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Northeast Asian Borders: History, Politics, and Local Societies

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1. Introduction¹⁾

Over the last two decades, following the implosion of the Soviet Union, the disciplines of anthropology, sociology, and political science have witnessed a sudden efflorescence of studies focused on borders. Much of this vast literature has been concerned with regions of the European Union, North America, and the Balkans. Today, however, the focus of global geopolitics is shifting to Northeast Asia. The main players—China and Russia—are former influential empires with long-standing disputes, with each other, and with neighboring countries. Both of these great powers are changing rapidly, and this is especially true of China, whose influence in the region and in the world is growing. Russia, in contrast, overestimated its own strength and therefore its potential role in the political arena, and underestimated the enduring strength of the United States and Europe. Russia also misjudged China’s ability to learn diplomacy (Yang 2012: 2), and remains hopeful of being able to counterbalance China’s influence in the region. Analyses of future relations between Russia and China have been cautious, pointing to “elements of unevenness in their relations,” and suggesting that the “next decades will be marked by greater challenges” (Rozman 2010: 15).

Soviet *perestroika* brought numerous positive changes to bilateral political relations between China and Russia. In particular, it led to the signing of an agreement on the eastern border between the Russian Federation and the People’s Republic of China (PRC), and to the demarcation of the Russian/Chinese border, finalized in 2008. In 1996, Russia and China signed a bilateral declaration in support of a “strategic partnership,” insisting that “cross-border and inter-regional collaboration and cooperation between the two countries” would become “an important part of the Sino-Russian good-neighborliness, friendship and mutually beneficial cooperation” (Chinese-Russian Joint Declaration²⁾).

This declaration introduced a new turn in the development of bilateral relations, and rapidly changed social and economic living conditions along the Russian-Chinese border. At the same time, two-way flows of resources, people, and ideas across this border led to the emergence of transnationalism in this region. In their search for a national identity, Russians questioned the very integrity of their territory. Radical Russian politicians expressed the fear that Moscow might eventually lose control of the Russian Far East

and Siberia. Following the 1991 agreement, when Russia had to address territorial disputes with China, increasing Chinese migration to Russian territories created a dominant fear, and social tensions closely echoed regional campaigns against a “territorial transfer” to China (Iwashita 2004: 44). During Vladimir Putin’s presidency (2000–2008) regional authorities were barred from interfering in international affairs, which helped to reduce anti-Chinese tensions in the Far East, and normalize economic activities between the two countries (Rozman 2010: 21). In both countries, state dominance in cross-border activities is regarded as necessary for maintaining stable borders.

In the early 1990s, after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War, some scholars assumed that national borders were declining in significance, and that the world would increasingly become borderless (Appadurai 1996). What many interdisciplinary researchers have shown, however, is that borders remain just as important, even when they are less heavily guarded and militarized (Simmons 2005; Donnan and Wilson 1994, 1999, 2010; Wilson and Donnan 1998). The border between the United States and Canada, for instance, is one of the most open in the world, yet two distant Canadian provinces trade more with each other than with a contiguous US state (Alesina and Spolaore 2003).

It is not altogether obvious why Russia wants to keep the door mostly shut, while China wants it mostly open. Our preliminary research suggests that Russia and China feel very differently about their borders. If both countries regard them as a source of commercial opportunities, Russia remains wary about the transformation of its Far East into China’s “raw materials appendage” (Kuhrt 2007). Frustrated by the slow pace of cross-border cooperation, China has turned some border cities, such as Heihe and Manzhouli, into free-trade areas, with prices that are far lower than those in Russia, enabling Russians to visit the city without a visa, to access educational opportunities, and even to purchase real estate (Wishnick 2005), thus creating a new hybrid space. In contrast, Russian frontier districts have strict quotas for Chinese immigrants; the construction of a new bridge over the Amur is being delayed. Moscow politicians and regional governors continue to whip up fears of a Chinese “invasion” and reminders of China’s territorial ambitions over extensive lands that were historically Chinese, such as the Primorye region (Alexseev 2006; Dyatlov 2008, 2009).

From 2010 to 2011, the Mongolia and Inner Asia Studies Unit (MIASU) at the University of Cambridge conducted a pilot research project focused on border interactions between three countries—Russia, China, and Mongolia—under the supervision of Professor Caroline Humphrey. This preliminary network identified key areas where new research is required, notably a comparative analysis of border cities. One of the results of this work is the book “Frontier Encounters: Knowledge and Practice at the Russian, Chinese and Mongolian Border” (Billé, Delaplace, and Humphrey 2012).

In 2012, MIASU initiated a three-year Sino-Russian border project (2012–2015)—“Where Rising Powers Meet: China and Russia at Their North Asian Border”—also under the leadership of Professor Humphrey. The significance of this project extends far beyond economic interests, for government leaders in both Russia and China are eager to portray their countries as civilizations. There is intense debate about their multiethnic

characters, and a clear drive toward political homogenization. For example, China is implementing administrative divisions based on territories rather than current ethnicities, while Russia is amalgamating small ethnic-based units into larger provinces. A comparison of the cultural politics behind these administrative processes not only reveals trends affecting minorities throughout Russia and China, but also points to emergent state aspirations. Important differences exist in how these Russian anxieties about Chinese expansion are conceptualized in Moscow, and in the adjacent regions to the border (Dyatlov 2008; see also Kuhrt 2007), with increased levels of anxiety about, and ignorance of the true situation, along with a feeling of greater separation from China.

A conference titled “The Russian–Chinese Border: A ‘Strategic Partnership’ in a Mosaic of Indigenous Societies” was held in January 2014, at the National Museum of Ethnology (Osaka, Japan), to promote this research project, particularly in regard to its relationship with the Japanese Border Studies Project led by Professor Iwashita, Slavic Research Center, Hokkaido University, and to emphasize the ethnologically complex situation in which Japanese achievements have accumulated. Participants from several countries discussed a variety of issues concerning the Sino-Russian border, such as international relations and economic collaborations, the life experiences of people separated by the border, and their memories of the border zone. To facilitate a comparative analysis, and document determinate variations between states and peoples, the conference included case studies from other parts of Northeast Asia.

2. Russian–Chinese Relations and the Cooperation Program

In the second chapter of this book, Akihiro Iwashita argues that the lessons from 1990 are crucial to understanding the real nature of the relationship between the two countries, and that there is the need to exercise caution when forecasting any Sino-Russian international alliance. Neither the opening and control of the border, nor the flow of goods and people between the two countries, has contributed to the successful development of a “strategic partnership,” which many had considered a means for creating a “multipolar world,” to prevent global dominance by the United States.

In his contribution, Iwashita shows that contradictory perceptions of China continue to prevail in Russia, resulting in little consensus among experts in the assessment of the nature of this bilateral relationship. Indeed, one quite often hears extreme comments such as, “China and Russia are friends,” or, “we are enemies.” China, in contrast, has “officially advanced a ‘smart’ concept of ‘new thinking’ in international relations in the post-Cold War period.” Chinese experts on Russia also show little consensus on the “quality” of Sino-Russian relations, and in the international arena Sino-Russian partnerships remain plagued by contentious issues such as China’s ambivalence, following Russia’s “invasion” of Ukraine, and Russia’s support for Taiwan and Tibet.

As Iwashita points out, Sino-Russian relations are easily influenced by the United States, and one can hardly speak of genuine rapprochement between the two countries as a counterweight to the United States on a global scale. Nonetheless, the current stability in the Sino-Russian relations is greatly preferable to the previous period of conflict, and

stability in Eurasia will be more beneficial to American interests than regional instability and disorder.

The second chapter by Cheng Yang further examines the evolution of bilateral relations between Russia and China. As the author shows, when examining issues of development with China, Russia mainly fears the marginalization of its interests. Russian experts believe that as a result of developing closer ties with the United States and Western countries, China may adopt a policy of unilateralism, and neglect Russia's interests. In fact, the strengthening of regional relations between China and Central Asian countries tends to be perceived as an encroachment on Russia's interests. At the same time, as noted by Cheng Yang, some Russian experts believe that a conflict between China and the United States is inevitable, and that it will lead to key changes in the international order over the next twenty years, to the benefit of Russia, which will act as counterweight between China and the United States.

Compared to the relationship between the United States and its allies, Sino-Russian relations are underdeveloped, but Russia and the United States may become closer partners in the future. In 2009, Russia and China reached new levels of cooperation and shifted their attention to transboundary development and cooperation. To achieve this aim, a "Program of Cooperation between the People's Republic of China, Northeast China, and the Far East and Eastern Siberia, Russian Federation 2009–2018," was signed by both parties. According to Cheng Yang, this program of cooperation allowed a change in the direction of Russian state interests toward the Far East and Siberia, and for China became an opportunity to switch the vector of economic international cooperation from traditional European partners in the west to its "Northern neighbor."

While these changes are promising, systemic issues survive, and outlooks differ drastically. Russia continues to support its outlying regions from the center, while China allows its northern regions to develop according to market principles. Implementation of the Program also revealed internal problems for both countries. Russia's bureaucratic institutions have adapted poorly to new challenges. The transience of officials has slowed work on the Program, and rendered governmental institutions involved in its implementation, such as the Department of the Far East, highly ineffective.

In China, officials face other difficulties. Despite the fact that China and Russia share the world's longest border, the foreign partners most beneficial for the two Chinese northern provinces of Jilin and Liaoning are Japan and South Korea, not Russia. Nonetheless, in "central government" discourse, officials in China's northern provinces continue to speak confidently about the Program's implementation. This discursive eagerness has led to negative reactions and cause for concern in Russia. In addition, a profound lack of knowledge of one another's cultural norms and traditions still complicates the development of the labor service market. Therefore, despite the fact that a labor force is urgently needed to work abandoned land in eastern Russia, Chinese workers, who are interested in working there, cannot enter these labor markets.

Ghosts from the past have also cast a shadow over implementation of the Program—due to what Cheng Yang refers to as "cold war thinking." For example, when constructing infrastructure in border areas, Russian authorities still tend to think about

security first, suggesting that Program implementation is perceived as being more of a political necessity than an opportunity for economic cooperation. Despite its cautious steps towards beneficial cooperation with China, the Kremlin periodically faces stiff criticism from the nationalist opposition and academia.

As Iwashita argues, the question of the “yellow peril” was prominent in Russia in the early 1990s, but negotiations that preceded the transfer of the disputed border territory to China revealed important contradictions within Russian society, between the interests of the “center,” and the interests of the periphery. However, after the treaty was signed, and the Russian-Chinese border demarcation was finally determined in 1997, anti-Chinese sentiment among the border populations abated, even though the Russian “center” continues to express its concerns with regard to China’s foreign policy and migration.

3. Tragic Memories and “Phantom Pains”

The first two chapters suggest that attempts by these two “great neighbors” to establish a trusting relationship through the cooperation of state-level institutions has been fraught with difficulties. Previous events continue to cloud their relationship, and do not always allow the government and national elites complete freedom to make important decisions. As Victor Zatspine writes in his chapter, personal memories do not fade as rapidly as political regimes and state ideologies. Although historical descriptions of Russian-Chinese relations have always been dominated by political events and ideologies, and institutional aspects of cross-border cooperation have reduced the role of individuals, it is social interactions and cultural expressions that have shaped the psycho-mental atmosphere in border communities.

Using cinematic images, Zatspine describes what ordinary people have experienced during their lives along the Sino-Russian border—in the past and in the present—despite contradictions in ideology and cultural prejudices. In his chapter he shows that people who live next to one another while being separated by a boundary have a double burden of fighting with historical interpretations. To gain a better understanding of their neighbors on the other side of the border, 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.”

Franck Billé takes up the theme of memory in the following chapter. He shows that historical ghosts continue to haunt local communities, and these memories find themselves lastingly embedded in architectural and museum practices. Eager to retain the memory of its past imperial greatness, Russia has erected numerous statues of historical figures, and created monuments celebrating its presence in the region. On the Chinese side, museum exhibits retrace the long cultural links between the two nations, and chronicle some of the traumatic events that have led to much human suffering, and have long soured mutual collaborations.

In his chapter, Billé describes the misalignment between an official discourse that celebrates the successful resolution of all territorial disputes between the two countries,

and the persistently popular view that the decision taken by the two governments is unsatisfactory. His reference to “phantom pains” as an analogy for what he is describing seeks to engage with the dominating imagery of the nation as a body, in which the loss of national territory is routinely framed through corporeal analogies such as mutilation and dismemberment. The metaphor of phantom pains also speaks to the traces left by former political incarnations and sedimented nationalistic discourses. Like phantom pains—recognized by the brain as remnants of an older bodily map that continues to frame neural and emotive responses—territorial phantom pains map out a political imagination unhinged from official narratives, both echoing older concerns, and proposing alternative futures.

4. Geographical and Spatial Images: Experiences with Traditions and Constructions in Northeast Asia

The spatial dimension of borders is developed further in the next two chapters, authored by Song-Yong Park and Caroline Humphrey. In his chapter, Park invites us to consider the history of the formation of new spatial imaginaries in the context of the maritime border of the East Sea. He shows us that the geographical image of the East Sea and its name originate in the traditional East Asian system of classifying natural objects. Until the nineteenth century, this maritime area was called the “East Sea” or the “Sea of Korea,” in both Korea and Japan. Beginning in the late nineteenth century however, the East Sea was increasingly denoted on maps as the “Sea of Japan.” For Park, this shift indexes Japan’s national political strategy, aimed at expanding its colonial ideology, and so dominating its peripheral space, and clarifying its stance in relation to other East Asian societies in this region. The name change from East Sea reveals the popularity of the colonial ideas of two Japanese ideologues in vogue at the time—Yukichi Fukuzava and Aritomo Yamagata. At that time, Park concludes, Japan’s concept of civilization represented a key criterion for evaluating the level of development of various nation-states and their people, and also played a pivotal role in shaping an ideology premised on expanding sea borders, and re-conceptualizing space for purposes of military action.

From Park’s study of the ideological methods used to reimagine borders between two states in North Asia, we move on to another example of conflicting spatial images—in this case the conflict is between the official institutions and ethnic traditions of a single state. Mismatches between local images of spatial hierarchies and the center/periphery dichotomy constructed by state institutions are discussed by Caroline Humphrey, in a chapter that focuses on the spatial images and concepts of indigenous peoples of Russia living along the Russian-Mongolian border.

Humphrey compares the points of view of two theoretical geographers about the ways in which perceptions of “remoteness” evolved in the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) and Russia. Boris Romodan argued that in Soviet times, the idea of “remoteness” emerged from the center, and was imposed on border areas, where it continues to override other spatializations. His student, Vladimir Kagansky, instead believes that this system has been disturbed by “spontaneous transformations,” as a result

of which state borders are not instruments that impose isolation, but instead provide opportunities for contacts and development.

In her chapter, Humphrey argues that, in practice, Russia's strong centralization is unlikely to allow Kagansky's idea that indigenous peoples living around the Russian-Mongolian border have their own spatial images in which "distance" and marginality are understood differently from those cultivated by Russian practices. She contends that Buryat social and spatial forms rest largely on different bases, and that they are in striking contrast with the parameters used to organize the Russian national system. Buryats remain faithful to their traditional bowl-shaped understanding, in which elevation and spiritual lordship are located at the boundaries. They do not organize spatially along a conical model, with "height" and political power at the center, and "depth" in the gaps and along the edges. The topographically central area, which is low-lying and not necessarily even inhabited, has no obvious feature to align with political centrality. Humphrey concludes that the Buryats' traditional spatial and geographical system performs an important function that takes precedence—or rather "takes form"—as a set of spatial concepts and feelings, allowing Buryats to "counteract the hyper-centric hierarchical structure of the Russian state."

5. The Transborder Life of Local Communities

Echoing Humphrey's discussion of autochthonous Buryat practices, the final section of the volume focuses on the role played by various ethnic groups indigenous to the region. For the peoples of Northeast Asia, models of interethnic "strategic cooperation" have historically been important social forms. As Yuki Konagaya explains in her chapter, the "strategy of friendship and practices of concluding agreements" (in Mongolian *anda*) has been crucial among the different ethnic groups living in this region, namely the Mongols, Buryats, Dagurs, Solon (Evenks), and Manchu, in different historical eras.

In outlining the development of this concept, Konagaya shows that in Mongolian history, *anda* emerged during the process of political unification, and continued to retain that meaning up to the period of the early Qing Dynasty. Later, in the twentieth century, the meaning of *anda* shifted, and was used to describe commercial partnerships between different ethnic groups. As the historical material clearly demonstrates, during the Ming Dynasty it also referred to transborder business relations between different ethnic groups, and became an official system during the Qing Dynasty. After the collapse of this system, many ethnic businessmen continued to use it. Therefore, *anda* appears to foster the continuation of peace-making processes: it describes a social process used to enhance cross-border relationships, both between states, and across social or ethnic boundaries.

Konagaya contends that these social mechanisms, which in the past have provided a power equilibrium, also performed a function similar to that of the modern international model of a "strategic partnership." Even after the abolition of this official institution, private *anda* continued to prevail as a social mechanism, and constituted a widespread form of cooperation in border areas, and throughout territories inhabited by different ethnic groups. Konagaya's oral history research of the Shenehen Buryats of Hulun Buir

in Inner Mongolia shed light on transborder strategies across the northeastern Asian borderland, and she regards the diaspora of various ethnic groups as a successful aspect of transborder activities.

The next chapter, by Shiro Sasaki, examines key causes of the border crossing practices of indigenous peoples from the Far East, between Russia and China, in the nineteenth century. He argues that each ethnic group had its own borders, which they respected and used to limit their range of movements, but that national borders determined through diplomatic negotiations violated and destroyed these voluntarily-accepted borders. Through modern diplomatic border negotiations between the Russian Empire and China, the Qing dynasty lost a large territory in the Amur region under the Treaties of Aigun and Beijing.

The local people found borders based on the Amur and Ussuri Rivers inconvenient and disagreeable. They were river people, and their main subsistence activity was fishing. For them, rivers were not borders or barriers, but places of contact, exchange, and social ties. Social and ethnic groups that shared common cultures and languages had lived on both sides of the river in the Amur River basin. Borders set through modernized diplomatic negotiations often divided these people into several groups. Along the Amur River basin, the new border between China and Russia did not function effectively for some time after being set. Sasaki shows that people were able to cross them, largely because the Russian government did not deem them to be full members of the Russian polity. The government considered them to be pagan primitive minorities who were unable to understand modern concepts, such as state or national laws, and not capable of participating in the development of the modern state.

In this chapter, Sasaki also describes an earlier historical context, where attempts to obtain taxes from the local population led to a division of the indigenous people of the Russian Far East, such as the Nanai (Hezhe), Udehe, Nivkh, Ulita, and Ainu. In the mid-seventeenth century, Manchuria and Russia attempted to place local people under their control, and to include them in their governing system. Some Russian and Soviet Orientalists have insisted that Russian administrators (under the rule of Cossack chiefs Erofey Khabarov and Onufriy Stepanov) organized the local people in the Amur and Ussuri River basins (the Dyucheri, Natki, and Gilyaks) into taxpayers for the furs they trapped in 1650, before the Manchu did so, and that this very fact supported Russia's legitimacy and territorial rights over the present Russian territory.

A similar political situation in the history of Tunka Buryats illustrates Olga Shaglanova's work, which is based on well-known historical documents. Unlike the peoples of the Far East, who were divided between the two empires of Russia and China, the group of Buryats Shaglanova describes experienced the effects of the Mongol Empire's political fragmentation, as well as the invasion of new conquerors, namely the Russian Empire, into native Buryat lands.

Historical sources reveal the multifaceted interactions of heterogeneous ethnic tribes with Russian authorities during the formation of a "borderlands milieu." They also illustrate Russia's imperial policy toward an "ethnically alien" periphery, and toward its Mongolian neighbors. In this particular case, the Russian empire preferred the strategy of

having a social contract with “foreigners” who adopted Russian citizenship, in preference to the more unstable living conditions among the Mongolian people, and the increasing threat posed by the Manchu.

Against this historical background, Shaglanova’s narratives illustrate how a “borderlands milieu” emerged among Mongolian and Buryat peoples in the course of the Soviet era. Following the Sino-Soviet conflict on Damanskii Island (1969), tensions prevailed around the Soviet-Mongolian border. Crossing the border became a more physically tangible act, with the border increasingly perceived as visible evidence of the military power of the state. However, at the same time, in the context of the Soviet activities under the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance (*Soviet ekonomicheskoi vzaimopomoshi-SEV*), the frontier represented by the Soviet-Mongolian border became porous for economic and cultural interactions between the USSR and Mongolia.

Note

- 1) This book is the product of a conference held in January 2014, titled “The Russian–Chinese Border: A ‘Strategic Partnership’ in a Mosaic of Indigenous Societies,” organized by Dr. Olga Shaglanova and Professor Yuki Konagaya, with the support of the National Museum of Ethnology (Osaka, Japan). This conference and volume are also the outcome of a three-year Sino-Russian border project (2012–2015), titled “Where Rising Powers Meet: China and Russia at their North Asian Border,” based at the University of Cambridge, UK, under the leadership of Professor Caroline Humphrey.
- 2) According to the materials of the Russian Foreign Ministry, the Sino-Russian joint declaration was signed between the President of the Russian Federation Boris Yeltsin and the President of the Chinese People’s Republic Jiang Zemin on 25 of April, 1996 in Beijing.

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