

Green shoots in China's rust belt

China's rust belt is fighting back the odds. Northeast China — also called Manchuria in another era when Czarist Russia and imperial Japan battled for dominance along its shores and inner cities — is showing great heart to stage a comeback.

Soon after the Chinese revolution of 1949, the region consolidated as the country's heavy industry base. A frenzied eruption of steel mills, aircraft factories, coal-fired power plants and much more followed, after Mao Zedong sought to leapfrog China into an advanced industrial nation.

Even today, tall chimneys of coal-fired electric plants belch smoke in Shenyang, the capital of the Liaoning province, the heart of China's embattled northeast. But also present in the surroundings are iconic glass and steel towers — the glitzy emblems of China's market-driven rise.

For Mao, planting industry in the northeast was a logical step forward. During their pre-First World War occupation, when Shenyang was called Mukden, the Japanese had sowed the seeds of heavy industry in the region. The northeast had copious natural reserves, including coal and iron ore. A military industrial complex had evolved to feed imperial Japan's militaristic drive.

Not far away were ports such as Dalian — the peninsular dividing line between the Yellow Sea and the Bohai Sea, from where big trading ships could sail to the far corners of the globe. Japan's South Manchuria Railway Company refurbished the route from Mukden to Dalian. One spur of the railway headed to Changchun, further to the northeast. In the 1950s, Changchun became a vast automobile manufacturing centre, earning the coinage "the Detroit of the East". But by the last decade of the 20th century, the northeast's star had waned. Markets began to dry up for goods produced by state-owned enterprises. Post-Mao China had embraced market reforms. Coastal cities such as Shenzhen, Guangzhou and Shanghai were becoming the new stars.

A new wave of industrialisation had started to dawn, powered by an influx of foreign capital and private enterprise, which would soon make China's southeastern coast the workshop of the world.

Transition pangs

Shenyang and its neighbourhood felt the pain of the transition as factories closed, unemployment surged and the looming spectre of poverty drove migrant workers to big cities — the beneficiaries of a new era of globalisation. Since then, there have been several false starts, political scandals and plenty of human strife to get Shenyang back on its feet.

But the green shoots are now pervasive. Nothing showcases Shenyang's riposte better than a BMW plant that has cropped up in the city's once stagnant Tiexi district, the heart of the rust belt. Over 7,000 people work together with an army of orange robots at the plant.

In another district, a Chinese manufacturer is churning out industrial robots. Ten years ago, a heavy thunderstorm that led to massive power disruption prodded Siasun Robot and Automation Company to successfully build an unmanned helicopter that could inspect power lines in extreme weather conditions.

"Make no mistake. Shenyang is very much at the centre of the Made-in-China 2025 drive. New materials, aviation, electric vehicles and robotics will be areas where we will be involved," said a local official, who did not wish to be named.

He was referring to China's next wave of manufacturing that would rely heavily on automation,

leveraging the power of the Internet, Big Data and Artificial Intelligence.

China's northeast, once home for heavy industries, suffered as the country embraced market reforms and new coastal mega cities rose. The region is now fighting back the odds

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