

The Impact of Power Struggles Between the Ming Dynasty Monarchy and Bureaucratic Groups on The Qing Dynasty Power Structure

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Abstract. Throughout Chinese history, the power of the emperor has shown a trend of increasing. Eventually, it reached its peak in the Qing Dynasty. Compared with the Ming Dynasty, imperial power during the Qing Dynasty was more powerful and centralized which led to a more stable political situation. The rulers of the Qing dynasty learned an important lesson from the Ming dynasty's demise that was the struggle between imperial power and bureaucratic groups and effectively avoided a series of problems occurred in the mid-to-late Ming dynasty by several means, including improving the emperor's personal ability, strengthening the emperor's power, optimizing the administrative apparatus, and intensifying ideological control. These methods above helped the imperial power grow up to an unprecedented level. This paper discusses the reasons for the measures to strengthen imperial power in the Qing dynasty, based on the historical works such as *The History of the Ming Dynasty*, *The History of the Qing Dynasty*, and *Reading Notes of Twenty-two Historical Books*.

Keywords: Ming Dynasty; Qing Dynasty; imperial power; bureaucracy.

1. Introduction

The Qing Dynasty was the last feudal dynasty in China. During this period, monarchical dictatorship reached its peak. The emperor's power had been greatly strengthened to an unprecedented level. A large number of studies have focused on the process of strengthening imperial power during the Qing Dynasty. Some scholars explore the Qing Emperor's measures to strengthen imperial power through institutional design. For example, Xu Xiaonan discusses the strengthening of imperial power from the perspective of the construction, increase or decrease, and containment of the bureaucratic system by the Qing government from a holistic perspective [1].

Some scholars have also examined the design of the system in a particular area, such as Li Naidong, who pointed out that the Qing Emperor interfered directly or indirectly in judicial cases by controlling the design of the judicial system in order to maintain his autocratic rule and strengthen imperial power [2].

Some scholars have analysed the strengthening of the Qing emperor's power from the perspective of his means of governance. Chen Guosheng discusses the process of strengthening imperial power by examining Emperor Yongzheng's promotion of superstitious doctrines, including metaphysics and celestial induction [3]. Qian Mu not only discusses from the above perspective, but also introduces the perspective of the changes in the ceremonial system of the monarchs and ministers, including the address and ceremonial regulations [4]. Fan Shuzhi, in particular, illustrates this power through the lens of cultural despotism and literal prisons [5].

Previous research primarily emphasizes the measures and processes of strengthening imperial power while overlooking their underlying causes. Based on the historical works such as *The History of the Ming Dynasty*, *The History of the Qing Dynasty*, and *Reading Notes of Twenty-two Historical Books*, this paper discusses the reasons for the measures to strengthen imperial power in the Qing dynasty.

2. Overview of the Struggle between Imperial Power and Bureaucratic Groups during the Ming Dynasty

The struggle between imperial power and bureaucratic groups during the Ming Dynasty originated from its own institutions. The first emperor of the Ming Dynasty, Zhu Yuanzhang, abolished the position of Chengxiang, which was almost equivalent to the prime minister. It is mentioned in *The History of the Ming Dynasty* that the prime minister Hu Weiyong and his colleagues were executed in the 13th year of Hongwu era due to their rebellion. The emperor then abolished the Zhongshusheng which means secretariat in Chinese [6]. This move strengthened the emperor's rule over his administrative affairs, allowing the exercise of imperial power to be free from possible restrictions of ministerial power, but it significantly increased the workload on the emperor. As a result, later emperors set up cabinets to assist them in dealing with political affairs. The chief assistant of the cabinet actually became as influential as the prime minister, especially when a young emperor ascended to the throne. In such cases, the chief assistant could even influence the emperor.

During the Ming dynasty, the official ideology was Neo-Confucianism, which was developed by Zhu Xi in the 12th century. Bureaucrats who believed in this philosophy reckoned that "Rendao", or the Way of Kindness, should be the fundamental principle of imperial politics, and that a correct and sincere mindset of the emperor should be the precondition for the policy-making process. In the Zhengde and Jiajing eras, Wang Shouren's philosophical doctrines, *xinxue*, became popular. It emphasized the cultivation of the emperor's virtues and the fulfilment of his aspirations.

It can be concluded that officials, at that time, hoped that their emperor would reach the realm of "the Way of the King", which was in accordance with the laws of heaven, and opposed to "the Way of the Hegemony", which was to let people's desires go unchecked. Hai Rui was an outstanding figure among them. Being famous for his boldness, in the 45th year of Jiajing's era, Hai Rui submitted a frank admonishment to the emperor. He suggested that the emperor should immediately cease his practice of Taoism and return to the government affairs. He believed that with the joint efforts of the emperor and bureaucrats, the whole empire could be governed in order [7]. However, the conflict between the expectations of the officials and the emperor's desire to enhance his personal control over state affairs was inevitable.

Imperial power and bureaucratic struggles can be broadly categorized as direct and indirect. The direct struggle took place between the emperor and his cronies, such as his chamberlain agency and secret service, and the bureaucrats. The chamberlain agency shared imperial power with the emperor with his tacit approval, and even acted on his behalf to a certain extent, causing discontent among the bureaucrats and leading to struggles.

During the Tianqi era, eunuch Wei Zhongxian seized the opportunity when the emperor was preoccupied with carpentry and used it to present his report to the emperor. The emperor, in contrast, was disinterested in these matters and delegated all of his responsibilities to Wei Zhongxian. As a result, Wei was able to monopolize both internal and external power by faking the emperor's will. With his power, Wei built up his own circle of loyalists, including Yan Dang, and even enjoyed titles. Instead of curbing Wei's influence, the emperor allowed the construction of shrines in his honor [8].

When the Chongzhen Emperor took the throne, Wei Zhongxian was immediately exiled. His cronies were also executed. The secret service, for instance, Jingyiwei and Dong Chang, played a significant role in enforcing imperial power. The emperor tasked these organs to arrest, detain, and convict individuals. It is known that the Jingyiwei had its own prison, *zhaoyu*, for the purpose of detention and interrogation.

Indirect struggles in the Ming dynasty usually took place within bureaucratic groups and were often characterized by partisan conflicts. These conflicts included the strife between Donglin Party and other factions during the Wanli era and the strife between Donglin Party and *Yandang*, the crony of Wei Zhongxian during the Tianqi era. Generally speaking, lower-ranking officials attached themselves to different political forces according to their origins and dependencies, often representing different vested interests. These political factions engaged in disputes over various issues primarily

to “show their uniqueness” [9]. The outcome of these struggles depended largely on which side enjoyed the support of imperial power.

The struggle between imperial power and bureaucrats fundamentally represented an irreconcilable conflict between the bureaucratic class, which had been severely suppressed and destroyed during the centralization of imperial power, and the imperial power class. Such struggles hindered the exercise of the emperor’s power, increased the risk of paralyzing central institutions, and made decision-making more difficult, sometimes resulting in inappropriate decisions. Thus, excessive struggle was one of the major reasons for the fall of the Ming dynasty. Zhao Yi, a renowned historian from the Qing Dynasty, pointed out that Ming ministers at the end of the dynasty failed to consider current events, ultimately leading to the empire’s decline [10]. This lesson served as a cautionary tale for Qing emperors in their rule.

3. Lessons of the Ming Dynasty in Strengthening Imperial Power by the Qing Emperors

The Qing Emperor had fully absorbed the lessons from the Ming Dynasty. Emperor Kangxi pointed out that the neglect of state governance by the emperors in the middle and late Ming dynasty led to conflicts between eunuchs and cronies which resulted in factions within the government [11]. Emperor Yongzheng also believed that cronyism, with selfishness to confuse the emperor, could not be conducive to the governance of the country [12]. In response, the Qing Emperor centralized their control over bureaucrats.

In order to prevent the division and transfer of imperial power, the Qing Emperors began with the selection of their heirs and providing them with strict education. This education encompassed various aspects, including traditional Manchu literature, riding and shooting, martial arts, and Confucianism. Emperors also often brought their imperial sons with them on inspection tours and assigned them tasks to assess their abilities to rule. For instance, in the twenty-first year of Kangxi’s reign, the emperor asked the Crown Prince Yinreng to follow him on his inspection tour [11]. In the Yongzheng’s reign, the emperor began to select heirs in secret. This facilitated his examination of the emperor’s son, in order to select a more suitable candidate for the throne. The Qing Dynasty witnessed fewer instances of weak or incapable emperors, as the emperors generally remained active and engaged in imperial governance.

Additionally, the Qing dynasty used eunuchs more cautiously. The royal family took measures to restrict the influence of eunuchs, thus basically eliminating the phenomenon of interference in politics by chamberlains—a marked departure from the frequent political interference by chamberlains observed during the Ming Dynasty [12].

The Qing emperors, out of fear, strengthened their ideological control over bureaucrats, especially Han Chinese bureaucrats and bureaucrats from the south of the country. At the beginning of the Qing Dynasty, some southern officials lacked acknowledgement with the emperor and the central government, despite the court. These people had actually become a destabilizing factor in the central government. By not focusing on decrees, but rather on indoctrination [13], the emperor enlisted these people through the use of imperial examinations, rituals, and sacrifices. The emperor himself also took the initiative to distance himself from these ministers by employing renowned scholars as lecturers, studying Confucian classics and even engaging in literary creation.

The bureaucracy and its potential candidates, the literati, were also under the control of the court. In order to prevent the literati from gathering into groups again, as they had done in the Ming Dynasty, and thus sparking off party disputes, the rulers placed a stone tablet in the Minglun Hall of each official school. It is stipulated on the stone tablet that students were not allowed to speak out, make alliances or form associations, or publish writings. At the same time, the rulers criminalized people based on the words and phrases in the literature to achieve the effect of deterrence. Once the words and deeds were against the imperial power, the emperor would suppress them severely. The Qing

Emperor also tried hard to avoid the Cabinet having too much power. The first measure was to deprive the cabinet of its decision-making power, so that edicts did not have to be issued through it.

In the Ming Dynasty, there were six ministries, including the minister, Shangshu, and the assistant minister, Shilang. The rulers of the Qing Dynasty, in contrast, arranged for separate Shangshu and Shilang to share power according to different ethnic groups. These ministers were allowed to report to the emperor secretly, and the emperor was able to give orders to these officials alone. Coupled with the fact that the Manchu and Han ministers did not speak the same language as each other and found it difficult to communicate with each other, a great deal of communication was required in the exercise of power. The efficiency of the six ministries was thus reduced.

On the contrary, power was more centralized towards the emperor. Considering the fact that if the central government was heavily involved in the government, it would cause a lot of official documents and would easily delay the things that must be handled immediately [14]. The emperor then set up departments to enable him to directly control political decision-making and improve administrative efficiency, such as the Office of Military and Political Affairs. These measures ensured that imperial power was always centralized in the hands of the emperors.

The above measures taken by the Qing emperors ensured a high degree of centralization of imperial power and the efficient functioning of the state apparatus. Such measures also made the Qing emperors at least conservative monarchs, and thus the society was relatively stable. The monarchical system reached its peak during this period.

During periods of peaceful rule, the emperor and the bureaucrats were often in a kind of balance. On the one hand, the emperor gave full play to the functions of the various state institutions and was open to advice. On the other hand, the bureaucrats were loyal and dedicated to assisting the emperor without overstepping the boundaries between ruler and subject. This equilibrium was pivotal to the stability of ancient Chinese politics, as an excess of imperial power and diminished bureaucratic influence could lead to unchecked authoritarianism, while excessive bureaucratic power and a weakened imperial authority might result in the dominance of powerful officials and factional struggles. However, as this balance was lost and the state revolved entirely around the personal desires of the emperor, the political system became less capable of internal innovation. Therefore, the moment when the monarchical system reached its peak marked the precipice of its rapid decline.

4. Conclusion

To sum up, this paper has outlined the struggle between imperial power and bureaucratic groups during the Ming Dynasty and subsequently summarised a series of measures taken by the Qing Dynasty to strengthen imperial power, along with the underlying reasons for these actions. Most of these measures originated from the Qing dynasty's reflection on the lessons of the Ming dynasty's tumultuous history of conflicts between imperial power and bureaucratic groups.

Historical evidence proves that this series of strategies successfully strengthened imperial power and avoided a series of pitfalls experienced during the Ming Dynasty. However, the analyses in this paper have primarily focused on central political aspects, with limited exploration of local political and economic aspects. At the same time, factors such as the influence of the harem and relatives of the empress remained unexamined, warranting further investigation in future research.

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