Clashes of Administrative Nationalisms:
Banners and Leagues vs. Counties and Provinces
in Inner Mongolia

Uradyn E. Bulag

Towards an Interactive Approach to Administrative Nationalism

Administering culturally differentiated populations is an age-old problem confronting not only colonial empires but also nation-states. Colonial empires put unrelated peoples in one single state, usually deliberately, but try to keep them away from the European metropolises. Nation-states with different ethnic groups, on the other hand, aspire for cultural and ethnic homogeneity. Both types of polity tend to classify peoples according to putative ideas of culture, investing them with ideas of difference or affinity, demarcating their cultural and territorial boundaries, but not always neatly. Neither has been successful in keeping the populations imprisoned in their colonial or national territories. Ethnic mixing has led to cultural and racial hybridity; transnational migrations have threatened national sovereignty; and empires have struck back, with millions of people from colonies settling in the European metropolises. Today, instead of a borderless world, borders have become more significant.1

During the Qing Empire, Inner Asia and China came under a composite state, but they were divided and ruled in separate administrative systems. In this chapter, I will discuss the banner (Khoshuu) and league (Chuulgan) system introduced by the Qing in Mongolia in relation to the county (Xian) and province (Sheng) system implemented in inland China among the Han Chinese. While banners and leagues were a territorial administrative system instituted on the basis of Mongol traditions, they served to keep the Mongols separate from the Chinese in the very process of bringing the two peoples under the same composite state.2

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2 Territorially, the Mongols were segregated from the Chinese by the Great Wall and the Willow Palisade, and the boundaries were demarcated to prevent movement between
Nicola Di Cosmo has argued that the Inner Asian territories including Mongolia were ‘colonies’ acquired by the Qing through conquest, not unlike European overseas colonies, and the Lifanyuan was to administer these colonies separately from the Chinese heartland. Like European colonizers, the Manchu conquerors also appear to have subscribed to what Frederick Cooper and Ann Stoler call a ‘grammar of difference’ between the Mongols and the Chinese. While I agree with this view in principle, I suggest that the resettlement of large numbers of Chinese famine refugees in Mongolia and the need to administer them from as early as the late 18th century severely challenged the raison d’être of the banner and league system, thereby constituting the basic tensions of the Qing empire in Inner Asia. The waning of Qing power towards the end of the 19th century in the face of external threat from European and Japanese powers saw not only a Manchu alignment with Chinese interests, but also the promotion of counties and provinces at the expense of banners and leagues, whereby the Chinese nationalist logic began to trump the Manchu imperial imperative. Thus, a key to understanding Qing administrative institutions in Inner Asia lies as much in identifying their distinctive features as in exploring how and whether the Mongols and Chinese could be kept separate.

This chapter adopts an interactive approach by putting the banner and league system and the county and province system in the same political ‘field’ of the composite state mediated by the centre (imperial, national, or ‘third party’). In the dynamic interaction or competition, the two systems have become ‘regimes of value’ with affective value investment made by the two sides, i.e., the Mongols defend the banner and league system as ‘Mongolian’

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3 Nicola Di Cosmo, “Qing Colonial Administration in Inner Asia,” *The International History Review* 20,2 (1998); see also Chia Ning, “Li-fan Yuan of the Early Qing Dynasty” (PhD diss., the Johns Hopkins University, 1992), and Chia Ning, “The Li-fan Yuan and the Inner Asian Rituals in the Early Qing (1644–1795),” *Late Imperial China* 14,1 (1993).


5 Here I follow the classical approach advanced by Max Gluckman in his *Analysis of a Social Situation in Modern Zululand* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1940) where he argued that Zulu and whites, however much they were opposed in terms of political interests, have to be seen as part of a single field of social relations.