

Bill Sewell, *Constructing Empire: The Japanese in Changchun, 1905–1945*. Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2019. xv + 295pp. 22 images. 21 tables. 3 maps. Bibliography. £65.00 hbk.
doi:10.1017/S0963926820000073

The city of Changchun in north-east China was one of the world's most extraordinary urban environments during the first half of the twentieth century. In 1901, Russia's China Eastern Railway (CER) reached this small trading town, but after Japanese victory against Russia in 1905, Changchun became the boundary between the CER and the Japanese-controlled South Manchuria Railway (SMR). In this unusual dual colonial setting, Russian influence declined, replaced by the dominance of the Japanese railway concession district. By 1930, it had attracted a population of over 30,000, of whom around a third were Japanese. This SMR zone was the most modern part of the growing city of Changchun, which now boasted 150,000 inhabitants.

Changchun's trajectory as a semi-colonial commercial city was transformed in the early 1930s. Following the Japanese seizure of Manchuria in September 1931, Changchun became capital of the nominally independent puppet state of Manchukuo. Rebranded as Xinjing ('New Capital'), Changchun became a modernist construction site as ambitious as any in the world. Japanese experts designed a new capital district, complete with wide boulevards, fashionable apartments and monumental bureaucratic architecture. Chinese residents may have still been in the numerical majority (360,000 of 490,000 inhabitants in 1940), but Changchun had become *the* centrepiece of Japanese political power in mainland Asia.

Given this political and symbolic importance, it is surprising that *Constructing Empire* is the first full-length publication on Changchun in English, over seven decades after the end of Japanese rule in 1945. In four thematic chapters on planning, architecture, economy and society, Bill Sewell carefully charts Japanese dominance in Changchun from SMR railway outpost to modernist capital of Manchukuo. Focusing on the role of civilians, including many from Tokyo Imperial University, he shows how top experts shaped the design and infrastructure of both versions of Japanese Changchun. Sewell argues that although colonial Changchun was largely successful in transplanting Japanese urban society overseas – sometimes even leading the metropole in barometers of modern urbanism – this very achievement undercut the rhetoric of Manchukuo as a harmonious multi-ethnic state in the 1930s and 1940s.

Sewell shows this most powerfully in his sharp reading of Changchun's changing architecture (chapter 2). Already by the late 1920s, the eclecticism of the early SMR railway town had given way to the new International Style (pp. 71–4). But although this global modernism continued to be used in Changchun after the founding of Manchukuo in 1932, the centrepiece government buildings of the new state were built in a rather different style. Architects Aiga Kensuke and Sano Riki (Toshikata) incorporated 'traditional' design elements, designed to chime with Manchukuo Pan-Asian rhetoric and appeal to Changchun's Chinese residents. Yet for Sewell, this 'Manchukuo bureaucratic' style was not just an architectural failure, with sloping Asian roofs meshing poorly with the vertical lines of modernism, but symbolized the inability of Japanese developmental colonialism to incorporate local practice. Compared to the similar 'Big Roof' controversy, which bedevilled

Chinese architecture in the 1950s, the colonial setting of Manchukuo's hybrid style added to the difficulty of popular appeal in authoritarian design.

It is clear, then, that Sewell is no apologist for Japanese empire, but *Constructing Empire* has three limitations that prevent it fully unpicking the nature of Japan's urban imperialism. The first, as Sewell notes (p. x), is that this is almost wholly an account of Japanese Changchun. The experience of Chinese residents is beyond the scope of the book. There are good reasons for this, including space and sources, but it leaves the inequalities of a hierarchical colonial city largely off-stage. It is only in the closing pages of the final chapter (pp. 166–73) that Sewell exposes the dark underbelly of Japanese rule: racialized coercion, social segregation and, after 1936, the appalling experiments in biological warfare performed on Chinese victims in the militarized suburbs. Without changing the remit of the book, such violence should have been discussed much earlier, undercutting from the beginning the language of progress and modernization that tried to justify Japanese Changchun. Second, and relatedly, *Constructing Empire* has a tendency in places to reproduce the perspectives of its source base in SMR and Manchukuo official publications. While Sewell is careful to remind the reader of their propaganda purposes, and it is important for us to understand the story the authorities were trying to tell about themselves, a little more reading against the grain would have exposed more clearly the assumptions and inequities behind the 'avowedly progressive dimensions' (p. x) of Japan's colonial modernity. This is particularly true in his discussion of the urban economy (chapter 3), which tends to catalogue achievement at the expense of a critical reading of the systems which underpinned it. Finally, *Constructing Empire* would have benefited from more sustained comparison with urban projects elsewhere in twentieth-century China. While Sewell rightly compares Changchun with imperial Beijing, there is only the briefest mention (p. 81) for China's other great 1930s modern capital-building project, the Chinese Nationalist rebuilding of Nanjing. Such comparison would not only place Changchun's story in the context of Chinese as well as Japanese urban history, but undermine the perspective of Japanese imperial sources where 'Chinese' is a virtual byword for backwardness.

This should not detract from either Sewell's rich research on Japanese Changchun or the importance of this book for twentieth-century urban history. *Constructing Empire* offers a fascinating exploration into the different meanings of urban modernity, from discourse and design to infrastructure and everyday life. In recent years, the very different urban worlds of Japanese-controlled Northeast Asia have been brought alive for English-language readers, thanks to Kathryn Meyer on Harbin (*Life and Death in the Garden*, 2014), Emer O'Dwyer on Dalian (*Significant Soil*, 2015) and Todd Henry on Seoul (*Assimilating Seoul*, 2016). *Constructing Empire* continues this welcome trend and brings it to the flagship city of 1930s Japanese empire. As well as providing *the work* on Japanese Changchun, *Constructing Empire* will open a host of global comparative and connective questions for scholars of developmental colonialism and modernist urban environments.

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