

REVIEWS

The Qing Empire – Big Fish in a Small Pond?

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Larsen, Kirk. *Tradition, Treaties, and Trade: Qing Imperialism and Chosun Korea, 1850-1910*. Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2008. 328 pages. ISBN 978-0-674-02807-4

Was Chosun's former benevolent big brother, the Qing Empire, as imperialistic as other nations? Was the Chinese whale in the basin of the traditional East Asian world order, actually trying to swallow the little Korean shrimp, whose shell was bound to be crushed by the inflow of Western and Japanese imperialism?

As a review of his Ph.D. dissertation written in 2000, Larsen once more tries to correct the image of China as a passive, backward victim of late 19th - early 20th century imperialism. Instead, Larsen argues that while getting the best out of emphasizing its tributary relationship with Chosun wherever it was advantageous, the Qing Empire showed flexibility in adapting to increasing Western influences and engaged in "informal" or "multilateral imperialism" as its new political design. Japan's unilateral imperialist penetration of the peninsula stands in contrast to the Qing attempt to bring in other countries in order to offset Meiji influence. In his descriptions, Larsen focuses on the political activities of Qing officials such as Li Hongzhang, Yuan Shikai and Chen Shutang.

The author emphasizes that the Qing Empire's imperialism in Chosun had its own indistinguishable features, but at the same time must be understood as a part of broader regional and global trends. These trends, however, should not be approached by contrasting the traditional with the modern, since the Qing Empire proved quite successful in forming new hybrid forms of Asian and Western political tools.

The decision to focus on Qing and refer to the Korean perspective only where necessary can be lamented, but appears to be the right choice in order to focus better on the main argument. The content of the different chapters in the book, however, is not well balanced. While some parts contain rather summary descriptions, others go into extreme detail, that is not always justified by the relevance of the chapter in question to the main argument or to the bigger picture as presented

overall throughout the book. Although most of Larsen's arguments are convincing and well-supported by historical sources, some of the economic facts at least could have been further substantiated by a more detailed use of statistics and figures; used extensively in Larsen's dissertation yet missing almost completely in *Tradition, Treaties and Trade*.

"Multilateral imperialism" presents itself as one of the key concepts of the book. Larsen argues convincingly that Qing entered into treaties with Western powers on Chosun's behalf to offset Japanese influence on the peninsula. It is, however, not convincing that this translated into a whole strategy once the treaties with Western nations were signed, not only in the case of the hermit kingdom but also when the Pandora's box of "multilateral imperialism" as a whole had been opened. Since at this point it had become impossible for Qing to undo any of the treaties between Chosun and the Western powers, the presence of these powers became a grim reality that the Qing Empire (and Chosun) had to deal with. Whenever Qing officials utilized the newly-created situation to get a bigger slice of the cake for their empire, this is not interpreted by Larsen as a departure from multilateral imperialism but as proof that the strategy worked to protect Chinese interests in Korea. Consequently, we cannot imagine any possible action Qing officials could have taken that would have violated their alleged 'special form' of imperialism, which also makes it impossible to find counter-evidence to the concept and reveal its emptiness.

Strong focus on Qing and the outspoken agenda to correct its image as a passive, old-fashioned victim of imperialism are achieved through emphasis on Qing's former economic strength and presentation of the imperialistic nature of its approach to Chosun as a flexible adaptation to the new era. Alongside this, the claim that empty rituals are not necessarily futile but an unavoidable part of diplomatic conduct seems like a more-or-less open attempt to prove that Qing was at the same level with all other Western imperialist powers of the time. To discuss this perspective more explicitly could have added an interesting angle to the book.

Although the rich and detailed descriptions of the facts make the book an interesting read, the main argument, as convincing it might be, in fact adds little to previous research in this area. Though argumentatively convincing, the cautious approach of the book reveals itself as the biggest weakness.

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