Inner Mongolia: Japanese Military Activity and Its Cultural Support, 1932–45

To the ends of the Great Wall,
To the ends of Mongolia,
In search of light
Did I travel afar.
But what do I find
Now that I’ve come . . .
Only cold winds of greed,
Oh! cold winds of greed.¹

With Japanese domination of Manchuria after the Manchurian Incident of September 1931, the number of ethnic Mongols who fell under direct Japanese control steadily grew, because, as discussed in the Introduction, parts of the three northeastern provinces of China were predominantly populated by Mongols. One consequence was that the question of the significance of Mongolia itself within the broader framework of Japanese imperialistic ambitions moved into the mainstream of government discourse. The Japanese Army, elements of which had sought to gain control of Mongolia for strategic reasons for the better part of two decades, now saw its ambitions in the region supported to a much greater extent by the government and the bureaucracy. In tandem with these changes within official circles, there was also a significant increase in the publication of cultural works justifying Japan’s claims to a special relationship with the Mongols. Such works often incorporated themes familiar from previous decades. For example, the romantic image of sweeping plains, lone horsemen and noble inhabitants was a strong element. The role that Japanese women could play in ongoing Japanese schemes in Mongolia was promoted too, again echoing themes from the early part of the twentieth century. Attempts by Japanese authors to mobilize Japanese public opinion behind the various official policies on
Mongolia also attracted attention from Western writers, and in some cases were reinforced by those writers.

From the early 1930s onwards, both military strategists and civilian writers worked to construct an image of Japan as the champion of the Mongols, building on a particular interpretation of past history and the opportunity to appeal directly to Mongols in Jehol and Hsingan, as a precursor to further incursions into the predominantly Mongol provinces of Chahar and Suiyuan in the years prior to the outbreak of the Second Sino-Japanese War. After 1937, however, as Inner Mongolia’s significance for the Japanese military declined with the shift in strategic focus, first to southern China and then to Southeast Asia, the purpose of promoting closer Japanese-Mongolian relations changed: now the goal was to strengthen the Japanese military’s grip on the region, presumably because of its strategic importance as a buffer zone between the Soviet Union and Republican China, and because of Inner Mongolia’s economic potential.

Japanese authors continued to write about Mongolia in this period, and a number of Western writers also examined Japan’s relationship with the region. Japanese perceptions of a special relationship with the Mongols were widely known outside of Japan and were, to a certain degree, appreciated and promoted by Western writers. Moreover, a number of those Western writers clearly believed that Japanese stewardship of the Mongols

Figure 19: Map of the contested region, c. 1936, compiled from various sources.