

*Manchukuo's Intoxicating Cultural History: Japanese-Occupied  
Northeast China and the Precarious Manchurian Environment*

*A Critical Examination of Intoxicating Manchuria:  
Alcohol, Opium, and Culture in China's Northeast*

by Norman Smith

Vancouver, Canada: University of British Columbia Press, 2012

—

Annika A. Culver

Florida State University

**Introduction: Contemporary Contexts for Manchukuo  
Studies**

Over 83 years ago, the creation of the “new state” of Manchukuo elicited controversy, similar to the “history issues” currently plaguing foreign relations in East Asia, with only a baker’s dozen of nations including Nazi Germany and fascist Italy officially recognizing Japanese-occupied northeast China.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, the rich number of propaganda materials still extant in libraries in the United States represents the contemporaneous “soft power” initiatives of imperial Japan aimed at convincing scholars of the legitimacy in their taking over the region. Japanese consular representatives today continue to hand out colorful brochures about contested issues, illustrating the Japanese government’s view of issues surrounding the Senkaku Islands (referred to as the Diaoyu Islands by China), which are under Japanese administrative control, but increasingly

-----

<sup>1</sup> It seems interesting that the United States actually did have a resident consul, Gerald Warner, representing Americans in Manchukuo, despite its lack of official recognition for the country.

being claimed by China. Similar brochures exist for Takeshima/Dokdo as well as the issue of relocating the Futenma U.S. military base in Okinawa. Of course, China and South Korea have their own organizations and means to represent such issues to foreigners, but it seems that such efforts are increasingly well-funded and organized within Japan to garner a much wider global reach. Such a climate warrants a timely reinvestigation of Manchuria/Manchukuo, since it directly affects the mutual histories of Japan, China, Korea, and even the United States.

The state of the field of Manchuria/Manchukuo studies in North America is currently undergoing an invigorating new stage, with more international conferences and writings focused on hot topics such as environmental history and cultural or literary studies. The political and economic history of northeast China has been well documented in English-language scholarship since the 1990s, primarily in North America, with the exception of Mexico where East Asian studies are much less developed. However, cultural history has only recently begun gaining popularity as a field of inquiry. Louise Young's seminal 1998 text contains an excellent general discussion of cultural policies, along with Prasenjit Duara's 2003 study on sovereignty issues featuring the cameo role the writer Liang Shanding's literary endeavors played in Manchukuo.<sup>2</sup> Yet, only as of late have scholars such as Norman Smith and others begun to systematically investigate literary and cultural activities in Manchukuo.<sup>3</sup>

-----  
<sup>2</sup> Louise Young, *Japan's Total Empire: Manchuria and the Culture of Wartime Imperialism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998); Prasenjit Duara, *Sovereignty and Authenticity: Manchukuo and the East Asian Modern* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003).

<sup>3</sup> Norman Smith, *Resisting Manchukuo: Chinese Women Writers and the Japanese Occupation* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2007); Annika A. Culver, *Glorify the Empire: Japanese Avant-Garde Propaganda in Manchukuo* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2013). *Glorify the Empire* is the first comprehensive study of the cultural endeavors promoted by imperial Japan in Manchukuo, where the new state attracted formerly leftwing intellectual or avant-garde artists with its utopian promises for a new, multi-ethnic culture, which later embodied principles of Pan-Asianism and co-opted earlier ideas expressed by Sun Yat-sen.

Literature was, of course, also of primary importance to Republican China. During the May Fourth period roughly between 1919 and 1932, Chinese writers, including Lu Xun (1881-1936), believed literature to be a tool of political awakening and a means to engage the masses. Writers in northeast China often expressed similar ideals in their works, and continued to do so during the Manchukuo period as did well-known revolutionary writers Xiao Jun (1907-1988) and Xiao Hong (1911-1944), even in the event of deciding against going into exile south of the Great Wall. In the case of occupied Manchuria, the cultural framework erected by the Japanese after 1938 was often the only means for Chinese (and some Russian) cultural producers to showcase their work, while maintaining economically stable jobs.

Intriguingly, the study of the cultural construction of Japanese-occupied northeast China reflects important foci that represent the crux to understanding the long wartime period, which became merged into World War II by late 1941. For imperial Japan, a mutual pan-Asianist culture was an important means to amalgamate occupied countries with disparate languages and cultures, while Manchukuo served as a template for the cultural construction of the Greater East Asian Co-Prosperity Sphere. This was evidenced in multiple empire-wide writers' conferences, and even presciently mentioned by the future 1968 Nobel Prize winner in literature, Kawabata Yasunari (1899-1972). Kawabata wrote in the introduction to a 1942 volume of multi-ethnic literature in Manchukuo about how imperial Japan's success in Manchuria was critical to its endeavors elsewhere. (Indeed, the literary collection he helped edit curiously depicts an opium poppy on its cover, an odd image framing a volume envisioned as "groundbreaking" and supportive of Sun Yat-Sen's legacy of Pan-Asianism!) In a 1943 address to the Greater East Asian Conference, the

-----

Earlier studies like Smith's have emphasized literary production, but no prior texts besides *Glorify the Empire* have critically examined imperial Japan's role in the arts, whether in painting or photography.

collaborationist leader of China Wang Jing-Wei (1883-1944) mentions Manchukuo first in a list of occupied nations as a “friend” to China, and frames the building of the Greater East Asian Co-prosperity Sphere as a bulwark against American and British colonialism and wartime “aggression.” The reviewer’s recent book, inspired by daring trailblazers such as Louise Young, Prasenjit Duara, and Norman Smith, illustrates how in Manchukuo, this early multi-ethnic culture, through the arts, provided a means for the ideological and cultural construction of Pan-Asianist aims through conquered territories in Southeast Asia. In addition, a cohort of younger scholars is also beginning to examine the role of photography in bolstering state propaganda in Manchukuo.<sup>4</sup>

## Literary Views of Intoxication: Propaganda and Products

Norman Smith has emerged as North America’s leading scholar of Manchukuo literature, initially focusing on Chinese female authors such as Dan Di (1916-1992) and Mei Niang (b. 1920). His 2007 study reveals how their works reflected an equivocating view of the new state, and argues that, as women, their often gloomy depictions of the supposedly utopian new state slipped past the radar of patriarchal Kantō Army censors who overlooked the appeal of female writing. The study’s strength lies in an intimate portrayal of these female writers’ personal and professional lives, gleaned from friendships as well as interviews with

-----  
<sup>4</sup> Recently, art historian Kari Shepherdson-Scott of Macalaster College and cultural historian Phillip Charrier of the University of Regina have investigated Japanese photographer Fuchikami Hakuyō’s role in depicting the state in propaganda images and pictorials. See Kari Shepherdson-Scott, “Utopia/Dystopia: Japan’s Image of the Manchurian Ideal” (Doctoral dissertation, Duke University, 2012). There is also an essay on Fuchikami Hakuyō and the aesthetic abstraction of war in Asato Ikeda, Aya Louisa Mcdonald, and Ming Tiampo, *Art and War in Japan and Its Empire, 1931-1960* (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 2013), and see Philip Charrier, “Fuchikami Hakuyō and the ‘Manchukuo Pastoral’ in 1930s Japanese Art Photography,” *Japanese Studies* 34, no. 2 (May 2014): 169-192.

their children and their generous sharing of proprietary personal writings. Smith has influenced the reviewer's own research, and he continues to receive inquiries from scholars while mentoring the transnational study of Manchurian literature by students in Canada, the United States, China, and even South Korea.

His most recent 2012 work, *Intoxicating Manchuria*, is part of the Contemporary Chinese Studies series published by the University of British Columbia Press. The book's enjoyable, well-researched narrative directly confronts topics darkly depicted by Chinese female writers in Manchukuo. At first blush, the work appears to be a historical study of intoxicants, advertising, and even crime in occupied northeast China, but it is instead a deft confrontation of more complicated issues. A subtext of Smith's work depicts a precarious culture perched on the brink of destruction in an environment beset by political dangers and moral peril. Like Mark Driscoll's controversial 2010 study, Smith unveils the prevalence of Japanese opium circulating through northeastern cities with devastating results.<sup>5</sup> Yet, he also reveals the complicated politics of intoxication—whether from drink or drugs—providing great solace in the face of mundane concerns, while also serving as a barometer for the general physical and moral health of the population. Smith outlines how an emerging discourse of national health and the actions of puritanical reformers de-mothballing earlier Confucian principles of the body grew alongside an oblivion-producing hedonism practiced by an occupied people caught in the net of a military government making intoxicants readily available to seemingly weaken political resistance.

The last decade is marked by increased knowledge about recent opium regimes like the Taliban running Afghanistan in the 1990s, where production continues despite the Karzai democracy. In the early and late

-----  
<sup>5</sup> Mark Driscoll, *Absolute Erotic, Absolute Grotesque: The Living, the Dead, and Undead in Japan's Imperialism, 1895-1945* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010).

twentieth century, military states like imperial Japan and other totalitarian regimes also used intoxicants to finance their activities during wartime. Even the Chinese communist guerillas led by Mao Zedong were partially financed by opium revenues during the Yan'an period, though after Liberation in 1949, the Chinese state successfully eliminated addiction and commercial poppy farming. All of these regimes attempted to communicate a moral discourse against addiction, while directly profiting from sales of drugs.

More recently, elaborating on themes touched upon by Smith, and inspired by Frank Dikötter's pivotal 2004 history of drugs in China, Miriam Kingsberg's 2014 study on narcotics in imperial Japan and beyond presents this interpretation in a chapter curiously entitled "Cultural Producers and Manchukuo."<sup>6</sup> This study by Kingsberg looks at how Japanese ideologues attempted to use the Kingly Way discourse to specifically target Chinese opium addiction, though Japanese also suffered under its sway while their empire reaped its benefits. According to Smith, in 1938, reports by *Shenjing shibao* stated that over ten percent of registered addicts in Harbin, the city most impacted by drugs, were Japanese (44). Appearing later in 2014, Kathryn Meyer provides a case study of a Harbin slum apartment building to examine the ecology of opium addiction and crime in a corrupt environment darkly contrasting with the state's seemingly bright promises.<sup>7</sup> She illustrates in microcosmic form Manchukuo's endemic social problems revealed by Driscoll, and penetrated by Smith through his keen lens into cultural notions of intoxication. Yet, as Smith seems to hint at first, the most powerful intoxicant of all was political belief—bolstered by state authorities and

-----  
<sup>6</sup> Frank Dikötter, Lars Laamann, and Xun Zhou, *Narcotic Culture: A History of Drugs in China* (London: C. Hurst & Co., 2004); Miriam Kingsberg, *Moral Nation: Modern Japan and Narcotics in Global History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014).

<sup>7</sup> Kathryn Meyer, *Life and Death in the Garden: Sex, Drugs, Cops, and Robbers in Wartime China* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014).

propaganda ideologues—wherein culture served an important role in keeping the masses befuddled by a rhetoric intimating that they were living in a utopian place of multiethnic harmony.

Smith's scholarship is unique in its strong literary angle to explore the intoxicating utopian promises of the state and its underlying discontents—rhetoric adopted or challenged by both producers of culture (writers) or commercial products (companies). In the period before what Smith calls the “Holy War” (*shengzhan* in Chinese, and *seisen* in Japanese, 1941-1945), a multiplicity of discourses existed for and against intoxicants.<sup>8</sup> In addition, multiple state and informal mechanisms developed to keep them strictly controlled, ranging from moral suasion, hospital treatment, state monopolies, and even the media's manufacturing of a “hostess scare” (also the title of Chapter 6) to arouse popular misogyny against alleged female sex workers. Yet, the exact gender balance of Manchukuo would have been worth mentioning, since it had an impact on addiction, intoxication, and public safety because single men were more likely to commit violent acts and support prostitution—Smith's study could have benefited from a more thorough statistical analysis of these gender-related issues. Nevertheless, through sources from popular media, Smith most notably creates an objective and compelling glimpse into the politics of intoxicants at the time, and views their place in advertising and popular culture, primarily in China's northeast, famed for its harsh climate necessitating strong drinks and the medicinal or numbing effects of opium.

In Chapter 3, “Evaluating Alcohol,” and Chapter 4, “Selling Alcohol, Selling Modernity,” Smith's clever exploration of commercial

-----  
<sup>8</sup> Smith defines “Holy War” as Japan's fight against Anglo-American imperialism (2). Scholars of modern Japanese history like Samuel Yamashita also view the late 1941 attack on Pearl Harbor as an opportunity for Japanese ideologues to reinvigorate home front civilian interest in the China conflict, according to remarks in a round table discussion honoring Japanese scholar of fascism Yoshimi Yoshiaki at the Association for Asian Studies Annual Meeting in Chicago, March 28, 2015.

advertising intersecting with public health messaging (arguably a form of propaganda), shows how newspaper ads first celebrated liquor, but then published essays to excoriate it as wartime demands began to impinge on Manchukuo's subjects. The tone of essays written about alcohol and opium consumption, covered in Chapter 5, "Writing Intoxicant Consumption," additionally changed from promoting recreational use in the 1930s to blaming intoxicants for ruining lives as wartime exigencies necessitated a productive, but prohibitionist populace by the early 1940s. Chapter 7, "Reasoning Addiction, Taking the Cures," shows the proliferation of concoctions supposedly combating physical deprivations caused by drink or opiates now sold for purposes of "health" in tandem with state propaganda aims to help the war effort. In addition, for the more sober members of society, lack of nutritious food due to wartime rationing arguably necessitated supplements like Ruosu, containing probiotics, various vitamins, fish liver oil, and extracts from minerals possibly mimicking hormones—all common attributes of contemporary products popular in North America today. A more in-depth view into and statistical data emphasizing rationing's impact on Manchukuo would have additionally lent support to the author's intriguing claims.

Most interesting is Smith's analysis in Chapter 7 of ads echoing propagandistic rhetoric like Ruosu, billed as a "Kingly Way" medicine (150). Companies like Wakamoto, which produced Ruosu, boasted a long and venerable history in making patent medicines and enjoyed deep connections to colonial territories including Manchuria. Ruosu's development paralleled other Japanese patent medicines, with advertisements emphasizing nationalistic messages, like the breath freshener *Jintan* appearing in the wake of the 1904-1905 Russo-Japanese War. The chapter might have been further enhanced by a discussion of the widespread popularity of Japanese patent medicines throughout northeast Asia, believed to have been effective due to Japan's scientific skills and imperialist prowess. This phenomenon continued into wartime, which seemed to little impact the largely Chinese purchase of products produced

by a militarily aggressive empire. For example, Smith analyzes a 1944 Ruosu ad, in which the supplement seems to reinvigorate a (Chinese) man enervated by drink, women, and other temptations, into instead “becoming a more productive hero” (which the reviewer read as a plan to enlist in the military), who dreams of producing a baby with a woman (153-155). It is apparent that this advertisement also supported Manchukuo subjects engaging in military duty because the man sheds his Chinese dress for a Japanese uniform, while the baby reflects the pro-natalism of the wartime regime.<sup>9</sup>

## Points of Departure

Smith’s most recent work presents many intriguing points of departure for future study, and will hopefully inspire further research on how people from ethnic groups beyond Chinese or Japanese viewed intoxicants, and how the regime treated them in particular. He does mention the historically multinational production of beers, liquors, and rice wines in Manchuria, with particular drinks appealing to certain peoples. It would therefore be fascinating to investigate a cross-cultural approach to addiction, which seems framed as a primarily Chinese problem, and thereby necessitating the intervention and control of the Japanese-led state. Does occupation beget intoxication, and if so, what are the state’s methods of intervention for each ethnic character? How might varying kinds of intoxication either foster or threaten “harmony” (*xiehe* in Chinese, and *kyōwa* in Japanese) in a political and metaphorical sense? All of these questions point to the compelling role of culture in presenting an enduring lens through which to interpret politics in Japanese-occupied northeast China.

-----

<sup>9</sup> Annika A. Culver, “Constructing a Rural Utopia: Propaganda Images of Japanese Settlers in Northern Manchuria, 1936-1943,” in *Manchuria and the Environment*, ed. Norman Smith (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, forthcoming).