

Borderlands of Ebb and Flow: Shared Histories and Imperial Encounters between China and Russia, 1600s to the Present

Workshop at the University of Hong Kong, December 13–15, 2023. Co-sponsored by the German Historical Institute, Washington, Ruhr University Bochum, and the University of Hong Kong, with additional support from the Louis Cha Fund for Chinese Studies and East/West Studies. Conveners: Sergey Glebov (Amherst College/Smith College), Loretta Kim (University of Hong Kong), Rachel Lin (University of Leeds), Willard Sunderland (University of Cincinnati), and Sören Urbansky (Ruhr University Bochum). Participants: Daigengna Duoer (University of California Santa Barbara), Yuan Gao (Georgetown University), Chia Yin Hsu (Portland State University), Kamal Kariem (Williams College), Aleksandr Turbin (University of Illinois at Chicago), Tomohiko Uyama (Hokkaido University), Miin-ling Yu (Institute of Modern History, Academia Sinica), Stephanie Ziehaus (University of Vienna).

On the 14th of December, 2023, the first day of the “Borderlands of Ebb and Flow” workshop commenced with welcoming remarks from Roland Vogt, the Head of School of Modern Languages and Cultures at the University of Hong Kong. The plenary session continued with presentations about the three key concepts which had guided the workshop’s conceptualization. Loretta Kim outlined the first concept, “shared history,” emphasizing the workshop’s intention of going beyond China-Russia state to state relations as well as simplistic, lopsided perspectives. “Shared history” transcends mere co-existence by highlighting cooperative behavior. This approach takes inspiration from the field of entangled history and focuses on the meaning of exchanges through interaction to break out of the molds of China studies and Russia

studies. The concept of “shared history” shows a desire to de-categorize and de-essentialize products and natural resources that have formerly been seen as symbols of separate cultures. Kim pointed out the challenges to this multilateral approach, such as attaining proficiency in both languages, familiarity with archives, and loyalties to one’s “home” field.

Rachel Lin followed by discussing the second key concept, “intersection,” which embodies the workshop’s shift away from bilateral approaches by looking at interactions locally and internationally. Lin pointed out the immediate urgency of such an approach in a contemporary climate when nationalistic rhetoric is strengthening. She argued that the utility of using “intersection” to approach the histories of a shared landscape is that it does not presuppose cooperation. Through the lens of “intersection” it is possible to explore parallel and overlapping understandings of frontier, competing policies of colonial solidification, and the nationalizing moment of imperial management. At the same time, it is important to consider that both sides tapped into global and international ideas in their approach to frontier management. Lastly, the concept of “intersection” substantiates the decolonizing and decentering of the metropolis, which was a main concern for this workshop.

Sören Urbansky concluded with an overview of the third key concept, “borderlands.” He explained that characteristics of the frontier, understood as the sparsely populated area beyond the imperial zone, persist even after the border has been established. One such key component of the frontier is the diverse population, as the borderland continues to be populated by people not of the country’s ethnic majority. Several borders remain within the borderland, while incomers recognize the national border. Another key feature is that territorial control is not established by the borderland, as the openness and closeness of borders is constantly contested.

The workshop was structured in breakout sessions, to allow in-person and online participation as well as a more in-depth discussion on the paper drafts. Each breakout session comprised three groups, whose members were reconfigured each session to give all participants the opportunity to comment on each paper. The second day, December 15, included a session spent on organizational matters regarding potential publication possibilities and discussion of the cross-references between papers.

Two workshop papers focused on the Russian and Qing empires in Central Asia. Yuan Gao focused on irrigation projects along the Ili River both before and after 1881, when the Qing and Romanov empires agreed on the Sino-Russian borders in the Treaty of St. Petersburg. Her paper examined the construction and maintenance of an “Imperial Canal” (*huangqu* 皇渠) network by the Qing in the upper Ili Valley. She contrasts the Qing’s costly endeavor of maintaining irrigation in Central Asia with the irrigation project plans envisioned by the Russian/Soviet technocrat Evgenii Skorniakov in the lower Ili Valley. Gao revealed the dynamics of geopolitics and colonization along the Sino-Russian border during a time when ideas such as nation-states, borders, and citizenship were emerging rapidly. The paper provided insights into the complex interactions between the two empires and their differing visions for the development of their territories in the arid borderlands of Central Asia.

Tomohiko Uyama’s paper on Xinjiang’s border focused on the ambiguity Central Asians had and still associate with China. He explored the experiences and observations of people who crossed the borders between today’s Kazakhstan/Kyrgyzstan and Xinjiang. These people include Shoqan Wälikhanov (1835–1865) and other Kazakh intellectuals; Kazakh and Kyrgyz refugees who fled to China because of the suppression of the 1916 uprisings, the Russian Civil War, famine, and the forced collectivization of agriculture;

Xinjiang Muslims who immigrated to the Soviet Union to escape conflict, hunger, and oppression; and people from Central Asia and China who visited each other's countries after the fall of the Soviet Union. He concluded that due to China's unwillingness to effectively use Xinjiang Muslims as intermediaries with Central Asia, Central Asians have perceived and continue to perceive China as a "civilizational other."

Three papers discussed knowledge production on the Northern Manchu-Russian borderland, its people, and its religions. Daigengna Duoer focused on the Japanese Empire and the production of knowledge about "Lamaism," a term widely used in early twentieth-century Japanese discourses to discuss Buddhism in Mongolia and Manchuria. She showcased how, following the Russo-Japanese War of 1905, there was an explosion of Japanese-language publications on "Lamaism" (*ramakyō*) which peaked in the 1930s after Japan's annexation of eastern Inner Mongolia and its establishment of the Manchukuo puppet state. The Japanese Empire urgently sought to generate knowledge about the powerful religious institutions of "Lamaism," which were remnants of Qing imperial arrangements in Manchuria, Mongolia, and Tibet, to assert control over Inner and Central Asia. These Japanese discourses on "Lamaism" were diverse products of historiography and ethnography that show a strong desire to know the geopolitically relevant Other, especially in competition with knowledge production in the Soviet Union and the Republic of China. The paper discussed some examples of these discourses as well as how Russian and Chinese discourses on "Lamaism" related to the Japanese ones.

Kamal A. Kariem's paper concerned V. K. Arsen'ev's ethnographic writing on the Ussuri *krai* [territory] during the late Russian Empire. In service to the empire, Arsen'ev strove to categorize the demographic diversity of the region by intentionally constructing Indigenous peoples as separate from

East Asian populations (especially Chinese settlers) in the region according to differences in their relationships to the Russian Empire and to nature. For Arsen'ev, Indigenous peoples came to be both helpful for nature and helpful for empire, while Chinese settlers and other East Asian peoples became bad for both. Thus, Arsen'ev embarked on a theorization of Indigenous peoples as not only different from other East Asian peoples within the region but as opposed to them. Kariem's argument traced these lines of separation from the late empire into the early Soviet Union through various genres of writing with an eye on how these histories and constructions are mobilized, edited, and forgotten today.

Stephanie Ziehaus argued that one of the main shared features of Russian and Qing empire building was the institutionalization of ethnicity (and ethnic groups) as an administrative and social unit via the establishment of native self-governance systems. Her research focused on the establishment of native self-governance institutions such as the Russian Inorodnoe Upravlenie and the Qing's Butha Eight Banners in the Manchu-Russian contact zone of the eighteenth and early nineteenth century as a process of imperial (dis)entanglement. The integration of local Barga and Khori Buryat people's social organization structures, via extended kinship ties, in both empires highlights the shared history not only of borderland peoples, but transimperial connections across borders that conceptually remain detrimentally demarcated in historiographical studies of empires. The Buryats in both the Romanov and Qing empire provide an ideal perspective on studying the imperial borderland as a cultural contact zone between the empire and its constituents as well as between empires.

Two papers covered the economic aspect of the borderland in trade relations and currency reforms. Aleksandr Turbin explored ethnic and national nuances of "Russian" trade in the imperial borderland. His paper focused on government

policy and public discourse surrounding the nationalization of the Romanov Empire from the second half of the nineteenth century to the early twentieth century. Turbin re-evaluated Russianness amidst the fundamental ethnic and socio-political diversity of the imperial space in the Russian Far East. Exploring various forms of legitimate representatives of Russian trades, such as Chinese merchants and the leased port of Dalny, allows for a better understanding of how national identity was constructed in the late imperial period. Chia-Yin Hsu studied the persistence of the old (silver) regime in the Soviet Far East and the cross-border trade with Manchuria in the early 1920s. She showed how various currencies such as the Japanese yen and imperial silver ruble coins persisted after the formation of the Far Eastern Oblast. Policies to monetarily “unify” the new oblast with Soviet Russia promoted the newly created Soviet money, the *chervonets*, as a trusted “hard currency” by manipulating exchange rates and banning imports from Manchuria. In effect, Soviet authorities carried out a protectionist policy against Manchuria to safeguard the *chervonets*, shutting down Chinese and Russian commercial ties to enact the currency “unification” of the FEO with the Soviet Union.

Two other papers focused on political influences on borderlands and the metropole while also examining the effects of transborder transfers of knowledge. Anran Wang’s paper focused on grassroots dynamics in Sino-Soviet-Mongolian Relations from 1956 to 1966 by concentrating on the Chinese border town of Erenhot, in the middle of the Gobi Desert, where the Trans-Mongolian Railway linking the Soviet Union to Mongolia enters China. The paper, based on documents of local party-state organs in Erenhot, scrutinized the ways routine work and life in the community evolved from the inauguration of the railway in 1956 to the start of the Cultural Revolution in 1966, a period when relations underwent rapid changes from socialist brotherhood to ideological and military antagonism. Wang argued that the border town expe-

rienced impacts from these changing international relations in a manner distinct from the rest of China. The paper contrasted the growing tensions in border-crossing formalities in Ereenhot with the Sino-Soviet-Mongolian honeymoon period and highlighted the paradoxical continuation of daily life, unhindered by ideological interference, in the period of Sino-Soviet antagonism.

Miin-Ling Yu's paper explored the autonomy of the CCP in relation to the Comintern after the Zunyi Conference in January 1935. By focusing on the Moscow Trials (1936–1938) and two diplomatic pacts—the Soviet–German Non-Aggression Pact and the Soviet-Japanese Neutrality Pact, the paper questioned the CCP's claims of enjoying full autonomy from the Comintern. In its persecution of internal enemies, the CCP followed the Comintern line set by the infamous Moscow trials. Soviet authorities demanded that China's government publicly denounce Trotskyists, Fascist Germans, or Japanese special agents, and the CCP followed through with eliminating Chinese Trotskyist-Fascists. The author questioned the CCP's varying levels of autonomy in internal party affairs when these opposed the Comintern's foreign policy objectives, illustrated by the shift in Soviet interpretations following the pacts signed in 1939 with Germany and 1941 with Japan. The author furthermore pondered the questions of China's sovereignty and autonomy in regards to Sino-Soviet relations and introduced a political framework into the discussion on borderlands.

In all these papers the underlining key concepts of the workshop—shared history, intersection, and borderlands—were recurring features. Omnipresent was the shared aspect of imperial competition as well as cooperation in knowledge production, trade, and irrigation projects, as well as the methodological approach of decolonizing research priorities by centering local peoples' perspectives—such as the Mongols, Buryats, and Indigenous people. These papers

underscore the relation of borderlands to the designs and demands made by the governing metropole and cover the multifold aspects of the borderland—ranging widely from the religious, economic, and political to the ethnic and the social.

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