

## **6. WAS MANCHURIA EVER PART OF CHINA?**

### **Brief history of the people of Manchuria**

Was Manchuria ever Chinese territory? Any consideration of the thorny Manchurian problem inevitably takes us back to this simple question. If Manchuria did not “belong” to China, then characterizations of the Manchurian Incident and the establishment of Manzhouguo as acts of Japanese aggression become baseless, and thus moot. To arrive at the optimal answer to this question, we must rely not on ideology, but on 2,000 years of Manchurian history.

The oldest Manchurian ethnic groups whose names appear in recorded history are the Sushen and the Yemaek people, who inhabited northeastern and southwestern Manchuria, respectively. The Sushen were quasi-legendary people who are thought to be ethnically Tungusic; they were known as Mishihase in ancient Japanese historical records. The Yemaek were of mixed Tungusic and Mongolian blood. There was no Han presence in Manchuria in ancient times.

Emperor Shi, the first ruler of the Qin dynasty (221-206 BCE), unified China, but never succeeded in gaining control of Manchuria and Mongolia. Instead, he had the Great Wall built and maintained to discourage incursions of the Beidi (Northern barbarians). From this perspective alone, we can assume that Manchuria was not Han territory 2,000 years ago.

Emperor Wu of the Western Han dynasty (202 BCE - 9 CE) extended his influence into the Korean peninsula, but some Yemaek established the kingdom of Buyeo in Manchuria; others founded the state of Goguryeo. In 668, during the Tang dynasty (618-907), Tang and Silla combined forces and destroyed Goguryeo. Surviving Goguryeo retainers moved to eastern Manchuria, where they established the kingdom of Balhae. Known as the “prosperous country in the East,” Balhae and Japan maintained amicable relations, but Balhae was destroyed by the nomadic Khitans in the 10<sup>th</sup> century. Nevertheless, the Khitans’ domain encompassed only the western half of what had been Balhae, i.e., reaching as far as the area later covered by the South Manchuria Railway. The Manchus, who were descended from the Balhae, established the Jin dynasty (1115-1234) and, forming an alliance with the Song, destroyed the Khitans. The Manchus then moved their forces into central China and proceeded to create a vast domain extending from Manchuria and Mongolia in the north to the Yellow River in the south. Next the Manchus invaded China and conquered the Han. However, in the first half of the 13<sup>th</sup> century, the Mongols rose up on the banks of the Onon River and overthrew the Jurchen Jin dynasty (1115-1234). Soon the Mongols established the Yuan dynasty (1271-1368), brought down the Song dynasty (960-1279) and built an empire unprecedented in scale, encompassing Manchuria and all of China.

In the latter half of the 14<sup>th</sup> century the fortunes of the Mongols were beginning to ebb. The Han drove them to the north again, and founded the Ming dynasty (1368-1644). Although the Ming expelled the Mongol forces from Manchuria, they never achieved complete control of the indigenous Manchus. We know that Ming authority was limited to a small part of the area downstream along the Liao River from the famous Willow Palisade, a barrier system constructed in the 15<sup>th</sup> century, designed to control movement between Manchuria and China proper. The Jurchen people, Manchus descended from the Balhae and Jin, became firmly rooted in all of

Manchuria. They never adopted the Han Ming calendar, and preserved their independent status in other ways as well.

Toward the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, Manchu Nurhaci raised an army, and in a little over 30 years, united the Manchus and established a dynasty, commonly called Later Jin (1616-1630). The year 1636 marked the beginning of the Qing dynasty, which persisted until 1912. In 1644 the Qing capitalizing on Ming internecine strife, occupied Beijing and set out to rule the Han. Since there were several hundred times more Han than Manchus (who numbered about one million), the Manchus moved to China. As a result, Manchuria became a vast wasteland. But the Qing continued to show respect to their homeland, both to preserve its integrity and to guarantee themselves a refuge in case their attempt to rule the Han failed. They implemented a *fengjin* (prohibition) policy, which barred the Han from moving to Manchuria. Following the Ming example, the Qing built willow palisades to keep Mongols and Koreans out of Manchuria. The Manchu royalty governed in a manner that differentiated Manchuria from China. For instance, generals in command of the three eastern provinces were always Manchus, never Han.

Having examined 2,000 years' worth of Manchurian history, we now know that the Han never ruled the Manchus. The Manchus sometimes conquered China, but the Han never controlled Manchuria. It is true that during the Han, Tang, and Ming dynasties, the Han forces extended their influence into Manchuria. However, this was but a temporary phenomenon and involved only a narrow strip of southern Manchuria, and Liaodong. History instructs us that Manchuria belonged to the Manchus. There is no evidence to support the Han claim of territorial rights.

### **Sun Yat-sen's perception of Manchuria**

There is evidence demonstrating that Sun Yat-sen, the leader of the 1911 Revolution, did not believe that Manchuria was Chinese territory. For instance, in August 1905, during the Russo-Japanese War, Chinese revolutionaries studying in Japan convened in Tokyo at a gathering called the Chinese Revolutionary Alliance. There the three revolutionary groups merged and selected Sun Yat-sen as their leader. The 8,000 attendees represented the 21 regions of China: the 17 Chinese provinces (with the exception of Gansu province), and Nanyang (Southeast Asia), Shanghai, Tianjin, and Hong Kong. Regional branch leaders were appointed, but not for Manchuria (the three eastern provinces: Heilongjiang, Jilin, and Mukden), as no branches had been established there, despite the fact that there were plenty of pure-blooded Manchus studying in Japan. This writer considers this fact the most compelling piece of evidence proving that neither Sun Yat-sen nor the participants in the Tokyo gathering considered the three eastern provinces, i.e., Manchuria, as Han Chinese territory. Moreover, the slogan used for the 1911 Revolution, *mieman xinghan* (exterminate the Manchus and revive the Han), did not cover a scenario in which the Han possessed Manchuria.

A second piece of evidence is Sun Yat-sen's promise to cede Manchuria to Japan. He made this promise more than once, but for our purposes I shall refer to an anecdote included in Mori Kaku's memoirs. It was July 1913, the time of the Second Revolution, this one an attempt to overthrow Yuan Shikai. At that juncture the revolutionaries were desperate for financial aid and weapons. Mitsui & Co. executive Mori Kaku arranged for negotiations between Sun supporter Yamada Junzaburō, then in Nanjing, and Sun Yat-sen to discuss the exchange of Manchuria for sufficient weapons to arm two divisions and ¥20 million in cash. The conversation involved Yamada,

Miyazaki Tōten (another Sun supporter), Sun Yat-sen, and Tongmenghui member Hu Hanmin. However, during the negotiations Sun also consulted with fellow revolutionary Huang Xing in a separate room. Ultimately Sun gave his blessing to the exchange. Then Huang Xing visited Japan, acting as Sun's proxy, where he met with former Prime Minister Katsura Tarō. They were just about to make final arrangements when the revolutionary forces suffered a defeat, compelling Sun Yat-sen and Huang Xing to seek asylum in Japan. The plan fizzled out in the face of opposition from the Yamamoto (Gonnohyōe) Cabinet and from Yamagata Aritomo, who said, "Manchuria is within our sphere of influence. Why should we have to buy it?"<sup>1</sup>

Here is another thought-provoking anecdote. Before and during the Great East Asian War, exciting adventure stories set in Asia were very popular among young boys. They bore titles like *300 Leagues Across Enemy Lines*, *Dawn of Asia*, and *Iron Man of the East*. The author of these books, Yamanaka Minetarō, was a graduate of the Imperial Japanese Army Academy. Employed for a time at one of the Imperial Guard regiments, he later withdrew from the Army War College to participate in Chinese revolutionary activities. Yamanaka served as Sun Yat-sen's chief of staff during the Third Revolution in 1915, when Yuan Shikai declared himself emperor.

In *The Dawn of Asia*, that same Yamanaka Minetarō, using his real name, wrote that at the time of the Third Revolution, he arranged a top-secret meeting between Sun, who had sought refuge in Japan, and Army Chief of Staff Gen. Uehara Yūsaku. According to Yamanaka, Sun Yat-sen was insistent when he made the following proposal to Uehara:

I can certainly understand why Japan, with its overpopulation problem and minimal resources, would find Manchuria, which is replete with vast plains and valuable natural resources, attractive. The GMD fully understands your position, and is willing to recognize Manchuria as a special region of Japan, and to give Japan priority, as far as opportunities for immigration and development are concerned. However, the three eastern provinces are Chinese territory, and we will under no circumstances relinquish sovereignty over them. If Japan helps us by providing enough Japanese reservists and weapons to form at least three divisions, we will grant special interests to Japan through all of Manchuria.

Sun then proceeded to enumerate a host of privileges he was willing to bestow, including precedence for Japanese advisors. The list was so long that Yamanaka was moved to express amazement.<sup>2</sup>

On one hand, Sun promised to cede special interests in Manchuria, and even Manchuria *per se* to Japan. On the other, he maintained that China had sovereignty over Manchuria. These unsophisticated contradictions were quite typical of Sun. It is possible, however that since 1915,

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<sup>1</sup> Mori Kaku denki hensankai (Compilation committee for the biography of Mori Kaku), *Mori Kaku*, ed. Yamaura Kan'ichi (Takayama Shoin, 1941).

<sup>2</sup> Yamanaka Minetarō, *Jitsuroku: Ajia no Akebono: Daisan kakumei no shinsō* (Dawn of Asia: a true account of the Third Revolution) (Tokyo: Bungei Shunju Shinsha, 1962).

the year of the Third Revolution, was also the year Japan presented the Twenty-One Demands, Chinese public opinion influenced Sun's remarks.

Additionally, in January 1907, in a speech delivered while he was an asylee in Japan, Sun Yat-sen said that the objective of the Chinese revolution was to "exterminate the Manchus and revive the Han." Therefore, if Japan would guarantee its support, once the revolution had succeeded, he would cede Manchuria and Mongolia to Japan.<sup>3</sup> (I have already stated that Sun was in agreement with the main aspects of the Twenty-One Demands.)

Judging from the examples I have offered, I believe it is sensible to conclude that Sun Yat-sen and his fellow revolutionary leaders were at best indifferent toward Manchuria. And that indifference is the most convincing evidence that they did not view Manchuria as their homeland. The question of the territorial jurisdiction over Manchuria, which is the fundamental source of the Manchurian problem, can be traced to the deception that was the 1911 Revolution. The true meaning of the philosophy behind "exterminate the Manchus and revive the Han," the slogan of the revolution, was unequivocally "only the Han shall rule the Han," and that is what motivated rejection of the Qing dynasty. Therefore, when the Chinese Revolutionary Alliance was established, the area to be ruled by the Han was assumed to be what I have described as China proper (18 provinces).

But after the revolution a bizarre semantic deception took place. Sun Yat-sen was installed as interim president in January 1912, a year after the revolution. In a declaration marking his appointment, he produced a clever argument: "The lands of the Han, Manchurians, Mongolians, Hui, and Tibetans shall be united into one nation, and the Han, Manchus, Mongolians, Hui, and Tibetans shall be united into one people. We call this a 'union of five races.' Independence is a matter of secession from the Qing, and uniting with the other provinces."<sup>4</sup>

The Manchu Qing dynasty domain embraced the Han, Mongols, the Hui of Xinjiang, and the Tibetans. If the objective of the Han people was to reject and overthrow the Manchus, one would expect the Mongolians, the Hui, and the Tibetans to be liberated from Manchu domination, and for the Manchus to control Manchuria. This is what we call "ethnic self-determination." But Sun did not accept the right of independence for the other four ethnic groups. He maintained that the Qing dynasty domain in its entirety (which he described as "one nation") would now be Han territory. In other words, this was a simple matter of the Han wresting the reins of power from the Manchus, no more, no less. The Han would then subsume the Manchus, Mongolians, Hui, and Tibetans.

When the revolutionaries overthrew the Qing dynasty and established a "new" China (the Republic of China), the new nation's territory should have encompassed, at most, the aforementioned 18 provinces. But what they did was claim all of the territory controlled by the Manchus, including Manchuria, Mongolia, Xinjiang, and Tibet, and call it China. In other words, though the revolutionaries had rejected the Qing dynasty, the new incarnation of China attempted to inherit

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<sup>3</sup> Kokuryūkai (Black Dragon Society), *Tōa Senkaku shishi kiden, chūkan* (Chronicles of pioneer patriots of East Asia, vol. 2), ed. Kuzuu Yoshihisa (Tokyo: Kokuryūkai Shuppanbu, 1936).

<sup>4</sup> Stephen Chen and Robert Payne, *Sun Yat-sen: A Portrait* (New York: The John Day Company, 1946), 103.

all its assets. Here lies the deception of the 1911 Revolution – the contradiction between the ideal and the real – that was the primary cause of friction between the Han and their neighbors.

The fact that independence movements have arisen in China in recent years, specifically in Tibet and Xinjiang, can be traced to the failure of the revolutionaries to recognize independence for the Tibetans and the Hui in 1911. For instance, in 1912 Tibet declared independence from the Qing, but the Republic of China refused to recognize that declaration. Then in 1917, the Chinese took advantage of the opportunity presented by Britain's being preoccupied with Europe during World War I. They invaded eastern Tibet and in 1928, when the unification of north and south China had been accomplished, they attempted to annex the eastern half of Tibet by establishing two "new provinces" (Qinghai and Xikang) and incorporating them into China. In 1949, after World War II had ended, the People's Republic of China was established. Millions of "People's Liberation Army" troops invaded eastern Tibet, beginning the communization and colonialization of that region. In 1955, the invasion complete, Xikang province was eliminated since it was no longer necessary. The current Tibetan independence movement is a natural consequence of the 1911 Revolution and other instances of deceit, as well as a Chinese policy of aggression.

Outer Mongolia, too, issued a declaration of independence from China after the 1911 Revolution. The Chinese refused to recognize it, but since Outer Mongolia at first sought shelter under the imperial Russian umbrella, and then turned to the USSR. China was powerless to counter its departure, and nothing has changed since then. Given this situation, was it not reasonable for the Manchu people, after being overpowered by China in the 1911 Revolution, to want to establish an independent nation in their homeland, Manchuria? Was it so strange for Japan, with its extensive interests in Manchuria, to offer its support, when compared with Russia's backing of Outer Mongolia or Britain's of Tibet? The conflict between Japan and China over Manchurian independence began with China's ambition – or perhaps China's grand illusion – to claim the homeland of the Manchus as its own territory. Before branding the Manchurian Incident and Manchurian independence as acts of Japanese aggression, we should be mindful that the root cause of this turmoil was Chinese deception and lust for domination, the culmination of which was the rejection of the Qing dynasty and the seizing of all its assets.

### **According to Shidehara, Manchuria belonged to Russia**

Foreign Minister Shidehara was known for his friendly policy toward China. What was his perception of Manchuria?

In 1931, shortly before the Manchurian Incident, Eugene Chen, foreign minister of the Nationalist Guangdong government, was in Japan on official business. On July 28 and 31 he met with Foreign Minister Shidehara. During those meetings the two men discussed the Manchurian problem. Chen seemed to be asking for a favor, i.e., Japanese recognition of the Guangdong government as the legitimate government of China. In return, the Nationalists would respect Japanese interests in Manchuria. Shidehara replied, "The Chinese people seem to believe that Manchuria is part of China. However, we know that Manchuria once belonged to Russia. After the Boxer Rebellion, we obtained permission from the Russians to install a consul at Yingkou. Since Chinese students are not familiar with their own history, they think that the Chinese reclaimed Manchuria through their own efforts. But it was the Japanese who expelled the Russians from Manchuria." Then Shidehara proceeded to explain Japan's position on Japanese special interests in Manchuria.

In 1896 China and Russia concluded a secret treaty forming an alliance against a potential threat from Japan (the Li-Lobanov Treaty). The term of that treaty was set at 15 years. During that period the Russo-Japanese War broke out. But in any case, as soon as that treaty was signed, the Russians began work on a Manchurian invasion plan. However, we know from records of negotiations between Japan and Russia prior to the conflict, that the Russians actually perceived Manchuria as an integral part of their territory. China was helpless in the face of this Russian coercion, and uttered not one word of protest. If this situation had been allowed to run its natural course, Manchuria would have, without a doubt, ceased to be Qing territory a long time ago. It was Japanese military intervention that enabled the Qing dynasty to retain this vast, fertile region. During the Russo-Japanese War we trusted the Chinese declaration of strict neutrality and adhered faithfully to our policy of protecting Chinese territorial integrity. Of course, had we known about the terms of the secret Sino-Russian alliance, Japan would have had more than enough reason to abandon that policy and adopt another.<sup>5</sup>

Since the Russo-Japanese War ended Manchuria has made a surprising degree of progress, and has achieved peace and prosperity, the likes of which no other region of China can claim. And the Japanese people are convinced that at least some of that progress is the result of Japanese corporate activity and investment. Japan makes no claim of territorial sovereignty over Manchuria. However, we hope that whether they hail from Japan proper or Korea, the Japanese people will be able to enjoy life in Manchuria, making friends and cooperating with their neighbors, engage in commerce and agriculture, and participate in the economic development of the region. We believe that we have a moral right to these modest objectives.<sup>6</sup>

Even Shidehara was not convinced that Manchuria was unqualifiedly Chinese territory. His remarks reflect the way in which the Japanese people perceived Manchuria.

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<sup>5</sup> The existence of the Li-Lobanov Treaty became known through a statement made by Wellington Koo (Gu Weijun) at the Washington Naval Conference (see Chapter 6.2).

<sup>6</sup> Suma Yakichirō, “Zai Shi jū yū ichi nen to gaikō hiroku” (Eleven years in China; Confidential diplomatic records) and “Shidehara gaishō, Chin Yūjin kaidan roku” (Conversation between Foreign Minister Shidehara and Chen Youren) in *Gaimushō* (Ministry of Foreign Affairs), ed., *Nihon gaikō nenpyō narabi ni shuyō bunsho* (Chronology and important papers on Japanese diplomacy) (Tokyo: Hara Shobō, 1966).