

# Disparate Influences of the Provincial Sino-Russian Political Border on Sociocultural and Economic Borders

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## **Abstract**

The resurgence of sovereign states in a highly globalized modern world calls for new approaches to border studies. The present paper suggests looking at political, sociocultural and economic borders as constructs of dynamic boundaries influencing people's interactions. Through an oral history of a mixed Sino-Russian ethnic community, and a narrative review of smugglers and shuttle traders, this study examines how the flux of the political border between the Heilongjiang<sup>1</sup> province and the Russian Far East (HLJ-RFE

<sup>1</sup> Heilongjiang is China's northeasternmost province bordering on Zabaikalsky Krai, the Amur Region, the Jewish Autonomous Oblast, Khabarovsk Krai, and Primorsky Krai of the Russian Far East.

political border) changed the sociocultural and economic borders during three periods: the 1910s-1920s, the 1960s-1970s, and the 2000s-2010s, when the political border was characterized as being porous, hostile, and friendly, respectively. The study shows that the HLJ-RFE political border had a strong impact on limiting the sociocultural demarcation, but a much weaker effect on facilitating sociocultural interactions and economic regulations. The results of the study demonstrate how a strong and friendly political border may lose its potency when utilized by the local government to facilitate interethnic integration. Furthermore, the study warrants an interdisciplinary approach to border studies and a region-oriented methodology.

**Keywords:** Sino-Russian border, border studies, Heilongjiang province, Russian Far East, Sino-Russian ethnic community, smugglers, shuttle traders.

## **INTRODUCTION: THE RETURN OF POLITICAL BORDERS IN A SEEMINGLY BORDERLESS WORLD**

Scholars in the 1990s claimed that the liberal international order would replace the former division between the West and the East and transform the globe into a “borderless world” (Hudson, 1998; Shapiro and Alker, 1996; Yeung, 1998). Meanwhile, anthropologists engaged in border studies began to delink the ‘nation’ from the ‘state,’ promoting a symbolic boundary of identity and deemphasizing the influence of physical structures of territory and political boundaries on “bordering” (Green, 2010; Gupta and Ferguson, 1992). However, such claims were heavily challenged by the closure of borders during the COVID-19 pandemic and the new borders arising on the periphery of the EU and between the United States and Mexico.

The resurgence of sovereign states in a highly globalized world has prompted the return of political boundaries in border studies. However, North American and EU borders have regularly come under the spotlight while the geographically extensive, culturally distinctive, and historically dynamic Sino-Russian border continues to be on the periphery of the scholars’ interest. Of the 4,209-kilometer-long Sino-Russian border, the Heilongjiang-Russian Far East (HLJ-RFE) section accounts for three quarters. Its impressive length and dynamic history

of opening and reopening can serve as a new context to check, clarify, and provide a new perspective for existing border theories.

Most current border theories are working against viewing all social, cultural, and economic borders as being congruent with a state's national border (i.e., the political border) (Agnew, 2008), a pattern that regards the nation-state as the natural analytical unit and reflects "methodological nationalism" (Wimmer and Schiller, 2002). Few Sino-Russian border studies have escaped this nation-centered vision (Dmitrieva, 2013; Li, 2012; Su, 2007), in which a state comes as a "bordered power container" (Giddens, 1985) that accommodates its wealth, culture, and societies and, therefore, defines its economic and sociocultural borders (Taylor, 1994).

To examine whether the immense influence of political borders on sociocultural and economic borders is grounded in reality or exaggerated, this study analyzes the historical and current state of affairs along the HLJ-RFE border to answer the question of *how the flux of the HLJ-RFE political border influences the change of sociocultural and economic borders?*

### **CROSS THE BORDERS OF BORDER STUDIES**

The definition of 'border' is essentially contested. For geographers, a border is an empirical and material line between states (Minghi and Rumley, 1991); for IR scholars, a border is the product of institutional constructions, a boundary for stabilizing sovereign power in an anarchic world (Paasi, 1996; Ó Tuathail and Dalby, 1998; Shapiro and Alker, 1996); for sociologists, a border is a dynamic process of 'othering,' a zigzag path towards identifying oneself with one social group rather than another on the opposite side of the border (Vila, 2003); for anthropologists, a border is a cultural boundary of the 'cultural realm' within which individuals share homogenous cultural productions, such as folk music, rituals, handicrafts, and architectures (Cohen, 1986; Donnan and Wilson, 1999); for economists, a border can be a bridge as well as a barrier to economic integration (Sparke, 2006).

To cross the borders of border studies, the present paper distills two quintessential characteristics of borders—being a *boundary* and

being *dynamic*. Being a *boundary* means to be fundamentally a kind of boundary between the *inside* and the *outside*, *Us* and *Others*, the *past* and the *current*, the *civilized* and the *barbaric*, or the *governed* and the *disordered* (Benwell and Stokoe, 2006; Donnan and Wilson, 1999; Newman and Paasi, 1998; Walker, 1993; Albert et al., 2001). Being *dynamic* indicates that all borders are evolving constructions experiencing a processes of *othering*, *de-bordering* and *re-bordering*, or *de-territorializing* and *re-territorializing* (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987; Michaelsen and Johnson, 1997; Paasi, 2003).

This study defines a *political border* as a *dynamic boundary between state powers*, the *sociocultural border* as a *dynamic boundary between Us and Others*, and the *economic border* as a *dynamic boundary between legal and illegal economies*. The state incorporates a regime type, legal institution, and military affairs; society is characterized by ethnic identity, collective memory, and intermarriage; and the economy comprises formal and informal trade. Although a general border theory that covers all disciplines is still unattainable (Paasi, 2011), through conceptualizing the visible and invisible elements pervading the borders, such conceptions could be applied or re-conceptualized in further studies to boost transdisciplinary exchange.

### **THE POROUS, HOSTILE, AND FRIENDLY HLJ-RFE POLITICAL BORDER**

Territoriality is a strategy of manipulating a territory by controlling its access—the border (Sack, 1983). Through practicing territoriality, a territory aligns itself with sovereignty to mold politics into an essentially state-centric process (Gottmann, 1973; Johnston, 1991). The state becomes a “power container” (Giddens, 1985) that automatically acts as a vortex sucking in power, wealth, culture, and societies (Taylor, 1994). The border of a state/territory, therefore, becomes equivalent to the border of power. To wit, the physical boundary among states emerges as a material symbol of the political border.

However, a political border is not purely a physical demarcation of territories but also the embodiment of a state’s tool for exercising authority. A political border encompasses a regime type that guarantees the undifferentiated national identity between the hinterland and

borderland, specific legal institutions that regulate the economic activities of its peripheral residents, and military actions that protect homeland security. The three components make the political border an extension of the state apparatus, and a manifestation of a state's efforts to maintain a state-wide uniformity, with the border being the last inch of consistency.

With respect to regime type, legal institutions and military affairs, this paper singles out three transition periods in modern history of the Sino-Russian border, which, respectively, characterize the HLJ-RFE political border as being porous (1910s–20s), hostile (1960s–1970s), and friendly (2000s–2010s).

The porosity (the absence of effective government control) during the first period was a result of dynamic regime changes. In 1912, the Republic of China replaced the Qing Empire, the last imperial dynasty of China, while the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) came into being in 1922 after the collapse of the Russian Empire. In the HLJ-RFE region, this period witnessed the rise and the defeat of the anti-Communism White governments during the Civil War in Siberia (1918–1920), and the establishment (1920) and the disappearance (1922) of the Far Eastern Republic—a buffer state that protected Soviet Russia from Japanese aggression (Baksheev et al., 2020; Pereira, 1987). Although the border saw the foundation of the Manchukuo (a puppet state of the Empire of Japan) in 1932, the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949, and the Russian Federation in 1991, turbulent regime changes on both sides of the border within a short period of time only occurred in the early 20th century.

The hostility during the second period was due to the Sino-Soviet disputes caused by their disagreements over the communist doctrine and military confrontations on the borderland. In 1969, the standoff between the PRC and the USSR reached its peak in a seven-month armed conflict over Damansky Island (*Zhenbao Dao* in Chinese) on the HLF-RFE border.

The friendliness was forged during the third period, during which ideological disputes no longer existed, the disputed eastern borderland was divided equally along the Ussuri River and the Amur River (*Heilongjiang* in Chinese), and the leaders in both countries actively

promoted a reciprocal Sino-Russian strategic partnership. It is worth noting that the friendship did not mark the end of territorial disputes. Today's scientists and the public in both countries still view the HLJ-RFE territory differently. Chinese people claim that Russia annexed China's primordial lands, while Russians believe those areas had not belonged to any side until Russians settled there (Voskresensky, 1999). The roots of the liminal and fragile sentiments over the seemingly monolithic borders can be traced back to the 1858 Treaty of Aigun and the 1860 Convention of Peking—the two treaties that consolidated the political geographies following the armed conflict between the Russian Empire and the weakening Qing Empire, during which the Qing Empire conceded its rights to Ussuri Krai to Russia in the Amur Annexation (Kim, 2010).

Should the political border exert considerable influence on the consistency of a state's wealth, culture, and society from its center to the periphery, the physical presentation of the sociocultural and economic border will be concurrent to that of the political border. The following two sections investigate whether such influence and concurrence exist in the HLJ-RFE borderland in the three characterized periods.

### **THE HLJ-RFE SOCIOCULTURAL BORDER: AN ORAL HISTORY OF THE "CULTURAL HYBRIDS"**

The essentialist view of culture sees culture as a bounded, homogeneous, and sharable system granted to the members of each society (Lugo, 1997). Anthropologists holding such a view tend to equate the border of a cultural group to that of a particular territory (Erickson, 1997; Goodenough, 1981; Wax, 1993). The cultural border resides upon a "cultural borderland," a psychological and political space at the juncture of two cultures (Foley, 1995). Residents of borderland struggle with the choices between identifying themselves with the original culture that is far away in the hinterland and adopting the culture of the adjacent territory. When the political power aims to defend the cultural privilege, the "cultural hybrids" in the borderland run the risk of being treated as a threat to cultural purity. However, according to the diffusionist view, culture is dynamic, and all cultures borrow elements from others (Wax, 1993). From this perspective, mixed

culture carriers blur the boundary of the cultural borderland. In the case of the HLJ-RFE border, however, neither of the views dominates.

In the HLJ-RFE borderland, Russians with exclusive Russian lineage are called *chunluosiren* (literally “pure Russian”), while *hunxue* (literally “mixed-blood people” in Chinese, or *metissy* (half-breed) in Russian they are referred to as the descendants of Russian females intermarrying with Han Chinese. Although Chinese people value consanguinity, the widely used term *hunxue* (hybrid) is disrespectful. Unfortunately, the mixed Sino-Russian people failed to develop a decent ethnic name for themselves—an unpopular name is, after all, better than no names at all.

By analyzing the oral history of the *hunxue* community, this section examines whether the power of the territory-based and politics-centered border rhetoric loses its potency in the HLJ-RFE socio-cultural context. Specifically, the oral history seeks to present: (1) how the lives of the mixed people interact with the dynamics of the political border; (2) how their social identity and cultural practices are cherished and/or abandoned; (3) how their relationship with maternal ethnic groups, the Han and the Slav, has been shaped and re-shaped.

Oral history, as a form of narrative research, was best suited to answer the above questions because it is adept at constructing group identity. Moreover, the strength of oral history at tapping into the process (Leavy, 2011) serves to depict the dynamics of borders and identify the overarching themes of mixed people at three turning points. Finally, oral history enables this study to wave the micro-macro linkage of the experiences expressed in lived and told stories of the mixed people and the changing status of the border.

There are 16,136 Ethnic Russians—*hunxue* people who have changed their ethnic identity from Han to ethnic Russian—living in China’s Xinjiang, Inner Mongolia, and Heilongjiang, three provinces bordering Russia (China Statistical Yearbook, 2021). The number of *hunxue* people maintaining Han ethnicity is unclear (Tang, 2007). *Hunxue* population in Heilongjiang is much smaller and more scattered than those in Inner Mongolia and Xinjiang, making it hard to be counted (Tang, 2008). In Heilongjiang, Xunke County in Heihe City has the

largest *hunxue* population (about 1500) (Tang, 2009). The author went to a border village called *Xiaodingzicun* which housed the densest *hunxue* population (about 247) in Xunke County, accounting for 70 percent of the villagers (Tang, 2009). Convenience sampling resulted in eight participants aged from 29 to 87, covering the second, third, and fourth generation of mixed families. Although emphasizing the role of saturation is debatable in qualitative studies based on a narrative approach, which focuses more on the “completeness” of personal accounts than the sufficient development of the theory (Saunders et al., 2018), sample recruitment in this study continued until data saturation or analytical themes could be generated from individual strands. Each participant was interviewed in one session lasting around 60 minutes. During the interview, both parties negotiated the meaning of the re-storied history to validate the researcher’s interpretation. All interviews occurred separately in households, except for one during which the participant, a fourth-generation *hunxue* female, engaged her uncle, a third-generation member living next door, to join the conversation. Photographs, documents, and other personal-family-social artefacts presented by the mixed people were also recorded. All stories were transcribed verbatim and further analyzed using Clandinin and Connelly’s (2000) three-dimensional space approach: the personal and social (interaction); the past, present, and future (continuity); and the place (situation).

### **THE THRIVING OF MIXED SINO-RUSSIAN ETHNIC GROUP ALONG THE POROUS POLITICAL BORDER**

During the first period (1910s–1920s) with a porous political border, the gold fever on the HLJ-RFE borderland attracted about 4,000 Russian people to Heilongjiang (Urbansky, 2014). Meanwhile, Manchuria—the birthplace of the Qing Empire forbidden to Han Chinese—became open in Northeast China. A wave of famine-stricken peasants from China’s Shandong Province migrated around 1,500 kilometers to Northeast China. This large-scale migration is known as *Chuang Guandong* (literally meaning “crashing into the Manchuria barrier”). One branch of these peasants migrated far away to the



borderland. The hunxue people on the HLJ-RFE border are mainly the descendants of Shandong men and Russian women who married when mass migrations on both sides merged on the porous borderland.

Mrs. Zhang<sup>2</sup>, a fourth-generation *hunxue* female aged 29, recalled how her Russian great-grandma met her Chinese great-grandpa: “My great-grandma’s father died in World War I. Her mother could not afford to raise too many children and sent her to another couple. My great-grandpa happened to migrate to the northeast frontier to survive the great famine in Shandong Province. He met my great-grandma when trading Chinese wine for Soviet salt and later brought her here to build a family. She arrived in our village at the age of 16 and never left.”

Mrs. Lin’s (second generation, aged 71) Soviet mother met her Chinese husband on the Chinese side: “My grandmother became a young widow when her husband died in the Russian-German War. She crossed the border with her 13-year-old daughter who later became my mom. My mom worked in a grocery store owned by my dad’s uncle. My dad, born in Shandong Province, migrated here to help his uncle and met my mom in the store. My dad spoke very good Russian because he was a member of the underground Communist Party of China who disguised himself as a shuttle trader in the store.”

The two life stories—of an adopted Russian girl who married a Chinese peasant migrant and of a Russian girl who was raised in a single-parent family during wartime and united with a Chinese underground party member during the Communist Revolution—were waved into the vibrant region change era. Permitted by loose border control, twenty mixed families settled in the village. Their stories, different in lives yet homogeneous in the macro context formed the genesis of the mixed Sino-Russian ethnic group. The new-born mixed ethnic community extended beyond the porous political border and twisted the cultural border which often connotes the boundary of political regions (Erickson, 1997; Goodenough, 1981; Wax, 1993).

The integration of two cultures was extensively deep. First, Russian mothers brought their Christian religion to the mixed family. Interviewees commonly mentioned a Russian-Orthodox icon picture

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<sup>2</sup> Participants’ names were changed for confidentiality.

hung on the wall in their childhood. Second, many first-generation children grew to be bilingual and became their parents' domestic translators. Also merged was the dietary culture. Mr. Tan (second generation, aged 87) still missed the taste of the Russian bread (*khleb* in Russian, *dalieba* in Chinese) and soup (*sup* in Russian, *subotang* in Chinese) cooked by his Soviet mother. The last was the preservation of Russian rituals. Each year the community celebrated the *Basike* Festival, the Easter for Eastern Orthodoxy (*paskha* in Russian) to mourn for their lost ones. Mr. Wu (third generation, aged 60) vividly recalled:

“As the festival approached, one family was responsible for cooking red eggs, one was making yoghurt, another was making wine, etc. At the *Basike* Festival, we went to the tomb and sang Russian songs. When songs swirled all around the hill, all Russian mothers cried in tears. We then went back, singing, drinking, and playing harmonica and accordion.”

The multi-dimensionally sociocultural integration marked the genesis and the thriving of the unique mixed ethnic group. The diffusionist view of culture was verified when rigorous border control was absent. However, their ethnic identity remained untitled and wandered between the Han and the Slav. When maternal ethnic groups came into conflict, hardship inevitably fell upon them.

### **MIXED PEOPLE'S COLLECTIVE TRAUMA ALONG THE HOSTILE POLITICAL BORDER**

Due to the demographic imbalance between Russia's sparsely populated Far East and the bordering provinces of China, Sino-phobic sentiments were prevalent in both late imperial Russia and Soviet Russia (Gerber, 2022; Dyatlov, 2012a). In extreme cases, in the early 20th century, concerned that the “peaceful” economic invasion by massive Chinese migrants would lead to loss of territory in the long run, Cossacks and military conscripts mercilessly drowned 5,000 Chinese residents of Blagoveshchensk in Amur Province (Dyatlov, 2012b). During the hostile period (1960s–1970s), the mixed ethnic group was identified as Chinese in Soviet Russia (belonged to the nationality of their Chinese fathers rather than Russian mothers). When anti-Chinese policies were

implemented during the Sino-Soviet disputes, families with mixed members became in danger of being persecuted and killed on the Soviet side (Tang, 2010).

At the height of the dispute, mixed people in China were labeled as Soviet spies. In the village, not a single mixed person was free from political persecution—even for those working for the party and the government. Mr. Tan (second generation, aged 87), a former member of the Chinese People's Liberation Army recalled: "I had been squeezed in a crowded confinement room for seven months. When I squatted down in that room for the first time, I looked around and found that we [the *hunxue* people] were all there, even including our village party secretary and village leader! My Chinese wife sent me food every day, but she could not see me, her food was transferred by a guard. One time, she made steam buns for me, but the buns were broken into pieces by the guard to verify whether letters were inserted inside."

Mrs. Lin (second generation, aged 71) talked with anger and sorrow: "We were regarded as Soviet spies due to our mixed ethnicity. We had nothing to do with it at all! How could we become Soviet spies? We barely speak their language and had no connections to the other side. My second brother, the party secretary of the County Committee, devoted all his life to the party, but he was relegated simply because he was a *hunxue*. Later, he committed suicide."

The political purification in the hinterland combined with the military sealing of the border not only stifled the cross-border social exchange, but also created a cultural selection environment wherein abandoning the culture inherited from the Soviet side increased the survival rate. The continuum of the sociocultural merging came to an abrupt end.

Culturally, the mixed people had to throw away Russian-Orthodox icons and abandon their Christian religion. Speaking Russian was prohibited and closely monitored, which significantly paralyzed the inheritance of Russian from the old to the new generations. No one knew how to make original Russian bread after the death of Russian mothers. Rituals such as Sunday gatherings for Russian-style dancing were also terminated.

At the societal level, in the fallout of the political demonization of the mixed ethnic group, *interracial* marriage between the offspring of mixed people and Han Chinese became a taboo. Mixed people per se avoided intraracial marriage, worried that two mixed children would physically be throwbacks to pure Russians and induced torture. The booming of intermarriage in the first period waned—on a large scale.

Since presenting anything authentic was a risk factor for danger, mixed people were afraid of naming themselves. Their ethnic name became at the mercy of the Han Chinese. The Han Chinese tagged the mixed as *maozi* (literally “people with fur”), another ill-mannered name like *hunxue*. The ‘elder *maozi*’ were referred to as the eldest in the mixed family tree; the ‘second *maozi*’ meant the first generation of *hunxue* descendants; the rest could be deduced in the same manner (Tang, 2004).

The hostile political border cropped out mixed people’s inborn social bond with maternal ethnic groups and their learned biracial culture, which made their ethnic identity wandering, name discriminated, and sociocultural border contracting within the national boundary. Mixed people’s miserable experiences manifested the essentialist view of culture in the context of political rivalry where cultural hybridity was despised by the mainstream culture. A mixed woman emotionally epitomized her reminiscence of their collective trauma: “In China, we were Russian; in Russia, we were Chinese.”

### **THE PSEUDO-REVIVAL OF MIXED CULTURE ALONG THE FRIENDLY POLITICAL BORDER**

After China’s reform and opening and the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the third period (2000s–2010s) substituted Sino-Soviet rivalry for strategic partnership. Top-down policies from Chinese central and local government endeavor to revive the fragile mixed ethnic community, which is perceived by Chinese officials as a living manifestation of Sino-Russian friendship.

At first glance, the abruptly cut Russian culture resurfaced in many ways. First, the *Basike* Festival, financed by Heihe Municipal Government, serves as an important day for mixed people to publicly celebrate their cultural heritage. They put on Russian-style dresses (*platye* in Russian,

*bulaji* in Chinese), drink and dance together, identical to what old generations did in the good old days—except for mourning the dead on the Russian side. Such celebration has attracted journalists, Han Chinese, and even Russians. Second, their ethnic identity has finally been accredited by the Chinese government. They have become the “ethnic Russians,” China’s last legitimate ethnic minority. Also, their village name has been changed from Frontier Village, a name marking the geographical location, to Russian Village, a name representing their sociocultural identity. Mr. Wang, a third-generation male, said that one-third of the mixed villagers had changed their ethnic identity from Han Chinese to ethnic Russian. He also pointed out that the government had been investing in their village for years. In 2018, twenty million RMB fiscal expenditure was allocated to pave roads, decorate houses, and build a local museum to exhibit the village history. Third, the introduction of Russian courses in middle schools in Xunke County and universities in Heilongjiang Province offers a chance for the fourth and fifth generations to regain their bilingual ability. For example, Mr. Liang’s (third generation) senior daughter and Mrs. Lin’s (second generation, aged 71) grandson both majored in Russian. Fourth, intermarriage with mixed youths becomes a new fashion among Chinese young people who adore their mixed peers’ exotic appearance. Mr. Liang confessed: “I attended a middle school in the city, away from my village. The urban children called me *maozi* [the fur]. I hated it very much, but I could do nothing. I was born like this, all written on my face. Now they do not call me that anymore. They want their children to marry mine, because of the good-looking.”

However, compared with the bottom-up Sino-Russian integration in the first period, the top-down incentives only bring a semblance of revival. For the *Basike* Festival, the Russian-style dresses were purchased online by the local government exclusively for those with the most Russian-like appearance (Mr. Wu, third generation, aged 60). The selected ones only wear the dress once a year while their Russian seniors always put them on. Moreover, journalists and Russian tourists were purposefully invited by local officials rather than self-motivated (Mr. Liang, third generation). The festival sponsored by the local government, in essence, serves as a show for advertising Sino-Russian

frontier rapprochement and covering up the divided past. Moreover, the trigger of the identity transition (from ethnic Han to ethnic Russian) is not the resurgence of their racial consciousness but the benefits of adding 20 more scores for their children's National College Entrance Examination. "It [being Ethnic Russian] means nothing to me, but a lot to my children" (Mrs. Zhang, fourth generation). The post-trauma senior generations believe hiding their ethnic identity will protect them in the unpredictable future. "Being Han Chinese is safer if Sino-Russian relationship turns terrible again" (Mr. Tan, second generation). For bilingual ability, although some mixed young people major in Russian, many more think learning Russian could only benefit those in Heilongjiang, but mastering English brings more opportunities. As for intermarriage, the popularity of marrying mixed youth is bounded by the national border—no mixed people marry Russians. Exclusively uniting with Han Chinese, in the long run, will make their mixed culture diluted and more assimilated to Han Chinese. On Russia's side, apprehensions about the increasing number of Chinese migrants resurged. Under the rapprochement lies Russians' concerns about China's expansion into the Far East and Central Asia through the Belt and Road Initiative (Gerber, 2022). In such macro contexts, new generations of Russian citizens in the Far East feel ethnically detached from *hunxue* people, regardless of inter-governmental advocates of local communications. The cross-border marriage materialized in the early 20th century turns out to be a flash in their ethnic history.

The waxing and waning of the mixed ethnic group exemplifies the inverse relationship between the HLJ-RFE political border and sociocultural border. The genesis and thriving of the mixed village owed to the massive social migration that a leaky, lawless HLJ-RFE political border in wartime failed to disrupt. A stronger yet antagonistic and militarily controlled political border effectively drew an artificial sociocultural boundary equivalent to the national border, which not only eliminated the cross-border marriage but also disparaged the mixed people in the hinterland. Ironically, a strong and friendly political border loses its potency when utilized by the local government to facilitate interethnic integration.

## **THE HLJ-RFE ECONOMIC BORDER: THE WEAK TRADE AGAINST THE STATE**

Unlike a legally defined national border, the changing legislation along the border makes the HLJ-RFE's economic border—a boundary between legal and illegal economies—more like a zipper, one that never completely open or sealed (Donnan and Haller, 2000). Smuggling and shuttle trade<sup>3</sup> can be categorized as legal as well as illegal or tolerated as well as despised (Felson, 2006). The following analysis aims to present how the state is perceived by economic actors along the periphery. Specially, this section reveals the discrepancy between the state's criminalization of illegal trade and the smuggler's and shuttle traders' *emic* perception of their moral legality.

### **Massive gold smuggling along the porous political border**

In the first period (1910s-1920s), newly discovered gold mines in the Russian Amur region attracted thousands of Russian peasants and middle-class fortune seekers and Chinese residents in northern Manchuria. A total of 17,210 workers worked in the Transbaikalia goldfields in 1909 (Torgashev, 1928). The percentage of Chinese labourers in Amur gold mines surged from 15 percent in 1900 to 76 percent in 1915 (Kormazov, 1927). On the other side of the border, Chinese, Russian, British, and American entrepreneurs owned dozens of gold mines in the vicinity of *Heihe* (Black River) and *Nenjiang* (Neng River), which made the northernmost part of Manchuria hailed as “California on Amur.”

The pumping gold market bred massive gold smuggling. During the last three decades of the Russian Empire, 20-60 percent of annual gold production were smuggled out of the RFE by the Chinese (Popenko, 2009). As a response, the tsarist government in Saint Petersburg set economic supervision to regulate smuggling in the frontier (Urbansky, 2014). However, such efforts were challenged by Russian mining firms that mainly relied on cheap Chinese labor. These workers, when returning home in winter, formed a major group of gold smugglers. Moreover, many customs officers were addicted to contraband vodka.

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<sup>3</sup> Shuttle trade is defined as the activity in which individual travelers frequently take domestic commodities to foreign nations and bring foreign goods back to home countries for resale (IMF, 1998).

Instead of practicing economic regulation legislated by the central government, they became nested in the smuggling network.

The political border, as an extension of the state apparatus, failed to regulate the illegal economy defined by the state. The free movement of labor together with porous border control made the smuggling channel both feasible and profitable (GACHO, n.d., f. 107, op. 1, d. 125, l. 365).

### **“Running over the private river” along the hostile political border**

Between the 1960s and the 1970s, the previously growing border trade between the two largest socialist regions was interrupted by the deterioration of Sino-Soviet relations. The military-controlled border forbidding any form of cross-border interaction plunged the HLJ-RFE border trade into a state of depression.

However, since daily goods in the Soviet market had been supplied by the Chinese for a prolonged period, Soviet domestic commodity enterprises had not yet matured. When China's export dropped dramatically, the supply shortage fully emerged in the Soviet market. Meanwhile, the exponential growth of Soviet immigrants in the Soviet Far East further boosted demand, which made the shortage more unbearable. To survive, the Soviet Far East border citizens traded with the Chinese informally. The Soviets carried daily hardware, aluminum products, steel plate, and other goods, sneaked to the shore of Heilongjiang by boat at night or in the early morning to trade with Chinese. Chinese merchants also stealthily paddled a boat to the Soviet side and used their daily necessities to trade with the Soviets. The Chinese called the informal border trade in this hostile era *Paosijiang* (“running on the private river”). It was estimated that the private trade exceeded the official trade in terms of quantity (Meng, 1996).

The legislation closing the border due to the deterioration of international relations at a higher level did not fit into the economic symbiosis of border citizens and industrial structure on both sides. The illegal shuttle trade, *Paosijiang*, was a humane way to survive in the eyes of the frontier people. Their secret routes over the border river day and night penetrated the political border and made the economic border like a zipper.



### **The “gray market” behind the friendly political border**

The third period (2000s-2010s) witnesses an era of border opening and economic recovery. China dominated the RFE’s foreign trade in the four Russian provinces (i.e., Amur, JAO, Khabarovsk, and Primorye) that lie on the RFE-HLJ border (Lee, 2013). However, trade ratios with China measured as a per cent of Gross Regional Product (GRP) were low because the officials fail to record the trans-local economy among the informal market or “gray market.” Once counted, the actual value of regional cross-border trade was estimated to be doubled or trebled (Lee and Lukin, 2016; Ryzhova, 2008). Due to the absence of data and a consensus on the boundary between lawful and illicit activities, the scale of informal trade is difficult for scholars to quantify (Ellis and MacGaffey, 1996; Khan et al., 2007). The following narrative review of case studies aims to depict the masked, yet ubiquitous shuttle trade and its interaction with legal institutions.

In the HLJ-RFE borderland, a shuttle trader is referred to *chelnoki* who weaves zigzagging routes across the border. There are two kinds of shuttle traders: *naemnye chelnoki* (hired shuttle traders) and *svobodnye chelnoki* (independent shuttle traders) (Holzlehner, 2014). The hired shuttle traders are mostly assembled by a tourist company through verbal or newspaper advertisements. The company then arranges their route, timeline, and accommodation. Without a company-built shuttle network, independent shuttle traders have to rely on personal social networks which could include buyers, taxi drivers and even customs officers. To become independent *chelnoki*, shuttle traders usually choose to work under a company, getting into the *chelnoki* system, acquainting themselves with the inside knowledge (such as where to find cheap goods), and building personal relations with dealers on both sides of the border. A 22-years-old Russian male was a college student facing financial problems when he first became involved in the shuttle business:

“At first I worked as a ‘lamp’ [carrier], then as a ‘brick’ [chief of carriers] and then decided to work for myself. I started an informal business. It’s not simple ... You have smuggled goods and you can go to prison” (Ryzhova, 2008).

Although shuttle business is despised by the state, shuttle traders value moral principles, indicates Anto, an automobile components shuttle trader. “The whole shuttle trade business is built upon honesty. The first time you steal, you are kicked out of the market. The Chinese all know each other and the moment you take what is not yours the Chinese instantly alert, and no one will deal with you after that. Plus, they tell the customs that you are a shyster, and you will start having problems with the customs. The whole system is built upon trust and honesty” (Holzlehner, 2014).

However, such moralities were never valued by the state. The traditional *jurisprudential perspective* defines an activity that violates the laws as a crime. Nevertheless, in the context of the HLJ-RFE border, the various forms of shuttle trade generally remain the same, while it is the laws determining the legality of shuttle trade that have been constantly changing. The *criminalization* and *decriminalization* of the shuttle trade exemplify a state’s exercise of political influence on its peripheral citizens’ economic behaviors (Vold, Bernard and Snipes, 2002).

A Russian government resolution of August 1st, 1996, created a loose border for shuttle traders to import merchandise up to 50 kilograms or \$1,000 without paying duty (Holzlehner, 2014). The Asian financial crises in 1997 also attributed to the growth of shuttle business when massive unemployed workers stepped into the informal market. Since the enlarging ‘gray market’ served as a buffer zone for the economic depression, the governments on both sides informally permitted shuttle trade by not implementing strict border regulations. However, the Russian government’s perspective changed when the HLJ-RFE’s formal trade significantly outweighed the informal turnover in the early 2000s. In 2003, Russia dissuaded the shuttle trade by limiting the type of permitted identities to “tourists” only and the frequency of shuttling to only once per week (Sklyarova, 2002). In February 2006, a new Russian federal import law further restricted the allowance to 35 kilograms per month per person (Ognevsky, 2006).

Here the state strategically minimized or eliminated certain behaviors (e.g., informal trade) by declaring them (either formally or informally) as being “bad,” “punishable,” and/or “criminal” (Vold,

Bernard, and Snipes, 2002). However, the shuttle traders' *emic* viewpoints that derived from their internal cultures and daily activities vary fundamentally from the legal perspective of state institutions (Abraham and van Schendel, 2005). To wit, what the shuttle traders deem legal is different from what the state decrees lawful: "If normal laws would exist, nobody would need this [shuttle] business ... If I would know that a truck from China would take a week to get here, I would not even think of using *chelnoki*. But I do not know how many days it [the official channel] will take. It could be five, seven, thirty, or forty days. If there are no rules, you have to make up your own. If the government is not able to create the conditions to make a living, we are going to cheat the government" (Holzlehner, 2014).

Moreover, the deep-seated mistrust in state institutions pervades the shuttle network. The shuttle traders loathe the unpredictable legal yet corrupt transport methods. Igor runs a small furniture business in Vladivostok and used to export legally to Suifenhe, a border city in Heilongjiang Province. However, after being recurrently frustrated by custom officials' abuse of power, he now relies on informal transportations: "I do not want to deal with the border authorities. Not because I ship illegal goods, but I am so fed up with the hassle that you face if you use the normal channels. For example, they can tell you that your weight was not 1,000 kilograms, but 1,003 kilograms. That means you are dealing in contraband, you have to pay a fine, or you need a special certificate for this commodity, which is only available in Moscow" (Holzlehner, 2014).

To conclude, when the border is used for commercial purpose, the line between the licit and the illicit becomes blurry. In this case, the economic border is characterized by its constant oscillation between the "legal" perspectives of the state and the traders along the periphery. Although the political border—which is deliberately designed by the state through its tax monopoly and legal institutions—has the authority to design the permeability of the HLJ-RFE border, smugglers and shuttle traders escape state control, exposing the state's weakness, and thereby trade against the state. These subversive economic practices constitute border people's reactions to the border program designed

by the state and provide perspectives on how the state is perceived by actors on its periphery in the economic arena.

In its essence, the informal cross-border economy is a product of frontier citizens' everyday life and does not conform to the national political border.

### **CONCLUSION: A LEAKING STATE CONTAINER IN THE BORDERLAND**

In conclusion, for the sociocultural border, the densest biopsychosocial intersectionality between the Han and the Slav, exemplified by the *naturally* formed mixed ethnic village, was materialized in the first period when the old regimes were waning and the political border as an extension of the state apparatus became blurry. Unfortunately, the more completed yet hostile HLJ-RFE political border exerted a strong influence on the formation of the *artificial* sociocultural boundary in the second period, eclipsing the multidimensional integration and inhumanely reshaping the natural sociocultural border to be identical with the national border. Ironically, in terms of facilitating border integration, the political border loses its potency. The pseudo-revival of the village is directed by the local governments as a bargaining chip in their relationship with the central government endeavoring to promote strategic partnership with Russia. The mixed village, as the legacy of a melding homeland, is still standing in the borderland, memorable and vulnerable, with their ethnic identity at risk of becoming uniform with Han Chinese and their future in the mercy of Sino-Russian relations.

The HLJ-RFE economic border, in a sense, has been remarkably resilient to fight against the dramatically changing political border across three periods. The shuttle traders and smugglers' daily economic practices have become the "weapons of the weak" (Scott, 2008), trading against the state, acting per their *emic* definition of 'legal' enterprise, and forging a path of their own to survive in the second period and to thrive in the first and third ones. In fact, the forms of shuttle trade and smuggling generally remain the same throughout history, while it is the laws that criminalize or decriminalize informal trade that change constantly. The actual boundary between the legal and illegal

economies in the HLJ-RFE borderland have never been identical to state regulations.

The HLJ-RFE border demonstrates how the state, as a “power container” (Giddens, 1985) can leak its wealth, culture, and society along the borderland. Furthermore, theoretically, this bottom-up, provincial case counters the concept of “methodological nationalism” that presumes the equivalence of three borders.

One limitation of this study is that the three different phases of the borderland’s history—the porous 1910s–1920s, the hostile 1960s–1970s, and the friendly 2000s–2010s—can only partially cover the transformation of the HLJ-RFE border. For example, the weakening of the border surveillance apparatus in both empires had started before the regime changes in the 1910s and the 1920s (Urbansky, 2020); hostilities along the border had occurred before—during the Sino-Soviet border war in 1929 (Walker, 2017) and border clashes between the USSR and Manchukuo (a de-facto conflict between the USSR and Japan) in the 1930s (Kuroiwa, 2011). Also, due to the regional specificity of the HLJ-RFE border, concrete results of this study may not fit other borders. Yet the analytic framework and the conceptualization of the invisible elements of the border issue can be applied and clarified in future studies to promote interdisciplinary border research.

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