Quarantine Sovereignty during the Pneumonic Plague in Northeast China (November 1910–April 1911)

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Abstract  The pneumonic plague, which spread over Northeast China during the winter of 1910 and the spring of 1911, caused a great many deaths and brought about severe social turmoil. After compulsory quarantine and other epidemic preventative measures were enforced by the Russian and Japanese colonial authorities in both north and south Manchuria, the local government of Northeast China, lacking similar quarantine and epidemic prevention procedures, was under the threat of forced intervention. It had to establish modern public health agencies in a short time following the compulsory quarantine and epidemic prevention methods of the Russian and Japanese colonial authorities, although they caused many social conflicts and confrontations. In this respect, the quarantine and epidemic prevention measures that were implemented at that time can never be simply and absolutely labeled as “progressive.” However, a “sympathetic understanding” can be upheld for the sufferings of the common people, for the various unpleasant but necessary measures taken by the Chinese government in order to safeguard sovereignty and prevent Russian and Japanese intervention, and also for the transformation of public health systems later carried out because of lessons learned from this painful experience.

Keywords  Northeast China, pneumonic plague, quarantine sovereignty, China-Japan confrontation

During the winter of 1910 and the spring of 1911, Northeast China suffered from a raging pneumonic plague, which, according to reports, caused over 60,000 deaths. This plague was one of the most horrifying fulminating infectious diseases ever contracted by human beings, and it was also when, for the first time,
the Chinese government began to adopt quarantine and epidemic prevention concepts introduced from the Western powers and Japan. Therefore, it has become a subject of much scholarly concern. At the end of 1960s, Carl F. Nathan conducted initial research, “Plague Prevention and Politics in Manchuria,” into the epidemic situation of that plague. In the 1990s, the research carried out by Carol Benedict in “New Policy and Public Health of China in Modern Times” and also that of Meshishimashibu named “Pesuto To Kindai Tyuugoku—Eisei No “Seidoka” to Shakai Hennyou” (Pneumonic Plague and Modern China—The Institutionalization of Public Health and Social Changes) both treated this plague as an important case and devoted a whole chapter to it. Since the turn of the new century, research by Sean Hisang-Lin LEI (Sovereignty and the Microscope: Constitution Notifiable Infectious Disease and Containing the Manchuria Plague (2005)), Robert John Perrins (Doctors, Diseases, and Development: Engineering Colonial Public Health in Southern Manchuria (2005)) and also Mark Gamsa (The Epidemic of Pneumonic Plague in Manchuria (2006)) have all jointly contributed to a more meticulous and detailed understanding of this subject. The research by Mark Gamsa is worth the greatest attention. Gamsa not only narrates some previously unknown historical facts, but also criticizes the historiography in regards to that plague, pointing out that past research placed too much attention on politics and Sino-foreign relationships, as well as the development of modern medicine in the West and of the modernization of public health, whilst ignoring the related social evolution and the experiences and feelings of thousands of local people suffering from both plague and poverty. This thesis is devoted to a representation of these voices and ideas that are completely void of any other background features such as class, sex or race.

Mark Gamsa based his criticism of previous research on the Russian materials he read which had not been employed in previous research, including the memoirs of Roger Budberg-Boenninghausen (1867–1926), a Russian doctor in

1 Carl F. Nathan; Carol Benedict, 150–164; Lijima Wataru, 2000; Sean Hisang-Lin LEI, “Sovereignty and the Microscope: Constitution Notifiable Infectious Disease and Containing the Manchuria Plague” (article in press, thanks to the author for granting permission to use this article); Robert John Perrins, “Doctors, Diseases, and Development: Engineering Colonial Public Health in Southern Manchuria, 1905–1926,” in Morris Low ed., 101–123 (Many thanks to Mr. Zhang Zhejia of the Institute of Modern History, Academia Sinica, Taiwan for providing this book); Mark Gamsa, 148–185 (Many thanks to Mr. Qiu Pengsheng of the Institute of History and Philosophy, Academia Sinica, Taiwan for providing this article). In addition, an article named “The Plague in Northeast China from 1910 to 1911 and Measures Adopted by the Government and the Public” is published in Jindaishi yanjiu (Modern Chinese History Studies), 2006, (3), 106–124, some common Chinese materials like Shengjing shiba, and Dongsansheng yishi baogao are used in the article, while the research of some foreign scholars such as Carl F. Nathan and Lijima Wataru did not been noticed. Therefore, the article are not treated as an object of discussion in this research.

2 Mark Gamsa, 183.