

Entangled Histories

The Transcultural Past of Northeast China

Dan Ben-Canaan · Frank Grüner
Ines Prodöhl *Editors*



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The Transcultural Past of Northeast China

 Springer

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The meeting in Harbin was the second of three events on cross-cultural encounters and processes of exchange in Manchuria. Preceding this conference was an April 2008 workshop at the University of Heidelberg that had aimed to generate new research perspectives on transcultural processes in the city of Harbin. A third international conference exploring daily life and urban spaces in Northeast Asian border towns from 1900 to 1950 followed in November 2010 at the University of Heidelberg in Germany. We wish to recognise the special contribution made by Dean Yin Tiechao of Heilongjiang University, School of Western Studies, and by Dean Heinz-Dietrich Löwe of the University of Heidelberg, Faculty of Philosophy, who were instrumental in establishing the cooperation between the two institutions.

The 2009 Harbin conference sought to analyse political, economic, social and cultural interdependencies in Manchuria during the end of the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth. The editors would like to thank the many participants who made the Harbin conference an intellectually stimulating event. We would also like to express our gratitude to the University of Heidelberg, Germany, Heilongjiang University in Harbin, China and the German Historical Institute in Washington, DC, USA, which jointly organised and sponsored the event. Our heartfelt thanks go to the many faculty members and student volunteers at Heilongjiang University, School of Western Studies and the research assistants at its Sino-Israel Research and Study Centre in Harbin who helped make the exchange between East and West meaningful.

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The articles in this book are more than just the conference proceedings. The authors widened their focus by reflecting on ongoing global discussions about contemporary scholarly concepts and methods. Very special thanks are due to the following persons who supported us in releasing this book: Helen Stringer and Patricia Sutcliffe diligently and professionally copyedited the contributions of this volume; Susanne Hohler and Rudolph Ng supported us substantially in formatting the manuscript and Andrea Hacker, managing director of the publication department of the Cluster “Asia and Europe in a Global Context” at the University of Heidelberg, accompanied the process of making this book with professional commitment and enthusiasm.

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Entangled Histories: The Transcultural Past of Northeast China

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Abstract During the first half of the twentieth century Manchuria, as Western historiography commonly designates the three northeastern provinces of China, was politically, culturally and economically a contested region. In the late nineteenth century, the region became the centre of competing Russian, Chinese and Japanese interests, thereby also gaining global attention. The coexistence of people of different nationalities, ethnicities and cultures in Manchuria was rarely if ever harmoniously balanced or static. On the contrary, interactions were both dynamic and complex. Semi-colonial experiences affected the people's living conditions, status and power relations. The transcultural negotiations and processes between all population groups across all kinds of borders are the theme of this book. The introduction argues that the past of Northeast China was significantly shaped by various entangled histories in areas such as administration, economy, ideas, ideologies, culture, media and daily life.

Studies on imperialism, colonialism and post-colonialism have shown that the worldwide economic and social situation at the turn of the nineteenth to the twentieth century was typified by asymmetries between industrialised states and colonised regions. But studies with a postcolonial sensibility have also proved that the simple analytical distinction between powerful colonisers and weak colonised does not do justice to the manifold transcultural experiences of the people involved

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in these asymmetrical relationships. Recently, entangled, connected and intertwined histories of entities formerly thought to be separate, such as geography, ethnicity, and class, have gained scholarly attention, thereby pushing both methodological questions and empirical research on all kinds of border crossing.¹ Viewed in this scholarly context, the chapters in this book shed light on the diverse processes of exchange among the different nationalities, ethnicities and cultures living in Northeast China in the first half of the twentieth century. With this, Northeast China is seen as a contact zone, which Mary Louise Pratt defines as a “social space where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in the context of highly asymmetrical relations of power.”² We are keen to analyse exactly those relationships and furthermore the various and often intertwined interactions between local and global processes.

Politically, culturally, and economically, Northeast China was a contested region. In the late nineteenth century, the Chinese government had long been reluctant to allow political and social changes, and it began to crack under the pressure of various imperial powers. Northeast China became the centre of competing Russian, Chinese, and Japanese interests, and also the focus of global attention. In the early twentieth century, Japanese and Russian imperialism made it the crossroads of expanding commerce between Asia, Europe, and North America. Affected by its powerful neighbours, this peripheral area was transformed by the construction of major railways as well as the opening of its mineral and agricultural resources. Northeast China illustrates a worldwide process that historians have defined as railway imperialism, a term that refers to all the ways the railway shaped an informal empire and contributed to an emerging, semi-colonised region.³ Here, the railway systems existed primarily to expedite the transfer of domestic resources to seaports for worldwide export, and to create a new market for goods and products manufactured elsewhere. However, the development of an infrastructure and the concomitant expansion of trade also implied significant migration. Migration occurred rapidly in Northeast China, and chiefly involved Han-Chinese settlers. Between 1890 and 1942, a population transfer occurred of approximately

¹ See as one of the most recent studies that both reflects on methodological questions and explores empirical research: Emily S. Rosenberg, “Transnational Currents in a Shrinking World,” in *A world connecting, 1870–1945*, ed. Emily S. Rosenberg (Cambridge, MA, London: Harvard University Press, 2012), 813–996, 1077–1095; see also: Madeleine Herren, Martin Rüesch, and Christiane Sibille, eds., *Transcultural History: Theory, Methods, Sources* (Berlin, Heidelberg: Springer Verlag, 2012).

² Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (New York: Routledge, 2nd ed., 2008).

³ Ronald E. Robinson, “Introduction,” in *Railway Imperialism*, ed. Clarence B. Davis, Kenneth E. Wilburn and Ronald E. Robinson (New York, NY: Greenwood Press, 1991), 1–6; Bruce A. Elleman and Stephen Kotkin, eds., *Manchurian Railways and the Opening of China: An International History* (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 2010); Rosemary K. I. Quesed, “*Matey*” imperialists?: the tsarist Russians in Manchuria, 1895–1917 (Centre of Asian Studies, University of Hong Kong, 1982); Hyun Ok Park, “Korean Manchuria: the racial politics of territorial osmosis,” *South Atlantic Quarterly* 99, 1 (2000): 193–215.

eight million Han-Chinese, principally from the northern provinces of Hebei and Shandong, to the three northeastern provinces of Heilongjiang, Jilin (Kirin), and Liaoning (Fengtian); this resettlement was one of the largest human migrations of the early twentieth century.⁴ In 1920, Japanese authorities estimated the population at 20 million, including all nationalities and ethnic groups.⁵

The interactions of people from different nationalities, ethnicities and cultures were both dynamic and complex, and semi-colonial experiences affected the people's living conditions, their status and power relations. Transcultural negotiations between all the different population groups and across all kinds of borders are the topic of this book. In pursuing this, we understand "transculturality" first of all as a research paradigm and a methodological approach that focuses on border crossings, processes of exchange, and entanglements between different population groups and various cultural spaces. Furthermore, we believe that the people's daily life experiences within the specific setting of a (multi-)cultural contact zone transcend geographical, political, national, ethnic and cultural borders. These processes and phenomena—placed in a globalised cosmopolitan setting and characterised by the amalgamation of cultural values, norms and mentalities—should be labelled here "transcultural". In this sense, the present volume deals with various entangled histories in areas covering for instance administration, economy, ideas, ideologies, culture, media and daily life. The complexity of these entangled histories and their density form our understanding of a "transcultural past". We are particularly keen to analyse the region's history in the first half of the twentieth century. We do not believe that transcultural processes ended immediately with the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949; however, their characteristics shifted enormously. And again, these changes were also the expression and result of worldwide entanglements generally known as the Cold War, and they have to be interpreted in that context.

The Shaping of a Region

In western historiography, the term Manchuria commonly refers to the three northeastern provinces of China, Heilongjiang, Jilin (Kirin), and Liaoning (Fengtian), as well as parts of Inner Mongolia (Fig. 1).⁶ With the rise of the Manchu and the Qing dynasty in the seventeenth century, this region formed a unified

⁴Thomas R. Gottschang, "Economic Change, Disasters, and Migration: The Historical Case of Manchuria," *Economic Development and Cultural Change* 35, 3 (1987): 461–90. See also Gottschang and Diana Lary, *Swallows and Settlers. The Great Migration from North China to Manchuria* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan, 2000).

⁵Bank of Chosen, ed., *Economic History of Manchuria* (Seoul, 1920).

⁶Mark C. Elliott, "The Limits of Tartary: Manchuria in Imperial and National Geographies," *Journal of Asian Studies* 59, 3 (2000): 603–46.



Fig. 1 Map of Manchuria, ca. 1930. This map demonstrates the character of Manchuria as a border region in Northeast Asia among the three empires China, Russia, and Japan. Courtesy of the *Manchuria Year Book 1931*, edited and published by the Toa-Keizai Chosakyoku (East-Asiatic Economic Investigation Bureau), Tokyo 1931

whole, which in political, cultural and economic terms can be sensibly identified as one territory. However, the name “Manchuria” is controversial, because it was primarily used in a certain imperial context. Thus the region is now collectively referred to in relation to other parts of China as the “Eastern Three Provinces” (Dongsansheng), “Northeast China,” or simply “The Northeast” (Dongbei).⁷

In the first half of the twentieth century, Northeast China was unified purely with regard to its territory. Since the late seventeenth century, Russia and China tried to fix their boundaries in this widely unexploited area, but it was not until 1858 that they came to an agreement. The Treaty of Aigun and its supplementary treaties stipulated that the boundaries between Russia and China’s northeast were the Argun River (Eergunahe) to the west, the Amur (Heilong Jiang) and the Ussuri (Wusuli Jiang) to the north, and a line from the mouth of the Ussuri to the mouth of the Tumen (Tu Men Jiang) to the east.⁸ Since then, the region has included an area of nearly 100,000 km², a territory as large as the western US states of California, Nevada and Arizona, or the three European states of the United Kingdom, Ireland and France put together.

Up to the late nineteenth century, Northeast China was widely unsettled and unexploited. The Qing dynasty had curtailed and systematically discouraged the migration of Han Chinese to the Three Eastern Provinces because the area was to be reserved as an ancestral homeland and imperial hunting ground. The Chinese government only relaxed its restrictions in 1868 and again in 1878, when Han Chinese were officially allowed to settle there.⁹ Sources on the living conditions in the region suggest that its winters were harsh and that there was a sparse but rapidly growing population of different origin.¹⁰

By the end of the nineteenth century, internal wars and foreign invasion had weakened the Qing dynasty. Japan’s growing desire to expand its territory, and in particular to gain a foothold on the Asian continent, was generating great tensions. This finally culminated in the Sino-Japanese War of 1894–1895, in which Japan surprised most observers by winning a decisive victory over the Chinese troops due to the technological superiority and more efficient organisation of its military forces. Russia, on the other side, had been planning and building its Trans-Siberian Railway across Siberia and the Russian Far East to Vladivostok since 1891, and was thinking of an alternative route through the two provinces of Heilongjiang and Jilin (Kirin) that would shorten the distance by 550 km and, even more importantly, strengthen its strategic and economic position in Northeast Asia. In the aftermath of

⁷ For the Chinese discomfort with the term, see Mariko Tamanoi, *Memory Maps: The State and Manchuria in Postwar Japan* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2009).

⁸ For this and the former treaties, see Alexander Hosie, *Manchuria. Its people, resources and recent history* (London: Methuen & Co., 2nd ed., 1904), 135–42.

⁹ Adachi Kinnosuké, *Manchuria. A survey* (New York: R. M. McBride & Company, 1925), 46–7; James Reardon-Anderson, *Reluctant Pioneers. China’s Expansion Northward, 1644–1937* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2005), especially 71–84.

¹⁰ E. g. Arthur Adams, *Travels of a Naturalist in Japan and Manchuria* (London: Hurst and Blackett, 1870). See also: Hosie, *Manchuria*, 155.

the Sino-Japanese war, Russia took advantage of China's weakness and offered a Sino-Russian alliance against Japan in exchange for a railroad concession in Northeast China. The alliance was sealed in June 1896, and the Chinese Eastern Railway (CER) was built between 1897 and 1903. The project was successful, even though the work proved rather hard and frustrating for both the colonisers and the colonised.¹¹

The construction and administration of the Russian settlements along the railway tracks was directed from the headquarters of the CER in Harbin, where mainly Russians did the skilled work of planning and engineering. The CER further stimulated the dynamic development of the region and its rise in strategic and economic importance in numerous ways. The railway, including a certain stretch of land along either side of the tracks, was an extraterritorial area of Russia, fully controlled by Russian institutions. The company was thus involved in many accompanying activities, such as lumbering and mining. The CER and its side activities brought thousands of Russian workers and their families to the area, where they established housing, schools, medical services and social institutions, in particular in settlements like Harbin. But the railway, of course, also attracted Chinese labour migration as the construction was primarily done by unskilled Chinese workers. Furthermore, the CER enabled the transport of people and goods, spurred on industrial and agricultural development, and boosted economic growth, which in turn attracted even more Han Chinese migrants to the region.

After Japan's victory over China in 1895, Japan astounded the world again in 1905 with its victory over Russia. The outcome of this war provided Japan with a strong foothold in Northeast China, particularly in its southern part. Russia lost control over the South-Manchurian Railway (SMR), which had been built running south from the CER towards Port Arthur, an ice-free port on the Pacific coast located at the southernmost point of Liaodong Peninsula. Once the Japanese began administering the SMR, one of their first activities was to change gauge so as to standardise the rising imperial infrastructure. Japan was in severe need of coal, which was initially a principal cause of its interest in the Asian mainland. Japan's encounters in China proved however profitable in many ways. The railway was a powerful stimulus to mining, manufacturing and agriculture, and it enabled Japan to engage in various economic enterprises outside Asia.¹²

¹¹ Ralph E. Glatfelter, "Russia, the Soviet Union, and the Chinese Eastern Railway," in *Railway Imperialism*, ed. Davis, Wilburn and Robinson, 137–54, here 140–1.

¹² Ramon H. Myers, "Japanese imperialism in Manchuria: The South Manchuria Railway Company, 1906–1933," in *The Japanese Informal Empire in China, 1895–1937*, ed. Peter Duus, Ramon H. Myers, Mark Peattie (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989), 101–32.

Entangled Histories

Thanks to some excellent research done in the last few years, it is now known that China's northeast followed the pattern of a semi-colonised region. The history of the CER and the resulting tensions between China, Russia, and Japan are well documented.¹³ However, the story of how the people living in the three provinces developed a daily routine and tried to maintain their standard of living remains relatively unknown and untold. Furthermore, it remains uncertain at this point how their local experiences fit into global patterns or how the two levels interacted with one another. The contributors to this book therefore ask what the semi-colonised status of Northeast China meant for its inhabitants and how their experiences in turn affected power relations. The Chinese Eastern and the South Manchurian Railways forced processes of exchange not only regarding the transported goods, but also concerning the various ethnic groups trying to make a living. Most people came to Northeast China to work on the railway, in the coalmines, or as farm peasants. Others who found jobs as traders or employees, or who started their own businesses, then followed. They brought differing cultural identities and social practices, such as traditional ideas about weddings and funerals, eating habits and consumer behaviour, social activities and family roles, languages and literacy. In this multi-cultural setting, their respective cultural and national self-conceptions mingled to a certain degree with one another. The authors of this book focus on these complex interrelations. They ask to what extent the different histories are entangled, connected and intertwined to form a colourful transcultural past. All of the authors show that the connections between the different ethnicities, cultures and nations living in Northeast China in the first half of the twentieth century were neither harmonious nor balanced. However, in most cases the different population groups worked out a daily routine for living and working alongside each other with interactions of greater or lesser intensity.

Four of the papers presented in this book deal with the question of how people transgressed cultural and/or national borders by negotiating their daily living conditions. Sören Urbansky explores the lives of smugglers in the Sino-Soviet borderland in the late 1920s and early 1930s. He focuses on their transcultural competencies and identities, which they utilised strategically for economic

¹³ Among others, see Olga M. Bakich, "Origins of the Russian Community on the Chinese Eastern Railway," *Canadian Slavonic Papers* 27, 1 (1985): 12–4; Bakich, "A Russian City in China: Harbin before 1917," *Canadian Slavonic Papers* 28, 1 (1986): 129–48, here 146–7; Blaine R. Chiasson, *Administering the Colonizer. Manchuria's Russians under Chinese Rule, 1918–29* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2010); Shun-Hsin Chou, "Railway Development and Economic Growth in Manchuria," *The China Quarterly* 45 (1971): 57–84; Glatfelter, "Russia, the Soviet Union, and the Chinese Eastern Railway," 137–54; Sarah C. M. Paine, "The Chinese Eastern Railway from the First Sino-Japanese War until the Russo-Japanese War," in *Manchurian Railways and the Opening of China*, ed. Bruce A. Elleman and Stephan Kotkin (Armonk, N.Y.: M.E. Sharpe, 2010), 15–17; David Wolff, *To the Harbin Station. The Liberal Alternative in Russian Manchuria, 1898–1914* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999).

purposes. In a linguistic approach, Xin Yuan asks how Chinese and Russian inhabitants communicated with one another. In particular she analyses the Sino-Russian pidgin spoken in Harbin in the 1920s. Mark Gamsa concentrates on mixed marriages and the adoption of mutual lifestyles by the Russians and Chinese. He points out that the intermarriage pattern in the region was atypical of global colonial situations: while intermarriage normally amounted to Western men taking native wives, intermarriage in this case was principally between Russian women and Chinese men. Madeleine Herren likewise focuses on civil statuses, but in her case on death and the way cemeteries shape narratives for migrants. In addition, she discusses methodological difficulties in writing history beyond national narratives.

Many contributors focus on the city of Harbin as an example of the massive presence and density of transcultural processes in urban life. Indeed, the city of Harbin reflects locally what Northeast China experienced on a regional level: the imperial struggle and its consequences for the various ethnic groups. The CER and the SMR met in Harbin, whose sizeable multinational population then grew even larger. Harbin became a city of various cultural encounters and, in the course of globalisation, a city of transcultural processes. Western historians date Harbin's founding to 1898, when the Chinese Eastern Railway Company designated the former small village on the river Sungari (Songhua Jiang) as its on site headquarters.¹⁴ Right from its foundation, Harbin was a hub for the exchange of people, goods, information, ideas and cultural practices. Being a centre for the construction of the railway, Harbin attracted non-Chinese migration from Russia and other European countries. Therefore, the city was often seen as the informal capital of Manchuria.¹⁵ Harbin is also an example of particularities reflected globally, because it served as an information centre for foreigners. The pneumonic plague epidemic in Northeast China with Harbin at its centre, for instance, brought global attention to the city in 1910/1911.¹⁶ Experts and international organisations vividly pictured the danger of the plague in this setting, because Harbin was seen as a place close to Europe.¹⁷

After 1917, the municipal administration of the multinational city gradually shifted towards the Chinese because Russia's internal struggles were reflected in the CER zone. For Harbin, the years following the Russian Revolution were a period of manifold change, because authorities and administration alternated between Russians/Soviets and the Chinese. In 1920, the Soviet Union lost its

¹⁴ Chinese historians usually dispute 1898 as the city's foundation date by pointing to the century-long settlement of the region. For the debate see Søren Clausen and Stig Thøgersen, *The Making of a Chinese City. History and Historiography in Harbin* (Armonk, N.Y.: M.E. Sharpe, 1995).

¹⁵ "Russians in Harbin: Capital of Manchuria Today Has 60,000 Population. Rapid Growth of the City," *The Washington Post*, March 20, 1904, A12.

¹⁶ Mark Gamsa, "The Epidemic of Pneumonic Plague in Manchuria 1910–1911," *Past and Present* 190 (Feb. 2006): 147–83; Carl F. Nathan, *Plague Prevention and Politics in Manchuria 1910–1931* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 1967).

¹⁷ Cornelia Knab, "Plague Times. Scientific Internationalism and the Manchurian Plague of 1910/1911," *Itinerario* 35 (2011): 87–105.

exterritorial areas surrounding the railway, leading to a change in the legal status of the Russians in Northeast China—and, of course, Harbin.¹⁸ For the Russians, Harbin had served as a strategic centre, but even after 1920 the city remained a hub for people and goods moving between the Soviet Union, Japan, China, and the world. The ever-shifting power relations and responsibilities during these years created various social and cultural frictions.¹⁹ But at least until the establishment of the Japanese puppet-state Manchukuo, the different ethnic and national groups generally practiced mutual tolerance.

The worldwide attention Harbin gained right from its founding is documented in press reports, travel guides, and encyclopaedias. They provide evidence that a place once virtually unknown had managed to bring itself rapidly into contemporary Western perception. The 1929 entry “*Charbin*” [Kharbin]²⁰ in the famous German encyclopaedia *Brockhaus* is remarkable, because it clearly points to the city’s transcultural character. It characterised Harbin as “peculiar” because eastern European and Asian characteristics stood side by side and penetrated one another. For Russia, it continued, Harbin constituted a door to China.²¹ Interestingly, the entry pictured Harbin as a frontier town, although the border between China and Russia was some 500 km away.²²

With its many people from different ethnic groups, Harbin was a place where a migrant’s legal status could quickly change and was difficult to determine. Thus, the history of Harbin demonstrates the challenges of constructing identities—topics that four contributors address. Olga Bakich focuses on the census as a governmental tool for shaping nationalities. She explores the emigration of former Russian subjects after 1917 to China’s Three Eastern Provinces and its consequences for their legal status and thus their identity. It is tricky to disentangle the contemporary correlation between nationalities as an administrative tool and the self-concept of the people. Rudolph Ng analyses the ambivalent role of the Russo-Chinese newspaper *Yuandongbao*, which was published between 1906 and 1916 in Harbin. He

¹⁸ For details see: Glatfelter, “Russia, the Soviet Union, and the Chinese Eastern Railway,” 137–54; Qusted, “*Matey*” *Imperialists?*; Bakich, “Charbin: Russland jenseits der Grenzen in Fernost,” 304–28; Bakich, “Origins of the Russian Community on the CER,” 1–14.

¹⁹ James H. Carter, *Creating a Chinese Harbin: Nationalism in an International City, 1916–1932* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002); Carter, “Struggle for the soul of a city. Nationalism, imperialism, and racial tensions in 1920s Harbin,” *Modern China* 27 (2001): 91–106; Chiasson, *Administering the Colonizer*.

²⁰ The Russian word for Harbin, харбин, was formerly transliterated as Charbin (German) or Kharbin (English).

²¹ “Charbin ist eine eigenartige Stadt, in der osteuropäische und asiatische Wesen nebeneinanderstehen und einander durchdringen. Das Tor nach China auf dem sibirischen Überlandweg.” See: “Charbin,” in *Der Große Brockhaus* (Leipzig: F. A. Brockhaus, 15th ed., 1929), vol. 3, 734.

²² In fact, with regard to many aspects/areas like politics and administration, religion and nationality, ideologies and education, mass media and daily social practices, Harbin could justifiably be interpreted as a border town in Northeast Asia beyond the traditional understanding of geographical or state borders. See, for this, Frank Grüner, Susanne Hohler and Sören Urbansky, “Borders in Imperial Times: Daily Life and Urban Spaces in Northeast Asia,” *Comparativ* 22, 5 (2012): 7–13.

demonstrates that the newspaper, though Russian-sponsored, evolved by means of a delicate balancing act. It was not an exclusively Chinese or Russian paper but, in essence, always an amalgamation. Susanne Hohler looks at what Harbin's history offers for questions of global-local interaction by examining the anti-German protest of the Jewish community in Harbin under the Manchukuo government. She demonstrates how particularities shaped a global event. Institutions and ideologies also had some strong impact on Harbin. Heinz-Dietrich Löwe discusses the global-local correlations and the transcultural character of fascism by focusing on Russian Far Eastern fascism in Harbin, which was the most important of all Russian émigré fascist groups in the city.

In his famous book on Manchukuo, Prasenjit Duara describes the Japanese puppet state as a "place of paradoxes, where it becomes difficult to disentangle imperialism from nationalism, modernity from tradition, frontier from heartland, and ideas of transcendence from ideologies of boundedness."²³ This view could actually be extended beyond the Manchukuo timeframe concerning the region. In the first half of the twentieth century, Northeast China presented a space for converting and transforming global discourses into discourses of ethnic, national, or cultural authenticity. In point of fact, although imperial powers like Russia and Japan certainly did set the legal frameworks, the imperial agenda went beyond defining the economic and political conditions. With the help of soft power, Russians and Japanese alike tried to expand their influence into any kind of cultural exchange, thereby pursuing a variety of interests. In this book, another four contributors focus on the dynamic interplay of soft power and the role of experts in imperial ambitions.

In his contribution, Blaine Chiasson sheds light on the various administrative reforms in Manchuria initiated by the late Qing government. Chiasson ascertains that the Chinese administrative project in Northeast China largely reflected the entangled histories of the Qing government, tsarist Russia, and imperial Japan, each of which was trying to establish its own Manchuria through economic, military, and administrative means. Victor Zatsépine analyses how Russian military topographers collected knowledge about Northeast China. He describes the topographers' sentiments, frustrations and the true challenges of surveying territories beyond Russia's borders to China. Yoshia Makita focuses on the Russo-Japanese War and, in particular, on the ambivalent role of the Red Cross Society of Japan. He investigates their public health programmes for indigenous communities and examines the ways medical activities in the Three Eastern Provinces of China complemented, and in practice created, the foundation for Japanese semi-colonial rule under the banner of humanitarianism. For the period of the Japanese occupation of the three provinces, Tomoko Akami identifies the Manzhouguo News Agency as a key institution which Japanese imperial authorities utilized for propaganda operations both within and outside the occupied territory.

²³ Prasenjit Duara, *Sovereignty and Authenticity: Manchukuo and the East Asian Modern* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003), 1.

From the late nineteenth century and continuing into the first half of the twentieth, Northeast China became a centre of competing political and economic interests for Japan, China, Russia, and other global powers. The history of Northeast China and Harbin presents an arena for the study of entangled political discourses and the challenges of constructing identities, as well as the dynamic interplay of soft power and imperialism. These transcultural negotiations and processes are the theme of this book.

Part I
Transgressing Cultural and
National Borders

“Vasily” of China and his Russian Friends: Smugglers and their Transcultural Identities

Sören Urbansky

Abstract This article explores lives of smugglers in the Sino-Soviet borderlands during the late 1920s and early 1930s. While studying phenomena of smuggling, historians can—besides its economic dimension—also learn about identities of smugglers, which go beyond the notions of “nation” or homogenous concepts of “culture.” How was the transfer of commodities connected with smugglers’ identities, which, in turn, shaped their strategies and networks? To answer this key question, the text focuses on smugglers’ transcultural identities in the Sino-Soviet borderlands. The studied cases show how Sino-Soviet contraband networks were established through long-term social and economic contacts. Traffickers had often spent years in contact zones meeting Russians and Chinese before they came to be involved in complex activities of illicit trade. The studied cases suggest that smugglers as a social group working in a complex context can be defined as people who need to have special skills that develop from transcultural biographies.

Introduction

Something about the man was suspicious. In the spring of 1930, Li Zhaozhi could be seen almost every day at the main railway station in Chita. The city on the Trans-Siberian Railway, some 400 miles east of Lake Baikal by train, is the administrative centre of Eastern Transbaikalia. At Chita station, Mr Li would either board a train or meet people at the platform. However, Li was not a conductor or any other ordinary railwayman. As his name suggests, his face had Asian, not Caucasian features. Police officers, railway officials and ordinary people in Chita noticed Mr Li there at the station. But what was he doing there by the tracks?

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This article explores the lives of smugglers in the Sino-Soviet borderlands during the late 1920s and early 1930s. Although contraband trade almost always originates from economic incentives, it is not my intention to write an economic history of smuggling. While studying the phenomena of smuggling, historians can also learn about the identities of smugglers, which go beyond the notions of “nation” or homogenous concepts of “culture.”¹ How was the transfer of commodities connected with smugglers’ identities, which shaped, in turn, their strategies and networks? To answer this key question, the text will focus on smugglers’ transcultural identities in the Sino-Soviet borderlands. By applying Dirk Hoerder’s definition of the term “transculturalism,” I am identifying people with transcultural identities as those who have the capacity to live and act in different cultural spaces (i.e. the imperial entities of China and the Soviet Union) and to create mixed or overlapping ways of life.² According to Hoerder, “[s]trategic transcultural competence involves conceptualizations of life projects in multiple contexts and informed choice between cultural options.”³ As a working hypothesis, I would suggest that smugglers often utilise their transcultural competences strategically for economic purposes. A major difference from Hoerder’s adoption of this concept for migrants is that this article will deal with smugglers of whom just *some* had a migration background. So does smuggling create transcultural identities, or is transculturality a precondition for a person to become a successful smuggler?

To understand smugglers’ lives in the Sino-Soviet borderlands I will be using Mary Louise Pratt’s notion of “contact zones.” Closely related to Hoerder’s definition of “transculturalism,” Pratt understands “[t]ransculturation [as] a phenomenon of the contact zone.” Looking at what she calls a “contact zone”—an area that allows the intermingling of two or more cultures—Pratt explores phenomena of “transculturation” in spaces of colonial encounter. The colonial context is negligible in the setting of this article inasmuch as there was no radical inequality among colonising and colonised subjects during the period under study. However, the

¹ Various concepts, such as “transnationality,” “hybridity,” “third space,” “cultures in between” and “entangled histories”—to mention just a few—advocate a shift from nation-state approaches to the study of people’s agency, mentality or cultural creation and could certainly also be adapted to enable smugglers’ personalities to be examined.

² Since the 1990s, anthropologists, historians and scholars of several other disciplines have used the concept “transculturality” in varying ways. As early as the 1940s, the Cuban sociologist Fernando Ortiz coined the term “transculturation” in a pioneering description of Afro-Cuban Culture. Among present scholars, the German philosopher Wolfgang Welsch is widely quoted but remains too normative for the case of smugglers’ identities. Wolfgang Welsch, “Transkulturalität. Zwischen Globalisierung und Partikularisierung,” in *Jahrbuch Deutsch als Fremdsprache. Intercultural German Studies*, ed. A. Wierlacher et al., vol. 26 (Munich: Iudicum 2006), 327–51. Dirk Hoerder’s approach seems more appropriate for the analysis of smugglers’ identities. Most important: Dirk Hoerder, “Transculturalism(s): From Nation-State to Human Agency in Social Spaces and Cultural Regions,” *Zeitschrift für Kanada-Studien* 45 (2005): 7–20.

³ Although quite similar to a sentence in Hoerder’s 2005 article, this passage was quoted in Dirk Hoerder, “Historians and Their Data: The Complex Shift from Nation-State Approaches to the Study of People’s Transcultural Lives,” *Journal of American Ethnic History* 25,4 (Summer 2006): 85–96, quotation on 91.

“contact zones” concept still remains highly productive and applicable, since it offers conclusive interpretations of the life patterns and strategies of smugglers and other border-crossing agents.⁴

As a second hypothesis, I will argue that smugglers had often lived and worked in contact zones for many years before they became involved in complex contraband activities.

Before attempting to analyse smugglers’ identities, one has to understand the extent to which people’s lives in the border region were entangled and in what kind of contact zones they interacted. Therefore, this text will address three aspects: First, it will very briefly touch upon the borderland’s multiethnic milieu and the relatively slow emergence of modern state-border controls. Second, it will sketch out how smuggling was carried out in the region by focusing on gold as a major contraband product. By examining two case studies of gold contraband networks it will, in a third section, attempt to analyse smuggler’s transcultural identities.

Porous Borders, Multiethnic Borderlands

According to Hoerder, people with transcultural backgrounds also create “transcultural spaces.”⁵ By the turn of the twentieth century, the Sino-Russian borderlands were in many respects “transcultural spaces”—or “zones of contact”—in which people with transcultural biographies did not care much about concepts of the nation-state. In general, the role of the nation-state, a nineteenth century construct institutionalised in the twentieth century, was of subordinate importance. This was true on both sides of the border.

Between the early 1900s and the mid 1950s, Manchuria, the Chinese borderland, was home to thousands of Russian colonists who settled along the semi-colonial Chinese Eastern Railway (CER), soon followed by even higher numbers of Russian émigrés fleeing from the Bolsheviks. Subjects of the Russian Empire and Soviet Union dwelled in the city of Harbin and the villages along the railway’s right of way zone. For the most part, these people preserved their pre-revolutionary lifestyle, spoke Russian, and maintained their religious beliefs. They were representatives of a Russian “culture abroad,” and were in many ways isolated from the Chinese culture by which they were surrounded.⁶

⁴ Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes. Travel Writing and Transculturation* (London: Routledge, 1992), quotation on 6.

⁵ See: Hoerder, “Transculturalism(s),” 8.

⁶ See the introduction of this volume. For further reading see Olga Bakich, “Charbin, ‘Rußland jenseits der Grenzen’ in Fernost,” in *Der große Exodus: Die russische Emigration und ihre Zentren 1917 bis 1941*, ed. Karl Schlögel (Munich: Beck, 1994), 304–28, in particular 327. For a brief history of the CER: Sören Urbansky, *Kolonialer Wettstreit. Rußland, China, Japan und die Ostchinesische Eisenbahn* (Frankfurt/Main: Campus, 2008).