

2011

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Kingsberg, Miriam, "Dalian's Past, Dalian's Present, Part 2" (2011). *The China Beat Blog Archive 2008-2012*. 866.  
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## Dalian's Past, Dalian's Present, Part 2

August 15, 2011 in [Uncategorized](#) by [jwasserstrom](#) | [Permalink](#)  
by Miriam Kingsberg

The tens of thousands of Dalian residents who gathered this weekend to demand the relocation of a chemical plant were responding to a contemporary situation. Their protest, though, reflected a complicated relationship among the people, the state, and the environment that was inscribed in the city from the very moment of its founding.

Dalian came into being in 1898, when Russia leased the Liaodong peninsula (a main part of the general region known often as either Dongbei or Manchuria) from the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911) and established the port of Dalny (Dal'nii) on the site of the fishing village of Qingniwa. Nature supplied the rationale for the very creation of Dalny. Perched on a year-round ice-free deep harbor, the site fulfilled a centuries-old quest of Russian empire-builders for just such a port. Planners laid out the city on the round, open plaza scheme of St. Petersburg, a built-from-scratch urban entity in turn modeled on Baron Haussmann's vision for Paris. Yet representatives of Tsar Nicholas II had scarcely designated the basic outlines of the metropolis when it was captured by Japan during the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-1905.

Renamed Dairen ("Great Connection"), the port was imperial Japan's first and in the end longest-held foothold on the Asian mainland. During the early twentieth century, it was a site for experimentation within the emerging science of urban planning. Stymied by bureaucratic regulations and existing infrastructure in the metropole, Japanese planners sought a "blank slate" in Dairen, an opportunity to legitimate imperialism on the Asian mainland by building the modern, Western-style city of their dreams.



Postcard view of Dairen; <http://picasaweb.google.com/114350517156607483397/DairenPostcards>  
Dairen came into being at a moment when urban reformers worldwide had come to view the natural world as an indispensable element of the modern city. Ebenezer Howard's vision of the "garden city" and early twentieth-century "city beautiful" campaigns emphasized greenery as a form of urban spectacle, a source of hygiene, and a subtle means of zoning among various races, economic classes, and urban functions. Japan created Dairen as a uniquely nature-oriented city to fulfill these functions as well as express a long domestic tradition of ambivalence towards urbanism.

As the city took shape in the early years of the twentieth century, nature competed successfully with the built environment for the attention of spectators. Images of the city, produced by the relatively new technology of the camera, included depictions of the landscape—mountains, beaches, and forests—as well as paved streets and monumental Western-style architecture. Under the administration of Dairen's first mayor, the Japanese Ishimoto Kantarō, thousands of acacia trees were planted. The flower came to function as the

analog of the cherry blossom in the Japanese home islands—a symbol of the city under imperial rule. One gazetteer noted (for the following quote and others to come, see the reference section at the very bottom of this post): “So many acacia trees line the streets of Dairen that it may well be called the city of acacia, especially in early summer when the breeze wafts the scent of the white blossoms over the city.” (In spite of Ishimoto’s efforts, multiple memoirs of Dairen under Japanese occupation have noted that the fragrance of acacia did not disguise the odor of another flower, the opium poppy, which formed the basis for the mayor’s wealth and power.)

Even the industrial zones of Dairen reflected the ideology of the city beautiful movement. Tens of thousands of Chinese, who migrated from the provinces of Shandong and Hebei in search of temporary unskilled work, lived in the segregated quarters of Hekizansō (Pishanzhuang, literally “Green Mountain Villa”). Though investigators who penetrated the barracks described the deprived lifestyle of laborers, from the outside the complex appeared almost pastoral. For visitors to Dairen, Hekizansō was simply another attraction of the local landscape, to be viewed from a designated platform atop a nearby hill. Yosano Akiko, the most famous female poet of her day, was moved by a visit to the site in 1928 to compose the following poem: “On a spring day, the acacia path of Hekizansō, unequalled even by the willows of Chang’an, is ignored by the laborers carrying heavy loads.”

Although Dairen was the production nexus of Manchuria, barely six percent of its area was allocated to industry. By contrast, parks covered more than eleven percent of the urban terrain. A song taught to schoolchildren highlights the importance of nature to the self-image of the city:

In the great plaza, the grass is green,  
At Hoshigaura beach, the sand is white.  
A sunset view that can’t be believed,  
A beautiful city,  
An engaging city,  
My Dairen, where life is good.

Waterways, trees, and shrubbery not only conveyed an impression of urban beauty, but also broke up open lots and prevented crowds from gathering. Following the models of Haussmann’s Paris and St. Petersburg, which manipulated the environment to curb the “power of the mob,” Dairen planners used nature to circumscribe public space. The major physical exception to this tendency was the park that became known as Renmin guangchang (People’s Plaza) in the PRC era. It was here that crowds gathered on Sunday to call for the relocation of a potentially polluting paraxylene plant. Unlike most of Japanese Dairen, which was built during the city beautiful years of the 1910s and 1920s, Renmin guangchang was the product of the 1930s era of high modernism. Reflecting the reverence for technology and order that characterized this aesthetic, the plaza was an unrelieved concrete wasteland, protected from the public not by interspersed artifacts of nature, but by the government buildings around it.



Photograph of People's Square, taken by Meg Rithmire

These structures remain in existence today, occupied by the ministries of the contemporary state. This past weekend, protestors both drew on and inverted the traditional relationship among the regime, the people, and the environment by laying claim to Renmin guangchang to call for the protection of nature. They won not only recognition of their grievances through a pledge (not yet honored) to close the chemical plant, but also the use of park space as public space.

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#### References:

The quote on the scent of "acacia" can be found on page 202 of *Kwantung Government, The Kwantung Government: Its Functions and Works* (Dairen: The Kwantung Government, 1934). A sample memoir highlighting the aroma of opium is Matsubara Kazue, *Dairen dansu ho-ru no yoru* (Tokyo: Chūō kōronsha, 1998). For Yosano Akiko's poem, see Vol. 5, p. 204 of Shin Kitsu and Nagaoka Masami, eds., *Shokuminchi shakai jigyo kankei shiryō shū "Manshū, Manshūkoku"* (Tokyo: Kin-gendai shiryō kenkōkai, 2005); the city of Chang'an mentioned in the poem was capital of the Tang Dynasty (618-906). The song for children can be found on p. 61 of Vol. 7 of Isoda Kazuo, et al., eds, *Zai-Man Nihonjin yō kyōkasho shūsei* (Tokyo: Kashiwa shobō, 2000). And for more on high modernist planning in the cities of Japanese Manchuria, see David Buck, "Railway City and National Capital: Two Faces of the Modern in Changchun," pp. 65-89, in Joseph W. Esherick, ed., *Remaking the Chinese City: Modernity and National Identity, 1900-1950* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1999).