



“Soy Division: Imperial Japan and Improvement Agriculture in the Mongol Lands



Sakura Christmas

Asst. Professor
History & Asian Studies
Bowdoin College

In the early twentieth century, the global desire for soy as a cheap source of organic fertilizer, vegetable oil, and animal feed drove the aggressive clearances of woodlands and rangelands in Northeast China. Imperial Japan accelerated the expansion of this commodity frontier when it took over half of the region’s railroad network. From the 1910s to the 1930s, it began to test the climactic limits of this crop as it ventured north and west into the Mongol lands. This talk examines how Japanese agronomists engineered high-yield varieties to overcome the ‘soy division’ between the Manchurian plain and the Mongolian steppe. They rendered their rural vision into reality at agricultural farm stations, exploring unfamiliar methods and breeding unique varieties in the miniature before introducing them out on the open range. The ideology underlying this initiative was that of improvement, or the application of scientific knowledge and modern technology to reconfigure nature for maximal production. Yet the term begs the question: improvement for whom and why? Improvement, as this lecture contends, relied on expropriating indigenous holdings and imposing agricultural systems that disrupted ecological relations already in place. It helped negotiate a new boundary between farm and pasture, one that ultimately hardened as the eastern border of the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region today.



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