

## Analysis of the Imperial Power in China's Qing Dynasty

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**Abstract:** There are many definitions of “imperialism” and “imperial power”. However, there are clear differences between the two terms. Imperialism mostly refers to capitalism’s monopolistic, parasitic, rotten and dying form. “Royalty” was a state that established economic and political hegemony by seizing more territory and enslaving the indigenous people in those territories. This paper will prove that Qing China was indeed an imperial state from the perspective of territorial colonization and expansion of the sphere of influence, and compare the ways of expansion of the Qing Empire and the Russian Empire as well as the policies towards the indigenous people.

### 1. Introduction

The terms “imperialism” and “imperial power” have been defined by many scholars and politicians in a variety of ways [1]. For example, in Lenin’s Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism, published in 1917, imperialism was defined as a monopolistic, parasitic, decadent and dying form of capitalism [2]. According to Political Geography, the concept of an “imperial power” was similarly defined as a country that establishes economic and political hegemony by seizing additional territories and enslaving the natives of the territories [3]. In occupied lands, most native populations were exploited as cheap labor, and relegated to second-class citizenship, while strict social hierarchies were enforced. By the definitions above, the British Empire, the French Empire, and the Russian Empire could all be considered imperial powers. Further, the Qing Empire (1644-1911) could also be defined as an imperial power if imperialism is solely analyzed in terms of territorial colonization and efforts of expanding spheres of influence.

### 2. Similarities in Military Strategies and Administration

Even while using the overarching category of “imperial power”, it should be noted that the Qing Empire and Western empires had very different forms of expansion [4]. It was, however, beneficial to compare China’s path of development with that of Tsarist Russia in the 18th Century [5], their own unique historical developments notwithstanding. Although sharing diplomatic and monarchical ties, Russia’s form of imperialism was very different from Britain, France and other western maritime powers yet similar to China regarding its expansion process [6]. For example, China and Russia both conquered parts of Siberia and much of the Asian continent’s interior by force [7]. Given that both China and Russia are land powers, they shared many similarities in military strategies, colonial administration, and policy-making while expanding in these territories.

#### 2.1. Military Strategies

Territorially, Russia colonized Siberia, while Qing Empire mainly colonized Miaojiang in South China [8]. After Russian General Yermak Timofeevich’s Cossack army defeated the leader of the Sibir Khanate, Kuchum, in 1585, the soldiers then invaded the Chukchi. The invasion was without organizational discipline due as the army was far away from the logistical and political support of the Tsar. The resistance of the Chukchi continued until 1751 [9]. Over a hundred years, Russia sent more than four hundred troops, conquering and occupying the Chukchi region and eventually the rest of Siberia. As was the case with other imperial ventures, the main motivation for this determined and rapid eastward push was economical, and in this case primarily the pursuit of fur [10]. Due to Siberia’s

vast expanse, to control the newly conquered territory and provide a base for further expansion, the Cossacks built Russian castles called Ostrogs at key points of communication, controlled the area around the castles, and continued to occupy new land through these castles [11].

The Qing Empire also built many military institutions and facilities in the Miaojiang areas to manage their conquered territories [12]. According to incomplete statistics, the Ming dynasty Miaojiang military facility stationed more than 280,000 soldiers [13].

## 2.2. Administration

Of course, because the colonized areas were sparsely populated relative to both China and Russia, both empires chose to increase the population of the newly conquered areas by means of migration [14]. In addition, to continue bringing in large numbers of skilled immigrants to the newly conquered regions in Siberia, Russia often used “exile” to continuing send manpower to Siberia [15]. In 1593, for example, the Russian government banished more than two hundred people from Ugerich to Perm [16]. This event marked the beginning of the government’s designation of Siberia as a place to exile prisoners, lawbreakers, and political dissidents. In 1649, Tsar Alexei issued the Code of Laws, which established “exile to Siberia” as a legal mechanism. After the promulgation of this law, the terms of exile expanded, and a considerable amount of people went to Siberia [17].

## 3. Differences in Goals and Approaches

The historical path Russia took in Siberia was not entirely different from that of China. After the ruling forces of the Qing Empire penetrated the Miao border of Hunan, Guizhou, and Sichuan, a large number of migrants from all other provinces and classes entered the Miao area [18]. The Qing dynasty ensured the migrant’s property and financial gain by looting the land of the indigenous Miao people as a measure to encourage the Han population to settle in the Miao territory [19].

The two countries succeeded in expanding their territories and spheres of influence, and the methods used in the colonization process were somewhat similar [20]. However, from the very beginning, their goals were different, as were the two means the two empires undertook [21].

### 3.1. Goals

As mentioned above, Russia colonized primarily for economic gain, as it had long coveted Siberian furs [22]. For Qing Empire, the colonization of Miaojiang was mainly to stabilize its rule. By the time Qing Emperor Yongzheng was in power, the country had achieved an unprecedented territorial unification [23]. Western empires such as Britain began to colonize the world by force by exploiting trade routes and doing business through the sword. By contrast [24], China used its vast tributary system to open international trade routes and sent Zheng He to sail between different vassal states, not just for profit, but more importantly to maintain its political position in Asia. The tributary system was undoubtedly an excellent way for China to maintain social order in Asia, similar to how imperialism controls people [25].

### 3.2. Approaches

It was precise because of the different purposes of their initial periods of colonization that Russia and China ended up having different forms of colonial rule.

#### 3.2.1. The Official Transfer System

First, the Voevadas - local officials sent by Russia - volunteered to go to Siberia because they wanted to make money for business [26]. They all brought their families, servants, and their own supplies. In 1635, Voevoda of Mangazeia set out on a journey to Siberia with his personal priest and thirty-two family entourage [27]. Under the Qing Empire’s official transfer system [28], officials who went to Miaojiang often had no preparation and needed to marry into the local elite families. Such marriages, in turn, increased the kinship ties of the local ruling class [29].

### **3.2.2. The Official Transfer System**

Next, one must compare the two countries' policies toward the indigenous people [30]. Both countries had different forms of exploitation of the indigenous people, but Russia's policies were more interest-driven and relatively less invasive [31]. The Russian government was very interested in protecting indigenous people's lives because losing a native meant it had less access to fur [32]. In 1763, the Russian government set up the Yasak Council in Tobolsk to strengthen the tax collection on fur [33]. It was responsible for determining the number of people and the amount of tax to be paid by each tribe and household. The administration in Siberia was primitive and crude, with the military dictatorship system headed by the supervising army [34]. At the same time, this military system enabled Russia to expand its territory and maintain its control over Siberia. Moreover, this military structure gave the overseers much power [35].

In the Qing Empire, local officials had unlimited power, and they often dispatched the Miaoos were treated like prisoners under the supervision of Manchu and Han landlords [36]. The government-supported leader Liuguan, a Miao region official, would even collude with Han immigrants to obtain management rights of local chieftains, and seize Miao people's farmland with the help of the settlers [37]. Under the rule of Liuguan, the Miao people suffered from economic oppression and severe exploitation and could not compete with the settlers. In its policy toward local residents, China had chosen to protect the status of officials [38]. One can see how the Qing government gave so much power to local officials to maintain these new borders and thus expand its control over previous "barbarians" lands, which, to some extent, partly fits the definition of imperialism.

### **3.2.3. The Ideological Education**

The policies of the two countries were also different in terms of ideological education for local residents. There were over five hundred different tribal groups in the Russian colonies. In order to keep the loyalty of the indigenous people, the Russian government needed local people to swear allegiance to the Russian Tsar and faithfully perform their duties whenever the government sent expeditions to the local people. Each ethnic group in Siberia preserved its own religious beliefs. However, the Russian government also forced minorities to pledge allegiance to the Tsar and pay taxes. The Russian Tsar's forces also maintained power by taking hostages. Russian colonizers captured local people as collateral to levy taxes. If the natives did not pay their taxes, the Russian government mistreated the hostages. The natives, terrorized in the newly occupied territories, were forced to hand over their chieftains and other influential leaders to the Russians [39].

The Qing government took a different approach, but it was also militant and coercive. As early as the Song dynasty, the government established Confucianism in the Miao areas. Moreover, in the Ming dynasty, the government stipulated that the children of chieftains had to attend Confucian schools where they learned Han ethnic customs. During this time, officials regarded the establishment of Confucianism as an important political matter to control the local population. The government thus wanted to standardize the culture of the Miao people through social and cultural management. Agents of the Qing dynasty began to check the household registration of all the residents, clear all the land, and make official records. Given these policies, it is evident that the Chinese government did not prioritize maintaining open relationships with the natives as their Russian counterparts did.

## **4. Conclusion**

Although the two imperial powers had distinct characteristics in conducting imperial policy, they both ultimately exploited local populations. Moreover, they both effectively consolidated the statuses of their own countries as imperial powers through expanding territory and spheres of influence. Overall, we cannot define the concept of "imperial power" exclusively in western terms and without considering other historical empires. We need to define imperialism in new ways that fit different non-Western expansions. Scholars need to jettison Western-centric approaches and include China's imperialism through new models to write more effective histories of imperialism. By doing so, we can not only include the Qing Empire as an imperial power but also draw historical connections

between different empires, forms of imperialism, and conditions of colonized peoples.

As we can see from the Qing Empire's expansion in Miaojiang and the relationship between Qing Empire and the local Miao people, China in the Qing Dynasty can be considered an imperial power.

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