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ARTICLE

Surviving Manchukuo: the economic struggles of ordinary people in urban Manchukuo from 1937–1945

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the colonial experiences of Chinese people in urban Manchukuo from 1937–1945. Previous studies on Manchukuo have been framed primarily from the top-down, with emphasis on the role of government elites and Japan's military expansionism, rather than on the ordinary experiences within the puppet state. Drawing on Chinese-language sources, the present research considers the impact of material shortages in ordinary people's lives. It highlights how obtaining access to goods under the constant pressure of scarcities heavily depended on the establishment of interpersonal relations. This study examines how survival strategies and behaviours were shaped under economic pressure. It argues that ordinary people who were not in a position of power were able to negotiate their own terms for survival under the framework of superficial compliance.

KEYWORDS

Manchukuo; ordinary people; colonial experience; everyday life; social history

Introduction

On the evening of September 18, 1931, a carefully staged bomb was detonated on the railroad tracks near Fengtian (also known as Mukden, nowadays Shenyang) by the Kwantung Army in hopes of provoking conflict with the Chinese troops stationed nearby in Beidaying. The act was used as the pretext for the full Japanese invasion of Manchuria that followed, and was known to the world as the Mukden Incident.[1] Roughly six months later, Manchukuo was formally established with Henry Puyi, the Last Emperor of China, as the ruler (later declared as the Kangde emperor in 1934) of the regime.[2]

This article focuses on ordinary people's experiences of urban life in Manchukuo, and the various tensions and impacts of economic policies that affected their livelihoods and living standards after the beginning of the Second Sino-Japanese War. To avoid general confusion, this paper refers to the people of Manchukuo by its politically correct term "Manchukuoans (*manzhou guoren*)." As a state identity, "Manchukuoan" was constructed with the political purpose of instilling an artificial distance between the people of the land and their Chinese roots. With Manchukuo envisioned as a "Kingly Way paradise (*wangdao letu*)," the people

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This article has been corrected with minor changes. These changes do not impact the academic content of the article.

[1]Coble, *Facing Japan*, 11.

[2]This article supports the idea of Manchukuo as a puppet state. However, since this study pertains to the discipline of social history and focuses on ordinary people, this article uses the term "puppet state," "regime," and "state" interchangeably to facilitate reading.

were required to perceive themselves as the new citizens of a benevolent, new state based on Pan-Asianist ideals that pledged peace and prosperity to all.[3]

In this article, ordinary people are defined as people who were not in a position of power to gain leverage with the invading Japanese forces that helped to establish Manchukuo. As opposed to the local elites who secured the continuation of their socio-economic status by means of collaboration, there were the ordinary people – the everyday working man, store clerk, merchant and shopkeeper – people who were situated far lower in the hierarchy of power and far removed from political concerns. As such, the strong political connotations associated with the purposefully constructed Manchukuoan identity had very little appeal to ordinary people. For them, to be Manchukuoan was not so much about the indoctrinations that urged people to become forward-thinking citizens in a striving new state, but rather about becoming adept in navigating through systematic hardships and shortages in order to make ends meet under a suppressive regime that emphasized violence and the willingness to punish anyone who failed to comply with its agenda.

As a regime established with the help of the Japanese, the period from 1937–1945 is particularly significant. It was during that time that ordinary people of Manchukuo witnessed the outbreak of war between China and Japan and the ensuing extreme shortages, which led to multiple lengthy crises. During this period, the Manchukuoans' everyday lives were characterised by the constant struggle to find the means of sustenance necessary for daily survival. Ordinary people's daily routines were guided by the anxiety of having to create solutions to meet such demands. For many, the mere process of obtaining goods was a challenging task, since shortages and inflation plagued society throughout the different stages of the regime. In retrospect, it is now possible to conclude that the root cause of shortages in Manchukuo was the imbalance between supply and demand generated by the war, in which demand grew excessively. However, none such information or explanation was of interest to the Manchukuoans living in such times. When shortages occurred, people were primarily driven by uncertainty and fear, whether they be triggered by social disturbances, financial turmoil, imminent threats of war, or simply by the overwhelming pressure that came with goods being in very short supply and on the verge of running out at any time.

Although the scope of this study is on the impact of chronic shortages in urban Manchukuo, it is nonetheless important to mention that rural communities also suffered significantly. Peasants were more commonly affected by starvation than city dwellers. In a partial effort to uphold grain circulation in cities and to support the war economy, rural grain procurement targets were introduced by the Manchukuo government, and systematically overestimated as conditions worsened over subsequent years. Needless to say, poor peasants were reluctant to give up their harvest, fearing shortfalls in their own sustenance crops. This was met with obvious disdain from pistol-waving local authorities, whose grain procurement strategies became increasingly forceful and violent as time passed. Consequently, social discrepancies between the rich and the poor increased. Impoverished peasants grew increasingly reliant on well-established local landowners for aid and relief, which effectively reshaped the social structure of the rural society: it became exploitative, as the poverty-stricken were often forced to work as farm helps to pay back their debts, thus became tied to the wealthy as servitors.[4]

[3] *Jianguo jingshen xinbian*, 3.
[4] For a more complete discussion on life in rural Manchukuo see Li, "Everyday Life in the Puppet State," 158–172.

Rana Mitter has suggested that on a macro level, the Japanese managed to construct a certain political legitimacy for Manchukuo through a number of reforms and the preservation of local social structures.[5] Building on his research, this paper sheds light on how "friendships," a word used here to refer to personal connections with the aim of gaining favored treatment, grew in importance for the process of gaining access to goods made scarce because of the Sino-Japanese conflict, and how such social practices bore consequences for the established hierarchical structure of urban society. This is especially evident in the 1940 failed holiday rationings case presented later in this article that led the government of Manchukuo to take more radical measures to deal with a worsening shortage situation. By assessing the impacts of shortages on the lives of ordinary Manchukuoans, this article aims at enhancing our understanding of the circumstances under which the people were forced to adopt new survival tactics to fulfil their basic needs in a framework of superficial compliance with the regime's agenda. By looking at the trials and errors of the Manchukuo government's economic management efforts, this article captures the essence of the responses of ordinary people, and how in the face of hardships, Manchukuoans developed their own tactics to overcome imposed rules, which can sometimes carry a long-lasting impact.

Materials and methods

This article draws heavily upon Manchukuo periodicals, especially reports and stories from *Shengjing shibao* (Shengjing Times). These writings were primarily concerned with specific social issues within each particular time-period that were frequently overlooked and neglected by government publications. Founded in 1906, *Shengjing Shibao* was a Japanese-owned daily that was one of the most influential Chinese-language newspapers in Manchuria. Despite its pro-Japan political and editorial stance, the newspaper was also well known for its sharp reporting styles concerning domestic social issues and for its being relatively less subjected, sometimes not at all subjected, to political interference and censorship, a tradition inherited from its Qing dynasty reporting days. Indeed, while the newspaper cannot be considered a purely objective reflection of political events, it provides a valuable indication of issues affecting everyday lives, and therefore can be seen as more illustrative of the public opinion and common areas of anxiety and concern at the time.

It is important to note that during the data collection and analysis process, no specific events or times were targeted, apart from the 1937–1945 timeframe. When collecting and analysing data, the present research targeted items that recurred across daily reports; thus highlighting main social issues that affected ordinary people's everyday lives and activities in Manchukuo. Themes began emerging and topics were categorized, with stories and testimonies collected from news reports that illustrated each theme. The use of newspapers allowed for continuity, and enabled a view of the development of social issues across time rather than looking at isolated events, and see how these issues unfold as the days passed.

In addition, the paper at hand also consulted a variety of Manchukuo era publications, republished primary documents, as well as major volumes of post-war narratives and witness accounts. To be sure, post-war narratives after the establishment of the People's Republic of China were systematically collected by the Chinese government, and the

[5]See Mitter, *The Manchurian Myth*. Mitter's observations on Chinese grassroot reactions were further developed in his subsequently published book chapters, see Mitter, "Evil Empire?," 146–168; and Mitter, "Manchuria in Mind," 25–49.

majority of these post war narratives were meant to fulfill a political agenda by purportedly evidencing the improvements brought about by the Communist government in contrast with the sufferings of the pre-revolutionary past.[6] However, it is equally important to note that this body of materials was also subjected to changing political imperatives as it was collected over the course of a few decades, which would suggest some inconsistencies in the degree of censorship; it must also be noted that the materials were inevitably constrained in different ways at different times and to different extents. Nonetheless, it is hard to deny that the numerous and rich personal narratives, dictations, and recollections reflected various essentials of the experiences of the people affected. The use of a combination of different sources from different time periods furthermore has allowed for a balanced assessment of Chinese experiences in Manchukuo.

Empty showcases and personal connections

For many, the year 1937 got off to a good start. The reform of commercial taxes initiated after the establishment of Manchukuo in 1932 was in full effect, and the currencies in circulation were stabilized.[7] Triumphant news of successful military operations against banditry and dissidents from the previous warlord regime continued to pour in from the countryside. At the same time, the population's welfare significantly improved thanks to the soybean trade agreement worth over one million yen per year initiated between Manchukuo and Germany.[8] Often regarded by state propagandists as the most prosperous time since the regime was founded, the start of 1937 witnessed substantial economic recoveries from the Mukden Incident that had plunged the region into social and financial chaos. Yet, almost entirely downplaying their part of the responsibility in provoking such turbulence, the Manchukuo authorities branded themselves as the liberators of the people, and deliberately put a strong emphasis on the failures of the previous Chinese warlord government that resulted in a crippled society where members' daily routines were to be salvaged by their leadership. Hence, after instituting the various reforms, the authorities considered such issues to be solved, and considered that social and financial crises were a thing of the past. With an attempt to instil a spirit of optimism into the Manchukuoans, the authorities insisted on the success of their achievements, emphasizing in particular the positive effects such reforms were to have on the people's quality of life, and further stressing the lasting benefits for them the peoples would be able to experience in the future:

> The people were [once] burdened with over-taxation to the point where they faced ruin and starvation. The currency system was completely ruined. The business of the country became stagnant and finally collapsed … Robbery, arson and massacre by the lawless elements (banditry) terrified the entire population, who, bereft of protection, were exposed to outrage and hunger in all parts of the country … To-day peace reigns all over the land; internal security is no longer the question … The unified currency system and the centralized credit system are outstanding examples of [our] successive achievements … [and] the standard of living of the Manchoukuo people will rise day by day.[9]

[6]For a discussion on the political imperatives regarding the construction of post-war narratives, see Mitter, "Writing War,"187–210.
[7]"Four Years of Manchukuo Administration," 121.
[8]Ibid., 122; See also Wright, "The Manchurian Economy," 1073–1112.
[9]Fumimaro Konoye, "Manchoukuo, Precursor of Asiatic Renaissance," 73–75.

Enthusiasm among the authorities and Manchukuoans was indeed burgeoning insofar as government leaders harboured grand visions for the regime's future. An ambitious Five-Year Industrial Development Plan (*Manzhou chanye kaifa wunian jihua*) that was already in the making since 1936 was officially announced in April 1937. Detailed arrangements were laid out as part of the goal to completely overhaul an economy hinged solely on agricultural commodities at the enormous expense of nearly three billion yen. With the influx of Japanese investments, the rigorous control of the economy came to an end. Instead, the government of Manchukuo gave way to the active participation of private capitalists in its state-building project, with the ultimate aim of achieving speedy economic development.[10] Initiated by Ishiwara Kanji and Miyazaki Masayoshi, the Five-Year Industrial Development Plan was clearly inspired from the Soviet development model. At the same time, the large sum of financial investments from its home islands also gave Japan a legitimate reason to assign Japanese personnel to every important position in Manchukuo's key industries.[11] Indeed, while the strategic consideration to integrate the region's economy reflected Japan's perceived needs to exploit the rich natural resources of Manchukuo, it also blurred the boundaries between informal and formal empire, fundamentally transcending Japanese imperialism to an entirely new level and reinforcing the status of Manchukuo as a colony in everything but name. However, ordinary people were preoccupied with different things. What mattered to them was not so much the news about foreign capital pouring in large sums to invest into the regime, but rather the impact it would have on their daily lives, and the creation of long-awaited and much-needed job opportunities, as well as the promises of better wages to improve their living standards. Even though the average Manchukuoan might or might not have shared the same intensity of optimism with regards to the government's visions, they could not simply ignore the promises given to them at hand. Without a doubt, for the time being it was difficult for Manchukuoans to get by every day. However, hopes for a brighter, more abundant future no longer seemed unreachable.

Nevertheless, during the same year, the overwhelming desires for future abundance and the government's plans of rejuvenation were abruptly disrupted by the Marco Polo Bridge Incident in July and the outbreak of the Battle of Shanghai in August. With the Kuomintang leadership refusing to succumb to Japan's demands, the regional conflicts between the two countries escalated. Soon enough, the second Sino-Japanese War was in full swing. In order to finance the new war, a series of patriotic bonds were subsequently issued in Japan, along with the implementation of an economic drive policy and nation-wide mobilization.[12] Manchukuo, on the other hand, was also forced to undergo a series of adjustments in order to accommodate the new political climate and the directives that ensued. The comprehensive Five-Year Development Plan for Manchukuo hence redirected its original purpose to achieve self-sufficiency, and began focusing on the exportation of raw materials and on the production of munitions to support the war economy.[13] In addition, as Japan was virtually Manchukuo's sole supplier for finished industrial and commercial products – insofar as in 1937, nearly 80 percent of Manchukuo's total import volume came from Japan[14] – the

[10]Nagaharu Yasuo, "Manchukuo's New Economic Policy," 113–115.
[11]Hotta, *Pan-Asianism and Japan's War*, 122; See also Beasley, *Japanese Imperialism*, 192.
[12]*Mainichi Shinbun*, Aug. 15, 1937.
[13]Myers, "Creating a Modern Enclave Economy," 136–170. See also Xie Xueshi, *Wei Manzhouguo shi xinbian*, 506.
[14]Tokutomi Masataka, *Manzhou jianguo duben*, 74–81.

imminent threat of the war triggered a state-wide increase in commodity prices, which inevitably affected the ordinary people, who began experiencing a dramatic surge in living costs.

Such a sudden shift in priorities was clearly reflected in the authorities' calls for their subjects to live frugally, strongly encouraging them to save money and avoid unnecessary expenses. Certainly, frugal living and economization became omnipresent in the regime's everyday rhetoric. "We all know that we cannot avoid purchasing essential items, but we also need to be prepared for the rise in prices and its impacts. In such times of emergency, we will all need to live humbly, and this is the only way to tide over the difficulties of life together (with Japan)."[15] Such statements were made to instil faith and confidence into the people, and although they were intended to reassure them, they had the exact opposite effect more often than not. After all, rather than impalpable long-term political visions meant to improve their quality of life, people could harbour a spirit of optimism because they believed in a foreseeable future that was promised to be a reality before long. Now, however, with the promises of abundance shattered, all there was left for Manchukuoans were the hardships and miseries of the present, with no incentives for them to form future projects.

Additionally, changes in the political climate caused Manchukuoans to grow increasingly insecure vis-à-vis their chances to acquire goods in times of potential crisis. Everyday products and goods that were still available for purchase were perceived differently and took on a new sense of importance. Indeed, goods mattered not because of the fact that they were in short supply, but rather because of the anticipation that they might be in even shorter supply in the near future. Being able to buy something was no longer relevant. Instead, having the chance and ability to acquire an item when needed became the new dominant concern, whether the item in question be a daily necessity or more specific goods. Long queues in front of stores and merchants' stalls could be seen across cities on a regular basis, with urban residents carrying large shopping bags around to make purchases of whatever they could get their hands on, "just in case". Indeed, people were becoming increasingly sensitive to even the smallest fluctuation of prices. These widespread everyday anxieties took on such magnitude that in January 1940, it was reported that all the shops in the city of Tieling had been fully cleared out of kerosene, and that during the cold wintry season, not even a single match could be found in any of the retail shops of the city.[16] Shortages of everyday items were aggravated to the point that even the most basic condiments such as salt became all but impossible to acquire through regular channels.[17] At the same time, in Hsinking, the capital of Manchukuo, a slight increase in the price of tobacco did not go unnoticed by consumers on the lookout, which sparked a wave of cigarette shortages that swept all shops throughout the city.[18]

Although panic purchases and customers raiding the stores one after the other on a daily basis would normally suggest that merchants across the regime enjoyed a lucrative amount of profits, the reality was otherwise. In fact, since December 1937, the government allocated all private businesses operating throughout the regime to relevant government-controlled state-managed sectors (*zuhe*) in order to regulate supplies and prices. The initiative was

[15]"Niantou zhici," *Dalian tekan, Shengjing shibao*, Feb. 5, 1938.
[16]"Jianshang da huoyue," *Shengjing shibao*, Jan. 11, 1940.
[17]"Jianshang chenji youtu baoli," *Shengjing shibao*, Jan. 9, 1940.
[18]"Zhiyan mi," *Shengjing shibao*, Jan. 16, 1940.

designed to empower the authorities to become the sole wholesale distributor of unprocessed raw materials and commodities to each store prior to retail.[19] The idea behind such organization was simple. It is in human nature to speculate on resources in the event of crisis. Thus, the control over the distribution of materials was not only meant to prevent merchants from taking advantage of the shortages and inflation by retailing goods at too high a price at the consumers' expense. The goal was also to reduce the costs linked to business operations, and therefore required merchants to retail goods at low prices regulated by the government.

However, the establishment of such state-managed sectors neither solved the costs of operating businesses nor the price inflations. Under the system, many merchants were left with no choice but to join several of these state-managed sectors at the same time. For instance, a store normally specializing in fabric dyeing would have to be a member of the coal and cotton sectors in addition to being an expected part of the dyestuff sector. Certainly, for the shop to maintain its normal operation, simultaneous sector memberships were indispensable as failure to do so was likely to result in the near impossibility of obtaining the needed raw materials and goods.[20] Additionally, because the state-managed sectors kept strict control over the sourcing and supply of all such commodities, it became increasingly difficult for retailers to make any of these products available to the ordinary Manchukuoan who fell victim to shortages rapidly taking over most supplies.[21] Consequently, by April 1938, nearly all basic foodstuffs and essential daily commodities had fallen under the category of regulated products. These included corn, sorghum, wheat, millet, charcoal, and cotton cloth, all of which were to be sold within a specifically designated price range. As such, not only had it become increasingly difficult for merchants to get their hands on the necessary materials for retail, such regulation of prices also meant that the profit margins made on the few items displayed in shops were becoming close to negligible. In practice, as expected, it was barely manageable for merchants and vendors across the regime to keep their businesses going while following the directives that forced them to sell at the regulated retail price.

To prevent their businesses from going under, merchants had to circumvent the limitations introduced by the varying state-managed sector regulations covering acquisition of materials. As a possible alternative, many of them thus resorted to finding more stable suppliers to source materials outside their respective sectors. Well aware that the risks were not to be underestimated, many merchants strove to purchase supplies from other distributors without being caught by the authorities, since they knew they would be liable to a fine of up to 300 *yuan*, and possibly a prison term of up to six months.[22] The other option for them was to resort to stockpiling supplies, and to refrain from putting them up for sale unless they estimated that a favourable profit could be made. But this too became illegal. The Manchukuo government therewith referred to any merchants they considered to be "hoarding merchandise with the intention of gaining profits" as "dishonest and evil traders (*jianshang*)." In the meantime, an even bigger penalty of up to 6,000 *yuan* was introduced to further dissuade

[19]Ha'erbin shi difangzhi bianzuan weiyuanhui, *Ha'erbin shizhi*, 52.
[20]Zhang Xiaoyun, "Weiman shiqi Riben dui tieling," 41.
[21]Sun Weiyi, "Changbai Yongcheng Gongyaodian de xingshuai," 146.
[22]Manzhou sifa xiehui, *Xin zhiding manzhou diguo liu fa*, 509.

merchants from trying their luck.[23] Indeed, it was becoming increasingly clear that under the amended Five-Year Industrialization Plan, the priorities of the regime had been redesigned to focus even more on heavy industry. The government's hefty penalties and inflexibility towards merchants' activities eventually left them with little to no wiggle room. This also suggests that the authorities were confident in their own distribution scheme wherein the state-managed sectors were to be the sole suppliers for most commodities, believing that such system would minimize risks of inflation and keep shortage issues under check. Unfortunately, when the authorities designed and implemented the monopolized distribution scheme, little foresight seems to have been taken in consideration of the mid- to long-term consequences affecting social relationships and the hierarchical structure.

In these troubled times, having "friends," (that is, a corrupt official, or certain kinds of intermediary) took on a crucial importance when navigating Manchukuo society. It was essential for Manchukuoans to have the right friends at the right time insofar as these so-called friends could often make almost any type of inconvenience go away. Many therefore sought them for help whenever they encountered a problem that needed to be solved, and the Manchukuo shop owners who were struggling to turn a profit were no exception. In this specific context, "making friends" refers more particularly to the process whereby two parties engage in a reciprocally instrumental relationship that involves the constant exchange of bribes and favours. For example, in Changbai County, Lü Ziying, an employee working in the Decheng Soy Sauce Shop, retold his experiences when serving the shop owner's friends:

> Because all of the materials needed to make soy sauce (soybeans, salt, etc.) are all distributed and supplied by the state-managed sector and the Monopoly Bureau, the officials were always treated as guests of honour whenever they came to the shop. During special occasions, holidays and the new year, my employer would always send me to the officials' home to deliver specially crafted premium soy sauce and pickles that could not be bought anywhere else. The chief of the Monopoly Bureau, Wang Hanmin would come by every day to the shop to play *mahjong* and *pai gow* poker. He would stay here to eat and drink all day long and sometimes even ask for money from the shop. But still, my employer always treated him as a distinguished guest. As long as Wang and his friends were here, we would always serve them very cautiously, in fear of offending them. When they played *mahjong*, we stood next to them to light their cigarettes, pour water and cater to them with fruits. Our shop owner always greeted them with a humble smile and welcomed them, as well as seeing them off outside the shop. Every time [when they left] they would be given bottles of soy sauce free of charge as well.[24]

As a reciprocal gesture for receiving quality soy sauce, the officials in return would turn a blind eye to the shop's questionable operations. These instances were all the more outraging since they could not even be compared to the mediocre products sold to the average customers. In contrast, inferior or even defective soy sauce that had been excessively diluted with water was served to the ordinary masses who walked through the front door. From time to time, some of the produce sold in the store made their way onto the shelves posing as soy sauce, even though all that the bottles really contained was a horrid mixture of leftover soup, peppercorns, aniseeds and coloured sugar. "I do not know how

[23]"Baoli qudi ling daifa," *Shengjing shibao*, Jan. 24, 1940.
[24]Lü Ziying, "Riwei tongzhi xia de changbai gongshangy," 181.

much money the shop was making every month," Lü stated, "But once, I overheard my shop owner in a conversation: How can I not make money if my business is collaborating with the local bosses? If there was any less money to make, I would not even be doing this."[25] Indeed, the example of Lü's employer and his friendly relationships with officials who held seats in the political sphere was characteristic of the not-so-hidden mechanisms of Manchukuo society operating in the context of monopolized distribution. Although in a certain way the distribution scheme was created to combat shortages and price inflations, it ended up worsening the existing social inequalities among Manchukuoans. Surely, in the event of shortages, access to whatever decent-quality goods were available for purchase depended almost exclusively on the type of connections one had. For the unprivileged, acceptable quality could become out of reach.

In fact, Manchukuoans incessantly grumbled their discontentment vis-à-vis the mediocrity of the few goods merchants would make available for them to purchase. This was especially evident after the official introduction of the rationing system in 1939, which operated as follows. The authorities appointed a number of merchants and retailers across the regime who were to distribute to eligible Manchukuoans the rationed goods obtained from the abovementioned state-managed sectors. Undeniably, this newly imposed distribution system further worsened the shortages situation, wherein the already scarce goods could only be obtained upon proof of cash and of rationing documents (*peiji tongzhang*).[26]

This is all merely to say that during such times few understood the value of things better than the average Manchukuoan. A decision to purchase something would often involve the entire household to make sure that nothing would go to waste. Used jars and bottles were repurposed as storage containers, leftover orange peels were preserved and dried to be used as medicine, even the seeds from such fruits were carefully collected and saved to be served as alternatives for sweets.[27] Ironically, such frugality by circumstance was perceived as a virtue of the local people by the Japanese, who commended Manchukuo as "a nation without waste."[28]

At the same time, however, the majority of the rationed goods distributed to the public were, in fact, an ensemble of rejects and defective products which the light industries in Japan exported for distribution to the Manchukuo market. Products deemed unfit for sale to the Japanese consumer market became, because of shortages, highly-prized goods among the toiling masses of Manchukuo, who were struggling to get hold of regular commodities.[29] Such commodities were regarded as highly-prized, not because of their quality or because of the high price that they fetched, but because it was so difficult to obtain them that mere possession was already a semi-victory.

Another possible reason why the products made available to the people by rationing were inferior in many respects was because merchants prioritized the better ones to their so-called friends, in hope of staying on their good side. Practically all types of commodities were affected. Shoes, for instance, were so poorly manufactured that they were reputed not to last longer than seven or eight days before the soles completely

[25]Ibid.
[26]Miyamoto Takeo, "Manzhouguo jingji tongzhi fagui," 30–50.
[27]Kawamura Kiyoshi, *Manchukoko no shuzoku*, 78.
[28]Ibid.
[29]Sui Shixiu, "1894–1941 nian de Linjiang shangye," 121.

broke off and the threads came off loose. Watches were not very functional either, and were commonly ridiculed for their uselessness, rebranded as the "three-diligence watches (*sanqin biao*)," simply because it required the owner constantly to align, dial, and tighten the watch for it to function as it should.[30] In like manner, with regards to foodstuffs, merchants in charge of distributing food staples purposely contaminated these rations with inconsumable impurities. In Fengtian, citizens had reportedly discovered that nearly half of their portion of millet consisted of sickening mixtures of sand and rocks.[31] Without a doubt, it can be said that unscrupulous merchants took advantage of their fellow Manchukuoans since they were confident that, given the ongoing shortages, buyers would choose to purchase subpar rationed goods than have nothing at all. When they saw the opportunity to maintain a profit at the expense of their fellow peers, they therefore willingly took the opportunity, much to the loss of ordinary people. Unfortunately, as time went by, the shortages situation continued regressing, and ended up affecting all strata of society.

Holiday rationings and the year 1940

The authorities' initiative to implement the rationing system in 1939 could be understood as a way for them to acknowledge the severe supply and distribution problems that were plaguing the regime. Nevertheless, they put together a number of special rationing arrangements in order to accommodate the upcoming holiday season in 1940. On the one hand, for the ordinary people of Manchukuo, holidays were important, not only because they offered the usual sort of break from daily routines, but also because holidays were regarded as a symbolic vestige representative of their traditional practices and values. On the other hand, and precisely for those same reasons, holidays were judged to be dangerous but necessary by the Manchukuo authorities. They were deemed to be dangerous since they temporarily put aside the social structures and hierarchy that the authorities had imposed on its subjects. And yet, holidays were also regarded as necessary because they allowed for the Manchukuoans to temper their frustrations, but within a limited and predetermined period of time that was scheduled. In other words, it can be said that holiday periods were brief but powerful outbursts of repressed cultural values during which the oppressed generated such energy that it could bridge the established hierarchical distance between the subjugator and the subjugated.[32] As such, for the ordinary people in Manchukuo, holidays represented a long-awaited, and indispensable portion of everyday life. However, the extraordinariness experienced during the holiday seasons was so far-fetched and unlikely to happen on regular days that it could barely be considered normal, or part of their everyday life. Finally, inasmuch as holiday celebrations were traditionally associated with abundance and fortune, the Manchukuo government had to take extra precautions to transition smoothly into and out of the festive periods in order to maintain its stability and legitimacy,[33] especially with the overwhelming backdrop of shortages affecting all layers of society.

[30]Ibid.
[31]"Shiliang," *Binjiang tekan, Shengjing shibao*, May 26, 1940.
[32]Highmore, *Everyday Life and Cultural Theory*, 123.
[33]For more on the "performance legitimacy" of Manchukuo, see Wright, "Legitimacy and Disaster," 186–216.

Given this sort of cultural and social sensitivity, the first round of holiday rationing was announced to the public early in 1940. In preparation for the Lunar New Year, the minister of economic affairs issued a statement on 10 January, wherein he promised special rationing of wheat flour to every household in Manchukuo for the upcoming celebration:

> The rationing of general necessities is our utmost concern, especially during important traditional holidays such as the upcoming Lunar New Year … We have heard about the baseless rumours [regarding hoarding and the shortage of goods] before, but that was because there were only a few appointed ration shops [in each area]. Due to their own financial problems, they were not able to receive the predetermined amount of goods for distribution [to residents]. In fact, the government has already taken notice of such problems, thus this time we have prepared over three million bags of flour to ensure that everyone will be able to obtain their special rations."[34]

Interestingly, the minister's statement stresses the authorities' awareness and understanding of the shortages situation. Nevertheless, it also specifies that the merchants' own failures are to blame for the situation, and denies any administrative responsibility. However, to alleviate the people's burdens, it features official generosity towards its subjects in such troubled times. A disproportionate amount of effort was thus put towards the promotion of the authorities' sagacious decisions and benevolence, which prompted Local governments to circulate rationing tickets of up to three kilograms of wheat flour per person.[35] For the ordinary people, this message was without a doubt an encouraging one, since wheat flour, along with other staple foodstuffs such as white sugar and rice, was considered to be desirable and largely inaccessible to the average Manchukuoans on a normal basis.

However, far from fulfilling their promises, the authorities failed to meet the goals they laid out, and the Lunar New Year rationing turned into a complete disaster. In the space of a few days only, the ambitious "rationing for every household" slogan evolved into "rationing as much as possible," to eventually become "until stocks last." The rationing tickets issued in large quantities to urban residents grew into nothing more than bitter scraps of paper. City residents who stood in line in the cold for hours holding onto their ration tickets felt all the more deceived when they discovered that all along, there had been no flour at all.[36] On the other hand, the authorities were once again quick to push the blame onto "unscrupulous" merchants: "Although there are different theories (regarding the issue of rationings), the speculators and the profiteers are the ones to blame," noted one official, " … we have urged the police department to handle the issues in a timely manner and to stabilize the prices, as it is the only way to soothe the hardships in people's lives."[37] Certainly, the delivery of these types of statements to the public resembled more to mere formalities which the authorities were simply going through the motions in order to protect themselves from growing popular criticism.

The Manchukuo authorities were probably at least somewhat aware of the real cause behind the failure of the rationing of such desirable goods. In a society plagued by shortages that caused its members to heavily depend on establishing and maintaining personal connections with relevant friends so that they could secure goods, it became

[34]"Jiunian quanman peiji mianfen," *Shengjing shibao*, Jan. 12, 1940.
[35]"Jiuzheng suoyong mianfen," *Shengjing shibao*, Jan. 22, 1940.
[36]"Dui jiunian mianshi wenti," *Shengjing shibao*, Feb. 29, 1940.
[37]"Tongchi jiuzheng mianfen peiji budang," *Binjiang tekan, Shengjing shibao*, Mar. 24, 1940.

natural for members with privileges to prioritize themselves over others. At the same time, such practices had become so common that none of those with privileges even considered themselves to be in an advantaged position anymore. The special rationing intended for the holidays did not escape the persistence of the shortages, and thus were given out in extremely limited quantities. Even the most influential individuals in Manchukuo society needed to act quickly in order to get their hands on any such rations. In Dalian, before the distribution of the rations for the Dragon Boat Festival (*Duanwu jie*) was even announced to the public, connected individuals had already begun to activate their friendships with various ration shop owners throughout the city. Name cards were thus circulating among said friends, who also received phone calls that saturated the lines, just so that they could secure their specified amount of wheat flour before it ran out. Consequently, ordinary customers who had been queuing for long hours in anticipation, even before the shops' opening times, were faced with yet another disappointment. Insistent on being "out of stock," shop owners repeatedly told disbelieving customers that they had come "too late," or that the day's rationings were all out. The situation was all the more ironic and hard to accept for ordinary customers because piles of wheat flour bags in the back rooms were clearly visible for all to see.[38] Such blatant excuses were made up to brush off customers, but often, actions like this could conceal much more complex mechanisms.

As a rule of thumb, the authorities allowed the ration shops to work out the details of the distribution process in whichever way they saw fit. However, granting them *carte blanche* on the rationing operations would inevitably cause negative repercussions on the ordinary people who could not secure goods with friends. In practice, this often meant that shop owners used tricks to hide their real intentions, for instance by resorting to promises to deliver the special rationings while in reality not intending to do so. For example, in Dalian, a ration-goods shop owner dispatched his employees to the nearby neighbourhoods prior to the day of the distribution to announce that as long as residents showed proof of their rationing tickets, one bag of flour that was distributed for the festivities was in fact to be divided between four households. In view of their previous experiences of having to beseech in vain to obtain their less than adequate amount of rations, the neighbourhood residents felt dubious at such sudden lavish decisions to be able to receive a good proportion of flour coming from the ration shops. It was not until the day of the festival that they discovered that it was no more than just a play on words. The ambiguous distribution method led residents to believe that each household were entitled to receive a quarter bag of flour, while the rationing shop intended to sell one bag of flour to groupings of four households, with demands of payment for the bag up front. "There was actually no clear way to divide the flour," shared one dispirited person. "When the average household in the city cannot even come up with enough money to buy four kilograms of flour for themselves, how do they expect us to raise enough money to purchase an entire bag?"[39] In another rationing store, customers who were queuing outside the store were urged to hand in their tickets, and to return the next day to collect their share. Promising that there was more than enough for everybody, many came back the second day only to find out that their portion had been sold out, and had become "out of stock." Being deprived of their rationing tickets, some tried

[38]"Ede de jianshang wanxinglong," *Dalian tekan, Shengjing shibao*, June 19, 1940.
[39]Ibid.

their luck again the day after, and repeated the process until their patience grew thin. Many gave up and decided that they would rather not have the flour than having to face the prevarications and lies from the shop.[40]

For those reasons, when walking past ration shops in Manchukuo, it was not uncommon to witness conflicts, heated arguments, or see desperate and angry citizens pushing and shoving one another after having wasted their time waiting in line for nothing. On some occasions, riots even broke out. On one cold morning in Dalian, an angry crowd took a ration branch by storm as soon as the owner opened his shop for business:

> … Young physically fit men in the back of the crowd violently shoved their way into the front and started to grab the rations from [shop owner] Wang's hands, leaving the more senior people vulnerable who had been there since six in the morning eagerly standing by and waiting their turn. Some women started to curse and yell as the crowd quickly turned into a chaotic mess. By nine o'clock, passers-by and onlookers all started to gather and joined in the chaos even if they were not eligible for the rations. Half an hour later, all rations were gone, snatched away by the crowd. It was impossible to tell who had taken what and in what quantities, nor how much damage was caused in total.[41]

When such events occurred, law enforcement patrolmen were on many occasions dispatched to the scene. In Harbin, police officers were reportedly beating and battering their way into Xinbin Street as they were called to intervene in an argument that had gone sour, degenerating into a large brawl between the Yiyuansheng branch and the residents who were turned down for their rations. It was reported that on this occasion, a 60-year-old lady who suffered from poor eyesight and deafness was caught up in the process and violently pushed down into a roadside ditch that was several meters deep. As the police were undoubtedly siding with the ration branch owner's interests, nobody in the crowd dared to lend a helping hand to the lady who suffered a broken leg and was crying in agony.[42]

These official reactions do not necessarily suggest that the Manchukuo government was completely unaware of the ordinary people's complaints about the abuse of special privileges. No matter how much the authorities considered the participation in speculation and acts of hoarding as criminal activities punishable by the law, it was, however, not considered illegal for people to use personal connections, or rather, to rely on the special friendships to obtain goods, especially since many of the beneficiaries were officials. The most important aspect when establishing and maintaining those friendships lay primarily in the human and relational aspects. Rather than relying on one-time large sums of money to bribe someone, it was considered to be much more worthwhile to make friends, with the focus on gaining regular access to goods in the long run. As illustrated in the cases above, accessing goods through connections was far more fruitful than attempting to claim them legitimately with rationing tickets. Although the special holiday rationings of 1940 were introduced by the central government with good faith, the local officials and the ration stores carried out their tasks half-heartedly to downright fraudulently. Later on, after the collapse of the regime, Wang Xianhui who formerly exercised the role of the mayor of Fengtian, admitted that in reality, the so-called special rationings were merely lip service to the public.[43] These

[40]"Jieqian fenpei mianfen bu gongping," *Shengjing shibao zonghe kan*, June 19, 1940.
[41]"Tunrou fenpei dian ezuoju," *Shengjing shibao zonghe kan*, Jan. 26, 1942.
[42]"Chimiannan," *Hsinking tekan, Shengjing shibao*, July 27, 1940.
[43]Wang Xianhui, "Wo qigong congzheng," 484.

confessions relayed the fact that saying that in the Manchukuo society, influential people had privileges was simply redundant, an unnecessary specification. However, for the faceless and nameless ordinary masses, daily survival was for the best-connected.

Hence, from 1940, as a direct consequence of the lies and accumulated frustrations, the several days following each holiday season were marked by a sharp increase of violence and criminal activities characteristic of the period. In the city of Dalian alone, a total of 1 murder case, 412 cases of thefts, 462 robberies, and 753 fraudulent extortions were reported in the short period of time following the failed holiday rationings that were meant for the Dragon Boat Festival.[44] Ironically, among the fraudsters targeting ration branches, those who succeeded in their scams managed to do so by dressing up in suits, or by wearing uniforms. In full disguise, they would be seen walking around in broad daylight, carrying around sticks, imitating local officials or police officers, and demanding access to goods. On a macro-level, as indicated by the Manchurian Central Bank, the state-wide cost-of-living index from July to August saw another sharp 97 percent increase.[45] In addition, the regime witnessed a major 4,295 percent increase in the cost of living when compared to that of 1939, and an alarming 11,542 percent increase from prior to the Macro Polo Bridge Incident in 1937.[46] This clearly shows that the introduction of the distribution scheme and the rationing system did not solve the shortages and price inflation crises. It also indicates that the failed holiday rationings further aggravated the crises, which did not let up.

The multiple failed attempts to keep the shortages crisis under control prompted the Manchukuo government to resort to more radical decisions to stabilize the general turmoil. One of these was the decision that, after 1940, statutory holidays and special rations were to be revoked. Traditional Chinese celebrations officially became "empty formalities," and deemed to be "outdated conventions" that no longer justified special celebrations nor considerations.[47] It is not surprising that this had a substantial impact on the people's morale. Regardless of how small or temporary the improvement might have been, the suppression of traditional holidays eliminated the relief valve that holidays supplied, as discussed above. Manchukuoans could no longer taste a glimpse of what the life of the privileged was like, nor bridge the social gap, even temporarily. Moreover, by taking control over the people's tradition to celebrate the holidays and by downplaying the symbolic significance of their cultural values, the authorities not only trampled on the people's heritage and identities, but they also reinforced the hierarchical structures in the society, where the distance increased between the privileged and the poor, who became even more marginalized. It could be interpreted that the Manchukuo authorities chose to annul the traditional Chinese festival in order to continue their complete, exploitative, and oppressive hold on the Manchukuoan's lives. But if that was the case, the decision must have been difficult to make and enforce.

Conclusion

Overall, on the state level, and in line with Rana Mitter's observations, it can be said that the main motive behind the political elites' decision to collaborate with the "Japanese devils

[44]"Fanzuitongji," *Shengjing shibao*, June 16, 1940.
[45]"Yiran jianqiao," *Dalian tekan, Shengjing shibao*, Sept. 8, 1940.
[46]Ibid.
[47]"Dang juezhan tizhi xia," *Shengjing shibao*, Jan. 25, 1942.

(*guizi*)" was principally linked to their desire simply to minimize whatever disruptions occurred by securing a certain amount of continuity in the existing economic and social statuses.[48] In this regard, similarities can be drawn when considering the next level down – from state to local. To some extent, it can be said that ordinary people of Manchukuo exercised their own form of "collaboration" as well. Although the people were not directly collaborating with the Japanese by keeping their distance, they certainly were doing so with the privileged elites, or the "secondary Japanese devils (*er guizi*)" at the local level. Negotiating their own terms, the people's greatest concern largely remained about food and commodities, and just as importantly, their possibility to access those, and secure procurement when needed.

The incidents discussed in this paper demonstrate the mechanisms and consequences of mutually beneficial relationships between the various ration shop owners and local influential persons. They shed light on the ways in which a number of ordinary people managed to secure significant economic and social privileges. At the same time, grumbling against this practice was widespread among the unconnected masses and criminality surged sharply. This may suggest that ordinary Manchukuoans affected by the crises and who failed to procure goods through compliance with the merchants, and thus contributing to the system, resorted to alternative strategies to compensate for their lack of connections.

Through the examination of socio-economic connections, this study can suggest further that the general difference in the quality of life among ordinary Manchukuoans was not determined only by social status or by occupation. Manchukuo was a Japanese puppet-state at the foremost, meaning that all Manchukuoans, regardless of social status or occupation, were subjected to prejudice and discrimination on the basis of ethnicity. At the same time, this also essentially levelled the playing field for ordinary people, as privileges were not given but earned. One can either play by or exploit the rules of the game as a compliant citizen, or actively go against the rules as an enemy of the state. Economic instabilities throughout the years meant that ordinary people's livelihoods were constantly at risk. Stable employment was an unimaginable luxury, let alone well-paid employment. All of this suggested that one's social class was important, particularly in the context of acute shortages and monopolized distribution. As discussed in this paper, beneficial interpersonal relations were a key tactic for those who wanted to get ahead in the game. A shopkeeper might set aside allocated rations for the higher-ups, but he might also secretly keep some for family or a close friend. In this case, the same degree of access to privilege was given, regardless of class status.

If ordinary people in Manchukuo can be regarded as having been passive in their response to the various economic policies forced onto them, in contrast, they were much more proactive when demonstrating resistance, that is, expressing dissatisfaction with the hardships caused by shortages. On a larger scale, the different behaviours of ordinary Manchukuoans further point both to the simultaneous existence of compliance and resistance within the same context of occupation, as well as to the changing circumstances encountered in a time of severe shortages.

Indeed, traces of privilege and the practice of personal connections can be found in all kinds of societies, especially during wartime shortages. However, this article also argues that

[48]Mitter, *The Manchurian Myth*, 129.

the experience of Manchukuo stands out from the other war-time experiences, not only because the puppet- regime became the sole allocator for all things commodities, but also because of the regime's heavy reliance on Japan for all trade procurements: this inevitably exacerbated the scarcity of goods as the war progressed and shipping became blocked. As a distinct feature of Japanese occupation, the situation was even more evident in the case of Shanghai, where comparable shortages occurred due to Japanese military operations that were directly ongoing in the city.[49] With shortage crises settling and taking on various forms, the importance for people to continually secure access to goods became crucial. Subsequently, different types of friendships that gravitated around goods were established, often at the cost of the unprivileged ordinary masses.

Overall, the rationing and distribution systems that the Manchukuo government implemented were undermined by its own unwillingness to face the consequences that emerged from the abusive use of personal connections. For the central authorities, the ability to determine who should be entitled to certain things, and how they were to use them, was not an easy task, especially since there was no previous political experience to draw on. When things went wrong, it was a matter of readjustment for the government, but it was very often a matter of life and death for the ordinary masses.

Disclosure statement

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Notes on contributor

Qiunan LI is a recent PhD graduate from the University of Sheffield. His research area is interdisciplinary, and draws on a variety of fields including politics, international relations, history, as well as social and political theory in Chinese history.

Glossary

Beidaying	北大营
Changbai	长白
Dalian	大连
Decheng	德成
Duanwu jie	端午节
er guizi	二鬼子
Fengtian	奉天
guizi	鬼子
Hsinking	新京
Ishiwara Kanji	石原莞爾
jianshang	奸商
Kangde	康德
Lü Ziying	吕子英
Manzhouguo ren	满洲国人
Manzhou chanye kaifa wunian jihua	满洲产业开发五年计划

[49]For the case of Shanghai see Henriot and Yeh, *In the Shadow of the Rising Sun*.

Miyazaki Masayoshi	宮崎正義
peiji tongzhang	配给通账
Puyi	溥仪
sanqin biao	三勤表
Shengjing shibao	《盛京时报》
Shenyang	沈阳
Tieling	铁岭
wangdao letu	王道乐土
Wang Xianhui	王贤讳
Xinbin	新宾
Yiyuansheng	义源盛
zuhe	组合

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