

Beyond the Steppe Hill. The Making of the Sino-Soviet Border (1890-1990)
Dissertation abstract, Sören Urbansky

Border regions are places where, at times, foreign relations between countries as perceived by the elites in the foreign ministries differ strongly from the realities of everyday life of the local residents. At times the latter are inclined to challenge imperial and colonial aims of the former for their personal benefit. My study examines a local aspect of the Sino-Russian border, namely the region in the vicinity of the two border settlements of Manzhouli and Zabaikalsk. The grasslands at the trilateral junction of present Mongolia–China–Russia, of Southeastern Transbaikalya (also known as Dauria) and Northwestern Manchuria (to be precise: Barga or Hulunbei'er) represent an exceptional region along the Sino-Russian border, which are not marked by a topographical barrier. Hence, at the beginning of 20th century – by the time the Chinese Eastern Railway was built – the border crossing at Manzhouli (then called and in Russian still known as: Manchuria) became the major economic hub for Sino-Russian commerce, which it remains to the present day. At the turn of the last century Manchuria station replaced Kyakhta as the heart of Sino-Russian exchange – economically, and, in some respects also, culturally.

This dissertation will investigate the formation of the Sino-Soviet border during the 20th century, framed by the aforesaid local perspective. How did the border become a border in the modern sense, that is, firstly, a sharp line of economic and political separation, and, secondly, a boundary of ethnic and cultural segregation? This question spotlights not only a China coming to terms with nationhood in the contemporary sense, but also with the impact – perceived and real – of its long and often glorious history. Furthermore, it emphasizes a Russia (Soviet Union) struggling with its imperial identity. Hence, the dissertation project will investigate antagonisms and parallels of »Sovietness« (»Russianness«), »Chineseness«, and »indigeneness« as complements in their interactions to examine the local historical and ideological tensions that shaped the cultural formation of »border« in China and Russia. It will question the »national« identities of the local inhabitants, who were brought up in a proto-national transborder milieu over centuries. Consequently, my dissertation focuses not only on elite culture, but also on marginalized – or to use another term still en vogue – subaltern groups. A century long time span can definitely only spotlight some conversions, but it can highlight significant turning points in the process of nationalizing the periphery and its populace.

I will attempt to analyze the transformation from »frontier« to »border« in a comprehensive sense, considering aspects of ethnicity, culture, politics, power and economy. I will use a detailed analysis of the ways that border was created in terms of state control (i.e. customs), official representation (i.e. propaganda), education and reform (i.e. collectivization), and how these aspirations were challenged (i.e. smuggling). Therefore, I will use a wide range of sources such as archival documents, local and regional newspapers, and recently published books by Russian and Chinese regional historians.

This project will contribute to the historical theorization of the processes of border and identity formation of (trans-)national border communities; to the cultural analysis of the role of the state in trans-border interactions and, needless to say, to the history of 20th century Sino-Russian relations.