‘Do You Not Bow before Heaven?’: The First Qing-Durrānī Encounter, the Tributary Non-relationship, and Disorder on a Shared Frontier

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Abstract

In 1763, Ahmad Shâh Durrānī sent an embassy to the Qianlong emperor. The envoy caused offence by refusing to prostrate himself. Still, the Qing court fêted his embassy. It seemed the beginning of a promising relationship, but the two empires never had contact again. The Qing court presented the embassy as a tributary mission, but in the pragmatic world of Qing frontier policy, contact with the Durrānīs was deliberately avoided. Why did no relationship develop? This attitude stemmed from Qianlong’s distrust of Central Asian rulers, and his understanding of the Afghans not as a tributary, but a rival imperial power.

Keywords

Qing – Durrānī – diplomacy – Central Asian history – empire

Introduction

Shortly before the celebration of the New Year in February 1763, ambassadors from distant lands from within and without the Qing empire arrive in Beijing.
Many have been traveling for months on end. Now, in the beating heart of the empire, each is to take part in rituals that reaffirm their respective relationships with the emperor. This year, parties from the empire’s far western frontier representing Kazakh tribes, Khoqand, and Badakhshān arrive with a unique and unfamiliar companion in tow: Khwāja Mirhan, envoy of the Afghan ruler Aḥmad Shāh Durrānī (r. 1747–73).1

The Muslim ambassadors are invited to meet the emperor for the first time in his personal quarters at the Palace of Renewed Splendor (chónghuá gōng 重華宮). Here the reigning Qianlong emperor (r. 1736–1796) lived in his youth; he makes a point of returning annually before the New Year to throw tea parties and compose poetry with a select group of officials—it is a place close to his heart.2 In accordance with the instructions received from their escorts, the ambassadors are to perform ritual prostrations here, in the presence of the emperor.

Khwāja Mirhan refuses. He has performed prostrations before, when presenting his letter upon arriving in Beijing, but will not koutou before the emperor. Incensed, several of the Qing Grand Councilors present at the reception reprimand him:

Why has your Khan dispatched you? Has your Khan not sent you to appear at an audience with the brilliance of our Great Lord? Our Great Lord is the ruler who has united All under Heaven. Besides you Afghans, as soon as people from the West, Russia, even the former Zunghars came, all of them promptly prostrated themselves before the Great Lord. He is like Heaven; do you not bow before Heaven?3

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1 What the name ‘Mirhan’ reflects is unclear; it is given in Chinese usually as mī’ěrhā 密爾哈 and once as mī’ěrhān 密爾漢 (only attested in Qianlong’s letter to Aḥmad Shāh). In Manchu, it appears as mirhan or mirgan. See Wang X. H. and Guan X. L., Qianlongchao Manwen Jixindang Yibian (Changsha: Yuelu Shushe, 2011): 3:342, 370–1. Henceforth QLJXD; and Fuheng, Campaign History of the Pacification of Zungharia—Continued = Jun Gar i Ba Be Necihiyeme Toktobuhu Bodogon i Bithei Sirame Banjibun (Beijing: Wuyingdian, 1772): 203r–18r. Henceforth JGBBSB. The likeliest option is probably Mir Khān, but given the variety of renderings in Chinese and Manchu, and his absence in Persian sources, we have chosen to avoid speculation and use ‘Mirhan’ instead, the most common rendering in Manchu.


3 QLJXD 4:8–9.
Their furious rebuke “causing him to tremble to the point of exhaustion” (Ma. lasihidame mohobume), Mirhan relents and performs the three kneelings and nine head-knockings. Is it enough to appease the emperor? Qianlong will later recount that the envoy went through the motions “presenting a picture of recalcitrance” (Ma. murin tarin i arbušambi), but he allows the embassy to proceed in accordance with Qing regulations. Mirhan is received at lavish imperial banquets and invited to attend the annual Manchu ice-skating spectacles; he joins the emperor in the Happy-Together Garden and watches impressive military performances. He drinks the imperial tea.

Reading of these events today, we know that this picture of amity was a façade. If Mirhan felt that, despite his faux pas, he was witnessing the amicable beginnings of a relationship between the Qing and Durrānī empires, he was mistaken. After the customary diplomatic receptions and protocols, he was hustled out of the empire hurriedly, with no further fanfare or banquets. Neither the Durrānīs nor the Qing court would initiate a single embassy again. Within five years, in 1768, Durrānī armies invaded Badakhshān, the Qing vassal that separated the two empires. The Badakhshānī ruler desperately appealed to the Qing for relief in several letters, asking, “How long can I resist such enemies?” But no help came: not so much as a letter, let alone an army, was sent to the Afghans. Khwāja Mirhan’s mission appears inconsequential: it seems to have produced no results.

Nevertheless, Qianlong made sure that the record of Aḥmad Shāh’s embassy would be long-lasting. The Afghans were recorded in the list of tribute-bearing polities. Their shāh’s gift of horses was materially commemorated by way of calligraphed poems, paintings, and a fine cabinet. Furthermore, the embassy provided the Qing emperor with knowledge and ideas about lands beyond the westernmost reaches of his domain, informing his decision-making about affairs on the frontier. By contrast, the embassy left no trace in extant Durrānī-sponsored sources. The British ambassador to the Durrānī court in 1808–9, Mountstuart Elphinstone, claimed that the Durrānī envoy had written an account of the trip to Beijing, but he was unable to procure it. However, dispatching the embassy was a significant performance of imperial status.

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4 QLJXD 4:8–9.
on Ahmad Shāh’s part. The embassy’s significance for both empires emerges when drawing out the meanings ascribed to the embassy, and the tensions of its course and outcome.

Aḥmad Shāh’s relations with the Qing are not widely studied. They have primarily been discussed in works by scholars of the Qing, rather than scholars of the Durrānīs or Afghan history. Scholars with an Afghan focus who refer to the Qing at all do so in passing, foregrounding the shāh’s ostensibly religious motivations and alliance with other Muslim rulers, and just reference secondary literature by China scholars.7 ʿAbd al-Shakūr Rishād very briefly touches on the embassy in a Pashto-language chapter on an attempted Russian embassy to Aḥmad Shāh. While it is possible that other Afghan historians have produced studies on the topic, we have been unable to find any.8

Qing scholars offer more detail and refer to primary sources, but Durrānī-Qing relations are almost never their focus. Laura Hostetler, for example, briefly discusses illustrations and a short text concerning the Afghans in the Qing Imperial Illustrations of Tributary Peoples (huáng qīng zhígōng tú 黃清職貢圖), a collection of descriptions and illustrations of all the peoples ever to bring tribute to the Qing court.9 Matthew Mosca provides the most detailed English-language account of Qing communication and attitudes to Aḥmad Shāh, but this only runs to around four full pages and does not discuss the

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8 ‘A. Rishād, “Da Pitarzburg darbār ghwaštta.” In Da loy Aḥmad Shāh Bābā yād, ed. S. M. Hāshimī (Kābul: Da Afghanistan ‘Ulūmo Akādmi, 1382 [2003]): 13–5. Perhaps the likeliest Afghan scholar to have taken note of the topic was ʿAzīz al-Dīn Wakīl Fūfalzay, in the second volume of his Aḥmad Shāh: Wāris wa mujaddid-i imīrāttāri-i Afghānistān (Kābul: Wizārat-i Iṭṭilāʿāt wa Kultür, 1983). However, we were only able to access the first volume, which stops short of the relevant time period.

elements analyzed by Hostetler. Another detailed, but still brief, reference is found in the footnotes of Yuri Bregel's edition of the nineteenth-century history of Khwarazm, *Firdaws al-Iqbal*. Bregel focuses on Russian primary sources relating to Durrani-Qing relations. A handful of other studies briefly mention aspects of the Durrani-Qing encounter in wider discussions about Qing policy in Central Asia.

None of these works engages with much primary or secondary literature on Afghan history. An important contribution which does engage with Persian-language primary texts is David Brophy's chapter on Persian letters in the Beijing Archive, which offers discussion and reproductions of original letters sent by regional rulers, several of which refer to Afghan campaigns in the region. Nevertheless the Afghans are not his focus. There is a single dedicated study of the relations between Aḥmad Shāh and the Qing in Chinese. Largely based on Qing primary documents, Li Xiao's 2013 article presents a comprehensive overview of the Afghan embassy to the Qing court, contextualizing it with reference to regional developments such as the rise of Khoqand and the perilous situation of Badakhshān. Li asks why the Qing court failed to confront the rising Afghan threat to its Central Asian frontier.

Li's argument is that the Afghan attempt at diplomacy failed to be recognized as communication on an equal level, because the Qianlong emperor embraced the traditional Chinese view of himself as representative of the Heavenly dynasty. As the emperor ruled supreme over the world, all other polities were subordinate to him. As they participated in tributary rituals, the rulers of those polities—and more often, their representatives—recognized the emperor's authority. Consequently, Li reasons, the emperor could only recognize the Afghans' embassy as a submissive tributary mission, and disregarded its requests, and decided to break off contact when a dispute about ritual
emerged. Secondly, Li states that the Qing empire had only a minor military presence in Altishahr (present-day southern Xinjiang), rendering it unable to intervene in Central Asia. In light of the above, Li concludes that the Qianlong emperor’s stance toward the Afghans was conciliatory and aimed at preserving his tenuous hold on the newly incorporated cities of the Tarim basin with little conflict.

Some of Li Xiao’s arguments are at odds with the emperor’s actions, and overlook the intricacies of Qing diplomacy. Li’s emphasis on ritual as a decisive factor in Qing diplomacy echoes the interpretation of Qing diplomacy as channeled exclusively through the Chinese ‘Tribute System,’ an idea put forward by Jonathan Fairbank. In recent decades, Fairbank’s model has come under scrutiny. This model emphasized China’s rigid and unilateral control of

15 This position is also visible in other Chinese scholarship on the Afghan embassy to Beijing; see for instance Pan Z. P., Haohanguo Yu Xiyu Zhengzhi (Wulumuqi: Xinjiang Renmin Chubanshe, 2006): 30–2.
foreign relationships through the ‘tribute system,’ whose unbending, illusory rituals of Chinese supremacy encompassed and regulated all aspects of diplomatic contact, thereby preventing energetic and resourceful engagement with others, especially European states.19

Fairbank’s model was premised on the absolute centrality of Chinese imperial ritual, based on the notion that foreign conquerors of China necessarily and rapidly became sinicized, for this was the only way they might successfully establish themselves as emperors of China. A new wave of scholarship has in recent decades challenged the idea of Qing sinicization, and concurrently drawn attention to the emperor’s engagement with various ethnic groups within and without the empire. It has revealed an array of different, nuanced diplomatic relationships between the Qing and other powers, far from the rigid constraints of ‘tribute ritual,’ but supplemented by layered possibilities for interaction.20 Viewing the Mirhan embassy exclusively in the sinocentric terms of the tributary relationship therefore limits explanations of its events.

James Hevia’s 1995 conception of Qing guest ritual as the continuous reproduction of an inherently hierarchical Qing cosmology, in which all who visited the Qing court were included as “lesser lords,” is especially helpful to our analysis of the Afghan embassy. Through reciprocal action in ritual, in which all lords of the world could be included, the emperor together with the lesser lords reaffirmed the cosmological order.21 It provided an—though not the sole—a avenue for Afghan interaction with the Qing court. Tonio Andrade makes the important point that a degree of “deliberate ambiguity” was crucial


20 Wills, “Introduction”; J. E. Wills, Embassies and Illusions (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 1984): 173–189 notably reiterates these points; see also J. E. Wills, “Tribute, Defensiveness, and Dependency: Uses and Limits of Some Basic Ideas about Mid-Ch’ing Foreign Relations.” American Neptune 48 (1988): 225–9; Akifumi Shioya has shown also how Russian relations with the Qing were formally conducted through the tribute system, but in practice the relationship was conducted on equal footing even in the negotiations for the treaty of Ghulja. A. Shioya, “The Treaty of Ghulja Reconsidered: Imperial Russian Diplomacy toward Qing China in 1851.” Journal of Eurasian Studies 10/2 (2019): 147–58; Ning Chia’s work on the Court of Dependencies or Lifanyuan eminently illustrates the Inner Asian nature of the Qing’s administration of the non-Chinese parts of the empire. See N. Chia “The Lifanyuan and the Inner Asian Rituals in the Early Qing (1644–1795).” Late Imperial China 14/1 (1993): 60–92; and D. Schorkowitz and N. Chia, ed. Managing Frontiers in Qing China (Boston: Brill, 2017).

21 Hevia, Cherishing Men from Afar: chaps. 1, 2, 5.
when conducting diplomacy. Ambiguity helped different parties navigate distinct cosmologies, maintaining appearances that were acceptable to both while allowing for a productive relationship.22

Aligning with these developments in the study of Qing ideology and diplomacy, we at the same time look to efforts to better integrate the Durrānīs into the history of empire in eighteenth-century South and Central Asia. Often, the Durrānīs are treated as a preliminary episode of Afghan state-building,23 inevitably taking up less space than later, better-documented nineteenth- and twentieth-century developments. In South Asia, much focus has gone into the Durrānī invasions of northern India, and their weakening of native empires prior to major British expansion.24 Jagjeet Lally has argued that framing the Durrānīs as an “exogenous shock” reduces their “constructive agency.”25 Especially in recent years, scholars have given greater priority to that agency by examining the empire’s construction of a bold imperial self-image.26 A study of the embassy to Beijing and its aftermath will contribute to this expanding literature.

We therefore examine the Durrānī-Qing relationship, firstly by examining the 1763 embassy in light of the two empires’ cosmologies. We then explore the implications of Qing non-engagement during the 1768–69 Afghan attacks on Badakhšān. Our guiding question is why no lasting contact materialized between the two empires—either amicable or hostile—after the embassy, despite a shared, contested frontier zone. We argue that, even as the formal world of the Qing court depicted the Afghans as normal tributaries for decades,
the Qianlong emperor refused communication because he saw the Durrānī empire as a rival power outside his reach and, like other Central Asian polities, as irredeemably warlike and capricious. Ahmād Shāh, meanwhile, having asserted his position and occupied with other campaigns, did not need to pursue further contact.

1 Convergence of Two Imperial Formations and Cosmologies

1.1 Durrānī Ideology and Ahmed Shāh’s Letter

Praise be to Allāh—what a court is this, which is like the heavens; what a court is this, the sanctuary of emperors [Pe. khawāqīn-panāh], which crown- and diadem-wearing sultāns, kings of countries and climes consider a refuge, and send covenants and tribute, [and] emissaries.

Maḥmūd al-Ḥusaynī, discussing a Mughal embassy to Ahmād Shāh in 1756.

We begin by approaching the 1763 embassy from the Durrānī perspective and considering its motives. As we lack Afghan sources on the topic, Durrānī aims are rather opaque. The choice of gifts and envoy, or other dimensions of the embassy might be fruitfully (but cautiously) analyzed, but for our purposes it is preferable to engage with the closest thing we have to an Afghan primary source for the embassy: Ahmād Shāh’s letter to the Qianlong emperor. While we lack its original text, the Qianlong emperor’s replies to it in his reciprocal letter allow us to glean something of Ahmād Shāh’s position.

An embassy allowed Ahmād Shāh to proclaim his status as a great emperor in his own right. As Waleed Ziad writes, while in contemporary Iran, Central and South Asia “[n]ew ruling houses [...] avoided using traditional titles like khan and shah [...] Ahmad Shah adopted [the] idea of universal kingship[.]” He and his successors made use of superlative imperial titles like ‘king of kings’ (Pe. shāhānshāh), ‘king of the world’ (Pe. shāh-i jahān) and ‘world-possessor’ (Pe. gītī-sitān). A number of works have explored Ahmād Shāh’s articulation of a

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29 These terms can be found plentifully and in numerous pro-Durrānī sources, e.g. M. al-Mūsawi, Āhwāl-i aqwām-i chahārgāna-i Afghān, MS, British Library, Or. 186i: 6a, Q. N. Muhammad, Jang-nāma, ed. G. Singh (Amritsar: Sikh History Research Department, 1939): 12–4, 126, and TAS: 338, 346.
divine mission, tied to his personal qualities, his mystical and spiritual potency, and an exalted status for the Afghans and especially the Durrānīs, which justified his imperial hegemony as ‘crown-bestower’ (Pe. tāj-bakhsh) over the more established royal houses of Iran and Hindustan.\(^\text{30}\)

The letter Ahmad Shāh sent to Beijing has clear parallels with the extensive letter addressed to the Ottoman sultan Muṣṭafā III in 1762, which makes for a useful comparison. In the latter, Ahmad Shāh refers to the recipient as “brother” (Pe. barādār), a bold assertion of parity with the self-proclaimed caliph.\(^\text{31}\) In other royal correspondence, Ahmad Shāh refers to his “God-given state” (Pe. dawlat-i khudā-dād) or otherwise proclaims the legitimacy of his status. Similar evocations would have adorned the letter to the Qing emperor.\(^\text{32}\)

The Qing ruler’s reply to Ahmad Shāh reflects two distinct themes. One is Ahmad Shāh’s campaigns, particularly his resounding victory at Panipat (1761). “[A]s you have stated, for many years now, you have warred to and fro [Ma. ubade tubade; Ch. géchù 各處],” writes Qianlong.\(^\text{33}\) This may refer to Durrānī campaigns in Khurasan and Hindustan, which Ahmad Shāh discussed in detail in his Ottoman letter and made reference to in his correspondence with the Mughals. These campaigns were framed according to an image of chaos in the wider region, in which rebels and wrongdoers needed to be cowed by the Afghan emperor who would restore order.\(^\text{34}\) Ahmad Shāh’s detailing of his campaigns and the political situation in the wider region was a way of staking claims to territory and legitimacy.

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\(^{32}\) See e.g. a letter to the Mughal emperor reproduced in TAS: 348.

\(^{33}\) JGBBSR: 2007V. Gaozong Chun Huangdi Shilu (1807): 678QL.28, henceforth GZCSL. Here, and in all following instances that we cite from Qianlong’s letter to Ahmad Shāh, the translation is our own. We have based it on the Manchu and the Chinese text, to offer as accurate as possible an English rendition of Qianlong’s words.

\(^{34}\) Succinctly outlined in Gommans, The Rise: 49–56.
Panipat, Aḥmad Shāh’s single greatest battlefield victory, appears to receive the most detailed treatment, just as it did in the Ottoman correspondence. The Qianlong emperor refers to it in detail:

Furthermore, you stated in your letter that when Balaji Baji Rao, ruler of the Marathas, had heard of your conquest of the city of Jahānābād [Delhi], he united his neighboring tribes, combining them into a force of many hundreds of thousands of mounted and foot soldiers. He led all of them to a place called Karnal to do battle with you, but when they heard of your personal presence, they became terrified and ensconced themselves inside the city of Panipat. After a siege of six months, you killed thirty-five great Begs, slaughtered over a hundred thousand troops, and obtained a tremendous amount of tools and vessels, gold, and silver. Balaji was able to assemble such a force and then did not attack, but instead retreated to the fortress-city of Panipat to sit and wait for annihilation. That is a matter I truly cannot understand.35

The timeline, and some details, are somewhat garbled. Still, this passage clearly parallels Aḥmad Shāh’s retelling of the battle in his Ottoman letter, and letters to the Rajput chiefs soon after the battle.36 From these retellings, it is clear that Aḥmad Shāh was producing what is known in Persian epistolary (inshā’) terminology as a fath-nāma, a ‘letter of victory.’ The fath-nāma was meant to celebrate and inflate a king’s military victory in lucid language, reflecting on his power and the obligation of kings to order human affairs and fight tyranny and unbelief.37

The Qianlong emperor was evidently attuned to the undertones of threat in this fath-nāma section, for he downplays the enormity of the victory by criticizing the Marathas for irrationally “sit[ting] and wait[ing] for annihilation.” At the same time, this veiled reply indicates that the two parties were not dealing in open threats. Aḥmad Shāh was playing with ambiguity and allowing his broader assertion of power and status to double as a tacit threat.

The second theme is the Qing conquest of Altishahr and its aftermath. Here, the Qianlong emperor paints a more conciliatory picture of Aḥmad Shāh’s words. He presents the Afghan emperor as complimentary of Qing
expansion: “you mentioned that we are far removed from one another [...] Since word had reached you that we have now subjugated all tribes, your gratification was unparalleled.”

Perhaps more substantively, he claims that Ahmad Shāh acknowledged withdrawing from a campaign to Bukhara upon learning of Bukhara’s submission to the Qing: “This is sufficient to illuminate the sincerity of your deference.”

There is good reason to doubt this picture of deference, which was certainly not part of Ahmad Shāh’s image as a universal ruler. Between the lines of the Qianlong emperor’s reply, it seems clear he was responding to more pointed remarks from his Afghan counterpart. He felt the need to justify his attacks on the Zunghars and the Khwājas (or Khojas), two brothers and Sufi leaders. Since the seventeenth century, their powerful lineage had wielded political, spiritual, and economic power in the Central Asian territories only recently conquered by the Qing and led a revolt against the Qing in 1759. Well before the seventeenth century, Sufis of the wider Naqshbandiyya order to which the brothers belonged had held great influence in the region. Qianlong accused the Zunghars of “la[ying] waste to one another’s lands and exterminat[ing] one another,” and the Khwājas of “turn[ing] their backs to my graces and lev[y]ing] false accusations against me, their benefactor.” This defensive tone seems to reflect Laura Newby’s statement that despite Qing glossing, “according to [Ahmad Shāh], his intention was to address the emperor on the matter of Qing rule in Central Asia and to petition on behalf of the Āfāqi khoja house.” Jin Noda cites a Russian report concerning a Kazakh envoy to Beijing, who claimed to have heard from Mirhan that Ahmad Shāh’s position was that “such territories claimed by the Qing Dynasty all belong to us, Muslims,” evoking the Āfāqi’s longstanding legitimacy in Altishahr.

However, these statements are derived from sources separated from Ahmad Shāh by several degrees, or by decades. His letter was unlikely to be directly, or exclusively, threatening. Ahmad Shāh’s supposed expression of gladness at the gap between the two empires closing may be overstated, but we need not assume it was fabricated. Treating the occasion as an exchange between

42 Newby, The Empire and the Khanate: 35.
powerful monarchs served Āḥmad Shāh’s interests, and *inshā’* conventions for royal letters typically include praise for the recipient and expression of desire to make contact.\textsuperscript{44} The letter’s lavish golden adornments communicated Durrānī majesty, but also conferred honor upon the recipient.\textsuperscript{45} Furthermore, we need not doubt the reality of Qianlong’s statement regarding Āḥmad Shāh’s abandonment of his campaign against Bukhara—even if “the sincerity of [Āḥmad Shāh’s] deference” may be doubted. Āḥmad Shāh may have been willing to demarcate spheres of control: his letter to Muṣṭafā III had posited a division of Iran between them, and in 1769 he negotiated the Amu Darya as a border with Bukhara.\textsuperscript{46}

Once again, there are signs of calculated ambiguity. From Qianlong’s tone, it appears that Āḥmad Shāh’s letter did express a desire for conciliation. However, certain sections, especially the *fatḥ-nāma* passages, emphasize his status and power and offer latent threat. If the more amicable overtures were not reciprocated, however, Āḥmad Shāh had no need to further encourage Qianlong’s ideas of Durrānī ‘deference,’ which were in principle unacceptable to him.\textsuperscript{47} Since war was on the cards, further ambiguous or friendly embassies would be unnecessary. Āḥmad Shāh was also occupied on other fronts: in 1764 a Russian envoy sent to encourage an anti-Qing campaign by the Afghans turned back after reaching Herat and learning Āḥmad Shāh was busy campaigning in Punjab, with no apparent plans to venture north.\textsuperscript{48} As we will see in the remainder of this article, the Qing response would depend on a complex interplay of imperial cosmology and on-the-ground developments in Central Asia.

1.2 **Reconciling Ritual Hiccups at the Qing Court**

As Qing officials stood in shock and the Councilors commanded Khwāja Mirhan to bow, the Qianlong emperor pondered the Afghans’ intentions. The envoy did eventually prostrate himself, reluctantly, but damage had been done. Afterwards, the emperor wrote: “now that I have witnessed such comportment on the part of [Āḥmad Shāh’s] emissary, I understand that the Afghans are not

\textsuperscript{44} Islam, *Calendar*: 11.
\textsuperscript{45} Fuheng, *Huang Qing Zhigongtu* (Beijing: Wuyingdian, 1788): tableau 61. Henceforth HQZGT.
\textsuperscript{46} Jalālī, *Nāma*: 78.
\textsuperscript{47} We do not, unfortunately, know how Āḥmad Shāh reacted to the Qing letter. A parallel might be ventured, however, with the infamous Timur (or Tamerlane) (d. 1405), who was incensed by the Ming emperor’s reference to his ‘submission’ following a large Timurid embassy. He retaliated by detaining a Chinese embassy in 1395, and apparently planned to invade China. See Fletcher, “China and Central Asia”: 210, and 349–50 n. 22, 23 for detailed citations.
a tribe who comprehend proper customs and reason at all! There is no need to send [them] an emissary to bestow even the slightest bit of favor.49 Li Xiao analyzes this “dispute of ritual” as the point at which the emperor decided to cut ties with the Afghans.50

Yet, no immediate rupture followed. Indeed the Qing court proceeded with all customary guest rituals and showed the Afghan envoy great favor, and long after Khwāja Mirhan had disappeared beyond the Pamirs, the Qing continued to count the Afghans as their tributaries. At the same time, Qianlong was clearly displeased and wary, and hastily ordered precautions to be taken to secure the frontier of Altishahar.51 How and why did this contentious embassy survive and continue to be represented in the formal world of the court?

Of central importance to this question is cosmology. The cosmology of the Qing empire combined traditions of legitimacy and rulership from across China and Inner Asia, as discussed in the Introduction. The Qianlong emperor’s position at the apex of the temporal world depended upon constant reiteration and reconfirmation of relationships with all subject peoples. Emissaries participated in and conformed with a coherent collection of ritual actions—prostrations, presenting gifts, accepting the gift of tea—initiated by the emperor, and reciprocated properly. The emperor again reciprocated, confirming the hierarchical relationships between, as Hevia calls them, the world’s supreme ruler and lesser lords. Because they required mutual engagement and recognition, subject to negotiation, these actions themselves constituted the production of power relations.52

The formation of these relations was constant, not momentary. Reciprocal and confirmative processes of guest ritual commenced from arrival at the border, where local authorities provided an escort. Banquets in provincial capitals, provisions and transport, housing, and protection were all a demonstration of imperial benevolence.53 Moments of transformative or confirmative ritual action, such as the emissary’s turn to perform the koutou, were especially meaningful. Audience with the emperor was the apogee of a single ritual process.

Mirhan had already performed prostrations when he had presented his letter upon arrival in the capital, but he refused to do so before the emperor.54

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50 Li, “Qianlong Nianjian Qingchao Yu Afuhan Guanxi Xinta”; 128.
51 QLJXD: 4:10–1.
52 Hevia, Cherishing Men from Afar: 23–2, chap. 5.
53 Laibo, Comprehensive Rites of the Great Qing = Qinding Daqing Tongli (Beijing: Wuyingdian, 1756): 43:1v–2r. Henceforth QJZ.
54 QLJXD: 4:8; Qijuzhu ce: ID: 故宫005185 QL27.12 下 36–7. Henceforth QJZ.
This indicates that there was no confusion about the physical act of prostration. Rather, Mirhan’s refusal came when he understood the emperor was the object of his veneration. This was a grave insult to the emperor’s cosmological position. Mirhan may have operated out of religious considerations, finding the prostration explicitly before a human being rather than before Allah impermissible—though other Muslim emissaries had no qualms with prostration. But as the Afghan emissary to Qianlong, his refusal was tantamount to the assertion that Aḥmad Shāh Durrānī was Qianlong’s equal: an unthinkable proposition at the Qing court. Mirhan threatened to negate Qing cosmology within the most significant sanctum of imperial ritual, and ceased to confirm his role as tribute-bearer even though he had, in the eyes of the Qing officials and emperor, comfortably and knowingly enjoyed the imperial benevolence that accompanied this role since he entered Qing territory. Provincial governors had lavishly banqueted Mirhan in every provincial capital he passed (see map 1), and when he developed an illness of the mouth and throat due to the unbearably cold weather, the emperor ordered that warm winter clothing should be provided.

While this understanding of Qing guest ritual deepens our sense of the offense caused by Mirhan, it also offers a partial explanation for the continuation of the tribute ritual despite it. An initial “dispute of ritual” was unpleasant and informed the emperor’s opinion of the Afghans as unworthy, even duplicitous, but did not justify breaking off the diplomatic process. Completion of the cosmological relationship was key, and Mirhan had crossed the threshold and accepted his position as representative of a lesser lord—however obstinately, and regardless of whether he believed it or not.

Other factors could help ease the tension. Qianlong did not place the blame squarely on Mirhan. As James Hevia has argued, fault for any problem during guest ritual lay also at the feet of those who practiced the universalist

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55 Hevia emphasizes the ritual importance of localities for the various spheres over which the emperor ruled. The imperial palace in Beijing was, naturally, the foremost ritual space of Chinese rulership. See Hevia, Cherishing Men from Afar: 32.

56 QLJXD: 3:406–7; GZCSL: 672:QL27.10.14 癸卯. Provincial governors and governors-general Yang Yingju (Governor-General of Shaan-Gan) at Hanzhong, Canggyiün (Governor of Gansu), Obi (Governor of Shaanxi), Mingde (Governor of Shanxi), and Fang Guancheng (Governor-general of Zhili) were instructed to prepare banquets. Together, they reveal the route through the provincial capitals. Most likely, the party followed the route of the relay stations from Yarkand along the northern rim of the Tarim basin, entering through the Jiayu pass into China proper, and stopping then at the seats of government of the aforementioned governors: Lanzhou, Hanzhong, Xi’an, Taiyuan, Baoding, before finally arriving at Beijing.
Figure 1: Route of Khwāja Mirhan’s embassy from Fayzabad to Beijing, through Central and East Asia. Created by the authors using QGIS and data from Natural Earth and CHGIS.
All emissaries were meant to be instructed in proper ritual forms, especially the koutou, before their audience. Qianlong was thus able to divert some blame for the fiasco onto Mirhan’s escort, a “good-for-nothing” (Ma. baitakû jaka) called Lingboo, for failing to properly educate the guest. With culpability diverted from Mirhan, tensions over his motivations were defused. This allowed the embassy to proceed without further confrontation, and without Mirhan noticing the emperor’s ill disposition toward him and the Afghans generally. The emperor had smoothed over the ritual hiccup.

Reconciliation was important, as continuing the embassy accomplished more than just affirming the core Qing cosmology. From both published and undisclosed documents, it is clear that Qianlong saw the Afghans as a significant power: a ‘great tribe’ (Ch. dà bùluò 大部落). He therefore wished to impress upon Khwāja Mirhan, and thus Ahmad Shah, the splendor and might of his empire. Qianlong went beyond normal guest ritual by showing Mirhan special favor for weeks. Mirhan was gifted clothing and caps, hosted at numerous luxurious banquets, and presented with fruit and tea by the emperor. He attended demonstrations of Qing elite troops, including a performance by the Eight Banners firearms division. He traveled with the emperor to the Summer Palace to the north-west of Beijing, where he watched fireworks. The emperor invited the emissaries to see how the lanterns illuminated the Happy-Together Garden.

Qing expansion into Central Asia in 1759 had afforded ample opportunity to similarly overawe Muslim rulers. In 1760, the rulers of Khoqand, Badakhshan, and Bolor (likely a region of Chitralt) dispatched embassies to Beijing for the first time. Laura Newby writes that the Khoqandi emissaries

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57 Hevia, *Cherishing Men from Afar*: 121–4, 130.
59 *QLJXD*: 3:370–1 attests to Lingboo’s position as escort of the Afghan and Badakhshanı envoys. For Qianlong’s berating remark, see *QLJXD*: 4:9.
60 Mujangga, *Da Qing Yitongzhi (J iaqing)* (1842): 420-29458 lists the Afghans as the most important tribe west of the Pamirs, “愛烏罕在蔥嶺西部落最大.” Henceforth *JQYZT*. On tableau 61 of the *HQZGT*, the Afghans are described as “always having been the most strong and robust” (Ma. etuhun kiyangkiyan; Ch. qiángshèng 強盛). This is echoed in the Veritable Records, in which the Afghans are likewise termed a great tribe. See *GZCSL*: 672:QL29.11.29. This entry in the Veritable Records is an adaptation of the more modest Manchu communication to Sinju, who was appointed the Grand Minister Consultant of Yarkand. The nuance of Qianlong’s description is lost in the Veritable Records. See *QLJXD*: 3:337, 342.
61 *DQTL*: vol. 43, which covers guest ritual, makes no mention of military demonstrations.
63 *JQYZT*: 拔達克山 2r = 26219; 博洛爾 1r = 26223; 霍罕 1v = 26196.
were reportedly overwhelmed by the hospitality they received all along their route.” Khwāja Mirhan arrived in Beijing and participated in diplomatic rituals alongside envoys of these and other powers—including Kazakhs, Qirghiz, and Kashgharis, as well as Begs from other Muslim cities of Altishahr, and Mongolian nobles. Mirhan witnessed the unquestioned humility and subservience to the emperor of myriad polities, and the representatives of those polities would in turn have witnessed his participation.

These considerations went beyond the symbolic. Altishahr was a recently-conquered and potentially volatile region, and Qianlong prioritized its stability. Preserving the image of Qing dominance was crucial. So too was communicating that image to the Durrānīs and integrating them into the imperial diplomatic sphere, to prevent them from undermining the carefully balanced stability among the polities of Central Asia. Furthermore, including a new and mighty power in the Qing cosmology broadened Qing imperial authority.

The weight of all these considerations meant that Mirhan’s "dispute of ritual" did not in itself end the formal relationship as envisioned by the court. Rather, the court chose to overlook the mishap, in favor of the relationship’s artificial prolongation. Qing historiography disregarded any evidence of Afghan reluctance to assume a tributary role. Projects begun by Qianlong to illustrate, explicate, and codify the universality of Qing imperial authority, notably the Qing Imperial Illustrations of Tributary Peoples, and administrative works such as the Gazetteer of the Great Qing Unification (dà qīng yìtǒng zhì) devoted volumes to enumerations and descriptions of tributary peoples, including the Afghans.

Poems celebrating the embassy entered Qing historiography and appeared as calligraphy on decorative fans. Aḥmad Shāh’s royal gifts—four excellent

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64 Newby, The Empire and the Khanate: 45.
65 QJZ 1D: 故宮 005986 QL28.1 上 passim.
67 As is well known, Lord George Macartney III’s non-conformity was not preserved in Qing court histories, and neither was Mirhan’s. See GZCSL: 677:Ql27.12.29 丁巳; 1434:QL58.8.10 庚午.
68 L. Hostetler, Qing Colonial Enterprise: Ethnography and Cartography in Early Modern China (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001): 41–9. Hostetler states that the Illustrations were "[l]ike the empire that it represented in microcosm" (p. 49). It seems to us that one might argue that the Illustrations were a collection that represented not only the empire in microcosm, but all peoples situated in the Qing cosmology, without regard for the territorial delimitation of the empire. It represented Qing imperial authority as transcending the empire—as universal.
69 JQYTZ: 愛烏罕 1R = 26233. See HQZGT: tableau 61 for the entry on the Afghans.
horses—were depicted by Qing court painter Giuseppe Castiglione on a three-meter long scroll painting and likewise accompanied by a poem extolling their magnificence. A sandalwood screen was commissioned, with the four horses rendered in a landscape relief. The scroll painting depicted the horses with descriptions in four languages: Manchu, Mongolian, Chinese, and finally Chaghatai. To Qianlong, Chaghatay was the quintessential language of the empire’s Muslim constituency. By purporting to address all constituencies concerned with the Central Asian frontier, the painting accomplished two goals: remembering the Afghans as tributaries, and presenting Qing imperial authority as universal. In the absence of further exchanges, these items gave physical presence to the Qing-Afghan relationship as it was
envisioned by the Qianlong emperor, perpetuating the Afghans' status as lesser lords in the Qing cosmology.

In this sense, despite initial problems, the embassy had proceeded as desired. Ahmād Shāh's letter and his envoy's comportment had still troubled Qianlong, though, and so before the emperor had said his goodbyes to Mīrhan, he made plans to secure the frontier, and economized on imperial favor: "there is no need to provide banquets on his way back." There was no longer any use in impressing Mīrhan. Even before the relationship had truly begun, Qianlong was pulling the plug on it. Future Qing representation of the Afghans as perpetually intertwined with the imperial hierarchy would contrast with a total lack of engagement on a diplomatic level.

2 Pragmatism on the Frontier

Sulṭān Shāh was a man of great force and ardent struggle. His conflict with [the Afghans] abruptly caused his valiant yet uncouth death, and the ruin of his lands. [..] The enmities and bloodshed among all states of the western regions take place not to benefit their lands, but

to expand their domains, not to serve their peoples, but to incorporate and register the households. They only steal their possessions and divide their loot, and think of it as profit. They seize their people and sell them off, and think of it as profit. The mighty swallow the weak, the great envelop the small, yet such is their normal condition, and we cannot blame them for it.

Qishiyi, describing Badakhshān in his Records of Things Seen and Heard in the Western Regions.74

Aḥmad Shāh’s embassy to the Qing court was ultimately a product of Qing westward expansion. The rulers of Khoqand, Badakhshān, and Bolor’s rulers dispatched embassies to the Qing court to formalize ties, which the Qing court codified. Simultaneously, Qing records reflect a more voluminous exchange of envoys locally, between civil and military administrators of Qing frontier cities such as Ili, Yarkand, and Kashghar, and Central Asian rulers. There were thus two parallel registers of diplomacy: first, the imperial register, requiring formal permission, formulaic messages and codified rituals, and secondly a much more discreet and pragmatic register, making use of cooperative local intermediaries sensitive to the particularities of Central Asian politics, culture, and diplomacy.75 Both channels were equal in one respect, however: their functioning was contingent on the emperor’s approval.

Focusing on the formal register thus occludes a much more dynamic series of exchanges. Memorials to the emperor about these communications from the stalwart Manchu frontier officials, and the remarkable diversity of policies they suggested, informed the emperor’s view of the Qing-Afghan relationship. We have seen how, despite serious difficulties, the Durrānī embassy was incorporated into the highly formalized cosmology of the court. By contrast, on the frontier, where opportunities for communication were more numerous and not as strained by continental distances, no Qing-Afghan contact developed. The emperor did not allow it. To understand why, we must turn to the small mountain emirate which formed the frontier between the Qing and Durrānī empires: Badakhshān, under its ruler Sulṭān Shāh (r. c.1748–1769).

75 James Millward has previously also argued that the Qing empire engaged with the polities beyond its northwestern borders pragmatically. J. Millward, Beyond the Pass Economy, Ethnicity, and Empire in Qing Central Asia, 1759–1864 (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998); especially pages 7–10, 48–9, 156–9, 197–203.
2.1  Badakhšān and the Development of Qing Non-interference in Central Asia

Since the early sixteenth century, Badakhšān’s rulers (mīrs or amīrs) largely enjoyed independence, even when they nominally submitted to larger powers. During the eighteenth century, members of Yār Beg Khān (d. 1706/7)’s dynasty, to which Sulṭān Shāh belonged, pulled external forces into their succession struggles, including the Uzbeks of Qataghan and the Zunghars. However, no outside power established definite control over the region. In 1750/1, Aḥmad Shāh’s wazīr (chief minister) Shāh Walī Khān apparently subjugated Badakhšān and imposed tribute, but Afghan rule was superficial. Sulṭān Shāh embarked on expansionist campaigns of his own into Chitral and Qataghan at this time. It was contact with the Qing court which would put the Badakhšānī ruler at greater risk from Aḥmad Shāh.

In 1759, Khwāja Jahān and Burhān al-Dīn, the two brothers of the Āfāqī Sufi lineage to whom Aḥmad Shāh’s letter referred, escaped Altishahr and crossed into Badakhšān as their anti-Qing revolt crumbled. Under vice-general Fude, one division of Qing troops pursued them, “the boom of the guns sounding incessantly.” Fude commanded Sulṭān Shāh to hand over the brothers. The mīr assented, and attacked his coreligionists: Khwāja Jahān was fatally wounded, and Burhān al-Dīn captured. It is likely Sulṭān Shāh hoped to ensure Qing military support, including against the Durrānīs who Qing records claim were poised to invade on behalf of the holy men. Qing officials emphasize their role in spurring on Sulṭān Shāh’s actions. However, according to the Tārīkh-i Badakhšān, written at the court of a later mīr in 1809, Sulṭān Shāh

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80 Fuheng, Campaign History of the Pacification of Zungharia = Jun Gar i Ba Be Necihiyeme Taktobuha Bodocon i Bithe = 《平定準噶爾方略》 (Beijing: Wuyingdian, 1772): 77:3v–4r. Henceforth JGBB. Ma, giyalan akâ sireneme sindahai.
81 JQYTZ: 拔達克山 1r–2r = 26217–9.
had initially welcomed them warmly, but was forced to react to their wanton plundering of Badakhshān.82

Whichever factor played a greater role in the mīr’s calculations, Qing officials remained suspicious of him, discovering that the Khwājas had resided in Badakhshān with Sulṭān Shāh’s knowledge for months before their defeat.83 Furthermore, Qing records state that Sulṭān Shāh felt it would be “inappropriate to deliver them [to the Qing court], due to the customs of the scripture of the Muslims.”84 Word later reached the Qing military encampment on the border that Sulṭān Shāh planned to deliver the Khwājas to Bukhara.85 The emperor issued an uncompromising edict threatening invasion.86 It did not come to this, as on 13 April 1763 Burhān al-Dīn’s disinterred remains were conveyed to Yarkand along with three of his wives and three of his sons.87 Still, distrust over these and other offenses (as understood by imperial authorities) would become a permanent feature of Sulṭān Shāh’s relationship with his notional overlord in Beijing.

While the slaying of the Āfāqi brothers more than likely made Sulṭān Shāh unpopular with the Durrānis, we lack Afghan sources for the period, making it difficult to get a sense of local sentiments. Sulṭān Shāh in a letter to a Qing official, Sinju, in 1763 claimed that Aḥmad Shāh was intent on taking revenge on him for the Khwājas’ deaths, on behalf of their young son. But the mīr had pragmatic reasons to emphasize his vulnerability and the religious impropriety of his actions, frustrated as he was that the Qing did not offer concrete support and rewards for his loyalty.88 There was no immediate reckoning: Aḥmad Shāh launched no campaign in response, confining his reactions to diplomatic enquiries. He sent an envoy, Sa’īd Beg, to Khoqand to discuss its ruler Irdānā Biy’s submission to the Qing in 1763, and the dispatching of

83 JGBB: 78:10v–11r. Qing officials accused Sulṭān Shāh of deliberately (Ma. jortanggi) providing passage and safe harbor to the khwāja brothers. See also TB, 28–33.
84 JGBB: 79:37r. Ma. damu hoise sei nomun i doro de alibume banjinarakû. See also Qianlong’s edict on 79:40r, where he writes that it would constitute “a great deviation from the customs of your scripture” (suweni nomun i doro ci ambula jurcehe).
85 JGBB: 79:33v–v.
86 JGBB: 79:38v–42v. Qianlong mentions in the edict that “if he still does not deliver them, we will simply invade” (aika kemuni alibume benjirakû oci. uthai cooha dosimbi) and passes it off as a suggestion from his officials and generals. He himself had suggested this approach several times in previous records. In the edict, however, he presents a more merciful picture of his rulership, and invites Sulṭān Shāh to accept his favor.
87 QLJXD: 4:82–3.
Mirhan’s embassy was organized in conjunction with Sulṭān Shāh, suggesting that communication was open between their courts. These events, and the uneasy situation which set in for the next few years, informed the later lack of communication between the Afghan and Qing empires.

A major development was the transformation of Qianlong’s attitude towards the affairs of his regional vassals. Initially, he readily used reprimands and threats of violence to influence them. While the embassies from the Durrānī empire and Badakhshān to Beijing were in full swing in 1763, Qing councilors in Altishahr sent an emissary to Sulṭān Shāh to resolve his conflict with fellow tributary Bolo, whose lands his forces had occupied and pillaged.

To Qianlong, his task was to preserve a harmonious equilibrium between the lesser lords. Sinju, Qianlong’s highest representative in Yarkand, accordingly proposed invading Badakhshān immediately. Qianlong cautioned against the frivolous use of troops, and ordered Sinju to wait for Sulṭān Shāh to obey his instructions: to bring the children, wives, and earthly remains of Burhān al-Dīn to Yarkand and then Beijing, and to restore the lands of Chitral to Bolo. “If [the people of] Bolor are in distress and beg us to save them, how can we ever win over their hearts and minds if we do not interfere, against all expectations?” A lesser lord in need required the supreme lord to act, lest he fail to fulfill his cosmological requirements. Qianlong mediated in the same way in a conflict between the Edegene Qirghiz and Khoqand.

Over time, however, Qianlong became increasingly irritated by the Central Asian rulers beyond his borders, whom he could not effectively control. Irdānā Biy of Khoqand held on to the city and pasturelands of Osh, which he had taken from the Qirghiz in exchange for their pillaging of Andijan. Conflicts broke out between the brothers of the erstwhile ruler of Bolo, and the emperor was outraged when one requested support from imperial troops. In 1765, the large Altishahri city of Uch-Turfan rebelled, and quelling the revolt was an enormous effort. The following year, Sulṭān Shāh requested Qing

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90 QLJXD: 3:445.
92 JGBBSB: 20:5v–6r. See also Newby, The Empire and the Khanate: 30–1.
93 Ibid.
94 QLJXD: 5:15–60.
reinforcements because of Afghan advances against Badakhshān, which he had been complaining of since at least 1764.96 This was seen as an audacious overreach by the emperor.

Qing troops in Altishahr were spread thin. Instead of active military intervention and the imposition of the Qing cosmology on Central Asia, the Qianlong emperor prioritized the security of Altishahr, and sought only to maintain stable relationships with the Central Asian polities, forgoing the peaceful equilibrium between them that he had sought during Mirhan’s embassy. Qianlong would distance himself from the trepidations of Central Asian affairs, which he felt was “the regular state of affairs amongst them” (Ma. ceni dorgi an i baita).97 Using the example of enmity between Khoqand and the Kazakhs, he elaborated:

There is no point in interfering in their mad behavior toward one another. Ablai [the Kazakh khan] and Irdāna [of Khoqand] pillage and plunder one another’s territories. As some generals and officials were still paying attention to this, I have issued an edict instructing them that they may not interfere.98

Non-interference (Ma. dacı ojorakû) became emblematic of Qianlong’s approach: the incorrigible Central Asians could do as they liked, as long as they did not threaten peace in Qing-controlled territories. The emperor did not find such a threat likely: “The mutually murderous conduct among them is all the normal state of affairs. Since the Muslim territories [Altishahr; Ma. hoise i ba] are far removed from them, they absolutely will not dare to come hither.”99 One hears echoes of the emperor’s earlier judgment of Mirhan and the Afghans: “not a tribe who comprehend proper customs and reason at all.”

Where did that leave Qianlong cosmologically? Ambiguity played an important role. He was happy to receive Central Asian envoys and go through the guest rituals, confirming the cosmological relationships. It was clear, however, that the practical implications of those relationships were limited. At best they accomplished a tacit acceptance of the status quo: the Qing empire controlled Altishahr, but relinquished its role as mediator between Central Asian polities. The Afghan threat, looming over the jagged horizon of the Pamirs, would both demonstrate the extent of Qianlong’s non-interference policy and draw out uncomfortable realities about the imperial cosmology’s limitations.

97 QLJXD: 8:289.
98 QLJXD: 8:290.
99 QLJXD: 9:32.
2.2 No More Ambiguity

In mid-August 1768, imperial agent Yunggui informed the emperor that the Durrānī commander Shāh Wali Khān had invaded Badakhshān together with Qubād Khān, ruler of Qunduz. Aḥmād Shāh’s court history reports that Shāh Wali was appointed to this task on May 30th. The invading armies besieged and conquered both Sulṭān Shāh’s fortress of Nuṣratābād and capital of Fayzabad. Sulṭān Shāh retreated north, but repulsed two attacks by Qubād Khan. A merchant fleeing Badakhshān arrived in Altishahr shortly after, claiming that Shāh Wali had interrogated him about Qing strength in the region. Upon being told (falsely) that thirty thousand troops were stationed there, the Afghans withdrew. In his initial memorial Yunggui proposed action:

The lands of Badakhshān are subject to us, so they may not be given up in allotment to anyone else. From among the Begs of Yarkand and Kashghar, I will appoint one or two to take a message to enlighten Aḥmād Shāh of the Afghans, explaining the benefits and drawbacks. If Aḥmad Shāh, who desires to occupy the territories of Badakhshān, does not submit, we will invade and pacify the lands of Badakhshān. I will make him forget his pretensions! I will prepare a total of eight thousand troops!

Yunggui’s logic was perfectly in line with Qing cosmology. Nevertheless, the emperor again emphasized that this state of chaos was “normal” (Ma. an ī). Military intervention would “be unreasonable” (Ma. dara kooli akû). Qianlong instructed Yunggui how to respond to three hypothetical outcomes of the invasion. All three strategies were aimed at reaffirming the status of Badakhshān’s mīr as a subservient ally in the region through diplomacy, whoever might occupy that position once the dust had settled. No scenario involved Qing military action. In his next communiqué to Yunggui, Qianlong wrote that “because we are not interfering at all with the matter of Sulṭān Shāh, there is also no need to send a delegation to the Afghans.”

That Qianlong opted for further non-interference is striking because, even though Shāh Wali had not attacked Qing domains, the Afghan advance threatened the empire. The TB and Tārīkh-i Aḥmad Shāhī, Aḥmad Shāh’s

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100 TAS: 645. The date given is 13 Muḥārram, 1182 AH.
101 QLJXD: 8:288.
102 QLJXD: 8:307–8. Qianlong had reservations about the veracity of the merchant’s claims, and ordered Yunggui to investigate whether he was telling the truth. We have found no record of a follow-up, but the Qing officials did rely on the merchant’s information.
103 QLJXD: 8:289.
104 QLJXD: 8:288–93.
105 QLJXD: 8:319.
Do You Not Bow before Heaven?

official chronicle, do not mention the Qing at all, the latter framing the campaign as punishment of Sulṭān Shāh and others who had “raised the head of rebellion” (Pe. *sār-i shūrish waʿīnād bār-āwurda ẖūdand*), and both referring to plans to seize a holy relic. But Qing sources tell us that the Afghans hosted a child named Sarimsāq in Qunduz, who had the potential to ignite revolt on the frontier.

Sarimsāq (d. 1809) was Burhān al-Dīn’s fourth son, and only an infant when the Āfāqī brothers revolted against Qing rule. While his three brothers were extradited by Sulṭān Shāh to live in exile in Beijing, Sarimsāq evaded capture and became the focus of Āfāqī resistance. By September 1768, Yunggu reported to the emperor that Sarimsāq was rumored to live in Qunduz. Qianlong feared that the heir to the lineage of Āfāqī Khwājas might inspire another uprising. Reports of Muslim travelers gathering support and funds to provide for Sarimsāq in Qunduz reached the emperor’s ear; ‘Ālim Khwāja, a local governor, drunkenly and openly speculated about the boy’s triumphant return. Qianlong was determined that Sarimsāq had to go, but even the child’s presence in the Afghan armies did not induce Qianlong to act. Part of this related to the cost and strain of military operations, but he refrained even from sending so much as a reproach to Aḥmad Shāh—supposedly his tributary.

Sulṭān Shāh took back his capital and slew the Afghan-appointed governor, but felt anything but safe in anticipation of a new Afghan raid. In the winter of 1768, his desperate plea reached the Qianlong emperor. Perhaps hoping to spur Qing forces into action and intertwine his interests with Qianlong’s, he sent two emissaries who communicated his warning that “Aḥmad Shāh of the Afghans is going to invade next year to support Sarimsāq. Since I cannot withstand their might, please send ten thousand troops to aid me against him.”

This request caused further deterioration in communications. In a harsh rebuke, Qianlong blamed Sulṭān Shāh for provoking conflict with the Afghans through his own expansionism. He chastised the *mīr* for failing to deliver Burhān al-Dīn’s last son when he had the chance, and emphasized that Sulṭān Shāh did not have the provisions or livestock to support ten thousand troops. Finally, the emperor made clear that he would confront the Afghans only if they violated Qing territory. He dissociated himself from Sulṭān Shāh

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106 *TAS*: 645.
108 Li, “Qianlong chao Zhongya Zhengce Yanjiu”: 123.
111 *QLJXD*: 8:422.
112 *QLJXD*: 8:422–4.
because of the latter’s wanton behavior, acquitting himself of the cosmological task of protecting this particular lesser lord.

Sulṭān Shāh was on his own, but he held out. A letter to Emin Khoja was received in August 1769, and showed the mīr’s frustration: he had expected reward and protection as a vassal, but found himself abandoned. Pointedly, he raised the threat of further Afghan advances: “[Aḥmad Shāh’s] trajectory will lead him in your direction: what tactics will you then adopt to ward off this enemy? [...] If you have any concern for the emperor’s territory, then now is the time to show it.”113 His ire was not reserved for imperial officials. In December 1769, a new message reached Beijing. Caustically, Sulṭān Shāh accused Qianlong of failing to perform his duty as protector: “Would you enlighten us, whether we are in actuality vassals to the Afghans?”114 Qianlong, at the end of his patience, personally revised the draft reply to Sulṭān Shāh in imperial red ink:

We have long known that you have previously presented gifts to the Afghans. That you now have no more options but to evade the issue just shows that you are paying tribute to the Afghans! [...] If you cannot protect your own lands, and wish to submit to the Afghans, then suit yourself! [...] If you wish to rely on our armies to serve your enmities and to subjugate your neighboring tribes, then we will under no circumstances provide you with our troops.115

This passage illustrates candidly Qianlong’s understanding of the Durrānī empire. From the events described above, it is clear there was no indication that Qianlong still meaningfully considered the Afghans his tributaries, nor that he sought to influence them. Prior to Khwāja Mirhan’s arrival, Qianlong had apparently been more optimistic: when an adventurer from Kashmir suggested the Qing conquer the region, the emperor wrote that “[Kashmir] is in the possession of Aḥmad Shāh. He is submitting to our authority as I write, so there is no need to take action.”116 But the troubling events of the embassy, and the concomitant frustration with Central Asian rulers’ perceived moral deficiencies, meant that Qianlong never again evoked Durrānī ‘submission.’

Indeed, his personal reply to Sulṭān Shāh reveals that Qianlong had come to view the Afghan empire as a rival cosmological center, drawing tribute from his supposed subject. Through Sulṭān Shāh, Qianlong had also learned that

114 QLJXD: 9:64.
the Afghans were, as he had first suspected in 1763, a hostile imperial formation bent on supporting the Āfāqī lineage.\textsuperscript{117} Despite the ‘benevolent’ edict bestowed on him, the Afghan shāh had never behaved like a tributary. Qianlong recognized this, and outside of Qing historiography, Aḥmad Shāh was never treated like one. Instead, Qianlong suspended, and prevented, all communications. When Afghan armies invaded Badakhshān, rather than protecting it as the orderer of the cosmos should, Qianlong justified the Afghan invasion. Stretched garrisons, long distances, and frustrations with the region’s powers had stayed Qianlong’s hand. In justifying his inaction, the incompatibility between the two cosmologies, left ambiguous at Mirhan’s audience, had become explicit. Now understanding Central Asia as a region of irreconcilable, incessant conflict menaced by a rival power outside his influence, Qianlong was primarily concerned with consolidating the security of the Qing hold on Altishahr. He counted on the distance and difficult terrain between the Qing oasis cities and the Afghans for their safety.

Conclusion

Khwāja Mirhan’s visit to the Qing court had been a fateful one, never to be repeated. The Durrānī and Qing empires had both reached the zeniths of their power, and reaching out further than ever before, they briefly touched. In due course, the Durrānī embassy proved a transformative moment for the Qing emperor’s cosmological position in Central Asia. While historiographically embracing the Afghans as tributaries, in reality the emperor distanced himself from them, going so far as to forbid any diplomatic contact even as they attacked his vassal in Badakhshān.

Mirhan’s challenge to Qing ritual during the audience had provided the first impetus for Qianlong’s parochial and charged perception of the Afghans, likely also informed by his consideration of the threatening subtext of Aḥmad Shāh’s letter. Qianlong in his reply evoked Durrānī deference to fit Aḥmad Shāh into the Qing cosmological framework, and so too would court historiography and artistic production for decades. But Aḥmad Shāh never accepted a submissive tributary position. For him, it was enough that the embassy had constituted an assertion of imperial authority and legitimacy. Mirhan’s embassy and its reception had made use of a calculated ambiguity that allowed for the possibility of amicable Qing-Durrānī relations. However, Afghan expansionism and tensions around Qing cosmology in Central Asia erased that possibility.

\textsuperscript{117} QLJXD: 4:9–11.
The dual position of Badakhshan as tributary of the Qing, yet firmly entrenched in the Muslim world order of Central Asia, had rendered it a proxy for the Qing-Durrānī relationship—a position that ultimately proved untenable, as it fomented distrust and animosity from both its powerful neighbors and led to Qing disengagement and Badakhshan being invaded by the Afghan empire. Qianlong’s justification of the Durrānī capture of his own tributary’s lands dispels any suspicion that he may have viewed the Durrānīs as his tributaries, rather than a rival imperial formation.

He did, however, avoid stating this outright, instead decrying the supposed violent natural order of Muslim polities and professing his aversion to futile interventions in Central Asia. Such dissociations were a tacit acknowledgement of Qianlong’s inability to successfully integrate the Central Asian polities into Qing cosmology. By the 1790s, as Khoqand became the center of Āfāqī resistance to the Qing and as Afghan power waned, the relationship between the empires dissipated entirely. No further embassies would come to Beijing; no edicts or warnings would ever reach the Afghan shāhs. Only in the Qing court would the fictive tributary relationship live on, given form by ink, paint, and wood in records and artworks—masking the uncomfortable realities about the empire’s limitations that Qianlong had faced decades before.

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