In recent years many books on the history of the Far East have been published and attention to the region’s past has clearly increased. However, I agree with the editor of the book under review, Kimitaka Matsuzato, that its title is almost revolutionary because it reflects the current change in the understanding of Russia’s historical role in the region: from a supporting player to one of the main actors in the Far Eastern scene, at least from the middle of the nineteenth century (viii).

The book consists of ten chapters written by authors from Japan, Russia, Great Britain, and Germany. The individual chapters demonstrate a breadth of research interests, tackling various aspects of the history of the Far East and its relationship to Russia on both the macro and micro levels. With a certain degree of conventionality, the chapters can be grouped into four thematic blocks. Chapters 1 and 2, Shinichi Fumoto’s “Russia’s Expansion to the Far East and Its Impact on Early Meiji Japan’s Korea Policy” (1–13) and Susumu Tsukase’s “The Russian Factor Facilitating the Administrative Reform in Qing Manchuria in the Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries” (15–31), are devoted to early (i.e., mid-nineteenth century) Russian activity in the region. Both authors note a high level of anxiety manifested both in Japan (due to the flight of starving Koreans into Russian territory from 1869–1870) and in China (due to the activity of Russians on its northern borders at a time when the power of Beijing had been weakened by the Taiping Uprising and Opium Wars). According to Fumoto, the Japanese perceived a sinister political motive on the part of St. Petersburg even behind such actions as its reception of Korean migrants, which seemed contrary to Russian interests. Of course, this perception was exaggerated, but the author does not answer the question whether it was the result of a conscious distortion of the situation in order to justify Japan’s colonial activity on the continent, or a consequence of the activity of subordinate
Japanese officials who, eager to show their zeal, seized on information gained from questionable sources—for example, conversations with a certain Russian, Shubin, or a retelling of a newspaper article on the Korean migrants—published, by the way, in Japan (4–5). In any case, the conclusion drawn by Japanese officials concerning the luring of Koreans onto Russian territory lacks credibility (5–6). The problem they formulated was of concern only to the Japanese themselves, since the Chinese were indifferent to the situation (5), and even the Koreans had to be convinced of Russian aggressiveness (3). Thus, the Japanese reaction to Korean migration did not reveal Russia’s plans but exposed instead the real intentions of Japan, which as early as the 1870s regarded Korea as an opportunity for expansion. An attempt to link the hypothetical Russian interests in Korea with references to St. Petersburg’s desire to purchase an ice-free port there (9) has no basis in Russian sources. St. Petersburg’s well-known intentions regarding the port in Korea did not begin to be realized until two and a half decades after the period under study (i.e., until the second half of the 1890s). Russian documents show that until the 1890s Russia did not seriously consider expansion in the region, but rather feared China and cared primarily about protecting its own undefended borders.

The atmosphere of political alarm in the region, already established in the second half of the nineteenth century, contrasted with the international character of rapid economic growth from the 1890s onward, and their coexistence was very complicated. Catherine Ladds explores various aspects of this tension in chapter 3, “Imperial Ambitions: Russians, Britons and the Politics of Nationality in the Chinese Customs Service, 1890–1937” (33–48). Ladds examines the special national institution of the Chinese maritime customs, an extremely important source of state revenue. Half of the employees there were foreigners—11,000 people, mostly Englishmen (35), among whom there were only a few Russians. The author found that the proportion of Russians among foreign customs officers was negligible; even in Harbin, by 1917 they numbered only slightly more than 5 percent of the foreigners. The case of Russia is unique compared to other countries, but we must remember that the position of the Russians in China after 1917 changed dramatically. Once the subjects of a great power, they were now stateless, even though their contribution to the economic life of China had grown. These trends were not limited to maritime customs and the region of Harbin; by the mid-1930s, one could speak of “Russian Shanghai,” and the Russian diaspora played a significant role in the economic life of the most international Chinese city, as attested in the amazing album of V. Zhiganov, The Russians in Shanghai (Shanghai, 1936).

The economic role of river communications and railways is the subject of the fourth and fifth chapters, Yukimura Sakon’s “Development of Trade on the Amur and the Sungari and the Customs Problem in the Last Years of the