Borders in Imperial Times: Daily Life and Urban Spaces in Northeast Asia

Frank Grüner / Susanne Hohler / Sören Urbansky

In particular during the 19th and 20th centuries, Northeast China has been formed by competing plans of expansion and international rivalries for power.[1] With the changing powers of the 20th century – Russian, Chinese and Japanese – a wide field of European-Asian interaction arose with complex mutual influences. The cultural polymorphy of the region known as "Manchuria" in the West started with Han-Chinese migration, which began in the 17th century and was significantly intensified since the 1870s, continued

1 Some significant recent contributions on the Chinese, Russian, Soviet, Japanese and other imperial histories of Manchuria are N. E. Ablova, KVZhD i rossiiskaia emigratsiia v Kitae. Mezhdunarodnye i politicheskie aspekty istorii (pervaia polovina XX veka), Moscow 2005; Blaine R. Chiasson, Administering the Colonizer: Manchuria's Russians under Chinese Rule, 1918–1929, Vancouver / Toronto 2010; Shao Dan, Remote Homeland, Recovered Borderland: Manchus, Manchukuo, and Manchuria, 1907–1985, Honolulu 2011; Prasenjit Duara, Sovereignty and Authenticity: Manchukuo and the East Asian Modern, Lanham 2004; Bruce A. Elleman / Stephen Kotkin (eds), Manchurian Railways and the Opening of China: An International History, Armonk, NY 2010; Mark C. Elliott, The Limits of Tartary: Manchuria in Imperial and National Geographies, in: The Journal of Asian Studies 59 (2000) 3, pp. 603-46; Ralph Edward Glatfelter, Russia, the Soviet Union, and the Chinese Eastern Railway, in: Clarence B. Davis / Kenneth E. Wilburn with Roland E. Robinson (eds), Railway Imperialism, New York et al. 1991, pp. 137-54; Mariko Asano Tamanoi (ed.), Crossed Histories. Manchuria in the Age of Empire, Ann Arbor 2005; Sören Urbansky, Kolonialer Wettstreit: Russland, China, Japan und die Ostchinesische Eisenbahn, Frankfurt a. M. 2008; David Wolff, To the Harbin Station. The Liberal Alternative in Russian Manchuria, 1898–1914, Stanford 1999; Louise Young, Japan's Total Empire: Manchuria and the Culture of Wartime Imperialism, Berkeley, CA 1998. In addition, a few selected "classical" reference works are Tao Shing Chang, International Controversies over the Chinese Eastern Railway, Shanghai 1936; Paul Hibbert Clyde, International Rivalries in Manchuria, 1689–1922, Columbus, Ohio 1926; Adachi Kinnosuke, Manchuria: A Survey, New York 1925; Owen Lattimore, Manchuria: Cradle of Conflict, New York 1932; Rosemary K. I. Quested, "Matey" Imperialists? The Tsarist Russians in Manchuria 1895–1917, Hongkong 1982; Peter S. H. Tang, Russian and Soviet Policy in Manchuria and Outer Mongolia 1911–1931, Durham, NC 1959.

Comparativ | Zeitschrift für Globalgeschichte und vergleichende Gesellschaftsforschung 22 (2012) Heft 5, S. 7–13.

with the Russian expansion into the Far East of the late 19th century, and was fortified by regional and global migration in the first half of the 20th century. By the 1920s the region consisted of numerous Asian and European ethnicities. With Russia's defeat in the Russo-Japanese War (1904/05), Japan entered the stage to change the region decisively over the following decades. By wresting the South Manchurian Railway from Russia, Japan managed to increase its economic influence constantly, first in the southern parts and subsequently throughout Northeast China. While Russia's influence in Manchuria was significantly weakened after the breakdown of the Tsarist Empire, the territory of the Three Northeastern Provinces (then called 'the Special District') was officially under administration of the Chinese Central government in Beijing. In practice, however, the Chinese warlord Zhang Zuolin, partly backed by Tokyo, ruled the area until 1928. After a short period of Chinese sovereignty over Manchuria, the Japanese occupied the territory in 1931 and installed a puppet regime. This newly created puppet-state, Manchukuo, was formally a constitutional monarchy, which existed between 1932 and 1945. The Soviet invasion in August 1945 toppled Manchukuo, and Manchuria fell temporarily under Soviet dominion. After the retreat of the Soviet Army in early 1946, the Chinese Communists soon threw out the Guomindang forces and seized the entire region.
Overlapping waves of imperial expansion fostered different principles of power and cultural-ideological monopolies of interpretation. The competing imperialist visions commingled with diverging ethnic, national, religious and cultural traditions of the inhabitants. Thus, Northeast China unexpectedly developed into a field of experiments on globalization, international interaction, and transcultural entanglement, which surpassed the national, political, and cultural frontiers of the ruling powers. Only the absorption of the region into the People's Republic of China put an end to the dynamics of this development.

Border towns

The international rivalry of competing powers was reflected in the interaction of their respective peoples "on the ground" in border towns. In many ways, cities in the vicinity of state borders are similar to any other urban area. However, certain features are particular to border towns. They often are established when new borders are drawn during imperial expansion, wars and in postwar treaties, or when new trade routes emerge. The existence and development of these urban areas often heavily depend on the fate of the border itself, the relations between the adjacent countries and their peoples, and the prevailing legal conditions and agreements, such as special rights for foreigners in concession areas, including treaty ports or railway zones. Border towns at the periphery of empires offer various opportunities that are usually absent at the center. Interactions between the "people" and the "state" are often more pronounced in these settlements. Prominent phenomena include the smuggling of goods and cross-border migration. These special features of border towns attract distinct groups of people with a "frontier spirit". They

comprise a mixed population of smugglers, political exiles, and polyglot soldiers of fortune, for example, that can only be found at the margins of territorial political entities. Numerous other characteristics are also typical for these settlements, such as a distinct underworld and interracial marriages.

This special issue goes beyond these well-known features of towns in imperial borderlands and concentrates particularly on contacts across ethnicities and nationalities that are defined not by state borders but by borders inside these towns. Thus, the aim is to offer some tentative answers for a more comprehensive knowledge of the characteristics of border town communities. More generally speaking, it is concerned with the cultural complexity of cross-border phenomena, transcultural entanglements, as well as processes of segregation inside border towns.

The study of borders has long been concerned with geographical, geopolitical, and juridical issues. Recently however, academic interest in transnational migration and in the historical effects of borders has reemerged. Leading scholars of border studies, such as Victor Prescott, Benedict Anderson, and Peter Sahlins, come from different disciplines, and their work represents an interdisciplinary renaissance of border studies. The term "border" itself has become a buzzword and is applied in many different ways.[2] Historians are relative latecomers in this regard, and the field of history is strongly influenced by anthropological approaches. The work of Sahlins and others have diverted historians away from traditional studies based on top-down and center-periphery interpretations of boundaries towards developments in the borderlands themselves, which include the perspectives of the border populations and the regional elites in the borderlands. They suggest that national policies and local-level actions are interdependent.[3] Historical studies on China's borders and borderlands still center, however, around the relationship of the imperial center and its heterogeneous peripheries.[4]

Despite the strong recent interest in borders, no significant concept of border towns has yet been formulated in the field of history. Historical studies of borders and contact zones in urban spaces are, however, necessary to transcend traditional historiography based on the nation-state. In our preliminary definition of border towns, we postulate that borders are not conceptually restricted to the category of state borders. Instead, we trace and analyze them apart from the cartographical aspect dictated by nation-states. In

2 For an excellent overview on the interdisciplinary study of borders, see, for instance: Hastings Donnan / Thomas M. Wilson, Borders. Frontiers of Identity, Nation and State, Oxford 1999. For a comparative research about the history of borderlands see: Michiel Baud / Willem van Schendel, Toward a Comparative History of Borderlands, in: Journal of World History 8 (1997) 2, pp. 211-42.

3 Peter Sahlins, Boundaries. The Making of France and Spain in the Pyrenees, Berkeley 1989.

4 On the formation of cultural, regional, and religious identities of borderlanders, the relationship between center and periphery and the question whether border peoples accepted Chinese cultural expansion to become inalienable parts of the Chinese Empire during Ming and Qing dynasties see the essays in: Pamela Crossley (ed.), Empire at the Margins: Culture, Ethnicity, and Frontier in Early Modern China, Berkeley 2006; Nicola Di Cosmo (ed.), Political Frontiers, Ethnic Boundaries, and Human Geographies in Chinese History, London 2003; Stevan Harrell (ed.), Cultural Encounters on China's Ethnic Frontiers. Hong Kong 1996; Diana Lary (ed.), The Chinese State at the Borders. Vancouver 2007. On the Russo-Chinese relations and the making of their common imperial border see: Sarah Paine, Imperial Rivals: China, Russia, and their Disputed Frontier, Armonk 1996.

contrast to the traditional notions of static state-borders and cities located directly on or divided by national borderlines (such as Cold War Berlin and the twin cities of Tijuana and San Diego), which are usually altered through wars or specified by border commissions, borders inside border towns prove to be much more flexible. They are highly dynamic because inhabitants constantly negotiate them, and they are difficult to enforce from the political centers.

Consequently, the case studies in this issue go beyond the traditional understanding of border towns. With the exception of Manchuria Station (Manzhouli), which was located directly on the border between Russia and China, these cities, such as Harbin and Dalian (Dairen, Dal'nyi) in China and Vladivostok in Russia, need not straddle state borders. Such cities are good specimens for border town studies because of their multicultural populations, colonial concessions, ethnic segregation, and competing political systems. It was the inter-imperial power struggle involving Russia, the Soviet Union, China, and Japan during the first half of the 20th century that created new borders separating different social, political, ethnic, and cultural groups within these urban arenas. Among them, borders could not easily be discerned and did not always correspond to the official boundaries as defined by the prevailing regimes. Borders became *the* determinant elements for those urban societies. For that reason, the border towns under study are distinct from other cities because they formed dynamic centers of different, often competing, economic, political, social, national, ethnic processes. Harbin, Dalian, Vladivostok and Manchuria Station are places where notions of identity, nationhood, and empire were especially significant because groups in fluctuating relations of competition and cooperation were constantly challenging these categories. Rivalry is often reflected in and represented through symbolic architecture,[5] day-to-day encounters in city life, competing public opinions, and contending performative actions.

Urban space

The concept of urban space, explicitly or implicitly, plays an important role in most articles of this volume. Urban space has recently enjoyed increasing popularity as a concept in various academic disciplines. Researchers typically emphasize two different aspects of urban spaces. On the one hand, developers, architects and urban planners focus more on the actual physical design and outline of cities; that is, public as well as private spaces, like housing, shopping malls, streets, squares and parks. On the other hand, urban spaces can be considered not just as any physical space within the borders of a city, but as common or shared spaces where the inhabitants of a city meet on a daily basis. Of course,

5 The role of symbolic architecture in Harbin is discussed in: James Hugh Carter, Creating a Chinese Harbin. Nationalism in an International City, 1916–1932, Ithaca 2002, pp. 126-61.

these two interpretations are not dichotomous; in fact, they are often interrelated conceptually and empirically.[6]

Another feature of these border towns is frequent changes of the politically dominant group. As a result, historians must transcend national biases in order to analyze various ethnic, political and social groups equally. This also helps to overcome exclusionary and partisan diaspora-narratives, which are common in the historiography of cities in overlapping inter-imperial borderlands.[7] The six case studies examine different borders crossing urban spaces in the everyday city life of border towns. They aim for a deeper understanding of the different levels of borders by examining the functions of borders in the daily lives, actions, and experiences of citizens and their organizations. The articles also inquire how and by whom borders were imposed. In general, two different levels of borders can be identified. The first level relates to "lower" and in many cases less visible borders, which cover daily encounters between people of different ethnic, social and cultural background in contact zones "on the ground", such as train stations, bazaars and playing fields. The second level relates to the "principal" borders of colonial discourses, cultural superiority, power, and *Deutungshoheit* (discursive power).

The articles by Benjamin Isitt, Susanne Hohler and Sören Urbansky aim at the first level of lower borders. Taking occupied Vladivostok as his case, Isitt visits street corners, marketplaces, barracks, and other cross-cultural zones of contact to trace the complex interactions between Canadian soldiers and local civilians in the spring of 1919. In border towns, as in many other regions and cities, processes of migration shaped the social relations and social spaces of the town. This article embraces a broad conception of "migrant worker", extending from the foreign soldiers to local civilians and refugees, to cope with the ubiquity and prominence of migration in urban surroundings. Sports, as Hohler demonstrates, offer another unique insight into the complex relationships between the different segments of the society in border towns with multiethnic populations. Hohler argues that the playing field, because of its particular characteristics, was a common or urban space where usually clear and regulated borders could be shifted, partly lifted and even abandoned. Urbansky's article on Manchuria Station is the only case study that

6 For "urban space" in urban development and planning see, for example: Clare Herrick, Designing the fit city: public health, active lives, and the (re)instrumentalization of urban space, in: Environment & Planning 41 (2009) 10, pp. 2437-54; Katherine B. Hankins / Emily M. Powers, The Disappearance of the State from "Livable" Urban Spaces, in: Antipode 41 (2009) 5, pp. 845-66; Gro Sandkjær Hanssen, Negotiating Urban Space: The Challenge of Political Steering in Market- and Network-oriented Urban Planning, in: Scandinavian Political Studies 35 (2012) 1, pp. 22-47. On "urban space" as a contact zone see, for example: Robert Rotenberg (ed.), The cultural meaning of urban space. Westport, Conn. 1993; Simon Gunn (ed.), Identities in space: contested terrains in the Western city since 1850, Aldershot 2001; Fran Tonkiss, Space, the city and social theory: social relations and urban forms, Cambridge, 2005; Helmuth Berking (ed.), Negotiating urban conflicts: interaction, space and control, Bielefeld 2006; Imagining the City. The politics of urban space, Oxford / Bern / Berlin 2006.

7 Especially relating to Dalian and Harbin, there are ongoing debates among historians and former residents about the identities with a "Russian", "Chinese", "Japanese", "Polish" past in national historiographies. See e.g. Søren Clausen / Stig Thøgersen (eds), The Making of a Chinese City: History and Historiography in Harbin, Armonk 1995; Thomas Lahusen, A Place Called Harbin: Reflections on a Centennial, in: The China Quarterly 154 (1998), pp. 400-10.

looks at border towns in their literal sense, that is, urban settlements located directly on an international border. By assessing the value of different types of sources, Urbansky explores the limits of our knowledge about border settlements in general. Located at the border between the Russian and the Chinese Empires, Manchuria Station contained many contact zones between Russians, Mongols and Chinese. Various administrative, cultural and ethnic boundaries existed inside the city and could only partly be crossed in everyday life by locals and travelers.

The remaining three case studies treat the second level of principal borders. Through Russian and Chinese newspapers printed in Harbin between 1900 and 1932, Frank Grüner and Rudolph Ng examine self-perceptions and perceptions of the "other". The periodicals mainly represented the Russians and Chinese as distinct entities with clear cultural boundaries, despite their spatial proximity and economic interdependence. Based on a few momentous events in the city, such as the 1924 Opera Riots, Blaine Chiasson argues that cultural divisions between the Russians and Chinese and the dispute over the nature of each people's contribution to Manchuria's development shaped Harbin's daily life. The volatile post-colonial atmosphere led to continuous conflict between the two founding populations over how each community represented itself and was represented by the other. Chiasson also demonstrates how particular common spaces can also be susceptible to conflict His examples, the Harbin Opera and the Museum of the Manchurian Research Society, were deliberately designed as common institutional space to encourage cultural contact and exchange between Russian and Chinese, but it was precisely this intensified contact that raised the stakes and made the opera and the museum into such heavily contested cultural territory. Therefore, common spaces or contact zones proved to be ambiguous for the quality of interethnic coexistence. Christian Hess studies Dalian's (Dairen) changing position in the empire and the nation from the late 1800s through the 1950s from two perspectives. First, Hess analyzes how the rise of the Japanese empire and, later on, the rise of the People's Republic of China defined this new city from the perspective of the nation-state and empire. Second, Hess examines urban spaces as spaces of encounter and visible signifiers, and he identifies internal borders within Dalian, especially between Chinese and Japanese residents there. In the process, Hess traces the layout of urban spaces in Dalian in relation to the city's position in the empire as a whole and shows how the two aspects of urban spaces, namely design and common space, are often interwoven and mutually dependent.

These case studies reveal several analogies and differences pertaining to the border town-concept. A central similarity is the long neglected fact that borders are not an exception but the rule in urban society. For over a century, historians have been trained to look for nation-states and have thus neglected many borders, principally those that are not coterminous with state borders. Further, borders can be imposed from the inside or the outside. Urban spaces are always spaces of encounter, representation (Grüner and Ng), conflict (Chiasson, Urbansky), and partnership (Hohler), but they are also instantiated as visible signifiers (Hess). The relations between imperial center and periphery are often crucial for the populations of border towns because they are immediately affected by

shifts in imperial policy and by the transitions from one empire to the next. Contested identities and representations of self and other is another analytic framework shared by many of the articles (Chiasson, Grüner and Ng, Hohler). A further similarity of border towns is the dynamic of their populations. Migration is the norm, not the exception. Most people were migrants from other provinces or countries (Isitt, Urbansky).

As a whole, the six case studies on borders in urban spaces analyze daily life in Northeast Asia in its diversity and complexity, surpassing the traditional narratives that have appeared in national historiographies until now. Common analytical categories and, in particular, *asymmetric counterconcepts*,[8] as Reinhart Koselleck has designated them, such as center-peripheries or colonizers-colonized, have often been applied in a single, linear dimension. Such applications oversimplify the polymorphic, entangled, and highly dynamic character of social interaction among the various ethnic or cultural populations that shared certain urban spaces in this overlapping imperial borderland. Similarly, borders have generally been considered static and stable. Challenging this assumption, the articles on Manchuria Station, Harbin, Dalian and Vladivostok reveal the performative and dynamic aspects of borders. In fact, borders in imperial times have been fluid and ambivalent. These articles argue that different kinds of borders were negotiated in the daily routines in an inter-imperial setting. The focus on borders lends insight to the study of daily life and urban spaces. It serves as a useful tool for a more adequate description of the highly dynamic developments in multicultural societies of Northeast Asian border towns.

8 See Reinhart Koselleck, The Historical-Political Semantics of Asymmetric Counterconcepts, in: Idem, Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time, New York 2004, pp. 155-91.