

Conclusion

Geography textbooks teach us that the Yalu and Tumen Rivers are the boundary between China and Korea. This seemingly straightforward fact was anything but clear during most of the long history of Chinese-Korean relations, because the territorial boundaries of these two countries, as well as their political relations, were subject to interpretation and negotiation. Just as the meanings of “China” and “Korea” have changed throughout history, so have perceptions of the boundaries between these two political entities evolved over time. The Chinese-Korean boundary has always been a place of encounters where people come into contact as well as conflict; simultaneously, their constant movements and interactions have led to the repeated rearrangement and redefinition of their countries’ mutual relations. At some times, the boundary was a thick line, consisting of a vaguely defined zone within which the limits of territory and sovereignty were ambiguous and often overlapped. In other times, the two states sought to draw a sharp line to clearly divide their respective realms, a task that they found far from easy. Depending on the circumstances in which the neighbors found themselves, their boundary took the form of a frontier, a borderland, or a border. In this sense, the conceptions and practices of boundary between China and Korea are a reflection of their domestic politics and foreign relations. The Yalu and Tumen Rivers have been in the same place since time immemorial, but the Chinese and Korean ideas about them have been subject to continuous change.

Ginseng production in the region near the Yalu and Tumen Rivers and Changbaishan helps us trace the development of the boundary from frontier to borderland and finally to border. This precious root growing in the wildness of Manchuria and the Korean peninsula was an object of reverence due to its medical efficacy

and commercial value. The Jurchens and the Koreans had an equal interest in the ginseng growing at their shared boundary. Once the Manchus established their state in Liaodong and claimed control over their territorial realm, the Yalu and Tumen Rivers became the boundary between the Jurchen/Manchu state and the Chosŏn. The natural resource of ginseng, as well as the territory in which it grew, became off-limits for the Koreans south of the rivers. The Jurchen-Chosŏn frontier, a vaguely defined zone where crossing the nominal boundary for the purpose of ginseng collection might have been overlooked, was more clearly demarcated, and trespassing for ginseng poaching in the neighboring state's territory began to be severely punished. The interest of the Qing in protecting the ginseng reserves around the Yalu and Tumen Rivers and their commitment to the strategic and cultural importance of Manchuria are clearly revealed in two separate projects regarding the boundary with the Chosŏn: the Changbaishan investigation and the military guard post at the Yalu River. These projects were initiated by the Qing court and promoted by Manchu officials for the goal of curbing unauthorized access to ginseng near the two rivers. After extensive examinations and discussions, the solution agreed upon by the two states was not the establishment of a clearly defined dividing line—a border—between their spatial realms. Instead, they decided to create and maintain a borderland, in which some parts of the boundary remained undefined and others were kept uninhabited by force. After centuries of unconstrained exploitation of the limited ginseng resources in Manchuria, ginseng became scarce. Trespassing for ginseng gradually disappeared at the boundary, but growing numbers of people began to settle in the land near the Yalu and Tumen Rivers. Instead of the privileged Manchus and ginseng hunters, Han Chinese settlers occupied Manchuria as well as the Chosŏn boundary. As the supposedly prohibited land at the boundary was occupied by illegal settlers, the Qing and the Chosŏn faced a serious challenge, compelling them to redefine their boundary as a clearly drawn line. Ginseng and people's movements in search of it thus shaped the nature of the Qing-Chosŏn boundary, causing its transformation from frontier to borderland to border.

Before the Manchus claimed rulership over Liaodong, the Ming, the Jurchens, and the Chosŏn had vague and porous frontiers. The history of the Jurchens is best illustrated through their close relations with the Ming and Chosŏn governments, with each of whom they intermingled politically and economically. While the Jurchens and the Koreans both paid tribute to the Ming court and acknowledged the superiority of the Son of Heaven in China, the Chosŏn claimed a status higher than that of the Jurchen "barbarians" by virtue of the official titles and trading opportunities they were granted. The Jurchen economy, based as it was primarily on hunting and gathering, made the Jurchens dependent on frontier markets with neighboring agricultural societies and eventually placed them in a vulnerable position in relation to the Ming and Chosŏn courts. The rise of the Jurchens in the

late sixteenth century, however, caused a major rift in the three-sided relationship centered on Liaodong. Nurhaci began to challenge Ming authority after his successful unification of various Jurchen tribes and rival groups near his homeland. By the time Hong Taiji succeeded Nurhaci as the leader of the Aisin Gurun, it became obvious that the Jurchens no longer intended to regard their state's boundaries with Ming China and Chosŏn Korea as vague and porous. Instead, Hong Taiji wanted to protect his people and territory, preserve economic benefits for the Aisin Gurun, and enhance his authority even beyond the territorial realm of his Manchu state.

In order to accomplish these multiple goals, Hong Taiji focused on wild ginseng, a highly valuable natural resource growing near the boundaries with his neighbors and an essential element in the saga of the Jurchen people. The Jurchens had a long history of trading ginseng with the Ming Chinese at frontier markets, which provided them with a commercial opportunity to build their power in Liaodong. As they began to challenge Ming authority in Liaodong during the early seventeenth century, the areas in which this precious root grew came to serve as signposts dividing Jurchen territory from the neighboring Ming and Chosŏn states. Hong Taiji complained about Ming Chinese entering his territory and poaching ginseng, a carefully calculated action that made the plant off-limits to anyone other than the Manchus and helped the Aisin Gurun exploit the power of ginseng as a physical and cultural marker symbolizing Manchuness. But Ming China was not the only neighbor against whom Hong Taiji employed ginseng: the Jurchen ruler's most strenuous efforts were aimed at protecting this valuable commodity from Chosŏn Koreans. He made numerous complaints to the Chosŏn court about Korean encroachments for the purpose of ginseng poaching, claims that he then used to justify the attacks of 1627 and 1637 on the Chosŏn state. Hong Taiji thus protected the exclusive right of the Manchus to gather ginseng and succeeded in asserting his authority against the Chosŏn by redefining the nature of the boundary with the Chosŏn away from an ambiguous frontier. However, he did not succeed in drawing a clear-cut line to separate the two realms. The tributary relationship, achieved through Hong Taiji's two military campaigns, allowed his successors to create a borderland with the Chosŏn—more definite than the previous frontier, but still retaining elements of ambiguity.

The Qing-Chosŏn borderland rested on two principles: the asymmetrical tributary relationship, and the Qing restrictive policy on Manchuria. Ginseng continued to claim a special status in the Qing empire after the 1644 conquest of China. Access to ginseng was authorized only for Manchu aristocrats and banner members, and the profits from the ginseng harvest were reserved exclusively for the imperial court. The natural resources of Manchuria, as well as the hallowed land itself, were carefully preserved as symbols of the Manchus through a series of rules and regulations. One of the biggest threats to Manchuria and ginseng was, in fact, Korean

trespassing in Qing territory. The tributary relationship established between the Qing and Chosŏn courts as a result of Hong Taiji's military campaigns did not stop local Koreans from crossing the Yalu and Tumen Rivers in search of ginseng. To the contrary, trespassing continued to disrupt relations between the two neighbors until the end of the nineteenth century. Korean trespassers were decapitated on the Yalu River in order to deter future criminals; Chosŏn officials were dismissed or demoted for failing to ensure adequate patrols at the boundary; and the Chosŏn king himself was blamed for neglecting his duty to serve the Qing emperor when cases of trespassing were discovered. In the early seventeenth century, as a part of a broader project of mapping the homeland of the Manchu imperial court, the Kangxi emperor proposed a joint survey with the Chosŏn authorities to establish the location of the origin of the Yalu and Tumen Rivers. This Qing survey initiative was not, however, well received by the Chosŏn court, which still held anti-Qing sentiments stemming from memories of inferior Manchu "barbarians" and devastating military defeats more than seventy years earlier. Despite their arduous surveying efforts in Changbaishan, Manchu and Korean officials ultimately failed to locate the origin of the Tumen River and ended up leaving the boundary at the upper Tumen River under-defined and unclear.

The process of the Changbaishan investigation and the debates surrounding it reveal the unique features of the respective conceptions of territory and sovereignty held by the Qing and the Chosŏn. The Qing reaction to the results of the investigation—namely, the incorrectly identified location of the Tumen River's source—tells us that the Kangxi emperor did not necessarily aim at clarifying the territorial boundary with the Chosŏn state. Instead, his primary interest in the northeast at the time, especially after the 1689 Treaty of Nerchinsk, lay in bringing the various tribal groups living there under Qing control and preventing further Russian influence over them. Kangxi's efforts to determine the boundaries of the empire and to fix them visually on maps were not necessarily aimed at containing Chosŏn Korea, a small neighbor who, in the early eighteenth century, was not regarded as posing any serious threat to Qing power. It was the loyalty of the Chosŏn, not a clear-cut demarcation of territorial limits, that the Qing sought to secure with the investigation of Changbaishan. However, the Chosŏn response to the investigation and to the resulting stone marker shows that Koreans had a very different perspective on their territory and sovereignty. The Chosŏn court's suspicions arose from its hostility toward the Manchus as well as from a desire to protect its lands from its powerful neighbor. Taking advantage of the relative lack of interest on the part of the Qing in territorial limits—based on the attitude that a superior power would not deign to fight with an inferior neighbor for a small piece of land—the Chosŏn decided to overlook the incorrect location of the Tumen riverhead. In other words, it was precisely the special relationship between the Qing and Chosŏn states, that is, their tributary relationship, that led the two neighbors

to tolerate the unclear demarcation of their territories at the upper Tumen River. This ambiguity, intentionally left between their territories and authorized by the tributary relationship, was one of the key features of the Qing-Chosŏn borderland.

If the boundary at the upper Tumen River in the east was unclear, at the Yalu River in the west it remained empty, cleared of inhabitation. In the early eighteenth century, Qing officials in Shengjing in charge of inspecting the boundary with the Chosŏn attempted several times to station soldiers at a guard post near the Yalu River in order to deter both Qing and Chosŏn trespassers. However, the Chosŏn government launched an all-out effort to stop Qing officials and their soldiers from approaching Korean territory. After much discussion and debate, the Yongzheng and Qianlong emperors decided to accept the Chosŏn king's appeal not to station soldiers at the Yalu River, a conclusion that contrasted dramatically with the cruel attitudes of Qing rulers in the previous century toward Korean trespassers. As much as the Qing emperors desired to establish their claim to the Mandate of Heaven, they also wished to present themselves as benevolent, embracing rulers of all of their domestic and foreign subjects. For eighteenth-century Qing rulers, security at the boundary with an unthreatening neighbor was less important than gaining and maintaining the respect of an old tributary state. Here, again, the tributary relationship between the Qing and the Chosŏn was the defining factor behind the maintenance of an empty buffer zone at the Yalu River—the second key feature of the Qing-Chosŏn borderland.

In addition to the Qing emperor's desire to present himself to his subjects as a universal ruler, there was another reason the Qing agreed to retain the empty zone at the boundary with the Chosŏn: the primary goal of Qing policy in Manchuria was the protection of the northeastern region from Han Chinese. Throughout the Qing period, Jilin and Heilongjiang were kept off-limits to Han civilians in order to preserve the region as the sacred birthplace of the imperial court and the last bastion of the Manchus. Within the vast territory of Manchuria, access to the Yalu River and Changbaishan—the specific homeland of the Aisin Gioro family and the richest source of ginseng—was thoroughly restricted as early as the seventeenth century. Between the Willow Palisade—a physical array of gates and outposts enforcing the ban on unauthorized access to the northeastern region—and the region north of the Yalu River there remained a wide swath of empty land where people were not allowed to settle. Such a buffer zone allowed the Qing government to avoid contact and conflict with neighboring people; it also required the Chosŏn court to control and punish its own trespassing subjects, another way that the Qing showed the generosity of the great power to the tributary state. The Chosŏn authorities, in turn, made every effort to uphold the Qing regulations by striving to leave the areas around the Yalu and Tumen Rivers undisturbed. Restrictions of movement into Manchuria and the Chosŏn boundary were successfully enforced as long as Qing authority was absolutely dominant in the northeast and

unconditionally respected by the Chosŏn court. Once Qing supremacy began to be challenged in the late nineteenth century, the idea of the untouched land at the boundary with Chosŏn territory came under pressure.

The empty zone at the Yalu River was never vacant in reality, however; instead, it continuously attracted people who engaged in a range of economic activities in the region. Ever since the complete surrender of the Chosŏn to the Manchus in 1637, the Chosŏn court took pains to observe the Qing demand to send tributary missions to the Son of Heaven in Beijing. Under various titles and within different types of missions, a great number of people joined the official embassy every year and crossed the Yalu River to enter Qing territory. During the journey from the last location in Chosŏn territory, Ŭiju, to the first entry point into Qing territory, Fenghuangcheng, several hundred Korean visitors participated in official rituals enacting Qing-Chosŏn relations and took advantage of a variety of trading opportunities with Qing merchants. In the remote areas at the empire's margin, where the Qing state sought to enforce a strict prohibition on entry and settlement, the Chosŏn visitors had to find forms of assistance other than the limited services provided by the Qing authorities in order to deliver their numerous tribute packages for the emperor and to transport necessities for themselves. As a result, the supposedly restricted zone unexpectedly gave a great number of Korean merchants an opportunity to cross the Yalu River under the excuse of assisting the embassy. In addition, local Qing people were eventually hired by the Chosŏn travelers as horsemen, cart drivers, innkeepers, and porters. Despite the state's efforts to limit contact between Qing and Chosŏn people, the Chosŏn tribute missions transformed this remote area into a lively place of trade and other forms of interaction. The growth of trading opportunities and transportation services and the subsequent debates and disputes show that the tributary relationship both defined the nature of the Qing-Chosŏn boundary and simultaneously provided enabling conditions for the contacts that occurred there. In short, the tributary relationship created the Qing-Chosŏn borderland as well as commercialized it.

A series of changes in Qing domestic politics and foreign relations in the late nineteenth century caused the disappearance of the Qing-Chosŏn borderland. For centuries, the Qing government had sought to maintain Manchuria and the area at the Yalu and Tumen Rivers as vacant and untainted, a goal that required immense state power in this distant location far away from the center of the empire. However, the vast, uninhabited territory at the boundary attracted from both sides increasing numbers of people hungry for land. In the late nineteenth century, by which time a huge number of civilian settlers had moved from China proper to the northeast and the threat of Russian encroachment in Manchuria was growing, the Qing relinquished the old governing principles of its Manchuria policy—the preservation of Manchuria as off-limits and the maintenance of an uninhabited buffer zone at the boundary with the Chosŏn. Subsequently, the Qing government began

to encourage civilian settlement at the empire's margin to protect its territorial sovereignty against foreign powers. With the influx of people from both China proper and the Korean peninsula, the Qing-Chosŏn boundary became, for a while, a vague and porous contact zone—the distinctive feature of a frontier—in which a variety of people interacted. This change in the nature of the Qing-Chosŏn boundary occurred simultaneously with the rearrangement of the traditional hierarchy between the old neighbors. As Qing dominance was challenged by a series of military losses inflicted by foreign powers, Qing influence over Seoul and over the Yalu and Tumen Rivers also waned. The Qing court now had to frame its authority to control the boundary with the Chosŏn in the terms of modern international relations based on sovereign equality, rather than those of the traditional suzerainty envisioned by the Chinese world order. The transition from traditional tributary relations to modern international relations required the two neighbors to reenvision their borderland as a clear border.

The efforts of the two states to demarcate their boundaries and to build modern nation-states were, however, in conflict with the desires of the people crossing the rivers in search of land, wealth, and freedom, and they thus ended up creating another frontier between the nation-states. The most obvious evidence of the ethnic and cultural frontier between modern China and Korea, which emerged amid the clear-cut political borders drawn in the twentieth century, may be the existence of the contemporary population of Korean-Chinese (*Chaoxianzu*), who highlight the complicated history of Chinese and Korean boundaries and territorial sovereignty. Throughout their long relationship, then, the Qing and the Chosŏn saw frontiers, borderlands, and borders emerge between them, and this history lives on in modern China and Korea in the visible legacy of the *Chaoxianzu*.

