

Chiasson, Blaine R.: *Administering the Colonizer. Manchuria's Russians under Chinese Rule, 1918-29*. Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press 2010. ISBN: 978-0-774-81656-4; 285 S.

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Over the last decade we have witnessed an explosion of studies on the history of imperialism in Manchuria. Although Japan's expansion gained most attention¹, the Russian colonial advance with the Chinese Eastern Railway (CER), the last leg of the Trans-Siberian railway, with headquarters in Harbin, as the main tool of imperial advance into China's Northeast attracted interest among western historians, too.² Still, many questions of Chinese-Russian encounters in the region remain unanswered. One of which was the Chinese takeover of the Russian administration of the CER concession during the 1920s.

Blaine Chiasson, associate professor of modern Chinese history at Wilfrid Laurier University (Canada), has successfully filled this blank spot with his illuminating analysis of Harbin's civil administration during the transition from Russian to Chinese rule. Chiasson's main argument is that Chinese administrative policies during the 1920s were based on compromise rather than conflict in order to extend Chinese sovereignty into Northern Manchuria, a region that was shaped by a large non-Chinese immigrant community. These unique circumstances encouraged a more flexible Chinese nationalism, one that also allowed for Russian influence. Chiasson's study gives a comprehensive account of Harbin's Chinese administrative presence during the 1920s. Therefore it is not only a valuable study on multiple national influences and interactions during Manchuria's imperial times but also an important contribution to the growing number of studies concerning the establishment of Chinese municipal governments during Republican China.³

The book is divided into nine chapters. The introduction (chapter 1) gives an insightful analysis of contemporary Western publications on Manchuria, Chinese, Western, Soviet-

and post-Soviet Russian histories of Harbin and Manchuria as well as recent Western scholarship on Sino-foreign interaction at the administrative level.

Chiasson begins the second chapter with an overview of North Manchuria before 1917. He deals with the Czarist colonial interests in China's Northeast and examines the tasks of the CER Civil Department, which turned the railway concession into a small-scale state mechanism. This mechanism controlled more than just rolling stock: the city administration, the police, education etc. were a part of the CER system as well.

Chapter 3 shifts the perspective and focuses on the Chinese attempts to neutralize the Russian influence in the region. After Russia's defeat in the Russo-Japanese war, the Qing established Chinese local government at the very edge of the Russian administration. The turmoil of the Russian 1917 revolutions and the ensuing civil war gave Republican China the opportunity to revoke Russia's extraterritoriality on Chinese soil in 1920. A major blow against Russian rule was the replacement of the Russian dominated CER concession with the Chinese Special District of the Three Eastern Provinces – the administrative parent of Harbin's Chinese administration –, which marked the beginning of China's establishment of control over Russian Harbin.

The following five chapters best suggest the dimensions of Chinese administration during 1920s Harbin. Chapter 4 studies the legal reform, the police, and courts in the Special District, asserting that the city was well policed and crime rates were quite low. Other than hysteric contemporary journalistic accounts of Russians being abused by the Chinese police may suggest, there were much less documented racial tensions and inter-ethnic violence in the city.

The fifth chapter looks at the CER's trans-

¹The two most important are: Prasenjit Duara, *Sovereignty and Authenticity. Manchukuo and the East Asian Modern*, Lanham 2003, and Louise Young, *Japan's Total Empire. Manchuria and the Culture of Wartime Imperialism*, Berkeley 1998.

²David Wolff, *To the Harbin Station. The Liberal Alternative in Russian Manchuria, 1898-1914*, Stanford 1999.

³Just to mention one classic study on urban politics during the warlord era: David Strand, *Rickshaw Beijing. City People and Politics in the 1920s*, Berkeley 1989.

formation from a semi-colonial Russian enterprise to a Sino and exile-Russian and a Sino-Soviet co-administered railway. Chiasson stresses that, like in the case of the Special District itself, the cooperative approach of the Chinese side failed, mainly because of the émigré and Soviet Russians. In their eyes, it threatened the single Russian/Soviet control. Disappointed by the Russians, the Chinese then turned to a more aggressive Chinese nationalism.

Chapter 6 surveys the dispute over the Special District's land, which was at the center of claims to sovereignty. The struggle over control of the CER's Land Department was not about simply supervising tax revenues. By achieving full control over the Department, the Chinese elite hoped to make Harbin Chinese in all respects, including physically reshaping the city.

Chapter 7, „Whose City Is This? Special Districts Municipal Governance“, shows that the municipal system established under Russian rule in Harbin was not only further implemented in 1920s Chinese Harbin, but became a model for many future Guomindang municipal codes.

The last main chapter concentrates on the question of how the Russians and the Chinese influenced each other through education and sciences. When Russian primary and secondary schools came under Chinese rule, the Special District's administration left Russian education relatively untouched. Still, the Chinese administration enhanced Russian education and sciences only when Russians did not challenge the principle of Chinese supervision and when the goals of both sides coincided.

Chiasson underpins his account with various sources of Russian, Chinese and Western origin. Most of the archival documents are culled from United States archives (chiefly US consular files). Some attentive readers may ask why primary sources in a study on Harbin – a Russian-founded city on Chinese soil – are of American origin? This (i.e. inaccessibility of the respective Chinese, as well as some of the Russian archives) is beyond the author's control. Archives are complemented with a vast array of published information, mostly newspapers, though some major Harbin émi-

gré papers (e.g. Rупор) are missing.

This book is highly instructive, and yet some scholars specializing in the history of imperialism in Manchuria might find some questions raised by Chiasson redundant. Especially the retrospect up to 1917 (chapter 2)⁴ as well as some aspects of the CER's co-administration during the 1920s (chapter 5) will be familiar to specialists from previous scholarship.⁵ Occasionally it remains vague, whether the author is referring to the Special District of the Three Eastern Provinces in general or only to Harbin's Chinese administration. As informative and useful as it is, the book also suffers from a few of inadequacies of form. The historical inaccuracies, such as errors in dates (e.g. the Far Eastern Republic joined the USSR in 1922 not 1924 [p. 102]) are negligible. The copyediting, a responsibility of the publisher, missed too many spelling, grammar, and translation errors uncorrected, especially errata in transliterations of Russian names and terms (e.g. pp. 108, 142, 152, 223).

Nevertheless, Blaine Chiasson's work should fascinate those interested in colonial history, modernization, and inter-cultural conflicts. He has written a fascinating book that helps us to understand that there is no monolithic story of national resistance to the foreign presence in China, as many earlier treaty port histories on colonial enclaves along the Chinese coast have suggested. The case of the Harbin Special District reveals that the Chinese could not only take over a colonial administration, but also improve it.

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⁴ Wolff, Harbin Station, and Sarah Paine, *Imperial Rivals. China, Russia, and their disputed frontier*, New York 1996, pp. 178-197.

⁵ Felix Patrikeev, *Russian Politics in Exile. The Northeast Asian Balance of Power, 1924-1931*, Basingstoke 2002.