the Making of Qing China* is a refreshing, well-researched, and important book. It sheds new light to an old debate and provides a good paradigm for how the use of non-Chinese sources can add to our understanding of Chinese history.

Notes

[1]. Ping-Ti Ho, "In Defense of Sinicization: A Rebuttal of Evelyn Rawski's 'Reenvisioning the Qing,'" *Journal of Asian Studies* 57, no. 1 (February 1998): 123-55; Li Zhiting, "'New Qing History': An Example of 'New Imperialist' History," *Contemporary Chinese Thought* 47, no. 1 (September 2016): 5-12; Pei Huang, *Reorienting the Manchus: A Study of Sinicization, 1583-1795* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell East Asia Series, 2011).

[2]. Frederic Wakeman, *The Great Enterprise, Vol. 1: The Manchu Reconstruction of Imperial Order in Seventeenth-Century China* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1986).

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-asia>

Citation: Jennifer H. Day. Review of Keliher, Macabe. *The Board of Rites and the Making of Qing China*. H-Asia, H-Net Reviews. November, 2021.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=54715>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.