Global Challenge and Regional Response. Early 20th Century Northeast China and Harbin: Their Social, Cultural, Economic and Political Encounters with the World

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In June, an international conference on „Global Challenge and Regional Response. Early 20th Century Northeast China and Harbin: Their Social, Cultural, Economic and Political Encounters with the World“ was held in Harbin, China. It was organized by Dan Ben-Canaan of the School of Western Studies at Heilongjiang University in Harbin, Frank Grüner of the Cluster of Excellence „Asia and Europe in a Global Context“ at the University of Heidelberg together with Ines Prodöhl of the German Historical Institute in Washington, DC.

Northeast China, known to the Western world as Manchuria, became the focus of global attention in the early twentieth century, when Japanese and Russian imperialism struggled for hegemony over a region that had become increasingly important as a crossroads for trade between Asia, Europe, and North America. Manchuria itself was rapidly transformed by the construction of major railways, massive migration, and the often strife-ridden exploitation of its rich mineral and agricultural resources by Russia, Japan, the United States, and other countries. The conference focused on Manchuria as an example of „glocalization“ – a phenomenon in which global and local interests converge. The organizers aimed to encourage methodological approaches that do not rely on ethnic, cultural, or national narratives but combine theories of transculturality with empirical research. The conference, in combination with a summer school, brought together scholars and students from various countries and disciplines to achieve a more complete picture of the dynamic and complex interactions that shaped the history of Manchuria.

OLGA BAKICH delivered the opening lecture on „Changing Identities: Harbin Censuses.“ Looking at Harbin’s censuses and population estimates, she analyzed how the nationality and citizenship of Harbin’s multinationa residents were identified during the four major periods of Harbin’s history as a multicultural place: (1) the period before the Russian Revolution, (2) the years 1918-1931, which were marked by a significant influx of Russian émigrés as well as China’s assertions of sovereignty, (3) the Manchukuo period, and (4) the postwar decades. Bakich revealed how demographics were affected by geographical factors and political considerations.

The first panel was devoted to „Imperialism and National Aspirations in Northeast China.“ In his talk on „The Russo-Japanese War and Northeast China: Global and Local Perspectives,“ ROTEM KOWNER examined the different strategic goals of Russia and Japan on the eve of the Russo-Japanese War and examined the war’s perceived outcome by looking at short-term and long-term geopolitical achievements. In the next paper, CHRISTIAN STÖRTZ focused on the „Global Impacts“ of the Russo-Japanese War, the first war against an Asian country that was lost by a European power. Störtz identified a multitude of processes at the regional, national, supranational, and global political levels, such as (anti-)colonialism and the emergence of national movements in the colonies. RUDOLPH NG’s presentation „Yuan dongbao: A Chinese or Russian Newspaper?“ looked at the impact of ownership on Harbin’s first modern Chinese newspaper. Although the Russian Chinese-Eastern Railway Company financed the paper, the editorial staff remained entirely Chinese and was free to publish sinophile and anti-Russian news articles. Hence, the newspaper was not just a Russian propaganda instrument in Manchuria. VICTOR ZATSEPI-NE’s paper „Surveying Manchuria: Imperial Russia’s Topographers at Work“ investigated the process of collecting knowledge about the conditions of the region. Although geographic expeditions to Manchuria were wide-ranging, maps of Manchuria remained inac-
curate for decades due to a lack of knowledge of Chinese and local languages, as well as other obstacles. The ensuing discussion focused on the question of the impact of the global on the local. How did Russian topographical and mental maps influence the local population? To what extent did the Russian-owned Yuandongbao affect the minds of Chinese in Harbin?

The second panel dealt with different aspects of economy and trade. In his talk „When the Ruble Rolled: Currency and Money Exchange Business as Part of Daily Life in Northeast China,” FRANK GRÜNER examined the effects of multiple currencies at the regional and local levels and how various social and national population groups handled these circumstances. In his presentation „Is there a border? Smugglers and their Proto-national and Transcultural Identities,” SÖREN URBANSKY suggested a new approach to smuggling along the Sino-Russian border, which is of interest to historians not only in economic terms. He argued that smugglers’ careers can teach us a great deal about transcultural identities and interethnic contacts in border regions. INES PRODÖHL’s presentation „A Miracle Bean: How Soy Conquered the World, 1905–1945” analyzed the history of soy cultivation. She described the emergence of the United States as the main producer of this valuable commodity, overtaking China’s Northeast in the 1940s. She examined the increasing demand for soybeans and its effects on both northeast China and the U.S. The subsequent discussion treated characteristics of transcultural identities and the ordinariness of chaos. Identities of people living in proto-national societies are difficult to define retrospectively. Certain types of chaos - such as the existence of multiple currencies, for example - can also be interpreted as a means of stabilizing a fragmented society.

The third panel looked into different „Aspects of Modernity in Manchukuo.” Focusing on media and propaganda policy, TOMOKO AKAMI analyzed Japan’s attempt to secure its dominance in Manchuko by using soft power. Focusing on the Manchukuo National News Agency, created in 1932, she demonstrated that Japan’s colonial strategy in Manchuko was experimental and new. NOR-

MAN SMITH’s presentation „Shifting Narratives of Alcohol Use in Manchuko” emphasized the importance of considering the “local” in terms of alcohol and its connotations. He investigated the shifting narratives in Manchuko’s alcohol advertising, from describing alcohol as an essential product of modern life in the 1930s to branding alcohol as a dangerous substance in the war-torn early 1940s. Comparisons of Japan’s Manchuko “puppet state” with German and Italian strategies of occupation were highlighted in the discussion.

The fourth panel, „Political Entanglements and Cultural Transgression,” dealt with different methods of exploring transcultural encounters in Manchuria. In his paper „Reading Time in Space: Mapping Cultural Junc-
tions,” KARL SCHLÖGEL showed how the method of „spacing history” could be used for an in-depth analysis of a place like Harbin. According to Schlögel, bringing the spatial dimension back into historiography means analyzing the city’s urban texture and reproducing the cultural topography of the city. MARK GAMSA discussed mixed marriages in Russian-Chinese Manchuria. The usual pattern was Chinese men marrying Russian women. These marriages often had an economic element, with Russian women seeking „economic” protection. Both men and women faced pressure and discrimination from their own communities for „crossing the line.” YO-
SHIYA MAKITA analyzed cultural representations of Manchuria by physicians and nurses of the Japanese Red Cross Society in the first decades of twentieth century by underscoring local intersections of global expansions of imperialism with (Western-style) medicalization. In her talk on language contacts, YUAN XIN examined Chinese pidgin Russian - a mixed, simplified language that was used as an interlanguage between the Chinese and Russian communities. In the discussion, participants primarily reflected on space as an analytical tool in historiography, which cannot be reduced to a „spatial turn.” They also discussed various outside cultural influences that initiated significant changes in the mental and material landscape of the city and region.

„Memory – Heritage and the Governing of History” was the topic of the fifth pa-
The architect CHEN ZIGUANG discussed the conservation or reconstruction of historical buildings and ways to integrate them into the architecture of modern Harbin using the example of Sofia Cathedral. He stressed that the protection of old buildings strengthens the identity of the city. In his presentation „Cultural Construction of Harbin and Manchuria in the Early 20th century: An Academic Reflection,” SHU ZHAN, a member of the Office for Minorities and Religious Affairs at the Heilongjiang People’s Congress, gave an outline of the history of Harbin. SU LING, a journalist at the Chinese Southern Weekly, gave an account of her investigations at the Heilongjiang Academy of Social Sciences, where the pursuit of prestige and income sometimes seems to take precedence over academic pursuits among the resident scholars. Though attempts were made to intimidate her and others, Su Ling succeeded in publishing her article. Based on her personal experiences, Su Ling tried to present ways foreign scholars could conduct research in China. Due to Chen Ziguang and Shu Zhan’s early departure, the discussion centered on techniques for conducting research and investigative journalism in China like networking with universities and Chinese scholars.

Panel six addressed „Global Memories and Shared Identities.” In her presentation „Sensibility Required: Exploring New Approaches to the History of Northeast China,” MARIKO TAMANOI suggested a new concept of sensibility for scholars dealing with history and memory. Using the case of Japanese war crimes in Manchuria, she showed how descending from „national” to „local” levels and connecting different local networks to one another could help scholars overcome hostility and avoid a dubious „international apology boom.” DAN BEN-CANAAN’s presentation „Problems of Memory and Nostalgia in Historical Reality: Imagined Communities - Imagined History” dealt with methodological problems that emerge when scholars work with memories and specifically with oral history records. ALENA KOZLOVA’s paper on „Oral Testimony of Former Harbin’s Residents, 1932-1955” presented a project by the „Memorial” society of Moscow and Yekaterinburg, which conducted interviews with 29 former residents of Harbin who had resettled in the Soviet Union. She touched on topics like reasons for returning, repression, and exclusion from the Soviet state and society, as well as the effects their Harbin stay had on their identity and self-perception. MADELEINE HERREN’s presentation „Globalization of Death: Foreign Cemeteries in a Transnational Perspective” discussed growing global entanglements as expressed in the foundation of foreign cemeteries, using civil and military cemeteries abroad as examples. She argued that foreign cemeteries shape the way people remember the past of their former communities in a global context. The ensuing discussion revolved around memory and narrative. How should we speak and write about memory, especially memories of suffering?

The seventh and final panel examined the role of civil society in Harbin, in particular the role of Russian fascists and the Jewish community. In his presentation, HEINZ-DIETRICH LÖWE showed that the ideology and Weltanschauung of the Russian fascists was not deeply influenced by Hitler and Mussolini. Rather, the Russian fascists were mainly influenced by the legacy of the Russian radical right of the late czarist empire. SUSANNE HOHLER used the anti-German boycott organized by the Jews in Harbin in 1933 as an example to demonstrate how reactions to global events can be shaped by local particularities. Compared to the boycott movement in other communities, Harbin was a special case due to the presence of two fairly strong and self-confident antagonistic groups: revisionist Zionists and Russian fascists. LI SHUHUA analyzed the relation between Jewish publications in the Soviet Union and those published by the Jewish Community in Harbin. After 1922, when Soviet attitudes towards Jewish publications worsened and censorship intensified, the importance of the publishing work by the Jewish Community of Harbin increased. The discussion focused mainly on the ideology of the Russian fascists and their influence on daily life and society in the multiethnic city.

The conference’s presentations and discussions testified to the complexity of the history of northeastern China, with the entanglements of different nationalities, cultures, and
influences, and brought to light the problems that arise in dealing with this history. Different concepts of history, memory, and identity recurred throughout the conference and, linking approaches and topics across a wide range. Between 1898 and 1949 Manchuria was home to several populations that participated in transcultural processes that made it possible for nationally, ethnically, or religiously defined boundaries to be crossed. After the exodus of emigrants from Harbin, however, these boundaries were reconstructed to conform to the new national identities. Some questions raised during the conference still require further reflection and discussion. What role do historians play in the reconstruction of memory and identity? How are conflicts of influence connected to the construction of memory and identity? How and to what degree did Manchuria have an influence on the West?

Conference Overview:

Opening lecture
Olga Bakich (Toronto): Changing Identities: Harbin Censuses

Panel 1 Imperialism and National Aspirations in Northeast China
Chair: Yin Tiechao (Harbin)
Rotem Kowner (Haifa): The Russo-Japanese War and Northeast China: Global and Local Perspectives
Christian Stoertz (Heidelberg): Global Impacts of a Local War
Rudolph Ng (Heidelberg): Yuandongbao: A Chinese or Russian Newspaper?
Victor Zatsepine (Hong Kong): Surveying Manchuria: Imperial Russia’s topographers at work

Panel 2 Economy and Trade
Chair: Susanne Hohler (Heidelberg)
Frank Grüner (Heidelberg): When the Rubel Rolled: Currency and Money Exchange Business as Part of Daily Life in Northeast China
Sören Urbansky (Heidelberg): Is there a border? Smugglers and their proto-national and trans-cultural identities

Ines Prodöhl (Washington, DC): „A Miracle Bean”: How Soy conquered the West, 1900–1945

Panel 3 The Aspects of Modernity in Manchukuo
Chair: Dan Ben Canaan (Harbin)
Tomoko Akami (Canberra): An experiment of dominance in the new era: Japan’s use of news propaganda at Manzhouguo
Norman Smith (Guelph/Ontario): Shifting Narratives of Alcohol Use in Manchukuo

Panel 4 Political Entanglements and cultural Transgression
Chair: Ines Prodöhl (Washington, DC)
Karl Schlögel (Frankfurt/Oder): Reading Time in Space. Mapping Cultural Junctions
Mark Gamse (Tel Aviv): Mixed Marriages in Russian Chinese Manchuria
Yoshiya Makita (Tokyo): Ambivalent Enterprise: Cultural Representation of Manchuria in the Social Hygienic Activities of the Japanese Red Cross Society in the Early Twentieth Century
Yuan Xin (Heidelberg): The Tale of two Chinese Cities –The Cultural Connotation Comparison of CPR CPE vocabulary

Panel 5 Memory I Heritage and the Governing of History
Chair: Frank Grüner (Heidelberg)
Chen Ziguang (Harbin): Resurrection of Historical Block in the Modern Harbin
Su Ling (Guangzhou): Conducting Research and Investigation in China: A Case Study of an Investigation of the Heilongjiang Academy of Social Sciences

Panel 6 Memory II Global Memories and shared Identities
Chair: Heinz Dietrich Löwe (Heidelberg)
Mariko Tamanoi (Los Angeles): Sensibility Required. Exploring new approaches to the history of Northeast China
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Dan Ben Canaan (Harbin): Problems of Memory and Nostalgia in Historical Reality: Imagined Communities


Madeleine Herren (Heidelberg): Globalization of Death – Foreign Cemeteries in a Transnational Perspective

Panel 7 The Role of the Civil Society
Chair: Victor Zatsepine (Hong Kong)

Heinz Dietrich Löwe (Heidelberg): Fascism as a Transcultural Phenomenon? – The Russian Fascists in Manchuria and others

Susanne Hohler (Heidelberg): Local Response to Nazi Politics. The Anti-German Boycott in Harbin


Conclusions: Dan Ben Canaan, Frank Grüner, Ines Prodöhl