The Trade Town of Manzhouli

Trust Created and Undermined

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Abstract

Manzhouli (Russian: Man’chzhuriya) had a complex 20th century history as a railway town, smuggler’s paradise, and military stronghold, but recently it has been specially designated as a border trade centre with Russia. Now China’s busiest land port of entry, its population has shot up to well over 300,000 and its crowded, brightly lit shopping streets contrast sharply with the sleepy dullness of Zabaikal’sk, the Russian town just over the border. Manzhouli has tried to encourage trust by creating special areas and services (linguistic, logistical) oriented toward Russian traders, but at the same time the city undermines trust through what Russians consider dubious trade practices. The chapter provides a historical explanation of the Russians’ entrenched suspiciousness. It concludes with a description of how both Chinese and Russians attempt to overcome these problems: by creating new images (‘the good Chinese’), by using the Internet, and by using people from other ethnicities (Shinehen Buryats, Mongols) as mediators – but so far largely in vain.

Keywords: China, Russia, frontier urbanism, trust, mistrust

The relationship between trust and the conceptualization and use of urban border trading spaces has been little touched upon in the academic literature. This chapter addresses this gap, examining the creation and dissolution of trust in relation to the concrete spaces of a specific border town. Unlike the prevalent approach to trust, which understands it as an inter-personal cultural or social process (Cook 2001), here trust will be seen as an instrument for the ‘taking over’ of urban space, by both citizens and visitors. Conceiving of the discursive appropriation of urban space as
involving choices along a scale from trust to mistrust, this approach makes it possible to demonstrate a direct link between such choices and other features of the border economy, such as Russian entrepreneurs’ images of trade ethics, their view of the ‘world on the other side of the border’, and the possibilities for joint development of the region.

The main theme of this chapter will be Russian cross-border traders’ open and hidden ideas concerning the appropriate conditions for business and leisure in Asia. These ideas not only reflect their evaluation of different kinds of space in general, but also determine their models for perceiving and appropriating specific urban spaces on the other side of the border. As Caroline Humphrey has observed, the everyday norms and values through which people attempt to understand the world around them can also, at the same time, be both the stimulus for economic action of one kind or another and a form of reaction to those very actions (Humphrey 2010, 111). According to Russian respondents, their criteria for good conditions for trade and leisure are obvious: relative security, low prices, and an adequate number of salespeople speaking Russian. But everything is not as simple as it appears.

As it happens, the Chinese border town of Manzhouli manifests all of these criteria in abundance. It was developed with Russian traders in mind, as a town of economic cooperation and friendship totally oriented toward visitors from Russia. Besides providing economic opportunities, the town is also a place of inexpensive and yet super-modern leisure facilities, which are particularly important for the weary folk who have experienced economic and social collapse across the border in Eastern Trans-baikalia. Despite this, trust and comfort are the last things in Russian visitors’ minds. For them, Manzhouli is a place of ill fame, said to be a place created by the cheating, aggression, and greed of Chinese traders. The town is seen as a facade hiding the true nature of China: two-faced, non-understandable, and dangerous. No other Chinese city arouses such emotions in Russia like Manzhouli; no other town is spoken of so emotionally and harshly.

Why should a town that has done everything possible to accede to the demands of Russian entrepreneurs be seen by them as such an ‘anti-place’? What were the unspoken expectations that resulted in such a negative opinion of the town? Why did the Chinese keenness to create trust result in

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1 Manzhouli (Chinese: Manzhouli; Russian: Manchzhuriya) is a border town in the Hulunbuir prefecture of Inner Mongolia. It is the economic centre of the region and China’s busiest point of land entry. In recent years its population has shot up to well over 300,000.
the very opposite? Answering these questions requires us to pay attention not only to Russian attitudes toward Chinese traders, but even more to the urban spaces themselves that give rise to such feelings of danger and distrust among the Russian guests. As I will show, the imaginary projection of a dangerous place can give rise to distrust, irrespective of the policies of municipal leaders or the behaviour of the local inhabitants.

Russian spaces in China: how post-colonial trauma transformed into neo-liberal hope

During the entire 19th century, Russia was the active force in its relations with China; it was the main architect in redrawing the eastern border, and insisted on the undesirability of Chinese citizens’ presence in the acquired territories. The combination of Russia’s economic-military presence in former Chinese territory with the policy of protecting her Far East province from too much Chinese incursion was consequential: it led to the widespread expectation that Russia too, along with other imperial powers, would be found at fault by the Chinese during the century of their humiliation (Mierzejewski 2012). The Tsarist government saw the presence of Chinese subjects in its new territories in the Far East as a necessary compromise, required because of demographic shortfalls in its Asiatic provinces. The idea of the ‘Yellow Peril’, so popular at the time, can be seen as a consequence of the desire to de-Sinicize the region. Peter Holquist has described Russia’s position during the last decades of the Empire as follows:

In studies of the Far East, Russian military statisticians, public activists, and government officials all singled out Chinese, both imperial subjects and aliens alike, as a particular threat. In addition to their growing numbers, the military men identified Chinese, like Jews, with commerce and the market, thereby conflating ethnic stereotypes with apprehension about the modern world. (Holquist 2001, 115)

The policy of ‘cleansing’ the border regions consisted of a complex of measures designed to ward off and control Chinese and Korean in-migration: the transfer of Chinese subjects to Russian legal jurisdiction (1883), removal of foreigners’ right to settle in border areas (1886), a ban on employing foreigners in state projects (1910), liquidation of the Manchu enclave in the Amur Province (1900), and cancellation of untaxed trade along the 50-verst border
strip (1913) (Kireev 2009, 76-77). At the same time, Russia was establishing itself inside Manchuria: Russian peasants and Trans-Baikal Cossacks settled freely in Chinese territories near the border, and Russian villages and towns sprang up all along the Russian-controlled Chinese Eastern Railway (KBZhD). Imperial fantasies created the image of Zheltorossiya (‘Yellow Russia’) in celebration of the century of Russian control in this part of Asia.

With the victory of the Bolsheviks in the civil war, the situation changed. From the Chinese perspective, the presence of Soviet personnel inside China was contradictory: on the one hand, it was a source of economic, moral, and military support for the Communist Party of China; on the other, the preservation of the Tsarist borders and the Soviets’ intrusive ‘friendship’ with Mongolia and Tuva were objectionable. Then the mass emigration of refugees from Soviet Russia into Northwest and Northeast China made the country the hostage of confrontations with these new ‘enemies’ of the USSR, manifest in the constant infringement of China’s sovereignty by the Red Army and Soviet spies. The border zone became an area of the mass settlement of former Russian citizens, who differed sharply from other Chinese citizens because of their continued contact with the Russian and Japanese cultures. The popularity of Orthodox Christianity among the refugees, mixed marriages, and the proximity of Russia made this area an unusual zone of inter-civilizational contact, in which local Chinese communities came under intensive Russian, Mongolian, and Japanese influences.

In 1949, the USSR changed from being China’s awkward neighbour into its cultural, financial, and technological donor. But this underlined Chinese fears about the priority of geopolitical interests over the ideology of internationalism among Soviet communists. After the denunciation of Stalin at the Soviet 20th Party Congress in 1956, the relations between the two countries steadily worsened for various internal and external reasons, including the lack of understanding between Mao and Khrushchev. The nadir was the Cultural Revolution, when the USSR acquired the image of the northern hegemon threatening the territorial integrity of China (Tihvinskii 2008). The Chinese greatly reinforced the militarization of their border areas, which gave rise to the mythic idea (‘mythologeme’) of the ‘frontier disloyalty’ of the

2 It should be noted that these measures were not very effective, due to the weakness of the administrative apparatus and the fact that the Cossacks guarding the border had a direct economic interest in the presence of Chinese. Despite this, the measures were significant as the origin of a biopolitical repertoire of terms and practices that were again useful in the Soviet period.

3 This was not constant and was subject to political circumstances.

4 On the influence of the cultural policies and institutional organization of Japanese Manchuguo on the Chinese population, see Mitter (2000).
Russian refugee settlers in China. This population was drawn into a complex emotional regime in the expectation of conflict, reinforced by limits on their movement and the general social-political sterilization of the region. Among the well-known operations are the persecution of the Russian and Buryat diasporas in China, the destruction of Russian architecture, and attempts to fully debar contact with the Soviet population over the border.

Between 1949 and 1986, the Soviet and Chinese policies of ‘frontier socialism’ broadly coincided. Mass migration from the middle of each country, together with the spread of primary education in socialist schools, had the effect of marginalizing the hybrid culture of the border regions and sharply accentuating the cultural distance between the Russian and Chinese sides of the border. The incoming populations began to dominate, bringing with them an absolutely different geographical imagination and gradually creating new forms of loyalty (Billé 2009; Peshkov 2014). The experience of the socialist border was in many ways transformed, not only concerning its present but also the understandings of its past. This brought a new ambivalence towards the neighbours on the other side: they are close, they have been living here, but we know almost nothing about them. When the border began to be opened after 1986 and the population of the area was allowed to become somewhat more mobile, people attempted to re-describe the former ‘fortress regions’ of the border in terms of openness, hybridity, and connections. However, this new period of Chinese-Russian cooperation brought radical changes in the balance of power between the two countries: it was no longer Russia playing the active role of donor and investor; instead, developing China actively tried to bring Russia’s Siberian and Far Eastern regions into its orbit. Despite the significant potential gains from the demilitarization of the border, Russian society was not ready for such a sharp overturning of roles. As Franck Billé has written concerning the Russian semantics of the border:

A strong differentiator in the way Russians and Chinese currently visualize their common border is the emotional quality they attach to it. While for Chinese the north-eastern border with Russia appears to be seen, predominantly, as a frontier of opportunity where commercial ties can be created and valuable contracts concluded, in the Russian media the border is most often associated with illegal migration and criminality […] and tends therefore to be perceived as a source of anxiety. (Billé 2012, 21)

This goes some way toward explaining the significant asymmetry in the emergence of Chinese spaces in Russia and Russian spaces in China. In Russia
these ‘Chinese spaces’ consist exclusively of market sectors and restaurants, set up by Chinese with purely economic interests, while the wider semiotic space of Russian Far Eastern cities was sterilized of all traces of Chinese presence (see Introduction and Billé 2014) – for the first two decades of the opened border, it was impossible for Russians consciously to imagine any Chinese cultural traits being reproduced among its local citizens. But unlike in Russia, northeastern China was able to play freely with the Russian past of the region, making use of it as an element in a new local identity and as an attraction for investment. The general Chinese process of decentralization and the emphasis on cultural attractors for investment, especially for tourism, led to a situation in which the old Russian European-style buildings in Manchuria were re-valued positively by the market; now there is a demand not only for their preservation but also for the reproduction of the style as the cultural heritage of the region. This new situation is the opposite of the practice during the Cultural Revolution, when all signs of foreign presence were abhorred. Today traditional Chinese districts are replaced with new buildings without regret, but the remains of European presence are carefully preserved – and even re-created for the benefit of Chinese and overseas tourists.

One Chinese respondent from Three Rivers (a rural area settled by refugees from Soviet Russia) interviewed by the Russian researcher Ivan Basharov, explained the difference between the Russians on either side of the border. He described the Chinese Russians as follows: ‘they are Russians but grown up on Chinese seeds’ (Basharov 2010 305). If we remain with this interesting metaphor, we can ask what are the specifics of the Russian space that has grown up on Chinese seeds? Russian spaces in China are not a single, generally agreed-upon entity. They are, rather, a network of various object-spaces, linked only by the common theme of the revitalization of Russians’ presence in a new economic situation. In the wider Chinese cultural field, these signs of Russianness mark the specificity of the region. The architecture of Harbin, the folk-Slavic fantasies of border towns, the urban architecture provided for ex-Siberian Evenki migrants, and buildings imitating churches in ‘Russian’ villages can all be seen as links in a chain. The effect has been to de-problematize Russia’s role in regional history, while at the same time concocting new cultural models that are disconnected from the real past. In contradistinction with the previous ‘Russian century’, this process is directly linked to the current active position of

5 From 2015 the situation has started to change with the devaluation of the rouble and the consequent rise in popularity of Far Eastern and Siberian towns for Chinese tourists and shoppers. It is possible that the market will alter the cultural hierarchy on the frontier.
China and its own interest in adapting the culture of its northern neighbour to its role in the Chinese cultural field.

In the case of Hulun Buir province in China, two types of Russian (Siberian) spaces can be clearly distinguished: trade towns and ethnic settlements. The two are distinguished by their temporal connotations: the trade town symbolizes friendship and cooperation in the present day, whereas the Russian peasant and Evenki ethnic settlements symbolize the trans-border past. It should be noted, though, that both the optimism about economic cooperation and the nostalgia for the ‘lovely past’ are subordinate to economics, i.e., the expectation of an inflow of shoppers and tourists.

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<th>Name</th>
<th>Type of space</th>
<th>Temporal orientation</th>
<th>Commercial aim</th>
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<tr>
<td>Manzhouli</td>
<td>Trade town</td>
<td>Present and future</td>
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<td>Enhe village</td>
<td>Russian village</td>
<td>Past peasantry</td>
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<td>Alaguya</td>
<td>Evenki settlement</td>
<td>Past forest people</td>
<td>Ethno-tourism</td>
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There are some common aspects of these spaces. First, they are ‘spaces not for oneself’ – they are fully subjected to the logic of the market, with priority given to the perspective of the trader, tourist, or investor (Bulag 2010). What we see is the absolutely artificial fabrication of authenticity to create commercially oriented images of the co-located past and the happy future. Symbolic objects are simply piled on top of one another, creating an effect of a-temporality and emptiness: hotels and bath-houses are built in the style of Orthodox churches, fields are filled with gigantic matryoshka dolls, and huge buildings represent Evenki chumy (‘tepees’). Meanwhile, copies of Soviet heroic memorials collected into a single locale transform this ‘Russian’ (or ‘Siberian’) space into a non-place, one that has been created for a neoliberal reading of Russian presence as an instrument to heighten the attractiveness of the region for investment and tourism.

6 The re-settlement of Evenki reindeer herders into the special settlement of Alaguya (Chinese: Aoluguya; a suburb of Genhe in Inner Mongolia) is an interesting example of the re-Siberianization of the Tungus-Manchu peoples of China. This policy is directly connected to the reproduction of a Siberian heritage as a contribution to nation-building among these peoples. The supposed main aim of the re-settlement was the protection of the forests from hunter-nomads and the ending of nomadism as an outdated socio-economic practice. The village of Alaguya has a jumble of meanings as a space: a completely new settlement of contemporary family cottages is combined with official buildings in the style of ‘Evenki architecture’. The consequence of the re-settlement was the division of the population into a majority (c. 190 people) living in Alaguya and a minority of around 30-40 people who tried to stay in the forests with a fairly large herd (c. 700 head) of reindeer (Fraser 2010).
Paradoxically, these developments break the connection with the actual Russian past of the region. This is the consequence of two imperatives of the new trans-border orientation: first, the need to represent cultural multiplicity; and second, the requirement to accentuate the frontier loyalty of the local population. In this context, popular ethnography and official narratives about the loyal inhabitants are bracketed off and left virtually untouched. This helps to solve the dilemmas associated with a postcolonial perspective on the earlier Russian presence, and promotes a focus on the mutual enrichment of the two sides. Thus, without ceasing to be a narrative of the correct (political) choice to remain loyal to socialist China,\textsuperscript{7} the past can also become a reserve of positive symbols that are useful for attracting investment and tourism. If we add to this the influence of the ethno-tourism market on administrative decisions, then one could say that the past has become the hostage not only of the present but also of the economic expectations of the future.

The urban space of trust: representations of friendship on the ruins of a border bastion

Man’chzhuria was the first station on the strip of *polosa otchuzhdenia* (appropriated strip of land) of the Russian-built Chinese Eastern Railway, and for most of its history it was a small settlement for Russian and Chinese railways workers. It was more like a village than a town (Urbansky 2012). The main determinant of its role was the border, which lies on the northern edge of the town. Depending on the situation, Man’chzhuria/Manzhouli had various functions: it has been an advanced post for the Russian takeover of Manchuria, a Japanese border post, a place of lively trade between two brotherly socialist nations, an important centre for organizing Soviet help for China, and a Chinese fortress defending the area from the northern neighbour. A new epoch began on 16 April 1983, when, after sixteen years of isolation, trade between the border regions of the USSR (eastern Siberia and the Far East) and China (Heilongjiang and Inner Mongolia) restarted. Two years later, in August 1985, several pairs of towns along the border (Manzhouli-Zabaikal’sk, Heihe-Blagoveshchensk, Suifenhe-Grodekovo, and Tongjiang-Nizhneleninskoe) were opened for border exchanges (Bazarov and Ganzhurov 2002, 59). From 1991, the former ‘bastion’ (i.e., fortified) towns along the border were turned into zones of formal and informal trade. This opening of the border was to determine the future of Manzhouli, which rapidly transformed from a poor,

\textsuperscript{7} Setting out the ‘right choice’ is the standard role of the past in socialist societies (Zalejko 1994).
provincial settlement into the main hub for Sino-Russian economic relations (Zhang, Ma, Yu 2002). It became a contemporary commercial area that, while located in China, cited Soviet symbolism and architecture as it pleased.

This was an extraordinary form of Russification of urban space, which had the single aim of turning a border station into the most powerful trade and tourist centre of the region. Today Manzhouli presents itself as both a key transport hub (60 percent of Russian exports go through it) and an exemplar of a super-modern lifestyle. The quasi-East European architecture, the use of Russian on trade signs, and the inhabitants’ almost fluent knowledge of Russian have turned the town into ‘our China’: maximally open to the Russian tourist or entrepreneur. The symbolic spaces of the town, from squares with matryoshki dolls to architectural images citing the Persian Gulf, play the role of ‘Russia’ for the Chinese and ‘China’ for the Russians, joining the two countries in a common post-socialist aesthetic and common economic interests. By bringing together contemporary architecture, Soviet symbols, and global signs (western brands, American food chains not found in Eastern Siberia, and Chinese goods adapted to Russian tastes), the town creates the atmosphere of an artificial place, at once alien and open to all.

Because of its remote location Manzhouli is not a global city, but it is the only regional example of an attempt to imitate such an idea. This has determined the city’s external appearance, the nature of its new citizens, and its cultural politics oriented toward the common socialist past of the region. On the other hand, its border location gives it a local and seasonal character: in the summer, the city presents itself as a Chinese Russia to Chinese tourists, while for the rest of the year it is a Russian China for visitors from Russia. In this situation, we can see Manzhouli as the producer of trust in a minimum of three contexts: that of Russian tourists and traders, for whom it embodies the idea of cheap goods acquired in a comfortable atmosphere; that of Chinese tourists, who hope to trust that it stands for the real Russia; and that of the government, where it represents a city of intensive cross-border exchange.

All of these strategies are inter-connected. The recent (2015) fall-off in Russian visitors not only makes it difficult to sell Russian exotica but also threatens catastrophe, should the Chinese state become disillusioned about the ‘city of friendship and trust’. The realization of such a disaster is rendered all the more probable by the peripheral locale of the nearby Siberian provinces, Russia’s ever greater economic problems, and the advent of new logistical models for trade, such as the development of different transport links for industrial bases in the west of China (the Urumchi-Bishkek-Irkutsk line) and the rapid expansion of internet trade with China (see Ryzhova, this volume). The fate of the city is directly related to the integration of Chinese
future-oriented economic perspectives (which now require a readjustment downwards) with the low purchasing power of a Siberian periphery that is greatly dependent on constantly decreasing subsidies from Moscow.

The creation of an urban ‘space of trust and friendship’ unites three imaginaries: the idea of the trade city, Chinese conceptions of the ideal Russian city, and the imitation of a global city. Unlike the infrastructure of memory (such as the Russian villages of Three Rivers, Trekhrech’ye) or the fabrication of authenticity oriented to the past but with a view to the future (Aloguya), this type of urban space symbolizes the future of the region as an important pole of cross-border development. Manzhouli is the epitome of the new Chinese urbanism. It joins the economy of expectation with an old practice typical of Maoist China: the city as the site of the materialization of utopia and the exemplar of new models of living (Lu 2006). As Bulag wrote about the urbanization boom in Inner Mongolia:

Cities have emerged as the centers where industrial miracles and ‘actions’ occur, pointing towards a future utopia, departing from Mao’s ideological ambivalence, and are represented in the media as an embodiment of modernity replete with much of the palette of global capitalist renderings of ‘modernity’ and its radically persuasive imagery of the good life, progress and development. (Bulag 2002, 212)

In the case of Manzhouli we are dealing with a complex form of urban spatiality, where ideas about ‘good life, progress and development’ are directly related to trans-border trade and the promotion of cultural links. And yet this urban space also links China and Russia in a multi-layered way that is in some ways akin to the Russian traditions of imperial urbanism in the early 20th century. The centre of the city is a grid of six large parallel streets (avenues), with monumental buildings and geometrical crossing roads. This part of Manzhouli recalls Russian colonial practices during the construction of modernity along the Chinese Eastern Railway. Then, the aim was to replace the narrow and difficult-to-negotiate streets of the village-town of the frontier with the wide streets, large buildings, and business centres of the imperial town. The centre of Harbin is the ideal realization of this idea, and its reflections can also be seen in the centre of Chita and the older Russian part of Hailar. The ideal was a city entirely independent of local traditions, a city that had overcome the past and was oriented to the future. The irony of Manzhouli is that, while it is built in the monumental style of Russian/Soviet architecture, the past that its neo-liberal future actually overcomes is not a Chinese one, but the early Russian model of the village-like settlement.
In this context, the question of how the urban past should be represented has been determined by two basic lines of Chinese policy in the region: the reproduction of ersatz signs of Russian culture (the imperative of regional diversity), and the destruction of all real traces of the presence of Russians in the city (the imperative of the frontier loyalty of the local citizenry).

Trust as a discursive choice: the semantics of the negative reputation of the city

In 2010, Siberian newspapers and Internet portals publicized numerous cases of physical aggression in Manzhouli markets, which were then expanded on a mythic scale and linked to the idea of the ‘awakened dragon’. The scale and context made the incidents something more than a mere description of the bad behaviour of a few sellers in a town known for its atmosphere of anonymity, quick money, and hedonistic 24-hour pleasures. Along with the Russian distrust of eastern traders, well described in the literature, one can see here the strange effect of another understanding: Manzhouli became the symbol of the town-as-market, which turned the ‘town of trust and friendship’ into a space of the deceit and aggression that has infected the whole trans-border space. A 40-year-old respondent in Irkutsk expressed his anxiety about awakening China as follows: ‘Everyone says that Manzhouli is dangerous. Here, the Chinese have gone completely wild. In the market they do exactly as they want. They can hit you if you don’t buy’. Internet forms depict Manzhouli as a danger, not only for Siberia but also for the whole of China. Thus a forum participant with the nickname Irina wrote: ‘And in fact, such criminal rubbish could only arise in Manchzhuria. The place is a “black hole”. And it will spread onwards in China, like in the good old days. We must hope that the Manchzhurian infection does not take over the whole of China.’

What is the reason for such distrust of the ‘town of friendship and cooperation’? It can be argued that it is indeed the spatial aspects of the border trade town that gives rise to such unexpected emotional reactions. First, penetrating the ambivalent zone of the border activates Russian ideas of the ‘Asiatic frontier’ as a space of danger and unwelcome encounters. As will be shown, we must not underestimate the ability of such ideas to drive a wedge between experience and representation. The second barrier is the concept of the ‘Asiatic market of Chinese type’, which is directly linked

to negative stereotypes about Chinese traders and the hidden threat of economic domination. The third aspect, no less important, is the town's role as a showcase, which simultaneously offends at least three Russian assumptions: about the proper vector of modernity in the region (themselves), about the very possibility of the town-cum-market, and about the prospect of collaborative development with China. These assumptions to a great extent determine the meanings given to the urban space and the resulting doubts about whether this city can provide the conditions for profitable exchange.

A good illustration of the divide between actuality and its representation is the contrast between the daily experience of visitors and the image they create of the dangerous, unwelcoming city. All respondents underlined the potential perils of being in Manzhouli, an idea applied both to nighttime streets (theft and mugging) and to daytime market places (cheating, aggressive sellers). Some cases of trickery and other crimes do of course take place, but to call Manzhouli a city dangerous for everyday life is an extraordinary exaggeration. In fact, this grim assessment of Manzhouli was contradicted by the behaviour of the visitors themselves. Until early 2015, all of the restaurants and nightclubs were filled with contented people freely taking advantage of the anonymity of the border town to participate in parties and sexual encounters. Chinese and Russians often enjoyed the same places, occasionally in one another’s company. But recollections of this experience in interviews, the press, and Internet forums were surprisingly anxious, gloomy, and alarmist. Pervasive dangers and cases of deception were constantly invoked. Describing the Asiatic trade town as a place of falsity, hypocrisy, and aggression, the respondents painted themselves as heroes who stood up to serious ordeals. This alternative memory not only masks the real experience, but also reproduces a mythic image (mythologeme) that is important in Russian culture: that of the Asiatic frontier as a place of meeting with danger and the unknown.9 We can argue that this mythic image forms a watershed between ‘us’ and ‘them’, and yet also performs an integrative function. By creating an imagined community of normal people in an abnormal place (the border), it folds the Russian notion of border capitalism into a process of symbolic reproduction of the border as a protective bastion. In this vision, tourists coming to buy fur coats, Dagestanis running an underground casino in Chita, the manager of a brothel in Irkutsk coming to buy underwear for her sex-workers, the hospital administrator from

9 Similarly, the collective memory of the Soviet contingent in socialist Mongolia fixed on a fictive political confrontation with the local population of Russian refugees from Communism, driving out actual memories of their work or military service (Peshkov 2012).
Ulan-Ude purchasing goods for the shop in his home village, shuttle-traders from nearby hamlets, artists from Donetsk, and former prisoners and former soldiers from Trans-Baikalia – all of these individuals and groups suddenly become some social whole that is threatened by Chinese aggression.

This distrust creatively unites the Russian colonial tradition of demonizing Chinese traders with the experience of the small market business in Siberia. The old Tsarist-era stereotype of the cunning, cheating Chinese took new forms after 1991: the former workers in socialist factories turned into tenacious Asiatic traders, who were seen as isolated from society, not understandable, and potentially threatening. The discourse of ‘a civilizational gulf’ and journalistic ‘culture-ology’ made it impossible for people to see any relationship between the socio-economic regress of the East Siberian border region and the long practice of drawing in labour power from China, a situation with many causes including the collapse of the system of organization on the frontier (demilitarization), the end of collective agriculture, and the hesitant adaptation of old industries to the new conditions (Ericson 2000; Hassard et al. 2007). Unlike former Soviet ethnic groups such as the Kyrgyz (see Introduction), the Chinese were understood in the context of a geopolitical mission specific to them, in which their good qualities (capacity for hard work, discipline, and modest way of life) became not only signs of their dangerously greedy economic expansionism but also an excuse for de-humanizing them. Thus, Tobias Holzlehner writes about the demonization of the Chinese in the first two decades of reform:

Patriotic discourse predominates in the press. The Chinese are presented as an amorphic mass like a moving swarm ready to engulf their helpless hosts and they are compared metaphorically to restless locusts or cockroaches [...]. Added to this there is the image of rapacious Chinese as dangerous bodies, capable of spreading infectious diseases among the Russian population. (2009, 108)

These ideas, when combined with the subjective extraterritoriality of the city, are related in a complex way with the negative image of the Chinese in Manzhouli: the two add to one another and create a false, seemingly empirical justification for xenophobic attitudes toward the neighbours.

As a city-market, Manzhouli is a challenge for the Russian post-Soviet periphery, since it rubs against both a cultural hierarchy (West superior to East) and an economic asymmetry (China strong, Siberia weak). People accustomed to contrasting Western and Soviet forms of modernity cannot accept the non-Soviet socialist modernity of China (Peshkov 2010). The
presence of a super-modern city on the other side of the border is seen not as a success of China, but as an abnormal humiliation of Russia. Manzhouli manifests everything new, which is perceived by the Russians as an outrageous slap in the face in the context of the failure of economic reforms in Russia – namely, the daring of Asiatic entrepreneurs, the plenitude of goods in China, and the success of only one side in joint ventures. The inability of Trans-Baikaliya to benefit is understood to be the result of the unpractical nature of Russians and the economic pragmatism of the Chinese. Lena, an inhabitant of a border village, expressed her suspicion (which in my view is typical) about the success of Manzhouli: ‘They have built everything on our money. I remember when Manzhouli was a village worse than Zabaikal'sk, but now... It’s necessary to be careful with them [the Chinese].’

Russian ideas about the peripherality of the entire region add to this picture, despite the efforts of the citizens and municipal officials. Manzhouli is seen as a phantom that only imitates modernity, appearing artificially in a region that is inherently incapable of real progress. The majority of my respondents, especially those from Eastern Trans-Baikalia, saw Manzhouli as a continuation of the geographical captivity determined by their region’s provincial status in relation to the Russian metropolises (Moscow, St. Petersburg) and other global cities. The Russian mental geography unequivocally posits the vectors of culture and development as moving from West to East. In this perspective, the border region is seen as a ‘zone of depression’, distant even from Siberian cultural centres. Anyone going to live in Manzhouli is ranked among the lowly, non-prestigious class of small traders. Respondents did not recognize any non-utilitarian reasons for being in the town, and tended to explain the presence of chance visitors (from central Russia, Eastern Europe, or the Baltics) as an almost incredible jump into the depths of remoteness. Sergei, a driver from Petrovsk-Zabaikal'sk, expressed this attitude when he commented to me, ‘So everything can’t be alright for you, can it, if you’ve ended up here?’ In this perspective, Trans-Baikalia is seen as a space of new poverty while Manzhouli appears as a bezkul’turnyi (‘culture-less’) town-market, and both are similarly locked into the geographical captivity of remoteness.

Mistrust in the city as market has deeper roots, deriving from the fact that including both ideas in one space is alien to Russian urban culture. The latter has always subordinated the market to the city, dividing it off as a separate, fenced-off place or externalizing it outside the town (Humphrey and Skvirskaya 2009). In her paper on trade, ‘disorder’, and citizenship regimes, Caroline Humphrey relates this attitude toward trade and traders
to Russian ideas about disorder (2010). The two decades after the material for that paper was gathered have not changed these cardinal Russian ideas. The Orientalist imaginary of the disorder of Asiatic trade jells with most Russians’ perception of both internal (ethnic market places) and external (Asiatic trade zones) business towns as places of deceit and light money. Elena Trubina, analysing the relation between classical views on the city and contemporary Russian urbanism, also remarks on the absolutely negative opinion toward the bazaar:

Among us the bazaar is associated with eastern savagery, immigrant traders, and ‘non-organised’ trade. The problematic unanimity with which ordinary people, intellectuals and political leaders have recourse to such metaphorical associations is expressed in many judgments and put-downs. For example, inhabitants of a St Petersburg suburb complained to journalists about the dreadful outburst of street trading in cheap goods, carried out by ‘immigrants from southern republics, mostly probably here illegally’. The complainants do not hesitate to accuse the incomers of recent thefts in the suburb and even claim that they are the cause of the ‘anti-social behaviour’ (bytovoi extremism) of the local inhabitants. [...] The ‘bazaar’ as a metaphor of plentiful opportunities and attractive variety has transposed into an emblem of the alien and the extraneous, which is felt to lie in wait for all those who do not ‘patriotically’ care about the boundaries of their community. (Trubina 2010)

From this perspective, disorder can be seen as the essence of the city-as-market, irrespective of its external appearance; it is immanent in such a place, and in many ways is its derivative. It is this fear of a lack of order that turns anxiety into a fundamental mistrust of the city-cum-market as the alter ego of the good post-Soviet city.

**Testing friendship: problems of trust and attempts to resolve them**

Let us turn to the techniques of cheating in the city. The trap of mistrust was a problem for the city from the moment it became a trading town. In fact, the Chinese aim of creating a new ‘idea’ of the city was to overcome this problem of distrust. The newly devised symbolic field, the use
of Russian, and the provision for payment in roubles, were all intended to create comfortable conditions for business and leisure. Yet, as I have described, trust is the last thing that comes to the mind of visitors from Russia. Practically everything makes them nervous: the sleepless town blazing with neon lights contrasted with the darkling ruins of Soviet Trans-Baikalia; the quantity and quality of the goods; the Chinese production standards that are different from Russian ones; the dubious authenticity of Chinese prices; the insincere geniality of the Chinese salespeople (or its opposite, their sincere anger); the incomprehensible Chinese vodka that masquerades as Russian; the spicy Chinese food; and even the unfamiliar bodies of Chinese prostitutes.

Most of these worries are typical of other post-socialist trading areas or cheap Asiatic resorts. In the former, the absence of procedures, common standards, and controls gives rise to very low prices but at the same time goods of dubious quality. In the latter, Asian countries’ laxity with regard to foreigners (allowing informal currency exchange, open prostitution, and easy border entry) makes a stay more convenient, but also creates an opening for swindlers and criminals. In this respect, many problems of distrust have a rational basis: the confusing differences in the sizes of clothing and footwear produced by Chinese factories under one brand name, linguistic misunderstandings, the energetic Chinese style of sales-talk that gives the impression they want to sell at any price, and so forth. The deceptive similarity of Manzhouli to a Siberian town (Russian signage, Russian music in bars, etc.) is also disturbing, given the differences already alluded to. The net effect is to give an impression of generalised low quality, which is not compensated for by the low prices. The over-hasty enthusiasm of some Chinese service agents has also played a role, since they would take any job without having the necessary credentials. However, much of the so-called obman (‘trickery’) was really something else: a lack of understanding, different emotional tone in selling, or an attempt to keep hold of a client at any price – though of course there were also occasional extravagant attempts to cheat ‘rich’ Russians. But the main objective basis for the mistrust must lie with the subjectivity of the visitors. It lies in the fact that Russian business people have to balance the fear of loss and the hope of gain in an arena that provokes feelings of danger and alarm. The fear of losing makes them search out ‘our Chinese’ (known local agents),

11 There is a rather popular story that in Manzhouli under-aged prostitutes are ‘slipped in’, after which the police are called. The absence of any cases of foreigners being prosecuted for sex with under-age girls has not stopped the spread of this rumour.
but the hope of making a profit creates the mistrustful suspicion that even ‘our Chinese’ are not offering the best (lowest) prices. This gives rise to an insoluble contradiction between the attempt to resolve problems through ‘known Chinese’ and the search for ‘real Chinese prices’ that have been ‘hidden from Russian entrepreneurs’ by their new Chinese friends – i.e., there is a mistrust in one’s own ability to organize access to economic bargains. The strategies arising from these fears have the effect of pushing Chinese sellers – who know that the Russians are going to be dissatisfied in any case – to sell their goods in any way possible. We could therefore suggest that it is not the problems faced by the Russian guests that are unique, but their means of reading them. Universal difficulties of border trade are formulated into a vocabulary of distrust toward the people, the town, and the border location itself.

Both Chinese and Russians agree that dishonest trade and aggressive behaviour can be found in Manzhouli, but they explain this with different causes and absolutely different perspectives. For the Chinese, the cases of cheating are correctable and temporary consequences of the fact that a huge number of diverse people have marvellous opportunities to make money. For them, the priority given to development over security and the consequent toleration of a certain grey zone underpins the image of the ‘town of success’ that goes along with neoliberal hopes of prosperity. This is why Manzhouli was for a long time taken by the Chinese to be the very symbol of the right (successful) model of cooperation. The size of the problem of trickery was also considered to be very different. For the Chinese, it was a matter of a few traders and a consequence of the ignorance (or naivety) of Russians, who should have taken care to distinguish the few bad Chinese from the majority of normal ones. The general Chinese understanding of the need for trust resulted in action: large numbers quickly took up the profession of the ‘Chinese friend’, the pomogai (‘helper’) who would resolve problems on the spot. Inner Mongols and Shenehen Buriats also became guides for Russians, and their culture is considerably closer to that of the Trans-Baikal/Siberian folk from over the border. They value this status highly and use it responsibly. There are few critical comments about them from Russian citizens, and they are not thought to pose any danger.12 The Chinese state's

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12 One of my Inner Mongolian respondents, Chinggis, remarked that Russians do not notice the drama of Inner Mongols from mixed families. ‘I am a Mongol with a Chinese face. It’s complicated. It is a good thing that the Russians are unaware of my Chinese parent.’ Consciously or unconsciously, Chinggis distinguished himself from Chinese pomogai (‘helpers’): he was more reserved, correct and calm, which his Russian clients saw as positive traits and attributed to the fact that he was not Chinese.
response to the need for trust creation was to set up a network of telephone numbers to call in case of complaints, make sure that Russian-speakers man the lines, and issue pamphlets with advice about security for visitors.

Nevertheless, these measures have not solved the problems of mistrust and they are also widely ignored by the Russians. The balance of dishonest versus honest traders is understood completely differently by the Russians, since they attribute some degree of hypocrisy to all Chinese. While noting the presence of good Chinese – a trait that is based on befriending Russians or just generally being decent people by nature – every one of my Russian respondents nevertheless commented on the generally rapacious character of the Chinese entrepreneur. Each case of trouble was taken as proof of this negative viewpoint, and isolated examples of trickery were seen as the norm in the Chinese market. It is significant that the fact that a very large number of Russian small traders have been able to make good money themselves (see Namsaraeva, this volume) was hardly ever mentioned, and was indeed barely noticeable against the flood of negative comments. This harsh attitude is linked not only to the factors already mentioned (the traditional view of the Asiatic market city as a place of fraud and profiteering), but also to the general priority given by the Russian state to security over economic development. The understanding was that there could be only two solutions to the problem of distrust: first, to work with ‘good Chinese’, i.e., entrepreneurs with irreproachable reputations; and second, for Russian mediators to emerge. In both cases, we can see that each ‘solution’ only increased the problem on a new level. The idea that there is a small group of ‘good Chinese’ only emphasized the hostile and suspect character of the rest. And in fact, when Russian mediator firms – which stood to lose out to Chinese competitors – did appear, they used their strong links with the media to discredit their Chinese counterparts as a way of protecting their own small segment of the market.

This last example shows the importance of reputation (which is directly linked to trust) in an antagonistic cultural area. Good reputations enable the participants in an exchange to decrease both their informational costs and the risk of receiving low quality goods or inappropriate prices. But, as we have seen, creating such a reputation in a situation of general mistrust requires the construction of the category of the good Chinese; this allows visitors to Manzhouli to do business without giving up their wider anxieties about the city. This is a trap that paradoxically only strengthens their fears. From this point of view, the problem of mistrust is insoluble, since each new decision gives rise to a new spurt of distrust. This combination of suspicions about the city and the city-as-market with an aggressive search for the
lowest possible prices has led to a spiral of disappointment and mistrust. Spatial projects and a fear of Chinese greed have turned out to be stronger than the idea of a cross-border machine of economic growth in the region.

**Conclusion**

China is carrying out a model of reform that preserves the characteristics of ‘transitional society’ into an indefinite future (Naughton 2007), and consequently many of the social responsibilities of the state are being gradually shifted to the individual sphere (Bhalla and Qiu 2009. This creates the conditions for a hybrid development of the border territories, where the goal of state policy is not only the modernization of industry and infrastructure but also the orientation of the border zone toward trading with the Russian and Mongolian markets. The problem with this model is that it is based on expectations of the future while being tied to fluctuations in the economies of the neighbouring countries. The fall of the rouble, the reduction of Russian state subsidies, and the general lack of certainty about tomorrow in Eastern Siberia have turned out to be more dangerous for Manzhouli than for the Siberian regions themselves. Actors in the market predict a downturn until at least 2018, and say this will inevitably lead to the temporary or permanent extinction of the energetic life of the city. But the inability of Manzhouli to realize its own slogan of trust and friendship is also playing a role in its downfall. Manzhouli was declared a place of deceit and aggression long before the most recent Russian economic problems. Besides the objective reasons (i.e., the problems of carrying out trade in subjectively ‘extra-territorial’ conditions), this negative attitude rests on three images that Russian clients find objectionable: the showcasing of Chinese success on the immediate other side of the border; the city-as-market; and the one-sided creation of a border development zone. Despite the (in fact rather positive) experience of contact, the image of a town of friendship and trust has been submerged in the complex process of the adaptation of Russians to the end of the ‘Russian century’ in this part of Asia.

This chapter has shown that the Russian reaction to a convenient place for trade and leisure was significantly influenced by subjective factors related to the experience of Russian colonial policies: most notably, the legacy of the Soviet culture of fear and emotionality associated with border territories and the Russian refusal to accept visible Chinese success on land that had earlier been Russian territory. These factors lie behind the radical confrontation of trust and mistrust created by the border, and the idea of a
border trade hub that would have been useful to everyone was subordinated to the discourse of danger arising from Russian fear of the economic might of China. The conceptual marginalization of Manzhouli by many Russians is a result of the present consensus that gives priority to post-soviet anxieties about security rather than the creation of a joint economic success story in the region. We can suggest that any successful attempt to create trust in the future will depend on a re-thinking of three current mythologemes of post-Soviet consciousness: the spatial (the periphery is dependent on the centre), the border (the need for protection from Chinese invasiveness), and the economic (the impossibility of cooperation without making a loss).

References


