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# A Preliminary Study on Frontier Governance of the Changbai-Lingjiang Region during the Late Qing Dynasty

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**Abstract:** This paper focuses on the transformation of frontier governance in the Changbai-Lingjiang Region during the Late Qing Dynasty, centering on its historical development, geographical characteristics, and governance practices. Located upstream of the Yalu River at the foot of the Changbai Mountains, the Changbai-Linjiang area possessed both the historical attribute of being the “fundamental stronghold” of the Manchu people and a strategic location in the geopolitical competition among China, Korea, Japan, and Russia. It evolved from a forbidden land during the Qing Dynasty to a modern key border town. During the late Qing Reform, facing internal and external crises such as the infiltration of Japanese and Russian forces and border-crossing land reclamation of Korean immigrants, the Qing court broke through traditional governance models by adjusting provincial administrative divisions; established prefectures and counties such as Changbai Prefecture and Linjiang County; and constructing a hierarchical administrative control system. Border officials like Zhang Fengtai proposed policies such as securing river rights, stationing engineering troops, clarifying Korean residency status, improving transportation, and elevating administrative authority, forming a systematic governance approach that combined military and political measures. The study reveals the historical trajectory of late Qing frontier governance shifting from passive defense to proactive planning, and from traditional loose control to modern management, analyzing its achievements and limitations in institutional adjustment, resource integration, and sovereignty maintenance. Thereby, a historical reference for contemporary governance in cross-border ethnic regions and borderland development has been provided.

**Keywords:** Changbai Prefecture; Linjiang County; Changbai Mountain; Yalu River Basin; Border Governance

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## 1. Introduction

In the late Qing and in the early republican period, the crisis on the northeastern frontier intensified, with the penetration and expansion of powers such as Japan and Russia. This made the strategic location of Changbai-Linjiang, situated at the border between China and Korea, increasingly a top priority for the Qing court’s frontier governance. Confronted with the practical difficulties of frontier control and external threats, officials like Zhang Fengtai, basing their reports on the geographic position and current governance of the Changbai-Linjiang area, systematically elaborated on the core ideas and specific strategies for frontier administration. These elaborations provided important decision-making references for the establishment of Changbai Prefecture in the late Qing and subsequent border defense development<sup>[1]</sup>.

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Zhang Fengtai et al. explicitly stated in their memorial that the Changbai-Linjiang region, as a frontier key area, has a fundamentally different administrative structure than inland regions: the core of inland governance lies in rectifying official conduct, whereas the key to frontier governance is in military and political construction. Therefore, the establishment of frontier administrative agencies must be planned from a holistic perspective, with pre-formulated border defense strategies to meet the practical needs of frontier governance. If hasty actions have been taken, even by capable officials, their governance capabilities would be hindered. During the late Qing Reform. This place, located on the left side of Lishu Gou, was named after a Tang Dynasty ravine remaining on the west side. Its geographic position was extremely critical—controlling the Yalu River to the south, backed by the Changbai Mountains to the north, with vast territory surrounded by mountains. The Qing court named this place Changbai Prefecture to highlight its special status as the birthplace of the dynasty.

Since the Qing's entry into Central Plains, the upper reaches of the Yalu River had long been poorly controlled, almost becoming a lawless zone. By the late Qing period, this governance vacuum naturally aroused the ambitions of foreign powers. Therefore, officials responsible for eastern frontier affairs adhered to the governance concept of "preventing future troubles." On one hand, they petitioned to establish prefectural-level administrative structures to strengthen direct control over the frontier and build an eastern defense barrier; on the other hand, they planned to establish two new counties, Tang and Man, as the rear support for Changbai Prefecture. As a result, a border defense pattern of coordinated prefecture and county was formed with the front and rear echoing each other. These measures constituted the core strategy for managing the Changbai-Linjiang frontier in the late Qing. Previously, Zhang Fengtai et al. had also suggested that Rongsheng Fort remain under Linjiang's jurisdiction, aiming to allow frontier officials to focus on frontier affairs and efficiently control the strategic location of the upper Yalu River.

During this period, officials governing the Changbai-Linjiang area believed that the main risks on the border were twofold: first, internal governance was weak, as the traffic of this region was obstructed, presenting a situation of "vast land, scarce population." Located on the frontier wilderness, with fortresses but no garrison forces, the border defense system was almost ineffective; second, external infiltration can not be ignored. From the area above Eight Gully (BaDao Gully), the number of Korean settlers exceeded indigenous populations, leading to frequent border disputes and household registration conflicts; While in the south area of the Yalu River, Japanese engineers stationed under cover conducted military deployments and posed a looming threat of invasion akin to a spark igniting a prairie fire, becoming a "a mortal malady" in Qing border governance. Of particular concern was the proposed site for the Changbai Prefecture office, where there is just a river isolating the Huishan in North Korea and Changbai Prefecture office, perfectly fitting the strategic danger described by military experts<sup>[2]</sup>.

## 2. Defending river sovereignty

The Yalu River, formerly known as Ma Zuo Water, originates from the southern slope of Changbai Mountain, flows southwest and merges with the Tongjia River, passing through Tadian, Linjiang, Jian, and Sudian City, ultimately reaching Andong. Along its basin, it faces North Korea across the river here and there. This geographical layout makes the Yalu River not only the vital waterway of the Changbai-Linjiang region but also a natural barrier of the China-North Korea border. The controlling of it directly relates to border defense and economic interests<sup>[3]</sup>.

At that time, Japanese forces has already established a presence along the Yalu River. From Huishan Town to Andong, including key locations such as Xinpai City and Xiachangli, gendarmes were stationed, and the land-based defense system was increasingly tight; moreover, last year, they built several river barges to transport goods directly from Andong to Huishan Town, causing drop in price and intensifying water and land trade competition between China and Japan. The Qing court gradually lost rights and control over the Yalu River basin. Land transportation from Linjiang to Tadian, above the Twelve Gully(ShiEr Dao Gully), was not yet developed on the right bank mountain road, which could only be bypassed by a hundred-mile detour through Korea. If the Changbai Prefectural Office was established without improving

transportation, it would inevitably fall into a state of economic hardship.

Therefore, Zhang Fengtai et al. proposed that while planning to open up land routes through Changbai Mountain, control of waterway rights must not be ceded to others. The core measure was to order the prefectures of Changbai, Linjiang, Jian, and Andong to cooperate closely. Each of them built two river barges within three months to handle the transfer of commercial goods via water, thereby establishing a water transportation network along the route. This strategy was practical and targeted. Initially trialed to accumulate experience, and once it was operational, the government would gradually excavate and improve the river routes. This would facilitate trade and movement along the coast, attract population settlement near the border, and provide an opportunity to establish river patrols, thus avoiding the complete loss of control over the Yalu River. This proposal was based on the reality of transportation blockages in the Changbai-Linjiang area and external pressure from Japan, aiming to regain waterway control as a breakthrough to resolve border defense issues in the eastern frontier<sup>[2]</sup>.

### 3. Recruitment of troops for garrison

At that time, Japan has established an extensive railway network in Northeast Asia, with the Beiqing Railway extending to Huining Prefecture, and the Pyongyang Railway running north from Andong to Fengtian. Once the Jilin-Changchun Railway was completed, it would connect eastward with Huining Prefecture, forming an east-west encircling network. The only area not included was the Changbai Mountain region. The strategic intent of this transportation layout is very clear: to encircle and contain the areas around Changbai and Linjiang through railway connections, thereby constricting the Qing court's border defense strategic space.

Therefore, Zhang Fengtai et al. proposed that border defense construction should be based on terrain features, strategically located and difficult of access, to determine the number of troops stationed. After the establishment of the Changbai Prefecture Office, it was necessary to immediately recruit or transfer troops to defend with at least one battalion, and gradually expand according to subsequent border defense needs. "If a general fails to guard the borders, it is tantamount to handing the nation over to the enemy." The deployment of troops is not a temporary measure, but a necessary step to consolidate the border defenses of Changbai and resist Japanese infiltration. This view directly addresses the problem of the "defense missing at the border" situation in late Qing Northeast frontier, combining military deployment with geographic conditions and external enemy movements, reflecting a pragmatic defensive approach.

### 4. Clarifying the Korean issue

In the Linjiang area, including Leqing and three other fortresses, the issue of Korean land reclamation is a problem left over by history. Zhang Fengtai et al. attributed its causes to three points. First, during the early Qing Dynasty, Korean official Jiang Gonglie led a group to surrender, and the Qing court regarded the local Koreans as Chinese citizens, allowing their free migration and settlement; second, in the early period, the number of Koreans crossing the border was limited, mostly working as hired labor, and did not form large-scale reclamation; third, some Koreans, impoverished in livelihood, were forced to venture into border valleys to farm illegally. The formation of this situation is closely related to the relatively lenient border control policies in the early Qing, when the Qing court did not strictly restrict border population movements, objectively facilitating the established fact of Korean land reclamation.

By the late Qing, the situation had undergone a fundamental change. The 12th clause of the Sino-Korean Treaty signed in the 25th year of Guangxu (1875) explicitly states:

"Border residents who have already crossed the border, should be allowed to settle and protect their lives and property; if they cross the border secretly in the future, both parties should prohibit it."

This clause, in the context of Korea still being an independent country at the time, was a legal act of benevolence

by the Qing court towards border residents, aimed at maintaining border order. However, with the annexation of Korea and Japan, the nature of the Korean land reclamation issue changed dramatically, and the hidden border crisis became increasingly prominent. The Qing court urgently needed to formulate a systematic and comprehensive governance plan.

From the principles of modern public law and household registration management, the rule that one person cannot be affiliated with two countries is extremely strict, and the Qing court's previous lack of effective control measures over long-term Korean reclamation, which became a major issue in border governance of the Changbai-Linjiang area in the late Qing. Regarding this issue, Zhang Fengtai et al. proposed three strategies. The best strategy was to order Korean reclamation and Korean civilians to return to their native place within a limited time; the second best strategy was to allow Koreans to naturalize and integrate into the household registration, removing their original nationality and treating them as Chinese civilians; the worst strategy was to show leniency and grant amnesty to Korean expatriate households, but its drawback was the difficulty in restraining unscrupulous individuals, thus only providing superficial responses to the current situation. Considering the actual circumstances at the time, the implementation of the best strategy was extremely difficult, so it was proposed to adopt the left two strategies, with the core idea of investigating the household registration of Korean reclamation households before the twenty-fifth year of Guangxu (1895), clarifying the household registration figures, and achieving the governance goal of "settle the settled and prevent the upcoming." Specifically, this involved guiding Koreans to naturalize out of sincere conviction through educational means and strictly establishing regulations in accordance with public law and household registration rules, fundamentally severing cross-border household registration entanglements. The realization of this governance approach ultimately depended on the execution ability and governance level of local officials, and its essence was an attempt by late Qing border governance to seek a balance between traditional tribal management and modern national sovereignty principles<sup>[2]</sup>.

## 5. Improving transportation

The Changbai Prefecture is isolated at the border, and transportation blockages have become the core obstacle to its governance and defense. Whether in normal administration or wartime response, it is difficult to sustain. Under normal conditions, transportation closures hinder agricultural and commercial activities, leading to a lack of population inflow and creating a governance dilemma of "Without the people, what use are there officials?"; once the border is disturbed, the prefectural seat falls into a siege, with external threats from bandits and no reinforcements internally. The poor communication of information has become a critical problem in border governance of the Changbai-Linjiang region.

In response to this dilemma, Zhang Fengtai et al. proposed three measures—post, telegraph, and railway—to improve border transportation. Among these, railway construction is difficult to fund due to high costs, while postal and telegraph infrastructure are cheaper and easier to establish, with telegraphic transmission being far more efficient than postal services. Relying on local resource of abies holophylla, it is feasible to manufacture electric poles on-site, which is low-cost and sustainable. Regarding specific route planning, after the completion of the LinZiTou section, there are plans to relocate and upgrade the Changling Road from Linjiang to Tadian. This road is flat and straight, over 300 miles long. If it can be paved along the river nearby, transportation efficiency could be further improved. The exact route requires on-site detailed survey by surveyors<sup>[2]</sup>.

The accomplishment of this road holds strategic significance beyond facilitating daily commerce and invigorating border economy. During wartime, it can quickly transmit military intelligence via telegraph and dispatch reinforcements along this route, achieving the goals of information connectivity and rapid troop deployment, thus enabling Changbai Prefecture to strengthen border defenses and resist external threats. In contrast, Japan has already established postal and telegraph networks in surrounding areas and planned to build lightweight railways, clearly aiming to seize the strategic initiative in border transportation. Compared to the proactive layout of Japan, the Qing court's approach was passive and constrained. If the Qing court continued to wait passively, it would undoubtedly miss the critical opportunity to consolidate border defenses. This transportation plan, based on the realistic conditions of the Changbai-Linjiang area, balancing

economic and defense needs, reflects the pragmatic governance approach of late Qing border officials to “strengthen border defenses through transportation.”

## 6. Improving the prefectural system

If Changbai Prefecture only follows the inland prefectural system, without jurisdiction over counties or military authority, it would be convenient for daily civil administration but severely impedimental for border defense development. In case of border emergencies, the prefectural office could only call for aid in vain, unable to obtain nearby support, falling into a dire situation where “The suburbs are filled with enemy fortresses, yet we lack even an inch of steel to rely on.”

In view of this, Zhang Fengtai et al. advocated granting special administrative and military powers to Changbai Prefecture, placing the four counties of Tonghua, Linjiang, and others under its jurisdiction. Thus, in the event of border disturbances, Changbai Prefecture could directly mobilize the manpower and resources of its counties. With a more flexible command system, layers of restrictions can be avoided, and the predicament of isolated and unsupported prefectural offices can be effectively prevented; at the same time, it was suggested to transfer the dispatch authority of engineering and brave soldiers to Changbai Prefecture, enabling it to have direct military capability to respond to border threats. This proposal was not a mere imagination but followed the traditional system of Han Dynasty, County Magistrate control troops, during which the Han Dynasty’s border control was achieved through the advantage of in their combined military and political governance during the wars against the Xiongnu (an ancient nationality in China).

In Zhang Fengtai and others’ view, strengthening the military and political power of Changbai Prefecture, making it both an administrative and military defense entity, is the only way to respond quickly in case of border crises and to effectively consolidate border defenses. Even if direct military authority cannot be granted to Changbai Prefecture, a fallback plan is to establish the Shangjiang Road system in Linjiang, dividing the jurisdiction of the Yalu River upstream and downstream with the Dongbian Road, thereby enhancing control over the Changbai-Linjiang area by elevating the administrative level of the border region. This idea stems from a clear understanding of Changbai Prefecture’s geographical position—Tadian and Andong are over a thousand miles apart, and if the superior authorities in Andong still remotely control from afar, delays caused by distance are likely, making it difficult to adapt to the rapidly changing border situation<sup>[2]</sup>.

## 7. Conclusion

The border governance of the Changbai-Linjiang region in the late Qing Dynasty was a crucial practice in modern China’s response to border crises and the transition from traditional border administration to modernization. Strategically located at the upper reaches of the Yalu River and at the foot of Changbai Mountain, this area underwent a historical transformation from a restricted zone to a key border stronghold. This shift profoundly reflects the adjustments and innovations within the late Qing national governance system in the face of internal and external challenges.

From the perspective of governance background, the unique geographical characteristics of the Changbai-Linjiang region, combined with the border crisis at the end of the Qing Dynasty, served as driving forces for governance transformation. As a critical point on the eastern frontier of the China-Korea border, situated in the gap between Japanese and Russian influence, it carried the historical significance of being the “fundamental stronghold” of Manchuria and faced practical pressures related to sovereignty defense and resource management. Breaking away from traditional restriction policies, the Qing court implemented a governance strategy of “settling immigrants to secure the border and establishing governance to strengthen border.” This was achieved by establishing administrative divisions such as Changbai Prefecture and Linjiang County, adjusting provincial administrative boundaries, and constructing a clear hierarchical administrative control system, thereby laying an institutional foundation for border governance.

The construction and improvement of the transportation network is an important strategy for border governance in the Changbai-Linjiang region. Picking Shengjing as a hub, six main roads extending along river valleys, connecting border gates, county seats, and key border locations, formed a transportation network linking the interior of Liaodong with the Changbai Mountains region. The planning and repair of transportation routes between Changbai-Linjiang and places like Fengtian, Jilin, Hunchun, Yanji, Ningguta, and Dunhua not only solve the geographical isolation of the area but also strengthen the communication of government orders, material flow, and military coordination between the central government and the border, achieving “promoting development through transportation, consolidating border defenses through development.”

However, border governance in the late Qing Changbai-Linjiang region also faced many limitations. Due to weakened national strength and institutional inertia, some governance measures could not be fully implemented, such as disputes over river authority and railway construction, which were hindered by lack of funds and external pressures; issues like household registration clarification and border official selection remained constrained by traditional governance models, failing to fully resolve deep-rooted cross-border governance conflicts. Nevertheless, the experience accumulated through this governance process still holds significant historical value. Its logic of establishing governance and consolidating borders, linking transportation and military coordination, and seeking a balance between traditional border administration and modern state governance, not only provided policy foundations for Republican border governance but also offered historical lessons and inspiration for contemporary China’s cross-border ethnic region governance, border defense construction, and regional coordinated development.

## Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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