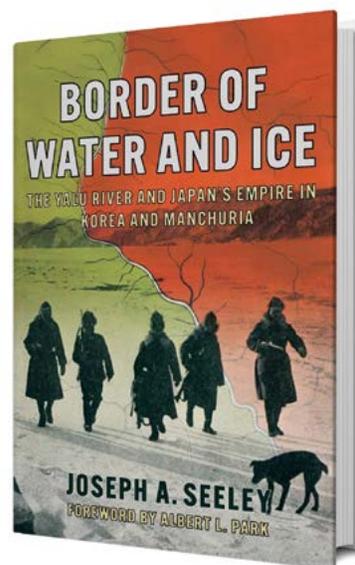


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Border of Water and Ice: The Yalu River and Japan's Empire in Korea and Manchuria

Reviewed by Yong Suk Lee

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*I do not know much about gods; but I think that the river
Is a strong brown god—sullen, untamed and intractable,
Patient to some degree, at first recognized as a frontier;
Useful, untrustworthy, as a conveyer of commerce;
Then only a problem confronting the builder of bridges.*

TS Eliot, “The Dry Salvages”

In *Border of Water and Ice*, first-time author Joseph A. Seeley, an assistant professor of history at the University of Virginia, introduces readers to the phrase “liquid geography.” Readers know these words but they rarely see them in combination as a single phrase. Geography often brings to mind landscapes, terrains, and maps. It is a *terra firma*-biased word. Water flows in these places but it is rarely the most dominant or noticeable feature on a map; it’s usually just a long-thin blue line traversing across the landscape. It is difficult to imagine the immensity

of the world’s great rivers, such as the Mississippi or the Nile, until you have stood on their banks. It is even more difficult to imagine the economic, social, cultural, and political significance of the great rivers, unless you lived alongside one.

Korea scholars would agree that it is difficult to overstate the importance of the Yalu River in Korean history. The Yalu more than any other river in Korea defines what is Korean. Just on the other side of the river is China, where people speak a different language, have different customs, and enjoy a different cuisine. It is a barrier, a life source, an economic resource, and a shaper of lives, events, and history. When taking all these factors into consideration, there is no better phrase than “liquid geography” to describe the study of the river’s influence in modern Korean history.

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Seeley's work examines a specific period in the Yalu River's history, when the Empire of Japan decided to bend the river to its will and reshape its flow. For centuries, Korea and China respected the Yalu as a barrier. Imperial authority from Seoul and Beijing ended at the respective sides of the river and troops guarded the border to deter smugglers and protect economic resources, such as timber. Japan dreamed bigger, however. For Tokyo, the Yalu was an obstacle to be bridged so it may use the foothold in Korea to go after a bigger prize: China.

As China slowly decayed and Western powers carved up the ancient empire into zones of influence, Japan did not want to be left out. The remote northeast corner of Asia where China, Korea, and Russia meet became a hotly contested geopolitical battleground. Dandong, China, just across the river from Sinuiju, Korea, was a den of international intrigue, with Russia, Japan, and Western powers competing for advantage, while the Chinese government tried desperately to hold onto illusions of control as it slowly decayed into obscurity.

Intrigue and subterfuge exploded into war, and Japan fought China and Russia before Western powers recognized its paramount control in the region. Japan first attempted to bridge the Yalu in 1894 to go to war against China in the Sino-Japanese war and then again in 1904 to fight the Russians in the Russo-Japanese war. It was a monumental task for the Japanese Army engineers; especially in 1904, when they realized that they could not replicate the army's 1894 river-crossing in the same spot because the mighty river had carved and changed the banks and shorelines.

As Seeley recounts, it is no surprise that one of the first major engineering projects the Japanese undertook after colonizing Korea was to build the first permanent bridge across the Yalu. After Japan formally annexed Korea in August 1910, the Yalu as a physical boundary gave Koreans who wanted to fight against Japanese forces occupying their homeland a safe haven. Most battles between Korean guerillas against Japanese forces took place along the Yalu. In winter, Korean forces would walk across the frozen river from their safe haven in China to attack isolated Japanese government outposts and police stations. Foot tracks

of the night raiders across the snow and ice became a diplomatic sore point between Japan and China and underscored for Japanese authorities that they needed to take action to secure the northernmost flank of the empire.

Securing the empire went beyond bolstering the army in the north. Japan also undertook one of the biggest civil engineering challenges in the world at the time, building the largest hydroelectric dam in Asia before World War II. From 1937 to 1943, Japanese engineers using Korean and Chinese forced labor built the Supung dam. The dam generated electricity and helped control buildup of ice flows in the river, making it more navigable. Environmentally, the dam transformed the river and its seasonal pace for the people who lived alongside it, Chinese and Korean. For the Japanese, it was a physical symbol of Manchurian and Korean unity under Tokyo's control.

Seeley demonstrates the Yalu River's legacy as a border, an obstacle, and economic superhighway continues today. During the Korean War, the Chinese People's Liberation Army poured across the frozen river to join the fight in Korea. More recently, the other side of the Yalu River became a sanctuary again for Koreans fleeing their country, this time to escape manmade famine and brutal dictatorship. It is a vital economic hub for transfer of goods and services, licit or illicit. It is a critical safety valve for North Korea to survive and for China to help prevent instability just across the border. For the Kim family regime in Pyongyang, with a political system similar to a medieval Korean kingdom, the Yalu is potentially a dangerous source of foreign influence to undermine the regime. During the COVID-19 pandemic, North Korean leader Kim Jong Un reportedly ordered the border closed and executed illicit border-crossers to prevent the spread of the disease.

Border of Water and Ice is an innovative and imaginative work. The Yalu River is frequently mentioned in Korean history, but as a just place on a map. Seeley's book serves as a biography of the Yalu in the modern era and offers a masterclass in political geography. ■