
Introduction

THIS STUDY seeks to lay bare the relationship of the sociopolitical structures that shaped peasant lives in Manchuria (northeast China) during the Qing dynasty and the development of that region's economy. The study is in three parts: it begins with an analysis of the ideological, political, and economic interests of the Qing ruling house in defending its homeland in the northeast against occupation by non-Manchus and examines how these interests informed state policy and the reconfiguration of the region's social landscape in the first decades of the dynasty; it turns to an examination of how this agrarian configuration unraveled under challenge from settler peasant communities and gives an account of the resulting property and labor regimes; the study ends with an account of how that social formation configured peasant economic behavior and in so doing established the limits of economic change and trade growth.

The Setting: Temporal, Geographic, and Political Boundaries of the Study

Historical studies require a temporal beginning and end, even though the forces at play carry over from one era to the next. The temporal parameters of this study are set by the establishment of Qing rule in 1644 and the opening of the Manchurian port at Niuzhuang to foreign trade in 1862. Both moments marked disjunctures in the history of the northeast and serve, therefore, as fitting bookends.

That said, at first glance the year 1644 may not appear to be the most appropriate beginning. The ethnically Manchu imperial house that ruled over China from 1644 to 1912 as the Qing dynasty had consolidated its authority over the

northeast by 1616. By the time of its invasion of north China in 1644, the Manchu ruling house ran a well-developed state and had established an agrarian system that relied upon the farm labor of free peasants, slaves, and soldiers (the major social elements of post-1644 agricultural production). But, what makes 1644 a useful starting point is the fact that this preexisting agrarian regime was dismantled in the immediate wake of the Manchu invasion, as the ruling house transferred the bulk of its subjects to China Proper. That resettlement effectively wiped Manchuria's social terrain clean. With the social landscape thus pruned to the ground, in the 1650s the ruling house set about restructuring the Manchurian countryside to serve a new imperial agenda. That reconfiguration of the agrarian order is this study's point of departure.

The second disjuncture, which fixes the temporal end of this study, is the opening in 1862 of the Manchurian entrepôt of Niuzhuang to foreign trade as a Treaty Port. The opening of Niuzhuang to foreign traders initiated a period of unprecedented growth in international demand for Manchuria's agricultural goods. The Qing's decision in 1860 to counter imperialist expansion in the northeast by ending its ban on immigration and encouraging colonization allowed for a rapid expansion in agricultural production and agricultural exports. By the 1890s, trade began to draw significant capital investments in railways and modern manufacturing plants that served as the spearheads of Russian and Japanese imperial adventures in the region. New forces were in play after 1862 that bore the potential of restructuring social arrangements and reshaping Manchuria's economy, distinguishing that period from what came before.¹

The geographic focus of this study is roughly commensurate with the contemporary provinces of Liaoning, Jilin, and Heilongjiang. The focus of the study lies in Liaoning and southern Jilin, however, as that was where agricultural settlement was most concentrated by 1862. For much of pre-Qing history this region lay outside of or was only partially incorporated within the Chinese imperium. Ming power did not extend beyond the lower Liao river plain. Under the Qing, Manchuria was for the first time brought fully into the imperium. However, because of Manchuria's particular standing as the ruling house's homeland, the dynasty chose to govern Manchuria in ways that set it apart administratively and even socially from China Proper, but was akin to its rule in central Asia. Of particular note, the ruling house appointed members of the Conquest Elite to govern the region and established a secondary capital with its own government in the Manchurian city of Shengjing (a.k.a. Mukden, the contemporary city of Shenyang). The demarcation of the region as separate from China Proper was affirmed in the ruling house's use of the Chinese term *Manzhou* (Manchu continent) to designate the region. It is from this term that our English "Manchuria" derives. Administratively, the region was often simply

known as Shengjing or Fengtian, terms that strictly speaking defined clearly demarcated administrative districts in southern Manchuria. This sense of Manchuria's separateness from China Proper remained until the very end of the Qing dynasty. Not until 1907 was the region politically and socially incorporated into China Proper. In that year, Manchuria (*Manzhou*) became simply the Three Eastern Provinces (*Dongsansheng*), a designation that defined its administrative and political parity with the other provinces of the empire. It is this region—its transformation—that is the subject of this study.

An Approach to Understanding the Economy in History

The analytical approach taken in this study asserts that long-term, macro-economic patterns are the outcome of particular social and political arrangements. These arrangements, or social property relations, configure how individuals attain access to the basic elements of production: in the early modern world these would have been labor, tools, and—above all else—land. By determining how individuals attain access to the means necessary for economic activity, social property relations establish the parameters of rational economic choices, or the rules of reproduction (what individuals must do to survive economically). In so doing, social property relations determine the long-term pattern of economic change.

This argument draws directly on the insights of Robert Brenner's work in social theory and comparative history.² Brenner holds that it is the given property relationship (the relationship between producers and nonproducers, among producers, and among nonproducers) that establishes the best economic strategies for individuals and social classes to pursue as they seek to maintain their social positions. By determining the opportunities and constraints acting upon individuals and social groups, property relations establish rules of reproduction which, when articulated, configure long-term patterns of economic development *while* reproducing the social relations in which people and classes are embedded. Because social property relations are politically determined (determined by the political balance between the major social classes), individual economic actors cannot alter them but instead must take them as they are. They must, therefore, pursue to the best of their abilities those ends that secure their individual reproduction *within* the prevailing property system.

One implication of this model is that economic growth—defined as sustained increases in the growth of output per unit of labor input—is not the result of the workings of the market, the growth of trade, or the elaboration of the division of labor; nor is it the result of onetime shifts in technologies such

as the finding of coal or the development of factory production; nor is it the result of gains in accumulation via colonization, or other forms of forced expropriations; and, finally, nor is it the outcome of cultural proclivities such as a commercial or entrepreneurial spirit.

In making this argument, I draw explicit comparisons between Manchuria's (and China's) pattern of growth and that of contemporaneous Europe, particularly England. I do so because I see England in this period undergoing what can only be described as the quintessential pattern of Smithian growth (i.e., modern or capitalist economic growth), understood to be the incessant reallocation of labor from one specialization to another specialization that yields a higher rate of return made possible by the growth of market demand or lower relative costs, ipso facto raising the productivity of labor. I see that pattern as distinctly different from the Malthusian or Ricardian-Malthusian pattern of growth, which is characterized by the allocation and reallocation of labor in ways that yield a steady decline in the productivity of labor and ipso facto stagnating or falling daily or hourly wages. The comparison between England and China is drawn to highlight those differences which I believe are telling of both the underlying causes of development (Smithian growth) and nondevelopment (Malthusian growth) and their divergent patterns once they are established. This view is clearly contrary to R. Bin Wong's (1997) typology of preindustrial economic patterns that collapses Smithian and Malthusian growth and subordinates the dynamics of the former to the constraints of the latter, a disagreement to which I return in the conclusion of this study.

In early modern England, in contrast to China (and much of continental Europe) the main economic agents had lost the capacity to secure their economic reproduction either through the extra-economic coercion of the direct producers or through the possession of the full means of subsistence. In Brenner's original thesis the restructuring of English property relations was itself the upshot of the demographic crisis of the fourteenth century. Briefly stated, a prolonged period of class struggle between lords and peasants in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries brought on by dwindling agricultural surpluses and labor shortages ended in the sixteenth century with lords holding on to their lands (and indeed the bulk of land in England) and peasants freed of their serf status but without direct access to the land they needed to reproduce themselves (Brenner [1982] 1985b).³ The major economic actors were thus rendered dependent upon the market by this outcome, a condition that required each to match the efficiency of the other or face "going out of business." Lords and peasants alike were compelled by the forces of competition to allocate their resources in a manner that would maximize their rate of return (the gains from trade). They could only achieve this by furthering specialization, deepening the

division of labor, reorganizing production toward greater efficiency, and accumulating and investing capital in the latest labor-saving methods. England experienced, as a result, a Smithian pattern of economic evolution, or self-sustaining growth, that commenced in the sixteenth century and brought it, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, to the edge of the Industrial Revolution.

The key to England's economic evolution in the early modern period and beyond was thus the consolidation of a system of social-property relations in the countryside that broke decisively from that which had prevailed during most of its medieval epoch. In the medieval period, agriculture had been largely in the hands of economic agents who, like their counterparts in late imperial China, by and large held direct, nonmarket access to the land, tools, and labor power that they required for their reproduction. Peasants possessed their plots, defending their rights (especially to inherit) by manorial custom and their peasant communities. Lords, for their part, generally took a rent by extra-economic coercion (Postan 1966). Thereby freed from the competitive constraint, medieval English peasants, like those in late imperial China, tended to subdivide holdings, as well as to marry early and to have many children. This was in the service of ensuring the survival of sons who would support them in case of illness or old age. The outcome was high fertility, which made for an initial period of rapid population growth and ever tinier plots that peasants could only counter by sacrificing labor productivity. They worked ever harder for ever slimmer returns.

England transcended the limits of its medieval epoch when, in the aftermath of socioeconomic collapse associated with the Black Death, there emerged a novel set of social property relations that rendered both lords and peasants dependent upon the market for their livelihood. Following the severe population decline of the late fourteenth century, peasants succeeded, by way of resistance and flight, in destroying the prevailing system of lordly exaction by extra-economic compulsion. Nevertheless, from the fifteenth century onwards, having failed to reinstate serfdom, lords did succeed in asserting their absolute property rights to the greater part of the land. They consolidated their hold on what were, in terms of western European norms of the time, unusually large demesnes. They expanded, moreover, those already large demesnes by appropriating peasant customary land left vacant in the demographic downturn. They acceded, finally, to land held by customary tenants who lacked both the right to pass on their holdings by inheritance and the right to invariable fines on the transfer of their holdings. The emergent class of commercial landlords, unable, as the feudal lords had been, to take their rents by extra-economic coercion, were obliged to depend on rents determined by supply and demand (i.e., what the market would bear). The emergent class of direct producers, now

largely separated from their means of subsistence (the land), though still possessing the means of production (tools and the like), were correspondingly obliged to maintain themselves through taking up commercial leases on a competitive land market. Compelled therefore to produce competitively to survive economically, these tenant farmers had to adopt an approach to their economic production that diverged sharply from that of England's medieval peasantry, as well as from their counterparts in China and most of continental Europe.⁴

I argue in this book that in Manchuria peasants' communities succeeded in securing for themselves direct and nonmarket access to the land that they required for their livelihood. By virtue of their possession of the land (as well as their labor, tools, and the like), peasants in Manchuria were shielded from the requirement to allocate their resources in order to maximize their returns via exchange and were, instead, free to allocate their resources in ways that, while individually sensible, nonetheless ran counter to the aggregate requirements of economic development. The upshot, I argue, was a Malthusian-Ricardian pattern of development in which the total output of the economy grew by a combination of labor intensification and the extension of arable land, but which was unable to realize any improvements in labor productivity.

Historiographical Questions

Though this is ultimately a study of economic outcomes, my adopted mode of analysis requires that the study move from the realm of the political and social to the economic, for it is in the realm of high and low politics and social transformation that social property relations are given. In the words of Perry Anderson, "it is the construction and destruction of States which seal the basic shifts in the relations of production, so long as classes subsist" (1974, 11). This study therefore begins at the level of Qing objectives in Manchuria and their repercussions for the countryside in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. It then turns to the contestation between state goals and the interests, objectives, and practices of frontier communities. It examines the outcomes of a peasant victory in the eighteenth century that afforded peasants control over their labor, tools, and most importantly their land. Only after addressing the unfolding of the sociopolitical terrain does this study turn to examine economic behavior and the long-term pattern of economic change. The three parts of this study correspond roughly to the state, society, and economy.

Manchuria's Place in the Qing Empire

More than any other factor shaping the political and social history of Manchuria during the Qing dynasty was the fact that the so-called Conquest Elite

(the ruling house, its coterie of noble followers, and its elite military units—the Banner Armies) originated there. This fact imbued the northeast with special meaning and value for the Qing dynasty, and beginning in 1680 it led successive emperors to adopt policies to prevent the colonization of Manchuria by Han peasants.

As alien rulers in China, the ethnically Jurchen Qing—the designation “Manchu” was not adopted until 1635—faced challenges that were common to previous alien dynasties and that are known by scholars as problems of “minority rule.” The first challenge was governing the far more populous Han—with whom the Qing Conquest Elite shared few if any cultural bonds—and securing the allegiance of the literati or scholar-officials who clung tightly to traditional notions of government and governance. The second challenge—and the one with greater implications for Manchuria—was preserving the ethnic and cultural distinctiveness of the Conquest Elite, something that the ruling house believed underwrote its hegemony in East Asia while living among the Han Chinese.

An earlier generation of scholarship underscored the Qing adoption of Neo-Confucianism to argue in essence that the ruling house largely abandoned its pre-Conquest Manchu ways to become part of the larger Chinese civilization. The “universalist” assumptions that lay at the heart of Confucian teachings not only explained what was necessary if Manchus wished to join Chinese civilization, but in fact made it possible for them to do so. Reacting against this analysis, recent English-language studies have placed Manchu ethnicity at the center of their analyses of Qing rule and have recast our understanding of how the empire was held together both institutionally and ideologically.⁵ Stated very briefly, it is argued that the Qing Conquest Elite never abandoned its Manchu identity and it never ruled fully in the Chinese style. At most, the Qing opted for a hybrid constitution that departed from both traditions.

Here is not the place to delve into this literature, but suffice it to say that it has signaled three points that require highlighting in this study. First, the imperial dynasty considered the maintenance of the martial prowess of the Conquest Elite—and particularly its foot soldiers in the banner armies—to be essential to its hegemony in Asia. Second, martial prowess and nomadic resilience were both understood to be the product of the Manchurian ecology and an associated way of life that existed before the Conquest. Third, it was believed that the acculturation of the Conquest Elite to Han ways would dissipate those characteristics that underwrote Qing power and, *pari passu*, to the loss of Qing hegemony in East Asia. The Kangxi emperor’s decision in 1680 to tightly control Han settlement in the northeast was the logical extension of those concerns.

The State, Qing Lands, and the Policy of Han Exclusion

To the Qing emperors, the northeast was part of the imperial patrimony. The region's resources were therefore to be used exclusively for imperial benefit. The Qing understood the productive possibilities of agriculture in the northeast, having exploited the labor of captive Chinese peasants on the Liao river plain in the 1620s and 1630s. With the establishment of the new dynasty in 1644, the Qing sought to assert a monopoly over Manchuria's potential farmland, creating in the process what I will call the Qing lands. The early Qing sovereigns carved out vast "territories" of cultivable land in Manchuria for the settlement of demustered banner warriors. These men were given land grants within these territories and then sent down to the countryside to farm (or rusticated) along with their families. The land grants they received were known as "bannerland" and those rusticated were known as "banner households of the farming colonies." In addition, the Qing established "manors" (*zhuang*) which provided the elite of the Conquest Elite with rental incomes garnered from serf labor. The manors were attached to the agencies of the imperial household as a source of privy revenue, conferred upon the Qing nobility as imperial largesse and distributed to parts of regional government bureaucracy as sources of operational revenue. No sooner had the imperial house made these arrangements, however, than commoners started to settle in Manchuria. Many settled alongside and on the Qing lands, which they occupied through illegal purchase or by squatting. It was, therefore, also with an eye to preserving the integrity of Qing land (and holding on to the revenue sources they provided) that the Qing ruling house tried to prevent Han settlement.

Yet, the sovereign's desire to exclude Han Chinese from the northeast pit the patrimonial and ideological interests of the ruling house against the ideological views and administrative interests of parts of the civil bureaucracy.⁶ Many Qing field administrators saw colonization of the frontier as a means to alleviate rural poverty and add revenue to the coffers, and the emperor concurred in principle (Rowe 2001, 56–57). By the second half of the eighteenth century, the population of the north China provinces Shandong and Zhili, which lay closest to Manchuria, outstripped local food supplies. Poor harvests were having devastating effects. And yet the Qing continued to enforce the prohibition against colonization of Manchuria and Mongolia. In 1750, after a series of particularly devastating famines in Zhili and Shandong, the Qianlong emperor formalized what was already unofficial policy by closing the borders to Manchuria. Tension between imperial and bureaucratic interests on this matter is evident in the sovereign's continued need to inform his bureaucrats of the necessity to keep the Manchurian borders closed and to return all illegal colonists to China Proper.

Whereas the emperor's interest lay with securing a Manchuria untrammled by Han settlers, the civil bureaucracy's natural inclinations lay with opening the northeast to immigration. For reasons of both ideology and political control, the civil bureaucracy was committed to what its officials termed "the people's livelihood" (*minsheng*) which, in the final analysis, meant pursuing policies that ensure peasants had adequate supplies of grain (Rowe 2001, 187–189, 202–204). In that endeavor, administrators encouraged peasants in the most densely populated regions of the empire to migrate to the frontiers, sometimes provided startup seed and draft oxen, and even granted a tax hiatus, enlisting landed magnates in the process. The latter were offered degrees and office on the basis of how many recruits and how much land they opened (Guo 1991, 239–247). However, when it came to the question of Han colonization in Manchuria, the patrimonial concerns of the ruling house took precedent over any bureaucratic commitment to *minsheng*. Consequently, despite clear evidence emanating from its own field administrators of problems associated with mounting population pressures and accompanying ecological degradation on the neighboring north China plain, and despite the clear evidence that landless peasants were risking the illegal crossing into Manchuria in order to secure a homestead, the ruling house remained opposed to opening the borders to the northeast. It was only because Russian incursions threatened Qing control of the region that the sovereign finally opened the borders to settlers in 1860. At this point in time, sinicization of Manchuria was preferable to Russian colonization, and establishing the facts of Qing territorial claims on the land became the imperial court's overriding concern.

In this regard, Qing behavior does not accord with the prevailing historiographical view of the Qing state. Not without justification, some have argued that Qing officialdom was committed to fostering social stability through the promotion of agricultural expansion as an expression of its adherence to Confucian notions of what constituted proper rule (Wong 1997).⁷ One might be tempted to argue, therefore, that the prohibition against Han migration to Manchuria was the exception that proved this rule. But in this case, I believe the exception speaks to and complicates our understanding of the Qing state. And, indeed, it was not the only exception.⁸ Recent scholarship emphasizing the Manchu origins of the Qing has highlighted the need to understand Qing rule in China Proper as part and parcel of a much larger imperial project. That project had a set of ideological and political imperatives that did not always line up with the concerns and interests of the civil bureaucracy and Han officialdom. The sovereign's ultimate objective was maintaining his own hegemony and different and conflicting strategies and agendas were followed in pursuit of that goal. A commitment to such classically Chinese notions as *minsheng* was not so

much foundational to Qing notions of how to govern, as it was perhaps conditional to the dynasty's broader strategic goals. Whereas there was no paradox inherent in such tensions, ideological discord did lead to practical inconsistencies as local officials navigated the rocky straits between the requirements of imperial policy on the one side and the requirements of rural social and political order on the other.

State and Village

Efforts by the Qing to limit the number and impact of Han peasants in the northeast notwithstanding, hundreds of thousands of them risked the illegal crossing into Manchuria. Once in the northeast, they hoped to establish a homestead and avoid detection by the authorities. Settling under these conditions, peasants faced considerable challenges, not the least of which was securing claims to their farms. Because the state proscribed the customary proprietary claims of settlers, peasants and their communities had no choice but to develop for themselves the means to acquire and hold land. That migrant-settlers were successful in this regard speaks to two points of interest.

The first is that peasants secured these claims while avoiding detection by the authorities, a fact that raises questions about both the state's ability to implement key policies in the countryside and the peasants' ability to assert their interests over and against the state. The second is that peasant communities were able to establish and maintain institutional arrangements that underwrote property systems to protect their claims *on their own*; suggesting that the normative functions of the state were unessential to the establishment of property claims.

On the first point, this study suggests that even when the stakes were high from the sovereign's perspective, the capacity of the emperor to mobilize the bureaucracy to influence local affairs remained significantly circumscribed. Since Peter Perdue's (1987) influential study of the opening of the central China province of Hunan during the Ming (1368–1644) and Qing eras, it has become commonplace in the English language historiography to hold that the late imperial state was interventionist in ways that ameliorated worsening peasant welfare and fostered economic expansion.⁹ The more recent historiography has moved beyond Perdue's cautious thesis of an activist state that was nonetheless limited in its effect to argue that the Qing state was not only especially solicitous of peasant interests (Wong 1997), but that it was "liberal" and even "modern" in its guardianship of the economy and its ability to effect social and economic change (e.g., Dunstan 1996; Marks 1998).

This recasting of the Qing state as an agent capable of intervening in the

lives of its subjects has focused principally on its efforts to affect grain movement and supply and to provide famine relief, and promote interregional trade integration (e.g., Marks 1998; Rowe 2001). By all accounts, the state registered successes that were impressive. However, because these interventions often occurred at nodes in urban and transportation networks where the state was best positioned logistically and institutionally to intercede in local affairs and to elicit the support and assistance of local notables in its efforts, it is not surprising that it had some effect. The famine relief efforts that are the focus of much of the new historiography were, moreover, exceptional instances of state-society relations. Not only were they atypical of the day-to-day interactions between bureaucrats and rural society, they were also instances when an emperor, frustrated by his lack of control over the bureaucracy, could energize and focus his attention and, hopefully, tighten his grip on it in the process.¹⁰

For the most part, the Qing state had limited ability to affect the daily lives of its subjects. The late imperial state's limited presence in the village can be traced to the earlier resolution of the destabilizing contradiction lying at the heart of the pre-Song (960–1279) state. The pre-Song state was an uneasy alliance between the sovereign and a strong and for the most part independent aristocracy that not only circumscribed the sovereign's ability to act but on occasion rose up in arms against him. The configuration of the late imperial state had resolved this contradiction by trimming the aristocracy back to members of the imperial family and by staffing the apparatus of state with dependent bureaucrats. In contrast to the pre-Song state, the late imperial state offered less in the way of institutional and social challenges to imperial authority.¹¹ The late imperial sovereign guarded his autocratic powers over the bureaucracy by requiring ideological conformity but also by ensuring officials remained sufficiently detached from local society. While that arrangement prevented officials from building political power bases from which to challenge imperial authority, it also hampered their ability to affect the village.¹² If these innovations precluded the emergence of private powers capable of challenging imperial authority, they also unintentionally attenuated imperial reach into the village by ensuring field administrators at the county level could put down only the shallowest of social roots.¹³ Thus, augmentation of monarchical power and control within the late imperial state was accompanied by a weak state presence in and control over the village. As we shall see, the Qing's use of the banner chain of command to administer Manchuria did not do much to enhance imperial presence or control there because it suffered from the same weaknesses.

This brings me to the second point. For their part, villagers in the northeast were well provided with strategies and means for circumventing detection by the state to secure claims to land.¹⁴ Recent scholarly work in legal history has fo-

cused on the overlapping realm between the formal legal system and customary practices to show how the former underwrote the latter (e.g., Allee 1994a, 1994b; Huang 1996; Macauley 1998). In this view, the formal system of the code and courts backed customary claims in the legal realm of *hu hun tiantu xishi* as much directly through formal litigation and adjudication as indirectly by virtue of the peasants' knowledge and fear of formal litigation. To the extent that scholarship has examined how peasants enforced claims outside the courts, the emphasis has therefore been on the interaction between the law and custom in and around the court, to show that the courts were part and parcel of the smooth functioning of the property system (e.g., Huang 1996, 122–130).

The evidence of a functioning set of customary norms for regulating property in Manchuria, by contrast, directs our attention not to the effects of the courts, direct or otherwise, but to the way that custom operated independently of and in tension with the Qing formal legal system; it requires an examination of the ways peasants and their communities were able to enforce property claims and police their property system *on their own*. But, if peasants and their communities in the northeast had to find ways of handling their affairs outside the courts, they also had to conceal their efforts from officials who were tasked with enforcing a property regime that was incongruent with the one taking shape on the ground. The manner in which commoners came to settle and occupy much of the land in the northeast speaks also to customary practices as a potential means for resisting the state and providing an alternative vision for social organization.

Property Relations and Agricultural Development

To the extent that the English language literature has drawn connections between Qing property systems and economic change, it has argued that peasants' strong legal and custom control of land allowed them to allocate their most valuable resource—their land—in ways that elicited modern economic growth via productivity gains (e.g., Rawski 1972, 24; Chen and Myers 1976; Buoye 2000, 25–32).¹⁵ These conclusions are disputed by Chinese scholars such as Li Wenzhi (1993) and Fang Xing and others (1992, 2000). They contend by contrast that the appearance of strong peasant claims to the land in the early Qing constituted an impediment to modern economic growth, even if such claims allowed peasants to keep more of their surpluses and granted them greater freedom in the deployment of their labor. These scholars have argued that the advent of modern economic growth is associated not with peasants' secure property rights *per se* but with competitive property arrangements of the sort associated with English farming from the sixteenth century on. If the new property regime

translated into greater security in land, cultivators may just as well have reasoned that household integrity was best served by avoiding the rigors of the marketplace with both its rewards and significant risks. Indeed, judging from comparative historical work, secure property rights are associated historically with instances of economic growth and nongrowth alike. Maurice Dobb (1947) and Robert Brenner (1976 [1985a], 1982 [1985b], 2001) have shown that despite the securing of property rights by the broad mass of rural producers in large areas of continental Europe in the early modern era, real economic growth in this period was confined to a narrow range of countries.

The approach taken in this study is distinguished from the neo-classical model of U.S. scholarship by its emphasis not on the clarity or strength of property rights *per se* (i.e., whether different social actors, be they peasants, landlords, or merchants, are able to get the most income out of their land as a result of their legal/customary relationship to it), but on how property arrangements configure the individual's relationship to the market. In short, I argue that shielded from the competitive pressures of the market by the virtue of their possession of land, peasants in Manchuria were under no compulsion to buy necessary inputs on the market. They were therefore relieved of the necessity to enter into competitive production to survive and instead able to allocate their resources to pursue social goals that were in their rational self-interest but had nonetheless uneconomic outcomes. First and foremost, peasants eschewed specialization and dependence upon the market to the fullest extent possible, preferring to diversify their production in order to secure as many of their needs without turning to the market. Needless to say, the ability of peasants to pursue these non-Smithian strategies rested upon possession of their means of reproduction, especially land, without which they would have been compelled to buy from the market and thus have no choice but to specialize to successfully compete.

Consequently, agriculture in Manchuria underwent what can only be described as a Malthusian-Ricardian-type expansion. On the one hand, as peasants filled up vacant land, thereby bringing more and more land into production, total agricultural output rose. The settlement of Manchuria in turn spurred the development of a Ricardian division of labor, one that was rooted in ecological differentiation across large distances. Peasants in Manchuria found themselves dependent upon other regions of the Qing empire for cotton cloth, which they had no choice but to acquire by exchanging grain and soybeans surpluses in their possession. While this dependency upon cotton imports accounts for the development of long-distance trade between Manchuria and north China and Jiangnan, securing cotton did not require peasants to specialize. Given the obvious risks to specialization, moreover, peasants had good

reason not to do so by choice and every reason to obtain the bulk of their needs directly instead.

On the other hand, it is not clear that had peasants wished to innovate in ways that made labor more efficient that they would have had the wherewithal to do so. As others have noted, the onset of declining farm size made it increasingly uneconomical to try to save labor (Elvin 1973; Chao 1986). Consequently, peasants had to turn to agricultural techniques that—all else being equal—would feed the same number of people as before. But they had to do so on smaller holdings and so under increasingly disadvantageous circumstances. The upshot was a gradual trend toward labor intensification (as peasants expended greater amounts of labor) and diminishing labor productivity (as marginal returns to labor fell with each addition of work time expended). In short, peasants shifted from low-yielding, labor-extensive farming methods to higher-yielding, labor-intensive ones.

State, Merchant, and Commerce

It is my contention that the Malthusian-Ricardian pattern was replicated in China's other macroregions, though with different limitations and different timelines, and it was those variations that configured Manchuria's commercial fit and economic function with the rest of the empire. Peasants on the empire's "peripheries," such as Manchuria, the middle Yangzi, and Taiwan, by virtue of the fact of their later settlement and greater availability of land, produced (up to a point) more grain than they could consume (Zhang Guoxiong 1993a; Jiang 1992). By means of long-distance trading networks and merchants, that grain surplus was made available to the longer-settled "cores" such as Jiangnan and Lingnan, where the population was far more dense by contrast and where food deficits had appeared by the early 1700s (Jiang 1992).

Historical examinations of trade in the Qing, broadly conceived, have focused much of their attention on two issues. First, what was the state's role in the distribution and circulation of grain and how did this change over time? Second, were merchants agents of economic development?

On the first issue, the low levels of labor productivity in agriculture (sufficient for only the slimmest surpluses) and the high and rising density of the rural population in China Proper presented the state with significant policy challenges. One could say that the Qing state was *structurally* committed to monitoring harvests, grain prices, and the circulation of grain by the fact that only ten to fifteen percent of grain harvested was surplus (Guo 1994; Fang et al. 2000). There were chronic grain shortages on the north China plain, in the Yangzi delta, and in Lingnan in the eighteenth century, forcing the Qing state to

expend significant bureaucratic resources to redistribute grain surpluses (Will 1990; Will and Wong 1991; Wong and Perdue 1983). What did it mean, therefore, that the state ceded the circulation of grain to merchants toward the end of the eighteenth century?

Helen Dunstan views this ceding of ground to merchants as “liberalization” (Dunstan 1996, 8–9, 260, 262–263).¹⁶ However, I think there is good reason to believe that Qing grain commerce after the late eighteenth century should not be characterized as liberal in either practice or ideology. If the Qing sovereign donned the ideological mantle of guarantor of his subjects welfare, as represented in the terms “people’s livelihood” (*minsheng*) and “nourishing the people” (*yangmin*), and fostered by his ritual plowing of the sacred plot outside Beijing, then he could not fully cede the commercial terrain to merchants without revealing the “emperor had no clothes.” Nor would it have been politically prudent to do so, given the constant potential for social unrest.¹⁷

The fact that the Qing state depended increasingly on merchants to move grain, whether in times of dearth or feast, does not by itself suggest that merchants were agents of economic transformation. For good reason, merchants and commerce are central to the neo-classical or Smithian paradigm, which takes the emergence of division of labor as its point of analytical departure. This is not the place to discuss the merits of this position, though the historical record would certainly seem to speak against it; whereas merchants and trade have historically been quite ubiquitous, sustained economic growth is rare.¹⁸ Far more important, I believe, is the question of whether merchant capital made its way into production and, in so doing, took on a new function. For centuries, merchants in China and elsewhere pursued a strategy of arbitrage profit-making, which they accomplished by buying cheap and selling dear. Yet, rarely were they a dynamic force for real economic growth. *At the very least*, that would have required that merchants invest capital in the production processes. In this regard, the social theorist and historian of Europe Charles Tilly (1990) posits that whenever and wherever merchant capital remained historically confined to the circulation of commodities, and therefore did not enter into the production process, sustained economic expansion characterized by ongoing increases in labor productivity did not occur.

Merchants in Manchuria could rely upon peasants’ need to exchange some of their output for cotton cloth to acquire the grain and soybeans they needed to secure their profits. But, given the fact that peasants were not subject to the full disciplining effects of the market (by virtue of their possession of land), merchants could not be guaranteed a return on any investments they made to improve agriculture production. Thus, rather than invest in improving agriculture, merchants in Manchuria did what was fairly typical of merchants in the

early modern era. They used their political clout to establish merchant organizations to protect their market positions. To the extent that they forwarded capital to peasants, because merchant loans bore high levels of interest, these functioned to allow peasants to reproduce themselves from year to year, but not to expand labor productivity. In the long run, these types of activities gave merchants some protection from the erratic market swings associated with early modern agriculture, but on their own these behaviors were incapable of propelling improvements in either agriculture or manufacturing.

Sources and Methods

In his study of the rural economy of north China, Philip Huang noted that Chinese agrarian history of the late imperial period is hampered by a lack of sources (1985, 33). This is particularly so for China's northeast where to date the major studies of Manchuria in Chinese and Japanese have relied heavily on standard Qing sources such as gazetteers, the Veritable Records of the (*shilu*) Qing dynasty, and the Qing's Collected Statutes (*huidian*). Sudō Yoshiyuki's (1944) classic examination of Qing land policy in Manchuria exhausted all such sources on the subject. Chinese scholars of the northeast such as Kong Jingwei, Yi Baozhong, and Diao Shuren have made use of the same sources. As a result, their work on the Manchurian land system has been very derivative of the earlier Japanese scholarship. I draw upon both scholarships in this study, making use of their references to pertinent regulations, changes in policy, and imperial concerns especially. But these sources, and the scholarship that has come from them, are decidedly state-centered. To understand what went on in the Manchurian village requires a look at new sources. The Japanese scholar Enatsu Yoshiki (1980, 1989), for instance, has made innovative use of Japanese ethnographic surveys from the 1930s to re-create the history of an imperial estate in southernmost Liaoning. James Lee and Cameron Campbell (e.g., 1997), on the other hand, have used Qing household registries of rusticated Han bannermen to examine changes in household formation and other demographic behavior. I have made up for the paucity of standard Qing sources on the northeast by using legal records from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

The late imperial legal system had two classifications of legal cases. The most common type of case was what the legal system referred to as *hu hun tiantu xishi* or "household, marriage, land, and other trivial matters." These were non-violent disputes over such matters as debts, property, and betrothal agreements and were handled almost exclusively at the local level by county magistrates. Because these cases rarely made it out of the local county court, and the records of most courts have been destroyed or lost, such cases have survived in only a few county-level archives. The most widely used collection of "marriage and

property” cases come from Ba county in Sichuan, the Danshui subprefecture in Taiwan; and Shuntian prefecture on the north China plain.

In the northeast, only a handful of such *xishi* records survive, all from the Boduna (Jilin) military yamen. Absent a bountiful prefectural-level archive, this study makes significant use of the more abundant records that have survived from the joint court sessions of the Shengjing Board of Revenue and Imperial Household Department in Shengjing and of the Office of Scrutiny (*xingke*) and Fengtian Office (*Fengtian si*) of the Board of Punishment in Beijing. The sessions of the Shengjing Board of Revenue and Imperial Household Department handled nonviolent criminal activity on the imperial estates in Fengtian. In content, they resemble “marriage and property” cases, though the court that handled them was part of the imperial household bureaucracy. Of these, I use the trial records of illegal sales of Qing manorial land as well as criminal investigations of estate malfeasance. The benefit of these court records is that the investigations focus on how land was bought and sold, the ways settlers obtained access to manor land, and the way in which others colluded to conceal these illegal goings on from higher officials.

The second category was death penalty or capital cases, the records of which survive in Beijing. All death penalty cases other than those slated for “immediate execution” (*li jue*) were presented to the emperor for review during the Autumn Assizes. The court records themselves are summations of the case and lower court findings and recommended sentencing. Most of Manchuria’s capital cases were reviewed by the Board of Punishment’s Office of Scrutiny, which reviewed most of the Autumn Assizes cases. But some of Manchuria’s death penalty cases were reviewed by the Board of Punishment’s Fengtian Office (*Fengtian si*), one of the seventeen provincial offices within the Board of Punishment.

There are many methodological problems associated with using trial records as windows on plebian society and social change. First, court records are not equivalent to surveys. Without independent verification, we have no way of knowing if the incidences these records relate are representative of general conditions, practices, or trends. Second, court records are by definition accounts of social conflict and irreconcilable differences. Alone, they leave the impression that late imperial society had no extra-legal means for resolving disputes. There are ways, however, by which we can read past the implicit biases of the court records to find social history. James Scott, for instance, argues that we often have little choice but to recapture plebian life and customary practices in the very documents that those seeking to stamp out such practices create (1990, 1–16). In making the arguments that I do about social change and practices I try to take from Qing court records the snapshots they provide of rural life and the customary practices employed by peasants and their communities to manage

their affairs, without letting the implicit biases of the source influence how I understand the representativeness and efficacy of such practices.

In making those kinds of judgments, I rely heavily on other sources including other types of official communications, missionary observations, gazetteers, but especially Japanese ethnographic surveys of rural conditions in the twentieth century. While reading the Qing legal cases, I make much use of the latter precisely for the sorts of insights they provide into plebian life that Qing court records often only hint at. The practice of using twentieth-century ethnographic work in this fashion was pioneered by Japanese legal historians such as Niiida Noboru (1962) and Shiga Shūzō (1967), who used rural surveys of Taiwan and north China in their studies of Qing law and legal custom, and continues to be used by Japanese historians today such as Kishimoto Mio (1997, 1998). In the United States, scholars have followed suit: Arthur Wolf and Huang Chieh-shan (1980) in their study of Taiwan, Philip Huang (1985, 1996) in his studies of the rural economy and Qing legal system, and David Wakefield (1998) in his examination of household property division (*fenjia*).

Whereas there are few sources from the Qing that shed light on rural Manchuria, twentieth-century sources make for an embarrassment of riches. Japanese colonial interests in Manchuria mean that it is one of world's most thoroughly documented peasant societies in the twentieth century. Japanese ethnographic investigations and surveys of economic conditions of China were the product of Japan's attempt in the first half of the twentieth century to carve out an empire in Asia.¹⁹ In Manchuria, most surveys were conducted in the 1930s and 1940s by the research arms of either the Ministry of Commerce and Industry of the Japanese-run Manchukuo government (1931–1945) or the Southern Manchurian Railway, a quasi-official arm of the Japanese state. This study makes much use of the investigations of the former, especially a multi-volume report on rural customs and agricultural practices and a household-by-household investigation of the economic conditions.²⁰ What these sources show—something the Qing court records were never intended to show—is how peasants went about regulating their affairs. Drawing from first-hand interviews, the reports describe such things as how peasants bought, sold, and rented land, how they divided property among sons and handled disputes between neighbors over adjoining fields, how they planted their fields and how much labor was required, and how they married their sons and daughters. In addition, I conducted my own field interviews with elderly peasants in Liujiatun, Jilin and Mengjiatun and Zhangjiatun, Heilongjiang, three villages also surveyed by the Japanese in the 1930s. I read all of these surveys alongside the Qing sources to obtain a much fuller sense of rural life and customary practices and to fill in information that is absent in the Qing sources.

Recapitulation of the Study

As I have already explained, the approach taken in this book requires that I move from the political to the economic. The work begins, therefore, by examining the ruling Qing dynasty's interests in its homeland in the mid- to late-seventeenth century and how these shaped the agrarian social structure and affected social change in the eighteenth century. Thus, I examine how these interests resulted in a particular set of policies and strategies for the region that shaped the ways in which the countryside was ruled. I also look at the peculiar historical conditions that granted the state unprecedented freedom to establish an agrarian order that suited its interests and needs in the region. I show how the state established a land system and corresponding agrarian order that suited its imperial needs and then excluded Han peasants from settling in the region in order to preserve that order.

I then turn to the challenges this order posed for the large number of peasants who settled in the northeast illegally in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. This includes how peasant communities organized and maneuvered politically in response to these challenges, and, in the process, how peasants restructured agrarian property relations. I show that at the level of the village Han peasants successfully secured control of land, even though they had settled illegally and the state refused to recognize their legal rights of ownership.

On the basis of this sociopolitical account of the unfolding agrarian social formation of the eighteenth century, I offer an interpretation of long-term economic change and the dynamics of agricultural change and export trade. I begin by arguing that the village-level consolidation of a set of social property relations that secured for the bulk of economic actors direct and nonmarket access to land, tools, and labor provided a shield from market competition that in turn allowed peasants to pursue goals that—while perfectly rational—were nonetheless incompatible with economic growth. I conclude with an account of the pattern of economic change and its implications for the long-term dynamics of Manchuria's trade, merchant activities, and state interventions in the economy.