

Official Seals on the Russian-Qing Treaties: Material Manifestations and Visual Enunciations

Authors : Ning Chia

Abstract : Each of the three different language texts (Manchu, Russian, and Latin) of the 1689 Treaty of Nerchinsk bore official seals from Imperial Russia and Qing China. These seals have received no academic attention, yet they can reveal a site of a layered and shared material, cultural, political, and diplomatic world of the time in Eastern Eurasia. The very different seal selections from both empires while ratifying the Treaty of Beijing in 1860 have obtained no scholarly advertency either; they can also explicate a tremendously changed relationship with visual and material manifestation. Exploring primary sources in Manchu, Russian, and Chinese languages as well as the images of the visual seals, this study investigates the reasons and purposes of utilizing official seals for the treaty agreement. A refreshed understanding of Russian-Qing diplomacy will be developed by pursuing the following aspects: (i) Analyzing the iconographic meanings of each seal insignia and unearthing a competitive, yet symbols-delivered and seal-generated, 'dialogue' between the two empires (ii) Contextualizing treaty seals within the historical seal cultures, and discovering how domestic seal system in each empire's political institution developed into treaty-defined bilateral relations (iii) Expounding the seal confiding in each empire's daily governing routines, and annotating the trust in the seal as a quested promise from the opponent negotiator to fulfill the treaty terms (iv) Contrasting the two seal traditions along two civilization-lines, Eastern vs. Western, and dissecting how the two styles of seal emblems affected the cross-cultural understanding or misunderstanding between the two empires (v) Comprehending the history-making events from the substantial resources such as the treaty seals, and grasping why the seals for the two treaties, so different in both visual design and symbolic value, were chosen in the two relationship eras (vi) Correlating the materialized seal 'expression' and the imperial worldviews based on each empire's national/or power identity, and probing the seal-represented 'rule under the Heaven' assumption of China and Russian rising role in 'European-American imperialism ... centered on East Asia' (Victor Shmagin, 2020). In conclusion, the impact of official seals on diplomatic treaties needs profound knowledge in seal history, insignia culture, and emblem belief to be able to comprehend. The official seals in both Imperial Russia and Qing China belonged to a particular statecraft art in a specific material and visual form. Once utilized in diplomatic treaties, the meticulously decorated and politically institutionalized seals were transformed from the determinant means for domestic administration and social control into the markers of an empire's sovereign authority. Overlooked in historical practice, the insignia seal created a wire of 'visual contest' between the two rival powers. Through this material lens, the scholarly knowledge of the Russian-Qing diplomatic relationship will be significantly upgraded. Connecting Russian studies, Qing/Chinese studies, and Eurasian studies, this study also ties material culture, political culture, and diplomatic culture together. It promotes the study of official seals and emblem symbols in worldwide diplomatic history.

Keywords : Russia-Qing diplomatic relation, Treaty of Beijing (1860), Treaty of Nerchinsk (1689), Treaty seals

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