Introduction

In 1638, Hong Taiji, the Manchu ruler of a small state on the northeastern fringe of the Asian continent, made a prophetic boast to a visiting envoy. The Mongol Yuan and other earlier dynasties, he declared, had campaigned as far as India, and his own Qing dynasty was now their equal.[1] Almost preposterous at the time, this assertion was realized by the conquests of his successors, who expanded the empire westward far into Inner Asia and ultimately extinguished their tenacious foe, the Junghar Mongols. In July 1757, Amursana, last pretender to the rule of an independent Jungharia, fled pursuing Qing forces into Russia. When the Qianlong emperor fully absorbed Amursana's domain two years later, the Qing realm reached its greatest extent, and its western border in Tibet and Xinjiang indeed abutted the Indian subcontinent. Never had the empire appeared more secure.

Yet the ramifications of another battle, fought far to the south almost at the moment Amursana fled the field, eventually confronted the Qing with a new and more powerful neighbor. In June 1757 the East India Company and its allies routed the nawab of Bengal, making the first in a patchwork of conquests that would in time establish British rule over virtually the whole of India. For the next hundred years, Company forces expanded their domin-

ion to the south of the Himalayas as effectively as the Qing had done to the north. In addition to the established trade between Guangzhou and Indian ports, agents of the East India Company began to appear on a vast arc of the Qing frontier, from the cities of Central Asia to the coast of northern China. This activity aimed at the expansion of trade with China, the revenues of which were necessary to meet the costs of conquest and rule in India. Ultimately, fiscal need required the defense of this trade by force of arms.

The Opium War of 1840–1842, in which Indian resources were heavily deployed, was an unprecedented military disaster for the Qing. A second war with the British empire erupted in 1856, and proved a still greater catastrophe. Only a century after Qianlong forced Amursana to flee, the emperor's great-grandson saw his own representative, Governor-General Ye Mingchen, captured by the British and taken to Calcutta in forced exile. Once perceiving itself as an empire of matchless power that had decisively settled the major threat to its frontier, the Qing state now found itself engaged in a struggle on a far greater scale.

How did Qing rulers, officials, and scholars interpret the rising power of the British in India between 1750 and 1860, and how did this understanding influence the policies that were proposed or implemented to maintain the empire's security? By considering these intertwined questions, this book identifies two major changes that occurred between the start of this period, when the Qianlong emperor brought the empire to the height of its power, and the end of it, when Qing weakness in the face of European empires became starkly evident. One was a shift in the Qing state's external relations, from a "frontier policy" toward a "foreign policy." In the eighteenth century, the empire was conceived by its rulers to be surrounded by a collection of discrete frontier areas, each to be analyzed and managed according to its own political circumstances. The formulation by the emperor and his ministers of segmented, regionally specific strategies to guide Qing relations with the outside world is what is meant here by "frontier policy." This approach, well suited to flexibly governing the far-flung diversity of the empire's borderlands, became less effective when the Qing confronted European empires that operated simultaneously in multiple, noncontiguous areas and could not be managed, or even fully comprehended, on any single frontier. From the late eighteenth century onward, China's geographers and strategists grappled with the implications of this change. One proposed solution, fully articulated for the first time shortly after the Opium War but drawing on ideas that had emerged earlier, can be termed a "foreign policy," which conceived of a single hierarchy of imperial

interests framed in reference to a unified outside world. Ultimately, this shift in outlook led to a revolution in how Qing rulers and subjects perceived their position: no longer unique, the Qing empire became one among several large entities locked in competition. Older strategies would have to be adapted by investigating, and perhaps imitating, China's rivals.

Although propelled in part by external events, this turn from a frontier policy to a foreign policy depended on an equally significant internal change in the Qing empire's information order.[2] Before 1800, the Qing realm was an amalgam of diverse conquered peoples united by common subordination to the same ruling house. Although the emperor and a small cohort of high advisors had a panoramic view over the entire domain, on the ground the administration of different regions relied heavily on indigenous power holders following their local political traditions. Reports sent to the capital from these regions reflected the language and culture of the inhabitants. For local governance this multiplicity of viewpoints was unproblematic, indeed necessary. However, where informants from around the empire submitted parallel reports about the same events, no common idiom existed in which to amalgamate them. Because descriptions of the outside world drew heavily on distinct local nomenclature, political conceptions, and cosmologies, the Qing central state had access to a rich and growing stock of data, but not a unifying matrix in which to understand and interpret it.

Around 1800, as the capacities of the Qing court diminished, private Han Chinese scholars began to take more interest in reforming the empire's administration. In the process, they broke the court's monopoly on a panoramic view of the empire's frontiers. Using various sources of official and unofficial information, they too began to survey the realm's non-Chinese frontiers, and the world beyond them. The emerging unofficial sphere of policy discussion was more flexible and unfettered than the confines of the bureaucracy. Already in the eighteenth century, the state had synthesized geographic and geopolitical information on a limited scale. Now, the computing power of individual researchers, communicating in letter or print across a scholarly network, was able to reach conclusions that surpassed the single imperial mainframe. By the middle of the nineteenth century, Chinese scholars had succeeded in creating a standardized lexicon for world geography. Through this, the empire's many localized outlooks were for the first time translated into a single language, producing a new global vision and a fresh reevaluation of its strategic interests.

In perhaps no other case was the need for integrated knowledge so great, the difficulties in constructing such a system so daunting, and the

consequences of success so profound as that of China's understanding of British activities in India. Over land and sea, along almost the entire stretch of the Qing empire's southern frontier, commerce and religion sustained contact with India. Through this interaction, much information about India passed from foreign informants to Qing subjects in frontier zones, and then into government documents or private writings. However, because these accounts were filtered through the cultural lenses of those living along the empire's border, activities in India were known to China only in fragments. Among the references to the British conquest of Mughal India received by different arms of the Qing government, for instance, were an oral report from a Kashmiri trader in Yarkand, a petition from Nepal, a letter from a Portuguese Jesuit, and comments from a British envoy in Beijing, each employing different geographic vocabularies and offering contradictory political glosses. Understanding contemporary developments was therefore not a simple matter of passive observation, but an active and sometimes contentious process of analysis and debate. Due to India's wide familiarity and geopolitical relevance for Qing observers, reconstructing these debates offers a glimpse into the empire-wide channels of information circulation, the principles and habits of strategic thought, and the exchange between bureaucratic and scholarly spheres that shaped the geographic and geopolitical worldviews of the entire Qing empire in this period.

As Qing scholars and bureaucrats gained an increasingly clear picture of what was occurring in India, they realized that their own state was vying for power with foes equally formidable. This change is most evident in the field of geography. European maps, which had earlier constituted only a small and controversial niche in the canon of worldviews, came to be accepted as the only valid representation of the world and its constituent parts. Chinese versions of these maps began to use a standardized vocabulary that eliminated the multilingual confusion of names found earlier. As this knowledge became more widespread, the empire's political leaders appreciated for the first time that struggles on a global scale were being carried out on their borders. Instead of dominating and managing a tapestry of small neighbors, the government suddenly had to entertain the possibility of being overcome by larger ones. Together, changes in geographic and strategic thinking allowed a unified foreign policy, which demanded a more active engagement with other states, to emerge as an alternative to a frontier policy. This did not radically alter the conduct of Qing foreign relations after 1840, or even

after 1860. The need to accommodate great internal diversity, more than bureaucratic inertia or complacency on the part of traditionally minded officials, preserved the influence of frontier policy. As will be discussed in the Conclusion, the balance between a frontier and foreign policy was closely tied to the internal politics of the Qing empire.

Qing Foreign Relations Reconsidered

Two factors propelled the adjustment in geo-strategic outlook from a frontier policy toward a foreign policy: prevailing conceptions of the outside world—its basic physical shape and the disposition of the Qing empire and other countries within it—and assumptions about how best to ensure the empire's security within the parameters of this geopolitical context. New information about foreign developments could obviously lead to a reconsideration of imperial strategies. Perhaps less obviously, strategic assumptions themselves could greatly influence the fullness and type of information channeled to officials and scholars concerned with formulating policy. In the Qing case, the ways intelligence was gathered, processed, and interpreted were shaped by intellectual legacies, bureaucratic procedures, and estimates of the empire's security. Proceeding from this basis, it is possible to reconcile two contradictory visions of the Qing empire's relationship with the outside world, and the role of information in forming it.

Until recently, imperial China's approach to foreign relations before 1840 was assumed to have been molded chiefly by ideological preconceptions of an ideal world order. According to the pioneering efforts of John K. Fairbank to construct a general framework for interpreting Ming and Qing foreign relations, there existed a "Chinese world order" founded on a Sinocentric ideology and manifested through institutional procedures collectively termed the "tribute system."[3] This world order was essentially "an outward extension of [the imperial government's] administration of China proper" designed to enforce—or appear to enforce—an emperor-centered hierarchy on foreign peoples.[4] Although in theory the emperor claimed universal authority, the main purpose of the system was less to manipulate actual foreign conditions to China's economic or military advantage, than to give domestic audiences proof that foreigners acknowledged and submitted to the emperor's power. Various measures, including trade incentives, religious and cultural pressures, and occasionally outright military force, were used to produce superficial conformity.

In this interpretation, rulers and officials appeared to possess what was in essence an a priori system for categorizing and managing foreign peoples, one that did not require close scrutiny of actual conditions within, or dynamics between, individual tributary states. Consequently, Fairbank argued, China suffered from a dearth of knowledge about foreign powers that produced fundamental misperceptions and poor policy choices, especially in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. In his classic study *Trade and Diplomacy on the China Coast*, he briefly reviewed some major Qing works of geography, only to dismiss the corpus as scant, "irretrievably confused," and effectively useless: "These examples of Chinese folklore, ignorance, and confusion about the Western barbarians do not strike one as representing a distinct set of ideas and evaluation," and were one factor in China's "intellectual unpreparedness for Western contact."[5]

Subsequent studies, particularly those concentrating on China's political interactions with European countries, have continued to see basic elements guiding imperial China's foreign relations as inimical to a realistic view of the world. Although ideology increasingly yielded to domestic politics in the search for the forces driving Qing foreign relations, Chinese diplomacy was still seen as inward-looking and committed to preserving "appearances."[6] John E. Wills, Jr., has suggested that Qing rulers, especially the successors to the Kangxi emperor, defensively concentrated on ceremonial forms rather than external realities, so that "a dangerous reliance on illusion would be a persistent failure of Chinese foreign policy."[7] James Polachek in particular has highlighted the "'court politics' of foreign policy," interpreting commentary about the outside world as a disguised proxy struggle over domestic agendas, particularly in the decades surrounding the Opium War.[8] Major works of geopolitical analysis produced around that time were "not much more than a polemic" written to score points.[9] If Qing officials and scholars seemed oblivious to dangerous external trends, there was little reason to explore the intelligence sources and strategic thinking actually underlying their policy choices.

Similarly, scholarship on the practice of geography in the Qing period has until recently declined to consider its political and strategic implications. Studies of Ming and Qing cartography, by far the largest subfield within the study of Chinese geography, have devoted considerable attention to elucidating the disputed reception of European maps and techniques of "scientific" cartography in China from the standpoint of cultural and intellectual history.[10] How maps and written sources might have influenced

the strategic outlook of the state or private scholars has been ignored, and even the very notion that cartographic data could have shifted ideologically entrenched worldviews has been disputed.[11] In current scholarship on the maritime sphere, it is only during and immediately after the Opium War that knowledge about the outside world and the evolution of China's strategic thinking have come to be regarded as two facets of the same topic.[12]

It has long been recognized that Qing policy toward Inner and Central Asia differed significantly from that pursued toward maritime European powers, but only in the past two decades has this coalesced into a major reconsideration of the empire's foreign relations.[13] Unlike the study of the maritime frontier, where defeats after 1840 have loomed largest, research into the court's inland policy has instead emphasized the success of sophisticated, realpolitik strategies in the conquest and rule of Tibet, Qinghai, Muslim eastern Turkestan, and virtually all Mongol territories. With vision unclouded by insular and Sino-centric assumptions, the dynasty's Manchu rulers are shown to have used logistical, technological, and administrative innovations similar to the state-building projects carried out by contemporary European and Russian governments. In Inner Asia, the Qing expanded and defended its interests like other "early modern" states.[14]

Manchu policy in Inner Asia succeeded in part because of its emphasis on using information to organize and execute diplomacy and warfare. Within the central administration, as Beatrice S. Bartlett has pointed out, methods of transmitting and filing correspondence and deliberating policies were reformed to meet the logistical requirements of large-scale campaigns.[15] Superior communications and planning, together with a sophisticated knowledge of Mongol political culture, helped the Qing to pacify the steppe.[16] Maps, collected from foreign sources or drafted within the court, were a "weapon in their struggle for control of central Eurasia."[17] In other words, pragmatism, flexibility, and a judicious mix of force, guile, and diplomacy allowed the empire to dominate Inner Asia, an achievement that merits comparison with the conquests of any other contemporary empire.

Thus, current scholarship describes Qing foreign relations as active and engaged in Inner Asia, and more passive and disengaged on the maritime frontier of China proper. Why did the empire show such dynamism in one theater in the eighteenth century, and yet prove unable to replicate this success elsewhere in the succeeding century? One answer is to break Qing foreign relations into smaller and more manageable units along temporal and spatial fault lines, treating Inner Asia and the maritime sphere as essentially

distinct, and the empire's capacities in the nineteenth century as radically diminished from their peak in the eighteenth century. There is validity in these distinctions. It is generally agreed that at the end of the eighteenth century and in the first decades of the nineteenth century, the capabilities of the Qing state were limited by fiscal crisis, a sharp decline in the effectiveness and discipline of the bureaucratic administration, social upheaval, and rebellion.[18] Around the same time, China's place in the global economy entered a major relative decline.[19]

Still, it is misleading to explain changes in the styles of Qing foreign relations solely on the basis of preconceived zones or periods without seeking to understand how Qing rulers and their ministers strategized on the basis of the information available to them. The dynamic and aggressive foreign policy aimed at defeating the Junghars and limiting Russian expansion, in which Qing practices appeared "early modern," was part of a project to secure the Mongol steppe. Although it was between the 1670s and the 1750s, chiefly in the Inner Asian theater, that Qing empire-building appeared most comparable to that undertaken elsewhere in Eurasia, this does not mean that the Qing state reserved a special style of imperialism for that region. Once the Junghar threat was eliminated and control over the Mongols assured, Qing policy there shifted away from aggressive campaigning toward maintaining a stable frontier using techniques of control similar to Fairbank's tributary system. On the western edge of their domain tributary precedents were employed not for ideological reasons, but as "no more, or less, than a diplomatic toolbox . . . replete with a vast range of instruments, all of which had been tried and tested by rulers of China over centuries."[20] In other words, there were no absolute policy differences distinguishing the empire's borderlands. Rather, it was the nature of the threat perceived that guided the empire's foreign policy choices.

This conclusion arises from an examination of policy changes over time as well as space. More than any decline in the capacities of the central state, it was changes in the way rulers and officials understood the empire's geopolitical position that had the most important implications for Qing foreign relations. It is generally agreed that at some point in the late eighteenth century the Qing government turned away from the vigorous empire-building continuing elsewhere in Asia.[21] Here again, the final defeat of the Junghars was of epochal significance, creating an effect not unlike the "end of history" perceived by some American commentators at the close of the Cold War. Although Qianlong would continue to prosecute frontier wars, some

protracted and bloody, no neighboring power seemed any longer to imperil the empire itself. Organized to make war, the Qing state had continued to grow and reform under that impetus, so that, as Peter C. Perdue has argued, the "end to military challenges on the frontier let much dynamism ebb out of the bureaucracy." Qing rulers had pursued administrative centralization, intensive resource extraction, and technological innovation to overmatch their foes abroad and maintain social order at home. With no major rivals on the horizon, "weakness, complacency, and rigidity" began to appear.[22]

To recapitulate, after the conquest of China, controlling the military might of the Mongols remained the single most important dimension of the empire's security, and the challenge posed by the Junghars was therefore met with attention, resources, and strategic innovation qualitatively different than that devoted to other neighboring peoples. Strategies the court was unwilling to contemplate elsewhere—unsolicited embassies, formal treaties, preemptive strikes—were adopted to fight this enemy. Even Qianlong's bitter war against Burma was not comparable.[23] It follows that the most important element in interpreting Qing foreign relations is neither regional exceptionalism nor the fluctuating capacities of the central state—significant as these may be—but rather the way emperors, scholars, and officials understood the risks posed by outside forces. If this is so, the connection between intelligence and strategy, what Qing policy-makers learned and what conclusions they drew from it, requires more attention than it has hitherto received. On the basis of this approach, I argue that no political, cultural-ideological, or economic factor fundamentally divided the reasoning of Qing strategists from that of their peers in other contemporary Eurasian empires. Rather, Qing policy diverged from that of its neighbors, ultimately at great cost to its security, because the Qing had a completely different perception of prevailing geopolitical dynamics and the extent of foreign threats after the conquest of the Junghars in 1757.

This raises a second puzzle: Why did the Qing empire believe itself fundamentally secure after the flight of Amursana and slow its competitive state-building just at the time when empires elsewhere on the continent, including some very near the Qing border, began a frenetic struggle for survival in what has been termed the "first age of global imperialism"?[24] The Seven Years War (1756–1763) saw the emergence of the British East India Company as a major territorial power in India, the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars were a worldwide struggle with implications for virtually every corner of Asia, and the Anglo-Russian "Great Game"

commenced shortly afterward. Intensifying rivalries were by no means limited to European empires: by 1840, almost every polity surrounding the Qing empire, from Macao through continental Southeast Asia, India, and Nepal to Afghanistan and northward to Russia, was deeply enmeshed in interlocking territorial struggles—struggles in which the British empire, and particularly British India, played a central role. Encircled by intensifying warfare and diplomacy, why did the Qing decline to engage in this almost universal maneuvering for alliances, grand strategic plans, and intensive surveillance—activities at which it had excelled only decades earlier—and, to the contrary, even relax its state-building efforts?[25] Why was its geostrategic analysis so out of alignment with prevailing Eurasian trends?

The key to understanding this difference lies in the empire's geographic and geopolitical thought. The Qing state saw the world differently. Difference does not necessarily imply a lack of sophistication in intelligence gathering or information processing. Archival records reveal that the Qing court was informed of at least the outlines of most of the major military engagements fought in the empire's vicinity, including those in India. In many cases, detailed accounts of current affairs abroad were easily obtained from domestic and foreign informants. Moreover, all of these sources fed into a system of centralized information gathering, filing, retrieval, and publication, designed to guide complex logistical and military operations when a need for them was perceived. Qianlong was as much a paper-shuffling "royal bureaucrat" as any of his European contemporaries, with committed, intelligent, and diligent servants.[26]

The reason the Qing government perceived its strategic environment so differently from other Eurasian empires was due primarily to the reciprocal relationship between geopolitical worldviews and strategic thinking. The operations of the Junghars, though carried out across vast distances from western Tibet to Inner Mongolia, were contiguous and relatively easy to track. The nature and structure of the Junghar polity itself caused few problems for elite Qing Manchu and Mongol military advisors, who were familiar with the means and goals of steppe warfare. Moreover, appreciating the depth of the Junghar threat, the court conducted constant surveillance of enemy activities. Once this threat was eliminated, the Qing court's focus turned to maintaining its enlarged territory. On the Inner Asian frontier, the energy devoted to collecting and analyzing intelligence diminished.[27] The central government's attention was atomized across a range of discrete frontiers, and intelligence gathering was limited to threats in the immediate

border area. Although the state largely achieved its goal of keeping the peace without becoming entangled in irrelevant foreign squabbles, it became less able to identify emerging threats even when a substantial amount of information about them was available. British activity in Asia was vastly more challenging to fathom than the Junghar threat had been, requiring noncontiguous military and diplomatic operations to be pieced together and the significance of unfamiliar economic and political institutions to be teased out. The result was mutually reinforcing: only fear of a large-scale threat could justify breaking from frontier policy, but identifying such a threat required the synthesis of information from around the empire, precisely what the frontier-based approach inhibited.

In sum, the most important variable in Qing foreign relations was whether the court and private scholars considered themselves to be facing an assortment of discrete, localized challenges, or a single, integrated crisis involving the empire as a whole. For western European empires in the eighteenth century, it is axiomatic that their rivals would force them to fight on a global scale, so that local contexts could not be viewed in isolation from the interests and goals of the total empire.[28] Recently, scholars of other empires in Europe and Asia have found it useful to identify the "grand strategies" by which rulers determined the overall interests of their large dominions.[29] For most of the period studied in this book, Qing statesmen and scholars never conceived a comprehensive "grand strategy," even at the loosest and most abstract level, one of the reasons their judgments of Qing interests differed so far from the estimations of their neighbors. By reconstructing how Qing rulers and officials saw the world, and the intellectual and political factors that influenced them, these differences are shown to have resulted from responses to external conditions impelled by reasoning not fundamentally different from that guiding the assumptions of their British counterparts. It was not ideology, but the scale of analysis, that set Qing policy-makers apart. Over time, at least some Qing observers shifted from "masterful disengagement" across many small frontiers to a "grand strategy" comparable to that of their major rivals. The trajectory of this change is the story of this book.

Reconstructing Qing Geopolitical Worldviews

The key to the momentous changes described above lies in the worldviews of Qing rulers, ministers, and scholars. To reconstruct their outlooks, it must first be recognized that the worldview underpinning a frontier policy,

in which external developments were seen in regionalized fragments rather than a panoramic vision, was reinforced by a complex of procedures and habits of thought. Three are of particular importance: strategic assumptions about the relationship between the Qing government and neighboring rulers, the structure of the Qing bureaucracy in its intelligence gathering and foreign relations, and the intellectual context of geographic scholarship.

Relations with foreign rulers were viewed as fundamentally bilateral, and the Qing government took pains to maintain neutrality in disputes that did not directly concern its own territory. From the imperial standpoint, the statements of submission and overlordship exchanged with tributary rulers were in no sense mutual defense pacts against third parties, still less aggressive alliances, but rather a device for stabilizing a specific stretch of the Qing border. These policies were designed to maintain the status quo, or, in extreme cases, restore it by force. Except in times of exceptional danger, as this book will demonstrate, the Qing government was reluctant even to contemplate drawing third countries into its relations with a foreign state, either as a useful ally or a common enemy. Acutely aware of the dangers of entanglement in its tributaries' internal factional struggles or external quarrels, the empire reacted only when the zone around its immediate border was imperiled. Unless a major campaign was being contemplated, there was no need for a constant and thorough survey of events much beyond the frontier itself. Furthermore, with so lengthy a border to manage, imperial surveillance was crisis-oriented, and a frontier zone that seemed quiet would rarely attract active scrutiny.

The structure and procedures of the Qing bureaucracy dovetailed with this localized approach to strategic planning. Responsibility for a particular stretch of the frontier and the management of relations with specific polities beyond it devolved upon officials administering adjacent provinces or other territories. In times of unrest, it was the responsibility of such an official to submit intelligence to Beijing together with his interpretation and policy proposals, which would then be considered and perhaps modified by the emperor and his ministers. Coordination was possible at the level of the Grand Council, the empire's highest deliberative body, which could potentially draw together information from several regions to shed light on a particular problem, but this was exceptional. Normally, it was assumed that officials on the spot could collect all the information required to address any local disturbance, and the intelligence they forwarded was generally used on its own terms.

The consequences of this structure must be considered in terms of bureaucratic responsibility. Local officials had great power to mold the court's perceptions of the world, and they understandably did so in ways that fit their interests. Generally speaking, this meant ignoring all but the most pressing frontier problems. Emperors normally considered aggressive behavior by foreign states to be prima facie evidence of poor management by local officials, and at the very least would subject them to careful investigation. Since the court expected the frontier to be quiet, neither the central government nor local officials had incentive to scrutinize superficially peaceful border areas. Bureaucrats best placed to study the outside world thus had the most incentive to remain officially ignorant of it. To acknowledge a problem meant proposing a solution and becoming responsible for its implementation. The larger the problem, the less appealing this responsibility became. It would take an especially diligent, capable, and selfless bureaucrat to scan the horizon for emerging threats and draw these to the court's attention. As we shall see, most officials proposed limited solutions to very narrowly defined problems, and even then only when it was impossible to overlook them.

Frontier policy was underpinned by an assumption of minimalism: that the empire's borderlands could be broken down into regions, that their routine management could be handled by nearby officials using local intelligence and resources, and that such management need not involve constant surveillance of the neighboring state's domestic politics or foreign relations. To the extent that these assumptions proved ill-founded, there was a strong onus on individual bureaucrats to protect their careers (if not their lives) by covering up rather than excavating potential problems. This approach, it should be stressed, was well suited to the economical management of many frontiers with very different local circumstances by a limited bureaucracy. In many cases it indeed produced the kind of benign, routine frontier interactions desired by the court, with relatively little attention from the center.

If strategic and bureaucratic factors already tended to divide imperial foreign relations into segmented frontiers, this approach was reinforced by the empire's methods of studying foreign geography. In so diverse a domain, information arriving from each frontier bore the distinct linguistic and cultural stamp of its region of origin, making it hard to recognize when the significance of a report arriving from one frontier overlapped with that from another. Neither officials nor scholars possessed a standardized framework within which to place in mutual relation all available geopolitical knowledge. Under these conditions, it was almost impossible to assemble many

threads of local data into a coherent tapestry and identify trends working themselves out across several frontiers.

Just as these three factors reinforced each other, so would change in one sphere induce shifts in the others. The artificially limited fields of concern imposed on, and defensively embraced by, the empire's bureaucrats were gradually broken down by the emergence of a parallel community of private statecraft scholars (see Chapter Seven) who were willing and newly able to issue written considerations of the empire's political problems as a whole. The rising power of European empires in Asia, above all the British in India, led to a growing sense of urgency in policy discussion and increasingly detailed inquiries about foreign conditions. Again, it was private scholars who most forcefully emphasized the need for action. As their inquiries advanced and more raw geopolitical intelligence emerged, it increasingly became possible to build a coherent, panoramic vision of China's place in the world. Collectively, non-bureaucratic channels of policy debate, a new consciousness of strategic challenges, and advances in geography broke the monopoly of frontier policy and led to the formulation of a foreign policy that for the first time treated the imperial frontier as a whole.

Of these three crucial elements, Qing geographic worldviews are the most difficult to reconstruct because they relied on modes of scholarly analysis that are unfamiliar and even counterintuitive today, and were formed by numerous sources of information from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Progressively denser networks of information transfer drew together elements from conflicting local perspectives on the outside world into fluctuating and provisional syntheses. Individuals selected from sources of different provenance on the basis of their own judgments of reliability, so that geopolitical worldviews varied widely throughout the empire. In the case of India, where the networks of information collection and interpretation reached all of the empire's frontiers and included contributions not only of private scholars and non-Han imperial elites, but also of sailors, merchants, and a range of foreigners, these outlooks became particularly complex.

Complexity originated in the multitude of apparently incommensurable sources themselves and the genre conventions of the official and unofficial works that circulated them. Linguistic differences meant that the names given to foreign places in one area were often unintelligible in another. Diverging cultural and religious histories had inflected the geographic and political thought of different groups with particular concepts and presumptions. Political loyalties among foreign informants also influenced reports

about, for instance, whether rising British power in India was benign or expansionist. Discussions of the outside world could vary even between individual Chinese provinces, where localized factors—proximity to Europeans at Guangzhou and Macao, for instance, or dense networks of overseas migration in Fujian—could also leave imprints on the base of available knowledge.[30] Transmitting coherent geographic understandings across linguistic and cultural boundaries between regional or intellectual communities was extremely difficult.

Diverse outlooks were further complicated by the networks of knowledge transfer within the Qing state and the scholarly world. The career of any given piece of information was difficult to predict. Among the many strands of information about India crossing the Qing border, some circulated widely throughout the empire by attracting the attention of the highest levels of government, being recorded in a popular work of scholarship, or both. Other strands of knowledge, equally familiar in a certain place or among a certain group, might appear only rarely in documents or books and remain virtually unknown to both the central government and subjects elsewhere in the empire.

It is also necessary to consider "ordinary knowledge" circulating among subjects, which (as David Morgan has remarked in the case of medieval Persia) was likely "rather more extensive than the surviving written evidence may lead us to suppose."[31] More imperial subjects, notably merchants, sailors, and returned sojourners, were professionally familiar with foreign conditions than in any previous period of Chinese history. In general, however, their "practical knowledge," like that of other specialized occupational groups, belonged to the "great variety of knowledge traditions that never reached the written or printed page."[32] This was partly because writing about geography or imperial statecraft was seen to require the high degree of literacy obtained only by literati elites, and partly because those living abroad or in close contact with foreigners had incentives not to advertise their knowledge.[33] To be sure, the Qing state and private scholars were aware that subjects of certain backgrounds could be tapped for critical intelligence via official depositions or records taken down by a literati amanuensis. Still, that merchants, sailors, and emigrants rarely propagated their expertise restricted the knowledge base of the empire, especially given that Chinese communities in Southeast Asia (and from the late eighteenth century in India and the eastern Indian Ocean) often lived in close contact with European imperial administrations. Their "ordinary knowledge" of

emerging political and economic trends had few channels through which to reach the political or scholarly elite—who were often skeptical of the uncorroborated firsthand accounts that did reach them.

The scope, purpose, and conventions of the genre in which geopolitical information was recorded also mattered. This is most obvious for bureaucratic documents, in which officials were responsible for the facts and proposals they advanced and therefore wrote with great circumspection, including only information directly relevant to the administrative problem at hand. An author might well suppress germane but inconvenient aspects of his knowledge. Similar constraints applied to formal reference works, normally by teams of scholars, which had their own strictures of relevance and authority. Here too, authors might be much better informed about current affairs than the constraints of their format allowed them to reveal. Those writing privately possessed greater freedom to cite any source and offer their own opinions and theories, but even here the genre in question—a comprehensive study, a short essay, a brief note in a jottings book, a letter—influenced the analysis and the evidence used.

Genre determined three major modes of analyzing the outside world in the Qing period. The first, operational geography, was employed in Qing state correspondence. Here, officials relied primarily on living informants with local expertise, and gave little attention to scholarship or even government archives. The second mode, scholastic geography, was undertaken exclusively by literati employing textual modes of analysis, usually in the context of state-sponsored research such as the imperial gazetteer. Rigorous rules of evidence required the use of authoritative written sources, often older official works. Here oral inquiries were almost never made, although compilers might cite official documents based on such inquiries. Finally, there was the sphere of private geography, the personal writings of individual authors, the scale and significance of which differed greatly over time depending on prevailing attitudes among officialdom and within the academic community. When intensively pursued, as after 1800, this was the most dynamic, diverse, and comprehensive form of research, unfettered by rigid conventions or bureaucratic restrictions. However, it was a much more diffuse and varied field of inquiry than scholastic or operational geography, and in practice it was almost impossible for any individual to master the vast corpus of geographic writings.

It should be stressed that no single type of source, or even class of source, was comprehensive or universally preferred. Rather, those interested in

geography, and with the requisite access, routinely consulted all three types of material to form their worldviews. Thus, although different genres could at times appear to be products of very different mental worlds insulated from each other, they were in fact different faces of a single field of research more tightly connected than might appear at first glance. It was not uncommon for officials or editors writing in one place under tight genre restraints to reveal elsewhere in personal notes or essays information not hinted at in their more formal pieces. However, though scholars read widely, this multitude of specialized genres meant that geographic writings were often only obliquely in dialogue with each other. Ultimately, developments in one genre influenced the others, but in complex and subtle ways.

No single source alone can be taken as a proxy of Qing worldviews. The diversity of raw data, of interpretation, and of genre meant that no two people approached the question of India and its contemporary situation from quite the same basis of information. Rather than seeking the chimera of *the* Qing perspective on India, which did not exist, or undertaking the impossible task of elucidating the nuances of each individual outlook, this study will track major dialogues and debates within the empire, the various positions adopted by important commentators, their interrelations, and the evolution of outlooks over time as different sources rose and fell in influence.

To draw out connections and coherent trends among this range of outlooks, the following study relies heavily on the analysis of something that today might appear insignificant and dryly philological, but for Chinese officials and scholars formed the most important element for formulating arguments and organizing data: geographic vocabularies, place-names above all. As will be explained in Chapter One, Chinese scholars were conditioned to treat place-names as the foundation of geographic analysis. Virtually all of the fragmented regional and cultural views of India were associated with their own lexicon, arising from different languages and canonical sources. Some terms for India were widely familiar; others found only in writings from a particular region or intellectual background; and still others unique to an individual author. This abundance of place-names proved to be a significant and vexing hurdle in the construction of a coherent picture of the world, but it was a difficulty that Chinese scholars confronted explicitly with extensive analysis. It is also a boon for historians, because place-names mentioned in a piece of writing are, as it were, the fingerprints left on it by the sources the author had consulted. They reveal direct and indirect sources of information; the way they were placed in mutual relation offers insight

into how these various terms were understood by the author, and often reveals the sources most influential for him. The degree to which an author tried to construct a synthetic worldview is a good proxy for the degree to which Qing officials and scholars saw the world as regional fragments or a larger whole.

Plan of the Book

PART ONE. THE QING EMPIRE'S VISION OF THE WORLD

This book begins by exploring the dense texture of information about India circulating within the empire during the first century of Qing rule and the analysis applied to it. Sources and techniques that dominated the study of foreign geography in the first century of Qing rule are examined in the Chapter One, which concentrates on two issues: the way geographic argument proceeded by proposing connections between bodies of evidence that were hard to commensurate, and the corresponding posture of skepticism that led geographic claims to be considered provisional, which I describe as "geographic agnosticism." In place of a single, dominant worldview there circulated a range of competing perspectives on India, including those of authors from the Han to the Ming dynasties, who left an extensive legacy of diverging sources; of Buddhist, Muslim, and Christian writers, who supplied geographic accounts according to their own intellectual and religious traditions; and of Mongol and Tibetan scholars, who influenced the Manchus and then the Han literati. Although elements in all these geographic worldviews cross-pollinated and influenced each other, they retained fundamental differences in their terminology, cosmologies, and religious and political implications. The result can be conceived as a single field of geographic debate held in tension by centrifugal and centripetal forces, but never congealing into a stable synthesis.

PART TWO. FORGING A MULTIETHNIC EMPIRE: THE APEX OF A FRONTIER POLICY

The next three chapters concern the Qianlong period, a time of intensive military and scholarly efforts, during which these centrifugal and centripetal forces each grew stronger. As imperial armies moved into distant and unfamiliar regions, new reports about India expressed in unfamiliar vocabular-

ies arrived at court. Matching the growing variety of information was the unexampled personal interest of the emperor, as a scholar and patron, in synthesizing geographic knowledge. Multilingual teams were assembled to translate, process, and interpret information that Qianlong's generals had gathered, while Manchu and Chinese officials mapped the terrain beyond the empire's boundaries with the aid of indigenous informants and Jesuit missionaries. Yet even these magnificent labors synthesized only a small part of available information about India.

In the 1750s and 1760s, looking outward from the vantage point of southern Xinjiang, the Qing state encountered India chiefly as "Hindustan." Decades later, during the drive to expel the Nepali Gurkhas from Tibet between 1788 and 1793, part of the territory earlier called Hindustan came to be described in different, Tibetan vocabularies. On the coast, under the influence of European languages and Chinese dialects, still other terms for contemporary India prevailed. Only in the 1790s did the first intimations emerge that localized intelligence gathering was inadequate to understand sprawling British imperialism in Asia. Because the aftermath of war in the Himalayas coincided with the arrival in 1793 of a British envoy, Lord Macartney, the Qing court was forced to address the connection between the country of Yingjili he represented and the tribe of the Pileng (Farangi, European) recently discovered in Bengal. Drawing on various channels of intelligence, the Qianlong court was able to ascertain the apparent kinship of these two groups, but this understanding remained vague and did not influence their foreign relations strategy. For the ensuing five decades, policies toward the Bengali Pileng and the Yingjili at Guangzhou were formulated in isolation.

PART THREE. THE AGE OF TRANSITION, 1800–1838

By the first decades of the nineteenth century the Qing court's fragmented view of the world was increasingly out of step with the strategic and military concerns of its Asian and European neighbors. The British empire became the single most powerful force on the southern Qing frontier. For most foreign observers in contact with the Qing, this constituted a revolution in Asia's balance of power that demanded a proportional response from Beijing. Messages to this effect, together with reports about contact with British India, made their way to the Qing court by various channels, each in the geographic idiom of its regional context. Though seen in its parts, British expansion in

India was not seen as a whole, and the deep anti-British fears common elsewhere in Asia did not come to grip the emperor or his highest ministers.

For a new type of geopolitical worldview to emerge, reciprocal adjustments were required in geographic knowledge, the structure of policymaking, and strategic assumptions. These began to occur after 1800; their emergence is described in Chapters Five and Six. After the Qianlong era, Han Chinese literati were liberated from many of the restraints that had impeded their study of geography and frontier affairs. Free to grapple with an unprecedented range of materials, they increasingly viewed the empire's frontier as an integrated panorama, and came to recognize the ubiquity of British imperial activity. Attention to the opium trade and the fiscal and command structures behind it led them to identify a nearby network of Asian territories ruled by England. Pulling this thread led Chinese scholars to discover that the Indian ports known collectively at Guangzhou as "Gangjiao" were in fact territories historically known as India. Once the concept of "British India" became available, its importance as the financial and military cornerstone of the British empire quickly became apparent.

PART FOUR. FOREIGN POLICY AND ITS LIMITS

For some scholars, this recognition led to a fundamental reconsideration of Qing geographic and strategic practices. Foremost of these was the influential policy analyst Wei Yuan, who argued that the empire's fragmented outlook had fatally hindered its capacity to identify and meet the British threat. The findings of his predecessors and the fruits of wartime intelligence gathering (described in Chapter Seven) constituted a critical mass of information that allowed Wei to integrate the empire's geographic knowledge, a goal that had eluded his predecessors. From his pen emerged a standardized system for referring to foreign place-names, raising some to prominence and casting others into obscurity. For Wei Yuan, the corollary of this revolution in geographic knowledge was a comparable integration of the empire's foreign policy. What had once seemed like discrete frontiers with local concerns, he argued, were in fact fronts in a larger war. Breaking with earlier practice—although he massaged his historical accounts to disguise this fact—Wei argued that the Qing needed to build coalitions against its one major enemy, the British empire. The centerpiece of his plan was to induce Nepal, Burma, and Russia to descend upon India as Qing allies, and together with Indians themselves push the British back into the sea. Bereft of

opium revenues and sepoys, England could pose no threat to China. What he was proposing, in other words, was that the Qing empire menace India using the strategy some English observers feared Russia would deploy in the "Great Game."

To adapt to foreign imperialism, Qing foreign relations became more centralized in the decades after the Opium War, and the drawbacks of fractured policy-making among various territorial officials became obvious. This was part of the reason the Qing government established its first "foreign office," the Zongli Yamen.[34] Nonetheless, Wei Yuan's more radical idea of a tightly integrated empire operating in close alliances with foreign powers was not adopted. One factor was certainly the inherent caution of Qing bureaucrats, who did not wish to risk their careers and possibly their lives to advocate costly measures that could end in disaster. Another was the limitations of the state's military and financial resources and the known unreliability of potential allies. The imperial government recognized Qing weakness more keenly than Wei.

Choices facing the Qing empire after 1840 were not simply a failed but familiar strategic model and one that was effective or "modern." The challenge was how to balance local needs and conditions with the emergence of empire-wide strategic considerations. To maintain control over its frontiers, the Qing state needed the resources and cooperation of local leaders. The logic of the frontier policy, foregrounding local needs, remained a source of strength and stability. Neither a frontier policy nor a foreign policy was tenable in its purest form. Finding the correct balance between them in the face of changing external conditions remained a major problem as the Qing government became a Chinese one.

A Note on "India"

This book uses the word "India" to refer to the region more commonly known in current scholarship as South Asia. I have decided to preserve the former term out of fidelity to the book's Chinese and Manchu sources. As Qing scholars were keenly aware, "Asia" was a European geographic concept. Its validity was controversial, and most were reluctant to adopt it. By contrast, the English word "India" derives from the same etymological root as the most common Chinese terms for that region (as well as comparable terms in Mongolian and Manchu). The felicitous conjunction of English and Chinese usage extends to the word's geographical flexibility. In both languages, in the

period under study, the boundaries of "India" were vague. In this sense as well it is a better fit than the misleadingly technical "South Asia."

For many of the decades under study, India was a patchwork of competing powers. How far and on what levels it makes sense to conceive of India as a unified entity in the abstract is a question beyond the scope of this study.[35] For the present study, "India" makes sense as a unit of analysis for two reasons. First, almost all subjects of the Qing empire conceived of India as a coherent geographic concept that did not depend for its existence on political unity. Independent states within its bounds were generally understood to be components of a larger India. Moreover, because this study concentrates on Qing understandings of the process by which the British empire conquered India piece by piece over the course of decades, it is first necessary to study how the areas that would come under British rule were understood in the period before their conquest. For this reason, the "India" that is the target of this study more or less conforms to the territory under direct or indirect British rule on the subcontinent by 1860 (excluding Burma). Comparatively little attention is given to southern India since, certain ports excepted, it had little contact with the Qing empire. Occasionally other territories not under direct British control by 1860—chiefly Nepal, Kashmir, and eastern Afghanistan—will form part of our analysis due to the crucial role they played as intermediaries between the Qing empire and India. Needless to say, the term "India" as used in this study bears no anachronistic relation to the borders of the current Republic of India.