STATEMENT OF GRANT PURPOSE
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Manchuria's Modern Bean

Throughout much of the early twentieth century, newspapers around the world routinely featured front-page articles about Manchuria. Between 1904 and 1905, the region (modern-day Northeast China) was the main theater in the Russo-Japanese War. In 1928, Japanese army officers assassinated Zhang Zuolin, the Chinese warlord whose armies controlled much of the area, and in 1931, the Japanese military launched a full-scale invasion of Manchuria. To many outside observers, Japan's actions in Manchuria seemed illogical and arbitrary. A handful of experts, however, argued that Japan's Manchuria policy made perfect sense, if one only understood the ins and outs of the soybean market, the foundation of Manchuria's economy. “Keep your eyes on the [soy]bean,” declared the editor of the New York Times’ Far Eastern Bureau in a 1916 editorial, “and you will not miss the direction of Japanese diplomacy in the ancient patrimony of North China.” Inspired by this and other intriguing observations, my project looks at Manchuria’s colonial history from the spatial perspective of the global soybean market. What would Manchuria’s history from the late nineteenth century to the mid-1950s look like from the vantage point of a soybean?

**Background:** Despite the soybean’s millennia-long history in China, scientists, dieticians, manufacturers, and agronomists in the United States and Europe, among other places, discovered the soybean’s remarkable potential as a foodstuff, industrial material, and fertilizer only in the early 1900s. After 1908, the year the first shipment of soybeans arrived at a European port, global demand for the bean grew exponentially. The soybean had been Manchuria’s chief export for centuries, and the rise in international demand transformed Manchuria into the undisputed center of global soybean production, a position the region would hold until World War Two.

**Methodology:** My study focuses primarily on the actions of three groups: agricultural researchers who staffed the South Manchuria Railway Company’s agricultural research stations in Manchuria, managers who worked for Mitsui Bussan, a Japanese trading company, and Chinese merchants, liangzhan, who acted as middlemen between Chinese producers and international trading companies. I examine these individuals’ decisions at key moments, exploring how and why they made the choices they did and the political, economic, and environmental ramifications of their actions. In other words, I treat these imperial researchers, shipping agents, and merchant go-betweens as political actors who shaped the structures of Japanese imperialism. By comparing chambers of commerce records, contemporaneous market analyses, quarterly reports, popular newspaper accounts, and a variety of other business communications, I aim to show how commodity traders, agricultural researchers, railway administrators, and shipping company managers involved in the transnational soybean trade shaped the everyday experience of Japanese imperialism in Manchuria in the first half of the twentieth century.

**Hypothoses**

1. **Soybeans represent a site of local colonial encounters:** Studying Chinese-Japanese interactions at sites important to the soybean trade, such as agricultural research stations, warehouses, and the Dalian stock exchange, can yield insights into the ways in which the soybean market everyday encounters in colonial Manchuria. To take one example: The South Manchuria Railway Company (SMR), the de facto colonial administration in Manchuria, set up a vast network of agricultural inspection stations, at which inspectors employed by the company would examine bean shipments and assign each shipment a grade based on the quality of that shipment’s beans. Japanese propaganda advertised this inspection system as a prime example of
Japanese-led progress, but because a lower grade meant substantially less money for Chinese producers, inspectors became targets of popular ire in local newspapers and on the street. I will search through chambers of commerce records and official SMR documents for information about the logic behind the creation of these inspection stations and other institutions related to the soybean trade. I will show how and why these new systems became key points of contention.

2). Soybeans offer a window into regional development: A study of the soybean trade can highlight the historical and environmental contingencies of Northeast China’s development. Rivalries between Chinese, Russian, and Japanese companies for commercial access to soybean fields played a significant role in shaping Manchuria’s economic geography. The Japanese-operated SMR, for instance, pursued a strategy of siphoning commercial traffic away from the Liao River and the Chinese port city of Yingkou, which had been the region’s main transportation artery for centuries. The company’s strategy seemed to succeed, as the port city of Dalian, once a small fishing village, emerged as one of East Asia’s principal entrepôts. Using chambers of commerce records, company papers, and newspaper articles, I will piece together the evolution of the systems and structures that facilitated this form of regional development.

3). Soybeans shaped empire and directed the course of global trade: Viewing Manchuria’s history from the perspective of a single commodity market can also show how imperialism did not just affect colonized and colonizer, but had innumerable global ramifications, as well. Such a transnational approach sheds light on the myriad ways in which seemingly unrelated events in far-off places affected the people living in semi-colonial Manchuria, and how decisions made in Manchuria changed agriculture and industry throughout the world. For instance, contemporary commentators credited exports of bean cake from Manchuria for both reviving the Dutch dairy industry and weakening the cotton industry in the American South. Newspapers and documents from Mitsui Bussan and other shipping companies will help to contextualize Manchuria’s place in the trading networks that spanned the globe in the early twentieth century.

Research Plans: To access the documents I need to carry out this project, I plan to conduct ten months of research in Northeast China. I will spend half of my time in Changchun, where I will conduct research at Northeast Normal University Library and the Changchun Municipal Archives. The local gazetteers and chambers of commerce records at these libraries contain valuable information about the local soybean trade that cannot be found elsewhere. Professor Fei Chi of Northeast Normal University, who has done research on related topics, has kindly offered to oversee my research project. I will divide my remaining time between the Liaoning Provincial Archives in Shenyang and the Municipal Archives of Dalian, both of which contain underutilized collections of Japanese- and Chinese-language colonial-era documents. I used Chinese- and Japanese-language sources in my master’s thesis on the same topic, and have taken courses in both advanced Japanese and Chinese, so I have the language skills necessary to carry out my proposed research. While in China, I will maintain close contact with my adviser, Louise Young, via weekly email updates and frequent video calls.

Project Goals: During and after my time in China, I plan to share my research with a diverse group of scholars, including historians interested in comparative imperialism, environmental history, and the history of capitalism; political scientists interested in the relationship between political systems and the capitalist economy; and sociologists and anthropologists interested in the cultural meanings societies attach to the production and consumption of commodities. When I return to the United States, I will turn my findings into a dissertation, which I will later revise for publication as a monograph.