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Teaching the frontier to read – language, literacy and the making of modern China

Ruling the Mongols of Manchuria by Jiani He examines how language shaped imperial governance and nation-building in late Qing borderlands. He's detailed and valuable linguistic history reveals the challenge of establishing a shared sense of imperial identity among multilingual subjects and shows how the attempt to impose a trilingual hierarchy transformed frontier politics and shaped modern China, writes Ron Po.

Ruling the Mongols of Manchuria: Language, Literacy, and Power in Late Qing Borderlands. Jiani He. Routledge. 2025.

What does it mean to rule a multilingual frontier at the fading edge of an empire? Mark Elliott's *The Manchu Way* (2001) is one point of departure. In his lucid account of the Qing Empire's territorial and cultural frontiers, Elliott shows how language, ethnicity, and administrative institutions intertwined in the practices of imperial rule. Moving from the Qing to 19th- and early 20th-century Southeast Asian world, Eric Tagliacozzo's *Secret Trades, Porous Borders* (2005) takes us to the maritime and terrestrial borderlands where multilingual and multiethnic webs of smugglers, traders, and intermediaries made made frontier zones sites of dynamism and ungovernability.



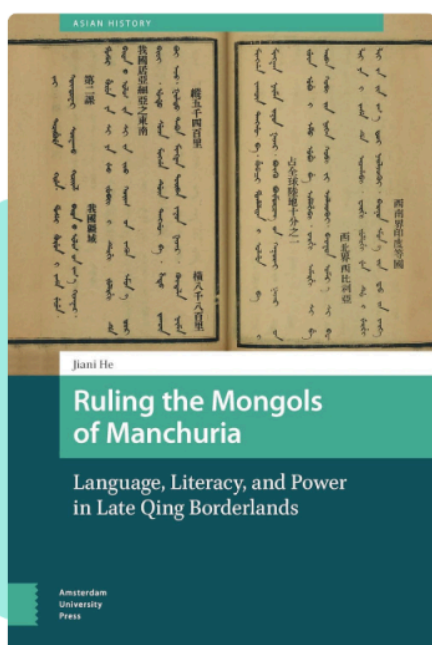
[The book] requires us to think about power not through the registers of treaties and wars but through the minutiae of managing languages.



From the frontier's open routes we might turn to its enclosed spaces, namely from the maritime world to the classroom. At the micro-level of education and everyday instruction, the politics of language took on another form: how was imperial and later national authority translated, standardised, and reproduced through schooling? In this sense, how might the story of classrooms and textbooks in a remote corner of Manchuria (a historical region in northeast Asia) help us rethink the birth of the modern Chinese state? These are the questions that hover, sometimes quietly, sometimes insistently, through Jiani He's *Ruling the Mongols of Manchuria*. It is not an easy book. Nor is it a simple one. It is a learned work, grounded in archives and philological care, that requires us to think about power not through the registers of treaties and wars but through the minutiae of managing languages: those spoken, those written, and those translated.

Language as a tool of imperial rule

He's stage is the **Jirim League**, an old Mongol confederation and late Qing administrative district squeezed between Beijing's bureaucracy and the conflicting imperialisms of Russia and Japan. It is on this border ground, He shows, the Qing state tested out new modalities of governing difference. Her ostensible object is disarmingly small: a trilingual textbook, the *Manchu-Mongolian-Chinese Combined Reader*, published in 1909 and used in the region's new-style schools. But from this slim textbook, He extracts a counterintuitive tale of transition: how an empire that had long celebrated its polyglot rule struggled to make its border peoples into literate citizens, and how this effort at linguistic literacy entangled imperial inclusion with national assimilation.



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Ruling the Mongols of Manchuria

Language, Literacy, and Power in Late Qing Borderlands

By Jiani He

That the book has already drawn scholarly attention is telling. A detailed and **rather exacting review** appeared a few months after its publication. Written by a fellow Qing linguistic historian, the review

essay both marvels at He's command of the source languages and carefully disputes some of her readings and transliterations. As welcome a reception as it is, however, it reads the book mostly from the perspective of philology. My own engagement with the volume moves in a different direction. There is a broader historical claim in He's book, that reclaims Manchuria's frontier as part of the modern Chinese state and in so doing, speaks back to a long-running historiographical debate about the nature of that state.

Statecraft at the borders

Two interlinked insights run through *Ruling the Mongols of Manchuria*. The first is He's refusal to see the Qing borderland as peripheral, ancillary, or anything less than a centre in its own right. The other is the re-imagination of border itself, not as a place where old practices fall into neglect or disrepair but as a frontier where the state's new capacities to measure, extract, and allocate resources are put to the test. In both these senses, the Jirim League becomes a place of innovation rather than inertia, of stress rather than stasis. Its schools, administrative offices, and printing houses were the places where administrators experimented with the new instruments of statecraft – the school, the poll tax, and the bureaucratised languages – under the combined pressure of population movement and international rivalry. Here, the Manchu, Mongol, and Han categories first started to break down under the weight of mobility and migration, not because of neglect, but because of design. If the empire was to manage this kind of border, it had to teach its population to read one another.



The late Qing project to rationalise and control language [was] a project of political re-invention in which the empire's trilingual textbooks seek to preserve the diverse state in the language of a modern nation.



A hierarchy of language

The second theme of He's book concerns the meaning of language reform itself. For her, the late Qing project to rationalise and control language is no mere pedagogical intervention. It is also a

project of political re-invention in which the empire's trilingual textbooks seek to preserve the diverse state in the language of a modern nation. It was both bridge and boundary, the same instrument that promised Mongols a place in the new political order that erased their difference. The trilingual textbook at the heart of He's book bears the weight of this ambivalence. On the facing page, Chinese is the language of progress; on the next page, Manchu and Mongolian mark a place for imperial difference. It was, in this way, a compromise of a sort: to teach Chinese literacy to Mongols was both to promise them a place in the nation and to dissolve the very hierarchy of tongues that had long marked Qing order. Language, in the new order, was both connective tissue and boundary.

He has the command of sources to support her claims. Her discussion of early 20th-century Manchu and Mongolian schooling in Manchuria shows a world still shaped by older habits of translation but also already drawn into the gravitational field of reform. We meet administrators who cling to 18th-century bilingual primers, officials who worry about the moral entropy of transliterated Mongolian, and students struggling to master three scripts at once. In them, the texture of He's historical world comes into view. They also show that the translation of language and its teaching were neither ordered from above nor fully embraced at the level of the classroom or office, but sometimes clumsily negotiated.



He's book resonates with the larger historiography of empire and modernity, a series of studies looking to the steppe, the desert, or the sea as places where new forms of political imagination were made possible.



But even as one applauds the book's rigorous evidence base, it has its limitations. On the Mongolian side of this story, for example, we hear less about the people for whom these were new schoolbooks and more about Manchu intermediaries and Chinese officials. The voices of Mongolian teachers and translators who surely had their own linguistic agendas in this story are less often heard. The book's analytical vocabulary, too, at times feels strained, particularly when we are asked to take the later Qing meaning of a Manchu term like *kamcime* as "simultaneous expression". By the 1900s, this was a less simultaneous than a hierarchical world. Bureaucrats by then could no longer be found rehearsing the virtues of parallel text but were scrambling to render multiple tongues administratively legible.

New insight on the making of modern China

Despite these caveats, *Ruling the Mongols of Manchuria* achieves something valuable. It reminds us that the making of modern China cannot be understood through its coastal ports or treaty negotiations alone. We must also follow it into the inland frontiers where the state learned to make do with difference, to translate, to codify diversity. In this sense, He's book resonates with the larger historiography of empire and modernity, a series of studies looking to the steppe, the desert, or the sea as places where new forms of political imagination were made possible. The world she chronicles was no mere residue of an older order: it was a workshop of the modern.

Note: *This review gives the views of the author and not the position of the LSE Review of Books blog, nor of the London School of Economics and Political Science.*

Main image: *Ink Tablet from the late Qing dynasty (1644–1911) or early Republic period (1912–49). Public Domain via [The Metropolitan Museum of Art](#).*

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