What Part of Manchuria Were the Han Chinese Able to Rule, Even Intermittently?

The Willow Palisade

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After the Han Wu-di’s conquest of Old Chosun in 108 BC, the Han Chinese began to inhabit the fertile Liao River basin called Liao-dong. It was the only part of Manchuria that could be put under direct control of the Han Chinese dynasties, off and on, for about 800 years out of the last three millennia (1,000 BC-2,000 AD). The Han Chinese settlements were localized almost entirely on a triangular area in southwestern Manchuria centering on the alluvial basin of the Liao River and the uplands of the Liao-dong Peninsula. This area came to be surrounded by a guarded line marked by trees and ditches punctuated with fortified gatehouses.

As a major way of preserving their identity and their control of mainland China, the Manchu Qing rulers tried to maintain their homeland as a base separate from the Han Chinese life and culture. In order to prevent Chinese immigration from the Liao River basin northward, northern and eastern Manchuria were closed to Chinese immigration in 1668. A long ditch with an embankment, repeatedly repaired...
and expanded, was built across southeastern Manchuria during the early days of the Qing dynasty (1616-1912). It ran from the Great Wall at Shanhai-guan, crossed the Liao River to the north of Mukden, and then returned to the coast near the Korean border down at the Yalu. It marked the boundary of the pale beyond which the Han Chinese should not expand, the statutory limit of Chinese settlement.1

The big ditch several hundred miles long and lined with willows is known as the Willow Palisade (Liu-tiao Bian). The Qing pale surrounded by the Willow Palisade is a little bit larger than the Ming pale surrounded by the defensive wall (Bian Qiang), constructed by the Ming during 1437-42 and 1479-81, that was to defend the Liao-dong area from the intrusion of the Mongol-Xianbei and the Ruzhen.2 It had delineated the Ming borderline in Manchuria.

The Inner Willow Palisade extending from Shanhai-guan to the mouth of the Yalu River was intended to keep Han Chinese out of north and east Manchuria, and the Outer Willow Palisade connecting the Liao River (at the north of Mukden) and the Song-hua River (at the north of Jilin) was to keep the Mongolic Xianbei out of Manchuria. Manchu and Mongol bannermen were stationed at twenty outposts (karun) to patrol its perimeter. The Manchus tried to close their homeland to Chinese immigration and maintain Manchuria as a hunting land outside the Chinese agricultural economy.3 Most of Manchuria, with its hunting lands, forests, and streams, was thus preserved for the tribal Manchu peoples for a long while.

If we look back over the past three millennia (1000 BC-2000 AD), we see that the Han Chinese were able to occupy the Liao-dong area for less than 840 years: at most 328 years during the Han dynasties (206 BC.-220 AD) after Wu-di's conquest of Old Chosun in 108 BC; 45 years during the Cao Cao's Wei dynasty (220-265); less than 51 years during the Western Jin dynasty (265-316); 89 years during the Tang dynasty (618-907) after 668 until the An Lu-shan Rebellion (755-77); 276 years during the Ming dynasty (1368-1644); and 51 years under the People's Republic of China (1949-2000).4

finished conquering the entire mainland of China, the Qing rulers reclassified many of the original Chinese Bannermen as honorary Manchus, and made the Altaicized Chinese of Laio-dong as the official language, called Mandarin, for the entire Han Chinese, though they themselves continued to speak the Manchu language (see Crossley, 1999, p. 56 and Janhunen, 1996, pp. 163-7).

BIBLIOGRAPHY

4 During the 364 year period after the beginning of the era of Five Barbarians and Sixteen States (304-439) until the fall of Koguryeo in 668, Liao-dong had been occupied briefly by the Xianbei (Former Yan, 349-370) and then for a long time by Koguryeo. Liao-dong had subsequently been occupied by such “barbarian dynasties” as Parhae (after the An Lu-shan rebellion in 757 until 926) for 169 years; Qidan Laio (916-1125) for 209 years; Ruzhen Jin (1115-1234) for 119 years; Mongol Yuan (1206-1368) for 162 years; and Manchu Qing (1616-1912) for 296 years until at last it was taken over by the modern (People’s) Republic of China.

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