

Daily Life and Urban Spaces in Northeast Asian Border Towns, 1900 to 1950

Veranstalter: Frank Grüner / Susanne Hohler / Sören Urbansky, Cluster of Excellence „Asia and Europe in a Global Context“, University of Heidelberg

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Organized by the Cluster of Excellence at the University of Heidelberg, a series of conferences in 2008, 2009, and 2010 has explored a broad range of issues concerning Northeast China—specifically Harbin - in the early 20th century. The last conference of this series, „Daily Life and Urban Spaces in Northeast Asian Border Towns, 1900 to 1950,“ took place in Heidelberg from November 25 to 27, 2010. The organizers, Frank Grüner (Heidelberg), Susanne Hohler (Heidelberg), and Sören Urbansky (Freiburg), remarked at the conference opening that the focus was to compare and analyze the social history of urban spaces in border towns and border regions of Northeast Asia (Russia and Soviet Far East, Siberia, Northeast China, Mongolia, Korea, and Japan) during the first half of the 20th century. This area and timeframe represents a complex history of competing powers and diverging colonial interests. Japan, the Russian Empire, the Soviet Union, China, the United States, and other Western powers have pursued their own economic and geostrategic objectives in the region. One of the outcomes from this power struggle was the creation of contact zones of different social, political, ethnic, and cultural groups. Among them, borders could not be easily discerned and did not always correspond to the official boundaries, defined by the regimes in power. This was a central issue discussed during the conference.

The first panel, „Cities at the Border,“ concentrated on the traditional understanding of border towns, which were located on or near state borders between two nation-states. Each of the four presenters selected a city in Northeast Asia that showed an intriguing contrast among different border towns.

BENJAMIN ISITT (Vancouver) explored

the Russian city of Vladivostok, where the Canadian troops participated in their short-lived Siberian Intervention between 1918 and 1919. Isitt described that social relations and spaces in Vladivostok were decidedly influenced by race, ideology, and class. His research indicated that although the foreign troops in Vladivostok generally viewed the Chinese and Koreans in the city as less of a Bolshevik threat, some of these Asian populations actively participated in the partisan insurgency in the spring of 1919.

SÖREN URBANSKY's (Freiburg) research focused on Manchuria Station, which is situated at the Mongolian-Chinese-Russian contact zone and has been a major transportation hub between China and Russia since the early 20th century. Urbansky analyzed characteristics of a town that is located immediately at the state border. He assessed different types of primary sources, such as travelogues, official reports, and archival material, and argued that border-crossing phenomena in places at the periphery and of subaltern groups could only be researched comprehensively if all these materials are studied in the appropriate context.

CHRISTIAN HESS (Warwick) studied Dalian's changing position within empire and nation from the late 1800s through the 1950s. He argued that the concept of borders is crucial for understanding Dalian's unique development. His research examined Dalian from two perspectives. First, viewing from the nation-state angle, he analyzed how empire and nation defined this newborn city. Second, he looked at the internal borders within Dalian, especially between Chinese and Japanese residents there.

VLADIMIR DATSYSHEN (Krasnoyarsk) told the history of Blagoveshchensk, which was largely disregarded in the Soviet historiography. He argued that boundary factors have been critical in the city's development and emphasized how the Chinese influenced Blagoveshchensk in the 20th century.

Panel 2, „Language, Locality and Border,“ addressed how border manifests itself in language and the environment. Not Chinese, not Russian, but Sino-Russian pidgin was the key subject of research of the first two papers. Another two presentations emphasized the local-

ity of the border town Harbin.

KAPITOLINA FEDOROVA (St. Petersburg) explored Sino-Russian interethnic communication as evidence of social relations and conditions that existed in the border zone between the two peoples in the early 20th century. She argued that there was no practical or symbolical need for Russians in the border zone to speak Chinese or even pidgin. Instead of the Russian language, Chinese and Sino-Russian pidgin did not hold prestige for the speakers, and the ones who spoke them were perceived as socially and culturally inferior to Russians.

XIN YUAN (Heidelberg) examined the formation of pidgins in China as limited acculturation in second-language acquisition and further analyzed the issue from a learner internal approach. Supporting evidence from social historical statistics included foreign language policy, foreign language education, and pidgin users' motivations toward each other's native languages.

OLGA BAKICH (Toronto) offered an overview of the historical Harbin based on its streets, addresses, and districts. She argued that the naming and renaming of Harbin streets constituted a significant display of political power over the city. The name changes in turn reflected the ever-shifting political, national, and cultural demarcations in Harbin between the Russians and Chinese.

INYOUNG BONG (Ithaca) studied the implications of migration and interracial relationships between the Russians and Chinese in Manchuria, based on Luo Binji's short story „Xiangqin Kang Tiangang“ (1943). The story, as Bong argued, illustrated the borderland characteristics of Manchuria, where people shaped and crossed racial, cultural, and physical demarcations.

The third panel, „Communicating Borders and Monopolies of Interpretation,“ discussed the presentation and representation of „self“ and „other“ in Manchuria, above all between the Russian and Chinese communities in Harbin.

BLAINE CHIASSON (Waterloo) explored the cultural clash between Russian and Chinese elites in the 1920s Harbin. Based on a few momentous events of the city, such as the Manchurian Research Society curatorial con-

troversy and the 1924 Opera Riots, Chiasson described how the cultural battle was fought between these two groups of elites.

FRANK GRÜNER and RUDOLPH NG (Heidelberg) compared and contrasted the Russian and Chinese presses in Harbin from the 1900s until the 1930s. Showing their self-perception and perception of the other, the Russian and Chinese newspapers left no doubt in their writing about the nature of their local Sino-Russian relationship: Two groups would be represented as distinct entities with clear cultural boundaries, despite their spatial proximity and economic interdependence. Especially the Russians saw the other as a commercial competitor or even a threat to the general welfare of the city. Such antagonism was particularly acute in times of crises, as the pneumonic plague in 1910 and 1911 demonstrated.

CHIA YIN HSU (Portland) scrutinized the Russian refugee movement to Manchuria in the 1920s and 1930s and the Chinese decolonization efforts. Her focus was on a particular group of refugees, namely the Chinese Eastern Railway (CER)-associated engineers and technical professionals. Hsu postulated that this group of refugees was instrumental in the continuation of the imperial-era colonial regime through maintaining the railroad concession.

DAN BEN-CANAAN and YISHA LIANG (Harbin) put forward both Chinese and Western historiographies of Harbin and argued that both perspectives have their own merits. Their paper elaborated on the Chinese understanding of time and space, which sometimes could be the reason behind vastly different interpretations of Harbin's history.

The fourth and final panel, „Shifting Identities,“ concentrated on border-crossing phenomena in and out of the border cities. For the Russian communities' repatriation to the USSR, for the Russian and Chinese workers at the Chinese Eastern Railway, and for athletes in Harbin, border-crossing appears to be a critical aspect of their experience.

IRINA OSTROVSKAYA (Moscow) explained the work of the Memorial Society, which included an oral history project with the last generation of Russian residents in Harbin. Her research highlighted the diffi-

culties that the Russian community faced in Harbin and later back in the Soviet Union.

HE YENFANG (Harbin) traced the history of the Chinese Eastern Railway from 1898 until today and examined the question of what impact the Russian labor movement had on Harbin and the CER. Based on his research on the memoirs of CER's Chinese workers, he argued that the Chinese and Russian workers cooperated closely in a number of labor movements, despite the fact that Russians enjoyed semicolonial privileges in Harbin.

Through the history of sports, SUSANNE HOHLER (Heidelberg) investigated if and how various groups of residents interacted among themselves. She argued that on the field of sports, because of its particular characteristics, partly lifted or even removed the usually clear and well-kept borders among peoples. Her example of a multiethnic sports team representing Harbin vividly illustrated the border-crossing phenomenon in sports.

The final discussion, on November 27, 2010, summarized and reexamined the key questions of the three-day conference. SUSANNE HOHLER identified different types of borders (race, national, gender) and their malleability. Furthermore, are these types of borders connected? If so, how? Must a city be a border town if it is located on the border? Most importantly, why are we the historians writing about border towns? FRANK GRÜNER continued by questioning how historians can conceptualize border towns, especially in Northeast China in the early 20th century. Were multilingualism and political tension prerequisites to the establishment of border towns? SÖREN URBANSKY emphasized the border-overcoming experience in Northeast Asia. Were there elements other than race, gender, and political boundaries that one should consider?

On these questions, the conference participants seemed to have come to a number of consensuses. The historical studies of contact zones are necessary as we move beyond the traditional nation-state-based historiography. Cities in Northeast Asia, such as Harbin, Vladivostok, Dalian, Manchuria Station, and Blagoveshchensk, provide good specimens for border-town studies. Research into border towns highlights multiplicity in

intercultural interactions and downplays homogeneity in traditional historical writings. Such an approach to historical research not only opens our eyes to those specific border towns but also reveals much more about the empires and nations that we have for so long understood as monoliths. Whether the topic was the Sino-Russian interaction in Harbin or Canadian-Japanese joint actions in Vladivostok, all discussions have pointed to a reassessment of the border concept and further research into contact zones among empires in the 19th and 20th centuries, in and beyond Northeast Asia.

Conference overview:

Opening Remarks

Frank Grüner (Heidelberg), Susanne Hohler (Heidelberg), Sören Urbansky (Freiburg)

Panel 1: Cities at the Border

Chair: Rudolph Ng (Heidelberg)

Discussant: David Mervart (Heidelberg)

Benjamin Isitt (Vancouver): On the Borders of Bolshevism: Ethnicity, Ideology, and Citizen-Soldier Interactions during the Allied Occupation of Vladivostok, 1918-1919

Sören Urbansky (Freiburg): Mapping Manchuria Station. Source Reading and Border-Crossing into the „Yellow Land“

Christian Hess (Warwick): Mapping Dalian: A City Between Empire and Nation, 1898-1950

Vladimir Datsyshen (Krasnoyarsk): Blagoveshchensk: The Boundary Factor in Daily History in the First Half of the 20th Century

Panel 2: Language, Locality, and Border

Chair: Sören Urbansky (Freiburg)

Discussant: Nicolae Statu (Heidelberg)

Kapitolina Fedorova (Petersburg): Interethnic Communication in the Russian-Chinese Border Area and the Use of Russian-Chinese Pidgin: Sociolinguistic Approach

Xin Yuan (Heidelberg): Translingual Borders in Harbin and Shanghai. Segregation and Acculturation in the Formation of Chinese Pidgin Russian and Chinese Pidgin English

Olga Bakich (Toronto): Narratives of Harbin

Streets

InYoung Bong (Ithaca): Deterritorialization: Interracial Marriage, Movement, and Non-Belonging in Luo Binji's „A Fellow Villager, Kang Tiangang“

Panel 3: Communicating Borders and Monopolies of Interpretation

Chair: Xin Yuan (Heidelberg)

Discussant: Susanne Hohler (Heidelberg)

Blaine Chiasson (Waterloo): Playing Guest and Host on the Manchurian Stage: Debating Modernity in the Chinese Northeast

Frank Grüner/Rudolph Ng (Heidelberg): Borders in Daily Life and the Press: Harbin's Russian and Chinese Newspapers in Early 20th Century

Chia Yin Hsu (Portland): Railroad Technocracy, Urban Dreams, and Imperial Lieux de Mémoire in Russian Émigrés' Manchuria, 1920-1930s

Dan Ben-Canaan and Yisha Liang (Harbin): Two Time Views of a One Space: The Mapping of Harbin, a Border City in a Frontier Region 1898–1950 and Beyond

Panel 4: Shifting Identities

Chair: Frank Grüner (Heidelberg)

Discussant: Heinz-Dietrich Löwe (Heidelberg)

Irina Ostrovskaya (Moscow): Crossing of the Border as Aspiration to Preserve National Identity. Based on Audio and Video Interviews (Omsk, Yekaterinburg and Moscow)

He Yanfeng (Harbin): Struggle for Survival and Dignity: The Joint Chinese and Russian Labor Movement in the Harbin General Factory of the CER

Susanne Hohler (Heidelberg): Go Team Harbin. Sports, Borders and Identity in the 1930s

Final Discussion

Conclusions: Frank Grüner, Susanne Hohler, Sören Urbansky

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