Though the Qing imperial rulership is sometimes described as generating new and innovative institutions for administering a large and diverse population, it is of some historical importance that the Qing empire was founded upon, and its rulership in large part generated by, three governments that existed before the promulgation of the empire in 1636 and continued to exist within one state for well over a century. The fact that these structures existed before the great Qing expansions into China and Mongolia explains some of the stability which the small state achieved during the explosive growth if its territory, and modifies to some degree the idea that the Qing state grew primarily in response to the development of its conquest enterprise. In the unusual structure of the state, the Lifanyuan provided unique capacities for negotiating and administering the imperial littoral. But as the conquests drew to a close and international pressures for clear boundaries and unqualified sovereignty intensified, the Lifanyuan was eroded in substance as well as in jurisdiction. After about 1760 the Lifanyuan was revised to accommodate what proved to be the final territorial acquisition of the Qing, and after 1811 gradually eroded as a distinct entity until its replacement in 1906 by the Lifanbu which despite the similarity in name was based upon very different principles of bureaucratic practice.

1 Three Governments and Imperial Simultaneity

The Qing decision to continue the Ming tradition of a light state appears to have been premised on both the competence of the three governments it had brought to China and the political exigencies of the continuing conquests. Low taxes were not only a reliable method of restoring the economy that had been
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damaged by two decades of fighting in some parts of China, the warfare that accompanied the Qing conquest of north China and the Yangtze delta, and the war to suppress the occupation governors of the south. They were also an overt means by which the Qing emperors ingratiated themselves with landowners, particularly in the Yangtze Delta. Even after illegal shifting of the tax burden from elites to the farming population, the effective tax rate through the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries remained modest. In 1713 the court announced a permanent freeze on the head tax and corvée labour. In the ensuing decades the freeze remained in effect even when the reserves of the government shrank. The Qing government until the nineteenth century successfully predicated its expansion and occupation on resting relatively lightly on its conquered territories and keeping land and commercial taxes low. The strategies were remarkably successful to two centuries, before the state fell prey to the very forces it had both depended upon and feared. Part of the ability of the conquests to expand so rapidly under the management of such a small state was that the state itself rested on three relatively self-sufficient governments.

2 The Three Governments and Simultaneous Emperorship

In 1616 the inchoate regime of Nurhaci (Nurgaci, *1559 †1626) became acknowledged as a khanate by those it dominated—that is, Nurhaci became a khan, and declared a state with the name of Jin (Aisin). In 1618 the khanate declared war on Ming China, and by 1621 had seized Shenyang, the Ming provincial capital of Liaodong. When Nurhaci died in 1626 he was succeeded by his fourth son Hung Taiji (Hong Taiji, Hūwangtaiji) as khan, and the war continued. Hung Taiji not only fought to pry the western territories of Liaodong from Ming, but also continued hostilities against the Chakhar Khaganate of eastern Mongolia, led by Ligdan Khagan from 1604 to 1634, when it collapsed as a result of a

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3 Kam Tak-sing points out that the proper spelling should be Hong Taiji or Xong Tayiji. I choose to continue my use of Hung Taiji for the simple reason that Hong Taiji is indistinguishable from the Chinese romanization for the characters involved; Hung Taiji, while technically incorrect, is conventional and clearly indicates the Manchu name. See also Kam Tak-sing, “The Romanization of Early Manchu Regnal Names,” *Studia Orientalia* 87 (1999).

4 Ligdan succeeded in 1604 to the throne of the so-called Northern Yuan or Chakhar Khaganate, the last direct Chinggisid rulership in Mongolia. In the sixteenth century the Khaganate had