

A Comparison of the Corrupt Governments of France and China During the 16th-18th Century

Siyao Li^{1,a,*}

¹*Moonshot Academy, Beijing, 102208, China*

a. evali@moonshotacademy.cn

**corresponding author*

Abstract: This paper primarily examines the corruptive government systems in France and China during the 16th century. It begins by introducing the individual characteristics of corruption within each government, then moving on to comparison. This study aims to contribute additional resources and insights to the existing body of research on this topic, thereby aiding fellow researchers in their investigations. The methodology used in this research is literature review, which forms the basis for the exploration and understanding of the topic. This approach allows for a detailed examination of the various facets of governmental corruption in both countries. By doing so, this work not only delineates the specific characteristics of each government's corruption but also draws parallels and contrasts between them, offering a nuanced perspective on the nature and manifestation of corruption in different historical and cultural contexts. The conclusion drawn is that while both governments can be characterized as corrupt, they exhibit distinct features that set them apart.

Keywords: Bourbon dynasty, Qing dynasty, Corruption

1. Introduction

As individuals gain more authority, they also bear greater responsibility. However, there is one circumstance where this assumption cannot be achieved, and that is the situation of corruption. Corruption can be defined as the dishonorable and illegal actions conducted by individuals in positions of authority or power. Corruptive behaviors can be found in seemingly tranquil governments worldwide due to the unique and influential factors within each country. For instance, the absolute monarchy in France's Bourbon Dynasty and the corruption enabled by the legal framework in China's Qing Dynasty serve as typical examples. The research objective of this paper is to examine the different corrupt government systems in Bourbon dynasty France and Qing Dynasty China, and subsequently compare the similarities and differences between them. The author utilized a literature review methodology to analyze the distinct characteristics of each country's corrupt government, and then identify their common features and differentiating factors. This study, which delves into a comparative analysis of the cultural and historical aspects of the feudal systems in the Qing and Bourbon dynasties, contributes to valuable sources to fellow scholars, by expanding their resources and deepening their understandings of these historical periods.

2. Bourbon and Qing's Corruptive Political System

2.1. Bourbon Dynasty of France

2.1.1. Aristocrats' Heavy Association with the French Government

Participation and support of aristocratic families to government in the French Bourbon dynasty were of great importance. The Bourbon dynasty relied on the involvement of aristocratic family members to garner support and advocacy for the King's policies [1]. Additionally, the government heavily depended on financial support from noble families, particularly in the areas of military science and commercial activities. This support allowed the government to operate efficiently in accordance with the King's wishes. Aristocrats were motivated not only by their loyalty to the King but also by their desire to enhance their prestige in society. Their participation and support in government were rewarded with titles and honors, adding to their wealth. In summary, the relationship between the government and aristocrats was mutually beneficial. However, from the perspective of the lower-class population, this relationship might be seen as corrupt and unequal.

2.1.2. Absolutism of French Monarch

The French Bourbon dynasty serves as a quintessential example of absolutism. This absolutist regime was significantly bolstered through a crucial event: the conversion of Henry IV to Catholicism [2]. This strategic move not only helped stabilize the religious conflicts within France but also fortified the King's legitimacy and his undisputed status in the eyes of the people. Henry IV's actions directly contributed to the establishment of a harmonious balance between the authority of the King and that of the divine, reinforcing the concept of absolute sovereignty and the divine rights bestowed upon the monarch. Religion played a pivotal role in emphasizing the principles of absolutism [1]. Within this framework, the King's power occupied an unparalleled and supreme position. There existed no institutions or individuals capable of limiting or intervening in the monarch's authority, granting the King the unchecked power to govern the entire nation according to his own will. The absolute monarchy led the autocratic dynasty.

2.1.3. The Failure to Fight Corruption

In order to avoid corruption from damaging the Bourbon dynasty, efforts had been made. Between 1716 and 1717, the construction of a temporary court, the Chamber of Justice, came out [1]. As defined by *Dictionnaire des Finances*, the Chamber of Justice was an “extraordinary tribunal[s] established by commission of the king, lasting a certain time for the investigation of wrongdoing committed in [royal] finance.” The Chamber of Justice was focused on supervising and punishing corruption cases. There were cases that showed the success of this creation, such as indicting a dozen of financiers, and punishing around 4000 people by using royal fines. This court avenged people who had been oppressed by financiers, besides, it restituted the crimes of those financiers back to the king, paying the debt left by the former king. But the Chamber of Justice was abruptly shut down without considering there were still cases that haven't been fixed. There were disputes that argued the Chamber of Justice was a means to achieve financial goals or means to “restored order” in its finance for the monarchy. The abrupt shut down may be associated with the destabilized political status and the financial burden of Bourbon dynasty [3].

2.2. Qing Dynasty of China

2.2.1. Corruptive Manchu Officials and Nobles in Qing's Government

At the end of the Ming Dynasty, it only took one generation for the Manchu to initiate a brand-new era for themselves, known as the Qing Dynasty. Although the Manchu and the Han Chinese blended after the Manchu takeover of the central plains of China, the Manchu continued to maintain greater control over both power and finance [4]. Specifically, it was the eight-banner system created by the Manchu that allowed their excessive power and corruption. The eight-banner system, which was hereditary among the noble bannermen, was tightly interconnected as a whole. Each individual within the system enjoyed privileges such as earning a salary and having the opportunity to become a government official. Initially, this factor contributed to the Qing government's strong cohesion compared to previous dynasties. However, over time, the eight-banner system became a cradle for corruption, and ultimately became one leading factor in the dynasty's downfall.

2.2.2. Absolute Monarchy of Qing Dynasty

Monarchy can be defined as an "absolute monarchy" where the monarch holds unrestricted power [4]. This means that the ruler's will is not constrained, directly impacting the fundamental direction of a country. Unfortunately, in order to maintain the delicate balance of authority, the importance of being incorruptible was overshadowed by loyalty to the emperor. Generally, as long as loyalty existed, monarchs often turned a blind eye to corrupt behaviors. Qianlong Emperor serves as an example, as he placed great emphasis on the loyalty of his officials. He praised and rewarded those who displayed loyalty to him. Qianlong believed in the significance of loyalty due to his strong adherence to Confucian values, which he considered key principles for the Chinese people to follow. Loyalty and obedience were seen as vital qualities. Moreover, embracing these values further enhanced the validity of Qianlong's rule [5].

2.2.3. Dysfunction of the Monitoring System and Rampant Contribution System

To delve deeper into the topic, another factor caused by the absolute monarchy in the Chinese government is the monitoring system. The focus of the supervisory department is to oversee government officials and prevent the occurrence of corruption, which was initially established for a positive purpose. However, in the Qing Dynasty, the control over the supervisory department was lacking. The monitoring system was closely tied to the monarch himself, making it highly dependent on the wisdom of the emperor. If the emperor was excessively wicked, there was little the monitoring system could do to halt the wrongdoings. They were powerless to restrain their ruler. In addition, the examination system also played a significant role. To obtain the opportunity to study or become government officials, individuals would sometimes resort to purchasing positions that they could not obtain through personal merits alone. This practice was common and accepted in the Qing Dynasty due to the government's reliance on the resources individuals could provide, such as finance or food supply. The pursuit of becoming a government official was highly valued in society as it was seen to elevate one's social status, accrue wealth, and establish a prosperous family. Consequently, these two systems contributed to the increasing prevalence and normalization of corruption within the government[4].

3. Comparison of Their Corruptive Political System

3.1. Similarities

The French Bourbon Dynasty and the Chinese Qing Dynasty exhibit notable parallels, particularly in their tendencies towards corruption. Both dynasties maintained close ties with aristocratic families. In the case of the Qing Dynasty, this privileged group was the Manchu people. Similarly, the Bourbon dynasty relied heavily on the aristocracy for support, creating a reciprocal relationship between the two. This interdependence was evident in the Qing Dynasty, where the elevated social status of the Manchu people granted them significant advantages over the Han population. Such disparities contributed to the corrupt nature of the Qing government. In both instances, the reliance on and the needs of the aristocracy led to an inherent weakness within the dynastic structure itself.

3.2. Differences

While the French Bourbon Dynasty and the Chinese Qing Dynasty shared certain similarities, they also exhibited distinct differences in their systems. One key area of divergence was in the nature and impact of the absolute power put into force by their respective rulers. The Bourbon dynasty placed a strong emphasis on the legitimacy and authority derived from religion. In contrast, the Qing Dynasty's emperor prioritized the loyalty of his officials, with less focus on maintaining a corruption-free administration. Another crucial difference lies in their approaches to combating corruption. The Bourbon dynasty attempted to address corruption through its "Chamber of Justice." However, this initiative ultimately failed, largely due to societal criticism. On the other hand, the Qing Dynasty's efforts to tackle corruption were directly tied to the emperor's will, leading to a degree of unpredictability in their anti-corruption measures. These contrasting approaches highlight the diversity in the corruptive systems of both dynasties.

4. Conclusion

This paper has focused on the corrupt government systems of France and China during the 16th century. Initially, it provided an individual analysis of each government, followed by a comparative examination. The conclusion drawn is that while both governments can be characterized as corrupt, they exhibit distinct features that set them apart. For further specificity, future research could delve into case studies of typical corruption incidents in both dynasties. Additional discussion would also serve to deepen the exploration of this topic.

References

- [1] Shennan, J. H. (2007). *The Bourbons [M]*. Bloomsbury Continuum.
- [2] Wolfe, M. (1987). *The Conversion of Henri IV and the Origins of Bourbon Absolutism*. *Historical Reflections / Réflexions Historiques*, 14(2), 287–309. Retrieved from <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41298881>
- [3] Goldner, E. (2013). *Corruption on Trial : Money, Power, and Punishment in France's Chambre de Justice of 1716*. *Crime, Histoire & Sociétés*, 17(1), 5–28. <https://doi.org/10.4000/chs.1407>
- [4] Gao & Zhang. (2006). *Analysis on the causes of official corruption in Qing Dynasty*. *Academia Bimestris*(02), 64-74.
- [5] Chan, W.-M. (2000). *The Qianlong Emperor's New Strategy in 1775 to Commend Late-Ming Loyalists*. *Asia Major*, 13(1), 109–137. Retrieved from <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41645557>