

Review Essay

Borderland and Farmland: Two New Studies of Manchuria

Matthew W. Mosca, University of Washington

Mosca, Matthew W. 2018. "Borderland and Farmland: Two New Studies of Manchuria." *Cross-Currents: East Asian History and Culture Review* (e-journal) 28: 129–137. <https://cross-currents.berkeley.edu/e-journal/issue-28/mosca>.

Shuang Chen. *State-Sponsored Inequality: The Banner System and Social Stratification in Northeast China*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2017. 368 pp. \$60 (cloth, e-book).

Seonmin Kim. *Ginseng and Borderland: Territorial Boundaries and Political Relations between Qing China and Chosŏn Korea, 1636–1912*, 2017. Berkeley: University of California Press. 224 pp. Open access.

Seonmin Kim's *Ginseng and Borderland: Territorial Boundaries and Political Relations between Qing China and Chosŏn Korea, 1636–1912* and Shuang Chen's *State-Sponsored Inequality: The Banner System and Social Stratification in Northeast China* show a mastery of their subjects founded on careful research. Beyond this mastery, their methodologies and topics share little in common, which is itself suggestive of the present state of the study of Manchuria. Owen Lattimore opened his pioneering book by noting both "the spectacular immigration of enormous numbers of Chinese (perhaps...the greatest peaceful migration in history)" and the continuing significance of long-term "historical forces" underlying and shaping a seemingly modern transformation (Lattimore 1935, 3–4). Until recently, this "spectacular immigration" attracted the most interest. Robert H. G. Lee's 1970 monograph, a baseline for tracing the evolution of English-language scholarship, placed a teleological emphasis on "sinicization." First a trickle and then a flood of Chinese migration transformed the region, in the teeth of opposition from Manchu emperors attempting to preserve their homeland in its original condition. "It was this demographic reality," he concluded, "that made the Manchurian frontier culturally an indisputable part of China" (Lee 1970, 78). Mark Elliott (2000) then brought the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries back onto the research agenda by demonstrating that the region's retrospective image as a pristine imperial homeland owed much to the ideological construction of successive Qing emperors.

Subsequent scholarship has continued to accentuate the complexity and diversity of the region's evolution, providing additional evidence that the unifying label "Manchuria" or "northeast China" covers sub-regions whose specific histories had little in common before the late nineteenth century (Schlesinger 2017, 88–91; Li and Cribb 2014). The far south, much of which had long been recognized as suitable for agriculture, resembled China proper. When the Jianzhou Jurchens conquered this zone in the process of forming a new state, they did not fundamentally alter this administrative and demographic reality. Starkly different were the far north, on the edge of Siberia, and the far west, on the edge of the Mongol-dominated steppe. Although these areas were subject to the administration developed in the distant base of the Jurchens, they remained distinct. The studies of Kim and Chen, which concentrate on smaller sub-regions and have relatively little to say about the history of Manchuria as a whole, form part of this analytical trend toward localization. Both show how the influx of Han civilian migration reshaped their sub-regions, but that is not their primary concern. Each is more interested in the deep impact of specifically local factors and conditions: for Kim, the presence of Korea, and the ecology and economy of ginseng harvesting; for Chen, the singular policies devised for a carefully tended settlement project on a site that today is located within the municipality of Harbin. In both cases, it is not evident that Manchuria is the most relevant frame of reference: Kim's research has helped develop a trend of placing the Yalu-Tumen borderland in a broader northeast Asian setting;¹ Chen takes as her primary object of comparison China proper rather than other parts of Manchuria (a name she avoids in her title).

There is no shortage of research on Chosŏn Korea's interactions with the Ming and Qing dynasties, but this body of work has concentrated on the heights of court-to-court relations: embassies, ideology, and cultural exchange. Seonmin Kim's *Ginseng and Borderland* makes an important and original contribution by focusing not on Beijing or Seoul, but on the creation and maintenance of a borderland far from those two capitals. Although scrutinizing policy choices of Qing emperors and Korean kings, Kim is just as interested in the ways these policies proved inadequate, or were subverted, on the ground.

Kim offers a stadial view of the evolving mountainous zone spanning the Yalu and Tumen Rivers. Once it had been a frontier, dominated by the politically fragmented Jurchens, nominally subjects of Ming China but also closely engaged with Chosŏn Korea. The centralized state built by Nurhaci and his Manchu successors transformed this undefined frontier into a borderland, "a site at which the two neighbors encountered one another and clashed but nonetheless recognized their mutual boundary" (15). Ginseng, as Kim's title suggests, played a crucial role in the emergence of this borderland and the Qing-Chosŏn tensions playing out within it. Nurhaci and his successors grew prosperous harvesting wild ginseng, feeding China's almost limitless demand for the root. Their attempt to monopolize this commodity long after the

¹ For two other recent works that develop this approach, see Rawski (2014) and Hasegawa (2016).

conquest of China, which required them to keep out Korean interlopers as well as civilian settlers among their own subjects, directed unprecedented imperial attention to the Yalu-Tumen borderland. Fearful of the repercussions Korean ginseng poaching might bring, Chosŏn kings maintained a similar buffer at the edge of their own territory. Kim ends her narrative with the collapse of this policy in the late nineteenth century, when civilian settlement led to new conceptions of territorial sovereignty in the region.

The opening chapter of *Ginseng and Borderland* analyzes the tripartite relationship between the Jurchens, Ming China, and Chosŏn Korea. Their delicate modus vivendi, by no means free of conflict, was shattered by Nurhaci's rise. He took pains to establish clear boundaries for his territories and pressed to have them respected by Korea and Ming China. Kim concurs with Nicola Di Cosmo (2009) regarding the importance of the ginseng trade for Nurhaci's state finances, which made a monopoly imperative. Holding the Chosŏn state responsible for the trespassing of its subjects introduced a punitive dimension to this emerging relationship, which made Korea cautious even when later Qing emperors somewhat relaxed this harsh stance.

Bringing Korea into formal submission in 1637 did not, in itself, establish a viable order in this border zone. Starting with chapter 2, "Making the Borderland," the three core chapters of Kim's book concentrate on how the two sides negotiated their territorial relationship during the Kangxi, Yongzheng, and Qianlong reigns (1661–1796). Kangxi developed a growing interest in the geography of the Qing-Korean border, particularly the peak known in Chinese as Changbaishan and in Korean as Paektusan. This mountain was the source of both the Yalu and Tumen, and its slopes were thus a source of ambiguity for a border otherwise clearly demarcated by those two rivers. The ambiguity was ostensibly removed in 1712, when the Qing official Mu-ke-deng overcame muted opposition from his Korean counterparts to erect a stele marking the Yalu and Tumen watershed, and ordered fences to be built for good measure. For the Qing, Kim argues, this accomplishment was largely symbolic: more important than the precise location of the stele was that it "signified Qing suzerainty over the Chosŏn" (70). Korean officials, by contrast, agonized over what they saw as the incorrect placement of the stele. In time, the goad of this Qing-mandated survey altered official Korean perceptions of the peak. Previously viewed as beyond Korea's northern boundary, it received the first ritual offering from a Chosŏn king in 1768, almost a century after Kangxi initiated a similar practice for Manchu rulers. Not long afterward, in 1793, the Chosŏn court opened to settlement the nearby "Four Closed Counties" on the upper reaches of the Yalu, which had been restricted since 1459, after the Ming voiced displeasure at Korean interactions with the Jurchen.

Chapter 3, "Managing the Borderland," tackles the rapidly evolving dynamics of ginseng management. In this task, the Qing state grappled with two challenges. The first was to harvest ever-scarcer ginseng within a state monopoly while making use of merchant investors and market forces. The second challenge was to keep poachers and farmers from the more densely settled Shengjing area out of the ginseng-producing mountains. The foundation of Qing policies in the region was the Willow Palisade, a long

wall that could be crossed only with authorization. As Kim points out, this feature gave the Qing state “multiple boundaries” with Korea, each with a “different meaning” (87): the gates of the Willow Palisade were the de facto limit of direct administration and control, and the Yalu and Tumen formed the edges of claimed sovereignty. The buffer zone proved uncomfortably porous despite this cordon. Some Qing military officers proposed building forts as far as the edge of Korean territory. This proposal was vigorously opposed by the Chosŏn court, which held that an empty zone would produce no complications. Why, Kim asks, did Qing emperors prefer the pleas of Korean kings to the advice of their own servants? Her answer is that emperors were prisoners of their own rhetoric. Citing the very values that emperors claimed to embody, Korean kings humbly begged for benevolence. Regarding royal goodwill as more vital to border stability than any infrastructure that might be constructed, Qing emperors acceded to these Korean requests.

Chapter 4, “Movement of People and Money,” examines the evolving logistics of the trade conducted by tributary missions crossing this borderland, demonstrating how almost every convention and procedure, at almost every stage of the mission’s journey, could be exploited to maximize profit. Although in principle the individual initiative of merchants and local officials drove this growth in commerce, Kim points out that “it was the profits from the trade along the embassy’s journey that made the tribute mission possible...the trade and the tribute embassy existed in a symbiotic relationship” (120). During the late seventeenth century, officials in Shengjing permitted local merchants to form a cartel for transporting embassy baggage. Its members, known as *lantou* 欄頭 (merchants), leveraged this cartel to win a monopoly over local Korean trade. Although this system was convenient and profitable for local Qing functionaries, it angered the Korean king, at whose request it was abolished in 1723.

The final chapter covers the shift from borderland to border. For several reasons, the Qing state relinquished its failing efforts to preserve the Yalu and Tumen buffer zone, opening the area to legal settlement. At the same time, beginning in the 1860s, considerable numbers of Korean farmers settled on the Qing side of the Tumen. Debates over their status were complicated by disagreement over the real location of the Tumen. In the 1880s, joint surveys attempted to rechart the border, marking the triumph of “the modern notion of national space” (149)—a conception of territorial sovereignty with no room for ambiguous borderlands.

A theme of Kim’s book is that seemingly self-evident truths about the Qing-Chosŏn relationship reveal little about conditions in practice. The uncontested territorial division at the Yalu and Tumen proved less important than the commitment of both sides to prevent agricultural settlement along them. The acknowledged suzerainty of the Qing emperor did not eliminate Korean influence on important questions. Flaunting their subordination was often an effective way for Korean rulers to nudge Qing policy. Although Kim is certainly correct to stress the role of ideology and the constraints of noblesse oblige, emphasizing the effectiveness of such appeals shows more of the Qing Empire’s velvet glove than of its iron fist. In other interstate relationships, Qing rulers

were rarely constrained by the rhetoric of their own benevolence, which could justify attack as easily as forbearance. It would have been helpful to know more about the coercive power Qing rulers believed they maintained over Korea in the eighteenth century, the cost calculus they perceived for openly menacing the Chosŏn king, and how far the Korean side anticipated such calculations. Finally, Kim shows in admirable detail how profit from legal and illicit commerce acted as a solvent on the ties binding officials to their duties. Guards connived at smuggling and poaching, for the right price. Korean chief interpreters, managers of embassy logistics, collaborated with *lantou* merchants against the interests of their compatriots. Some Koreans were “emboldened...to behave imperiously” (122) on Qing soil, abusing their local employees. Power relations were never as simple as they might seem at first glance.

Although Kim’s focus never strays from the Qing-Korean borderland, historians of the Qing Empire will be stimulated to read her book in comparative perspective. Her focus on institutions and dilemmas will resonate with researchers of similar borders and buffer zones, particularly those in Mongolia and elsewhere in Manchuria recently described by Jonathan Schlesinger (2017).² Historians of the Canton trade will be interested in the *lantou* monopoly. As an attempt to pair official control with merchant profit that floundered in the face of opposition from foreign traders, the monopoly has clear parallels to the contemporary and more famous failed first effort to construct a monopolistic Cohong (1720–1721). In a study of interstate relations between the Qing and other neighbors, John E. Wills, Jr. (2012) points out that when Qing emperors “found a trans-border negotiating partner that was ready to deal in linear border terms they were quite ready to do so and even to get obsessive about it” (457). Although Kim interprets Mu-ke-deng’s grueling effort to delineate the one obscure stretch of the Qing-Korea frontier as largely symbolic, it has commonalities with contemporary attempts to eliminate ambiguities on the border with Russia and Vietnam. As in those cases, a clear borderline allowed the Qing state to leave the area unsettled and unfortified without compromising its sovereignty. Chosŏn kings firmly believed that this policy served their interests, keeping the Qing menace as remote as possible. Historians of the Qing Empire and Korea will be grateful to Seonmin Kim for deftly taking us through the complex interplay between border line and border zone, where carefully crafted statecraft was paired with calculated forbearance.

Shuang Chen’s *State-Sponsored Inequality* is a meaty and meticulous work of historical sociology, rich in insights drawn straight from the archives. The core of her concern is how a state-managed settlement project evolved into an organic local society, yet one that internalized and reproduced the priorities of state planners more often than it diverged from them. Historians are familiar with the growing difficulty faced by the Qing state in maintaining and employing members of the Eight Banners.

² Schlesinger offers a detailed account of Qing ginseng policy that nicely complements Kim’s study. On one point they differ: for Kim, ginseng was a “unique symbol of Jurchen identity” (43), whereas for Schlesinger, “ginseng did not signify ‘Manchus’ in the same way as pearls” (2017, 80).

The majority of these bannermen lived in Beijing. Qing statesmen had long dreamed of transforming these idle urbanites into self-sufficient farmers, but getting the bannermen to share this ambition proved extremely difficult. For this reason, Qing officials planned with utmost care every detail of the settlement project in Shuangcheng 雙城, the subject of Chen's study. A thorough survey of Manchuria identified Shuangcheng as the ideal site for resettling banner households. In 1815, households of "rural bannermen" (*tunding* 屯丁)—experienced farmers from Shengjing and elsewhere in Jilin—were moved to Shuangcheng and charged with working the land that eventually grew to consist of three large divisions, or *tun*, each with forty villages. After years of preparation, the first metropolitan households began to arrive in Shuangcheng in 1824. However, vigorous recruitment efforts yielded disappointing results. The initial quota was reduced by two-thirds to 1,000. When recruitment ended in 1838, only 698 metropolitan banner households had arrived. Chen shows that volunteers rarely emerged from the ranks of the truly indigent; most were comfortable, middle-income households hoping to inflate their social status with large landholdings.

Shuangcheng remained a sprawling garrison, and only bannermen were permitted to hold its land. Although unappealing to banner households in Beijing, for whom it was designed, it was most attractive to those from more densely settled parts of southern Manchuria, and to Han Chinese settlers. Thus, Chen's analysis divides Shuangcheng's population into the "haves," the metropolitan and rural bannermen legally entitled to its land, and the "have-nots," civilian commoners, "floating" (*fuding* 浮丁) bannermen who arrived without authorization, and a still larger pool of migrants who evaded all registration. Officials administering Shuangcheng remained committed to its founding principle that metropolitan banner households should form the local elite. Policies favored this group, who were allotted more land and much larger resettlement stipends than their rural counterparts, and were later given greater opportunity to split their households and grow their holdings still further. Moreover, the Qing state took for granted that metropolitan households would arrive unable and unwilling to farm. Volunteers were promised "life as landlords" (60); rural bannermen were, by design, their tenants and "designated laborers" (66). Although both groups were "haves," metropolitan banner households dominated the settlement.

Chen's central concern is how this intricately planned and supervised settlement slowly became an organic community, whose members had individual agency and a sense of identity transcending state-mandated administrative statuses. Yet, these identities reinforced, rather than subverted, the intentions of state policy. Thus, after the first half of the book details official planning and its constant refinement in the face of realities on the ground, the second delves from multiple perspectives into how a local society emerged. In the second half of the book, we see Chen's effort to "integrate quantitative and qualitative methods" (xiii). She succeeds by complementing demographic and economic data with illustrative legal cases, reconstructions of the history of particular households, and findings from fieldwork and interviews. Private development was the primary channel for household economic agency. Each registered

banner household received an allotment of land in perpetuity. By a system formalized in the 1850s, such households could also develop unassigned land in return for rent payments to the state. Because local rents were comparatively low, enterprising rural banner households could rival the income of metropolitan households. However, as shown by Chen's data, although particular families rose and fell, in balance the structural advantages of metropolitan households meant that the long-term distribution of wealth essentially fit the hierarchy designed by the Qing state.

It is impossible to do justice here to the many themes Chen raises in her introduction, and to which she returns periodically. In addition to the relationship of state-created categories with household agency, identity, and prosperity, these themes include wealth inequality, debates over whether landholdings grew more concentrated over time, and parallels between the Shuangcheng system and the *hukou* 戶口 (household registration) system of contemporary China. A striking feature of Chen's story, but one rarely made explicit, is the irrelevance of banner status per se in the Shuangcheng setting. Chen shows the effectiveness of efforts to "build a new social hierarchy based on state-designed population categories," in her view a deliberate attempt at "boundary-clearing" to eliminate the potential for organized rural banner resistance to a system designed to subordinate them to their metropolitan counterparts (54). Belonging to the Eight Banners was a prerequisite for legal settlement in Shuangcheng, but it offered no benefits in and of itself. Registration category was everything: the divide between metropolitan and rural households was stark and permanent, and "floating" bannermen could never legally hold state land even if they arrived as relatives of registered settlers.

Previous research on Manchuria's development in the nineteenth century has emphasized the transformative effect of Han Chinese migration on the region. An important and notable aspect of Chen's study is that it does not. Chen shows that the agricultural settlement of Manchuria by bannermen was a long-cherished goal of the Qing state. Even after a flood of Han civilian migration, Shuangcheng remained a banner-dominated community. Nonetheless, Han Chinese actors do make suggestive cameo appearances in Chen's book. For example, exiled magistrates, dispatched and backed by the Jilin general, used their statecraft expertise to advise on the complex task of adapting garrison organization to territorial administration. One such ex-prefect, Wang Lütai 王履泰, wielded so much influence that he drove to suicide the settlement's highest-ranking local Manchu official. Han civilian settlers were in some sense Shuangcheng's indigenous inhabitants. Hundreds had been living there when its fertile site was first selected for development. These households were permitted to remain as state tenants, holding land in a segregated zone outside the three *tun* reserved for bannermen. Some of these civilian commoners on the Shuangcheng periphery were large-scale agricultural contractors comparable to those found in contemporary Inner Mongolia, recruiting sub-tenants to farm huge tracts (73–78). In fact, civilian commoners were the two largest individual landowners in Shuangcheng. The top 1 percent of households, measured by landholdings, contained forty-three civilian state

tenants, compared with only ten metropolitan and eighteen rural banner households (195). Han Chinese also dominated local commerce. Yet, they play a relatively small role in this book, perhaps because their activities are less documented in surviving records.

A vivid indication of how far household status overshadowed ethnicity in local identity politics comes from a simmering dispute between bannermen in the central *tun*, where all metropolitan households had settled, and those in the left and right *tun*, inhabited exclusively by rural banner households. During the original settlement, the state had allocated central *tun* households supplemental plots in the left and right *tun*, without delineating their physical locations. Instead, rural bannermen were obligated to pay an annual grain rent, based on the proportion of their land nominally owned by their state-assigned central *tun* landlords. A stalemate persisted for generations: those in the central *tun* could not sell these notional plots, and those in the left and right *tun* could not escape rent payments. When the government began to alter the basis of land tenure in 1902, converting state allotments to private ownership, those in the left and right *tun* became more insistent on ending this subsidy. The fall of the Qing dynasty failed to dissolve the arrangement, and this dispute remained a primary flashpoint in local society. Republican-era language of citizenship and equal rights was applied to this intra-banner grievance. It demonstrates how Qing-created local identities, closely connected to landholding patterns, persisted for decades after the fall of the dynasty.

Another factor muting the salience of Manchu ethnicity here is that Chen treats Shuangcheng as a slightly unusual Chinese local society. Because it was created and controlled by the state, Shuangcheng's archival legacy offers rich data. By definition, this exceptional body of data describes a society subject to exceptional oversight. Chen therefore seeks to determine if the trends she identifies correspond to those found elsewhere, with northern China as her primary region of comparison. This search for parallels enriches her study with comparative analysis and leads to shrewd insights. For example, she shows that the hybrid administration devised for Shuangcheng morphed the military hierarchy of a banner garrison into something resembling the administration of a Chinese county. This was a "mismatch" (91), in part because there was no provision for the law of avoidance, meaning that the local officials administering Shuangcheng were also local landholders not above enriching their own households and kin. Likewise, Chen demonstrates that although a land market was formally impossible in Shuangcheng, where all land remained state property, a close study of local practices shows that there was indeed "space for de facto land sales" (152). In other cases, however, such comparisons risk obscuring rather than illuminating. Most villages in Shuangcheng built temples, and Chen finds that "their practices of folk religion had many commonalities with...the North China Plain" (140). This is undoubtedly the case, but the analysis makes no mention of specifically Manchu religious practices. If spirit poles and other aspects of shamanistic ritual were indeed absent in Shuangcheng, that would be a notable finding, indicating that the move had effected major changes to customs prevalent in Beijing (Elliott 2001, 235–241). If they were present in the nineteenth century, but left no physical remains or traces in official documents, they

seem to have slipped the net of this study. There is room for further analysis of how the move from Beijing to rural Jilin affected ties to Manchu cultural practices and traditions.

Without the vagaries and contingencies of the Qing imperial project, from its creation by Nurhaci to its collapse in 1912, Manchuria (or the “Three Eastern Provinces” or “Northeast China”) would not exist as a unit of analysis. Reviewing the history of its boundaries, shaped by Nurhaci’s early contest with Ming China—as well as the relations of his successors with Russia, Korea, and the Mongol powers to the west—reveals how the region was created and continually reformed by evolving political circumstances. Likewise, tracing the differential impact of more subtle ecological, demographic, economic, and cultural shifts on various parts of the region shows that its internal diversity at least matched its internal unity. The focused research offered by Kim and Chen allows us to build, place by place and layer by layer, a richer picture of Qing Manchuria and the surrounding area. These books invite us to ponder the future of Manchuria as an object of study, by showing us that its parts can be carefully analyzed without overwhelming reference to the whole.

References

- Di Cosmo, Nicola. 2009. “The Manchu Conquest in World-Historical Perspective: A Note on Trade and Silver.” *Journal of Central Eurasian Studies* 1: 43–60.
- Elliott, Mark C. 2000. “The Limits of Tartary: Manchuria in Imperial and National Geographies.” *Journal of Asian Studies* 59 (3): 603–646.
- . 2001. *The Manchu Way: The Eight Banners and Ethnic Identity in Late Imperial China*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Hasegawa, Masato. 2016. “War, Supply Lines, and Society in the Sino-Korean Borderland of the Late Sixteenth Century.” *Late Imperial China* 37 (1): 109–152.
- Lattimore, Owen. 1935. *Manchuria: Cradle of Conflict*, rev. ed. New York: Macmillan.
- Lee, Robert H. G. 1970. *The Manchurian Frontier in Ch’ing History*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Li, Narangoa, and Robert Cribb. 2014. *Historical Atlas of Northeast Asia, 1590–2010: Korea, Manchuria, Mongolia, Eastern Siberia*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Rawski, Evelyn S. 2014. *Early Modern China and Northeast Asia: Cross-Border Perspectives*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Schlesinger, Jonathan. 2017. *A World Trimmed with Fur: Wild Things, Pristine Places, and the Natural Fringes of Qing Rule*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Wills, Jr., John E. 2012. “Functional, Not Fossilized: Qing Tribute Relations with Đại Việt (Vietnam) and Siam (Thailand), 1700–1820.” *T’oung Pao* 98: 439–478.

About the Author

Matthew W. Mosca is Associate Professor of History and International Studies at the University of Washington.