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An Analysis of China's Borderland History Offers a Left Case for the Uyghurs

Image by Kuzzat Altay.

Introduction and Context

This essay discusses the frontier borderlands of East Asia from the seventeenth through nineteenth century. I analyze Chinese dynastic political practice, its legacy on early twentieth and twenty-first century geopolitics, as well as the need for American progressive positioning regarding the Uyghurs. In my view, commentary on this issue needs to be firmly rooted in leftist opposition to international human rights abuses, (*Pukr*) while resisting Sinophobia, US militarism, and Cold War exaggeration and intervention. I highlight these borders by looking at multiple frontiers geographically and thematically. Generally speaking, the regions discussed are covered in terms of the following respective

evolving institutional zones: (1) the northeast, Manchuria, eastern Mongolia and Chosŏn Korea, (2) the southwest, Yunnan, Tibet and India (3) the northwest, Turkestan and Xinjiang, and (4) the north, and Outer and Inner Mongolia. I will show how each area had its own set of social, political and economic implications of environmental territory and history "across forest, steppe and mountain."[1] To understand the problematic nature of American imperialism and Frederick Jackson Turner's "frontier thesis" is to understand China's own borderlands and how Uyghurs today, or "people in the middle" get in the way of uncompromising nation-building.

I argue that significant conflicts, starting in the seventeenth century, influenced Qing territory and the consequences of these are still seen in the case of the Uyghurs: ranging from mounting and forced pressure to reopen markets adjacent to border space, corporatized surveillance, economic suffering and famine, dejected statesmen and Confucian scholars, political impeachments, and forms of illicit trading. Additionally, succession and sectional disputes, mass violence, as well as pivotal demographic changes, all shaped China's society, and its environmental history for generations.

As a result of these continuous, regional seventeenth and eighteenth-century skirmishes, areas nearby mountain trade routes saw increased levels of commerce, yet at the same time, more Chinese intervention and political volatility. Occupation and border disputes finally led to war by 1814 as European trade deficits, the opium trade, as well as fluctuations in trading and shifting economic policies of dominant actors, brought on the First Opium War. By 1820, The Qing Empire stretched into Outer Mongolia, Turkestan and Tibet and featured provinces like Yunnan, military governorates and protectorates such as Manchuria, and the tributary states of Burma, Nepal and Korea.

Historians that study nineteenth-century Qing borderlands undergo investigations of environmental cultivation and social interaction and its degradation in respective regions. Territorial expansion fluctuating disproportionately to population changes, food supplies, and nonhuman entities placed a great deal of social, economic, and political stresses in particular regions. Specifically, to environmental history it is important to note that the natural commodities harvested easily, and at a premium value, took place on a global scale during the Qing era.

The institutional zones analyzed here largely rely on scholars that study route publications, travelogues, maps and prefectural gazetteers, which offer specialized ways to investigate unique features of Qing territory and borders. The production of the gazetteer, the

institutional and (topographical in particular), are perhaps the most important sources of information for studying the most significant border histories spanning nineteenth and twentieth-century China. For example, covering from 1880-1889, the Qing Dynasty produced 141 gazetteers, both extant and lost editions. From 1920-1939, the Republican era saw 126 published, both extant and lost. These two sets of dates and figures overwhelm, and by far outweigh, all other publication totals covering the 1640-1959 period in greater East Asia.[2]

This essay also explains how the geographical regions and revisionists write against the historical grain. By conceptualizing history from "west to east" and starting with the "underdeveloped areas" as opposed to starting with the "developed and developing areas" east to west – Tibet, Xinjiang and Mongolia, all become salient revisionist frontier samples, and in the case of the Uyghurs, an ongoing example. What interests Qing environmental historians are the fast-moving political ramifications, during the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries regarding the natural world. Historians here, place the Qing Dynasty in the context of world history, as they challenge the traditional historiography and John K. Fairbank thesis of the tribute system and Sino-centrism. Academics revising the original scholarship forge a renewed analysis of the Qing in Chinese history that shows the early phases of globalization, and for that matter, capitalism, especially when pointing out how organic, commercial networks exceeded artificial borderlands. Here, it is important to call out Beijing-led frontier aggression in the present, just as we should our own American aggression, both past and present.

In short, the Asian border scholarship after the mid-90s, with the use of gazetteers, challenged the Sinicized orthodoxy and posited further discussion for how the Qing period environmental history exhibited pre-capitalistic tendencies. Furthermore, my contention is that frontier and geographical microhistories serve as forms of world history that explain and synthesize both the themes of social class and ethnic identity around commodities. A multi-frontier study of the natural environment is an overlooked component in explaining the creation of the early modern nation-state and how ethnic tensions factored in China. *Frontier* is an oversimplified term, and borders change over time. They were socially constructed, never fixed, and more precisely, the term *peripheral institutional zones* better encapsulates these regional frontier histories.

Northeastern Frontiers

The first institutional and regional zone in regards to the north and northeastern Qing is explained as an environmental case study by David Bello, which provides a scholarly borderland analysis of the Manchurian region and how Han spaces existed with nature. This narrative, in my view, picks up on the work of Owen Lattimore in part, who argued in 1940 that Asian pastoralism and its interactions with sedentary life shaped Chinese history more than major global actors. American academics and journalists in general have long taken an interest in East Asia, as Benjamin Welles wrote in the *New York Times* in 1947, "Manchuria: 'A Cradle of Conflict' in the vast land today met the rivalries of Russian, Chinese and American interests."[3]

The Manchurian border was a vast land, but one of untapped resources. Readers need to consider how ecology and ethnicity (*then*) help explain geographical borderlands as they relate to the nature of dynastic expansion and the Uyghurs (*now*). By analyzing game hunting and pastoral lifestyle in the northeast institutional zone, you will notice what constituted for political and imperial balance between dynastic survival and the compatibility of diverse people in Manchuria and east Mongolia.

With the use of primary source material found in natural science literature, along with under-utilized sources of the Manchu language, New Qing historians show borderlands as diversified imperial projects, and how their cultivations relied on environmental interactions across the landscape. With so many moving parts, the Qing had to devise ways to maintain the society through human and non-human relations. Borderlands were inevitably shaped with unique sets of identity. An understanding of the northeastern portion of the Qing Empire is enhanced with maps of The Hu Line ecotone, and tables that illustrate, "manpower" raids, the exploitation of banner companies, relocation routes, foraging equivalents, annual quotas, major state pastures in Manchuria and Mongolia, as well as horse and sheep herd statistics of the seventeenth and eighteenth century. Borderland space was malleable, and the state determined this often. It still does sadly.

"Borderland space was ostensibly dependent on sustaining animal-people interactions that conditioned any human borderland interactions. The imperial design was not merely a human social construct,"[4] furthers Bello. Thus, borderland histories suggest that the Qing did not simply explain how people effected the environment directly, but how the landscape necessitated and interacted with a particular region's way of life, whether it militaristic or game oriented. Explaining the Manchurian systems from an environmental point of view forces the reader to consider a greater interconnectedness for how and why the empires manage to sustain themselves both then and now. While constructing

individual border identities around foraging, steppe life, pastoralism, banner identity, and tribal identity constructs, the discourse extends beyond environmental.

Historians draw on other disciplines and areas of research aside from environmental history, anthropology, ecology and biodiversity to create this work — namely human psychology. This can explain the formation of ethnicity in the borderlands. This is central since academics set out to also explain state discourses and its relationship to what humans shared with their environments. Bello refers to "an anthropocentric mindset," in order to explain the connection of human diversity to ecological diversity and the symbiotic relationships and distinctions therein.

When distinctions collapsed along the northeast frontier, between how humans and non-humans interacted on the Qing landscape, the boundaries also collapsed. Environmental history here renders a broader history of material culture. How much Chinese material culture is a byproduct of Manchu material culture? This question is probably best answered by the more prominent dress attire of the Manchu Emperor with regal, sable fur, as well as Manchu dresses seen replacing Han dresses. In short, Manchuria had to be invented, and institutionalizing and mapping open spaces within the natural landscape required a bureaucratic response, according to the New Qing academics.

Jonathan Schlesinger starts with the nineteenth-century description of Manchuria as "a cornucopia of nature"[5] while other European travelers marveled that Manchuria had been hardly touched by man and seemed uninhabited."[6] Schlesinger uses both Manchu and Mongolian primary sources to tell the environmental history of Qing Rule. He points out that 1760 to 1830 represents a time of incredible imperial growth that called for a scramble for resources that altered China and its borderlands. This resulted in the reimagined state of Mongolia and Manchuria and revealed how Empire did not actively preserve nature in its borderlands. By investigating mussels and animal populations in the borderlands, he demonstrates how an environmental history can produce a context of global history with a multilingual and multi-archival approach. Furthermore, he is correct in my view, that in the secondary and tertiary literature, too much attention is paid to topographical features such as the silt or *loess* of let's say, the Yellow River, at the expense of discussing biological and political systems working together in shaping frontier spaces and their histories. Language is as important as the borders themselves.

Most historians no longer use the word Manchuria but instead refer to it as Northeast China as Schlesinger wants to understand, when and how did Manchuria become Chinese? He states that "the answer lies in the historical legitimacy of the modern border."[7] China

scholarship and historiography in general, merges with the accounts of nation building in the American West, Australia and Russia. By placing China central to frontier history "the standalone importance of the Enlightenment, the British economy, or European-centered capitalism are rethought within the making of the global environment."[8] Setting out to explain contextual differences between Mongolia and Manchuria is important in differentiating the people of a peripheral zone as conventional accounts do not tend to evaluate the Qing Empire, or China today, as a place with ethnic and territorial distinction. Ethnic and territorial distinctions are found in the northeastern frontier spaces in the form of objects, commodities, poetry, travelogues, and imperial archives. These help to uncover the Qing and how the region's agricultural core helped to discover places, new topics and subjects that complicate the explanations of ethnicities. By citing William Cronon that "nature is itself artificial"[9] and that "no environment lacks a human history," along with Bello's ability to see Chinese development as "a matrix of environmental practice,"[10] Schlesinger too, wants the reader to have a greater understanding of the environmental history of China. He concludes that this institutional zone was about more than doing away with "pearl thieves, undocumented migrants and mushroom pickers," but required courts to strengthen policy and reform while realizing its connection to the local environment that relied on furbearing animals. In order to reimagine the Qing, the primary documents needed to be read "against the grain," and while seeking "alternative archives," it became evident that oversimplifying mushroom picking, fur trapping and ginseng picking, limited the rich history of the people.

The northeast regions of the Qing show how demand for resources impacts a country and its dynamic people within institutional zones. This history challenges the traditional account that a blank slate or barren land transitioned into a bountiful harvest only to be emptied and hopefully replenished. This is far too simplistic as trends of fashionable and conspicuous consumption put a strain on the supply of natural resources. The Qing experienced stripped riverbeds, uprooted steppes, and fur animal depletion. As a result, the powers that be responded with methods of social control to harness ecological phenomenon in the region that help to illustrate, thus exemplifying, the global invention of nature and open space from an eastern perspective.

Seonmin Kim, in a highly specialized study, also discusses Manchuria and Chosŏn Korea and control over open space in *Ginseng and Borderland*, thus providing agency for historical actors left out of the tributary worldview. This work fulfills an increased need to define northeastern borders of the nineteenth century more accurately. By studying how

material and political components were modelled on patron-client relations, we see how the Qing Emperor wished to be perceived. Ginseng gained distinctiveness as an item of tribute and shaped the Qing's political economy as well as the eventual construction of a formalized nineteenth-century border. Kim accessed Chosŏn libraries and investigated judicial documents, land surveys, maps, and rulings that courts handed down regarding banners, in revising the original thesis which undervalued the relevance of ginseng. In short, this institutional zone prompts an investigation of the formulated and bureaucratic responses to areas rich in ginseng.

In terms of the northeast region, a multi-archival approach puts forth a new context, from the point of view of the Manchu and Mongolian speaking world that creates and further develops nineteenth-century Qing frontier compensatory history. The Qing was a multi-lingual empire and prior histories demonstrate that scholars were not reading all the documents related to Manchuria and Chosŏn. By investigating and analyzing the documentation, New Qing historians provide narratives explaining the desires for the government and the courts to take an interest in the natural harvest. Leaderships' own cynical preoccupations of the frontier in the service of the state, illustrate how governments created a memory of the natural world, thus turning them into pristine landscapes. A failure to brings these themes to historical light, provides an opportunity for the right to prove some on the left correct regarding the Uyghurs.

Southwestern Frontiers

The second regional history this essay covers is a revisionist discussion of the southwestern border and the greater Yunnan, Tibetan, and Indian expanses which Jesuit maps of the eighteenth century indicated as undiscovered. The previously discussed Bello covers imperial foraging in the Sahaliyan Amur Heilong (SAH) Basin. Aside from considering the nature of imperial pastoralism in the northeast, he also asks, what was the nature of imperial indigenism in Southwestern Yunnan? In effect, how do we best describe the borderland Hanspace, and what was entailed in Qing environmentality?[11] Specifically, how did malarial locales in Qing southwestern Yunnan shape China's history through the lens of the nineteenth century? Studying the Yunnan's Southwestern frontier establishes how "historical and environmental relations centered on ties between people and animals."[12] By reviewing how steppe survival required livestock in Mongolia, and noting the impacts of malaria in Yunnan, multiple and respective frontier studies of the Qing show a diversified understanding of borderland conditions that best explain the time period and regional identity.

Qing borderland identities shaped by the "actor network theory" or ANT, challenges the idea that only human to human connections can explain the past. This work invites you to think about how humans and nonhumans interact and leaves us with a new form of knowledge construction of Yunnan's past. Again, it is important to recall Cronon, and Alfred W. Crosby, who both studied environmental history and ecological imperialism to provide a useful model for studying China *west to east*. Nonhuman formations and factors of imperial projects contribute to the understanding of frontier identities and varied "anthropocentric tendencies in modernity."[13]

Other studies of Western Yunnan in the nineteenth century are C. Patterson Giersch's *Asian Borderlands: The Transformation of Qing China's Yunnan Frontier*, as well as *Corporate Conquests: Business, The State, and The Origins of Ethnic Inequality in Southwest China*. *Corporate Conquests* is compelling, not only for its historicism related to the Tai region but moreover, it reveals Giersch's interest in how Qing period social dynamics link to the present's *Terror Capitalism*. Giersch writes, "By incorporating the borderlands into our historical understandings of China as a whole, historians will better serve the public. We are watching the Communist Party's despicable internment of thousands upon thousands of Uyghurs and Kazakhs in Xinjiang, and only a few specialists are able to make sense of this for a public who is largely ignoring this abomination." Asian sovereigns clearly *should* have some element of political and socio-economic independence while maintaining agency within China proper's governance. I will cover this more in depth when I discuss Xinjiang in the next institutional zone.

The southwest regional frontier highlights Fang Keshang and the Tai elites' concept of development along the Teng Long Border Region and how it showed an idealistic vision for creating a benevolent partnership between elites, while attempting to decrease any likelihood for ethnic conflict. Focusing on nineteenth-century Qing "pre-capitalist" developments, as well as twentieth-century state driven corporatism, in my estimation, complicates any "flying geese paradigm." This, in an effort, points out how densely populated areas within Eastern China, with rapidly increasing populations, mediated nature's harvest in the less populated west. My argument here is that not only Giersch, but most New Qing historians in general, cultivate and regenerate the debates for this mediation, but while they do so, they advance arguments supporting the "sprouts of capitalism" theory tacitly, for it is embedded in the Ming-Qing transition. Also related to capitalism, from analyzing Yunnan corporatism, is the realization that Chinese communism didn't invent inequality. China pursued the standardized disempowerment of

non-Han inhabitants starting at the end of the nineteenth century. And this history and evolution of a command economy helps explain how Uyghurs came to be, *Strangers in Their Own Land*.

Further, in the southwest, Matthew Mosca studied the professionalization and standardization of Qing cartographic practice at the India-China border. This regional focus is interesting because of current political matters as a framework provide the historical context for subsequent geo-political developments. By taking account the travel interests of monks, in the case of India in the eighteenth century, primary source documentation such as letters, diaries, encounter-stories, diplomatic missions, and travelogues, show the significance of frontier monastics and their entry to Tibet. They occupied distant spaces and illustrated an ability to speak Chinese. Again, borders are socially constructed.

Qing authorities and intellectuals constructed a perception of British power, much like China does with the US today, while shaping their own understandings of foreign policy in pursuit of security. By recognizing both the empire at the height of its power, and the Qing decline in the face of European power, a frontier constituted an assemblage of provincial administrative strategies, per location, that better facilitated the Qing's dealings with the outer world. It worked out "well" and served its own purpose but was less useful when engaging with European influences in the region. Even more importantly, through changes in strategic thinking, a balance developed between foreign policy and frontier space, thus shaping the Qing's internal political dynamics in the southwestern peripheral zone.

Northwestern Frontiers

In terms of the northwest, Judd C. Kinzley, like Giersch in regards to the southwest, emphasizes that the frontier past, much like China borders at the present, show the need for political solutions over military ones. This is especially true when it comes to balancing the needs of territories and people on the margins in relation to Beijing. For instance, in an October 2020 issue of *The Economist*, the cover story reads: "Torment of the Uyghurs and the Global Crisis in Human Rights." Although the human rights crisis and re-education camps are heavily concentrated in the northwestern region of Xinjiang, as well as Kazakhstan, members of the diaspora stretch across an archipelago, laced with tragedy, and tier-levelled prisons all throughout the autonomous region.

Tracing Xinjiang's natural environment, from harsh locations to treasure-troves, illustrates a historiographical turning point in the late nineteenth century. Explaining eighteenth-

century conquests and nineteenth-century uprisings in the southwest contextualizes the conditions of frontier status in the region. This institutional zone also renders a focus on industrialization elsewhere as it relates to agricultural reclamation, geological surveying, and the early layering of the province. A multi-frontier study of the natural environment is an overlooked component historically in explaining the creation of the early modern nation-state and how ethnic tensions factored.

In reference to ethno-cultural tensions Kinzsley states that "the lessons of Xinjiang speak to a larger perspective on the development of state power that applies broadly across Chinese peripheries. Rather than focusing on the impact of the formation of ethnic identities, this work reveals the value in understanding the ways in which ethnic formation in state economic policies helped create conditions for inequality." [14] In other words, the development of infrastructure went hand in hand with exploiting raw materials as a form of official border policy in the northwest.

This regional history then, focuses on greater Chinese Imperial border policy, the discovery of gold in the South, oil in the North, the increasing relevance of the Russian Empire, as well as the significance of twentieth-century developments and consequences of a burgeoning command economy. Early twentieth-century capital investment of the Soviets, and the impacts of dependence through exportation of items considered rare, explain the development of the state via transnational integration of frontiers and borders. In my estimation ultimately, the border policy scheme failed because not enough capitalization was acquired to make the transition pay for itself, besides lacking the population to maintain any aspirations for a richer infrastructure. An important regional and historical takeaway here is looking at how oil from Baku impacted the contemporary industrial age as the supreme economic commodity and material prize leading into the twentieth-century. Discussing oil as it related to empire building, and the influence of foreign and state power, namely the Soviet influence, show how countries can alternate from aggressors to investors.

Within this same institutional zone, Peter B. Lavelle allows the reader to see Chinese history through the lens of agriculture. He argues that the coalescence of industrial nations around China gets too much play in the nineteenth century and ignores the importance of agriculture as an extension of theoretical science. He maintains that agricultural development rivaled the other great economic powers of the world. Writing about social and environmental desolation and how the Qing capitalized on a host of calamities to foist widespread political change, explains reconfigurations of resource development. In

devastation, there are always opportunities to introduce techniques of statecraft, as the pandemic surely impacted the Uyghurs.

Lavelle's *Profits of Nature* is a reference to Zuo Zongtang's passion for learning agriculture and improving farming techniques. In using Zuo (General Tso's chicken) at the center of the story, he discusses how his reputation for pacification was subdued by what I consider, a latent imperialism, and created a new pattern for the northwest borderland in order to state-build. The nineteenth-century landscape of China was under great stress due to the incredible growth and the pursuit of rich natural resources. Some historians referred to this as a period of "environmental decline and crisis." [15] This in turn caused China to start looking out and "gazing upon territories with anticipation in recognizing their potential for development," in the second half of the nineteenth century. Thus, the Chinese population was not seen as a burden, but rather as an opportunity to secure the frontier regions as assets.

Zuo Zongtang emerged into power after the Taiping Civil War and by shaping outcomes of rebel movements he administered every conquest in the borderlands to the West. Zuo became known for his military capabilities and had a reputation for conquest even though he only used these capabilities for an overall economic frontier strategy. It seems he played a crucial role in the rebranding of the Qing as it went through crises and environmental decline in search of capital. He came from a group of leaders that experienced an up-and-down "perfect storm." The perfect storm, to William Rowe, was not only a variety of instances of environmental ruin and the social, political and economic conditions that accompanied them. More specifically, that Chinese ports now open to both foreign commerce and frontier expansion necessitated a buffer.

New Qing scholars set out to explain agricultural history and the Qing's ambition to capitalize on the country's resources and their establishment of institutions based on rural development. This became a matter of policy after 1850 and much of the region sought out the capital development of land and logistical supplies to yield public benefits. Although modern development in China was influenced by European theoretical science and breakthroughs of technology, I understand Lavelle to argue that China internally relied on the complexities of Qing geography and their own knowledge of industry to create a "two-dimensional" transformation of the frontier. This attempt in extension of empire received rude intrusions from nature, namely the North China famine in 1876. Nonhuman events disrupted the "seasonal rhythms" of the modern world and China. By 1884 Zuo became accustomed to the natural disasters in rural parts not unique to Hunan. With an already

strained northern China infrastructure, environmental devastation placed further strain on the population. The literati or public intellectual sector had to spring into action due to the mounting social and ecological stresses placed on China, in part because best practices had not been previously shared.

Finally, in the northwest, Kwangman Kim, in *Borderland Capitalism: Turkestan Produce, Qing Silver, and the Birth of an Eastern Market*, unpacks primary source literature, with a substantial portion written in Turki, thus providing a capitalistic explanation for why the Begs, or Turkic nobles and chieftains, wanted to ally with the Qing after a cross-continental decline in commercial trade. Silver was the central trading product and served as the connective link that allowed for the entrepreneur class to maintain leverage over this institutional zone prone to instability. The Qing bureaucratic military elite offered a *quid pro quo* if the Begs supported basic Qing economic provisions, commercial ventures, and policies. Again, we have another example, no matter the commodity or the institution, of frontiers in China shaping and contextualizing a process of borderland expansion. In this case, the Qing's military security interests in proportion to Beg capitalism.

Northern Frontiers

Sören Urbansky of the German Historical Institute, and author of *Beyond the Steppe: A History of the Sino-Russian Border*, provides a multi-regional focus on one of the longest borderlands in the world, the Sino-Russian border, and looks at it as an extensive continental and riverine boundary. Closer examination of this borderland illustrates varied meeting points of social and economic significance as Urbansky demonstrates how frontier spaces change over time.[16] His work also challenges the narrative that city bureaucrats, or metropoles, influenced the borders when actually people on the ground that worked on the rail, farm, or served as guards in these remote locations, did so.

History has shown that East Asian borderlands have their own unique economies and developments. In this case, infrastructure projects along the Sino-Russian border are largely a twentieth-century development. The respective Qing and Romanov imperial state formations however, setting the stage for these developments, I would argue, started in the nineteenth-century. Similar to the people of India entering the border of Tibet and Mongolia in the eighteenth-century, the Sino-Russian border was very porous, had a regular and routine exchange of people and ideas and exhibited its own distinctive linguistic patterns.[17]

Aside from this strong contribution to the study of Asian borderlands in general is the fact that his analysis explains a frontier history of Mongolians on the cusp of independence in a

post-Qing world. This region's most pressing insights, from my perspective, were the testimonies of Mongolian farmers and herders. They had political and social capital for Russians, in trying to strike deals with frontier locals in the early part of the twentieth century. As a result, China was able to maintain sovereign use of the greater Argun (Amur) River region.

To conduct the research for this work, he spent time on both sides of the China-Russian border and piloted extensive border-ethnography fieldwork, while implementing and using micro-histories, oral history interviews, and local newspaper clippings. Urbansky had to navigate and balance both countries concerning access to the archival material. He found two ways around the red tape when faced with accessibility and bureaucratic challenges: (1) by locating consulate documents in Washington, D.C. featuring Russo-Chinese source information and (2) by finding communications in the Russian archive that focused on Chinese correspondences. Understanding the northern frontier is not only vital to differentiate the agricultural traditions and practices of China proper compared to Mongolians of the steppe, but it reveals how revisionist historians like Urbansky and others, such as Victor Zatsepine[18] challenge the classical work of Lattimore that in subtle ways, undermines a more thorough and comprehensive integration of steppe life. They might even argue against New Qing orthodoxy and state that "historical frontiers" are too large and complex to allow for a singular term, preferring instead, "peripheral and institutional zones."

Conclusion

In my view, the social, economic, and political ramifications of early modern China's themes of border history relate directly to the ongoing Uyghur human rights crisis which includes evidence of forced labor. The 1848 edition of *Mitchell's School Geography* provides a "descriptive geography" of "Chinese Empire" that "embraces China, Chinese Tartary, Corea, and Thibet," with a "ruling race," the "Mantchoo," that's noted for its "singularity of its manners and customs," as the "Americans supply the Chinese with ginseng." This source references the tribute system but gives no mention to any frontier traditions with agency.[19]

R. Kent Guy points out how in the early twentieth century, the prevailing and original Eurocentric thesis designated and portrayed China as an inflexible fiasco, suggesting that it was a unique disaster with backward governance and inherent policy failures. From there, an antithesis gathered new perspectives after 1970 and the Qing became emblematic of a vibrant early modern nation-state in terms of its urbanization, demographic shifts,

increased populations, and reforms. Since New Qing scholarship has taken hold of the East Asian narrative for the past 25 years, scholarly acquisition of the Manchu language synthesizes a revisionist perspective and illustrates how the Qing embodies and occupies a dynamic (yet problematic) place in local, regional, and world history. Furthermore, Qing China era history reveals a complicated dynastic phenomenon featuring an elastic frontier, with pre-capitalistic and expansionist impulses in the various contact and institutional peripheral zones with non-Han peoples. It flourished, had major setbacks, and experienced a restricting and a constant reconstituting of its borders over the two centuries it grew.

Much of the New Qing work is drawn from a west to east perspective, an approach that illustrates a better understanding of nineteenth-century American history as well. Many of the parallels to the United States around the same time are noteworthy: displacement, mass violence, transitioning from agricultural life to industrial life, urbanization, frontier identities taking precedence over artificial borders, regional militaries, civil war, reconstruction phases, sectional politics, and human rights abuses. Reducing the definition of American imperialism to include only Hawaii and Alaska, and not previous westward expansion or histories dating back to the first contact, is in error. Chinese imperialism too, is constituted by its borderlands and territorial transitions and forms of internal adjacent imperialism, not merely its historical and influential relationships to Korea, Taiwan and Hong Kong, *or* industrial powers.

China continues to be a dominant force in the American and global political discourse, consciousness, and imagination. In my view, not only have New Qing historians opened up new ways to explore and investigate nineteenth-century Qing environmental and frontier histories, but have helped more scholars to analyze how current affairs, like the Uyghur issue can trace back to Chinese corporatism. This can help us understand contemporary ecological studies, Marxism, feminist studies, and the study of rural communities in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

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