

Dalian and Japan's Shipping Empire, 1918-1937

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My paper examines the significance of the port of Dalian for Japanese shipping in the interwar period (1918-1937). Dalian (Jp. Dairen) was the commercial center of the Kwantung Leased Territory (a section of China's Liaodong Peninsula), and the major port connecting Manchuria to the world's sealanes. Dalian began developing into a significant port under the Russian Empire, which leased the Kwantung Territory from the Qing Empire in 1898 and invested millions of rubles in the city's port facilities. After victory in the Russo-Japanese War (1904-05), the Japanese Empire assumed control of the lease on the territory—and of the southern portion of the China Eastern Railway, renamed the South Manchuria Railway (SMR)—and continued to develop Dalian into a major deep-water port. Though the southern terminus of the SMR was Lüshunkou (also known as Port Arthur), a major naval center, it was Dalian that thus served as the primary juncture between railway and shipping traffic in the region.

As the gateway to Manchuria's fertile lands, Dalian became an important nodal point in the shipping networks of the Japanese Empire. Soy products and other resources flowed from SMR rail cars and into ship holds, which bore such products to the metropole, other colonies, and treaty ports throughout China. Dalian's significance for Japanese shipping did not, however, solely derive from the commerce circulating across its docks; the city also had a unique status within the broader Empire. As a "free port" (*jiyūkō*), Dalian's customs and ship registry fees were more relaxed than those of the Japanese home islands, but Japanese "subjects" (*shinmin*) were still permitted to register their ships in the port. Japanese shipowners thus used the Dalian registry as a kind of flag of convenience through which they could circumvent the higher duties levied in the home islands on imported ships.

Dalian ship registry became a center of controversy at several points in the interwar period. First, ships registered in Dalian had an ambiguous position in Japan's ship laws and regulations, which were crafted on the assumption of a simple dichotomy between "Japanese ships" and "foreign ships." Ships carrying a Dalian registry thereby undermined the effectiveness of laws designed in the late 1890s to restrict coastal trading in Japan to "Japanese" ships. Second, at several intervals in this period the central government sought to improve the quality of the Japanese merchant marine by restricting imports of used foreign ships. At such times, shipowners in the home islands regularly used Dalian as a backdoor through which to continue importing older ships, and thus undercut centralized efforts to produce a technologically advanced merchant fleet. In my paper, I will use Dalian as a focal point from which to examine such issues in order to shed light on the ways that the framework of the Japanese Empire structured the development of Japanese shipping.