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Open and Retain: The Disposal of the Imperial Tomb's Forest in Late Qing and Early Republican China

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Abstract: Northeastern China is rich in forest resources, which were protected throughout the Qing period. After the 1911 Revolution, the Qing Dynasty fell, and the Republic was established. In the midst of the political turmoil, the question of how to manage and develop the northeast forest whose property rights were unclear, became an urgent problem for the Beiyang government. Recent years have witnessed a dedicated exploration of the policies governing the northeast forest's, with forests being variously defined as “State forests” or “Private forests.” However, the problem of “the forest of the imperial tomb,” which had long been managed by the former Qing government, requires further research. The Qing government had demarcated a large area of land, the Yongling *fengjindi*(永陵封禁地), around the Yongling and prohibited people from entering it. This paper explores how forests within the *Yongling fengjindi*, especially those on the resource-rich Songzi Guanshan(松子官山), were opened, rented out, and disposed of by the Republican provincial government, with some portions retained as property of the former Qing emperor. It demonstrates how political structures in Northeast China was shaped by the disposal of the *fengjindi* throughout the modern Chinese history.

Introduction

At the end of the Qing period, the imperial government attempted to reshape itself into a constitutional monarchy. In this process, it was hardly clear how to explicitly define the “imperial property.” Elites at that time believed that if the country wanted to make the imperial finances independent, steady financial resources and property were essential. Thus, they decided to set up an “imperial fiefdom.” Specifically, they tried to develop the land and forest of the northeast of China. Unfortunately, this attempt ended in failure (Xiong, 2020, pp. 163–174).

After the 1911 revolution, and the fall of the Qing dynasty, the Republic was established. To ensure smooth transition of political power, the new government drew up an agreement with the Qing court called the *Articles of Favorable Treatment* (清室優待条件). This document set out several protections for the emperor and his family, such as maintenance, in perpetuity, of the imperial family's temples and tombs. In addition, after the Qing emperor's abdication, his “original private property” was also placed under special protection by the Republican government. However, this agreement did not specify the exact area of land that was to be considered as the “original private property” of the imperial family or the entity of management and utility. Therefore, heated conflicts arose between multiple local agencies in the northeast over this issue.

In contrast, with the enactment of the Northeastern China's Forest Disposal Law (東三省国有林發放規則) in 1912, forests were officially distinguished into two categories: “State forests” and “Private forests” for the first time. In recent years, there has been considerable historical exploration of such policies related to the

northeast forest's disposition. Existing studies primarily focused on the identification and evolution of forest rights related to state-owned and private forests, as well as shifts in forest development concepts.

However, the vast forest surrounding the Qing imperial tomb, or Yongling (清永陵), in Liaoning Province (formerly called Fengtian Province, 1907–1928), created other issues for the Republic. This tomb complex houses the ancestors of Nurhaci (1559–1626), whose descendants founded the Qing dynasty. The forest surrounding it had long been forbidden to outsiders and managed by the former Qing government but could not be easily defined as state or civil forest.

The problems caused by “the forest of the imperial tomb” remain underexplored. A study by Chi Xiang (2020) discusses how, due to uncertainty regarding the status of the forest, the Republic's government responded by seizing ownership of the forest and forming a company to control it. As a result, the Banner Office (*qishu*, 旗署)—an institution that handled the affairs of the privileged class—which should have been dismantled by the Republic, was effectively restored (pp. 178–180). The paper of Shoko Oide had focused on the disputed forests in Fuling (福陵) and Zhaoling (昭陵), discussing how the transfer of the Japanese imperial property system failed during the Manchukuo period (1932–1945) (Oide, 2024, pp. 61–75).

However, these studies cannot explain the following questions. First, which portion of the imperial tomb's forest was designated as belonging to the past emperor, and how was it defined as “imperial property” during the Beiyang government period (1913–1928)? Second, who was exactly responsible for managing that area, and how should it be developed?

This paper will therefore focus on the very process of the disposal of the forests surrounding Yongling, with a focus on the area of Songzi Guanshan, 松子官山, during early Republican China. This will be accomplished by an analysis of the documents kept in the Liaoning Provincial Archives. These documents will be used to illustrate how the forest around Yongling was opened, rented, and disposed of by the Republican provincial government, with some portions being retained as property of the former Qing emperor. The author tries will also discuss how modern political structures in northeastern China was shaped by the disposal of this forest.

The Closing of Songzi Guanshan

The Qing Dynasty was the last “feudal” dynasty of China and originated in the northeastern of China. To protect the dynasty's birthplace, the early Qing government strictly prohibited immigration into and exploitation of the area and its rich forest resources. The protection of the forests surrounding the imperial tombs was a top priority, and the Qing government undertook multiple measures to this end. One of them was creating a *fengjindi* (封禁地, lit., “forbidden area”), in which the presence of persons unrelated to the imperial family was considered taboo. This practice was implemented to protect the *fengshui* (風水) of imperial tombs and the important resources used for preparing offerings for the imperial ancestors.

There are three Qing burial sites in northeastern China, which nowadays are called the “*sanlin* (三陵).” Yongling is the earliest of these sites and was placed in

Nurhaci's former capital of *Hetu Ala* or Xingjing (興京) in the region now known as Liaoning Province. The Qing government demarcated a large area of land as belonging to the site and prohibited unrelated people from entering, thus creating the Yongling *fengjindi*. Within the Yongling *fengjindi*, Songzi Guanshan was well known for its namesake pine nuts, which were used in the rituals of imperial tombs. Songzi Guanshan is a branch of the Changbai Mountains, which host coniferous and broadleaf forests. The *hongsong* (紅松, *Pinus koraiensis*) is the dominant tree species on Songzi Guanshan.¹ The pine nuts of this tree are important ingredients for the offerings made during rituals at the Yongling, including those commemorating the winter solstice and the end of the year. Pine nuts were also an important staple in the daily diet of the imperial family (Li, 2016, p. 61). Wood was another important resource offered by the mountain. Along with the wood of the *hongsong* there are many other types of wood found on Songzi Guanshan, and these have a wide range of uses.²

The pine nuts produced on Songzi Guanshan were not only for Yongling, but also to meet the needs of the other nearby imperial tombs, such as Fuling and Zhaoling in Fengtian (also called Shengjing, 盛京), and the Xiaoling (孝陵) and Tailing (泰陵) in Beijing. According to the archives of the Shengjing Sanling Ritual Office (盛京三陵礼股档房), which oversaw imperial mausoleum rituals during the Qing Dynasty, approximately 22.5 tons of pine nuts from Songzi Guanshan were collected every year. Regarding specific data, Xiaoling and Tailing in Beijing required more than 21.2 tons pine nuts altogether, and the Yongling, Fuling, and Zhaoling in Fengtian required about 1.1 tons pine nuts altogether.³

Songzi Guanshan is also not a singular cohesive area. Its official designation was changed several times during Qing dynasty. At first, it was designated as the eastern part of Xingjing Old Town (*Hetu Ala*), specifically in areas between the Juliu River (巨流河) and the Jing'er gou (井爾溝). However, the problem of banditry became so severe that the area was burned to the ground, with no trees left standing. Therefore, in 1821, Songzi Guanshan was redesignated as the area around Dashu River (大束河) and Xiaoshu River (小束河)'s basins.⁴

Songzi Guanshan is not a single mountain, but rather a collective name of scattered locations. From the late Qing dynasty, the locations in which *hongsong* could not be cut down were clearly established. In 1836, wooden plaques(*mupai*, 木牌) were set up in 91 sites to indicate places where it was forbidden by the Qing government to cut down trees. However, by 1907, only about 40 of these sites remained.⁵

¹ Liao Xunju, & Li Shifang (1915) “Diaocha Fengtian Xingjing Senlin Baogao”, *Zhonghua Shiyejie*, p.2.

² Ibid.

³ JC011-02-012163-000032, 1912, Liaoning Provincial Archives.

⁴ JC011-02-012163-000020, 1912, Liaoning Provincial Archives.

⁵ Ibid.

Guidelines by the Fengtian Civil Office

After the establishment of the Republic of China, the survey of the Yongling *fengjindi* was completed in December 1912. The Fengtian civil office (an institution responsible for managing public affairs) then drafted a plan for its disposal. The paragraph below outlines the main guidelines for handling the disposal of Songzi Guanshan in this plan.

The forests of Songzi Guanshan are prolific, and many would have high development value if they were used for lumber. However, due to the special nature of the area as a place to prepare offerings for the imperial tombs, it should [only] be partially opened (JC045-01-007704-000043, 1912, Liaoning Provincial Archives. Translation mine).

According to this entry, the development value of Songzi Guanshan was extremely high, so it should have no longer remained under prohibition but should have instead been opened up. However, due to its special relation to the imperial tombs, its disposal was needed to be handled on a case-by-case basis, with a portion reserved for supplying the imperial tombs. First, the Fengtian civil office would select areas that produced large quantities of pine nuts to maintain the prohibition on cutting. In particular, Linzitou Gou (林子頭溝) and Huangdaizi Gou (黃帶子溝) were set aside for growing *hongsong*. Second, the Fengtian civil office would cut down the remaining trees and then transport and sell their lumber. To prevent deforestation by merchants in areas other than the two designated ones, a temporary department called *zhangfangju* (丈放局) would be established to totally manage these affairs by Fengtian civil office. Finally, it was stipulated that the *zhangfangju* should regularly appraise the value of Songzi Guanshan's trees and permit merchants to purchase trees. After *zhangfangju*'s work was complete, it would be abolished and a new department called *caimuju* (采木局) would be established to continue work of overseeing the disposal of Songzi Guanshan's forests.⁶ However, despite this rule, the Fengtian civil office also did not clearly specify whether these trees were considered imperial property at that time.

The practical implementation of these guidelines faced several challenges. First, the approaching winter posed an issue, as the river roads used to transport timber would soon freeze over. In order to sell the timber to Fengtian within the year, it needed to be cut and transported quickly.⁷ However, based on the archived documents, as the situation unfolded, it became clear that the timber could not be processed before the end of 1912.

According to the treatment that was submitted, there are two approaches of managing the forests: through government-run industry, and government-supervised and merchant-managed industry [*guandu shangban*, 官督商弁]. According to the current survey conducted by the *caizhengju* [財政局], the

⁶ JC045-01-007704-000043, 1912, Liaoning Provincial Archives.

⁷ JC045-01-007704-000059, 1912, Liaoning Provincial Archives.

financial bureau under Fengtian civil office], it is difficult to secure funds for the government-run industry, which is slow in generating profits. Therefore, the government-supervised, merchant-managed industry is considered as the best option. In this way, first, the number of trees on Songzi Guanshan must be determined and assessed. Then, we need to estimate their value and convene merchants. Furthermore, merchants form companies, and we can require those companies to pay for logging rights. The companies will be allowed to handle all logging, transportation, sales, and so on. The government's role will be limited to supervising the companies and protecting the forest, without being involved in any other activities. In this way, our office does not need to provide capital but can still generate a significant amount of revenue quickly. This approach is possibly more efficient, potentially eliminating the need to establish a *caimuju* (JC045-01-007704-000085, 1913, Liaoning Provincial Archives. Translation mine).

According to this document, in March 1913, Fengtian civil office opposed the establishment of the *caimuju* due to the financial difficulties presented by the cost of logging, running the office, and paying the salaries of its employees. The opinion of the Fengtian civil office was that government-supervised and merchant-managed industry was the best solution. For this underfunded public institution like the Fengtian civil office, the government-supervised and merchant-managed industry was not only more profitable than a purely government-run industry, but it also did not require any further fundraising; this made it unnecessary to establish a new department like *caimuju*. Fengtian civil office also proposed that after investigating and clarifying the exact number of trees on Songzi Guanshan, they would be able to estimate their exact value and convene merchants to establish companies. Furthermore, they suggested that the established company would have to purchase the development rights for Songzi Guanshan. In other words, the Fengtian civil office's expectation was that the company would have full control over logging, transportation, and sales, while the Fengtian civil office and its subordinate agencies would supervise and retain its protection rights over the area.

However, the analysis of the history of personnel changes in the local government reveals that the *caimuju* was eventually established. In April 1913, Jin Liang (金梁), the head of the Xingjing *zhangfangju*, resigned on the pretext of illness, with the intention of entrusting the disposal of the Xingjing *zhangfangju* to the Xingjing civil office.⁸ This was due to the numerous administrative tasks remained and they could not complete them. However, the Xingjing civil office refused, citing their own busy schedule.⁹ Therefore, the abolition of the *zhangfangju* was postponed. In August of the same year, Shi Fu (世福), a member of the *zhangfangju*, took over the *zhangfangju*'s work as the director. But in May 1915, Shi Fu was dismissed for misusing the money collected from land disposals and

⁸ JC045-01-007704-000082, 1913, Liaoning Provincial Archives.

⁹ JC045-01-007704-000109, 1913, Liaoning Provincial Archives.

failing to fulfill his duties.¹⁰ Subsequently, Yang Guodong (楊國棟) succeeded Shi Fu as the director of the Xingjing *zhangfangju*, while also taking on the responsibilities of the general comprador of the newly established *caimuju*.¹¹ In other words, although there is no specific date of its establishment, Yang Guodong's assumption of the director position for both the Xingjing *zhangfangju* and *caimuju* suggests that the *caimuju* had indeed been eventually set up.

The Changxin firm and the Fengtian Banner Office of *Sanling*

In August 1915, the Agricultural Association of Xingjing County (興京縣農會) submitted a motion to suspend the harvesting of pine nuts.¹² However, the Fengtian banner office of *sanling* (奉天三陵衙門) opposed this and tried to seek a more balanced approach. Invoking the Articles of Favorable Treatment in response, the Fengtian banner office of *sanling* (奉天三陵衙門) declared two places around the Yongling *fengjindi* that must be maintained for use completely in imperial rituals, which means that these places were considered "imperial private property." The use of "completely in imperial rituals [完全皇室祭產]" is noteworthy here.¹³ As mentioned above, in 1912 the Fengtian civil office had not explicitly clarified whether these forests were "imperial property" or not. Nevertheless, this time, the Fengtian banner office unequivocally declared the areas as imperial property, asserting that they, as representatives of the past-imperial family, held full rights of management over these places for the first time.

Meanwhile, in 1915, the exploitation of Songzi Guanshan officially came under the jurisdiction of a government-supervised, merchant-managed industry. Control over the timber was transferred from the *caimuju* (采木局) to the Changxin Firm (昌新會社). The Changxin Firm was a stock company founded by Gao Erdeng (高爾登) from Zhejiang. This company secured the rights to log trees over Songzi Guanshan in May 1915.¹⁴ Subsequently, in March 1916, the Changxin Firm sent a letter to the Fengtian banner office, informing them that they had acquired the logging rights for the entire forest.¹⁵

The banner office disagreed with this arrangement, asserting that certain areas within Songzi Guanshan should be maintained under the scope of the "imperial property." However, because the exploitation of Songzi Guanshan's forest was considered beneficial to regional development, the Banner Office offered to rent these areas to the Changxin Firm for a rent.¹⁶¹⁴ After a number of negotiations

¹⁰ JC011-02-017408-000018, 1913, Liaoning Provincial Archives, JC011-02-002230-000029, 1915, Liaoning Provincial Archives.

¹¹ JC010-01-007638-000001, 1915, Liaoning Provincial Archives.

¹² JC045-01-011291-000025, 1915, Liaoning Provincial Archives.

¹³ JC045-01-011291-000032, 1915, Liaoning Provincial Archives.

¹⁴ JC045-01-010011-000023, 1916, Liaoning Provincial Archives.

¹⁵ JC010-01-011450-000001, 1916, Liaoning Provincial Archives.

¹⁶ JC010-01-011450-000002, 1916, Liaoning Provincial Archives.

regarding the price, the Changxin Firm eventually agreed to pay the fees to lease the logging rights of the areas deemed “imperial property.” However, these rights remained limited. For example, the Changxin Firm had lease rights of only 20 years, and the Firm had no right to sublease or mortgage these areas.

While the Changxin Firm successfully rented these “imperial property” and paid the rent from 1916 to 1919, but to protect the imperial property, the banner office suddenly withdrawn the logging rights from Changxin firm in 1920. The following is the opinion of the banner office at that time.

According to our research, Songzi Guanshan is associated with the imperial tombs, and there are tens of thousands of pine trees on entire mountain [to be used] as offering. However, the Changxing [Changxin] Firm has only paid an annual rent of 500 *yuan* for these trees and yet they have been cutting and sold at will for the past three years. The Changxin Firm is a deceitful and self-serving merchant [group] that profits greatly, cheats the government, and reaps enormous gains. Their actions are deeply reprehensible. To protect the “imperial property,” they should be clamped down. Now, we are going to dispatch two officials, Xian Jingshan [見敬山] and Li Zhenduo [李振鐸], to conduct an investigation and seal off the area. [...] The trees that have not been cut down by the Changxing (Changxin) Firm are prohibited from being cut down are now to be allowed to grow naturally. The trees that have already been cut but not sold will be strictly confiscated, prohibited from being sold; they will be preserved and used in the repair of the imperial tombs. Therefore, it is crucial that we immediately revoke the contract with the firm (JC010-01-011450-000017, 1920, Liaoning Provincial Archives. Translation mine).

Based on this document, we can see that the banner office believed that Songzi Guanshan was closely associated with the Imperial Tombs. And there were tens of thousands of trees, which means Songzi Guanshan was extremely valuable. Therefore, they regarded the activities of the Changxin Firm as an abuse of the forest resources associated with the imperial tombs. Furthermore, the banner office clearly considered that direct exploitation and resource utilization by themselves would be a more appropriate approach. As a result, the banner office decided to prohibit the felling of any remaining trees and ordered the confiscation of the trees that had already been cut down, to be used in the repair of the imperial tombs.

By then, the banner office thus had ultimately regained full control of the forest, which was considered “imperial property.”

Conclusion

This paper focused on Yongling as a case study and analyzed the management of the imperial tombs' forests in early Republican China, an aspect that has been overlooked in the previous research.

At the end of the Qing Dynasty, the failure to establish a clear system for imperial finances left the private property of the imperial family undefined. The subsequent inability to clearly define the scope of rights within the *Articles of Favorable Treatment* engendered a series of ensuing problems. During the Beiyang government period, there were still no explicit laws or decrees regarding the

recognition of “imperial property.” As a result, the actions of various agencies played a significant role in determining the final recognition of “imperial property.” Over time, the regulations and rules enacted by local government agencies gradually delineated the scope of forests that was considered a part of the “imperial property” and more clearly defined associated rights, such as the right to manage these forests.

The main question raised by this paper was how the forests surrounding the imperial tombs were defined as “imperial property” during the Beiyang government period. As this paper has demonstrated, the definition of “imperial property” was directly related to the movements of local politics. Additionally, this study examined who was responsible for managing these areas and deciding how they would be developed. As shown herein, the management activities of the Songzi Guanshan were jointly overseen by the Fengtian civil Office and the Fengtian banner office of *sanling*. And the banner office, which had long been responsible for overseeing imperial tombs’ management since the Qing Dynasty, maintained that it held the authority to administer the forest, which was recognized as “imperial property.”

Considering the unique nature of Songzi Guanshan, the Fengtian civil office selected two areas rich in pine nuts to maintain the ban on logging. The management of forests within the Yongling *fengjingdi* was also separated from the management of the rest of the mountain. The managements of the Fengtian civil office and the banner office ran in parallel. By invoking the name of *Articles of Favorable Treatment*, the banner office was able to retain control over parts of the forests of Songzi Guanshan within the Yongling *fengjingdi* as “imperial property.” Despite conflicts with other actors such as the Changxin Firm until 1920, the Banner office fully enforced its rights over the forest areas recognized as “imperial property.”

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