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## Dalian's Past, Dalian's Present, Part 3

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By Christian Hess

The past week has seen Dalian become the focal point of significant global press coverage for two different reasons. The uptick in interest started with the maiden voyage of China's first aircraft carrier, the former Soviet vessel Varyag, which set sail from Dalian's harbour after years of not-so-secret rebuilding. More recently, the ongoing drama of citywide protests over the feared environmental impact caused by damage to one of the city's major chemical plants has made the rounds of the international press.

Perhaps because it does not feature prominently on the foreign journalist's map of China, the coverage of events in Dalian quickly transcends the city itself. Seemingly out of nowhere, Dalian is the place which has rebuilt a weapon which may allow China to project power in the region in important new ways, and a site of protest where we may be witnessing a nervous government making major capitulations to the demands of outraged citizens.

There are of course important local contexts here. The two previous posts in this series, by political scientist Meg Rithmire and historian Miriam Kingsberg, reminded us of this, as they explored the origins and development of an environmental discourse related to urban planning in Dalian that stretches from the colonial period into the reform era. I'd like to add two more points to this discussion.

The first deals with Dalian's industrial heritage, which likewise harkens back to the colonial era. The ongoing protests over the PX plant in particular reveal significant changes in what industrial development means for Dalian and its people.

The second and related point I want to make touches on the nature of planning models and order in the local past. And how this has been linked to an endless series of top-down, state definitions of the city's identity.

The recent protests remind us that Dalian's makeover as one of China's greenest cities shouldn't blind us to the fact that potentially harmful industries continue to play an important role in the city's growth. While similar protests have occurred in other parts of China, the intensity of the movement in Dalian is likely due to the fact that, for many years, industry (including chemical production) served as a defining feature of the city. Dalian's industries, led by shipbuilding, locomotive plants, and chemical production enabled this former colonial city to rebuild quickly after 1945, and gave the city and its people a privileged position in the new urban landscape of the People's Republic.

The city did not start its life as a major industrial base. Dalian was built by Russian (1898-1905) and Japanese (1905-1945) colonial powers as a trading port, billed by the South Manchuria Railway Company as "The Gateway to Manchuria." It stood as an ultramodern point of access to the agricultural and mineral wealth of Manchuria.

By the 1920s Dalian was on the global map as a major port, home a burgeoning commercial and consumer economy best symbolized by the central plaza. This often photographed space was ringed with monumental buildings which reflected this economic vitality, including banks, stock exchanges, post offices, and luxury hotels, and still stands today as the core district of the city. While locomotive and shipbuilding facilities were also major features of the economy, it wasn't until the 1930s that Japanese authorities began to implement significant industrialization plans for the city.

It wasn't an easy transition. Dalian lacked space and ready access to water for large scale industries. But Dalian's geographical location, and the pressing needs of an empire at total war would make the transformation of the colonial port into an industrial center of Japan's wartime empire an urgent priority. With its advanced rail and port links, raw materials could move into

the city with relative ease and finished goods, ranging from chemicals and armaments, to locomotives, ships and machined tools could flow out. New industrial zones were built in the suburbs, which came to replace the central plaza as the city's center of economic gravity. Importantly, many of these industries were large in scale, and state-owned. This industrial base would prove critical for the city's survival in the postwar era.

At the end of the war in 1945, Dalian was in a state of geopolitical limbo. Soviet troops occupied the city, and Chinese political powers had to work under Soviet authority while at the same time building legitimacy for themselves. Unlike Harbin and Changchun, Dalian had never been a Chinese administered city.

Yet, Chinese were the majority population throughout the colonial period, and many had lived there for decades. How would they be treated? Dalian might have easily been condemned for its colonial past. Instead, once the CCP started to gain control, the city's industrial base, along with its colonial built environment served as the foundation for rebuilding the city. Equally important, reindustrialization provided the storyline for Dalian's integration with China. By the late 1940s, it was rebranded as "China's model production city." Since the bulk of its industries had been in state hands under the Japanese, Dalian's new authorities had a significant lead over places like Shanghai in terms of the transition to state ownership. Skilled Chinese workers who worked in these industrial units, trained under the Japanese, were not threatened politically, but rather were rewarded for staying on the job, often with former Japanese houses as part of their benefit package.

Dalian's colonial built environment was used to build an image of the city as a "worker's paradise." The new story of Dalian as a production model and worker's paradise was empowering in a time of renewed civil war. Moreover, it emphasized to workers that both their individual path to redemption and the city's reintegration with China rested on their ability to live up to the new, state-ordained status as model production city.

Things have obviously changed quite a bit since then. Dalian sits far more comfortably on the map of China than it did in the late 1940s. As Meg Rithmire's post shows us, the reform era has brought new state initiated efforts to build Dalian into a powerful new model with multiple "branding" operations. This pursuit to order the city through the use of models has been a constant feature of the city since its inception by Russian planners in the late 1890s. From Russia's dream of a European style imperial metropolis and Japan's building of a vibrant trading port and then industrial city, to its status as a vanguard production city in the late 1940s, "Dalian as model" has, at different times brought wealth and prosperity, or certain political clout to people here.

Yet such systematic and often overlapping schemes to rebrand, reorient and reorder the city often leave city residents out of the equation. It was a total colonial space, full of inequalities and exploitation. People here had little say in what happened to them after the 1940s. The brutal campaigns of the 1950s and 1960s did dive into family backgrounds, and past ties to Japan and even the Soviets cost people dearly. In recent years, Dalian's GDP has risen, and new models have firmly planted it on the global map as a major IT center. It is still regarded as one of the cleanest cities in China. Yet the PX plant was allowed to set up shop here along with other polluting industries, and Dalian's new image has involved much relocation and destruction, a fact not lost on city residents.

Perhaps it is more useful to view the recent events here as less a rigid tale of the Chinese government vs. the People, and more about local people trying to claim some control over what their city is and how it functions. And also about what it means to be from Dalian.

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