Empire and Environment in the Making of Manchuria

EDITED BY NORMAN SMITH

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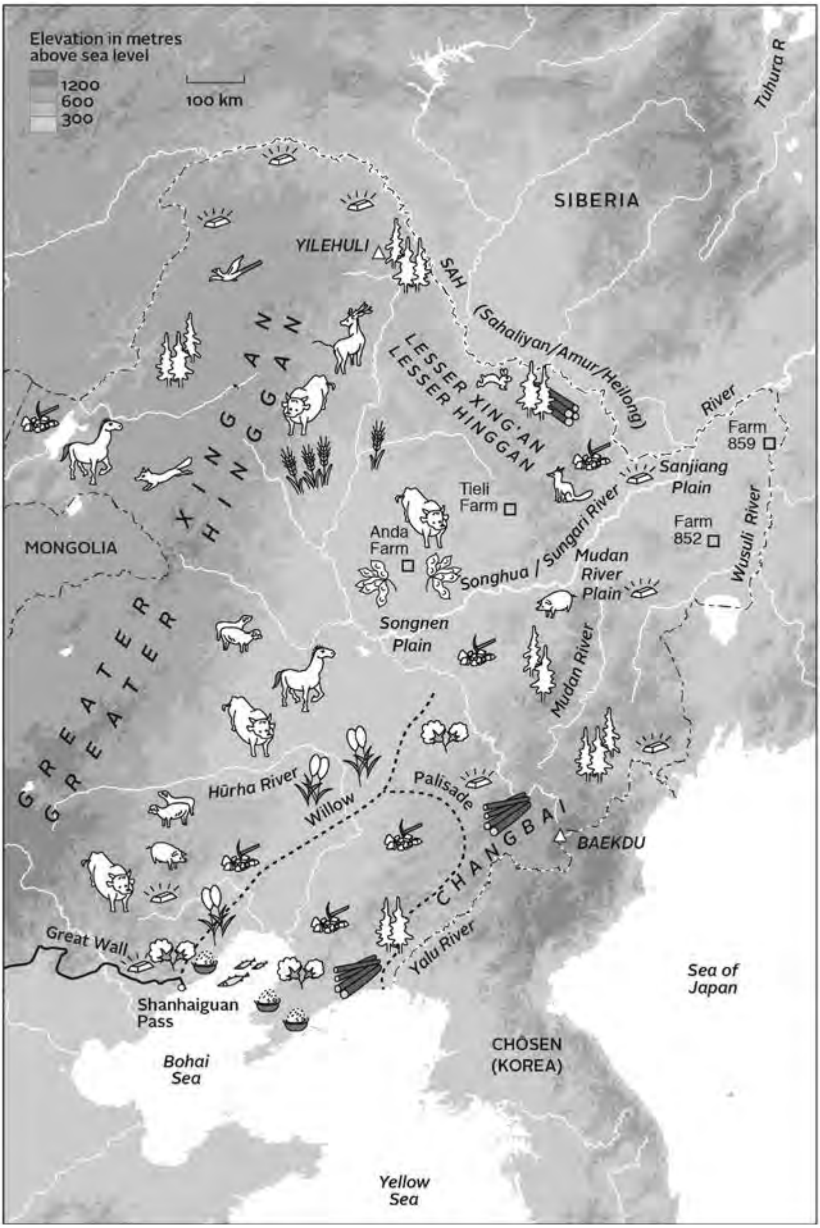

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Introduction

Norman Smith

In the early decades of the twentieth century, Japanese- and English-language commentators characterized the vast lands of Northeast China, then known as Manchuria, as a "Land of Opportunities," a "Promised Land," and the "Cockpit of Asia."[1] Within China, it was more commonly known as the land "beyond the passes" or the Three Eastern Provinces.[2] "Manchuria" conjured up images of far-away adventure, romance, and wealth for the foreigners who most widely used the term, while Chinese nationalists came to view the term as an embodiment of foreign imperialism and "Manchus" as an ethnonym linking them to their ancestral home.[3] The number of names applied to the region attests to a centuries-long contestation over its sovereignty. From the 1600s until the mid-twentieth century, sovereignty over Manchuria was challenged by Manchu, Russian, and Japanese empires, Chinese warlords, Soviet invaders, and finally by Chinese nationalists and communists. Mass migrations of people from across Eurasia, lured by Manchuria's rich resources, vast territory, and relatively sparse population, transformed the region from a Manchu homeland to a quixotic imperial frontier or borderland and, now, one of China's "Four Economic Engines."[4]

This volume advances new understandings of Manchurian history through two unifying themes: empire building and the environment. While the former has been the focus of previous volumes on Manchuria, the latter has been more rarely, so the chapters in this book direct the reader's attention to a multiplicity of colonizing agendas *as well as* human interactions with the environment to highlight significances over a period of four centuries.[5] The region's history has been forged at the interstices of Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Manchu, Mongolian, and Russian states within a diverse array of regimes, including colonial, agricultural, economic, military, moral, and penal, as represented in chapters of this volume.[6] Each regime sought control over the region's resources and engaged in a range of conflicting sovereignty claims, in what Jonathan Schlesinger has termed a "commercial dynamism of the frontiers."[7] For historians, Manchuria offers a unique space to study Manchu and Russian imperialism, Japanese fascism, and Chinese communism. A study of Manchuria also allows for research into farming, resource extraction, northern identity, and the interconnections between them. Such research reveals regional significances that have been obscured for decades. Today, even with over 100 million residents (almost one-tenth of China's population), Manchuria continues to be denigrated as a cultural backwater, if not the imagined "empty space" of earlier times. *Empire and Environment in the Making of Manchuria* questions the ways that control over Manchuria was linked to its distinctive environmental conditions. How did these conditions shape the rivalries of those who sought to claim Manchuria for their own? The answers to this question posit Manchuria as a major factor in the modern history of China and East Asia from a perspective that goes beyond the immediately political.

Imperial Approaches to Manchurian Environment

"Manchuria" (*Manzhou*) is a controversial name given to the homeland of the Jurchen peoples whom Hong Taiji (1592–1643) banded together under the name "Manchu" (*Manzu*) to form the last imperial dynasty in China, the Qing (1644–1912).[8] Once the dynasty was firmly established, the Kangxi emperor (1654–1722) and his successors attempted to seal off the area to protect "Manchu" heritage and prevent the Sinicization of local peoples such as the Daur, Ewenk, and Oroqen; Evelyn Rawski notes that these latter groups were "culturally 'Manchuized'" during Qing rule.[9] For two hundred years, efforts were made to keep Han Chinese migrants from the multi-ethnic region that the Manchus claimed as their own. The Great Wall and Willow Palisade, Qing statutes, and the region's famously ferocious winters initially succeeded, to an extent, in limiting Chinese migration, especially to the northernmost regions of Jilin and Heilongjiang.

During those years, the land marked as the Manchu people's homeland – an area far greater in extent than their foraging grounds – acquired the name "Manchuria," which Mark Elliott has termed a "troublesome toponym,"[10] a product of Manchu-Jesuit cartographic projects, designed to distinguish the region from "China proper."[11] The most egregious application of the term was by Japanese and Russian imperialists, through their efforts to permanently sever the region from Chinese control. Perhaps the least egregious use was by Manchu royals, who in the early 1930s saw in the term a chance to regain mastery over their namesake land from a Chinese warlord. For each group, "Manchuria" was a toponym reflecting questionable sovereignty claims. Over the past several decades, the term "Manchuria," once widely used, has fallen into disfavour in China as a token of the region's imperialist past – yet it is suggestive of a regional identity that continues to exist.[12] In the early 1960s, in a Chinese Communist Party (CCP) internal document (*neibu wenjian*), historian Sun Wenliang argued that the term *Manzhou* dated to Nurhaci (1559–1626), was prevalent by the Qianlong emperor's era (r. 1735–96), and was improperly used from at least then to the time of his writing. Sun stressed that *Man* could no more denote a country name (*guohao*) than that of an area (*diyu*).[13] He stressed that the term was properly only the name of an ethnic group (*zucheng*), and that ongoing improper usage was due to mistaken understandings of the term in magazines, books, and common speech, as well as ongoing political manipulation by Japanese and American imperialists, which forced him to clarify that the proper usage of the term was *Manzu* for a people and not *Manzhou* for a region. Clearly, CCP members required instruction that the term, though widely used, was to be deemed politically incorrect.

"Manchuria" is used in this volume to reflect the term's historical applications and the distinct status of the region before it came to be treated as a constituent part of the Chinese nation. How successful were the Manchus at securing the land that came to bear their name? Their control over it, and their coordination of the local peoples, enabled them to replace the moribund Ming Dynasty (1368–1644) and establish a regime that lasted for nearly three hundred years as the Qing Dynasty. But in the eighteenth century, as ecological and cultural pressures arising from the region's successful incorporation increased, waves of Han Chinese migrants began to surge in and out of Manchuria, while Russian and Japanese expansionism threatened the region's borders.[14] Faced with few choices as the long-term ambitions of the Russians and the Japanese became clearer, Qing rulers reluctantly allowed Han Chinese migration, heightening tensions in the region in the Age of Imperialism, when – unlike recent decades – Manchuria attracted a great deal of international attention.[15]

In 1888, H.E.M. James (1846–1923) remarked in *The Long White Mountain* that Manchuria was "the scene of a great conflict in the past, for supremacy over Eastern Asia, and perhaps of a still greater [one] in the future. Manchuria merits alike the attention of historical students and contemporary statesmen."[16] His observation almost certainly inspired Owen Lattimore (1900–89), who, having travelled extensively through the region in the 1920s and 1930s, formulated his important "reservoir theory," in which he conceptualizes Manchuria as a historic source for the Inner Asian invasion of China. This theory would establish Lattimore as a leading figure of frontier studies.[17] Thomas Barfield argued that "Manchuria, for political and ecological reasons, was the breeding ground for foreign dynasties when native dynasties collapsed in the face of internal rebellions."[18] Even in 1929, the significance of Manchuria was lauded by Frederick Simpich (1878–1950) in *National Geographic Magazine:* "Here, through turbulent years, three ancient empires met – the Bear, the Dragon, and the Rising Sun. Their struggles shook the earth. Korea succumbed, absorbed by the Rising Sun; the Dragon mothered Manchuria. War mangled the Bear, and to the north rose an evanescent Far Eastern Republic."[19]

These men argued, in no uncertain terms, that great changes with worldly significance were being wrought in Manchuria, "The Wild West of the Far East"[20] – a land that was simultaneously a "frontier" or "borderland" and a "contact zone" for peoples from China, Japan, Korea, Russia, and beyond. Mark Elliott, in his recent analysis of words approximating "frontier" and "borderland" in Chinese and Manchu, argues the continued relevance of Lattimore's description of Manchuria as a "zone of contestation."[21] Mary Louise Pratt's concept of the contact zone – "social spaces where disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination" – is also pertinent to the study of Manchuria.[22] Pratt argues that such "peripheral" zones can produce effects unanticipated in the imperial metropolis.[23] The chapters in this volume demonstrate how successive waves of disparate cultures were attracted to Manchuria's environment, over which and within which they grappled with one another (and the environment itself) in a heavily contested zone, often with dramatic ramifications beyond the region's borders.[24]

In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, two expansionist empires – the Qing and the Romanov – clashed over the settling of their borders. Pamela Kyle Crossley has argued that the Qing "was an empire, one of the largest, most powerful and influential of the early modern period."[25] Ho

Ping-ti has called it "the most successful dynasty of conquest in Chinese history."[26] According to Evelyn S. Rawski, the Qing owed its rise to power to "its ability to use its cultural links with the non-Han peoples of Inner Asia and to differentiate the administration of the non-Han regions from the administration of the former Ming provinces."[27] A powerful multi-ethnic Qing empire then faced its Romanov counterpart; both empires expanded with the settling – and sharing – of Manchuria's borders. The empires grew in what Li Narangoa and Robert Cribb have labelled a "twin story," incorporating peoples and lands at a remarkable pace.[28] Manchuria held a special place in both regimes. The Qing treated the region as a Manchu imperial reserve *par excellence* (notwithstanding the presence of twenty to thirty ethnic groups and subgroups).[29] For the Romanov, the region was a fount of considerable wealth, initially in furs, and later a vital link to a year-round, ice-free Asian seaport.[30] Qing policies, while effective for the dynasty's early modern ambitions, led in time to unanticipated imperialist contention over Manchuria's sovereignty.

Early Qing-Romanov treaties, notably Nerchinsk in 1689 and Kiakhta in 1727, permitted a supplicant Russia special, limited rights. European powers from farther afield and, later, Japan, would subsequently wage much larger wars in order to exploit these rights as victors.[31] Qing and Romanov histories entwined, but not always as peacefully as the treaties might suggest. Subsequent treaties in 1858 and 1860, following humiliating Chinese defeats, transferred vast tracts of land to Russia, demonstrating just how weak the Qing dynasty had become. In *International Rivalries in Manchuria (1689–1922),* Paul Hibbert Clyde describes Chinese and Russian tensions in Manchuria over the *longue durée.* Clyde is especially critical of the vicious treatment of local peoples by the Russians, which, he argues, undermined Russian efforts to bring the local population peaceably into the tsarist empire. Clyde's view receives qualified support from David A. Bello in this volume.[32] R.K.I. Quested, too, argues that the Chinese and Russian empires shared uneasy borders that necessitated treaties of reconciliation because ongoing quests for land and resources pitted them against one another.[33] S.C.M. Paine stresses how Russia repeatedly violated these treaties as Qing power declined.[34] More recently, Rui Hua has argued that the Russian occupation of south Manchuria in the aftermath of the Boxer Rebellion was characterized by more collaborationism between Russians and local populations than was the case earlier in northern and western Manchuria and, in fact, paved the way for later collaboration with the Japanese.[35]

Scholarship on the Russian presence in Manchuria highlights the significance of railways and the culture of Harbin, one of the largest Manchurian cities and an important railway hub in Heilongjiang. To celebrate the twenty-fifth anniversary of Russia's founding of the Chinese Eastern Railway (CER) (est. 1896), E.Kh. Nilus published a historical survey that described the CER as an economic, civilizing, and beneficial force in the development of the region.[36] Felix Patrikeeff and Harold Shukman's *Railways and the Russo-Japanese War* emphasizes the "railway imperialism" through which both Russia and Japan sought to settle Manchuria as their own; this is also the focus of Bruce Elleman and Stephen Kotkin's *Manchurian Railways and the Opening of China*.[37] Patrikeeff and Shukman argue that the Russo-Japanese War (1904–5) was a "watershed event" as decisive as Waterloo, though now mostly forgotten.[38] The long-term Russian presence in Manchuria has perhaps best been illustrated in monographs on the Russo-Chinese culture of Harbin, which stress the roles played by Russians in Manchuria and by Manchurians in Russia in the decade before and after the revolution of 1917, as Harbin became a centre for tsarist loyalists and a truly international city.[39] There, the increasingly common sight of Russians working for the Chinese as labourers or sex workers led many to view the city as the "grave of the white man's prestige."[40] Harbin, the "Paris of the East," thus named for its European, cosmopolitan flavour, contributed to the creation of a "distinct regional identity" that still exists today.[41]

Ultimately, the Russian state's ambitions in Manchuria cost Russia dearly, as Japan decisively defeated Russia in 1905, in the first modern war in which an Asian country defeated what was then widely perceived as a European one. This war was notable in three other ways as well. First, it gave birth to a new terror: war in the trenches, with machine guns and barbed wire that presaged the calamitous Great War in Europe (1914–18). Second, the defeat in Manchuria, distant though it may have been to most, inspired revolutionaries around the world and set Manchuria firmly on the world's radar. Vladimir Lenin (1870–1924) noted: "The catastrophe of our vilest enemy signifies not only the approach of Russian freedom. It also portends a new revolutionary upsurge of the European proletariat … Progressive, advanced Asia has struck a blow at retarded, reactionary Europe."[42] Lenin explicitly linked the Russian loss in Manchuria with the revolution that would replace tsarist rule with a communist regime. Third, the war spurred the Qing court to permit large-scale Chinese migration to Manchuria in order to prevent further attempts at external appropriation, in what has been called "a migration perhaps without parallel in recorded history."[43] The Russian and Japanese contestation over Manchuria attracted international attention. To date, however, the early- to mid-twentieth-century Russian presence in Manchuria has not attracted the degree of critical attention it deserves, overshadowed as it has been by the harsh Soviet invasion of Manchuria in 1945 and the subsequent cooling of Sino-Soviet relations. Soviet and Russian historians have generally ignored the topic,[44] while historians in China have tended to downplay the Russians' presence in Manchuria. Two of the chapters in this volume (by David A. Bello and Blaine Chiasson) highlight Russian involvement in the region's history and the varied agendas of tsarist and Soviet regimes, as demonstrated in their studies of tribute collection and farming practices.

The collapse of the Qing Dynasty in 1912 ushered in a period of Chinese warlord rule that lasted for two decades, until the Japanese invaded in 1931. The following year, Harry L. Kingman further outlined the development of "railway diplomacy" over the control of Manchuria's rail system, which had fuelled Chinese nationalism and created the context for a Japanese invasion to protect Japanese regional investments.[45] Gavan McCormack and Ronald Suleski have demonstrated how ruler Zhang Zuolin (1878–1928) secured a respectable level of stability in the early 1920s while overseeing the expansion of the railways, the creation of the largest munitions factory in China, and, for a while, a flourishing economy.[46] As the chapters in this volume make clear, Chinese rule over Manchuria during this period was made even more complex by continuing Russian and Japanese interests. In 1922, as a harbinger of events to come, Japanese officials of the South Manchuria Railway (SMR / Ja., *Mantetsu*) (est. 1907) lauded Manchuria as "The Garden of China," citing it as "the most favored [*sic*] spot for agriculture in the Far East."[47]

The Japanese invasion of Manchuria in 1931 capped a decades-long struggle for dominance in the region.[48] Japan's "incremental" empire building, especially through the SMR, is the focus of Yoshihisa Tak Matsusaka's *The Making of Japanese Manchuria.*[49] The SMR is also the subject of John Young's *Research Activities of the South Manchurian Railway Company, 1907–1945,* which examines the conglomerate's wide-ranging activities. It operated rail lines, hospitals, schools, and research facilities that produced massive collections of statistics tarnished by their imperialist provenance.[50] Louise Young has detailed the impact in Japan of such huge Japanese investments in, and romanticized perceptions of, Manchuria and the puppet state of Manchukuo (1932–45). Manchuria served as a "lifeline" for Japan, inspiring the most romantic of Japanese "visions of empire."[51] Prasenjit Duara has termed these visions that manifested in Manchukuo as "tradition within modernity," stressing the role that modern concepts such as Asianism, citizenship, and ideal womanhood played in the Confucian rhetoric–based regime that the Japanese named "Country of the Manchus."[52] Janis Mimura has cogently argued that the regime was "techno-fascist."[53]

Received interpretations of widespread, immediate Chinese condemnation of the Japanese establishment of Manchukuo are the focus of Rana Mitter's *Manchurian Myth,* in which he carefully traces "the development of the narrative of resistance to the occupation" that played a central role in the creation of Chinese regional and nationalist identities.[54] Mitter argues that while the Japanese occupation was negative, over the long term more positive outcomes included the strengthening of a Northeast Chinese self-identity to counter Japanese attempts to sever the region from the republic. Mitter underlines the contentious nature of sovereign claims to the region, as does Dan Shao, who traces shifting local self-identities of Manchus and the impact on them of multiple colonial contestations as the region transformed from a Manchu homeland to a Qing borderland and then to an inalienable part of China.[55] The long-term ramifications of Japanese rule even extended into neighbouring Korea, as Suk-jung Han argues: "Manchukuo incubated the leadership of both Koreas."[56] Although fourteen years under Japanese rule did little to empower the Manchus for whom the state was named, those years have structured much understanding of the region's history.

Under Japanese occupation, Manchuria's industrial sector grew to be the largest in mainland China; there, multinational automobile manufacturer Nissan had its start.[57] A modern, urban environment grew in Changchun as it was renamed the "New Capital" (Ch., Xinjing; Ja., Shinkyō) and became home to one of the largest movie-making enterprises in Asia, the Manchukuo Film Association, which ultimately became one of the leading mainland Chinese film production companies, the Changchun Film Group Corporation. Japanese consumer goods spread through local marketplaces. Japanese-sponsored, Chinese-language newspapers, journals, and books reflected a growing literary community and an increasingly identifiable regional identity. The population of Manchukuo grew by a third, mostly Chinese migrants fleeing war and poverty for the relative security of the region. Officials called their new state a "Kingly Way paradise land" (Ch., *Wangdao letu;* Ja., *Ōdō rakudo*).[58] Despite potentially positive attributes, however, the state of Manchukuo failed to gain recognition from most of the outside world as it devolved into a racist, colonial regime that engaged in crimes against humanity, including Harbin's infamous Unit 731, a biological warfare unit operated by the Japanese until 1945 and which carried out experiments on human beings. Sheldon H. Harris's *Factories of Death,* which recounts horrendous Japanese war crimes, reflects mainstream Chinese understandings of Japanese involvement in the history of the region, if not the nation.[59] A related legacy was the enormous drug market that serviced users and addicts within and well beyond Manchuria's borders, as reflected in Kathryn Meyer's contribution to this volume.[60] Few who lived through Manchukuo, and stayed afterward, publicly mourned the state's disappearance in 1945.[61]

The contestation of sovereignty over Manchuria was one of the most significant influences of the region's history.[62] Russian and Japanese colonial ambitions, empowered by the relative weakness of Manchu and Chinese regimes, ensured that Manchuria was a feature of China's "century of humiliation" (*bainian guochi*), while bestowing on the region an unprecedented prestige. Yet for decades after Russia and Japan had been driven out, there was only modest international interest in the region, which was transformed into a cornerstone of national economic development in the People's Republic of China (PRC) after communist victory in the civil war (the crucible of which was in Manchuria).[63] As in the late Qing-Republican, Romanov-Soviet, and Japanese regimes, development became a major focus of PRC state policy, which sought to maximize the potential of the region's resources and peoples. As this volume demonstrates, though the PRC implemented different policies in Manchuria, it faced many of the same rewards and challenges (albeit within larger regional ecological conditions of continuity and change) as its predecessors.

Environmental Approaches to Manchurian Empire

Manchuria's environmental context is the second major theme of this volume. The latitude, topographical features, and wind currents from Siberia create an environment that has long attracted the attention of governments, scholars, missionaries, and journalists. Owen Lattimore argued that "historical processes of real importance are possible within the forest, river, and mountain world that overlaps from Manchuria into Siberia and Korea and sweeps to the edges of both the Mongol steppe and the Chinese Pale of lower Manchuria."[64] Lattimore took Manchuria's environment into dynamic analytical account, recognizing that certain factors acted to inhibit human