

Playing Guest and Host on the Manchurian Stage: Debating Modernity in the Chinese Northeast

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RESÜMEE

Am 12. Januar 1924 wurden im Harbiner Klub der Ostchinesischen Eisenbahn im Beisein von Vertretern der verschiedenen Bevölkerungsgruppen zwei Operetten aufgeführt. *Der Sohn des Mandarin* von Cesar Cui und *Die Geisha* von Sidney Jones waren beide leichte Stücke mit orientalischer Thematik, von denen die Organisatoren hofften, dass sie das multikulturelle Milieu Harbins widerspiegeln würden. Stattdessen verließen die chinesischen Verwaltungsbeamten die Aufführung unter Protest, weil sie die Stücke als Beleidigung Chinas auffassten, während die meisten Russen die Aufregung nicht nachvollziehen konnten. In der folgenden Woche wurde Harbin von Demonstrationen paralysiert, auf denen die protestierenden Menschen eine öffentliche Entschuldigung und den Rücktritt des russischen Leiters der Eisenbahn forderten. Die unterschiedlichen Reaktionen auf die Demonstrationen spiegeln die Spaltung zwischen den jetzt unter chinesischer Kontrolle lebenden Russen und den in ihrer Rolle als Machthaber noch unsicheren Chinesen wider. Aufbauend auf meiner Monographie *Administering the Colonizer: Manchuria's Russians under Chinese Rule, 1919–1929* argumentiere ich, dass das alltägliche Leben in der ehemaligen Eisenbahnzone durch Spannungen zwischen diesen beiden Bevölkerungsgruppen geprägt war. Nach 1917 sahen sich die Russen gezwungen, ihre Position in der Mandschurei neu zu verhandeln. Aber obwohl sie nun chinesischer Kontrolle unterstellt waren, behielten die Russen Schlüsselpositionen in Wirtschaft und Verwaltung. Die chinesische Verwaltungselite des Distrikts war bestrebt, die ehemalige russische Kolonialverwaltung zu erhalten und zu verbessern. Sie reagierte empfindlich auf Vorwürfe, sie sei zu unorganisiert, um über eine europäische Gemeinschaft zu herrschen. Umso mehr zeigte sie sich entschlossen, die Region als modern und progressiv zu präsentieren. In diesem Beitrag werden die Opern-Demonstrationen mit den Debatten um den Beitrag der einzelnen Bevölkerungsgruppen zur Entwicklung der Region verglichen, die innerhalb der Harbiner *Gesellschaft zur Erforschung der Mandschurei*

geführt wurden. Insgesamt soll gezeigt werden, dass die erhitzte post-koloniale Atmosphäre in der ehemaligen Eisenbahnzone vor allem zu Auseinandersetzungen darüber führte, wie sich jede Gemeinschaft selbst repräsentierte und wie sie von anderen dargestellt wurde.

During the 1920s the Chinese northeastern city of Harbin was the location of a unique administrative experiment. This city, the hub for the Chinese Eastern Railway (CER) concession was now the capital of the newly created Special District of the Three Eastern Provinces (hereafter Special District), a Chinese controlled and Chinese administered district designed to replace the formerly Russian controlled concession. Before 1917 the concession had been a virtual Russian colony in northern China and within its boundaries local government, education, commerce, the language of daily life was Russian. The Chinese lived, as they commented, as “guests” in their own country. After 1917, the “guests” asserted their rights to be the “host,” that is, to be the city’s dominant group. Harbin, and the Special District, was also the site of two conflicts, or debates, that reflected the cultural tensions in a changed political context between the Chinese, once the colonized, and the Russians, once the colonizers. Each debate focused on how the Russian elite represented the Chinese and their culture as pre-modern, and demonstrated how entangled the two Chinese and Russian projects of creating a modern Manchuria had become. This entanglement, highlighted in the 1924 Opera Riots, and the 1929 museum scandal, could have only happened on the two empires’ periphery, where both the Chinese and Russian empires met. As imperial frontier, and periphery to both China and Russia each polity built the CER railway zone, and the successor Special District, in their own image. This extended beyond the railroad to the building of cities, the founding of schools and universities and the imposition of their own cultures and vision of modernity on this frontier periphery.

This paper argues that these two competing, yet similar, visions of colonial modernity required that the Russians publically represent the Chinese as pre-modern. The first, in 1924, was a public protest over the depiction of Chinese characters at a charity opera performance to a multi-national audience. The second was a 1929 debate within the confines of an academic research museum, merged with regional politics. Each event shared similar characteristics, elite Chinese protesting the depiction, representation, and exhibition of contemporary Chinese people and culture by members of Harbin’s established Russian community. Each conflict brought to the stage, in the first instance the very real stage of Harbin’s opera, in the second the curatorial “stage” of the public museum, with its attendant belief of objective representation, a debate over the relative modernity and developmental stage of Harbin’s competing elites.

Representation of self and other, it will be seen, became a means by which each elite, both jockeying for position in the changed political and cultural context of the 1920s Special District, attempted to impose their own version of modernity on the region. The Chinese elite, now co-administrators on the railway, had imposed a Chinese managerial administrative structure over the former Russian colonial government, and a new Chinese managerial class to supervise the transition of the Special District from informal

Russian colony to Chinese district. Despite the fact the Russian's had lost extraterritorial status, Harbin's Russian elite had maintained much of its economic and administrative power, its "cultural capital" in the words of one Chinese journalist, in the new Special District.¹ Although this continued privileged position was a conscious decision, and acknowledgement, by the new Chinese political overlords that Russians were essential to the Special District, the Russian elite used this "capital" to justify a continued Russian domination over Harbin's political, economic, social, and cultural life in the press, and as will be seen, on the operatic and curatorial stage. This Russian depiction of the Chinese as a people, too undeveloped and culturally immature to administer the sophisticated economic and political machine that was the Special District, justified continued Russian economic and cultural dominance, and can be seen as a strategic cultural response to their loss of political power.

The strategy worked, however, because of the particular circumstances of the Harbin and the railway zone as a place of competing modernities. Both the Russian founders and the Chinese administrators who inherited the district in the 1920s had a vision of the railway zone as a modern district. The Chinese admired what the Russians had created and did not want to radically change the district, only improve it under Chinese supervision. Harbin then became the locus of a cultural transfer, in which the Chinese took on the Russian administrative and economic project, including elements of Russian culture, such as opera. This cultural transfer, emblematic of the District's multiple modernities, and the entanglements that would lead to the disputed cultural territory of the opera and the museum.

What gave this debate added importance was the Special District's place in the Russian and Chinese colonial imaginations. Despite Russian or Chinese long-term claims over the Chinese northeast, also known as Manchuria, the fact remained that the Chinese northeast had only been recently been attached to the Chinese polity, while Russia had interests in the region dating back centuries. Manchuria, ethnic homeland of the Qing dynasty, had been officially closed to Chinese immigration, although unofficially settlement had been taking place for at least two hundred years in southern Manchuria. Northern Manchuria, however, had a relatively small Chinese population. Only after the Qing government agreed to the construction of the CER as a joint Sino-Russian venture, did large numbers of Russians and Chinese arrive in the region. Only after 1905 did the Qing government formally divide Manchuria into three new Chinese provinces, in part to establish a Chinese administrative fact in the face of growing Russian and Japanese imperial interest.

The CER concession had been developed in the late 1890s and early 1900s as not only a railroad, but as a complete Russian community. Taking advantage of a discrepancy in the translation of the original CER contract the Imperial Russian Government was able to

1 The Harbin Municipal Government on the Eve of Reforms, in: *Novosti Zhizni*, 2 July 1924, United States National Archive Record Group (hereafter USNA-RG) 59, M329 Roll 100, File 893.102H/44, 7 July 1924.

build a virtual colony in northern China.² From this dispute over semantics, backed by Russian power, grew CER Russian concession administration. The company controlled all institutions of this fully developed European community, the railroad, the city councils, schools, hospitals, and museums. Following the 1917 revolution the CER concession became a colony abandoned by its motherland. Spurning, and spurned by, the new USSR, the concession was forced into a new relationship with the Chinese government and local Chinese elite.

On 31 October 1920, by special order of the Chinese President, Russian extra-territoriality was ended and the Chinese government created the Special District, in the former CER zone. The CER was charged with creating for itself a new role, that of sound financial institution. Nevertheless, from 1920 to 1924 Chinese administrators left the original colonial mandate of the CER intact, albeit under new Russian supervisors. In 1920, a new General Manager was appointed, B. V. Ostroumov. A former colonial bureaucrat from the Russian Far East, Ostroumov was a man accustomed to building a strong Russian colonial presence. His new challenge was to make the CER a viable economic concern but his experience as a colonial administrator colored his directorship. He expanded CER investment into health resorts, factories, experimental agricultural farms, and research societies. Largely successful, these changes were presented as benefiting the general welfare of the Special District, but laid Ostroumov open to the charge that he was re-colonizing the Special District, in the name of progress and modernity, for the benefit of the Russian community.

In 1923, the 25th anniversary celebrations gave the CER the opportunity to highlight Russian contributions to the region's development. The railway was still dominated by a Russian managerial class who saw its role as employer for the Russian population and the promotion of regional economic development.³ The twenty-fifth anniversary gave these Russian leaders the opportunity to pioneer a new vision of Russian leadership in Northeastern China, except it was a vision of modernization driven Russian technology, Russian talent and supposed objective development targets, albeit supervised by Russians. The highly successful Jubilee exhibition highlighted the CER's contribution to northeastern frontier modernization and economic progress. In all exhibits and publications references to the railway's connection to the Czarist government were dropped. Instead, the Chinese Eastern was portrayed as a pure economic enterprise, which had opened the Chinese northeast to Chinese and Russian colonization. Although Chinese labor contributions were acknowledged, the underlying message was Russian planning, capital, and expertise that had created the modern northeast.

2 "Lands necessary for the construction of the railroad in the vicinity of the line will be turned over to the company freely. The company shall have the absolute and exclusive right of the administration of its lands. *La Société aura le droit absolu et exclus de l'administration de ses terrains*." John V.A. MacMurray, *Treaties and Agreements with and Concerning China 1844–1919*, New York 1921, p. 75.

3 Interview between American representative and Ostroumov, head of the CER, "Journey of the American Minister to Harbin and over the CER," USNA-RG 59 861.77 3233. 25 September 1923. 3.

However, it is not only by exhibitions and by material distinctions to old employees that this holiday should be observed. The Railway is an emblem of Russian genius. With the efforts of the Russian mind, and with Russian energy this country, which had slept for centuries, was awakened but improved and made to blossom with material and cultural progress. The might of the Russian mind was shown through the combined efforts of hundreds of thousands of Russians. Bearing this in mind the Railway should erect a number of monuments which would serve as an inspiration to further efforts on behalf of this country. The Russian population of the Railway Zone has the right to demand, in the view of the fact that it is with its efforts that the railway has been placed in its present condition, that out of the budget of millions of rubles that the requirements of this population should be satisfied.⁴

Although the CER's history was published in both languages, a "narrative of some 690 pages (which) justified and glorified Russian work and achievements in building the CER and Harbin,"⁵ and four scholarships, two each in honour of CER pioneers, were established, all jubilee activities took place in Pristan, with its predominately European and Russian population. Harbin's Municipal Council, still dominated by Russian members, featured prominently in all activities. From the opera at the railway club, the singing of a Te Deum in the Russian cathedral, the dance in the municipal gardens, all events signaled that the jubilee was a Russian celebration.⁶

The first debate took place on the stage of Harbin's opera, one year after the 1923 jubilee. In this conflict member's of Harbin's elite Chinese community contested representations on stage, of Chinese and Chinese culture as servile and pre-modern. European opera in Harbin was serious business, patronized by both Chinese and Russian elites. At a time when many North American cities could not support a permanent company, opera was performed in Harbin twice a week at the Railway club and other performances were scheduled around the city. The theater in the CER club was lavishly appointed and its performances subsidized by the company, stressing the railway's commitment to the best of European civilization. Everybody in Harbin went to the opera, including Chinese, according to an American journalist.⁷ In the Special District's dual cultural context both Russian and Chinese elites patronage of European opera illustrates the entangled nature of the District's culture, in which both elites accepted European opera as a cultural marker of modernity.

The particular incident arose from the performance of two operas on 12 January 1924. The performances in question were benefit productions for the disadvantaged students

4 Two Jubilees, in: Novosti Zhizni translated and included as enclosure #1 with Dispatch # 1294 May 29th, 1923 in USNA-RG59 Roll 153 M316 861.77/3121 29 May 1923.

5 Olga Bakich, City and Émigré Identity: the Case of Harbin, in: 4. Unpublished conference paper for "Place, Space and Identity: Harbin and Manchuria in the first half of the Twentieth Century", University of Toronto, 19-21 November 1988.

6 Twenty-fifth Anniversary of the Chinese Eastern Railway, in: Russian Daily News, 7 June 1923. Enclosure #1 with dispatch 1335 8 June 1923 from USNA-RG59 Roll 153 M316 861.77/3133.

7 Adelaide Nichols, Any Night at the Opera in Harbin, in: New York Times, 23 March 1923, l. 8.

of the Russo-Chinese Technical Institute. In performance were “The Mandarin’s Son” by Cesar Cui and “The Geisha” by Sidney Jones as well as some Russian light opera. The intention was to celebrate the Special District’s two leading populations, Chinese and Russian,⁸ and in the audience were CER manager Ostroumov and leading members of Harbin’s economic, diplomatic and political communities.

Both the Cui and the Jones piece depicted Chinese and Chinese life in a manner that the Chinese members of the audience found insulting. “The Mandarin’s Son,” composed in 1858 by the Russian Cui, is an orientalist fantasy depicting the romantic difficulties of a young Chinese servant, in love with his patron’s daughter. The inn where he works is to be visited by a high official who is revealed as the boy’s father and all romantic difficulties are resolved. The Chinese objected to the portrayal of slavish relations between the classes, and the depiction of the Chinese ruling class as hopelessly corrupt.⁹ One Russian source said the piece portrayed the Chinese as “total idiots.”¹⁰

“The Geisha” by Sidney Jones was a very popular English music hall piece, widely translated, which depicted a day in a Japanese brothel. The brothel was run by a “Chinaman” Wun-hi, described in the libretto as “devious.” The plot concerns the efforts of one geisha to marry her Japanese lover and an English woman’s attempt to disguise herself as Japanese in order to woo back her fiancée. In the libretto, both the Japanese and the English characters speak in normal, correct English. Only the Chinese character Wun-Hi, speaks in a broken pidgin English – presumably translated into Harbin pidgin Russian.

WUN-HI. *Oh dearee me! Oh dearee me! This is very awkward – and most obstreperous! He wantee O Mimosa San, and O Mimosa San makee sing-song for English officer, who givee me plenty much money. What will Wun-hi tell Marquis?*

JULIETTE. *A Chinaman is never at a loss for a lie.*

WUN-HI. *Me very like a woman! Oh, here he comes! This very awkward, most unrelishable. What me do? You, Frenchee girl, be very nice to Marquis. Perhaps Marquis like French girlee – leave Mimosa San – makee much money for me!¹¹*

In the second act Wun-hi bows repeatedly to a Japanese official: in the Harbin production Wun-hi was slapped repeatedly.¹²

General Ma, representing the Chinese Municipal Bureau and a devotee of Russian opera,

8 Letter to the editor of the „International“, 30 January 1924, from USNA-RG59 Roll 153 M316 861.77/3371.

9 The Mandarin’s Son. <http://php.indiana.edu/~Ineff/russmus/cui/syn.html>. Last visit August 2001. The opera is still popular in Russia, especially for children. Several Russian friends have spoken of it fondly and one said it formed her first images of China.

10 Iu. V. Kruzenshtern-Peterets, *Memoirs*, in: *Russians in Asia*, 4 (Autumn 1997).

11 Act Two. *Geisha* by Sidney Jones. Edited and formatted by Fraser Charlton, www.staff.ncl.ac.uk/fraser.charlton/geisyn.html. Last visited August 2001.

12 Iu. V. Kruzenshtern-Peterets, *Memoirs* (note 10).

walked out during the performance of “Geisha” and members of the Chinese elite followed him. What followed was a furor in the Chinese press and demonstrations against Ostroumov and the émigré Russian CER administration. The Chinese press condemned the two pieces as degrading and insulting to China and took great offense to the pleasure quarters setting of the piece and the depiction of Chinese life as corrupt and backward. The obsequious behavior of the Chinese character, “Wun-hi” towards a Japanese official, garnered particular fury in the Chinese press. On 20 January, at a joint meeting of three Binjiang¹³ self-governing societies-- ostensibly called to discuss paving Fujiadian’s¹⁴ roads-- the participants resolved that the operas had been an insult “to the dignity of the state and all Chinese” and formed a committee to unify CER employees and protest to the authorities.¹⁵ The protest took place on 19 February, when a crowd of several hundred, described as “mostly coolies and boys”, marched from Fujiadian into Pristan, stopping at the office of the CER’s Chinese president and moving on to the CER’s main administration building. They carried banners and shouted “down with Ostroumov.” The demonstration was described as peaceful and that the Chinese police were alerted and kept order.¹⁶

Non-Chinese newspaper did not understand what the furor was about, and that these performances were perceived by the Chinese as insulting and degrading. Instead, the demonstrations were blamed on national chauvinism. In one Russian paper the “Fujiadian (sic) press” was blamed for creating animosity against the Russians and the CER.¹⁷ The foreign press cast doubts on the protestor’s nationalist feelings, writing that they were bribed with food and drink. “It (the demonstration) is not an indication of popular feeling. It is not an expression of popular wrath, but merely a rude imitation of it. The people of Harbin know full well by what means Chinese popular wrath is staged.”¹⁸ The demonstrations were thus portrayed as illegitimate: the sentiments manufactured by the Chinese elite for their own selfish purposes. Lacking in the Russian press was any attempt on the part of the Russians or other foreigners to see the Chinese point of view. Never was the choice of performing these operas considered by the Russians as a severe lack of judgment and exercise in bad taste. That, Russians could not comprehend why two performances, depicting Chinese as corrupt, servile, and pre-modern, with leading members of the Chinese community in the audience, were insulting, demonstrates that these Russians still believed that Chinese and their culture were not modern, a belief essential for the maintenance of Russian superiority in the Special District.

To admit the insult, however, would also have to acknowledge the Chinese as equal part-

13 Binjiang was the Chinese county where Harbin was located.

14 Fujiadian was the settlement adjacent to Harbin but always under Chinese administration.

15 Propaganda of all circles in favor of the banish (sic) of Ostroumoff, in: Dawning, 25 January 1924, translated from Chinese and included in USNA-RG59 Roll 153 M316 861.77/3371.

16 USNA-RG59 Roll 153 M316 861.77/3376 20 February 1924. American Consul to American Ambassador, Beijing.

17 CER to demand guarantees against demonstrations, in: Harbin Daily News, 22 February 1924, from USNA-RG59 Roll 153 M316 861.77/3376.

18 Russky Golos, 21 February 1924, translated and enclosed in USNA-RG59 Roll 153 M316 861.77/3376.

ners in the Special District. If a modern Special District could only be achieved under a Russian managerial class, than it followed that the Chinese were incapable of achieving this vision. Thus, the opera depictions were consistent with the Russian émigré belief system. What the Chinese elite objected to was the making explicit of what had been up to that point, implicit. The Jubilee celebrations and the new CER regime had not overtly stated that the Chinese were incapable of managing a modern administration, although it was implicit in the Russian re-imagining of the Special District.

What the Russian and foreign press seemed to most object to was that the Chinese had publicly protested-- that they had claimed public space in Harbin's European neighborhoods. The stories that attracted the most attention in the Russian press were the purported chants of "We will throw the Russians into the Sungari River!"¹⁹, as the Chinese marched towards the Russian cathedral although the Chinese administration said the incident did not take place.²⁰ Even if these chants were not voiced that this detail was taken up by the Russian press shows an underlying sense of frustration, fear, and powerlessness. The power dynamic had changed and these rumors were the acknowledgement that the Chinese were in control and if they wanted, could indeed "throw the Russians into the Sungari." As demonstrations, the opera protests were relatively tame. Zhang Zuolin, Special District head, did not put national insults above the smooth functioning of the Special District, ordering the Russian press to cease printing rumors of a Chinese plan to expel the Russians. Zhang promised all efforts would be made to stop such rumors and both the Chinese and Russian population would be treated with complete equality.²¹ Zhang Zuolin then prohibited all further demonstrations and closed the opera issue. By the standards of foreigners who choose to see every Chinese meeting as a threat to foreign privilege even the Fujiadian nationalists behaved well. There was much shouting but no violence during the demonstrations. Given that the Special District Chinese elite witnessed the performance, the willingness of the same authorities to defuse rather than exploit the issue demonstrated that, for the Chinese administration, peaceful government came before "chauvinistic" nationalism.

The second debate over representation and modernity did not end so well for the Russian community, concluding as it did in the suppression of a Russian research institute. This takeover of the research institute, the Manchurian Research Society (*Obshchestva izucheniia Man'chzurskogo kraia*, OIMK according to its Russian abbreviation), must also be put into context of growing Russian, especially Russian-Soviet interference in the Special District, after the Soviet Union became a co-administrator of the CER after 1925. OIMK was founded and funded by the CER as a research institute and clearing-house for information on the CER zone, as part of Ostroumov's new vision of a railway committed to regional development in a Russian cultural context. It was a complex

19 The Sungari is the river that flows through Harbin.

20 USNA-RG59 Roll 153 M316 861.77/3376.

21 Proclamation issued to prohibit the circulation of rumors, 24 February 1924. Enclosed in USNA-RG59 Roll 153 M316 861.77/3376.

institute, with a large museum in Harbin, experimental farms, many publications, and a generous budget funding its members' research agendas and providing them with employment.

As the CER's research and development arm, OIMK was devoted to the ethnographic, economic, anthropological, botanical and historical study of northeastern China.²² During the seven years it operated, the society published numerous proceedings and by 1929 had 800 members.²³ The society operated a museum with over 62,000 exhibits, a publishing house, botanical garden, library, and archive.²⁴ The society had many successful exhibitions, in Harbin and abroad; sponsored many research expeditions across the northeast and contributed much to the study of northeastern China. OIMK's publications extolled the virtues of the northeast's untapped natural resources and the CER as the best tool to tap them, a land to be conquered by technology and research.²⁵ Within Harbin OIMK was an important institution and its members were acknowledged as the intellectual leaders of the community.

Specific Chinese criticisms of OIMK's activities concerned the displacement of Chinese farmers on OIMK's experimental farm, the representation and periodization of Chinese culture in OIMK's publication and museum, and the overall Russian context in which OIMK's work was presented. Unacknowledged in the criticisms was the use of the terms "Manchurian" and "region" in OIMK's work, a semiotic glimpse into how OIMK saw the Chinese northeast and the contribution of Russians to it.

OIMK's researchers emphasized the northeast as a region, rather than as a Chinese administrative unit, therefore not one particular culture or nationality dominated their work. In the Russian language, *krai* contains the meaning of "territory" in the sense of an administrative unit. It was used in the title of various Russian Far Eastern territories such as Amurskii *krai* (Amur Territory or Region) and Primorskii *krai* (Maritime Territory). The use of *krai*, instead of the Chinese word for the area *dong sheng* (Eastern Provinces), and the use of the even more vague Manchuria in OIMK's English translations suggested an the region had an ambiguous relationship to Chinese sovereignty. Designating this area as a "region" or as "Manchurian" had (and still has) never been accepted by the Chinese because it suggests the area's distinct identity. Although there is historical evidence for the area's unique and separate identity, by the 1920s the northeast had been fully integrated into the Chinese state. The Chinese elite had watched in frustration, when in the late 1800s and early 1900s, both Japan and Russia tried to detach the northeast from China through a program of railway colonization. OIMK's claim that the Chinese northeast, as a region, shared characteristics and development potential with the Russian Far East and Korea did not resonate well for a Chinese elite with its own national agenda for the region. By using both controversial geographical terms, "Manchuria" and

22 Olga Bakich, Society for the Study of Manchuria (Unpublished notes).

23 Ibid.

24 Ibid.

25 OIMK, in: *Isvestia obchestva izuchenia Manchurskovo Krai*, No. 16, Harbin, March 1926.

“region” in its title OIMK could be accused of having its own agenda. If the northeast was not Chinese what was it – and whose was it?

OIMK’s construction of northeast ethnographic history was another point where Chinese and Russian constructions of local identity diverged. For example, the society followed established Russian scientific practice of periodizing the region’s ethnic groups by time of settlement. Since Chinese settlement in the northeast occurred in the 1890s, the same time as Russians arrived, OIMK’s historical narrative of the northeast stressed indigenous groups such as the Manchus and the Mongolians and their dress, customs, language, economic life. Studies of the Chinese were confined to either ancient China or contemporary studies of labor, marriage, and economic life. OIMK’s research created a hierarchy of contributions by the different ethnic groups to the economic and political development of the region, placing a greater value on the Russian, rather than the Chinese contribution.

Chinese perceptions of OIMK having a hidden agenda were also based on the content and form of its work. The prominence of economic studies underscored the importance of OIMK as a promoter and disseminator of information on the economic life of the Northeast. In 1926, 177 researchers, the largest portion of the Society’s membership of 460, were involved in economic studies.²⁶ These studies ranged from forestry to numerous studies of the soybean, the main agricultural export of the area. These studies highlighted the unique characteristics of the area’s flora and fauna. One particular study of Manchurian wheat portrayed the species as unique to the region, a synthesis of Russian and local varieties.²⁷ Contrasts were drawn between the traditional methods of cultivation and modern methods promoted by OIMK, however, these modern methods were Russian in form and personal. OIMK publications repeatedly gave the impression, not only to the Chinese, that modernity equaled Russian.²⁸

OIMK’s museum was located on Bolshoi Prospect, the main street of Russian Harbin. It shared the street with the other visible reminders of Russian power: the railway headquarters and club, the Technical University, the Orthodox Cathedral and the main department stores. The museum’s curator had divided the space into exhibits on regional anthropology and history, economic life and culture. The biggest section was devoted to natural science, which stressed cross-border (China and USSR) regional flora and fauna. The second largest section was ethnography founded “to collect exhibits, delineating the level of existence and culture attained by the indigenous races inhabiting the territory.”²⁹ In the archeological exhibit the Chinese came second to last in the periodization of the region’s peoples, again highlighting the fact the Chinese were also recent immigrants.

All exhibits concerning China and the Chinese were found in the museum’s rooms on traditional culture, marking a clear division between the pre-modern and the modern.

26 A. P., *Isvestia obchestva izucheniia Manchurskovo Kraia*, p. 10.

27 No author, *North Manchurian Wheat*, in: *Manjurskaia pmenitsa* (circa 1925), p. 25.

28 This dispute over OIMK and its museum took place at the same.

29 Loukashkin, p. 184.

Thus, there were examples of Chinese arts and crafts, historical displays and models of Chinese homes and costume. All emphasized China's traditional lifestyles and ancient past. Exhibits on contemporary industry all concerned with the Russian-controlled railway. There were no examples of the region's Chinese controlled economy and nothing of Chinese industry outside of Manchuria. The exhibition's message was clear; modernity was Russian.³⁰

Although OIMK's ethnographic/historical expositions highlighted Chinese bronzes, Mongolian Buddhism or Manchu costumes, the expositions on contemporary themes, such as art, photography or industry, reflected the dominance of a Russian and European vision of culture, in part due to the Russian émigré community's tenuous psychological, political, cultural and economic position. Homeless after the creation of the Soviet Union, émigrés in China bolstered Russian and European culture not only to preserve cultural and community values, but to demonstrate that the émigrés were still European, with all the privileges that identity gave in 1920s China. In the Special District European and Russian culture had taken on a new and desperate legitimacy.

This dislike, on the part of the Chinese, for the content of OIMK's research material must also be linked to the Russian context in which it was presented. OIMK, although never explicitly promoted as a Russian cultural institution, was in language, socialization and intent purely Russian. These members of OIMK presented themselves not just as Russians, but Russians educated in the best model of Russian liberal enlightenment thought. As the number of OIMK members grew, so did the number of honorary Chinese members, local dignitaries and representatives of the provincial and civic elite and Chinese educated in Harbin's Russian school system. Other than these few exceptions, there were no active Chinese members and no Chinese language section. In only one instance were proceedings published in both languages.³¹ OIMK remained a source of employment for Russian academics centered on the railroad, itself a reminder of Russian imperialism, and like the other Russian cultural institutions, OIMK held itself above the greater Chinese linguistic, national, and geographic context of the Special District. Since the society's language of publication was Russian, it was difficult to attract the interest of local Chinese scholars and academics. The Russian members of OIMK did not question their model of science and research into the northeast because this model validated their social and ethnic status in Harbin. This elite dominated Harbin society and by the act of naming, studying and cataloguing created and filled a new role for themselves and the culture they represented. Using the tools which OIMK researchers knew best, they dominated their physical and social landscape.

Dogmatic Russian attitudes that only Russians and Russian methods were modern and the Chinese were mired in a pre-modern past were illustrated in the conflict over the OIMK/CER's experimental agricultural farm at Anda, a small town on the railway.

30 A. Pachkovskii, *Shest' let (Six Years)*, in: *Isvestiia obshchestva izucheniia Man'chzhurskogo Kraia (Review of the Manchurian Research Society)* 7, Harbin, December, 1928, p. 3.

31 A.P., *Isvestia obchestva izucheniia Manchurskovo Kraia*, p. 17.

OIMK's Russian authorities had seized land and built a cattle farm and milk procession station, ignoring the protests of resident Chinese farmers who argued the land was their property. Eventually Chinese farmers, with the permission of local Chinese authorities, invaded the experimental farm, divided the land into small plots and destroyed the milk processing equipment, which had benefited only the European diet. In the accompanying investigation the Russian authorities could not, or would not, take the Chinese position seriously, labeling the farmers "anti-modern," "feudal" and "dark." In this case, by believing themselves on the side of development and modernity the Russians closed any possibility of dialogue with their Chinese partners. The Chinese press actively resisted the pre-modern label, instead they argue that the Russians and OIMK had ignored the farmers' valid claims. The Chinese sources reveal an acute sensitivity about being labeled "pre-modern" and a desire to be seen as progressive. This anxiety the Russians misunderstood as chauvinism, the need to pursue Chinese interests to the detriment of the "greater" good. Thus, the toxic misunderstanding between the two elites was well established, even before OIMK was suppressed.

By 1929, the Chinese municipal and provincial elites were actively campaigning to change OIMK's status, leading to its incorporation into the Chinese provincial educational system. This campaign was also related to elite Chinese concerns about growing Soviet influence. In 1924, the Chinese government, tired of what they perceived as Russian *émigré* neo-colonialism, signed an agreement giving the Russian power of the jointly administered railway to the Soviet Union. Almost immediately the Chinese discovered they had exchanged one colonial vision for another. The USSR very much saw the CER as part of Russia's traditional sphere of influence, and used its position in the Special District to advance its version of soviet socialism. Soviet advisors interfered in municipal politics and used CER funded institutions, such as schools or OIMK, to pursue their agenda.

In language and form OIMK was seen as a "private" institution of the Harbin Russian community and not the public, non-political research institute it claimed to be. In 1929, with a war over the railway looming with the USSR, OIMK was placed under the authority of the local Chinese government. That same year exhibits on the Manchu and Mongol peoples from OIMK's Harbin museum were removed on order of OIMK's new Chinese directors, recently appointed by the Chinese controlled Special District, because they were "uninteresting."³² OIMK's new Chinese directors substituted for these exhibitions of "regional" dress and daily life, an exhibition on Soviet industrialization, associating these Chinese elites with Soviet modernity, even as the same elite opposed Soviet interference in the district's affairs. OIMK's museum was the "exhibitionary"³³ manifestation of OIMK's greater project to render the Chinese northeast as an ordered and comprehensible region open to economic development by its Russian managerial

32 A. C. Loukashskin, *The Museum of Northern Manchuria in Harbin*, in: *Manchurian Monitor* 1 (1934), p. 187.

33 Sharon MacDonald, *Exhibitions of power and powers of exhibition: an introduction to the politics of display*, in: Sharon Macdonald (ed.), *The Politics of Display: Museums, Science, Culture*, London/New York 1998.

class. From the Chinese point of view, the society served the former Russian colonials. The Chinese elite understood OIMK's museum as political, "in other words, lies not just in the policy statements and intentions but also in the apparently non-political and even minor details such as the architecture of buildings, the classification and juxtaposition of artifacts."³⁴ In marginalizing Chinese contributions to the hoary past, in ignoring the claims of Chinese farmers, in the use of politically ambiguous terms such as "region" and "Manchurian," and by presenting their findings only in Russian, OIMK was sending a clear message. The region's political identity was doubtful, that Chinese were not modern and could not be expected to meaningfully contribute to regional development.

Conclusion

The question of who would be the guest and the host in Manchuria was one that could not be solved through political change alone. Although the region was politically Chinese, Manchuria was a border frontier of recent settlement by both Russian and Chinese. It was a periphery to both empires, in which each empire competed to build their own 'modern' Manchuria. The CER concession, later the Special District, was the product of both peoples and polities, illustrating the entangled natures of the cultural transfer in the Chinese northeast. Each had contributed labour, money, and technology to northeast China, first in the form of the Russian-controlled CER concession, then as the Chinese-administered Special District. After 1917, with their real political power gone, the Russian elite attempted to retain its status by remaking itself as a developmental elite, best equipped to modernize the northeast. The former colonizer had become the uneasy subject of the former colonized who were intent on taking over the Russian development project and imposing Chinese direction and reform. In this context of post-colonial competitive visions of modern development whoever could best direct the exploitation of the region and its rich resources could claim the title of "host." The stage was Manchuria itself and how elite Chinese and Russians represented themselves and each other. That the Russians would assume the role of host in this changed post-colonial context irritated the Chinese elite, eager to prove that northern Manchuria could be both "modern" and "Chinese." Both groups clashed over depictions over how Chinese culture was staged by Russians, either on the real stage of Harbin's opera house, or the exhibitory stage of OIMK's vision of pre-modern Chinese culture that implied modernity could only be Russian. Both examples demonstrated that in this bi-cultural and bi-racial northeastern border town the ways in which each community presented itself and represented the other, indeed even whose representation of modernity would prevail, resulted in an identity politics debate that we in the 21st century find familiar today.