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Ruth Rogaski, *Knowing Manchuria: Environments, the Senses, and Natural Knowledge on an Asian Borderland*. Chicago: the University of Chicago Press, 2022. 464 pp.

He Bian(邊和)*

Academic reading has become, for most professional researchers, a routinized means of extracting information within the set frameworks of our discipline. We open a scholarly monograph, flip through its key passages to make a mental map of its arguments vis-à-vis existing bodies of literature and look through its footnotes or other evidentiary apparatuses for primary sources that might open new avenues of research for ourselves. Only rarely does a different reading experience come along that grabs the totality of our attention and suspends our habitual pursuit of a straightforward argument. Ruth Rogaski's much-anticipated *Knowing Manchuria* is such a book. It richly rewards those who are game to its challenge and bears careful study for scholars at various stages of their career. My goal in this review essay is thus first to serve as a tour guide through the book and then to ponder its compositional strategies and the methodological implications as an imaginary interlocutor.

Like a classical symphony, *Knowing Manchuria* can be divided into four movements. Each movement contains unique motifs and material, moves at various

* Associate Professor, Department of History, Princeton University

paces, and builds up and partially resolves tension within its plot. The idea of Manchuria as a region provides the unifying theme, which by no means went unchallenged by virtue of the sheer diversity of habitats depicted and addressed within the book, from snow-covered mountains to riverine meadows, from tall-grass prairie to densely settled cities and towns. Its temporal coverage spans nearly three centuries, starting from the Manchu ascendancy in the seventeenth century and ending with the large-scale agricultural transformation of the region in the 1970s.

The book opens with an eerie overture (Introduction) set squarely in the very hot beginning of the Cold War, when rumors of flying voles infested with deadly pathogens being dropped from the sky by the American military roiled the region in the early 1950s. To properly understand the nightmarish catastrophes besetting the place, the First Movement (Chapters 1–3) takes us back in time to survey the land in the first century of Qing rule. With a steady tempo (*largo*), the movement introduces us to the Manchurian landscape, still sparsely inhabited and exploited, and shows how a Qing-centered paradigm of knowing (and naming) Manchuria came into existence during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Chapter 1 follows the steps of Han literati in the early Qing period as they went on exile to the military outpost of Ningguta. Through poetry and memoirs, the exiled Chinese elite sought to express their bitterness and then bewilderment at the utterly strange climate and environment of Manchuria. The literary records left by these people also constituted the first attempt to make sense of Manchuria as a place in the Chinese literary tradition. Chapter 2 shifts its focus in turn to the young Kangxi Emperor (r. 1661–1722), who sought to articulate the virtues of Manchuria as proof and harbinger of his own sagely rulership. Through his own imperial pilgrimage to Qing ancestral shrines in Mukden, Kangxi harnessed the cultural capital of both elite Chinese officials and Jesuit missionaries to forge new knowledge about the land "where the dragon arose." Chapter 3 further ascends the White Mountain, comparing and contrasting how Qing and Chosŏn Korean writings sought to measure and map the mountain as a sacred site. The chapter—and the whole movement—ends with an elegiac Shamanic song preserved in modern folklore research about the spiritual journey descending from the White Mountain.

The Second Movement, Chapters 4 and 5, picks up the pace (*allegretto*) through two case studies of how the Qing paradigm was confronted with a different kind of imperial science during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Chapter 4 documents how Russian botanists and explorers surveyed the flora along the Amur River, a then-recent development resulting from imperial Russia's expansion into the Far East following the Qing defeat during the Arrow War. Guided by local natives that belonged to the Nanai tribe, who had in turn been subject to Qing frontier management and exploitation, the Russian scientists sought to incorporate Manchurian flora into the universalizing science and insert their own names in the nomenclature, thereby erasing the Nanai origin of their knowledge. Chapter 5 excavates how pre-historic fossils of the Jehol Biota came under the perusal of paleontologists and geologists working from their home institutions in Great Britain, Germany, and Japan. In both chapters, flashbacks to earlier Qing sources of Manchurian plants and fossils by the Kangxi Emperor and elite bannermen authors provide a counterpoint to Rogaski's multi-sited account of modern science. Both chapters thus fulfill the promise of epistemological equity set out in the beginning, in which the historian "tries not to privilege one form of knowledge over another" (p. 4).

Toward the end of Chapter 5, the relatively innocuous imperial science of classification and nomenclature gives way to a more sinister and exploitative regime of energy through fossil fuels. The Third Movement (the very long Chapter 6) presents a macabre dance in breathtaking tempo (*presto*). Casting a longer look at the 1910–1911 Great Manchurian Plague, the chapter challenges the usual narrative about the mass suffering from the deadly pneumonic plague as the crucible for the birth of the modern Chinese nation. The heroic and heavy-handed acts by Dr. Wu Lien-teh and the Plague Prevention Services, while frequently cited as evidence for the integrity of Chinese science in resistance to imperialist threats, should also be seen as an episode in the tragic excesses of environmental degradation and total warfare down to the visceral level. Drawing largely from sources in Japanese, Rogaski shows the continuous practice of plague research in Manchuria under Japanese control after 1931, culminating in atrocities committed by the notorious Unit 731, who engaged in lethal bacteriological testing on human subjects and the development of germ warfare during WWII. The short Chapter 7 briefly wades deeper into controversial waters by linking Unit 731's research program with the germ warfare allegations made during the Korean War and by the new People's Republic of China's bacteriological expertise. Functioning as a short transition (*attaca*) toward the final movement, this short chapter also echoes back to the prelude, framing the flying voles of Gannan as convulsive reactions to the nightmarish experience during fifteen years of occupation and displacement on a massive scale.

The Fourth Movement again features a stand-alone piece in Chapter 8. Focusing on the PRC campaign to transform Manchuria through industrialized agriculture in the 1950s to 1970s, the chapter proceeds at a brisk but not rushed pace (*allegro con brio*). Overall, the chapter pays sympathetic tribute to the people toiling in the Great Northern Wasteland, especially the "sent-down youths" (*zhiqing*) who arrived during the Cultural Revolution from cities around the country, interrupting their education to help build socialism following the Sino-Soviet split. Drawing largely from published gazetteers, memoirs, and other secondary works, the chapter parallels Chapter 1 of the book through a different kind of urbane exiles who found themselves in a strange and otherworldly place. Toward the end of the chapter, we do not arrive at a definitive assessment as to whether the PRC reclamation of the land produced a new knowledge paradigm vis-à-vis the early modern Qing model or the Western and Japanese imperialist model. The book ends with a quiet but soulful reflection on its journey through the author's own travels in the region.

Symphonic in its scope and composition, *Knowing Manchuria* is also cinematic in its touch. Reading the book never feels dull in that actors are always cast against the background of the environment of Manchuria—the land and the various creatures living on it. It would be apt to see the book as a "disaggregated composite portrait" (p. 11) of the place, with memorable close-up studies of characters, such as the Japanese officer who listened to the chirps of birds while supervising Chinese coolies working in a coal mine (Chapter 6). Each chapter has memorable scenes like this one. Overall, the book more than fulfills its promise as a "kinesthetic project" (p. 14) that never stays transfixed in one place, but always infuses its narratives with the human sensual experience of the place. *Knowing Manchuria* is thus ultimately neither about the rise and fall of any single empire or nation-state, nor should it be read as a composite history of modern geology, botany, paleontology, epidemiology, or industrialized agriculture, although it goes deep into every one of these topics at various points.

This observation then brings us to an important methodological point. So much recent historiography of science, technology, and medicine in modern China has hinged on the question of nation-building and modernity, which in turn necessitates a heavy interpretive reliance on the archive of modern science. Even when scholars seek to highlight the agency of local actors who sought to resist the hegemony of Western imperialism, the *telos* of the story construes the Chinese nation as an alternative modernity that nevertheless referenced the West as the universal model. *Knowing Manchuria* sets a wonderful example by showing how one can engage deeply with the multi-sited, transnational confluence of modern science without privileging either the Western imperialist or the Chinese nationalist enterprise as the main take-away of this history.

It is also significant, I think, that *Knowing Manchuria* achieved this interpretive independence from modernist enterprises because it really takes the Qing seriously—from its early modern beginnings to its late imperial struggles. If we follow the thread of recurrent Qing episodes throughout the book—like a string of beads with various shapes and texture—we can make three brief observations: first, that the Qing paradigm of knowing Manchuria centers on the Kangxi Emperor, who toured Mukden in the 1680s and regularly commented on anomalies found beyond the Great Wall; second, that there was no fundamental divide between how elite Manchus comprehended Manchurian nature from the received knowledge base in the Chinese tradition as exemplified by the *bencao* pharmacopeia quoted by bannermen authors such as Xiqing (Ch. 4); third, Manchu shamanic songs (Ch. 3) stood apart from the literate culture of the Qing and represented a purer, ethno-centric site of knowledge on the same level as the Nanai captain's familiarity with native plants.

Especially in Chapters 4 and 5, the Qing functions as a stark contrast to the advance of Western imperialist knowledge regimes, which Rogaski has succinctly summed up as “from *qi* to fossil fuel” (p. 229). Whereas modern botany sought to isolate species from their native habitat, Qing voices remained “people-centered” and “place based” (p. 191); in the face of relentless imperialist prospecting for fossil fuel, we are reminded of how the Kangxi Emperor exemplifies one of the “careful observers of the intricate, delicate fish fossils” (p. 228). The Qing, while demonstrating exploitative behavior toward many frontier subjects such as the Nanai, represents one crucial link in the “nested imperialism” that slowly but surely embroiled the land that would come to be called Manchuria into the fierce clash of empires of the early twentieth century. At the same time, the Qing knowledge regime remains fundamentally true to an “empire of myriad things” that is more holistic and committed to governance in accordance with the cosmic laws laid down long ago in the Chinese Classics.

Absent from this striking portrait of Qing knowledge within a larger composite portrait of knowing Manchuria is any serious treatment of the High Qing after the Kangxi reign—skipping over the Yongzheng (r. 1723–1735) and Qianlong (r. 1736–1796) reigns during which Chinese literate culture underwent drastic disciplining in large part thanks to the highly politicized issue of Manchu identity and civilizational legitimacy to rule over China. Also unmentioned are the travails of agricultural settlers and commercial agents from North China who ventured into Manchuria in large numbers, especially during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and whose descendants probably shouldered the lion’s share of labor in Japanese-controlled coalmines and homesteads on collectivized socialist farms. Their embodied knowledge of the land may lead to a divergent interpretation of history than one bookended by written records of literate exiles in both the early Qing and the early PRC.

On the most general level, a central tension that runs throughout *Knowing Manchuria* is that between a declensionist narrative on the surface and a humanist voice deep down in the core. On the one hand, we read about disenchantment, *qi* to plunder, and the degradation of the environment, both through physical destruction and epistemic violence. On the other hand, we are reminded that such disenchantment always occasioned its own undoing as human actors could not help but to cast new mythologies and subliminal meanings onto their environment. The poetics of disenchantment and reenchantment replaces the *telos* of modernization and nationalism as the driving force of the book. This is thus not a typical monograph in either environmental history or history of medicine/science, but at the same time the book makes contributions in all these subfields of history.

As readers, we behold the accrual and disintegration of knowledge regimes over three hundred years. Depending on one's own disposition and specialization, however, we also cannot escape the feeling that the author perhaps did not show us all her cards, or even most of her cards. By choosing to not read with or against any singular archive, the author-historian must take on the arduous decision on what to leave in and what to leave out. In the end, therefore, the journey represents *one* account of the Manchurian past out of many possible ones, a singular itinerary through space that constituted the place, with clear echoes of Paul Carter's 1987 manifesto for an anti-imperial kind of spatial history. Anyone seriously engaging with the enterprise of the history of knowledge can learn so much from the brave adventure into unknown historiographical waters here. I congratulate the author on the ship being at last back at bay and ready for the next journey out.