

# The Utilization of Confucian Ideology by the Manchus during the Qing Dynasty

Jiayan Tu

## Abstract:

Power is an abstract concept commonly seen as the ability to bring changes. Mill defines it as the ability to attain goals despite resistance often through force. Arendt emphasizes its collective and context-dependent nature. Luke's third Dimension of Power underscores its influence on perceptions and preferences sometimes conflicting with individual interests. Li highlights cultural agreements' impact on public interest illustrating how culture shapes power distribution. This understanding underscores the importance of considering cultural context when analyzing power dynamics and structures. Building on that I define power as a cultural consensus on public interest and proper usage of its exercise involving both the exertion and perception of power. While these frameworks primarily stem from discussions within the European context it is important to acknowledge that power may vary in other regions such as Asian cultures. In this essay I aim to explore how these Western understandings of power can be applied to Asian cultures focusing specifically on the utilization of Confucian ideology by the Manchus during the Qing dynasty.

**Keywords:**Confucianism, Qing Dynasty, Power Dynamics, Manchus, Symbolic Power

## Introduction

Power is an abstract concept commonly seen as the ability to bring changes. Mill defines it as the ability to attain goals despite resistance often through force. Arendt emphasizes its collective and context-dependent nature. Luke's third Dimension of Power underscores its influence on perceptions and preferences sometimes conflicting with individual interests. Li highlights cultural agreements' impact on public interest illustrating how culture shapes power distribution. This understanding underscores the importance of considering cultural context when analyzing power dynamics and structures. Building on that I define power as a cultural consensus on public interest and proper usage of its exercise involving both the exertion and perception of power. While these frameworks primarily stem from discussions within the European context it is important to acknowledge that power may vary in other regions such as Asian cultures. In this essay I aim to explore how these Western understandings of power can be applied to Asian cultures focusing specifically on the utilization of Confucian ideology by the Manchus during the Qing dynasty.

### Research Questions

This case study raises a question: Why did the ruling Manchus despite achieving military victories and expanding their territory choose to incorporate Confucian ideology into their governing decisions? This incorporation

fundamentally reshaped their perceptions of power and the state's behavior under their control. Based on that, I aim to explore the following questions within my essay:

1. What constitutes power?
2. What are the consequences when one uses power?
3. How do actors enact or deploy power?

## Literature Review

I chose China, specifically the Qing dynasty, and the ideology of Confucianism to illustrate power because it presents an intriguing case worth studying. Confucianism not only stands as the predominant religious belief system in China but embodies a fusion of religious practices and bureaucracy. According to Confucianism the emperors were seen as the „sons of heaven“ a concept known as the Mandate of Heaven similar to the Western Church and its understanding of divine roles. On the other hand Confucianism advocated for a bureaucratic structure akin to Weber's proposals emphasizing specialization and division of labor. Education and credentials are highly valued and there is a preference for impersonality. While in Western contexts religious practices and bureaucracy are completely segmented in the Asian context, particularly within Chinese Confucianism, they coexist and are magically integrated.

## Case Study: The Qing Dynasty

The Qing dynasty emerged as the final ruling dynasty and the second one not led by the Han people. It is characterized by a robust centralized governance structure and significant territorial expansion alongside population growth. The Manchus, despite achieving military victories and expanding their territory, chose to incorporate Confucian ideology into their governing decisions. This incorporation fundamentally reshaped their perceptions of power and the state's behavior under their control.

## Results

The utilization of Confucianism by the Qing Dynasty symbolized a form of power deeply intertwined with their authority and governance. According to Pierre Bourdieu symbolic power operates by shaping perceptions, beliefs, and values through cultural symbols. Within the Qing Dynasty this symbolic power operated on multiple levels. Legal codes and governance structures were influenced by Confucian principles emphasizing filial piety, social hierarchy, and moral conduct. Punishments and rewards further reinforced obedience to authority and societal norms. Civil service examinations ensured that officials were well-versed in Confucian ideology thereby solidifying its influence within the bureaucracy.

## Discussion

The reason behind their incorporation of Confucianism is clear: to legitimize and govern the state's rule. The Manchu elite strategically embraced Confucian principles—a departure from their own cultural heritage—in order to gain acceptance from the mainly Han Chinese population. The integration of Confucianism into Qing governance represented a combination of cultural authority, ideological legitimacy, and symbolic representation. Confucianism provided a framework through which the ruling elite could assert authority over the diverse Chinese population fostering stability and order while shaping the socio-political landscape. It served as an instrumental tool for organization and a means to exert power effectively. The state acting like an organization integrated Confucianism into its governing structure and offered a framework that could effectively manage a diverse and complex society like China in pursuit of maintaining control and legitimacy. Therefore it is fair to say that it is the legitimization of the ruling authority that granted the Manchus their power to govern.

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## Conclusion

The adoption of Confucianism by the Manchus represented more than just legitimizing their rule among the Han majority, their initial motive, but also a commitment to traditional Chinese values. This helps explain their persistence in using such ideology. This acceptance of Confucianism profoundly influenced Manchu governing strategies such as the introduction of merit-based civil service examinations aligning their actions with Confucian values and principles. This reflects a genuine incorporation and compliance with Confucian governance by the Manchu rulers as Confucian ideology proposed a clear bureaucratic system for governing states. Manchus, originally nomads, learned such an efficient state structure and applied it with respect. At this point, their compliance with such ideology is not merely to justify and legitimize their regime but because they recognize that such a framework is a better way to govern the state more efficiently and they are willing to comply with it. Thus by truly applying such power and understanding it, the Manchus changed their attitude from using Confucianism as a veneer for their ambitious ruling to willingly comply out of respect.

### Growth and Return

The relationship between the Manchus and Confucianism can be interpreted as „growth and return like a seed“ reflecting how the adoption of Confucian principles was not just a one-time transfer of power but a process of cultivation yielding long-term benefits. This is based on the fact that the ideology is not just simply an instrumental tool for the ruling class—the Manchus anymore but also a pursuit they are willing to comply with knowing it is just and efficient. By embracing and complying with Confucianism the Manchus sought legitimacy among the Han Chinese majority and themselves as the ruling class fostering stability within the Qing Dynasty. In conclusion, the strategic adoption of Confucian principles by the Manchu elite during the Qing dynasty marked a significant turning point in Chinese history reshaping governing strategies and power dynamics. This embrace of Confucianism functioned as a means through which power was obtained, wielded, and understood providing the Manchu rulers with legitimacy among the predominantly Han population. The long-term effects of Confucianism are sustained as it can reproduce its own symbolic power within the existing social framework thus exerting a lasting cultural impact on society and people's perceptions toward it.

### Final Thoughts

It can also be argued that beyond the symbolic power of

Confucianism, the ability to shape the attitudes of the Manchus from dismissive utilitarian to respectful compliance also involves mechanisms from the Third Power Dimension. Under the Qing cultural context Confucianism was given the power to shape the perceptions of Manchu elites regarding what is good and what is in their self-interest thus determining the cultural consensus on public interest and the proper exercise of power involving both its exertion and perception.

### Further Research

The distinction matters in whether the Manchus consider Confucianism as a better way to govern or if there is a cultural element involved. It can be argued that there is a cultural push as their initial attempt to use Confucianism is to justify themselves as a ruling class without considering the potential consequences. However during the process of exerting power and engaging with such symbolic authority they gradually become shaped by this cultural belief and accept how it works not necessarily because it is inherently good but because they integrate themselves into the Confucian framework and view the ideology from

an inner perspective.

Therefore further research should be conducted to examine the mechanism behind the Manchus' willingness to comply with Confucian ideology in their ruling regime.

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