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Historical Legacies and Cinematic Representations of Cross-Border Interactions between China and Russia

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1. Introduction

In recent years, the Amur River has witnessed a significant amount of commercial activity.¹⁾ In fact, since the normalization of Sino-Russian relations in the early 1990s, this river has been the location of vibrant cross-border trade, accompanied by the flow of goods and people. After three decades of ideological hostility—from the 1960s to the 1980s—individual traders and tourists got the opportunity to cross the border and become acquainted with their neighbors. The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 and Chinese economic reforms gradually opened up the border regions between the two countries to international trade, creating new market opportunities for state companies and the private sector. A new social class of peddler traders emerged across the Sino-Soviet border; new urban peddler markets appeared along the border regions of Northeast China and the Russian Far East. The citizens of the border towns of Blagoveshchensk and Heihe, separated by a narrow stretch of the Amur River, became accustomed to each other. With simplified visa regulations, they regularly crossed the border and were able to experience the best (and worst) of each other's culture, cuisine, and social habits.

In the 1990s, this river of trade gradually turned into a friendly border. In May 1991, Moscow and Beijing signed an agreement to resolve all former disputes along the extensive Sino-Russian border. The most difficult part of these negotiations proved to be the Amur River along with its multiple islands. In fact, the joint border demarcation committee took over a decade to demarcate the disputed sections of this border.²⁾ The new principle of “strategic partnership,” according to which relations between the two countries were defined since 1996, helped in the countries' resolution of long standing disagreements about this border and resulted in regular contact and dialogue between provincial governments and societies.³⁾ This new bilateral relationship was based on practical and mutually beneficial considerations such as border security and economic cooperation, and tasks were shared by both countries' central governments.

Despite regular state visits, multilateral agreements, official praise for expanding cross-border trade, and even joint military and naval exercises, the local populations across this border still lacked a genuine appreciation for and understanding of each other's culture and way of life. The question that arises, then, is what makes the people

and local administrations along the Amur border cautious about the degree of openness and transparency in their cross-border ties? Here, I argue that despite official insistence on normal and friendly bilateral cooperation, this region remains haunted by its troubled history of Imperial Russia's territorial ambitions in Manchuria, the highly ideological nature of Sino-Soviet politics, and the post-Cold War differences in political and regional development. Imperialism, revolutions, regime changes, civil wars, the Second World War, and ideological campaigns made it very difficult for politicians, historians, and local societies to come to grips with the turbulent history of their cross-border contacts. Since the 1990s, official, historical narratives in both countries have remained nationalistic, and there is a tendency to reduce their shared history to the actions of state leaders and prominent political figures, as favored by the current political climate. As such, the stories of common people affected by state policies and international conflicts have been given no voice.

At the same time, dialogue about this shared history no longer remains the monopoly of official historians, diplomats, and politicians, but it has entered the realm of film and television. Two television dramas discussed here, *It All Began in Harbin* (*Vsio nachalos'v Kharbine*) (2013) and *My Natasha* (我的娜塔莎) (2012), interweave historical fact and fiction to recreate the daily lives of ordinary Russian and Chinese men and women, their interactions, relationships, and changing fortunes in Harbin in the 1930s and during the war in the border areas in the 1940s, respectively. These cinematic representations of life across the Sino-Soviet/Russian border, past and present, despite their cultural biases and ideological deliberations, tell stories of how insecure the lives of people living along and across this border always were and how little they still know about each other's culture. The genre of television drama allows for a different interpretation of history; at the same time, it shifts the focus from national to provincial and personal aspects of cross-border interactions. The cinematic approach offers new ways of recreating local histories and life on the ground and helps to explain how Russian and Chinese communities today are divided along the lines of history and culture.

2. Imperial Legacies

Imperial Russia's eastward expansion since the seventeenth century brought it into contact with Qing China. After the Treaty of Nerchinsk (1689), for the first time, the approximate eastern section of the border between the two empires was established. According to this treaty, the Qing dynasty laid claim to most of the Amur River basin. The terms of the Burinsky and Kyakhta Treaties, signed in 1727, further delimited the Qing-Russian border and established regulations for cross-border trade (Myasnikov 2004: 27–48). These treaties set the stage for peaceful relations and mutually profitable Kyakhta trade that lasted for over a century. In the mid-nineteenth century, however, Imperial Russia took advantage of the Qing dynasty's weakness during the Arrow War (1856–1860)⁴⁾ and annexed its territory north of the Amur River and east of the Ussuri River, by forcing the Qing state to sign two unequal treaties—the Treaty of Aigun (1858) and the

Treaty of Peking (1860) (Myasnikov 2004: 62–64, 70–78). As a result, the Amur River was divided between two empires: its estuary was under Russian control, its main channel and the Ussuri River became the new Qing-Russian boundary, and its upper tributaries ran through the Qing territory and Mongol lands.

Following these treaties, the Qing government ceased to challenge the Amur River's new status as international border, and no attempt was made to get back their lost territories. The Qing Empire—which had a long history of westward territorial expansion and conquest of culturally alien people from Inner and Central Asia—was internally weakened by the Taiping Rebellion (1851–1864) and reduced to semi-colonial status by European naval powers of England and France. From the 1860s to the 1890s, Imperial Russia established a new administration, towns, seaports, and river ports in its newly acquired territories of the Amur and Maritime regions. State-sponsored settlement programs brought Cossacks and poor peasants from Siberia and European Russia to strengthen Russia's new eastern border. The Manchu rulers of China, concerned about the new threat from its northern neighbor, opened up their traditional homeland in Manchuria to Han-Chinese migrants and settlers after a nearly 200-year ban on their settlement (Paine 1996: 180).

The Chinese colonization of Manchuria was accompanied by the arrival of seasonal laborers, traders, and businesspeople from China proper. Chinese migrants moved to the new frontier towns of the Russian Far East in search of work and a better life. The Qing-Russian eastern frontier region became a place of such vibrant and chaotic trade that the governments of both empires were unable to properly regulate the movement of people, goods (gold, alcohol, opium, and agricultural, animal, and sea products), and services. In fact, before the arrival of the railways, the Russian authorities could not control the economic activities of Chinese trappers, fur dealers, and traders in the forests of the Ussuri region (Arseniev 2004: 107–108). Facing constant frustrations, the regional administration of the Russian Far East had limited success in restricting Chinese migration (Larin 2003: 5–30).

Imperial Russia's economic expansion beyond the Amur River and into Manchuria in the late 1890s was an ambitious colonization project to secure a sphere of influence during the period when several European powers and Imperial Japan had expanded their own spheres of influence along China's coast. The Chinese Eastern Railway (CER), built between 1898 and 1903, became an extension of the Trans-Siberian Railway, linking Moscow with Vladivostok. The CER crossed Manchuria, from Manzhouli (满洲里) to Pogranichnaia via Harbin, and continued on to Vladivostok. Another line, the South Manchurian Railway (SMR) stretched from Harbin to the ice-free sea port of Port Arthur/Lushunkou (旅顺口) in the southern part of the Liaodong Peninsula, which was leased to China in 1898. Russia's aim with the construction of this railway was the long-term economic colonization of Manchuria and the exploitation of its natural resources. The towns built along this railway attracted Russian settlers who moved to Manchuria for lucrative jobs with the CER and its auxiliary enterprises. They brought their families and enjoyed privileged status, protected by extraterritorial rights. Harbin was not only the administrative center of the CER but it also became the city with the highest

concentration of Imperial Russian population, businesses, architecture, and culture in Asia (Zatsepine 2013: 18–23).

However, Imperial Russia's colonization projects in Manchuria were short-lived. In 1904, Imperial Japan proclaimed war on Russia, which was fought in South Manchuria and on the sea nearby. In 1905, Russia was defeated; it lost its influence along the SMR, but retained its position along the CER and in North Manchuria. Russian military presence in Manchuria diminished after this war, but the Russian administration of the CER, its employees, and businesses remained intact for several decades, long after the collapse of the Qing and Russian Empires in 1911 and 1917, respectively.

These historical developments created long-standing animosity between the Russian/Soviet and Chinese governments and societies in the twentieth century. Imperial Russia's territorial expansionism and railway imperialism had been accompanied by military invasion and brute force. In 1900, Imperial Russia burned Qing frontier settlements and killed Qing subjects during their military campaign to suppress the Boxer rebellion that had spread to Manchuria. As a result, the destructive policies of Imperial Russia in Manchuria remained fixed in the minds of Chinese nationalists with different political affiliations.⁵⁾ While the construction and operation of the CER created job opportunities for Chinese migrants and contributed to the modernization of Manchuria, the relationship between the two empires was unequal and based on the notion of the cultural superiority of European civilization over that of Asia. This view was shared among Imperial Russian subjects in the Russian Far East and in Manchuria. The CER and other railway lines in the Russian Far East, along the Amur and Ussuri border, were built predominantly by cheap Chinese contract labor. The presence of Chinese migrants (farmers, seasonal laborers, and traders) on the Russian side of the Amur border was tolerated only because the Russian Far East always had a shortage of workers and agricultural products, which Manchuria provided at low cost. Feelings of xenophobia toward Chinese migrants—widespread in the Russian Far East during the last decades of the Russian empire—resurfaced a century later, following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, when the Russian Far East was struggling with issues such as declining population, economic stagnation, and official corruption, making it easy to blame Chinese migrants for local economic and social problems (Zatsepine 2002: 20). The contribution of Chinese workers, farmers, and traders to the economic development of the Russian Far East was neither praised nor properly acknowledged.

3. Soviet and Chinese States, Political Change, and Borderland Communities

In the twentieth century, the political regimes in China and Russia changed twice; yet, there were some striking parallels between both countries' historical developments. In Russia, the October Revolution (1917) ended 304 years of the Romanov dynasty and brought the Bolsheviks into power. After the Civil War (1918–1922), the Bolsheviks established the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, which lasted for 69 years until its collapse in August 1991, when it was replaced by the Russian Federation. In China, the Xinhai Revolution (1911) marked the end of 365 years of the Qing dynasty and the

establishment of Republican China (1912–1949). Both the Soviet Union and Republican China were profoundly affected by the Second World War (1939–1945), suffering enormous casualties and immense destruction. Parts of their territories were occupied by Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan.⁶⁾ In China, the War of Resistance against Japan (1937–1945) intensified civil conflict between the Nationalist government and the Communists, eventually culminating in the Civil War (1945–1949). The Chinese Communists won this war, pushed the Nationalist government into exile, and established the People's Republic of China, whose government and administration were modelled on that of the Soviet Union. The regime changes in both countries were accompanied by brutal civil wars, warlord rule, and radical political or economic reforms that dramatically affected borderland societies. Long periods of lawlessness and chaos were followed by the decades of war, political repression, forced migrations, ideological campaigns, and state interference in every aspect of people's lives.

During the twentieth century, the Chinese and Russian governments adopted an attitude of ambivalence toward their countries' shared borders. The movement of people across the Amur River was determined by existing bilateral relations and by the ability of regional administrations to reinforce border control. During the Warlord Era in Republican China (1912–1928), the eastern section of the Sino-Russian border remained penetrable. The October Revolution and Civil War in Russia brought defeated White Russian armies and émigrés to Manchuria. Many of them stayed for decades. As the population of Manchuria grew, Chinese laborers and traders maintained ties with Chinese communities in the border towns of the Russian Far East.

Violence and military conflict were aspects of everyday life for people in the Amur border region. In the late 1920s, Manchuria became the cradle of international conflict, where Chinese, Soviet, and Japanese interests clashed. The first serious standoff between the Soviet and Republican governments occurred in 1929, when disagreements over the joint management of the CER resulted in a border conflict.⁷⁾ The political situation in this region further deteriorated after Imperial Japan occupied Manchuria in 1931 and established the puppet state of Manchukuo (1932–1945). In 1937, when Japan started a full-scale war on Chinese territory, Soviet leader Joseph Stalin, fearing a possible Japanese invasion of the Russian Far East, ordered the resettlement or deportation of people with “questionable loyalties” living near the Sino-Soviet border, including ethnic Koreans and Chinese.⁸⁾ The Amur border was subsequently militarized and became the scene of severe border clashes. After the Second World War, the region remained heavily regulated, even after the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949, when relations between the two socialist states were at their best.

While ideology did affect the political climate in the borderlands and was important in bilateral relations, it was geopolitics and national interests—more than Marxism-Leninism—that determined Soviet policies in China and Beijing's response to them. Overreliance on Soviet ideology, expertise, financial support, and leadership during the early stages of the Cold War cost the People's Republic dearly when the relationship between the two countries deteriorated. In 1960, the Soviet Union recalled its experts and stopped all technical assistance to China, resulting in nearly three decades of Sino-Soviet

estrangement. In 1969, during the Cultural Revolution, ideological animosity turned into armed conflict along the Sino-Soviet border on the Ussuri River, when Chinese troops opened fire on a Soviet border patrol on Zhenbao/Damansky Island (珍宝岛), and Soviet troops retaliated.⁹⁾ Military build-up along this border brought the former ideological allies to the brink of war. Hostility continued for the rest of the Cultural Revolution and thereafter. Both countries denounced anything associated with Sino-Soviet politics and history. The Chinese leadership condemned Imperial Russia's past encroachment on Qing territory and the Soviet "revisionism" of Marxism-Leninism during Khrushchev's (1953–1964) and Brezhnev's (1964–1982) leadership. The generation of people who were directly involved in different aspects of Sino-Soviet cooperation in the 1950s were purged in China, lost their careers in the Soviet Union, and were forced to renounce each other and re-invent their careers.

For most of the twentieth century, the Russian Far East and Manchuria were not hospitable places to live. The political situation was unpredictable, and living conditions were challenging (Reardon-Anderson 2005: 153–159). Cold winters and wet summers required years of adjustment for newcomers. Not a single generation was spared from war, revolution, political campaigns, banditry, and persecution. Even the fates of prominent administrators, businesspeople, and well-paid professionals changed during times of political upheaval or military conflict, resulting in the loss of their jobs, property, freedom, or lives. Moreover, the central governments at different times, maintained strong prejudices against their borderland regions. During the later stages of its imperial history, the Russian Far East shared Siberia's reputation as a place for banishment; people were sent to labor camps known as the *katorga*, or, during Soviet times, the *gulag*. In modern Chinese history, Manchuria served a similar purpose. For example, in 1958, the government of the People's Republic of China banished the victims of anti-Rightist campaigns, intellectuals, and administrators to army farms in *Beidahuang* (北大荒, the Great Northern Wilderness), located in the north of the Heilongjiang province in Manchuria, where they underwent forced labor in harsh conditions (Wang Ning 2007: 206–212).

The deterioration of Sino-Soviet relations from the 1960s to the end of the 1980s alienated local communities living across the Sino-Soviet border. Not surprisingly, when relations between the two countries were formally normalized after years of negotiations, during Mikhail Gorbachev's visit to China in May 1989, it proved to be easier to adopt a pragmatic, economic relationship than to fix ideological differences and ignore historical antagonisms. Ultimately, the decline of the international socialist system further affected the two countries. While in Russia, the one-party state collapsed with the disintegration of the Soviet Union in December 1991, the Chinese Communist Party continued its rule for more than six decades, using a combination of the single-party state model and the ideology of "socialism with Chinese characteristics".¹⁰⁾

In the 1990s, people living along the vast Amur River started to work, travel, and study across the border, learning about each other and re-discovering their shared past. Despite persistent negative stereotypes about each other's historical past and culture—reinforced by nationalist-minded politicians and ideologues on both sides of the border—

the dialogue about local and cross-border history was no longer the monopoly of the state. Social and cultural historians, intellectuals, and the media now explored life on the ground in ways unthinkable in the past. Yet, the writing of the social and ethnographic history of this region is complicated by the fact that many historical voices of local people—women, Chinese peasants, bandits, seasonal workers, ordinary Cossacks, merchants, indigenous people and minor officials—are missing in official records and difficult to reconstruct. This is partly because their lives were never considered important to the provincial or regional authorities and partly because each political regime was selective about the kind of history it wanted to preserve. Furthermore, the social histories of the frontier society and the borderlands cannot be fully grasped by urban-centered authorities and intellectuals. Available official, historical records still suffer from ideological, urban, social, and cultural biases when it comes to analyzing ordinary lives and indigenous cultures in the borderlands.

How do recent cultural productions in China and Russia depict the history of the borderland communities in the Russian Far East and Manchuria? Do they fall into the same traps as national-centered historical narratives? The two television dramas discussed below—*It All Began in Harbin* and *My Natasha*—do not have much in common, except that they were produced after 1991, in the new political climate when bilateral relations were normalized. These dramas pay particular attention to life on the ground, and they depict the lives of ordinary people affected by war and politics. The protagonists in both dramas cross the border into an unknown society and culture that fascinates and alienates them, and changes their lives to the point of political, material, and emotional no return. These television series, in a semi-fictional way, tell the stories of how people adjust to changing personal and political circumstances and overcome their hardships. People are depicted as unsuspecting victims of national and international politics.

3.1 *It All Began in Harbin*

This television drama was produced by Leonid Zisov (Zisman) in 2012 and released on the state television Channel “Russia” in 2013.¹¹⁾ The drama is based on real historical events described in the memoirs of Soviet engineer Boris Khristenko (1919–1998). He was born in Vladivostok and lived with his family in Harbin from 1926 to 1934, where his father worked as a controller at the CER, then under joint Sino-Soviet management¹²⁾ (Khristenko 2009). Three parts of this eight-part television drama describe the life of Boris Yebozhenko (drawn from Khristenko’s experiences) and his family in Harbin, from 1929 to 1934.

Boris is a typical Russian teenager whose family life revolves around the CER. He wants to become a locomotive engineer and one day return to the Soviet Union. In 1929, the fate of his family starts to change: his father loses his job after being accused of disloyalty to the Soviet authorities during the political crisis between the Soviet Union and the Chinese government over increasing Soviet influence on the CER. The Russian community in Harbin is split among hostile groups of former Imperial Russian employees, White Russians, and the Soviet employees of the CER. These divisions add pressure to the daily lives of Boris, his brother, and his father. Harbin is occupied by

Japan in 1931, and the Russian community lives in uncertainty. Boris and his father survive by doing odd jobs, while his mother becomes increasingly anxious about the family's future. When the Soviet Union sells the railway to Japan-controlled Manchukuo, their family is ordered to return to the Soviet Union along with other Soviet CER employees and their families.¹³⁾

Political change also affects Boris' personal life. He falls in love with Lyudmila Yerzhanova, the daughter of the CER's Head of Operations. Forced by circumstances, Lyudmila attempts to run away with a former officer from White Admiral Alexander Kolchak's army; instead, she is arrested and sent to the Soviet gulag. For Boris, the pain of separation from her is further aggravated by the fate of his family upon their return to the Soviet Union. In 1937, his entire family becomes victims of Stalin's repressions. Boris is arrested, accused of espionage, and spends a decade in labor camps. In 1958, after ten years of working in factories, he slowly starts to rebuild his life (Kazakov 2010).

This television drama mostly focuses on Russian Harbin, despite the fact that in Republican China, Harbin's Chinese residents far outnumbered the Russians or any other cultural group. Chinese characters appear only occasionally, as Chinese railway administrators, police officers, car salesmen and *taijiquan* (太极拳) practitioners. In one unexpected scene, Lyudmila brings Boris to an opium den where they spot Empress Wanrong, the estranged wife of Manchukuo's puppet emperor, Henry Puyi (r. 1935–1945). The Yebozhenkos and other Russian families have little interaction with the Chinese citizens of Harbin. For both “White” and “Red” Russians, China barely exists. The Russians are consumed by their own internal tensions, by the growing threat from the Japanese occupation, and by the uncertainty of life back in the Soviet Union. Overall, this television drama is an attempt to recreate the life of the Russian community outside its international borders. The tragedy of the Yebozhenko family has less to do with China than to do with Stalin's reign of terror that affected innocent people. This television drama explores the different personal, social, and cultural dimensions of Russian and Soviet identity outside the national borders of the Soviet Union, ignoring the conflicting legacy of Imperial and Soviet Russia's claim over the CER and Harbin. This insensitivity to the historical developments in Manchuria—which was predominantly Chinese—is consistent with the present-day attitudes of Russians living in the border towns of the Russian Far East as well as among the Russian trading communities in Chinese cities.

3.2 My Natasha

This 41-part television drama, directed by Guo Jingyu, is based on a screenplay by prominent writer Gao Mantang. *My Natasha* is an epic love story spanning 50 years, from the early 1940s to the late 1980s; it is the love story between a Chinese Communist guerrilla soldier, Pang Tiande, and a Soviet military intelligence officer, Natalia Nikolaevna Petrova (Natasha). They meet each other at the height of the Sino-Japanese War, when the Soviet border patrol captures a group of Chinese guerrilla fighters escaping from Japanese-occupied Northern Manchuria. Tiande remains on Soviet territory to be trained in Soviet guerrilla warfare by Natasha. At first, he feels alienated by

Natasha's strong and independent character, but as he gradually discovers her humane side, they become more than friends. They eventually fall in love when on a secret mission to Manchuria, disguised as a married couple engaged in petty trade.¹⁴⁾

Upon completing their mission, Natasha returns to Russia, while the Soviet Army sends Tiande to the Western front to fight Nazi Germany. A few years later, he returns to Manchuria to infiltrate the Japanese military command. After initial success, his identity is exposed, and he is arrested and imprisoned. He spends the final years of the war in the infamous Unit 731 outside Harbin, where he becomes the victim of Japanese biological experiments. When the war ends in 1945, the Soviet army occupies Manchuria and releases all the prisoners. He survives the war by sheer luck after being rescued by a former Japanese military nurse, who takes care of him and brings him to his parents' house, where both of them eventually remain.

Tiande's father, a prominent local merchant, finds it difficult to understand his son, as he disappeared for years, and upon his return, is pursued by two foreign women, one Russian, and one Japanese. He is unaware of Tiande's Communist connections, but starts to suspect them when Natasha shows up at his house one day dressed in the Soviet military uniform and looking for his son. He objects to Tiande's affair with Natasha and tries to prevent them from being together. He is a traditional Chinese man, and his relationship with his son is guided by Confucian values. Tiande, on the other hand, is divided between his obligation of filial piety, his love for Natasha, and his commitment to the Communist cause.

After the establishment of the People's Republic, Tiande fully recovers, demobilizes from the army, and becomes a factory worker. He corresponds with Natasha, and they promise to meet again. An opportunity presents itself in the mid-1950s, when she returns to Manchuria as a Soviet engineer to oversee the transfer of Soviet technology in the factory where Tiande works. This time, they are determined to marry, despite opposition from his father and the Communist factory leaders. However, fate separates them again after a few years when Sino-Soviet relations deteriorate, and Natasha, like other Soviet experts, is ordered to leave China on the eve of their planned wedding.

Their unconditional love becomes the high point of this drama. Natasha and Tiande are determined to meet against all odds. They both make an effort to move closer to each other. Despite growing tensions along the Sino-Soviet border, they find a secret spot along the river (possibly the Ussuri River, or its southern extension) where the gap between the two shores is narrow. This is the same place where, many years ago, they promised to be together after the war. Natasha buys a peasant's log hut overlooking the river, while Tiande stays with a family of fishermen on the opposite bank. One chilly night, she swims across the river, spends the night with him, and becomes pregnant. Soon afterward, he is arrested by Chinese border troops and sent for investigation.

This time around, they lose each other for over two decades, during which time communication between their countries breaks down. Meanwhile, Tiande fulfills his father's last wish and marries the Japanese nurse, and they have a daughter. But Tiande's feelings for Natasha remain strong. During the late 1980s, when Sino-Soviet relations improve, the border re-opens for trade and travel. Tiande and Natasha's grown-up son,

who lives with Natasha, helps her to find Tiande. In the final scene at the border-crossing station, they all meet: Natasha, Tiande, their son, and his daughter. Tiande's lifelong search for happiness is over. He is loved by two women, has two children, and is a successful businessman. For the women who vied for his affection all their lives, this ending is awkward; the reunification is yet another reminder of their tortured love triangle.

My Natasha is a work of fiction. The narrative neither pretends to be historically accurate, nor does it contradict or challenge the official version of modern Chinese history. For example, the narrative, which spans nearly half a century in 41 episodes, glosses over the period of the Civil War (1945–1949), the political campaigns of the early 1950s, and the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), all of which could have been the cause of Tiande being persecuted for his ties with foreign women. His father could also have been purged for his bourgeois past. The Japanese nurse living with their family could have been thrown into prison as a possible spy and wartime enemy. In this television drama, the complex history of war-time Manchuria is simplified, the heroism of the underground Communist guerilla fighters is highlighted, local collaborators with the Manchukuo regime are condemned, and the role of Nationalist forces is downplayed. Early links between Chinese and Soviet Communist fighters are highlighted, reminding the audience about the era when Soviet support for Chinese Communists was crucial for China's victory in the War of Resistance against Japan and in the Civil War against the Nationalist Government.

China's national destiny serves as a backdrop for Tiande and Natasha's cross-border romance, which dominates the narrative. The drama portrays the dilemmas they faced: On one hand, they are devoted to the Communist cause and believe in international Bolshevik solidarity, but on the other hand, the politics and ideological divisions between their countries prevent them from being together. They also have to struggle with cultural differences such as language, religion, social norms, and hierarchical relations within the family. Natasha, despite her efforts, is never accepted by Tiande's father. Tiande, on the other hand, refuses to go to the Soviet Union and marry Natasha there, even when Sino-Soviet relations are good. The changing circumstances on each side of the border in the 1960s make their marriage impossible. When they promise to marry each other during the war, they view their love as a symbol of friendship between Chinese and Russian Communists and their respective states (the Communist victory in China is portrayed as the inevitable outcome of the Communist struggle). However, even though they sacrifice their lives for the national cause, the Party and state prevent them from being together. The barbed wire running over the frozen river in winter, and two individuals facing each other across it, is one of the most haunting images in this drama, symbolizing the dominant power of the state over the lives of two individuals.



Figure 1 *My Natasha*, original poster.



Figure 2 Scene at the river: Natasha and Tiande pledge to love each other.
 HDVD Source: *Wode Natasha* (My Natasha) (Guangzhou: Guangzhou bona wenhua chuanbo youxian gongsi, 2012)

4. Conclusion

Historical accounts of the Sino-Russian/Soviet borderlands have been dominated by empire/nation-centered narratives. The focus on political, diplomatic, military and, most recently, economic aspects of cross-border interactions diminishes the role played by individuals, their interactions, and their culture, all of which function as independent factors in the formation of borderland societies.

Since the 1990s, historical television dramas have gained so much popularity in China and Russia that they have affected people's perceptions about their own history and about each other.¹⁵⁾ While traditional historians of Sino-Russian relations may not take this medium seriously, for a cultural and social historian, it can offer new perspectives on the history of the frontier/borderland societies. Individual stories, the feelings and emotions of ordinary people, and their responses to changing political circumstances are still omitted from official historical narratives, guided as they are by concerns about historical and political correctness. In Far East Russia and Northeast China, the dialogue between historians about the shared history of their regions is still controlled by the state and colored by nationalist sentiments.

Personal memories, however, cannot be wiped out as fast as changing political regimes, repressive policies, and shifting ideologies. Each generation of people, affected by transformative events such as civil or world wars, revolutions, economic hardships, political repression, and forced resettlement remember them in unique ways and pass on those memories to subsequent generations in ways different from state propaganda or official histories. People living in close proximity to each other, but separated by a border, have a double burden of coping with historical interpretations: they have to come

to grips with the history of their own generation, place, region, or country before they can understand the history of their neighbors across the border.

The ghosts of history still haunt local communities along the Amur River. Russian Imperial sentiments take on different forms—as the statue of the expansionist Count Muraviev-Amursky overlooking the river in Khabarovsk, as a revival of the Cossack spirit and the new dominant role of the Orthodox Christian church, which has built a chapel on one of the formerly disputed islands between Khabarovsk and Fuyuan. On the Chinese side, the Aihun Historical Museum in Heihe (黑河市瑗瑯历史陈列馆) tells the story of lost territories and destroyed local communities whose suffering was a result of Imperial Russia's aggression toward the Qing territory. Despite the current “strategic partnership” between the two countries, marriages between Russian and Chinese citizens is discouraged by central and local governments on both sides of the border. The bridge across the Amur River between Heihe and Blagoveshchensk, planned since the 1990s, has never materialized. State-sponsored mistrust, reinforced by provincial administrations, prevents dialogue between the local populations who continue to live in isolated cultural and political worlds. It is no wonder, then, that cinematic fantasies about this border invoke different nostalgias: Russian Harbin versus two Communist lovers divided by the river and by history itself.

Notes

- 1) The scope of this paper is limited to the eastern section of the Sino-Russian border and to the discussion of how the Russian and Chinese communities living on both sides of the Amur and Ussuri Rivers were affected by the turbulent history of their shared border.
- 2) The eastern section of the Sino-Soviet border was demarcated from 1992 to 1999 on the basis of two Sino-Soviet government agreements signed in 1991 and 1994. In October 2004, China and Russia signed an agreement fixing the entire 4,300-kilometer-long border, including two disputed islands at the confluence of the Amur and Ussuri Rivers (Xinhua News Agency 2004).
- 3) In Beijing, in April 1996, Chinese President Jiang Zemin and Russian President Boris Yeltsin formalized the principle of “strategic partnership of equality, mutual confidence and mutual coordination directed toward the twenty-first century” (Rong 1999: 13).
- 4) The British fleet defeated China in the First Opium War (1839–1842). The Arrow War is also known as the Second Opium War, which Qing China fought with Anglo-French forces. After the two Opium Wars, China was forced to open its ports to international trade, a clause from the unequal treaties signed with European powers.
- 5) For information on early protest movements against Imperial Russia's policies in China, see Yang Tianshi (Yang 2007: 333–344). The issue of China losing its territories to Imperial Russia was widely publicized by Republican and Communist governments in China and downplayed by the Soviet leadership (Kapitsa 1979: 383–388).
- 6) From 1932 to 1945, the Soviet Union shared its eastern border with the Japanese-controlled puppet state of Manchukuo, where the authority of the Chinese Nationalist government ceased to exist.
- 7) In 1924, China's Nationalist government diplomatically recognized the Soviet Union.

Following this, both sides negotiated the joint management of the CER, when real power in Manchuria was controlled by the warlord Zhang Zuolin. Tensions between the government of Chiang Kai-shek and the Soviet Union over Soviet support for the Chinese communists resulted in border clashes, the arrest of the Soviet administration of the CER, and the temporary breakdown of diplomatic relations.

- 8) In 1937, more than 170,000 ethnic Koreans living in the Far East were forcefully resettled in Kazakhstan and Central Asian republics. The following year witnessed the resettlement of nearly 11,000 Chinese migrants living near the eastern section of the Sino-Soviet eastern border. More than half of them were repatriated to China, while the rest were either sent to labor camps or to Kazakhstan. See Larin A.G. *Kitaittsy v Rossii: vchera i segodnya*, 148–150.
- 9) This was the most publicized Sino-Soviet military border incident. Official Chinese and Soviet sources vary with regard to the number of border incidents. The People's Liberation Army (PLA) sources cite nearly 4,200 incidents from 1964 to 1969. Soviet diplomats mention about 8,690 cases from 1965 to 1968 (Kireev 2006: 92).
- 10) The term “socialism with Chinese characteristics” (中国特色社会主义) was first put forth by Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping (1904–1997) at the 12th National Congress in 1982, which marked the Chinese government's departure from a Maoist planned economy and the beginning of market-oriented economic reforms within the socialist system. This term was widely used after 1987 (Zhao 1987: 1).
- 11) The television drama was produced by the Russian film studio “Kobura”; the screenplay was written by Eduard Volodarsky.
- 12) Khristenko's memoir covers his family history from 1913 to 1958. The Harbin period of Khristenko's life occupies only part of this book; it describes his life in Harbin as a teenager studying at the technical college attached to the CER. When the CER was sold to Japan in 1935, his family moved back to the Soviet Union, and all his family members fell victim to Stalin's repressions. From 1937 to 1947, Boris was imprisoned and sent to prison camps. After his release and rehabilitation in 1958, he worked as an engineer, obtained a university degree, and taught at the Chelyabinsk Polytechnic Institute.
- 13) According to this television drama, 150,000 CER Soviet employees and their families were repatriated from Harbin to the Soviet Union. Official Soviet sources place this number at 6,000 families, or 20,000 people. See “Postanovlenie Komissii TsKVRP (B) i CNK SSSR po zheleznodorozhnomu transportu” (The Resolution of the Commission of the Central Committee of the All-Russia Bolshevik Party and of the Soviet of the People's Commissars about Railway Transportation) (Ledovsky, Mirovitskaia and Myasnikov 2010: 404).
- 14) My summary of this television drama is taken from the following DVD version: *Wode Natasha* (My Natasha) (Guangzhou: Guangdong jiaying yinxiang chubanshe youxian gongsi, 2012).
- 15) The boom in television drama productions is especially remarkable in China, where dynastic histories and depictions of the War of Resistance against Japan and the Civil War of 1945–1949 dominate this genre of historical drama.

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