Han Chinese Immigrants in Manchuria, 1850–1931

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Introduction: Chinese Migration in the North Asian System

This chapter studies a specific case of Han Chinese migration from North China to Manchuria (Dongbei, or northeast of the present-day China, shown in Map 1) from the Qing (1644–1911) to the Republican period (1911–1949), following Adam McKeown's chapter on Chinese mobility across time and space. North China is estimated to have sent over 25 million migrants in total to Manchuria from the 1890s to the end of the Second World War. The volume is comparable to those of other major cross-cultural migrations including Chinese migration to Southeast Asia, and eclipses all other migrations to Manchuria from other states and regions including Russia and Japan. The sequential migratory flows can be conceived as part of a more globalized concurrent population shift toward North Asia, or what McKeown calls the ‘North Asian system,’ along with Russian colonization of Siberia and Central Asia. The present day northeast of the People's Republic, comparable to Siberia of the Russian Federation, has now been completely incorporated not just in the political domain but also in the cultural sphere of the home state. Both Manchuria and Siberia, however, had long been independent tribal territories with their own cultures. The two regions were gradually transformed by the homesteading movement of the respective states within the context of international geopolitics. The Han Chinese migration to Manchuria in this North Asian system can therefore be regarded as a cross-cultural migration, without which Manchuria might not be a Chinese territory now. The Chinese migratory stream was largely spontaneous as shown by the dominance of free migrants, in contrast to coercive ‘rural resettlement’ in Siberia projected by Catherine the Great.

The colonizing migration to Manchuria is also distinct from other Chinese overseas migrations in another respect. The transpacific and Southeast Asian migrations were mainly driven by political violence and disasters as McKeown observes with respect to the rather early mobility transition of China as a whole in the second half of the nineteenth century. Until that time migration to Manchuria was politically controlled and its sudden increase followed the introduction of railways around the turn of the twentieth century. The migration is in this sense comparable to the European transatlantic experience,1

1 Lucassen & Lucassen 2009.
MAP 1  
*Location of the sites under study: North China (Hebei and Shandong), Manchuria, and six sampled villages (1935)*

_Notes:_ The solid and dotted black lines are the present-day state and provincial borders, respectively. The solid grey lines represent railways in operation in the first half of the twentieth century. The small black squares specify the locations of the villages under study in this chapter from a household-level perspective. The small grey squares are other villages sampled in the Manchukuo Farm Survey of 1935.

although the underlying causes were the unstable political and socioeconomic situation of the home region shared by other Chinese migrations.²

Migration to Manchuria was stopped in the post-Second World War period by the strict residential control under the communist production regime. After the economic reforms initiated by Deng Xiaoping at the end of the 1970s, it resumed but remained very modest due to the pull of eastern coastal cities such as Shanghai and Beijing, which offered many more opportunities to rural

² See McKeown’s chapter.