

*Remote Homeland, Recovered Borderland:
Manchus, Manchoukuo, and Manchuria, 1907-1985*

by Shao Dan

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This is a welcome work on Manchuria, one of the most complex regions in East Asian history. In the English-speaking world, Shao Dan's book is connected with the rare lineage of Manchurian studies over the past decade.¹ This book is on modern Manchuria (now called, *Dongbei*, or Northeast, by the People's Republic of China [PRC]), once the sacrosanct homeland of the Qing rulers, then lost territory, now a provincialized area in China; on Manchus (currently called *Manzu* by the PRC government), who once managed the largest territory of China and have fallen to one of its minority groups; and on Manzhouguo (1932-1945), which was a Japanese puppet state, or "an internationally and intentionally repressed historical entity."²

¹ For works on Manchuria published in the twenty-first century, see Prasenjit Duara, *Sovereignty and Authenticity: Manchukuo and the East Asian Modern* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2003); Hyeon Ok Park, *Two Dreams in One Bead: Empire, Social Life, and the Origins of the North Korean Revolution in Manchuria* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005); and Janis Mimura, *Planning for Empire: Reform Bureaucrats and the Japanese Wartime State* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2011).

² Gavan McCormack, "Manchukuo: Constructing the Past," *East Asian History* 2 (1991), 106.

As the author aptly points out, Manchuria is not a part of homogenous China, or an extension of the glorious Middle Kingdom. It originally was the homeland of the Manchus who founded Qing China. Called “the cradle of conflict,”³ it became a historically contested region from the latter part of the nineteenth century, full of large-scale phenomena, and dramatic incidents, such as the Russian and Japanese encroachments that led to the Russo-Japanese War, the influx of tens of millions of Chinese after the lifting of the centuries-long ban forbidding migration, the fall of Qing China, the subsequent rule of the Guomindang (KMT) and warlord regimes, the Mukden incident, the founding of Manzhouguo, rule by the KMT again, and rule by the PRC. It has a complex history with several regimes and several historical agents, including Han Chinese, Manchus, Mongols, Koreans, Japanese, Russians, and others.

Manchuria is a black box for the foundation of contemporary East Asian powers.⁴ Through the area’s abundant resources, for instance, the Japanese military envisioned the Greater East Asian Co-prosperity Sphere and waged a doomed war of civilization against the West in the late 1930s. The so-called Manchurian clique that had managed Manzhouguo became the main pillar of the postwar ruling bloc in Japan. For the Chinese Communist Party, Manchuria became an “anvil of victory” at the final moment of the civil war with its rival, the KMT.⁵ Also, it became a space of gestation for future North Korean and South Korean leaders. The former North Korean leader Kim Il Sung, who founded the longest dynastic rule since World War II, and the former South Korean president Park Chung Hee, who led the so-called miracle

³ Owen Lattimore, *Manchuria: Cradle of Conflict* (New York: MacMillan, 1932).

⁴ Han Seok-jeong, *Manjuguk geonguk ui jaehaeseok: Goeroeguk ui gukga hyogwa, 1932-1936* [Reinterpretation of the state formation of Manzhouguo: The state effect of the puppet state, 1932-1936] (Busan, Republic of Korea: Dong-A Daehakkyo chulpanbu, 2007), chapter 1.

⁵ Steven Levine, *Anvil of Victory: The Communist Revolution in Manchuria, 1945-1948* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987).

of the Han River, spent their early careers there as a resistance guerrilla leader and a young officer of the puppet state, respectively.

In spite of Manchuria's significance, previous studies, including Chinese official historiography, seldom deviate from the rigid themes subsumed by modern nationalism, such as brutal fascist rule and heroic national resistance. However, as Prasenjit Duara succinctly points out, Manchuria is "a place of paradoxes."⁶ Concerning Manchuria and Manzhouguo, it is difficult to disentangle imperialism from nationalism, modernity from tradition, or frontier from heartland. The book nicely surpasses such established verdicts and charts its own voyage.

Composed of three parts, the book largely follows chronological order from early Qing to the late twentieth century. Part one focuses on the Manchus and Manchuria until the 1911 Revolution. Part two concentrates on the lives of Manchus in Manzhouguo and the post-liberation period, when the KMT and then the PRC ruled the area. Part three has two chapters: a biography of the so-called Oriental Mata Hari, a Manchu spy who lived under several identities, and Manchus' memory (largely interviews) of the contemporary Manchus living in Manchuria. This is an ambitious work covering several regimes over a long time span (at the maximum, for more than three centuries in spite of the time period set in the book's title). Relying heavily on archives on the military organization (bannermen) of the Qing government, local gazetteers in Manchuria, Chinese and Japanese sources, interviews, and secondary materials, including a long list of previous publications on pre-modern and modern Manchuria, the book traces the transformation of Manchuria from the Manchus' remote homeland to a contested borderland, then as a symbol of the lost and recovered territory, and then as a mere province absorbing historical tourism.

Raising questions regarding conventional approaches toward

⁶ Duara, *Sovereignty and Authenticity*, 1.

Manchuria which have been in the subfield of the history of Sino-Japanese relations, or on the prevailing binary view of Japanese imperialism and the heroic anti-Japanese struggle, the book illuminates hitherto vague and invisible spots which could not be captured by grand narratives of nationalism. The book stresses that modern Manchuria is hardly captured by East Asian studies bordered along nation-states or by Chinese nationalism. Following recent revisionist studies on Manchuria,⁷ the book deconstructs the Sinification theme in Qing studies (namely, the assimilation of Manchu rulers by Han Chinese) and contemporary Chinese nationalism. It also reevaluates several facets of the state formation of Manzhouguo which have been overlooked in the East Asian history field.

Above all, this book's main contribution is its close-up treatment of Manchus. This is a full-scale compilation of their lives over more than a century. The book searches through the dramatic changes in the Manchus' status from the late Qing period up to the present. This is a great achievement, especially when we consider the fragmentary works on their lives. For instance, Duara's book provides some short discussions of people in Taiwan who experienced the Manzhouguo period. But no other works have endeavored to focus upon their lives.

The fresh starting point of this book is on those Manchus who remained in Manchuria after most Manchu conquerors had moved to the mainland in order to rule the new territory in the seventeenth century. This is the vacuum which other works have neglected. The book contrasts Manchus in Manchuria and Manchus in the mainland, the latter of which have been well documented in other works, such as those by Mark Elliott.⁸ The comparison of their lives between two places (or

⁷ See Duara, *Sovereignty and Authenticity*; Rana Mitter, *The Manchurian Myth: Nationalism, Resistance, and Collaboration in Modern China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000); and Pamela Kyle Crossley, *Orphan Warriors: Three Manchu Generations and the End of the Qing World* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990).

between north and south) is a stout pillar of the whole project. The book illuminates the salience of the former in various realms. There are a number of intriguing parts, for instance, the failure of the Qing policy to keep Manchus in their holy land due to the Manchu officials' disrespect for Manchuria, their low self-esteem, the perception of their lives in exile, and their indulging in drinking and poem writing.

The book strenuously traces Manchus in Manchuria for a century. Themes include their co-existence with Han Chinese (compared with the segregation of both in the south), the inclusion of Han bannermen (C. *Hanjun*) in their organization which contributed to growing pride among the Chinese soldiers, and their dire poverty in the early twentieth century. In the Manzhouguo period, topics discussed include the hopes of restoration, collaboration (for instance, by General Xi Qia), disillusionment, and the paradoxical deletion of their identity (subsumed by the Chinese language term *Manren*, or citizens of Manzhouguo). The KMT labeled them as pro-Japanese collaborators after liberation in 1945. In the PRC, the Chinese government has acknowledged their participation in anti-Japanese resistance and the state-building process, and the state continues to maintain the Manchu identity in China. This book is a laborious work.

There are rare descriptions of the Manchus' tragedy, too, including their massacre, largely perpetrated in the south, following the overthrow of the Qing dynasty. This may explain their long hesitation to admit their identity throughout China after the 1911 Revolution. Utilizing the saga frame flowing from early glory to downfall, massacre, then hiding, summoning by the PRC, and, finally, to the recent construction of autonomous ethnic administrative units, the book succeeds in delivering emotional elements, reminiscent of Pamela Kyle Crossley's soul-stirring

⁸ Mark Elliott, *The Manchu Way: The Eight Banners and Ethnic Identity in Late Imperial China* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2001).

work on a Manchu literary man who lamented the fall of the Qing dynasty and tried to cherish the Manchu culture.⁹

The book also highlights the long history of government-led borderland studies in China, that is, the devotion of many scholars to sinicizing anthropology and ethnology that could assist the government with claiming and managing borderlands. This section will remind readers of the current efforts of the Chinese government to annex the histories of non-Han kingdoms inside and outside China, such as through the *Dongbei Gongcheng* (Northeast Project) to absorb Koguryo, once a rival of Sui China and Tang China, which existed in Manchuria and in the northern part of the Korean peninsula from the first century BCE to the seventh century.

The treatment of the shifting identity or the ideology related with Manchus is another strong feature of this book. For instance, Manchu leaders redefined their identities beyond the Manchu-Han or banner-civilian framework and within a framework of Chinese-foreigner references in the last years of the Qing period, when China faced imperialist encroachment. Also, leaders of the KMT, who once were strong Han centrists imbued with anti-Manchuism, later strategically dropped the racist discourse in the state-building process after the 1911 Revolution.

Finally, the book argues through the case of the Manchus that identity is fluid, that it is something to be revised and (re)negotiated. This is a theoretical contribution. Updating the current literature on borderlands, identity problems, nationalism, and other related themes, the book successfully proposes that people continue to revise their identity, ethnohistory, and their homeland within different political entities.

This is a point worth mentioning. The author stresses that the “interconnections between pasts and presents decide the continuing

⁹ Crossley, *Orphan Warriors*.

revision of Manchus' history" (280). The book persuasively illustrates how the Manchus redefined their identity from former conquerors to colonized victims, and then to heroes of anti-Japanese resistance and nation building. According to the author, "Reconfiguration of their identity is a continuing process of interactions between the legacy of Manchu rule over the Qing empire, new ideologies of anti-colonial nationalism, and the imported concepts of national identity and ethnic categories" (288).

However, there are some obstacles which slow the smooth voyage of the book. One problem might be earlier studies. Respecting previous research is necessary, but their heavy influence would lessen novelty. For instance, when this book introduces previous borderland studies (such as the state-led anthropology and ethnology in China to annex Manchuria into the Chinese geo-body, and the difference of Chinese and Japanese studies on Manchuria), the book more or less follows Duara's work. The author's strategy is simply broadening Duara's realm. Also, the dramatic biography of the famous Manchu traitor Aisin Gioro Xianyu was introduced by Miriam Silverberg, who contrasted her life with Li Koran, who was an icon of the film world in the Japanese empire.¹⁰ The only difference is the focus on Xianyu.

On Manzhouguo, the book reiterates somewhat historical details which have already been well studied, such as the Lytton Commission, the Concordia Association (J. *Kyōwakai*), the South Manchurian Railway, the Manchurian Film Association (J. *Manshū eiga kyōkai*) and other topics. Students of Manchurian history would rather expect information on Manchus in the Manzhouguo period, for they have been scarcely studied.

Also, the book shows editing problems, although this tendency is

¹⁰ Miriam Silverberg, "Remembering Pearl Harbor, Forgetting Charlie Chaplin, and the Case of the Disappearing Western Woman: A Picture Story," in *Formations of Colonial Modernity in East Asia*, ed. Tani Barlow (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997).

not unusual among historians. For example, it frequently provides the information of the primary data (largely Chinese sources) in full, though this could be treated in footnotes. The mentioning of tables and chapters (in particular, of local gazetteers in Part III) is too detailed. Lastly, Part III suddenly jumps to the level of biography. It would have been desirable if this part could have been an independent book project.

Despite these problems, it cannot be denied that this book is a rare achievement in the field of Chinese history, in particular, in Manchurian studies. One hopes that the author will examine overseas Manchus in the next project, if possible. It would be another achievement if she could reach Manchus in Taiwan or the United States, following Thomas Lahusen and his colleagues, who searched for Jews who had dispersed all over the world from Harbin in order to reconstruct the world of Harbin, or the “Paris of the East,” in the first half of the twentieth century.¹¹

¹¹ See Thomas Lahusen, “Introduction,” *South Atlantic Quarterly* 99, no. 1 (2000), 1-4.