

Review Essay

Imperial Powers and the Modern Chinese State in the Inner Asian Borderlands

Kwangmin Kim, University of Colorado, Boulder

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Nianshen Song. *Making Borders in Modern East Asia: The Tumen River Demarcation, 1881–1919*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018. 318 pp. \$100 (cloth); \$80 (e-book).

Judd C. Kinzley. *Natural Resources and the New Frontier: Constructing Modern China's Borderlands*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2018. 272 pp. \$105 (cloth); \$35 (paper/e-book).

The books by Nianshen Song and Judd C. Kinzley reviewed here are excellent studies on the transnational nature of the rise of the modern Chinese state on its Inner Asian border—Manchuria and Xinjiang, in particular—during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The books highlight the constitutive ways in which the two major imperialist powers in the region, Russia and Japan, contributed to the rise of the modern Chinese state from two distinctive angles, namely, international law and the politics of infrastructure development. Not only do these works significantly qualify the previous scholarship, particularly Chinese, that focuses on the confrontational aspect of these relations, but when read in combination they also unexpectedly reveal the neglected story of the transnational politics in the expansion of global capitalism deep in the resource-rich and labor-scarce Inner Asian borderlands.

Nianshen Song's *Making Borders in Modern East Asia: The Tumen River Demarcation, 1881–1919* focuses on the boundary dispute between Korea and China from 1881 to 1919. When Japan made Chosŏn Korea its protectorate in 1905, it made claim on behalf of the Korean state to the territory north of the Tumen River, where large numbers of Korean migrants settled from the 1860s to the 1900s. In so doing, the Japanese legalists introduced European international law, predicated on the notion of the territorial sovereignty of the nation-state, as a new foundation for future interstate relations in East Asia. Drawing on the record of an influential encyclopedic four-volume work on China published in 1735 by Jesuit historian Jean-Baptiste Du Halde, the Japanese defined the vast area of southern Manchuria extending north from the Tumen and Yalu Rivers as a "no-man's-land" (*terra nullius*; 160) that people from neighboring countries could legitimately occupy for territorial acquisition. European empires used

the same concept to justify their disenfranchisement of native people's territorial rights in Asia, Africa, and America. Although China was able to secure territorial rights over the area in exchange for other rights, including the right to construct railroads in Manchuria in 1909, the debate fundamentally changed the foundation of international relations in East Asia. Government officials, revolutionaries, and intellectuals of the three countries involved in the debate—China, Japan, and Korea—began to view their country's past and present and relations among the countries through the lens of international law and modern territorial sovereignty.

While devoting most of the book to the importation of international law, Song develops a secondary, more intriguing argument: Although the Japanese Empire was able to introduce European-style *international* order in East Asia at the turn of the twentieth century, the traditional *regional* order of East Asia did not disappear immediately. Even during the heated border-demarkation debate, some Qing officials used the language of the tributary system (the *zongfan* institution, in Song's terms) and argued to maintain an informal political sphere of influence over regional interests even by sacrificing narrowly defined national interests. They thus advocated settling Korean border squatters north of the Tumen River as the "newborn babies to the Celestial Empire" (34). Some Korean negotiators also used the same language of the tributary system to enhance Korea's negotiating position. Song even suggests that the language resurfaced later during the People's Republic of China (PRC) era when special relations were established with the North Korean Democratic People's Republic of Korea regime.

Here Song develops the idea of Northeast Asia that historian Evelyn Rawski has articulated in her work (Rawski 2015). Northeast Asia was an interconnected regional space that included Manchuria (the homeland of various non-Chinese people such as the Khitan, Jurchen, and Manchu), Korea, and Japan, distinct from China centered in the northern Chinese plain. These regions' relationships with China were conducted through the local rulers' participation in the overlord-vassal relations of the tributary system ("tribute trade system," to use Rawski's term), and creative appropriation of the various Chinese political and cultural institutions by the states and nonstate actors. Although Rawski applies this concept only to examining the history of the early modern period, Song's argument implies that this framework of Northeast Asia may have analytical utility even in examining twentieth-century modern Chinese border history and international relations.

This is a provocative suggestion. One can legitimately question whether the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century use of the language and policies reminiscent of the traditional tributary system was a testimony to the tenacity of early *zongfan* relations. It may be more analytically intriguing to see this continuity as the repurposing of old language in a new context. That is, the Chinese officials and intellectuals used the traditional language to justify China's attempt to obtain a new imperialist sphere of influence over Korea, emulating the model of Western and Japanese imperialist policies. By the same token, the Korean diplomats were also willing to subscribe to the system in order to protect Korea from further encroachment by Japanese and Western imperialist

powers. Song makes an important contribution by raising this important question, whose clarification may need to await further academic debate.

In *Natural Resources and the New Frontier: Constructing Modern China's Borderlands*, Judd C. Kinzley highlights the Russian (and later Soviet) involvement in borderland politics. He argues that Russia provided the physical infrastructure of state-building for the Chinese state in Xinjiang, for locally based warlord regimes as well as the Republican and Communist governments based in the Chinese metropole. Deeply interested in the extraction of mining resources in Xinjiang, Russia dispatched geologists and mapped resources such as gold and petroleum there beginning in the late nineteenth century. The Russians established cooperative businesses with the eager provincial officials of the late Qing Empire, who decided to focus on mining development as the solution to their perennial financial crisis. Russia provided the capital, technicians, and equipment needed for the development and constructed new roads, railways, and a steamship line, which in turn was linked to its Trans-Siberian Railway.

The original grid of the investment and infrastructure the Russians laid out in the late nineteenth century provided the groundwork for the later pattern of economic development, infrastructure construction, and state-building in the area. The successive Chinese regimes, from Xinjiang warlords to the Nationalist and Communist governments, constantly returned to the proven oil and mining sites that Russia had originally developed, most notably an oil field in Dushanzi, in north-central Xinjiang. Although some new oil fields and nonferrous metal mines were opened in the Tarim Basin under pressure to increase energy production during the Great Leap Forward period (1958–1962), the long distance of these sites from the high-tech refinery facilities in northern Xinjiang limited their further development. This was the power of what Kinzley calls the “layers” (10), a pattern in which the previous capital investment and infrastructure building reinforced future investment due to the planners’ tendency to avoid risk. During the PRC era, the sites of oil production and mining in northern Xinjiang also became the backbone of state-building, requiring the establishment of administrative institutions and the expansion of communication networks and attracting large numbers of Chinese migrants.

Much like Song, Kinzley articulates a surprising long-term pattern of historical development that transcended the political periodization of the late Qing, Nationalist, and Communist periods. The basis for this continuity was provided by the sustained interest of successive Chinese regimes in the extraction of natural resources and their continued need to acquire Russian assistance in achieving their goals. I suspect it may be possible to extend Kinzley’s argument even further and trace the continuity back to the high Qing period in the eighteenth century. Although Kinzley argues that the Chinese state’s interests in the extraction of Xinjiang’s subterranean wealth began only in the late nineteenth century (37–39), the high Qing state showed significant interest in mining in Xinjiang as well, especially in developing extraction of copper, gold, and jade. For example, the Imperial Household Department monopolized the entire production of

the two jade mining centers in southern Xinjian—Khotan and Yarkand—with the latter sending 20 tons of jadestones to Beijing in 1778 (Kim 2016, 59).

The difference between the high Qing and the Chinese states from the late Qing onward was the specific sector of the mining that attracted attention. Whereas the high Qing Empire focused on mining jade, gold, and copper in Xinjiang, the Chinese state after the Qing period focused on extracting petroleum and nonferrous metals, such as beryllium, needed for making nuclear weapons. The mining of the former resources did not require heavy investment of capital and advanced technology to process them, and the Qing state was able to outsource the mining to native local officials and Chinese merchants. By contrast, the extraction of petroleum required heavy capital investment and high-tech equipment. In such situations in which they could not expect much support from the Chinese state based in the metropole, the warlord regimes in Xinjiang had to rely on the Russians.

Based on thorough research using archives in Chinese, Russian, and Japanese, both Song and Kinzley convincingly demonstrate the heterogeneity and contested nature of the Chinese borderlands at the turn of the twentieth century. They thus successfully qualify the previous scholarship's integrationist interpretation that focuses primarily on the Chinese states' unilateral efforts to establish Chinese administrative units and the promotion of Chinese migration into the borderlands. These books vividly show that it is more appropriate to view Chinese state-building in the borderlands as the result of collaborations, mutual emulation, and enmeshment that involved multiple transnational actors at various levels—most importantly, imperialist powers.

However, the two authors' decisions to focus on the imperialists' role in Chinese state-building on the border leaves the reader as perplexed as satisfied. An unanswered question lies in the logic of the political integration of the borderlands with the Chinese metropole. At some points in the early twentieth century, the Japanese and Russian empires each made obvious attempts to detach their respective spheres of influence from China by supporting the establishment of the separatist regimes in Xinjiang and Manchuria—the second East Turkestan Republic (1944–1949) in Xinjiang supported by Russians, and Manchukuo (1932–1945) by the Japanese. However, despite the growing influence of the Russian and Japanese empires, both Xinjiang and Manchuria eventually ended up as parts of the PRC. How can this surprising strength of Chinese political power, even during its time of weakness, be explained? It is one matter to highlight the long-term footprint that the imperialist powers left on the structure of Chinese political formation in the borderlands; it is quite another to determine whether the imperial powers helped the borderlands integrate with the Chinese metropole politically. Neither author provides an answer to this crucial question. Instead, both are content to leave the explanation to political contingency.

What is equally intriguing and challenging is how both works construct a borderland timeline of history distinct from that of the Chinese metropole, which was dominated by landmark political developments such as the 1911 Revolution, the May Fourth Movement, and the 1949 Communist Revolution. In the borderland history as

constructed by Song and Kinzley, the late nineteenth century—in particular, the period after 1860 when the Peking Convention between the Qing and Russian empires was ratified—emerged as a pivotal moment. However, pivotal political events in metropolitan history such as the 1911 Revolution hardly register in these works, whereas the Communist regime is largely considered as a continuation of the early regime (Kinzley) or the revival of such earlier practices as the *zongfan* system in socialist form (Song). Certain random years emerge as new breaks. These include the Soviet decision in the mid-1930s to seek raw materials in Xinjiang for the development of heavy industry in the Soviet Union, and Chinese warlord Sheng Shicai's joining China's Nationalist regime in 1942. How would the arc of greater China's history differ if one considered borderland history as an integral part of China? Both works raise this important question.

Read side by side, these two books also illuminate the underexamined story of the expansion of global capitalism deep in Inner Asia at the turn of the twentieth century. They depict the rise of the new transnational flows engendered by the capitalist initiative of the two non-Western imperialist powers, and the uneven permeability of the emerging national border of the Chinese Republic to different kinds of transnational flows. Indeed, in Kinzley's book the Russians represent the transnational flow of capital and investment and the people—geologists, technicians, and industrialists—who sustained the flow. The Koreans in Song's book are migrant workers who crossed the border, often without any other means of sustenance, to develop the vast underutilized land. They worked the land in order to meet the growing demand for agrarian goods and lumber in the aftermath of opening Manchuria to global markets, particularly after the establishment of its first treaty port, Yingkou, in 1861.

Therefore, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries the successive Chinese states in Xinjiang had to grapple with the issue of the necessity of Russian capital investment in resource development and its political (in)compatibility with Chinese territorial sovereignty. Meanwhile, the Sino-Korean border faced the issue of the necessity of labor immigration to work the wasteland and the security concerns that their settlement could pose to the Chinese border defense.

Together, the two books show that the Chinese state was surprisingly willing to work with Russian imperialists and industrialists—and other Europeans, for that matter—despite the ostensible security threat posed by the Russians. The Qing state was also willing to accept Korean labor migration on the Sino-Korean border for the purpose of land development but only under the strict condition that the Korean immigrants become subjects of the Chinese state. In other words, the national border that the emerging Chinese state constructed in Inner Asia was more permeable to Russians than to Koreans. However, the most important issue in explaining the different degree of the permeability of the border was not just the ethnicity of the people, although ethnicity was never unimportant. The more relevant issue was the different nature of each transnational flow: the modern state border was much more porous to the crossing of capital but remained restrictive with regard to labor.

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About the Reviewer

Kwangmin Kim is Associate Professor of History at the University of Colorado, Boulder. He is the author of *Borderland Capitalism: Turkestan Produce, Qing Silver, and the Birth of an Eastern Market* (2016).