

Feeding the Nation from the Wilderness: Food, Migration, and Environment in Northeast China

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From Lester Brown's 1995 book, *Who Will Feed China?: Wake-up Call for a Small Planet*, to the 2015 *New York Times* article, "Why China Will Reclaim Siberia," sensational titles cite global concern for the ecological burden of feeding the world's largest population and the menace of China's rising power in its quest for national food security. Yet, Australian professor John Matthews optimistically predicts that China will drive the next global transformation with its green growth. So, where does China stand between these opposing views? Researches addressing this question have, naturally, focused on China's rural sector, and notably its mainstay of household farming, to assess the prospects of China's food security and its environmental costs. However, no scholar has paid attention to the agribusiness giant rising on China's northeastern border, Beidahuang (the Great Northern Wilderness). The plains that once held China's largest concentration of freshwater wetlands, nicknamed "Kidney of Asia" for its ecological functions, have become home to China's largest cluster of state farms, which can now feed 10% of the Chinese population. This state-owned agribusiness complex has capitalized on consumers' rising environmental consciousness and made Beidahuang the most valuable agricultural brand in China. It has also expanded overseas, establishing farms in 13 countries including Russia, Australia, Thailand, and Mozambique.

This study analyzes the monumental transformation of Beidahuang from "wasteland" on the frontier to the exemplar of Chinese agricultural modernity. The transformation gradually started in the late 1940s and became intensified in the 1950s and 1960s when the Chinese state mobilized tens of thousands of people, including veterans, college graduates, rural and urban youths, political exiles, and criminal convicts, and moved them from other parts of China to Beidahuang to build army farms and work farms. These have evolved into today's 113 state farms with a total population of 1.67 million. Drawing on extensive archives, propaganda materials, memoirs and interviews, the study will critically evaluate the changing relationships among the state, humans, and nature. It will make three particular contributions to knowledge production that will enhance public discourse and have clear relevance for policy makers. First, it will complicate the common understanding of the state-sanctioned urban-rural division of Chinese society by analyzing the continuing movement of people in and out of Beidahuang where settlers hold urban residency on paper but live and work on farms. Second, it will situate Beidahuang in China's border region development schemes to compare with well-studied western frontiers in Xinjiang and Yunnan and reveal how Beidahuang manipulated its marginality to rise as the leading agribusiness in the state-defined center-peripheral framework. Third, it will examine the social and ecological costs of Beidahuang's transformation to show the crucial lessons to be learned from pursuing the seemingly contradictory agendas of food security and eco-security.