

Macabe Keliher, *The Board of Rites and the Making of Qing China*

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The New Year's Day ceremony was one of the many court rituals that the early Qing rulers organized to promote the formation of the Qing empire and its ruling class. Honoring the emperor through shamanic rituals on New Year's Day had been a Manchu tradition, but Hong Taiji (1592–1643, r. 1626–1643)—the second Manchu ruler under who the state assumed the name of Qing—introduced new elements by regulating the guest list and the ceremonial process. He thus transformed the New Year's Day ceremony into an arena in which to perform supreme rulership before a carefully curated audience of diverse subjects. Considering that Macabe Keliher focuses on the early Qing period (1631–1690) to demonstrate how the Manchu rulers used rituals to create and sustain their own unique style of emperorship and in the process subjugated competitors within the ruling class, it is not a coincidence that a thorough discussion of the New Year's Day ceremony and the institutions that oversaw the rituals of the Qing court feature in Keliher's *The Board of Rites and the Making of Qing China*.

The book comprises three parts. The two chapters that make up Part One, titled "Context," introduce the relationship between *li* 禮 and the making of the Qing. *Li* is commonly translated as rites, ritual, or ceremony; according to

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Keliher's definition, it includes rituals, cosmology, social order, and law and administrative order (p. 12). *Li* was not a new concept in the Qing. Nonetheless, Keliher argues that *li* played an important role in the Qing state-making process by employing a narrative account of Hong Taiji's rise to power with an emphasis on *li* and the Board of Rites. The Inner Asian tradition that gave powerful members of the Khan's clan the opportunity to compete for the throne contributed to the struggles for power in the early Qing period, and as outlined in Part One, when Hong Taiji came to power in 1626, he was only one of the four *beile* 貝勒 (title of the highest-ranking lord or prince below the Khan) in a council managed by ruling elites in the banner system. In short, in the first few years of Hong Taiji's reign, although he was the selected Khan, he sat along with the other three *beile*, and his role as the supreme ruler had yet to be secured. It is, according to Keliher, Hong Taiji's innovative use of *li* that helped him establish both the emperorship and the Qing empire.

Keliher lays out his core argument in chapters three, four, and five which form Part Two "Formation, 1631–1651." Here, he traces how Hong Taiji and his successors adopted and transformed *li* as well as the administrative code (the so-called *Huidian* 會典) of the previous Ming dynasty to attract supporters, settle power struggles, and create a more stable foundation for their rule. In chapter three specifically, he claims that although the Qing court's New Year's Day ceremony was a revised version of Ming practices introduced via Chinese officials, the first ceremony was Hong Taiji's attempt to reconstruct a political order through appropriating *li*. Keliher analyzes the contents of the celebration, including how banner lords and generals would participate, namely in what seating arrangements and with which titles. He further explains the manner and order in which the diverse subjects would greet Hong Taiji, as well as the standardization of the

ceremonial contents and how the political order was then fixed on the emperor's authority. In chapters four and five, Keliher explores Qing symbols and the symbolic functions of *li*. Chapter four is devoted to a comparison of the court rituals in the Ming and the Qing, and he argues that because the emperors were presented differently in their respective rituals, both the emperorship and the specific kinds of political interactions born out of these contexts were fundamentally dissimilar. In chapter five, Keliher demonstrates the processes in which the behaviors and practices of imperial relatives and officials were regulated, and how those regulations further produced a political system that kept them under control.

The discussion of the processes of state-making and the role *li* played continues into Part Three "Institutionalization, 1651–1690." In chapter six, Keliher focuses on the Imperial Clan Court 宗人府 under the Board of Rites, showing the structural shifts in the struggles for power among influential relatives after the institutionalization of the Qing emperorship. Keliher then reviews the hybrid representation of a Manchu sovereign through a case study of imperial dress in chapter seven by combing through the debates over what would constitute proper imperial dress at the Qing court in 1653. The debates were important because they revealed how a Manchu conqueror wished to present himself in front of his new agrarian Chinese subjects, and the Shunzhi Emperor (1638–1661, r. 1644–1661) notably chose a style that amalgamated both Chinese and Manchu traditions. Keliher ends his discussion of early Qing state formation in 1690, when *li* was written into the administrative code which legally bound and subordinated the imperial relatives to the emperor. *The Board of Rites and the Making of Qing China*, in sum, is a political history of an institution (the Board of Rites) that proved essential to the making of an early modern imperial order.

Keliher's book makes two important contributions to the field of Qing studies. First, it is a meticulously researched study using a significant number of Manchu-language sources to discuss the history of the early Qing. Recent scholarship has benefited greatly from using non-Chinese-language archives to discuss the origins and practices of Qing rule, and Keliher's emphasis on the distinctiveness of the Qing Board of Rites—as opposed to its Chinese antecedents—builds upon this scholarly trend. His study is the first to focus both on the importance of rituals and their symbolic meanings as well as on the Board of Rites as a political institution. Earlier works have largely avoided discussion of *li* and the Board of Rites, as they have been closely associated with previous (Han) Chinese dynasties and accordingly not thought to be distinctively Manchu. The attention of scholarship intent on showing the unique, innovative, or even specifically Manchu and Inner Asian elements of Qing rule have instead chosen to center on the Eight Banners system, the Lifanyuan 理藩院 (which managed relations with Mongolia), or the Grand Council.¹ Keliher breaks new ground in bringing the Board of Rites into the discussion of the specificity of Qing rule. He does so by engaging in a close reading of some of the most important Manchu sources from the early Qing and carefully comparing the court rituals used in the Ming and the Qing. Keliher persuasively shows that although some Qing ceremonies were adapted from the Ming, because the Manchu emperors deliberately took part in transforming the rituals to respond to particular Inner Asian problems, the Qing concept of *li* and the institution of the Board of Rites not only differed from those of the Ming, but should also be seen as distinctively Qing innovations.

¹ See Mark C. Elliott, *The Manchu Way: The Eight Banners and Ethnic Identity in Late Imperial China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001); Ning Chia, "The Lifanyuan and the Inner Asian Rituals in the Early Qing (1644–1795)," in *Late Imperial China*, 14:1 (1993), pp. 60–92; Beatrice S. Bartlett, *Monarchs and Ministers: The Grand Council in Mid-Ch'ing China, 1723–1820* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991).

Keliher's second contribution—made possible by his focus on the Board of Rites—lies in his reconfiguration of the Qing state-formation process. Scholarship on the formation of the Qing state has predominantly centered on either the armed conflicts of the pre-conquest era or the Qing empire's southward and westward expansion following the Manchu conquest in 1644. As a result, scholars tend to dwell on the military or bureaucratic institutions that helped sustain the imperial project.² Keliher instead highlights the year in which the Board of Rites was established (1631) and the year of Hong Taiji announcing the founding of the Qing empire (1636), arguing that Hong Taiji's creation of the Board of Rites enabled him to use *li* to manage the power struggles within the ruling elite. This in turn facilitated the Qing empire's later conquest of China and allowed Hong Taiji's descendants to monopolize the right to the Qing emperorship. This, Keliher maintains, is how the Board of Rites should be understood: as one of the central instruments that helped the Manchu rulers shape both the Qing empire and the emperorship. He concludes that the Qing empire-building project could not be completed before *li* had become part of the administrative code that guided the behaviors and practices of both the imperial household and Qing officials.

As much as Keliher wants to draw a line between the use of *li* and the Board of Rites in the Ming and Qing, however, one problem seems intrinsic to the sources he compares. In the discussion of the codification of *li* in the two dynasties, Keliher explains that the specific version of *Da Ming huidian* 大明會典, which guided the Qing court in the seventeenth century, was published in the late sixteenth century, more than two hundred years after the founding of the Ming

² See Liu Xiaomeng 劉小萌, *Manzu cong buluo dao guojia de fazhan* (From tribe to state: An early history of the Manchus) 滿族從部落到國家的發展 (Beijing: Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe, 2007); Peter C. Perdue, *China Marches West: The Qing Conquest of Central Eurasia* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2005).

in 1368 (p. 172), and then proceeds to detail how *Da Ming huidian* featured in the dynamic between the Manchu rulers and Chinese advisors, showing the work's contributions to the formation of the Qing. Yet, it is less convincing to say the Ming's use of *li* in its state-building project was unlike that of the Qing, as the documents and periods compared represent different stages in the state-formation process of the two dynasties. Moreover, the continuities across the Ming-Qing divide may be more significant than Keliher wants to admit. Although Keliher acknowledges the role the Chinese advisors played in transmitting the symbolic and political importance of *li* to the Qing rulers, he nevertheless places his focus on the agency of the Qing rulers, especially that of Hong Taiji, to argue for a uniquely Qing approach to *li* and a repurposed Board of Rites. For example, Keliher outlines the ceremonial process of the Qing court rituals and maintains that because the rituals of the Qing put the emperors at the forefront, Qing *li* was crucial in unifying a shared ruling class bound by shared interests under a stable supreme ruler. By contrast, the Ming emperor himself and the members of the royal family seldom participated in court rituals; hence, *li* played a much more obscure role in shaping both the patterns of power struggles and the making of the Ming empire. However, a closer look at the early history of the Ming—that is to say, before the publication of the *Da Ming huidian* in the late sixteenth century—might suggest that this period was likewise marked by struggles for power and efforts to balance the influence of bureaucrats and aristocrats through appropriating *li*. A more detailed account of the early Ming concept of *li* and the early Ming Board of Rites might reveal more similarities than Keliher's very general description of the Ming institution allows.

Keliher emphasizes the differences between his project on state-making and earlier works that center on war making and the formation of Qing bureaucracy.

However, he also acknowledges that the institutionalization of *li* in 1690, almost sixty years after the founding of the Qing Board of Rites, occurred due to the defeat of the last Ming loyalists and complete subjugation of China proper. He notes that while proponents of *li* had argued for codification for nearly six decades, the Kangxi Emperor (1654–1722, r. 1661–1722) only agreed to it after the suppression of the Revolt of the Three Feudatories. What, then, was the relationship between *li* and warfare? And what was the relationship between the Board of Rites and other institutions? The latter question is especially tricky because the Board of Rites was just one of the Six Boards (*liu bu* 六部) established in 1631, and the structure of the Qing government changed at least two more times before 1690 in ways that influenced the place of the Six Boards within it.³ Keliher persuasively shows the importance of rituals and symbols in the process of state-making, as well as presenting Hong Taiji and his successors as compelling and insightful rulers able to soothe powerful rivalries, but he leaves the reader wondering if *li* fully resolved the tensions at the center. The early Qing was marked by fratricidal conflicts within the royal family and ruling class, exemplified by the first two reigns both having powerful regents from among the banner lords. Although Keliher observes that a stable ruler would be more likely to guarantee young banner officials' access to resources and power and that Qing emperors were thus able to appease bannermen and attract their support, he tends to overlook the dissatisfaction among the banner elite with the adoption of these new practices. In other words, Keliher foregrounds the early Qing rulers' agency while understating the agency of others, thereby effacing the menacing undercurrent to Qing rule that lasted until well after 1690.

³ See Guo Chengkang 郭成康 and Zhang Jinfan 張晉藩, *Qing ruguan qian guojia falü zhidu shi* (A legal and institutional history of the pre-conquest Qing State) 清入關前國家法律制度史 (Shenyang: Liaoning renmin chubanshe, 1988), pp. 50–79.

To conclude, the book is a pleasure to read and offers an important new perspective on the early Qing. Macabe Keliher vividly calls attention to the position of ritual in Qing state formation and offers detailed descriptions of some of the most important court rituals, including the New Year's Day ceremony, and the hierarchical arrangement of seating and clothing. He capably shows that ritual played an important role in the formation of the Manchu ruling class and its subordination to imperial rule. He also executes a robust comparative analysis of the Ming and Qing administrative codes and offers a compelling argument about the relationship between *li* and law. The book thus offers a clear and accessible history of an important early Qing institution and a new account of the formation of the Qing formation, one which should be widely read and discussed.