The Ambans of Tibet—Imperial Rule at the Inner Asian Periphery

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In the eighteenth century, China experienced an exceptional flourishing of dynastic government. The Qing emperor ruled successfully over an empire consisting of China proper and the Inner Asian regions of Mongolia, Xinjiang, and Tibet. The Qing state was a fairly typical example of an early-modern land-based Eurasian empire. Its state apparatus was relatively small compared to the size of Qing society and economy. In China proper, the low level of governmental presence was compensated by many quasi-governmental tasks entrusted or left to the indigenous elites of gentry, local headmen, militia leaders or commercial brokers and different social groups like lineages or villages. The emperor used campaign-like initiatives in local governments to mobilise men and resources across the divide of formal and informal institutions of rule. In the newly conquered regions of the Inner Asian periphery such a process of power-balancing between central and local (bureaucratic and sub-bureaucratic) government was more difficult to achieve. The Qing government developed new administrative structures for political control. To consolidate central rule over the multi-ethnic frontier entities new bureaucracies and new formal and informal relationships had to be created. Imperial administrators interacted between the dynastic centre and a multitude of local identities in the peripheries. Like viceroys, proconsuls or governors in other empires of the early modern world, such imperial manpower was indispensible at crucial points in the spatial networks of the polity. In Tibet, representatives of the Qing court, the imperial ambans (zhu Zang dachen), fulfilled the important task to embody the imperial centre at the periphery.

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The Tibetans had originally gained the attention of the Qing government because of their close contacts with the Mongolian peoples.³ Dynastic historiography interpreted the imperial award of an honorific title to the Dalai Lama during his visit at the Qing court in 1652 as the foundational event of Chinese suzerainty over Tibet.⁴ During the eighteenth century, when the consolidation of imperial power in Inner Asia proceeded apace, Tibet evolved into a protective buffer on the south-western border of the Qing state. Like Mongolia in the north and Xinjiang in the north-west, Tibet was turned into an important frontier region of the expanding Sino-Manchurian empire.

Officially, the Qing government justified its multiple interventions into Tibetan affairs during the eighteenth century by citing the crises frequently occurring in the region.⁵ The institutional form of the imperial government over Tibet grew out of the specific historical context of repeated needs for military intervention when the region was thrown into turmoil by Mongolian raiders or as a result of aristocratic power-struggles. The stationing of two grand minister residents in Tibet, the ‘ambans’ (meaning ‘officials’ in Manchu), can be best understood as a conscious response of the Qing emperor to those specific historical problems at an increasingly sensitive frontier of his empire.⁶

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Like the governors of Chinese provinces the *ambans* acted as intermediaries bridging metropolis and periphery.⁷ In the wide field of Tibetan regional interests, they represented the emperor’s eyes and ears. Through their political activities, indigenous elites were groomed to act as trusted imperial subjects. Like European proconsuls, imperial ambans functioned as an instrument of

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³ In the early seventeenth century, Mongol tribes had extended their influence over Tibet. With their khan’s military support, the Fifth Dalai Lama (1617–82) destroyed the power of his religious rivals and founded a centralised Tibetan state in 1642. For the rest of the century, Mongol khans represented the de facto rulers of Tibet.


⁵ Elliot Sperling, ‘Awe and Submission: A Tibetan Aristocrat at the Court of Qianlong’, *The International History Review* 20, no. 2 (June 1998), 325–335, here 325f.


⁷ Li Fengzhen, ‘Shizhi Qingdai Xizang zhezheng guanzhi de yuanqi [Origins of the political administration of Qingtime Tibet]’, *Xizang minzu xueyuan xuebao (zhexue shehui kexue ban)* 2 (2010), 15–18.