

The Taiji Government and the Rise of the Warrior State. By Lhamsuren Munkh-Erdene. Leiden: Brill, 2021. Pp. xviii + 543. £190.00 hardback.

Munkh-Erdene Lhamsuren is well known for his substantial and challenging revisions of historiographies of nomadism and of the history of Mongolia. In *The Taiji Government and the Rise of the Warrior State*, he considers not only Mongolia of the Qing period but the Qing imperial state itself. His conclusion is stark; as he argues uncompromisingly in the introduction, “if the Qing was a colonial empire, its colony was China rather than Mongolia” (p. 2). In case this is not clear enough, he adds on page 10, “The Qing, then, represented an Inner Asian aristocratic power that had successfully conquered and ‘colonized’ China.” Though the language is crisp and direct, the framework of Munkh-Erdene’s argument is complex, encompassing both the historical evidence and what the historical evidence means. His unpublished sources include not only the First Historical Archives of China in Beijing, but also the National Central Archive of Mongolia. Like all modern researchers, the author has benefitted from the publication of primary archival sources: among those he uses are additional Number One documents and *Manwen laodang* 滿文老檔; the important Qing imperial narrative usually known by its Chinese name, *Kaiguo fanglüe* 開國方略; the extensive Mongolian records of the Qing Grand Secretariat; and Russian sources on seventeenth-century relations between Russia and the peoples of Mongolia. He also draws upon well-known Mongolian chronicles, including the *Čayan Teüke* (White History).

These diverse sources allow Munkh-Erdene to combat some commonplaces of seventeenth-century history that might otherwise hinder his overall interpretation. It is essential, for instance, that the broad assumption that the Qing conquered Mongolia, in any meaningful sense of that word, be refuted. The first watershed moment in the conventional Qing narrative of conquest is the struggle against Ligdan, his defeat, and the assumption of control over the Chakhar khaghanate. The prominence of this episode is probably due to Saghang Sečen’s narrative, *Erdeni-yin Tobči* (1662). The reliability of the work has been questioned since its first translation into a European language (German) in 1829. The climax of this saga is Ligdan’s demise, written by his avowed enemy and fully endorsing the righteousness of the Qing absorption of Chakhar in 1634 (a partisan posture for which Saghang Sečen was amply rewarded by the Qing imperial court). In conventional historiography, refutation of specific claims has not been as great an issue as the study of conflicts among the three complete versions of the work, as well as defects in the most frequently used translations into Manchu and Chinese. Munkh-Erdene is not interested in these technical issues, but in something else: Evidence from contemporary Russian correspondence indicates that Saghang Sečen himself led the coup in which Ligdan was assassinated, and it happened while Ligdan was leading a military campaign in Köke Nuur (Qinghai), not fleeing westward from the Qing; it was his murderers who surrendered to the Qing.

On the basis of those emendations, Munkh-Erdene considers the foundation of the myth of the Qing defeat of Ligdan to be dismantled, so that the real story can now be told: Hong Taiji, as the ruler of Aisin Gurun (for many historians, “Later Jin”), before he became the first Qing emperor, joined the Mongol princes in their war against Ligdan. As an equal ally of the Mongol princes against Ligdan, Hong Taiji was essentially subscribing to the constitutional legitimacy of the *taiji* state. The Qing empire, therefore, did not conquer Mongolia. Instead, the Qing was itself an extension of the aristocratic political institutions of Mongolia, and it was as an entity of this nature—mirrored in the aristocratic collegial governance of the Eight Banners—that it proceeded to conquer China.

This is the story that Munkh-Erdene builds in the book, and it shows his orientation as a sociologist rather than a historian. In some passages of the book, this means that dates and even individuals may go some paragraphs without being specified. More significantly, the revisionist project the author undertakes here has less to do with establishing new facts and more to do with illuminating and recasting the theoretical assumptions behind the standing narratives of the Qing relationship to Mongol aristocracy. Though the author never explicitly defines “constitution,” as used in his title, it is clear that he means the convergence of social, religious, military, and political practices that created a form of collegial government in Mongolia, which was then extended to the Qing—and continued to generate law and policy in the Qing empire until the first years of the twentieth century. The thesis requires a review of the political history of Mongolia, much of it based on Munkh-Erdene’s own extensive publications on law and political institutions in Eurasian, Liao, and Chinggisid contexts.¹ The great development of the pre-Qing period, the author explains, was the destruction of “*taishi* government” and its replacement by “*taiji* government” in the Northern Yuan state.

Taishi government—as exemplified by Esen Taishi—was a political mode in which a powerful military leader who, like Esen himself, might not be a Chinggisid was given responsibility for administering the army and the fiscal institutions on behalf of the *khaghan*. But Esen (a prominent figure in Saghang Sečen’s text) mishandled affairs (including the kidnapping and captivity of the Ming emperor Zhu Qizhen 朱祁鎮 [r. 436–1450 and 1457–1464]) and then made the mistake of attempting to eliminate

¹ As examples, see “The 1640 Great Code: An Inner Asian Parallel to the Treaty of Westphalia,” *Central Asian Survey*, 29.3 (2010); “Political Order in Pre-Modern Eurasia: Imperial Incorporation and the Hereditary Divisional System,” *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 26.4 (2016); “In Accordance with the Great Törü: Pre-Modern Mongol Concept of Moral Order, Law and Government,” *Proceedings of the Eleventh International Congress of Mongolists* (2017).

the Chinggisid heir and make himself the Northern Yuan *khaghan*; in the ensuing struggle against the Chinggisids, Esen's own supporters eventually murdered him. The Chinggisid revival that followed under Dayan Khaghan included destruction of the political practices that had allowed Esen to come to power. Thereafter, the imperial lineage and the ruler together formed one sovereign entity. This was the precursor to Qing assumption of Ligdan's Chakhar ruler-aristocracy compact in 1634, which was followed by thorough restructuring of the Aisin khanate and the promulgation of the Qing empire in 1636. The state that emerged from this process, the author stresses, was not an emulation of the Chakhar polity, nor was it inspired or influenced by it, but was an organic continuation of the Northern Yuan-Chakhar *taiji* (or "princes") state. This *taiji* state was based upon a perpetual alliance with the princes of Mongolia, the appanage or patrimony holders who had succeeded to the Dayan-period lineages. At the same time, maintaining a living alliance with the Mongol princes entailed the development within the Qing rulership of a religious construction of *čakravartin* rulership encompassing the "two norms" of the spiritual and mundane worlds. The relationship was also reflected in Qing imperial patronage of Zanazabar and of the Yonghegong 雍和宮, imperial publishing of Tibetan (specifically Gelug) liturgies, as well as religious art in all media.

This extended partnership of the Mongol aristocracy and the Qing imperial lineage was, in essence, the constitution of the Qing empire (formalized, in 1651, in writing). In the author's view, it was observed by all Qing emperors, who referred to it as the "original law" (p. 352) and relied upon it in the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century campaigns to quell rebellions in Mongolia led by non-aristocratic upstarts. On the basis of a study of fifteen law codes—of fifteen patrimonial domains or *taiji*—of pre-Qing Mongolia, the author characterizes this state as "aristocratic parliamentary constitutional monarchy" (p. 12, 20). Lomi, usually considered the leading Mongol apologist for Qing imperialism in Mongolia, is presented as an advocate for the constitutional compact between the *taiji* and the Qing emperor, who became critical only when the Qing violated the compact in minor ways; here he is not an apologist for imperialism, which does not happen, but an arbiter of political ethics based on the *taiji*–Qing constitution. The empire was also a dual state, one that recognised the Aisingioro aristocrats as an "inner" (p. 331) constituency and the Chinggisid princes as an "outer" (p. 301) constituency (here "outer" is used to mean being communicated with via the Lifan yuan 理藩院, and not as meaning outside the empire). This remained the status quo until the early twentieth century, when the Qing court attempted to pacify both Chinese elites and foreign governments by initiating reforms that would have neutralized the ancient constitution with a formal, civil constitutional monarchy. At that point, the author concludes, the princes of Mongolia immediately recognised the contradiction in the original law, interpreted it to mean that the empire was dissolved, and declared Mongolia independent in 1910.

The above summary may suggest that, while *The Taiji State* takes its line of revision to a distinct and novel level, many of the basic elements appear to be shared with recent trends in the history of the Qing empire. Many prominent Qing historians regard the Qing as a segmented state, a fundamental part of which was drawn directly from Chakhar. This line of thought in historiography in Western languages, dating as far back as the early twentieth century, has been revived and elaborated in the past two decades. By way of full disclosure, in previous and forthcoming publications, I myself describe the Qing as a state composed of multiple governments, one of which was the Lifan yuan, originally dedicated to the management of Mongol affairs. Other historians of the Qing have generally affirmed the continuing power and independence of the Chinggisid aristocracy (through the Borjigid lineage in particular) and will find Munkh-Erdene's arguments compatible with many other ways in which the Qing state is characterised in current scholarship. But Munkh-Erdene is stern in his refusal to accept that his approach has any antecedents in modern historiography or shares much with current studies of the Qing. This denial is sometimes achieved by lumping together historians who, to many readers, appear to be sharply at odds.

The logic of Munkh-Erdene's lumping is important to examine. In his view, even historians who think there was some kind of definitive "Manchu" element in the Qing state or its political culture are nevertheless under the sway of sinocentrism, because they narrate Mongolia as being under Qing dominion (that is, ruled from China) and they see the institutions of Qing rule in Mongolia (and by implication, more than definitive characterization, in Tibet) as undergoing bureaucratization in the eighteenth century, which would deny the continuing foundation of the Qing state in the compact with the Mongol aristocracy and substitute instead a Chinese-derived governance system. For example, Zhang Shiming would appear to many to merit Munkh-Erdene's sympathy because he characterized the Eight Banners as an aristocratic government within the Qing state; but Zhang is dismissed as sinocentric because he argues that, by the mid-eighteenth century, bureaucratization had eradicated most or all of the foundations of the Eight Banners "vassal" state. Munkh-Erdene, in contrast, argues that the Eight Banners, as well as the *taiji* government of Mongolia, retained their aristocratic, collegial compact with the imperial state until virtually the end of the empire. Even a historian like myself, who insists that empires by definition transcend culture—a premise basic to the emergence of simultaneous rulerships of Eurasian conquest empires—is considered "sinocentric" because my narratives do not depict fundamentally unchanged foundations of government in Mongolia through the Qing period.

Though I find this habit of lumping distorting, and unrepresentative of the actual historiography of Qing in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, I would nevertheless urge that Munkh-Erdene's perspective be soberly considered by Qing specialists everywhere. There is nothing unlikely in the proposition that China-centred

assumptions still pervade our view of the period, often to a degree not warranted by documentary evidence. Moreover, modern historians generally need to be reminded that our imaginative grasp of the nature of aristocratic polities in earlier periods is always weak. Despite strongly developed historiography on the Mongolian sources of Qing institutions and political culture, in my view Munkh-Erdene is the first to develop in English the idea of a continuing organic relationship with the Mongolian aristocracy as a central controlling principle of Qing imperial governance. And what he proposes does challenge modern historiography. If I were to assess my own view of the early Qing from the perspective of Munkh-Erdene's thesis (that is, if I were to set aside the lumping together of all other historians as "sinocentric" and actually look at the specifics of what they have written), my interpretation of the Chakhar-Aisin merger that created the Qing empire and initiated its simultaneous rulership (Chinggisid *khaghan*, Northeastern *khan* and Chinese emperor) would suggest that *khaghan* was an independent persona within the rulership (and had a more or less independent role in defining a Mongol identity in the eighteenth century and later). That is very different from Munkh-Erdene's proposal of a relationship of mutual definition and mutual legitimation between the historical aristocratic constituency of the Mongol *khaghan* and the Qing ruler—a relationship that would link Qing rule of Mongolia to post-Qing Mongol identity in a very different way. The author himself does not explore such differences, though one hopes he will in future, as the implications of his argument could go much further than suggested in this book.

The logic behind the author's historiographical judgments is a separate question from the persuasiveness of his specific analysis of Mongolia's governance in the Qing period and its relationship to a hypothesized constitution for the empire. Bureaucratization is a serious proposition for Munkh-Erdene. In the context of eastern Eurasia, he equates bureaucratization with emperor-centred governance on a model distinctly and uniquely found in early China. Because other societies in Northeast Asia, Manchuria, Mongolia, Turkestan, Tibet, and Southeast Asia were, in early historical times, all governed by collegial aristocracies and the institutions generated by their relationship to a consensual leader, the progress of bureaucratization designed to disrupt these compacts and replace them with emperorships becomes, cumulatively, Munkh-Erdene's definition of "sinicization" (p. 26). In his paradigm, there is no "Mongol" or "Manchu" bureaucratization, only the erosion or eradication of socially, spiritually and politically unified aristocratic government by imported Chinese institutions. Munkh-Erdene insists that this did not happen in the Mongolia of the Qing period. Exploring the assumptions of previous historians who have, in his view, inaccurately ascribed bureaucratic qualities to Qing-period institutions, most important among them the *aimag* and *khoshuu*, he argues that virtually all narratives of eighteenth-century Mongolia have mistakenly portrayed the *aimag* in particular as a Qing imposition (if not an outright invention) that displaced the earlier political organization under

the *taiji*. In fact, Munkh-Erdene concludes, the Qing-period *aimag* were patently aristocratic institutions produced through the mutually beneficial alliance of the *taiji* and the Qing court.

For Munkh-Erdene, it is essential to establish that, through the Qing period, Mongolia remained governed by fundamentally traditional collegial institutions that dated to Dayan Khaghan and were not significantly revised, despite repeated challenges from the incarnate theocrat ruling model devised by Altan and adopted by aspiring non-Chinggisid rulers. The sole meaningful alteration was the re-orientation of the relationship of the *taiji* toward the Qing emperor (from the beginning of the empire in 1636 the emperors were all descendants of the Borjigids) in place of the Chinggisids who had ruled Mongolia in previous centuries. Not only did *taiji* governance in Mongolia continue without disruption, it became the foundation of the dominant political values of the Qing state—its constitution. On this point Munkh-Erdene places himself in opposition to David M. Farquhar, Christopher P. Atwood, Nicola Di Cosmo, Johan Elverskog, Peter C. Perdue, Zhang Shiming and others (Oka Hiroki is given an occasional merit for not being entirely sinocentric), who all argue that the Qing used progressive bureaucratization (though in varying degrees) of the governance of Mongolia as its most effective tool for undermining the traditional elites and installing its own tame Mongol aristocrats and religious leaders.

For Munkh-Erdene's interpretation to be wholly persuasive (which, in my view, is never the final criterion of valuable historiography), it would have to be able to predict attested qualities of Qing-period Mongolia and of the Qing state itself. His discussion of Galdan as "the perfect product of the Altanic theocratic monarchy and teacher-patron relationship" (p. 435) compellingly presents the depth and complexity of Galdan's challenge, which was not directed separately against the Khalkha leaders and against the Qing (or the Kangxi 康熙 emperor personally), but was a military, political, and spiritual assault upon the combined polity of the Mongol princes and the Qing emperors. This is a powerful enhancement of the conventional narrative of Qing Mongolia. The same can also be said of Munkh-Erdene's detailed narrative of the sovereignty-defining contention over selection of the Seventh Dalai Lama in the last decade of the Kangxi emperor's (r. 1662–1722) reign. But the book's historical coverage is weighted heavily toward the seventeenth century, and all but ideological developments of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries figure only faintly, or not at all, in the narrative. The repeated exploration by Mongol aristocrats of an alliance with—or if necessary submission to—Russia in order to mitigate the Qing hold over Mongolia is discussed for the eighteenth century but not the seventeenth century (when the constitution was supposedly being formed). The constitutional implications of instances in which unhappy Mongol princes (as with the Tüseyetü Khan in 1686) turned to the Dalai Lama to intervene in negotiations with the Qing court are not explained. And the occasions when Mongol princes justified their opposition to the Qing, such

as during the Chinggünjab rebellion of 1756–1757, by claiming that the empire was undermining princely power with the same reforms that Munkh-Erdene says had insignificant effect, are also treated cursorily. The evidence appears to raise the question of whether a *taiji* collegial alliance was fungible. Was the Chinggisid-contiguous Aisingioro imperial lineage of Qing the necessary partner in such a constitutional alliance? Could a *taiji*-style constitution have been constructed around the Romanovs? In Munkh-Erdene's account, the relationship does not seem transferrable, but the strategic and diplomatic history of the Mongol princes suggests it might have been.

Perhaps more difficult to find persuasive is Munkh-Erdene's preference for seeing straight, nearly exclusive, lines of influence of one period upon another or one place upon another. Few Qing specialists would fail to rank Mongol political institutions and values high among the influences shaping the early Qing empire. But there are surely other factors, some of which may be of equal importance. The period of the Aisin khanate is not of much interest to Munkh-Erdene and leaves only a light trace on the narrative. But this was the period of the formation and aristocratic institutionalization of the Eight Banners. It was also a period in which a rich combination of influences—direct and indirect—from all over Northeast Asia can be seen to exert some influence over the Aisingioro founders. If there was a Qing constitution, might it not have been derived from the monopolization of *beile* status by the Aisingioro exclusively, which occurred in this period—that is, before the compact with the Mongol *taiji*? A moral basis of this kind for the state would strongly resemble *taiji* collegial government, but would instead be derived from very old practices in Manchuria, refracted and tangential influences from eastern Mongolia and Korea, and Chinese imperial government as it was filtered through Liaodong.

To the reservation I expressed above, Munkh-Erdene might respond by pointing out that it was the Chakhar state that, among regional political traditions, had the most profound impact on Aisin—so profound that an entirely new state emerged from the convergence of Chakhar and Aisin after 1634. It was, perhaps, direct Mongol influence, and no other, that catalysed the emergence of an empire in 1636. Yet this only invokes another troubling aspect of Munkh-Erdene's argument. Diachrony and transformation are not absent from the book, but they are represented as marginal and inconvenient. It is, as Munkh-Erdene demonstrates, much harder to show that something did not change than to show that it did. In my own case, I would argue that the Aisin state was a different state after the entry into Liaodong, and was again a different state after resolution of the conflict with Chakhar, and that the Qing was a different state after the conclusion of the White Lotus War (1796–1804), and again a different state after the Taiping War (1851–1864), and yet again a different state after the Jiawu War (1894–1895). I would have to forget a lot of Qing history to be convinced that a single constitutional ethos animated the Qing from the 1630s to the first years of the twentieth century. Munkh-Erdene allows that change did indeed

occur. He points to the steady programme of centralization of border administrations—including Mongolia—under the Yongzheng 雍正 emperor (r. 1723–1735), in which cooperative traditional elites and the socio-political structures that had sustained them were displaced by civil government forms and personnel, which would appear to many readers to be bureaucratization. Munkh-Erdene acknowledges these Yongzheng reforms, but he argues that, in the case of Mongolia, the depth of the reforms has been exaggerated by previous historians, who perhaps most critically have not understood that the Qing court itself continually modulated threats to the status and independence of the Mongol *taiji*. In his view, the Qing imperial lineage saw its own legitimacy as dependent upon preserving the ability of the *taiji* to willingly and continually renew their loyalty and to demand treatment as sovereign allies in return.

This caution against accepting familiar paradigms of assimilation, routinization, professionalization, and legalization is one of the distinct virtues of *The Taiji State*. Whether or not the reader finds the work as a whole persuasive, it is salubrious to be forced to come to terms with the argument that tradition—with its charisma, its spiritual force, its mutually regenerating interaction with political, cultural, and psychological milieu of the “present”—persists late into the ostensibly modern period. No Qing, Mongolia, or Inner Asia specialist who gives *The Taiji State* an attentive reading will accept stock generalizations about conquest, empire, or Mongolia without some careful review.