

Administering the Colonizer

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**Administering the Colonizer
Manchuria's Russians
under Chinese Rule, 1918-29
Blaine R. Chiasson**



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TO WASHABUCK AND CHETICAMP

“RUSSIANS ARE EASY TO MARRY, BUT IT IS HARD TO CHANGE
THEIR CUSTOMS”

- *Title of Article in Chinese newspaper Binjiang shibao [Binjiang News]
(Harbin), 2 February 1922*

DO NOT MAKE A *HOOCHA* [RUSSIAN NICKNAME FOR A CHINESE COOLIE]
CITY OUT OF HARBIN!

- *Insult shouted during Harbin’s 1922 municipal elections, “Unusual Fiasco in
Municipal Elections,” Zaria, 18 December 1922, NARA, RG 59, M329, Roll 100,
File 893.102H/399, 17 January 1923*

OH, THOSE RUSSIANS ...

- *Boney M, “Rasputin,” Nightflight to Venus, 1978*

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Administering the Colonizer

Introduction: Where Yellow Ruled White – Harbin, 1929

“It is little realized that in one city in the world the thing (Yellow Peril) is a fait accompli: the Oriental has ascended to the seats of power, is sitting there, and has been sitting there for some time. This city is Harbin, the only white city in the world run by yellows.” So begins an article by Olive Gilbreath, “Where Yellow Rules White,” published in the February 1929 edition of *Harper’s Magazine*.¹ An American journalist and adventurer born in 1883, Gilbreath had travelled the Far East since 1914, witnessed the First World War and the Russian Revolution firsthand in St. Petersburg, and then fled Russia, as did many Russians, by heading east toward the Chinese republic. A sophisticated writer who during her travels in Europe and Asia had witnessed the extremes of human behaviour, Gilbreath was astonished by the northern Manchurian city of Harbin; its lifeline, the Chinese Eastern Railway (CER); and the “drama of changing peoples, of shifting social orders and races.”² Located at the hub of two branches of the Trans-Siberian Railway’s northern Manchurian shortcut, funded with Russian money, built with Chinese labour, and, prior to 1917, administered as a Russian concession, Harbin was by 1929 a city in which “the mass of the city is white, but the wires, the antennae that control it, are Chinese. The whole administration, in short, of this Russian city of eighty thousand is Chinese.”³ Gilbreath was one of many Anglo-American tourists and journalists who visited the northeastern Chinese city of Harbin in the decade between 1920 and 1930. As much as these foreign visitors were accustomed to the world and its diversity, they found (depending on their politics and racial prejudices) Harbin intriguing, unparalleled, and deeply shocking. Harbin, which was the railway and administrative centre of the newly founded Special District, was in its culture, architecture, and population a combination of two very different cultures and peoples: Russian and Chinese. Adding to the shock and generating a frisson of threatened racial hierarchies (which one can still feel when reading these articles today) was the fact that, unlike other great Chinese concession cities with large foreign populations, such as Shanghai or Hankou, the Russian population did not control the city and the concession. The Special District’s administration was Chinese.

Although today Harbin is something of a provincial backwater, in the 1920s it was not only the hub city for the CER – which took passengers and freight north to the USSR, west to Europe, and south to Dalian and China proper – it was one of the few modern cities with the distinction of having been founded by two countries and two nationalities. Russians and Chinese had worked together under the CER’s supervision to settle the city and its concession in the late nineteenth century. As the heart of this international rail network and the largest northern Manchurian city, Harbin was a vital commercial, administrative, and cultural centre that pulsed with a cosmopolitan energy that is very much absent from the present-day city. Prior to 1949 Harbin had, at most, 250,000 to 300,000 inhabitants; as many as 40,000 were Russians. Today, many people take the chaotic nature and the racial, linguistic, and cultural mix of vibrant multicultural cities for granted; such cities have become the background noise to our everyday lives. For Harbin’s visitors in the 1920s – many of whom took for granted, especially in China, racial segregation and European superiority – the ease with which racial and cultural boundaries were crossed and flaunted in Harbin was unsettling.

What follows is a study of Gilbreath’s “Chinese wires”: the Chinese administration of the Special District of the Three Eastern Provinces [*dongsansheng tiebie qu*] (hereafter referred to as the Special District), created in 1920 to replace the Russian-controlled CER concession.⁴ Replacement, however, is only half of the story. This study is equally concerned with how the Special District’s new Chinese administrators crafted policies that would not only ensure Chinese supervision but also preserve the conditions that made the CER concession – and its successor, the Special District – one of republican China’s most prosperous regions by securing the economic, cultural, and political rights of its stateless Russian settlers. This is a history of an administrative experiment in pragmatic accommodation that partially failed because of deeply held ideas of racial superiority on the part of Russians, lingering colonial resentment on the part of Chinese, and the power of national identity to shape all of these actors.

Although this book opens with Gilbreath’s observations, this is not solely a story about foreign reaction to this administrative experiment. Most Anglo-European accounts posit the Special District as a cautionary tale of the fate awaiting all foreigners in China should extraterritoriality be abolished. In their decision to concentrate, embellish, or outright fabricate narratives of foreign exploitation, these sources ignored the policy successes pioneered by the Special District.

Nor is it a story about Russian Kharbin or Chinese Haerbin, for these narratives are often driven by national pride and a combination of colonial and postcolonial resentment. Like many émigré sources the world over, those of Manchuria’s former Russian population are often infused with nostalgia and bitterness. For émigrés (forced out of China in the 1950s and thus doubly exiled) who sought to justify and defend Russian colonialism in northern Manchuria,

the story of the Chinese administration's success is also the story of Russian decline and marginalization. Although foreign or Russian accounts tend to also celebrate Russian achievement and criticize the Chinese, contemporary Chinese histories of the Dongsansheng, written to secure for that region the Chinese past it never truly had, literally excise from the region's history Russian influence as well as the contributions of other nations and nationalities.

Instead, this book shows that Harbin's Chinese administration – along with its administrative parent, the Special District – was a localized response to the problem of asserting Chinese sovereignty in a former foreign concession, one greatly influenced by its Russian population and founding administrative model. The city and district's Chinese elite did not merely seek to imitate but also to create new opportunities for civic expression and good governance. The administrative form it pioneered was shaped equally by the two founding peoples and the conditions each faced to establish their national, cultural, and administrative presence in a regional frontier. Studies of the interaction between Chinese and foreign communities in Manchuria and China proper have stressed foreign-Chinese conflict and the emergence of a rather uncomplicated (read xenophobic) Chinese nationalism. In this book the focus is on Harbin's and the Special District's special conditions. The region was a frontier area recently occupied by China and therefore needed administrative policies based on compromise rather than conflict. Circumstances in the area encouraged a more flexible Chinese nationalism, one that allowed for considerable Russian influence. In essence, the goal of extending Chinese sovereignty in northern Manchuria was shaped by the presence of a large non-Chinese immigrant community that was essential to the region's economy and whose needs could not be ignored.

The administrative experiment also had a pedagogical function. The Special District's Chinese administration served as an important example of how Chinese sovereignty could be asserted over China's foreign concessions without threatening the political and property rights of the foreign settler community. However, the essentially colonialist nature of the Russian and Soviet presence in northern Manchuria and the resentment many Chinese felt toward the region's former colonial masters poisoned some aspects of the administrative experiment. Regional Chinese and Russian identities that influenced the policy of compromise clashed with national ideologies, both Russian and Chinese, that refused to accept an equal partnership. Despite the difficulties they encountered in the administration of the Russian community, the Chinese elite – which, like the Russian elite, consisted primarily of Chinese administrators and administrative personnel for the CER – used this opportunity to experiment with new forms of municipal and local governance and to expand the boundaries of civic participation.

Not all of the inhabitants of the Special District, especially some of the displaced Russian elite and the representatives and nationals of China's remaining concessionary powers, praised these administrative solutions. In newspaper

and journal articles, memoirs and bitter diatribes, diplomatic dispatches and consular reports, and political tracts designed to inflame racial or political divisions, these critics derided the Special District's decade-long administrative experiment. By describing the Special District as a reversal of natural racial hierarchies, as the assertion of crude Chinese nationalism, and as a harbinger of doom for the whole edifice of treaty-backed foreign privilege in China, these accounts have shaped how historians view the region's history.

These narrators employed a variety of images – a Chinese merchant and his Russian wife, a Russian maid washing the windows of her Chinese employer's home, Russian bodyguards protecting wealthy Chinese clients, and Russian beggars on the streets of the now Chinese-controlled city of Harbin – to communicate that Harbin represented, for them, a world turned upside down. Nevertheless, one image dominated their stories – an image that Caucasian journalists writing for the treaty port press knew would provoke the strongest reaction from their readers. It was the image of a Chinese who not only held power over a white man or woman but whose power was also buttressed by a Chinese administration that had abolished extraterritoriality, the right of some nationalities to be outside of Chinese law. In short, the image represented fears about Caucasians being subjected to a Chinese-controlled administration. Foreign journalists such as Gilbreath, for instance, included images of Chinese policemen remonstrating or beating Russian men or women. “Now the traffic policeman, who puts up his hand at which the bearded *Jehu* stops short, has a yellow skin and slant eyes. If there is an altercation, the Russian will be slapped or beaten before a crowd and there is no redress. If he is arrested, it is the heavy hand of the yellow which hales him to the *yamen* and the judge he meets is yellow.”⁵ Some saw Harbin as the “grave of the white man's prestige” because “Caucasians are governed and bullied by Chinese officials and Chinese soldiers and policemen.”⁶ In the Special District, Chinese control over foreigners was seen as a portent “for nowhere in all the East – since the early days of Treaty Ports and extraterritorial privileges – have yellow men ever ruled over whites, with the power of arrest and punishment.”⁷

During the 1920s these questions of extraterritoriality and imperialism moved to the forefront of Chinese-foreign relations, and the Special District was where anxieties about Chinese rule and the position of the white race in China were played out.⁸ Harbin was portrayed as “the largest foreign community without rights, subject to the vagrancy's [*sic*] and eccentricities of Chinese law.”⁹ One English author, on the subject of the end of extraterritoriality, wrote that the Russians were

abominably treated by Chinese officials, beggared, leaderless and helpless in a strange land, were as meek and as long-suffering as cattle. Of this temper every Chinese coolie took delighted advantage, and knocking Russians about became a favorite Chinese sport throughout North China. Although small foreign communities in China supported thousands of these poor folks

who could find no work, helped others to find employment and liberally patronized all manner of Russian charities, there was much inevitable suffering which the Chinese did virtually nothing to relieve but which they soon learned to aggravate, taking delight in humiliating and abusing these poor folk to their own imagined aggrandizement.¹⁰

The author could marshal no evidence to support this claim, but none was needed. The image was enough, and the warning was clear. The Chinese had their inspiration to take over all concessions “from their experience of taking over Russian areas and Russian Consulates, giving the Chinese officialdom much courage in pushing forward a policy of encroachment upon the treaties and which prompted the Chinese common people in many quarters to regard this surrender of the Russians to the Chinese as license to browbeat and abuse aliens.”¹¹ Foreign correspondents were obsessed by the ongoing drama of the Russian princess as taxi dancer or the Chinese policeman who beat the Russian beggar. This obsession reflected the belief of foreigners in China that their continued prosperity and elevated social position rested solely on maintaining their extraterritorial status. For these reporters and their audience, the fate of China’s Russian émigrés, as foreigners saw it, was a cautionary tale of the fate that awaited all foreigners should extraterritoriality disappear. Because they lack objectivity, foreign accounts of the Special District administration have limited usefulness.

It is therefore necessary to problematize contemporary European and Japanese treatment of the Harbin administration. Changes to Harbin’s administration were linked in the treaty port press to the overthrow of the natural order and accepted conventions of work, race, and sexuality. Maurice Hindus wrote in 1928: “Since the change in government the old stigma of social inferiority has gone, there is no place in Harbin from which the Chinese are barred. They work together on the railroad; some wealthy Chinese have Russian servants. There are shared bandits gangs and intermarriage. A number of them (Russians) have become Chinese citizens. A host of Russian Émigrés has to win and hold the good will of the Chinese in order to earn a living.”¹²

These images – of Russians labouring for Chinese or, more often than not, being subject to the power of Chinese – were reported as having been told to the authors or as hearsay. These stories should be read as examples of treaty port anxiety rather than the unconditional truth. Nevertheless, the stereotypes they perpetuate have influenced the historiography on Harbin and the Special District.

Russian histories and accounts of Harbin and the Special District are, quite simply, diverse; they reflect the complexity of the Russian community in Manchuria. The Russian community was split along class lines. Old Russian Harbin families, for instance, were economically secure and tended to monopolize the better jobs. They also tended to be politically and culturally conservative. Residents also distinguished themselves through the length of their

residence: *starozhily* (old-timers) were differentiated from émigrés.¹⁵ And they were divided along political and national lines – some chose to be Chinese citizens, some Soviet, and some remained stateless. Not only was Harbin the most cosmopolitan city under Chinese control (Shanghai was divided between Chinese, French, and Anglo-American administrations) during the 1920s, it was also the only city in the world in which communities representing Imperial Russia and the USSR worked and lived closely together. After 1924 the CER administration was divided between Soviet Russians and Chinese staff appointed by the Manchurian warlord government. According to Gilbreath, “The officials of the Chinese Eastern Railway represent Moscow, and whoever controls the Chinese Eastern Railway controls Harbin. But in population Harbin is White Russian, the stand of the Old Regime.” In a fashionable riverside café, she continues, “a group of the Old Regime, the women marked by thin faces and fragile skulls, the men in well-cut suits,” sit across the room from Soviet officials. Harbin’s opera, clubs, and churches were full of French- and Russian-speaking émigrés, but if you attend an official CER dinner “you dine with Stalin.” “In Russia, the Old Regime has ceased to exist in sufficient numbers to affect the scene. In Harbin, they sit side by side.”¹⁴ The tension that existed between the Soviet-appointed CER management, regular workers of varying political sympathies, recently arrived refugees, and Bolshevik workers who arrived after 1924 makes any attempt to write of a singular Russian position impossible.

Histories and memoirs written from the perspective of the Russian émigrés reveal that this segment of the population despised the Soviet Union and the post-1924 Sino-Soviet CER administration. Nevertheless, these works share the perspective that all that was good in North Manchuria was the result of Russian colonization. The Chinese, when they appear in these narratives, are portrayed either as good but submissive co-workers and servants or as tyrannical overlords who have to speak pidgin Russian so that Russians can communicate with them.

Granny lived in Harbin for 54 years and did not know a word of Chinese! But she got on famously with the natives of the country, was adept at making sense of the atrocious pidgin lingo where the words and notions were neither Russian nor Chinese but perfectly understandable to both. Peasants fled to Harbin in droves, carrying in wicker baskets on yokes their old mothers, missies with tiny deformed feet and small children. And begged the Russians, on their knees, to save them. The Russians, they lived behind high, strong fences. In their yards they hid the refugees, gave them food and looked after them. How many lives were saved thanks to the right of extraterritoriality!¹⁵

In these narratives, the Chinese are infantilized, the Russians are their saviours, and extraterritoriality is upheld as the foundation of foreign life in Manchuria.

Although contemporary documents from Harbin in the 1920s and 1930s point to a high degree of co-operation between Russians and Chinese, those Russians who chose to base their identity on cultural and national chauvinism have dominated émigré discourse. Insecurity, dislocation, and the ceaseless need for self-legitimization are hallmarks of every émigré population around the world, and these influences can be seen in Russian émigré memoirs on Manchuria. Harbin itself is often bathed in the perpetual light of a golden autumn as the last citadel of pre-war Russian culture in the world, a culture in which the Chinese again disappear. According to Viktor Petrov, “Harbin became, to all intents, a really free Russian town: a place where life continued as previously, in the old Russian way, a place of calm and contentment. As in old Russia, the deep solemn tones of the cathedral bell called the congregation to early morning service, and in the evening people crossed themselves once more as its measured tolling summoned them to mass.”¹⁶ Much of the memoir literature is either an overt or covert anti-Soviet exercise in nostalgia. Harbin before 1945 did witness a remarkable final flourishing of pre-revolutionary Russian culture. As a fully formed pre-revolutionary Russian community, Harbin was a refuge unlike any other Russian émigré community in the world. For most émigrés, Harbin was more than a refuge – it was home. These émigrés constructed a community to replace the one taken from them by the Russian Revolution. Once these Russians were forced to leave Manchuria, post 1949, their fragile community was extinguished, except in remembrance. These nostalgic memoirs are perhaps, as Olga Bakich hints, the coping mechanisms of a refugee community with no home other than their own memories. For many of these Harbiners, the past is either too painful to remember or one that must be defended against all detractors.¹⁷ In either case, there is no place for the Chinese in Harbin.

Russian accounts write off the Chinese administration as an expression of narrow chauvinism at best or open persecution at worst. Inter-marriage, the thousands of Russians who took Chinese citizenship, the Russians who worked daily with Chinese, who attended school with Chinese, or who lived in mixed neighbourhoods are not included in these memoirs. For Yaacov Liberman, growing up as a Russian Jew in Harbin meant defending that identity. In his memoirs, much like those of other Russian émigrés, he renders Harbin’s Chinese invisible as a means of maintaining a Jewish identity:

For us this existence (as Jews) outweighed the colossus (China) surrounding us, because our own lives were directed by an inner vision of communal integration. This integration was neither effected nor was affected by the local population and its problems ... As I grew older, I often wondered what the Chinese population was doing, while we continued to enjoy life in this city. The question continued to perplex me for many years. Hardly any Chinese youngsters shared our activities and the grown ups seemed to have moved out of sight in order to leave us, their guests, in total privacy.¹⁸

As in other memoirs, the Chinese disappeared. Yet they reappear when Liberman describes everyday life. His mother learned to speak Chinese. Most of the Chinese Liberman knew spoke Russian. His father worked in an import-export house that had extensive dealings with the Chinese administration and saw in the 1920s an increase in the number of Chinese employees. Chinese attended the Russian concerts and the CER Club. None of these observations were commented on as being unusual or out of the ordinary.

Soviet and post-Soviet Russian histories about Harbin and Manchuria reveal complex state interactions along a shared frontier and explore the dynamic of two nations seeking definition vis-à-vis each other. Histories from both eras, however, tend to exhibit a basic Russian chauvinism by claiming that positive developments in the region were due to Russian intervention. B.A. Romanov's *Russia in Manchuria* condemned the CER and the czarist Russian concession administrative project as imperialist infringements on Chinese sovereignty. Yet Romanov stressed Russian accomplishments in Manchuria and the taming of its wild frontier. The title of G.V. Melikhov's book *Manch'zhuriia: Dalekaia i blizkaia* (Manchuria: Far and Near) stresses not only Manchuria's regional distinctiveness but also Russia's historical links to the area. To paraphrase Melikhov's title, the region is – and yet is not – Russian. Both authors argue that Russians brought civilization and culture to the region and express resentment that the Chinese refuse to admit to the debt they owe Russia.¹⁹ This is not to say that Russians do not have a claim on Harbin history. They do. But it is the possessive nature of that claim that continues to annoy both the Chinese, who did the hard labour, and the émigrés, whom the Soviet state abandoned and defamed and whom the new Russian republic would now reclaim. With the fall of the Soviet Union, a number of histories in addition to Melikhov's have been written about the Russian emigration, and there have been two significant conferences in Russia – one in Moscow and the other in Khabarovsk – on the subject of Harbin. At each conference it was the image of Russian Harbin and the accomplishments of Russians in Manchuria that predominated.²⁰

This experiment in Chinese administration has also suffered from the fact that the Special District's political history does not fit the dominant historical narratives chosen by China's twentieth-century governments. During much of the period under consideration, China's national government was like a ball tossed from one warlord to another. Neither of two main political contenders in twentieth-century China – the rightist Nationalists and the Communists – can claim the region's innovations as their own initiative, and the disappearance of this administrative experiment from Chinese written history suggests that the compromises it entailed did not fit into either party's narratives of national or ideological triumph. In 1931 the Japanese conquered the region; in the 1940s the Soviet, Chinese Nationalist (Guomindang, GMD), and Communist armies all fought in Manchuria; and, from 1945 to 1949, the region was the principal battleground of the Chinese Civil War.

The attitude of members of Manchuria's Chinese elite toward their Russian neighbours in the 1920s is complex. Evidence from documents and the Chinese press suggests that there was no single Chinese response to Sino-Russian interaction. For instance, Chinese distinguished between the Russian and Soviet citizens of the Special District. In an exchange of letters between Zhang Zuolin, the warlord who governed Manchuria until his assassination in 1928, and Zhang Huanxiang, Special District police chief (no relation), Zhang Zuolin wrote about "our" Russians and the need to have these people and their skills on the Chinese side.²¹ In Harbin's Chinese press, the Russian language was both criticized as a tool of imperial domination and praised as a means of getting ahead. Although Harbin's rising crime rate was blamed on poor Russian refugees conspiring with Chinese criminals, Chinese journalists acknowledged that Russians were driven into crime by economic circumstances and should be pitied and helped out of their plight. The compromise that was the Special District administration can be seen in the short-term solution, which was to hire additional Russian policeman but to teach them to speak Chinese.²² The Russian elite was castigated for staging an opera that portrayed a servile Chinese character and for continuing to act as if the Russians were the dominant power in Manchuria by pretending to be the hosts instead of the guests. One fascinating article speculated that soaring rates of intermarriage between Chinese and Russians would produce a new civilization and race in Manchuria, one that combined the best elements of both races and cultures.²³

Chinese histories published since 1949 tend to be written from a nationalist and Marxist perspective. A great effort has been made to establish a thousand-year history of the Chinese presence in Harbin – as if the Russian contribution were a recent aberration. Sun Zhengjia, for instance, writes: "To sum up, the historical culture of our city is one of great antiquity, continuity and variety, and it forms an important constituent part of the glorious and outstanding historical culture of the Chinese nation."²⁴ Histories written after 1949 also tend to blur the line between Marxism and nationalism. The Chinese Civil War is portrayed as a process both of national liberation and of cleansing Manchuria of its non-Chinese population and history.²⁵ Most Chinese accounts of Harbin history concentrate on the CER, and they emphasize Russian and Soviet economic and political imperialism.²⁶ This emphasis has the advantage of symbolically uniting the struggle against transnational capital with the struggle of the working Chinese against their Russian and Soviet oppressors. Officially sanctioned memoirs also stress national themes, although there are hints in descriptions of daily life that the two communities lived together in peace.²⁷ As for the experience of the Chinese who administered the Russian community and the two communities that worked and lived side by side – there is a gap. The few post-1949 works that mention the Chinese bourgeoisie who controlled the administration are caught between affirming that they defended China's sovereignty and asserting that they did so because of class interests.²⁸

Certainly, China's experience with the Russian state, in its various incarnations, did not encourage the Chinese in general and the Manchurian Chinese in particular to explore the subtleties of the relationship. The formation of twentieth-century Chinese nationalism was concurrent with great power incursions on Chinese territory. Russia's occupation and detachment of the area now known as the Russian Far East – that is, its economic, cultural, and military penetration of China – has left feelings of deep resentment among many Chinese. Until recently, Chinese political centralism and a lingering animosity toward the Soviet Union/Russia have made it difficult for a regional historiography, a northeastern or Manchurian school of Chinese history so to speak, to express itself openly. However, there are signs that regional variations to standard Chinese nationalist histories are now being written. Although Ding Lianglun's "A Survey of Harbin's Russian Community, 1917-1951" presents its argument within a Marxist perspective, Ding acknowledges that after 1917, when the Russians had lost their privileged position, they saw the Chinese as equals. In a departure from other contemporary histories, Ding argues that both peoples had a hand in settling the region and that Harbin's political, cultural, and economic infrastructure owed much to Russian settlers.²⁹

As a measure of change, in both history writing and Chinese views of their Russian neighbours, one can trace the evolution of Chinese names for Manchurian Russians. Texts from the republican era describe the Russians neutrally as White Russians (*bai-E*), Russian sojourners or Russian nationals living abroad (*eqiao*), or, sympathetically, as refugees (*nanmin*). Many administrative texts describe them as *emin* (Russian settlers or immigrants), a term that carries a connotation of legitimate settlement. In contrast, the favourite term in texts published after 1949 is Russian bandit (*efei*). Since the relaxation of Russo-Chinese tensions, the term *emin* has come back into use. By focusing on an identity based on settlement rather than on politics or temporary residence, some Chinese historians are beginning to acknowledge the contribution of Russians to the Chinese northeast.³⁰

Harbin's origins continue to divide contemporary Harbiners. In 1994 the *Haerbin shizhi* (Harbin City Gazetteer) published a series of articles on how best to commemorate the upcoming centenary of the 1898 railway contact that led to the founding of the city. Most authors expressed caution about or did not believe that the CER should be linked to the foundation of the city. One article, titled "The Day of the Establishment of the Administration Should Be the Commemoration Day of the City," stated that 1920, the year the Special District was created, not 1898, should be designated as the real foundation of the city.³¹ Presumably, a truly Chinese Harbin came into existence only at the moment the Chinese assumed administrative control of the city. One Chinese article, however, did make a case for 1898. The author Wei Guozhong argued, in Thomas Lahusen's words, that

those who think that attributing the foundation of the city to the CER strikes a blow to China's dignity are narrow minded. Wei invokes the "secret treaty" of 1896, of which he says that it was, after all, signed by two sovereign nations and based on a common investment, that most of those who worked on the construction were Chinese, and that all foreigners were not necessarily aggressors and criminals. He adds: an independent nation that has confidence in itself must not be afraid to acknowledge the positive contribution of foreigners in its history.³²

Aside from a few Chinese authors such as Wei who are willing to acknowledge Manchuria's multinational origins, however, this brief administrative experiment has no place in existing Chinese national or ideological narratives.

Until recently, the Special District and Harbin were subjects that likewise drew little comment in a Western historiographical tradition that looked to southern China, the nineteenth century, the crisis of extraterritoriality, and the development of Chinese nationalism for their paradigms of Sino-foreign relations. In this context, *Western historiography* is used to designate non-Russian works. This is not a judgment on the cultural place of Russia in the world but rather a convenient historiographical distinction that reinforces the point that the Russian approach to the Special District and Harbin differs from those of Western sources.

John King Fairbank's *Trade and Diplomacy on the China Coast* was an early attempt to categorize Sino-foreign interaction at the administrative level. Fairbank argues that Western contact led to a metamorphosis within Chinese institutions. The West destroyed the old Chinese political and cultural framework, and the Chinese elite was forced to remake itself and its political system. The result was an institutional, administrative, and intellectual Chinese-Western hybrid that Fairbank called "synergy." Leaving aside the dated conceit that Western interaction was the engine of historical change, Fairbank's speculations about synergy, a theory that he argued was beneficial to both parties and responsible for economic and political adaptation, offer a theory that suits this study of the Special District in the 1920s.³⁵

In his work "Treaty Ports and China's Modernization," Rhoads Murphey continues Fairbank's theme by speculating on how Chinese and foreign elites were both transformed through their interaction. He characterizes the Chinese elite as a self-regulating society that took advantage of central government weakness to assert an administrative autonomy influenced by foreign economic and political institutions. This characterization fits with the elite's efforts to make the district's administration Chinese largely through trial and error and the Russian model it had inherited.³⁴ Nevertheless, there are limitations to Murphey's argument. When he states that the treaty ports were not Asian but belonged more to a "modernizing and supranational world than to

the particular cultures and economies whose economic peripheries they occupied,” he reveals that his argument is based on the Western assumption of European action and Asian reaction.⁵⁵ This argument shares a fundamental assumption with the modernization school and its critics – namely, that Asia can only imitate the West or isolate itself to achieve a more authentic form of development. This approach to the Special District places more emphasis on the foreignness and Asianness of the two partners and less on their common administrative problems.

The Fairbank thesis has also been attacked by a few scholars who argue that it echoes modernization theory and justifies imperialism.⁵⁶ These China-centred scholars argue that the synergy thesis has an intellectual foundation based on the concept of a stagnate China awoken by interaction with the West. These scholars, in contrast, argue that China must be understood within the context of Chinese history.⁵⁷ Indeed, in the 1960s and 1970s, when debates about imperialism left the classrooms and entered the streets, the trend was to de-emphasize the China coast, concessions, and Chinese-foreign interaction. This early debate on Sino-foreign interaction was driven by political and ideological concerns and took as its first principle state-on-state interaction on the China coast. It did not comment on regional administrative variations such as those in Manchuria. As political ideologies have faded and as starkly coloured colonial paradigms have turned to the varied hues of postcolonial theory, it is possible to adopt an integrated and nuanced approach to this episode in the history of Manchuria’s administration. Histories of Chinese-foreign and centre-periphery interaction need not be informed solely by the question of whose nation and civilization will prevail.

Many studies of Chinese municipal government have influenced this book, and they share two common themes: the creation of new public spaces and the opportunities for civic participation outside of national control that emerged at moments when the national government was weak. These studies are geographically specific – all focus on southern cities. Maryruth Coleman’s study of Nanjing, David Buck’s book on Jinan, and David Strand’s book on Beijing all examine municipal government as a means for creating a new form of public space in China’s cities. Each of these studies concludes that post-imperial elites rose to the challenge of creating new municipal governments and encouraging civic participation. In both Nanjing and Jinan, foreign models were used as a foundation for these new polities. Strand comments that the growing interest in Beijing municipal politics throughout the 1920s was due to a long tradition of guilds and native-place associations and that municipal politics built upon this foundation.⁵⁸ Each study concludes, however, that the power and scope of these municipal governments were restricted because of their collaboration and co-optation by the Guomindang, which refused to allow autonomous political structures.⁵⁹ In contrast, the Special District obtained sovereignty over a foreign concession in 1920, well before most

southern concessions were turned over to Chinese control, and it remained independent until 1952. (Twenty of China's thirty-three concessions would be turned over to Chinese control before 1937, the majority in the mid-1920s and early 1930s. Although the GMD flag was raised over Harbin in 1928, the GMD did not interfere as it did in southern China.

Geographically, the study of concessions, treaty ports, and municipal governance has been dominated by work on southern China, particularly Shanghai and, to a lesser extent, Hong Kong. This is because southern China is considered a site of political and social change, in contrast to the conservatism of the north.⁴⁰ Of the two cities, Shanghai has been the most studied. A sprawling, chaotic, multi-ethnic metropolis, Shanghai has captured both the Chinese and non-Chinese imagination, and numerous memoirs on pre-1949 Shanghai have shaped secondary research on this city. The relative ease with which scholars gain access to Shanghai's archives and the availability of primary and secondary sources in English and French have generated a number of studies of the city's municipal government and the relations between the Chinese and non-Chinese communities. Although they claim to be studies of Chinese-foreign interaction, these academic studies focus exclusively on one community or nationality rather than on interactions between groups. Multi-ethnic Shanghai was in fact three cities in one, and the separate communities rarely interacted. In this respect, Harbin offers a better example of true Sino-foreign interaction.

In his work on the Chinese Shanghai Municipal Council, Christian Henriot argues that the Anglo-American and French city councils of Shanghai were the models for Chinese municipal government. Henriot agrees with Strand, Coleman, and Buck that the creation of the city council represented the appearance in China of a new form of public space. Henriot also agrees with a point made in other concession studies – that GMD politics shaped and controlled local politics and ultimately restricted municipal governance.⁴¹ Although they focus only on southern cities, the findings of studies such as Henriot's have been universally applied to all Chinese cities of the 1920s.

Robert Bickers' article "Shanghaianders: The Formation and Identity of the British Settler Community in Shanghai, 1843-1937" is the one work that examines how the experiences of a settler community shaped the formation of a foreign identity. Bickers argues that historians of empire have ignored the history of the British diaspora in Shanghai. His observation that China's settler communities "have been difficult to define and their particularities and problems lost in the wider accounts of the progress of Sino-British relations" is tailor-made for the Russian settler community of China's northeast.⁴² He concludes that the economic, racial, and political identity of the English settler community was tied to the maintenance of municipal and judicial privileges in Shanghai and that the struggle to retain these privileges shaped British relations with the Chinese community. In Harbin and the CER concession, the

Russian settler community's identity was linked to the maintenance of that community's privileges, and the real and imagined Chinese threat to those privileges determined the Russian response to Chinese administration.

One Chinese historian has attempted to tell the story of the Russian community in Shanghai. Wang Zhicheng's *Shanghai e-qiaoshi* (A history of the Russian émigré community in Shanghai) is a pioneering work that captures the scope of Shanghai's Russian experience. However, Wang's book is essentially a catalogue of Russian societies, newspapers, and organizations that has little analytical content of the Russian community's cultural or political impact on Shanghai. Wang's history is not a political history of the Sino-Russian relationship because, unlike in Harbin, the Russians were never a strong imperial presence in Shanghai.⁴⁵ Hong Kong is the other popular subject in studies on the Sino-foreign administrative experience. In *Hong Kong in Chinese History*, Jung-Fang Tsai argues that the initial colonial relationship of submission and domination determined all future interactions between the English and their Chinese subjects. Tsai counters a school of English triumphalism that sought to disguise the coercive nature of the original colonial relationship.⁴⁴

There have been two recent substantial contributions to the small field of Harbin studies. David Wolff's *To the Harbin Station: The Liberal Alternative in Russian Manchuria, 1898-1914* concentrates on the foundation and early years of Russian-controlled Harbin. Wolff's work has been crucial to establishing Harbin as a valid subject of study, and his book on the city's and the concession's foundations has served to untangle a complicated narrative. Wolff must also be commended for his work in the archives of both founding nations, which has made it clear that it is impossible to study Harbin and the CER government from only one perspective. Wolff's principal claim is that Russian Harbin was a liberal alternative to the more autocratic Russian motherland, which he convincingly bases on the fact that Harbin's city government – the Municipal Council – enfranchised women, Jews, and Chinese.⁴⁵ From the perspective of nineteenth-century Imperial Russian history, Harbin appears to have been a more liberal polity. When it is viewed from a pre-1919 Chinese perspective, however, the concession's civic administration was dominated and controlled by the CER and motivated by the need to maintain Russian power in the face of the concession's Chinese majority. After 1919, using the Russian administration as a model, the Chinese would extend the franchise.

James Carter's book *Creating a Chinese Harbin: Nationalism in an International City, 1916-1932* examines the creation of nationalism, an education system, and national symbols in the postcolonial context of 1920s Harbin. By focusing on the Chinese elite, Carter's insightful study uncovers the tension between the goals of achieving sovereignty in a region once controlled by others and the shaping of Chinese nationalism within a regional and multi-ethnic context.⁴⁶ Nevertheless, the key Chinese players in Carter's work are largely outside the Special District's administration, a situation that reflects their espousal of a Chinese nationalism aimed at excluding the Russians. If

the administration itself is studied, a much more pragmatic policy, one conditioned also by the demands of administering a multinational government, is revealed.

Carter's conclusion – that because Chinese nationalism in Harbin was weak, China had to compromise with both the USSR and Japan – provides an interesting contrast to the one presented in Rana Mitter's *The Manchurian Myth: Nationalism, Resistance, and Collaboration in Modern China*. Mitter argues that the Manchurian elite gave little resistance to Japanese invasion because their ideas about nation, state, and national identity differed from those of the inhabitants of central China. Manchurian Chinese elites' pliable policy vis-à-vis the invading Japanese confounded the southern Chinese, who had clear national goals of active resistance. Mitter's work points to a regional understanding of Chinese nationalism, one in which the Dongsansheng did not share the south's dogmatic nationalism.⁴⁷ This same pliable sense of national identity can also be detected in policies crafted for the region's Russian population in the 1920s.

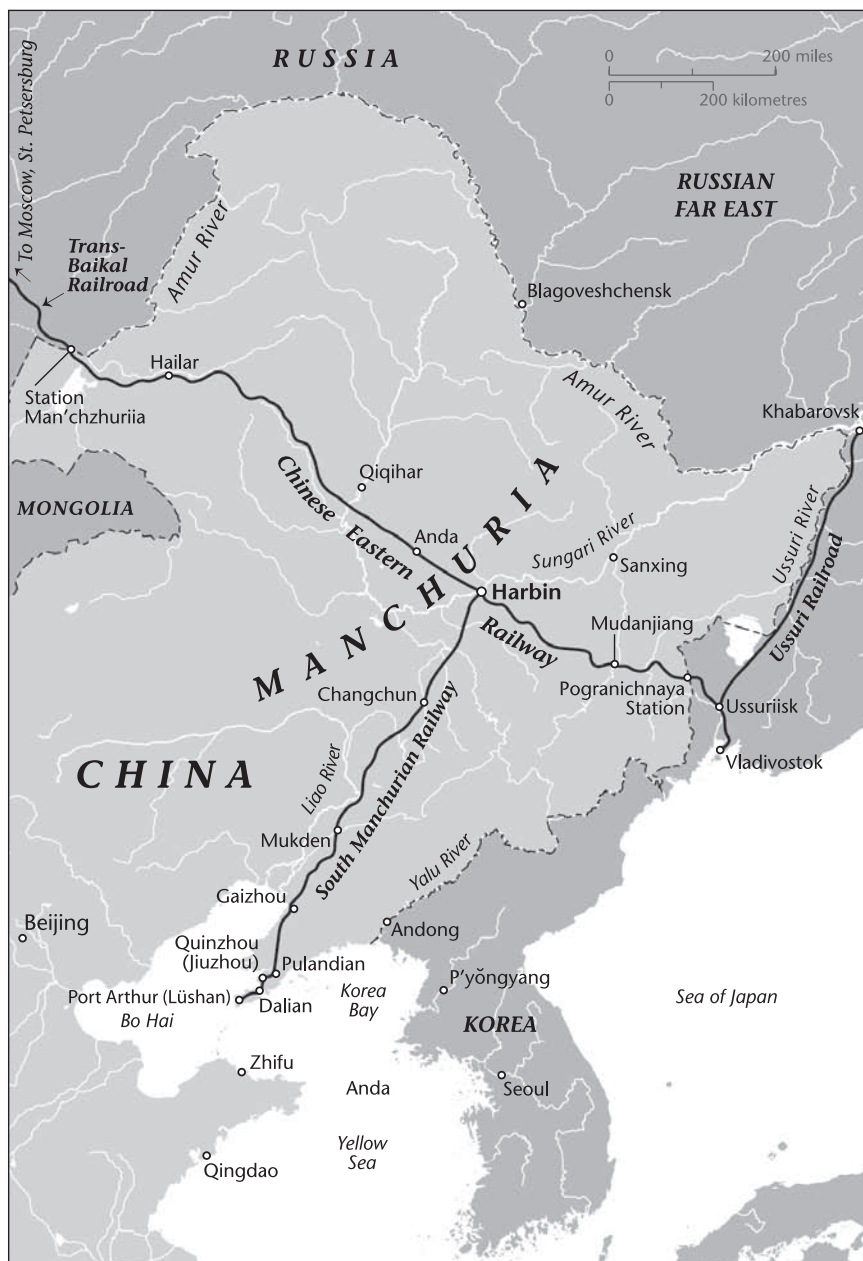
Manchuria, except as a focus of Japanese imperialism, has received little attention from historians even though in the 1920s the region was the most technologically developed part of China. It had the fastest-growing population, the most developed transportation infrastructure, and the highest rate of urbanization. Despite the seemingly transitory nature of the Special District, its history as an administrative solution – to ruling a large foreign population and asserting Chinese sovereignty – deserves our attention, not only because it complicates our understanding of Chinese nationalism but also because the Special District is an important example of an early solution to problems that dominate the history of many societies today: the settlement of refugees, the collective administration of diverse populations, and the search for a common civic identity in a multicultural context. Although the experience was shaped by the colonialist enterprise that created the Russian CER concession, the Chinese elite used this experience to reformulate ideas about civic participation and nationalism. They would do this earlier than elites in the south and outside the context of GMD politics. In terms of Sino-foreign relations, the influence of foreign ideas on Chinese administration, civic participation, and concepts of citizenship, Manchuria was as important, if not more so, than Shanghai and Hong Kong. Although it draws on questions asked in and responds to the limitations of studies that focus on southern China, this history of the Special District administration goes beyond the southern school of Sino-foreign relations. The Special District was an administrative region in which, in Prasenjit Duara's words, "the tensions between minorities, the border areas and nationalism, at the moment nationalism coalesces" were in full view.⁴⁸ National histories written from the perspective of the centre have wiped out these ambiguities. This book restores them.

Railway Frontier: North Manchuria before 1917

It is said that the Chinese Eastern Railway (CER) concession and its hub city, Harbin, was founded in 1898. The use of the passive voice is deliberate, for the concession's origin is a controversial and contested subject. Chinese sources written after 1949 stress the continuity of Asian settlement in the region of what was then northern Manchuria, while Russian sources point out that the area that became Harbin was relatively uninhabited and contained only a few dilapidated huts and an unused distillery.¹ Although both Russia and China have a stake in establishing that they were the first to occupy the territory before 1890, it is probably local tribes that have the best original claim to northern Manchuria. Unfortunately, like tribal peoples the world over whose homes would become prime real estate, those in Manchuria, having no papers and no national identity to back claims, were swept away in the competition between two nations and two competing frontier colonial projects.

Nevertheless, just as it is impossible to deny that Russia's establishment of the CER concession began the process of large-scale industrial development that transformed northern Manchuria, it is impossible to deny that the Chinese provided the people and the muscle that made this transformation possible. The story will therefore begin with the Russian half of the concession's two founding peoples. Chinese documents written prior to 1949 readily acknowledge the Russian fact in northern Manchuria. For instance, one article from 1929 credits the Russians with building the settlement that became Harbin on a "barren land, empty of people," while Harbin's city guide freely admitted in 1931 that Harbin and the Special District would not exist were it not for the Russians.²

The Imperial Russian Finance Ministry created the CER railway concession. The principal justification for running this branch line of the Trans-Siberian Railway through a foreign country was that it would serve as a time- and money-saving shortcut. By building a line through northern China's relatively flat land to Vladivostok, the CER would enable the Trans-Siberian Railway to avoid the twisted Amur River that formed the border between the



Manchuria, the Chinese Eastern Railway, and the South Manchurian Railway, c. 1901 | Source: David Wolff, *To the Harbin Station: The Liberal Alternative in Russian Manchuria, 1848-1914* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), xvii.

two countries.⁵ Behind this rather bland and pragmatic justification, there were other imperial dreams and foreign policy anxieties that motivated the Russian government's Manchurian project.

For the Russian government, the creation of the CER concession embodied Imperial Russia's contradictory regional policies in the Far East: peaceful economic penetration and direct military domination. Although the CER was administered as a separate company, the concession was a vehicle for Russian economic penetration of northern Manchuria, just as the Trans-Siberian Railway served a similar purpose in the Russian Far East. Colonization and economic development of the largely uninhabited Russian Far East was subsidized by the construction of the Trans-Siberian Railway, in accord with a policy laid down by the builder of both railroads, Sergei Witte. Charismatic and intelligent, Witte controlled the Finance Ministry, which endorsed his policy of government intervention to jump start the Russian economy. Witte saw the creation of the CER concession as a way for Russia to establish an economic foothold in Manchuria, an area rich in natural resources that could be developed for Russia's benefit. The soil produced "amazing and magnificent crops." Wild fruit trees and wild flowers – especially "lilies of the valley, violets, and tulips" – grew in abundance. The hills contained tigers and boars, and the plains teemed with pheasants, partridges, hares, and quail – "capital sport for all."⁴ The more temperate climate opened up the possibility that the area could become a breadbasket for the agriculturally challenged Russian Far East. In Witte's own words, the railway was Russia's "peaceful economic penetration" of the region.⁵

Russian administration of the Far East was relatively new. The area had only been detached from the Chinese sphere of influence and given to Russia by the Treaty of Aigun in 1858 and the Treaty of Peking in 1860. Russia had been expanding continuously since the seventeenth century and had extensive experience in bringing new territories under its control. The Russian Far East, however, was far from central Russia. The Russian population of the area was miniscule and, despite attempts to increase the numbers of Orthodox Russians (as opposed to indigenous populations or Chinese or Korean immigrants), the Russian population remained small. The soil and climate of the region did not meet the expectations of the Russian government, and central Russian agriculture was not suitable for the new territories. Because Russian settlers were reluctant to adapt their diet and agricultural production to local conditions, food had to be imported from central Russia. Similarly, the non-Russian population of the area was growing rapidly and was dependent on foodstuffs imported from China.

In addition to these practical considerations, there was anxiety that other countries would take control of the region if Russia did not. In particular, both Japan and China were held up as potential competitors who, as Asiatics, were better adapted to control the region. Nevertheless, rapid expansion of the European sphere of influence in Asia also acted as a catalyst to Russian imperial pretensions. The creation of the CER concession was therefore both a

means for Russia to expand its influence in China and a buffer zone between the vulnerable Russian Far East and other countries that could threaten the region.

At the level of national ideology, there was a sense that Russia had a special mission in Asia, a mission that was fuelled by the debate, which dated from the reign of Peter the Great, within Russia's governing and intellectual elite on the nature of the country's national identity. Was Russia a European or an Asiatic power? Late nineteenth-century Russian nationalists took up this debate and synthesized the concepts of a unique Slavic civilization with the idea that Russia had a special tie to Asia. According to this theory, the West was soulless and materialistic. Only Russia, equipped with European learning yet possessed of a national essence that was more Asian than European, could save Asia.⁶ Russia, in their opinion, had a special role in Asia. It acted as a bridge between East and West by developing China but preserving it from Western materialism.

Russia's domestic and foreign policy along its border with China was, therefore, shaped by a number of factors: a negligible Russian colonial presence, fear of Chinese economic and demographic competition, fear of another country competing with Russia for the region, and Russia's prestige and mission in Asia. A more vigorous defence of the border region by Qing China might have taken the air out of some of Russia's grand Manchurian pretensions; however, the Chinese political imagination had not yet fully incorporated Manchuria. In addition, the Chinese government had limited resources, and those it did have were taxed by the payment of indemnities and the costs of late Qing institutional reforms.

For the Russian builders of the Trans-Siberian Railway, the Manchurian landscape was particularly well suited for a railroad because it was relatively flat and uninhabited. The CER's *raison d'être* as a shortcut for the Trans-Siberian Railway enabled the Russian transcontinental railway to avoid a circuitous route along the Russo-Chinese border. The CER was, however, always much more than a simple business concern. Railways are both a rationale and a means for creating ordered, administered landscapes. The straight line of the tracks heralds the arrival of civilization and modernity in a previously untamed landscape. Railroads and railroad colonialism have played a crucial role in the subjugation and settlement of North and South America, Australia, and Africa. In Russia, railroads were crucial to the settlement of Siberia and the Russian Far East and the creation of a Russian presence in what would become Russian Central Asia. The CER would be the means and the end, the alpha and omega, of Russian colonialism in Manchuria.

The Sino-Russian dispute over the railway centred on the CER's exact nature and purpose – commercial enterprise or instrument of Russian colonization? The railway had been created in the wake of the First Sino-Japanese war, when the Japanese government demanded the entire Liaodong peninsula. Russia, hoping to prevent the interference of another country in

Manchuria, co-operated with Germany and France to force Japan to relinquish its claim to the area. Although the Imperial Russian Foreign Ministry had presented itself to the Chinese government as a friend, it pressed for compensation in the form of a railway concession in return for deflecting Japanese designs from the region. The Russian government had been planning a cross-country railroad for a number of years and seized this opportunity to extend the line into Chinese territory. It was not entirely an illogical decision: a route across the northeast would avoid the need to lay track through the Amur border region. By building through Chinese territory from Chita to Vladivostok, a distance of 1,529 kilometres, the total length of the Trans-Siberian Railway was reduced by 913 kilometres.⁷ In the opinion of Russian officials, the “Chinese Eastern Railway may be compared to an enormous bridge which through Manchuria spanned two Russian shores and was to serve the requirements of Russian transit.”⁸

Negotiations for the CER’s construction were conducted by Count Witte and a Chinese envoy, Li Hongzhang. As a respected Qing official, Li had advanced China’s so-called self-strengthening movement and helped develop a modern naval, transportation, and military infrastructure. As Qing China’s most prominent foreign officer, Li had also been responsible for negotiations after the Sino-Japanese War.⁹ Li had experience with the Russians and was sympathetic to transportation infrastructure projects. He also knew firsthand the threat Japan posed to Manchuria. During negotiations for the Treaty of Shimonoseki in 1895, Li promised the Russian minister to Beijing, Count Artur Pavlovich Cassini, military and communications rights in Manchuria if Japan was forced from its postwar claims to the Liaodong peninsula. Pressure was applied, and Japan withdrew its claim to the peninsula as part of the compensation package. When he was dispatched to Moscow in 1895 to attend the coronation of Nicholas II, Li resumed talks with Count Witte, who reminded Li that Russia had fulfilled its part of the bargain.

Writers inspired by Chinese nationalism from the 1920s onward have accused Li of letting the Russian wolf into Chinese territory. In his defence, the policy of using Russia to discourage Japanese aggression was one that circulated in the highest Chinese circles.¹⁰ The Qing Empire had little administrative presence in northern Manchuria and would not begin its colonization project until after the 1900 Boxer Rebellion. These government officials were not deluded and knew that Russia had ulterior motives; however, they believed that the Japanese threat was more significant.

But Russia does not want Japan to be strong, and Japan’s invasion of our Three Eastern Provinces makes Russia even more jealous. Thus, by the Sino-Japanese peace treaty we had already ceded Liaotung [sic] to Japan, but Russia, France, and Germany compelled her to return it to China. Is Russia doing this especially for us? She is, at the same time, working for herself. If we take this opportunity to establish close relations with her, for mutual

assistance, and also give her some concessions, Russia will be surely glad to comply.¹¹

Russia was also a known quantity to the recently founded Zongli Yamen, the Foreign Ministry, and China had had treaty relationships with the Russian Empire for over 250 years. By the late nineteenth century, Imperial Russia, the best known of the barbarian powers, was perceived as being less rapacious than the other foreign powers, a perception that necessitated forgetting Russia's acquisition of Qing territory in the late nineteenth century.

Now if we wish to make a treaty, and to have a bond for mutual assistance, naturally Russia is most convenient for us, because England uses commerce to absorb the profits of China, France uses religion to entice the Chinese people, Germany has no common territorial boundary with us, and the United States does not like to interfere in others' military affairs. It is difficult for all of these neighbours to discuss an alliance with us. It is known that Russia, as China's neighbour, has kept treaty agreements with us for more than two hundred years, and that she has never embarked on hostilities; she is different from other countries who have frequently resorted to warfare with us. Moreover her behavior is grand and generous, and cannot be compared to that of the Europeans. For example, in the church case at Tianjin in 1870, in which all the countries were busy making a clamor, Russia did not participate, and in the treaties over Ili (1879 and 1881) our nation completely refused and then modified the eighteen articles, and Russia generously consented. This time she has demanded the return of the territory of Liaotung [sic] for us; although she did it for the sake of the general situation in the East; yet China has already received the benefit.¹²

Chinese negotiators went to great lengths to delineate the functions and scope of the new railway so that the enterprise did not impinge on Chinese sovereignty. In the secret Sino-Russian treaty of alliance, signed June 1896, Russia and China pledged to come to each other's assistance in the event of a Japanese attack. Article 4 of this agreement defined the CER as a mixed military-business enterprise.

In order to facilitate the access of the Russian land troops to the menaced points, and to ensure their means of subsistence, the Chinese government consents to the construction of a railway line across the Chinese provinces of the Amour [sic] and of Guirin [sic] in the direction of Vladivostok. The junction of this railway with the Russian railway shall not serve as a pretext for any encroachment on Chinese territory nor for any infringement of the rights of the sovereignty of his Majesty the Emperor of China. The construction and exploitation of this railway shall be accorded to the Russo-Chinese Bank, and the clauses of the Contract which shall be concluded for this purpose shall be

duly discussed between the Chinese minister in St. Petersburg and the Russo-Chinese Bank.¹⁵

Despite the military origins of the CER, the Chinese government insisted that the railway should function as a commercial enterprise by forbidding the Russian government any direct control over the CER. The Chinese reinforced this position by demanding that both Chinese and Russians manage the company. The Russo-Chinese Bank, chartered in December 1895, would be the legal body charged with the Russian half of the co-administration of the railway.¹⁴ On 8 September 1896, the construction contract between the Russo-Chinese Bank and the Chinese government was signed; French was used as the language of final arbitration. The Russo-Chinese Bank's position as the main signatory to the agreement, rather than the Russian government, emphasized the Chinese government's position that the concession was solely a commercial enterprise co-administered by the bank and the Chinese government. Article 1 stipulated that the Chinese Eastern Railway Company, organized by the Russo-Chinese Bank, would construct and operate the railway. Therefore, the Russian government was twice removed from the railway's administration.

Article 6 of the treaty would have the greatest influence on later Sino-Russian administrative disputes:

The lands actually necessary for the construction, operation, and protection of the line, as also the lands in the vicinity of the line necessary for procuring sand, stone, lime, etc. will be turned over to the Company freely, if these lands are the property of the State: if they belong to individuals, they will be turned over to the Company either upon a single payment or upon an annual rental to the proprietors, at current prices. The lands belonging to the Company will be exempt from all land taxes.

The company will have the absolute and exclusive right of administration of its lands. (*La Société aura la droit absolu et exclusif de l'administration de ses terrains.*)¹⁵

Article 6 clearly states that the lands turned over to the CER were to be used for commercial purposes only. In the Chinese translation, the word employed for administration is *jingli*. *Jingli* is understood as the administration of a business, unlike the word *guanli*, which means political administration.¹⁶ There are additional differences between the Chinese, Russian, and French texts. According to historian Olga Bakich, the Chinese text reads as follows: "All leased land used by the company is exempt from land taxation and to be managed by the said company single-handedly." In both the Russian and French texts, the sentence is broken into two and reads, "The lands belonging to the company would be exempt from taxation. The company is granted the absolute and exclusive right of administration of land."¹⁷ A reading of the second

version allowed the CER to avoid paying taxes to the Chinese administration and permitted it to tax and administer land within the concession. This outcome was not in accordance with the Chinese government's wish for the railway to remain only a railway. When the contract had been signed in Berlin, the Chinese had read both the Russian and the Chinese versions, which were close in meaning, but did not see the French translation. They had not been told that the French translation was the legally binding version.¹⁸

So the Chinese were not aware that the contract's French translation was binding in the event of a dispute, and the word *administration* in the French text was interpreted as meaning full territorial administration. The exact nature of the CER's relationship to its leased lands was also unclear. In Russian the term used was *polosa otchuzhdeniia* (zone of alienation), and the Russians would disingenuously argue that the land had been alienated administratively but not politically from China. Russian actions, however, revealed that the CER zone was, in their opinion, Russian territory. From 1898 onward, the Chinese argued that the contract specified a simple right-of-way for a railway, a business enterprise, but did not provide for an accompanying administrative privilege.¹⁹

French and Russian interpretations of the contract were not the only factors that limited Chinese sovereignty – a number of other measures ensured Russian control within the CER zone. For instance, although the CER's lands were exempt from Chinese taxation, those living on them were subject to a tax levied and collected by the railway administration.²⁰ Because the CER's gauge was identical to that of the Trans-Siberian Railway and different from that of the Chinese, it was difficult for the CER to be used within the Chinese railway system.²¹ The Imperial Russian government also guaranteed its control over the enterprise by announcing the public sale of the stock on the morning of the day they were to be sold. Not unexpectedly, when few buyers came forward, the Russian Finance Ministry purchased 25 percent of the stock with an option to buy the remainder, an option that was exercised after the 1900 Boxer Rebellion, when the ministry increased its share to 53 percent. All of these actions flouted the spirit of the original contract, which designated the CER a private company, not a Russian government concern.²²

Chinese authority was vested in the largely ceremonial position of the Chinese-appointed president, who resided in Beijing and was removed from the CER's daily concerns. The president was to “see particularly to the scrupulous fulfillment of the obligations of the Bank and of the Railway Company toward the Chinese government; he will furthermore be responsible for the relations of the Bank and the Railway Company with the Chinese government and the central and local authorities.”²³ What little supervisory power the Chinese had was limited further by the fact that the position remained vacant between 1900 and 1920: there was not even a limited Chinese voice to mediate between the CER's administration and Chinese central and local authorities.²⁴ True authority was vested in the Russian vice-president, also known as the

general manager, CER head, or chief engineer (the title most used among Russians. For the sake of clarity I will use “chief engineer”). Buried in subsections 18 and 19 of the CER statutes – which were published four months after the signed contract and, therefore, kept from Chinese revision – were statutes that gave the vice-president real power over the CER. Although the president was a Chinese government appointee, the vice-president was chosen by the CER board from among its own members – that is, from the Russian-dominated board. The statutes ensured that control over the CER and its concession would rest in Russian hands.²⁵

Some statutes did reaffirm China’s sovereignty by explaining that “offences, litigation etc. on the territory of the Chinese Eastern Railway shall be dealt with by local authorities, Chinese and Russian, on the basis of existing treaties.”²⁶ Russian and Chinese authorities appeared to have equal power, but article 8 of the contract extended and secured Russian authority. “The Chinese Government has undertaken to adapt measures for securing the safety of the railway and of all employed on it from any extraneous attacks. *The preservation of law and order on the lands assigned to the railway and its appurtenances shall be confided to police agents appointed by the company.*”²⁷ Russian control agencies would thereafter control day-to-day police jurisdiction in the concession. Finally, through article 16 the Russian government removed any doubt that the CER was a simple commercial enterprise. In this article the Russian government, through the Finance Ministry, guaranteed that it would subsidize the CER, “should the gross receipts of the railway prove insufficient for defraying the working expenses,” as was the case between 1898 and 1919, when the Russian government directly subsidized the CER’s operations.²⁸

In 1897, following discussions between Britain and Russia about their respective Chinese spheres of influence, Russia was granted Manchuria. Russia seized the tip of the Liaodong peninsula in December 1897 on the pretext of protecting the area from Germany. In January the government began to evict Chinese from the peninsula and killed those who resisted. In March it formally demanded the two Liaodong peninsula harbours – Dalian and Lüshun. The Chinese government at first resisted, but agreed to negotiate after the Russian government threatened to seize the territory by force.

On 27 March 1898, the Chinese Foreign Ministry and the Russian government signed a separate twenty-five-year lease for Russian possession of the Liaodong peninsula. Although article 1 once again specified that the agreement did not violate the sovereign rights of the Chinese emperor, the lease went further in articulating and extending Russian power. The newly leased area was divided into two sections. The first ran from the ports of Dalian and Lüshun to just north of Pulandian Station. The entire military and civil administration in this area was given over “to the Russian authorities and will be concentrated in the hands of one person who however shall not have the title of Governor or governor-general.”²⁹ Presumably, this was a small concession to the Chinese, who wished to maintain the appearance of nominal control. In

the neutral zone, which ran from Pulandian Station to Gaizhou, the civil administration was left in the hands of the Chinese. The Russians controlled the military, however, and Chinese troops were only admitted with Russia's permission.⁵⁰ An addendum allowed for a token Chinese administration in the city of Quinzhou, located in the first area.⁵¹ Control by the CER and, by extension, Russia had been extended southward to the tip of the peninsula. Russia had already broken two promises made during negotiations for the CER's construction, namely, not to build the railway through areas already populated by Chinese and not to extend the CER south of the city of Changchun.

In 1900 northern China, and to a lesser extent Manchuria, was racked by the Boxer Rebellion, a rebellion that had its origins in an anti-Qing, religiously inspired peasant ideology. It was triggered by drought, an economic depression in the Grand Canal region, missionary activity, and poor harvests in Shandong Province. After forging an alliance with the Qing court in the summer of 1900, the Boxers spread across northern China, attacking foreigners and the Chinese associated with them. The rebellion's influence was, therefore, most significant in the northern region surrounding the capital city of Beijing. In Manchuria the uprising produced isolated attacks on the Russian-owned railways, a siege of Harbin, and a general feeling of panic among Russian settlers in Manchuria.⁵²

After the Rebellion, as part of the multinational force that invaded Qing China, Russian forces usurped the administrative functions of the Chinese in Manchuria and Russian administrators assumed the duties of local administrators.⁵³ Before the Boxer Rebellion, the Russians had been militarily and administratively quarantined to the boundaries of the CER concession. In November 1900, however, Russia pressured Qing representatives to sign an agreement that allowed Russia to assume all military and administrative power in Manchuria. The final provision stated that Russian supervision would end only when Russia determined that order had been restored; therefore, the possibility of Russian withdrawal was unlikely.⁵⁴ Russian troops continued to patrol Manchuria until they were forced – by pressure from Japan, England, and France – to withdraw in 1902. Despite this pressure, many Russian troops remained; they simply exchanged the uniform of the Russian army for that of the CER guards.

Following the Boxer Rebellion, czarist judicial control over the concession was extended by an imperial decree. The construction of the CER had “attracted a great number of Russians to the line of the railway, which passes through the territories of China, where our subjects, by virtue of the treaties concluded between the Imperial government and the government of the Bogdokhan [Qing emperor], have the right of being judged in accordance to Russian laws.”⁵⁵ By this decree, any case that involved a Russian was to be tried by a Russian court. The decree contravened CER statutes that stipulated that only cases in which both parties were Russian nationals were subject to extra-territorial procedure. In addition, CER concession courts were placed under

the jurisdiction of the governor general of the Amur region and the district courts of Vladivostok and Chita.³⁶ The CER was not, originally, supposed to have a separate judicial system (as did some of the foreign concessions to the south). The Chinese government reserved for itself the right to police and administer justice within the concession. Through a complex net of overlapping treaties, the administration of justice in the CER concession, located in another country and *de jure* a commercial enterprise, had become part of the Russian provincial court system. In 1901 Russia forced the province of Heilongjiang (at that time a province north of the Songhua River [*Sungari* in Russian]) to build its railway bureau in Harbin – that is, outside of the provincial boundaries – to control one of the few remaining Chinese administrative offices left in northern Manchuria. The railroad bureaus were created to function as a liaison between the CER and the Chinese administration. Now, the Harbin railroad bureau, nominally independent, was funded by the CER, which also appointed the Chinese staff. Bureau officials were selected by the Chinese, but they were appointed only with the permission of the CER general manager.³⁷ The CER constructed and furnished all bureaus in its zone and paid all salaries.³⁸ Bureau officials, now located within the Russian concession, were to examine all cases of interest to the CER that involved “interpreters, servants, artisans and ordinary labourers in the railway service, persons supplying materials, contractors for work of various kinds, and finally of all Chinese residing in the territory of the railway.”³⁹ In other words, all Chinese in the railway zone were now under the jurisdiction of an institution controlled by the CER. The bureau examined all serious violations of Russian *and* Chinese law in the concession. A special official of the bureau could settle less serious affairs that did not constitute an infringement of Chinese law on the spot by agreement with the district engineer, a CER official.⁴⁰

The amount of money spent on the creation of Russian economic and administrative structures in the Russian Far East and Manchuria reveals the area’s importance to the Russian government – an importance that placed it beyond the constraints of sound fiscal policy. Between 1897 and 1902, the average annual deficit of the government of the Russian Far East was 171 million rubles. The total expenses for the Russian Far East and the CER in these years was more than one billion rubles, a figure that almost exceeded the entire state budget for 1903. The railway’s commercial activities covered only 10 percent of its costs; 90 percent of the CER’s income came in the form of a direct subsidy from the Russian government.⁴¹

In 1903 the CER zone was placed under a Russian viceroy of the Far East, whose power was not restricted by Russian ministerial ties: the viceroy answered to the czar alone. The viceroy was given the supreme authority “regarding the maintenance of order and security in the localities appropriated for the benefit of the Chinese Eastern Railway.”⁴² The new viceroy, Admiral Evgenii Alekseev, supported Russian annexation of the Chinese northeast and immediately placed the CER concession under his personal

control. Alekseev also planned to appoint a general commissar to supervise each of the Russian military commissars that had been appointed since 1900 to the three Chinese provincial governments. The commissar was to take all measures to obtain the broadest guarantee of [Russia's] political and commercial interest in Manchuria ... He [the commissar] has full influence over Chinese officials, their appointment and administration; [he] gathers information on the taxable resource of the region and their expenditure; [he] encourages just and humane judicial procedures, communicating to the Chinese people the principles of humanity and respect for Russia."⁴⁵

The 1905 creation of the Russian viceroy of the Far East, under whose administrative purview the CER concession fell, was a clear signal that Russia was moving from the realm of peaceful economic penetration to direct control of the Far East and Manchuria. Within the context of Imperial Russian administration, the creation of the viceroyalty, a geographical area under the direct control of a viceroy who was appointed by and answerable only to the czar, was an administrative practice used to further Russian colonization. Viceroyalties such as the Viceroy of Poland or the Viceroy of the Caucasus had traditionally been created in areas that were ethnically and culturally non-Russian and believed to be in danger of slipping out of Russian control. Therefore, the viceroyalty was a temporary administrative solution to the problem of establishing Russian power in non-Russian areas. Once an area was deemed sufficiently "Russified," it was incorporated into the regular Russian administrative system.

The appointment of a viceroy of the Far East, whose powers included the final say in administrative matters within the CER concession zone, that is, in a foreign country, sent a clear signal that Russia considered the administration of this Chinese area to be within the sphere of Russian national interests.

The Imperial Lieutenant of the Far East is invested with the supreme power in respect of civil administration over those provinces (Pri-Amur on the Russian side, Kuantung on the Chinese) and is independent of different ministries. He is also given the supreme authority regarding the maintenance of order and security in the localities appropriated for the benefit of the Chinese Eastern Railway. Due care and protection in regard to the interests and wants of Russian subjects in the neighbouring territories outside of the border of the Imperial Lieutenancy are also confided to him.⁴⁴

The appointment of Admiral Alekseev to the position also sent a clear message. Alekseev was a strong Slavic nationalist who believed that Russia had a special mission in Asia and that domination of the region should be pursued not only by economic but also by military means. He strongly advocated the annexation of Manchuria by Russia. His bellicose attitude undermined Witte's policy of peaceful economic domination and helped provoke the Russo-Japanese War of 1905.

Opinion differed among the czarist ministers as to the wisdom of annexing Manchuria. Along with Alekseev, General Andrei Y. Matynov, the commander of the Russo-Chinese border, declared in 1910 that the “idea of eventual annexation of North Manchuria [had] permeated Russian thinking for years.”⁴⁵ Among the czarist ministers, both the minister of war and the foreign minister endorsed annexation.⁴⁶ Even Prime Minister V.N. Kokovstov, who was considered a moderate, said in 1910 that Russia should acquire Manchuria in the future.⁴⁷ The Russian Council of Ministers echoed his conclusion and left open the possibility of direct military intervention: “So far as Northern Manchuria is concerned, the Ministerial Council regards annexation as dangerous at the present moment, but it is of the opinion that the trend of events may force Russia to this step. All Ministries must therefore be guided by the consideration that our stipulated privileges in Northern Manchuria must be maintained to permit eventually an annexation at some future date. The Ministerial Council sanctions the measures proposed by the Minister of Foreign Affairs to exert pressure on China. In case of necessity however there must be no shrinking from forceful measures.”⁴⁸ By 1905, Russia, through its legal control of the CER zone, through its military and administrative control of Manchuria, had severely constrained Chinese sovereignty in what British envoy Sir Claude MacDonald called the “Russian province of Manchuria.”⁴⁹

Following the loss of the CER’s southern branch to Japan in 1905, Russia was forced to rethink its policy for the Far East. Before the Russo-Japanese War, Russia followed an openly expansionist policy, and the czar’s ministers debated annexation. This policy alarmed the Japanese government and provoked war between the two Manchurian competitors. The Russian government was then forced to play a more careful game. In turn, the Chinese government began to aggressively increase the Chinese state’s administrative presence in Manchuria to counter Russian and Japanese claims. To break Russia’s exclusive sphere of influence, China opened up sixteen towns to foreign business. Some were located very close to the CER zone, and the closest, Fujiadian, adjoined it.⁵⁰ In addition, beginning in 1907, China began to harmonize Manchuria’s administrative structure with that of the Chinese heartland to emphasize that the area was politically Chinese.

The CER could no longer depend on Russian imperial largesse to survive financially. Russia’s defeat by Japan had been very costly. In addition to the estimated one billion rubles that St. Petersburg paid to the viceroy and the CER between 1897 and 1902, the Russo-Japanese War had cost Russia 6.6 billion rubles and over four hundred thousand dead or wounded.⁵¹ Russia had also undergone the 1905 Revolution, which caused it to be politically preoccupied with the Russian heartland. Subsidies to the CER would be curtailed but not abolished, and a new Russian mission in northern Manchuria – one that emphasized commerce and colonization to make the concession pay – was necessary.

Russia began by imposing new tariffs. Prior to 1905, the CER had introduced punitive tariffs, which encouraged rail traffic south to Changchun and toward the then Russian-controlled port of Dalian. This did not pay because Manchurian trade normally went from west to east or from south to north. The Russian government could, however, be counted on to subsidize the railway. Not so after 1905. Responding to declining subsidies and the need to develop sound business practices, the CER set privileged rates for traffic moving eastward from Harbin to Vladivostok and set prohibitive rates for goods going south to the Chinese-controlled city of Changchun, which now served as the connection to the Japanese-owned South Manchurian Railway, the railway created out of the CER's southern route, which Russia lost to Japan after 1905.⁵²

Although the CER was supposed to give up its administrative role per the post-1905 settlement, Russian administrative and military control over the CER concession was maintained. The Russian vice-president, or chief engineer, remained at the top of the CER hierarchy. Prior to 1920, General Dmitrii Horvath a distant relative of the czar, held this position. Horvath's powers, not only over the regular administration of the CER's business affairs but also over the CER's governmental and administrative functions, were absolute. His responsibilities were divided into two equal spheres – railway affairs and civil administration – that were reflected in the CER's principal departments: (1) General Communications and Explorations, (2) Diplomatic (for dealing with Chinese officials), (3) General Secretariat, (4) CER guards, (5) Military Railway Brigade, (6) Military Transportation, (7) Judicial, (8) Commercial, (9) Financial, (10) Land Office, (11) Medical, (12) Meteorological, (13) Mining, (14) Supplies, (15) Repairs and Construction of Tracks, (16) Mechanical, (17) Traffic, (18) Telegraph, (19) Postal, (20) Motive Power, (21) Technical, (22) Land Administration (Harbin), (23) Local Commercial, (24) Steamship, and (25) the Civil Department.⁵³ In addition, Horvath also supervised six separate Russian government offices: the Manchurian Military Forces; its military court, the Russian Frontier Circuit Court; the Post Office; the Telegraph Office; and the Russian Consulate. The predominance of control enterprises among the Russian government offices indicates that the Russian mission in North Manchuria was as much about control, of its own population as well as the Chinese, as it was about development.

Russian civil administration in the concession was vested in the CER's Civil Department, which was a unique department not only within the CER's administrative organization but also among all other railway administrations in Russia proper. Of all the Russian-owned railways, only the CER had a civil department, established on the czar's order.⁵⁴ The Civil Department functioned as a colonial civil administrative body whose head was one rank below the CER head and reported directly, and only, to him. Within Imperial Russia's ranking system, the rank of the chief of the CER's Civil Department was equal

to that of a Russian provincial governor. The position in the ranking system indicated the importance that the Russian government accorded to the post.⁵⁵ A list of the Civil Department's sub-departments illustrates its administrative scope: (1) Police, (2) Medical, (3) Veterinary, (4) Passport, (5) Land, (6) Education, (7) Religion, (8) Construction, (9) Meteorology, (10) Building Maintenance, (11) Department for Relations with Chinese Officials, and (12) Prisons.⁵⁶

The 1905 Russian Revolution had been motivated partly by a desire for representative government in Russia, including a new national assembly, the Duma, and more independent municipal governments. Following the revolution, administrative practices in the CER concession were brought into line with Russian norms, including the creation of municipal governments. (The creation of Russian self-government in the CER zone paralleled the creation of the Duma. The Duma's role was also purely consultative, and it exercised very little power. The czar, like the CER general manager, retained the right of veto.) Because Russia had lost its dominant role in Manchuria and could no longer rely on a military presence alone to establish a secure Russian presence in the region, Russian control was linked to the creation of administrative structures modelled on Russian local administration. The decision to create municipal administrations in the CER concession was made in 1907 and culminated in 1909 with an accord on municipal self-government. Many of the Civil Department's duties were transferred to the new municipal governments, but the CER's general manager was invested with final veto power over any decisions taken by these municipal governments. The CER continued to function as a quasi-colonial regional government until 1920, when many of its administrative functions were taken over by the Chinese government.

The CER Civil Department therefore oversaw the CER concession between 1898 and 1909. The powers of this department, and the general manager who oversaw it, were truly comprehensive. It functioned, as CER head Horvath wrote, as "a state mechanism in miniature."⁵⁷ City and town administration, the police, medical and sanitary matters, the press, approval of any construction, passport control, education, and the Russian Orthodox Church were all under the CER Civil Department's control. The germ of the new municipal government was a twelve-member city commission that Horvath ordered Harbin's homeowners and leaseholders, both Russian and Chinese, to elect in November 1903 to aid the CER in the task of governing Harbin. Because of the revolution, however, the commission achieved little beyond taxing Harbin's residents. The amount collected (592,000 rubles between September 1905 and February 1907), when compared to the amount the CER Civil Department spent on administration (1,390,000 rubles), demonstrated two things to the CER: civil administration was very expensive, but the cost could be partially, if not completely, turned over to Harbin's ratepayers.⁵⁸

Despite Witte's policy of peaceful penetration, Harbin and its concession became as much a military as a civilian or commercial outpost. From 1900 to 1905, the city was the headquarters of the Russian occupying army. When

soldiers were converted into paid CER employees, Harbin became home to the CER guards. Between 1905 and 1908, Harbin was, in turn, transformed from a military to a civilian centre. The CER lifted martial law in the concession in 1906, and the first Russian consulate was established that year. Significantly, there had been no Russian consul in the zone to this point because it was considered part of the Russian Empire. Both of these changes signalled a turn away from establishing legitimacy through military authority toward building legitimacy on modern civil administration. The Russian Chamber of Commerce was established in 1907, and in 1908 the Russian Civil Administration for the zone was created.⁵⁹

Municipal administration in the concession was complicated further by interministerial rivalries within the Russian government.⁶⁰ When the CER was built, it was controlled by Sergei Witte and his Finance Ministry. However, the Russian Foreign Ministry, jealous of Witte's separate kingdom, argued that because the concession was outside Russia's borders, the Foreign Ministry should also have a say in its affairs. After Witte's fall in 1903, the two ministries divided the CER between them. The Finance Ministry, no longer the nation-building enterprise it had been under Witte's tenure, was determined to economize.⁶¹ Given that the ministry was no longer responsible for the concession's foreign policy, it pursued the cost-cutting measure of creating local governments. In October 1907 the Finance Ministry's representative, in Harbin on an inspection tour, met with Horvath and Harbin's leading residents to discuss proposals for municipal government. One month later, in December 1907, the first city statutes, based on Russian municipal regulations, were published.

In a private protest to the Russian Finance Ministry, the Russian Foreign Ministry argued that establishing municipal governments in foreign countries was outside the Finance Ministry's jurisdiction (the issue of the project's basic illegality was not discussed). For the sake of unity, however, the Foreign Ministry publicly supported the Finance Ministry.⁶² By dividing the supervision of the concession between the two ministries, the Russian government ensured that it could bury international protests by citing bureaucratic rivalry. In response to protests from the Chinese government and Harbin foreign consuls, that creating a Russian-controlled municipal government in a concession established purely for commercial purposes was illegal, the Foreign Ministry replied that it understood their concerns but the project belonged to the Finance Ministry. The Finance Ministry, however, could not respond to protests from outside Russia.⁶³ Although they protected the Finance Ministry's actions, officials in the Foreign Ministry never accepted the municipal agreement and characterized the system by which the CER, not the Chinese administration, controlled municipal self-government as "not to their taste."⁶⁴

Seeing that Russia and the CER were determined to create municipal governments in the CER zone, the Chinese government conceded to the plan in an attempt to save face and insert some Chinese control into the system. In April

1909 representatives of the CER and the Chinese Foreign Affairs Department signed a preliminary agreement on CER concession municipal government. Dong Shien, the daoyin (circuit intendant) of Binjiang County, and Horvath were to meet at a future date to work out the final settlement. Dong had begun his administrative career as daoyin in 1908. He counted the CER's Russian administrators as his friends and was familiar with Russian administrative practices.⁶⁵ The daoyin wanted Harbin and the other six stations that would receive municipal governments to become international settlements, a development that would limit Russian power by placing the CER stations under multiple jurisdictions. The daoyin was supported by all the foreign consuls, particularly the consul from the United States, because they were worried about exclusive Russian control of the region. Horvath publicly declared his support for the proposal; in the meantime, as a temporary solution, he created a Russian-style municipal administration.⁶⁶ The proposal to allow all powers equal access to Manchuria – the famous open-door policy – was later dropped, and the final agreement on municipal governments, which was signed in August 1909, was identical to the one signed three months earlier. Horvath insisted that he, rather than a representative of the Russian government, sign the text.⁶⁷

Article 1 acknowledged Chinese sovereignty within the CER concession, but article 2 effectively limited it. China, the article stated, could take any measures to protect its sovereignty, and neither the CER administration nor the municipal governments could oppose it, so long “as the said measures are not in contravention of the contracts concluded with the CER company.”⁶⁸ Because the contract gave the CER the power to determine a contravention, article 2 effectively gave the CER sovereignty within the concession. Article 15 placed the CER in control of municipal councils. All important questions concerning the public interest or municipal finances in the concession were to be turned over, after discussion by the municipal assemblies, for approval by the CER's Chinese president and the CER's board of directors.⁶⁹ Given that a Chinese president had not been appointed since 1900, the CER's Russian board of directors had the final veto over municipal affairs. The agreement also stated that municipal governments would be established in important commercial centres, that all concession inhabitants were to enjoy the same rights and were subject to the same obligations (which bound the Chinese to Russian administrative and judicial control), and that all members who owned property or paid a fixed amount of rent had the right to vote.⁷⁰ In reality, however, the Chinese franchise would be severely restricted.

The CER's control over municipal government was enhanced by two sets of regulations published in 1909.⁷¹ Taken together, these regulations completed the CER's domination of the concession's municipal politics. The first set of fifteen regulations explained the relationship between municipal government and the CER's Civil Department. Article 1 stated that municipal government existed because of the Civil Department (“the department determines the right

of municipal government to exist”) and gave that department the right to supervise all municipal activities. Article 2 empowered the Civil Department to participate in discussions on public funds and the right to increase or decrease those funds. Article 9 gave the Civil Department the right to deny or approve any motions passed by the municipal assemblies, and article 16 gave the department the right to place delegates in municipal assemblies, either as chairmen or as members of the election committees.⁷²

A second set of regulations concerned the powers of the CER’s board of directors. Article 1 gave the board the right to determine the legality of all actions taken by the municipal assemblies and councils. Article 3 gave the CER directors the power to change land classifications from public to private, thereby returning land to direct CER control.⁷³ Article 7 gave the board the right to check the allotment of land for public use, and article 8 stated that the CER board could supervise any construction. Article 12 allowed the board to approve or deny any council motion, while article 14 gave the board the power to supervise any controversies between the municipal administrations and the railway.⁷⁴ The importance of this article was not lost on the Chinese. The author of the introduction to a Chinese-language history on Harbin’s municipal government wrote that the CER “completely abandoned the principle of local government and instead used the autocratic Tsarist regulations. They did this in the beautiful name of autonomy but with the secret method of aggression.”⁷⁵

Other factors tempered Chinese sovereignty. The first was a 1910 decree by the Russian Senate that stated that the CER was legally an extension of Siberia,⁷⁶ while the second was the right of the CER head or board to veto any decision made by the Municipal Council. This power was unique within China’s foreign controlled concessions, where power was customarily vested in the consul. However, Horvath insisted. The 1909 agreement would not be signed unless Horvath himself, in his capacity as CER manager, had this power.⁷⁷ Horvath also attempted to temporarily combine the position of consul and CER general manager, a development that had been expressly forbidden by the 1898 CER agreement. When pressed by the American consul to provide a rationale for the proposed change, the Russian ambassador to Beijing, J. Korostovetz, responded: “In the days when Russia looked upon Harbin as an integral part of the Empire ... all the administrative machinery of a Russian city in the way of courts, police and public officers had been established in Harbin, so that the duties of a consular officer had been reduced to a minimum, and his presence or absence did not materially affect the transaction of international relations, which were, for the time being, rather facilitated than otherwise by merging into one office those of the general manager of the railway and consul-general.”⁷⁸ In other words, there was no need for a consul in an area that the Russian government considered to be Russian. Although its administration now fell under the title of municipal self-government, the CER remained firmly in control of concession city government.

The CER's crucial and extensive supervisory role mirrored city government within the Russian Empire itself. Self-governing bodies had been created in both the towns and countryside as part of Alexander II's Great Reforms. The Russian municipal regulations were initially relatively liberal. The 1870 City Statute provided for elected municipal organs in 423 towns of the empire and, within the limits of the authority granted to them, these bodies were allowed to operate independently. However, after the assassination of Alexander II, the new czar, Alexander III, authorized a return to strict autocratic control. The 1870 statute was watered down, and the state was given broad powers to enact martial law and suspend elected city government. In 1892 the autocracy enacted a new city statute that limited the franchise to those who owned several thousand rubles worth of property and allowed the local czarist administration to veto the election of council members. A new level of bureaucracy, the Special Office for City Affairs, was created to review all city council decisions. City councils did have many responsibilities, but municipal law "permitted many restrictions on their work."⁷⁹ Therefore, rather than the municipal governments of Harbin and the CER concessions being examples of Russian liberalism outside of Russia, the relationship between the CER and the councils under its control was identical to the relationship between the Russian Imperial government and Russia's few elected municipal governments. Rather than being bastions of independent and participatory politics, the municipal governments in Imperial Russia and its quasi CER colony were mere facades of participation.

Municipal government in Harbin was two-tiered. Its legislative body, the Municipal Assembly, had sixty members who were elected by local residents. All inhabitants who owned property in Harbin worth not less than 500 rubles or paid annual taxes of at least 10 rubles were permitted, regardless of nationality, to vote for members of the assembly.⁸⁰ Three assembly members were Chinese and appointed by the Chinese Chamber of Commerce. They were observers only – they had no vote and were assigned a Russian supervisor "with a view to familiarizing them with their duties."⁸¹ The Municipal Assembly's duties were to estimate expenses, fix taxation rates, and implement the city council's decisions. All Municipal Assembly decisions were forwarded to the CER general manager for approval,⁸² and in the event the CER vetoed a decision, the matter was returned to the assembly for revision. If the matter passed with three-quarters approval, it was turned over to the Finance Ministry in St. Petersburg for a final decision.⁸³

Executive power, such as it was, was vested in the Municipal Council, which had six, and later ten, members. The assembly elected three members of the council, and a chairman and two members were appointed by the CER. The council chairman was required to be a Russian subject. Municipal Council decisions were to be submitted to the local Chinese authorities as well as the CER manager for approval. Harbin's Municipal Council did not permit even the token presence of Chinese. In 1911 the Chinese Chamber of Commerce

petitioned the council for the inclusion of the three Chinese nominated seats, as was provided for in article 13 of the municipal regulation.⁸⁴ The petition and the question of Chinese participation was left “to the future”; in the short term, the Chinese members were requested, as “delegates without vote,” to attend council but not vote.⁸⁵ By council decision, Russian members were paid 4,200 rubles annually while the Chinese delegates were paid only 600 rubles per year.⁸⁶

The concession’s municipal councils were concerned with the ordinary details of city administration. According to the Harbin Municipal Council’s 1911 report, the council dealt with street repair, the city hospital, farm animals within city limits, and the enforcement of stone and brick as proper building materials.⁸⁷ The council had a budget of 800,000 rubles, 616,300 of which were derived from municipal taxes.⁸⁸ The rest was provided by CER subsidy or loan. When asked for their opinion on these municipal changes, most Harbin residents replied negatively and cited their fear of higher taxes. Others questioned whether true representative government would ever come to be. In a pamphlet titled “On the Question of Mutual Relations between the CER Company and Harbin Russians,” which was published by the Harbin Ratepayers’ Association, Harbin’s Russian citizens argued that because the CER completely controlled the concession, a municipal government would function only as another CER-controlled mechanism, albeit one that taxed residents for the privilege of having a facade of self-government.⁸⁹ Therefore, despite Wolff’s claims that the 1905 Revolution would inaugurate a period of municipal liberalism, the reforms simply confirmed and extended the CER’s powers of local administration and shifted its financial burden from the Imperial Russian Ministry of Finance onto the CER’s taxpayers.

By 1917, on the eve of the momentous changes that would transform the concession, the Russian government was not doing anything unique in Manchuria. Foreign countries, using broadly defined extraterritorial powers, had created areas throughout China where Chinese did not exercise economic and political control. The manipulation of business contracts, the deliberate neglect of China’s legal right to supervise the CER, the deliberate exclusion of Chinese through hiring and language policies, and the creation of a non-Chinese local administration under the control of the CER were colonial strategies to exercise power and create legitimacy that were employed by other countries. What is remarkable is that, unlike concessions in which the rights conceded by China were acknowledged by the Chinese government as political rights, the contract for the CER concession was signed by China because it believed it was signing a business contract for a railway right-of-way and nothing more. By employing a flimsy interpretation of the word *administer*, the Russian government managed to erect an apparatus of commercial, military, and civilian control. The existence of this apparatus was then used to justify Russia’s ongoing presence in the region and the CER’s ongoing domination of the concession. The initial Russian goal of domination over the region did not disappear after its defeat by Japan in 1905. Instead, Russia’s priorities in the CER

zone shifted from direct military to direct commercial and administrative domination. Russia's aspirations prior to 1905 were overt; following the revolution of 1905, they were clothed in the guise of peace, order, and good government, all of which were under Russian control in the concession. The normality of Russian control – the sense that Russian control of the region was correct, modern, and natural – provided the intellectual and emotional superstructure for the post-1920 Russian-Chinese co-administration. Émigré and Soviet partners tried but could not truly share power with the Chinese.

The CER was not simply a jointly owned Sino-Russian railway company that happened to operate in China. Until 1920 joint co-management of the CER was a polite myth rarely discussed by either side. The Russians did not want to make the implicit explicit; the Chinese did not want to acknowledge that a Russian colony had been established in Manchuria. Nevertheless, presenting the CER as a simple tool of Russian colonialism disguises the complex relationship that existed between the Chinese and their Russian neighbours and glosses over the CER's role as both an employer and an instrument of local administration for Russians and Chinese alike. The CER's establishment and the controversy over the limits of its jurisdiction had a profound effect on the administrative landscape of the entire CER concession. The struggle over the railroad was not an issue of simple Russian versus Chinese control: it was, in essence, a microcosm of the entire Sino-Russian administrative experience in northern Manchuria and the struggle over the region's political identity. For Russians, the CER symbolized the Russian project of development – taming and settling *Man'chzhuriia*. And the idea persisted after the October Revolution of 1917, when the established Russian community used the CER's new role as a commercial enterprise to justify a continued Russian administrative presence in China. After 1920 Russia would take advantage of China's willingness to co-administer the CER to promote a Russian vision of northern Manchuria being directed and controlled by Russians. This brought Russia into direct conflict with China, which had envisioned a new equal relationship between the two owners. In this manner, the CER's colonial origins determined the antagonistic relationship between Chinese and Russians into the next decade. Even joint administration with the Soviet Union, which China turned to after the older Russian community blocked shared control, was tainted with, and inherited, the implicit colonialism of a Russian commercial and administrative enterprise that had no clear boundaries between economic and colonial control

The Russian government had built, maintained, and subsidized a commercial enterprise that was the *raison d'être* for establishing a complete Russian community in the northeast. Once built, the CER and the Russian community existed in a symbiotic and circular relationship – the Russian community was necessary to the continued well-being of the CER, and the CER was necessary to the well-being of the Russian community. The CER's essential meaning was contested from the beginning. For the Russians, the CER

represented Russian imperial civilization making its way into the northern Chinese hinterland, for it brought with it progress and development. This definition of the CER was not political. Politics involved ugly and divisive disputes between parties. The CER was an objective force for progress.

The Chinese contested this definition of the CER from the beginning. In their opinion, the CER was built for the primary benefit of the Russian community. Its administrative pretensions were based on the shady interpretation of an unclear and biased contract. In the meantime, Russian culture, administration, and education became the norm for Harbin and the CER concession. While a coherent Russian government existed, the Chinese could not press their case. After 1920, however, the Chinese began to establish their own presence in the concession through pragmatic and conciliatory policies that acknowledged the CER's Russian origins and the importance of the Russian community to its continued functioning. However, the Chinese called for Chinese co-administration and the introduction of a Chinese managerial class. Most of all, the Chinese wanted to strip the CER of any political or administrative pretensions and make it a simple commercial enterprise.

The struggle between Russia and China reflected the inability of either side to define the CER. Any enterprise that has as its primary function the opening, taming, and development of an empty landscape will never be just another company. It will, in fact, represent the political, cultural, and moral values of the group in control. It was, therefore, impossible for China and Russia, despite the success of the CER as a commercial enterprise, to work together, for they differed on the fundamental meaning and intent of the enterprise they were co-administering. Co-operation was possible between northern Manchuria's two founding peoples, but it was achieved only when the Chinese began to reverse Russian colonial policies after 1917.