Abstract

The officials of the Qing government in Hunchun were in charge of the coastal areas in the east of Jilin Province, where there were important trade ports. A large number of Chinese businessmen from the southern coastal areas went to Hunchun to exchange daily necessities for furs. The active commercial trade contributed to promoting the prosperity of Hunchun. However, when Russia, Germany, the United States, Britain, Japan and other countries began to seek interests in Manchuria, the border crisis started to emerge in the Qing Dynasty. The once-hidden business activities gradually became public. This paper aims to illustrate that Hunchun is connected with an immense commercial network through maritime trade. When Russian and Japanese forces entered the region, they replaced the role of Chinese businessmen in the regional market.

Keywords: the Eight Banners; Amur River; fur trade; Chinese Eastern Railway; maritime trade; Ezo Island; Vladivostok

Introduction

Since the 16th century, fur trade has played an important role in Russia’s economy. A large amount of fur from Siberia and the Far East has been sold to the domestic and European markets in exchange for huge profits.¹ The revenue of Russian government also increased significantly due to fur trade, so Siberia is regarded as the resource frontier.² Since the 18th century, Russia began to expand its territory to the East in order to seek more resources due to the increase of expenditure brought about by the war.

Just as Russia expanded its frontiers, the territory of the Qing Empire was gradually formed. In 1636, after conquering Manch Mongolia, Hong Taiji officially became the emperor and changed the country’s name to Qing. The next year, the Qing Dynasty’s army launched an attack on Korea, subjecting it to the Qing Dynasty. After the Eight Banners army of the Qing Dynasty entered Shanhai Pass in 1644, the Kuyala, Hezhe, Elunchun and other tribes that originally lived in Manchuria were incorporated into the Eight Banners. These tribes, known as the
new Manchu (Manchu: iche manju), retained their original customs while carrying out military duties. These tribes paid fur as tribute to the Qing government and received silk clothes and daily necessities as a reward. The Qing government acquired a lot of valuable fur in this way, while silk products flowed to Hokkaido through Sakhalin Island and became a transnational commodity. From the 1750s, Russian caravans began to enter the trade network controlled by the Qing government, and a series of conflicts broke out between the two sides in Amur River (Chinese: Heilongjiang) Basin. Eventually, the two countries signed the Treaty of Nerchinsk in 1689. As a result, Russia agreed to withdraw from Amur River Basin which locates on the east of Baikal Lake in exchange for trade with the Qing Dynasty. For nearly 200 years, Russian caravans exchanged Siberian mink and sea otter skins for Chinese silk, tobacco, tea and other goods.

Russia has not given up exploring the Far East further. Gerhard Friedrich Müller, a geographer from the St. Petersburg Academy of Sciences, participated in the second Kamchatka expedition (1733-1743) in Siberia. In his memo to the Tsar in 1741, he complained about the insufficient geographical knowledge of the area around Amur River estuary, which hindered the mapping work that can help to solve the suspending border issues between Russia and the Qing Dynasty.

The substantive measures adopted by Russia include the appointment of Nikolai Nikolaevich Muravev as the governor of eastern Siberia in 1847. After taking office, he repeatedly emphasized that Amur River Basin is the only channel for Russia to develop military, commercial and industrial forces along the Pacific coast. In a speech in 1860, Dmitri Romanov, a lieutenant of Irkutsk, one of Nikolai Nikolaevich’s subordinates, said that although the Far East had only recently become the focus of all developed countries, the main center of world business activities had rapidly shifted to the Pacific coast.

Resource Frontier

The turmoil in the Qing Dynasty provided Russia with an opportunity to expand its territory to Amur River Basin. In May 1858, Russia forced the Heilongjiang general Yi Shan to sign the Treaty of Aigun while British and French troops attacked Tianjin. In addition to ceding more than 600,000 square kilometers of territory to Russia, which located from the south of Stanovoy Range (Chinese: wai xing’an ling) to the north of Amur River, the treaty also designated the southeast coastal areas and islands of Jilin Province as the joint management zone between China and Russia, namely the “Russia-Hunchun circle.” In November 1860, the British and French allied forces occupied Beijing. Russia took advantage of the occasion to sign the Sino-Russian Beijing Treaty with the anxious Qing government, and obtained 400,000 square kilometers of land on the east side of the Ussuri River (Chinese: wusuli jiang). Henceforth, the joint management zone, including the southeast coast and islands of Jilin, has been under Russian control.

For local Chinese settlers and businessmen, their lifestyles had not changed immediately. Because according to the treaty, the local Chinese were still permitted to live in Russia. At the same time, the two countries opened their borders and allowed free trade, so the trade activities of Chinese merchants were not directly affected. In March 1862, the “Sino-Russia Land Trade Regulations” signed by the two countries stipulated that: “Within 50 kilometers of the border between China and Russia, free trade is allowed, and there is no tax on those goods.”

However, Russian forces soon began to penetrate the coast along the Sea of Japan and attempted to get involved in international trade networks. During the Qing Dynasty, the eastern coastal area of Jilin was called the South Sea (Chinese: nanhai). (Figure 1) This area was not only home to the Kuyala people, but also had trade links with other regions such as Japan and Korea. In the mid-19th century, Chinese businessmen from Shandong and Guangdong dominated the maritime trade in this area, but there were also some Western businessmen. With the opening of coastal commercial ports after the Opium War, several Western countries crossed the Tsushima Strait and reached the coast of the Sea of Japan. Foreign ships have already docked in Nikolaevsk (Chinese: Miaojie), the estuary of Amur River, and some German and American companies have set up local trading companies.

According to Tingjie Cao’s visit to Vladivostok in 1884, there were businessmen from Japan, Korea, Germany, the United States and France in that area. Moreover, about 20,000 Chinese businessmen were living there, and the majority of them were from Shandong. Whereas, most of the powerful business firms were from Guangdong. Chinese businessmen mainly transported cloth, food and other living
reinforcing the linkage between the port and the inland, the site selection and port planning was carried out together with the project of the Siberian Railway construction. However, Muraviev did not stop there. He began to extend his control over other important traffic routes. Possiet (Chinese, Mokuwai), located at the estuary of the Tumen River, was the only way to transport goods from the Hunchun area to the sea. Then Russia began to explore and control this important traffic route.  

During the first 20 years of Russia’s expansion to the south of Amur River, there was no capacity to aggrandize the scale of food and material production. From 1860 to 1882, there were only 5,186 Russian immigrants in the Far East, although Alexander II announced the abolition of serfdom in 1861 and provided generous treatment to those willing to immigrate there. Along the east coast of the Ussuri River, a large number of Chinese farmers engaged in farming at the same time - “catching deer in summer and catching mink in winter”. In 1869, due to the natural calamities in Korea, Primorskaya Oblast (Coastal Provinces of Russia) accepted 7,000 Korean farmers who produced a large amount of food, which became one of the sources of food for Russian immigrants. At first, Russian immigrants in the Far East had to trade with Chinese, Korean or Japanese businessmen to get food and daily necessities. Adequate food supplies laid the foundation for Russian immigrants to settle in the Far East.

Russia had long coveted the commercial interests of Chinese businessmen in the Far East. As the Russians became more powerful in the Far East, they continued to add barriers to Chinese businessmen passing by Vladivostok to limit their trade rights in Russia. In December 1879, the Russian government required that the merchant ships heading to Hunchun must hold the license issued by Chinese officials and be stamped by the Russian consul at the same time. The fishermen should also hold the ticket issued by the Chinese authority, and then exchange the ticket with the Russian government in Vladivostok. It also stipulates that if there is no ticket, the person is a villain, who can be arrested and sent to Hunchun for judgment.” The request was notified to local Chinese officials by the Russian consul in Shanghai. However, the reality is that most Chinese who did business in Vladivostok failed to exchange tickets. According to Tingjie Cao’s observations in Vladivostok, local Chinese businessmen “never had the tickets required by Russia”.

Figure 1. Yeoju-Do Seonggyeong ( مرطحية/칠난, Topographical Map, Seonggyeong Area).
Source: Sungkia Women's University Museum.
but instead had to meet the middlemen of Russian officials to ensure the smooth proceeding of business. This unequal trade activity has laid the groundwork for the subsequent trade losses of Chinese businessmen in Russia. Russia continuously imposed various restrictions on the operation of Chinese businessmen. For example, when Russian merchants began to engage in the trade of tea, brown sugar, and liquor, Russian officials prohibited Chinese merchants from transporting the above goods to Vladivostok. In 1886, Russia issued a deportation order to expel the Chinese people who lived more than 50 versts away from the Sino-Russian border.

The Russian government’s increasing interventions have caused great losses to the interests of Chinese businessmen. The decline in the status of Chinese businessmen was even more severe after the opening of the Chinese Eastern Railway (Chinese: zhongdong tielu) in 1903. The railway made Vladivostok a transit center of land and sea trade. Since the railway did not pass through Hunchun, the importance of Hunchun in local trade has declined, and its connection with Vladivostok has also weakened. Due to the loss of the right to speak in foreign trade and various restrictions imposed by Russia, Chinese businessmen began to shrink their trade network in the Far East, and gradually changed the route from Vladivostok to Hunchun. Merchants from Shandong, Guangdong, and other southern regions transported the goods to Vladivostok by sea, and then transferred them to Wangqing, Ningguta, Yanji, Helong, Dunhua, E’er and other places via Hunchun.

From Vladivostok to Hunchun

Russia was not satisfied with expelling Chinese merchants from its newly-seized Far East Territory, but planned to penetrate the Northeast China under the control of the Qing government. After the Qing government agreed to build the Chinese Eastern Railway, Russia was able to travel freely on both sides of the border. As shown in Figure 2, Sanxing, Ningguta and Hunchun, which are located at the border of Jilin and Russia, were all under the threat of Russian military force. Ningguta and Sanxing are situated along the railway as well as the Songhua River.

But compared with Hunchun, they are not close to the national border. Once the Russian invasion is detected, there is still buffer space available for the deployment of troops. However, if Hunchun is lost, the Russian army could directly reach Jilin—the capital of Jilin province. As Jilin General Changshun pointed out, “Once there is a war between the three eastern provinces and Russia, the Russian army will invade from Hunchun to restrict our army.”

Out of concerns about the above issues, Changshun regarded Hunchun as the key point of anti-Russian deployments in Jilin Province. As the Eight Banners garrison system had long lost its military defense role, the main defense force in Jilin Province is the Jingbian army which was recruited from various places. Half of the total strength of 18 battalions of the Jingbian army were stationed in the area under the jurisdiction of Hunchun vice Capital, including 6 battalions in Hunchun and 3 battalions in Nangang area. When the Russian army was found sending troops from
many places, Changshun relocated the garrison in various areas to further disperse the defensive forces. Due to the limited forces of the Qing Army, officials of Qing government solicited the assistance of the Boxer Rebellion Movement to help defend the Russian aggression. In July 1900, after the Boxer Rebellion Movement appeared in Northeastern China, Qing troops disguised as Boxers to destroy Russia’s railways and facilities along Northeastern China, and fought jointly with the Russian troops guarding the railway.

However, the boxers lack military skills and basic discipline in actual combat, and their strategies are very limited. Instead, Russia used the suppression of the rebellion as an excuse to divert troops to Northeastern China started from July. As a result, a war without formal declaration between China and Russia broke out.

At the beginning of the war, the army of Jilin Border who stationed in Hunchun was defeated and retreated to Nangang within a month. On September 21, Changshun, the General of Jilin, who had no intention of fighting again, signed eight agreements with Russia. He agreed to demobilize or abolish the Jingbian army and the newly recruited Jiexian army after the armistice, and to provide supplies and money for the Russian army. Although the agreement retained the power of Jilin authorities to organize and train troops to maintain local security, its power was weak and had no support, which rendered it difficult to compete with bandits. In Hunchun, as the Deputy capital of Hunchun retreated to Nangang, the government building had also been burned down, so Russia passed through everywhere.

Because Shanhai Pass was controlled by Russia, the connection between Northeastern China and inland was cut off, resulting in Beijing’s ignorance of the situation in that area. After Emperor Guangxu and Empress Dowager Cixi fled from Beijing, they had no time to consider the chaotic situation happening there. However, St. Petersburg knew all about the changes that have taken place in Northeastern China. In Russia, some newspapers even advocated that Northeastern China should be occupied for a longer time. Many Russian businessmen hold a similar view, arguing that the annexation of Northeast China would benefit Russian trade.

Under the influence of the above public opinions, Russian military actively promoted economic aggression against Manchuria. Russian authorities forced Chinese businessmen to use Russian rubles to pay taxes in Russia and at customs. In addition, they attempted to introduce rubles in Northeastern China. Economically, they tried to control the production chain. For this reason, they obtained the rights to exploit forests and minerals from the Qing government through negotiations in order to truly colonize Northeastern China. Russian merchants transported the goods from Vladivostok to Hunchun by shipping through Yanchuhe estuary of Tumen River. As a consequence, half of the commercial profits originally owned by Chinese businessmen were seized by the Russians.

It was the invasion of Russian army that caused the fatal blow to the cross-border trade between Hunchun and Vladivostok. A large number of Chinese businessmen had to leave Hunchun to escape the war. During the war, most of the shops in Hunchun were burned. Moreover, after the Qing army disbanded, the local public security fell into chaos, and the local banditry was serious, which brought great difficulties to resume local business. Businessmen who were unwilling to take any more risks turned Hunchun’s trade to the hinterland. In addition to tobacco, cloth, rice, salt and other goods imported from Vladivostok, there are also wine, wheat, and millet from Yanji. Most of the daily necessities were shipped from the hinterland via Fengtian and Jilin. It can be seen that after 1900, with the increase of transportation costs and the deterioration of business environment, the trade between Hunchun and Vladivostok was not as good as before. Between Hunchun and Vladivostok, there are still products that cannot be replaced by foreign investors for a while. These products are mainly resource products, such as soybean cake, soybean oil, cattle, wood, etc.

While carrying out maritime trade, Russia also maintained a high interest in road trade in the hinterland of China. They intended to establish contacts with Hunchun. However, Russia’s further expansion in Northeastern China was stopped by the Russo-Japanese War. Since then, Japan began to enter the northeast. Hunchun, which had been marginalized in trade, has once again become important.

The Alternation of Russia and Japan

The biggest opponent of Russia’s expansion in the Far East is Japan. For a long time, Japan has been an important member of East Asian maritime trade. Even
under the condition of Japan's long-term implementation of the order of locking the country during the Shogunate period, it still maintained some non-governmental trade exchanges with other regions in Asia. After signing the Treaty of Nerchinsk with the Qing government in 1689, Russia's plan to enter Amur River Basin was frustrated, so it decided to move eastward and enter Kamchatka Peninsula. From the second half of the 18th century, Russia, who was expanding, turned its attention to Japan. After crossing Siberia, the Russians went south through the Kuril Islands and reached the Ezo Island (Chinese: xiayi dao) in the 1770s.

At that time, Ezo was not regarded as Japanese territory, but was considered as an important member of the regional trade network. It maintained private trade with Japan, Northeastern China, and Sakhalin. As a result, Russia's actions have alarmed Japan. In order to stop Russia's further aggression, the shogunate made Ezo Island under its direct jurisdiction in 1807. In addition, Japan sent explorers to Sakhalin and the Kuril Islands in an attempt to occupy southern Sakhalin and the largest island in the Kuril Islands, Etorofu. (Figure 3) Until Japan reopened to the outside world in 1853, it had few official contacts with Russia.

From 1852 to 1853, under the leadership of a navy captain, Russian troops entered Sakhalin Island and established a stronghold. Russia even put forward the claim of sovereignty over Sakhalin Island, which was strongly questioned by Japan. After the Russian personnel evacuated, the two sides reached a negotiated settlement agreement in 1855, which made the island a joint management of Japan and Russia. Although Russia was not satisfied with this, the outbreak of Crimean War made it impossible to take care of the interests of the Far East. Until May 1875, Japan and Russia finally signed the Sakhalin-Kuril Islands Exchange Treaty in St. Petersburg. Russia acquired all the territory of Sakhalin Island, while Japan controlled the Kuril Islands between Hokkaido and Kamchatka Peninsula. Although the territorial boundaries of the neighboring areas of the two countries have been confirmed, the competition of interests between the two sides did not end, but stretched further to the Korean Peninsula and Northeastern China.

Since Vladivostok Port was closed every winter due to the sea ice, starting in the 1890s, Russia began to seek an unfrozen port in the Far East as a new naval base, and they finally chose Lvshun. After 1895, Japan began to penetrate into the Korean Peninsula. After realizing that Japan was gradually becoming stronger, Russia was once again actively involved in international affairs in the Far East. In 1895, with the support of Germany and France, Russia required Japan to return the Liaodong Peninsula to China. According to the Treaty of Shimonoseki signed by China and Japan, the Korean Peninsula will be ceded to Japan. Russia lent money to the Qing government to help it compensate for the loss of war. In 1896, Russia signed a secret treaty with the Qing government to fight against Japan's future aggression against China. In return, Qing government agreed to grant Russia the right to build a railway in Manchuria, that is, the Chinese Eastern Railway, which was later constructed. From then on, the Russians realized that their biggest threat in Manchuria came from Japan.

Compared to Russia's expansion in the Far East, Japan focused on Korea and Northeastern China. Although Japan had trade ties with ports such as Vladivostok and Possiet in the Far East, it was not in a large scale. Most of the Japanese
businessmen who settled in the Far East came from Nagasaki, and before 1900, their total number did not exceed 4,000. Prior to 1907, Russia refused Japan’s request to establish a consulate in Vladivostok, so Japan has long relied on commerce chambers to manage the diaspora.

After taking control of the Korean Peninsula, Japan’s interest in Vladivostok began to decrease, and it tried to establish commercial links with the other side of Yalu River and Tumen River. In 1900, the Russian army destroyed the administrative and defense system of Hunchun and occupied Hunchun until the outbreak of the Russo-Japanese War in 1904. During this period, Russia did not establish an effective administrative rule in Hunchun, which provided opportunities for Japanese businessmen to enter Hunchun from the Korean Peninsula.

After the war, the number of merchants engaged in trade in Hunchun returned to more than 200. By the 1910s, the number rose to more than 400. On the one hand, the increase of merchants was related to the Qing government’s land reclamation; on the other hand, it was due to the reason that a large number of merchants returned to China from the land occupied by Russia. After the trade channel between Hunchun and Vladivostok was cut off, Chinese merchants transported hinterland goods to Hunchun via Jilin instead. However, the transportation costs have increased significantly compared to past maritime trade. The result is that Hunchun lost its position advantage in regional trade. In 1907, Shichang Xu, the governor of the three eastern provinces, set up the Border Affairs Office in Yanji, which is relatively far away from the border area. Although the deputy governor of Hunchun still retained, the local political center has been shifted.

Yanji, located in the west of Hunchun, has more convenient land communication with the provincial capital Jilin. At the same time, Japan began to import large quantities of materials into Northeastern China, taking advantage of convenient transportation between the Korean Peninsula and Hunchun, since there is only a river separating the two places. Japan shipped local goods to Chongsong (Chinese: Zhongcheng) and Hoeryong (Chinese: Huining), Korea, by railway. After the signing of the Sino-Japanese Aftermath Treaty in the Three North East Provinces in 1906, Hunchun was also listed as a commercial port, and the number of Japanese businessmen in Hunchun began to increase. Japanese goods imported from the Korean Peninsula have become the mainstream of cross-border trade, and a large number of them flowed into Yanji, Ning’an and other places through Hunchun.

In 1922, the Soviet Union transformed Vladivostok into a military port, blocked the border and stopped trading with China. At this point, the trade channel between Hunchun and Vladivostok was completely cut off. After Hunchun’s trade ties with Russia were interrupted, its contacts with Japan increased and intensified. Just a few years later, after the Tiantu railway was put into use, the goods from the Korean peninsula could be directly transported to Sangsambong (Chinese: Shangsanfeng) station, along the Tumen River, then crossed the river to Kaishantun, and then to Yanji, the situation of which marginalized Hunchun again.

Conclusion

The decline of Hunchun reflected the loss of the right of maritime trade in Northeastern China in the Qing Dynasty. For a long time, the Qing government only regarded it as a border city, but ignored its overseas maritime connections. More importantly, the Qing government neglected the immense regional commercial network behind Hunchun’s marine trade. In the official documents of the Qing Dynasty, there were hardly any direct records of these trades. Until the Russians came to Vladivostok, Hunchun’s role in connecting the port and hinterland was revealed in local literature.

Trade in the borderlands can reveal how the central government controls the border areas from an economic perspective. The case of Hunchun not only shows the relationship between the border and the central government, but also reflects the border’s trade links with overseas countries. In addition, it plays a significant role in transmitting information. When Hunchun’s trade began to decline, the networks of cross-border business would disintegrate accordingly, which led to difficulties in foreign exchange. After the decrease of cross-border communication, the Qing government soon lost control of these border areas.


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