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2. On Ideas of the Border in the Russian and Chinese Social Imaginaries

Franck Billé

Following Liberation and the installation of a communist government in 1949, China set out to resolve numerous border disputes with neighbouring countries. Between 1960 and 1963, China settled outstanding territorial disagreements with North Korea, Mongolia, Myanmar, Nepal, Pakistan and Afghanistan. A number of other border disputes have been resolved more recently, particularly with territories formerly included in the Soviet Union. In 1991, China signed the Sino-Soviet Border Agreement, which brought to an end longstanding territorial disputes with Russia and led to a final agreement in October 2004 (Foucher 2007: 33). Delimitation agreements have also been signed over the last two decades with Central Asian countries adjacent to China, namely with Kyrgyzstan in 1996, Kazakhstan in 1994 and Tajikistan in 1999 (Pan 2009: 95).

If in several of these agreements China frequently flexed her political muscles – claiming as hers significant areas of Tajik, Kazakh and Kyrgyz territory in the process – these demarcation efforts also index a willingness to put to rest outstanding disputes and to normalise border relations with her neighbours. Indeed, if normalisation of borders is essential to the development of border trade, and therefore financially advantageous (Simmons 2005: 842–43), China’s participation in territorial resolutions clearly signals her desire to portray herself as good-neighbourly (Lukin 2009, Tang, Li and Acharya 2009). As Fravel notes, “China’s compromises have often been substantial, as it has usually offered to accept less than

half of the contested territory in any final settlement. In addition, these compromises have resulted in boundary agreements in which China has abandoned potential irredentist claims to more than 3.4 million square kilometres of land that had been part of the Qing empire at its height in the early nineteenth century" (2008: 2). Yet, despite China's insistence on her commitment to a "peaceful rise" (*heping jueqi* 和平崛起), many of her neighbours continue to look at her progress with ambivalence and anxiety, and frequently suspect imperialistic designs.

In Mongolia, for example, all anxieties relating to continued cultural and political independence are focused on China (Batbayar 2005): the spectre of a Chinese takeover of the country remains pervasive and rumours of Chinese malfeasance omnipresent (Billé 2008). Popular discourses in the far eastern provinces of Russia are strikingly similar. Scholars writing on Russian perceptions of Chinese migrant workers (Dyatlov 1999, 2008; Larin 2005; Alexseev 2001, 2006) report widespread fears that the Chinese are coming in vast numbers and that they attempt to stay behind illegally (see Dyatlov, this volume), thereby introducing significant demographic shifts that may eventually lead to a balkanisation of the region and the secession of the eastern regions of Russia to the benefit of China. While it is likely that such fears are grounded, in part, in the demographic imbalance between China and eastern Russia, I wish to suggest here that suspicions of Chinese imperialistic designs may also have emerged in response to differences in Russian and Chinese conceptualisations of the border. Despite China's efforts to settle border disputes and to normalise relations with all her neighbours, Chinese current approaches to the issue of borders appear to be at odds with Russian, or Mongolian, understandings.

Definitions of the word "border" are notably difficult to agree upon since the term can refer both to the political boundary of a state and to the limits of cultural regions, two entities that are hardly, if ever, coextensive. English makes a useful distinction, however, between "border" and "frontier", with the former denoting a formal line of demarcation between states and the latter the process of expansion of a political entity, such as the frontier of America's westwards expansion in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, or indeed the similar eastwards expansion of the Russian state into Siberia.¹ According to Wilson and Donnan, "frontiers"

1 The English word "frontier" comes from the French *frontière* which etymologically is related to the word "front" in a military sense. The "frontier" was thus the line that

are “territorial zones of varying width which stretch across and away from borders, within which people negotiate a variety of behaviours and meanings associated with their membership in nations and states” (1998: 5). Indeed, the disconnect between the apparent arbitrariness of political boundaries and the reality of the numerous cultural regions that straddle these lines has proved a fertile terrain for anthropological research, since the very existence of borderlands, of liminal regions “bisected by the boundary line between states” (Donnan and Wilson 1999: 50) helps disrupt the national fantasy of complete geophysical and cultural separateness.

The focus of this paper is on this conceptual tension between “border” and “frontier” and its relevance for the Sino-Russian border. As I will illustrate shortly, the difference between the two concepts gains palpability when a linguistic comparison is made of the terms currently used in Russian and Chinese to speak of borders: if in Russian there is a relative paucity of terms to refer to borders, Chinese lexical wealth suggests a much wider set of spatially overlapping concepts. Indeed, while in Russian the border tends to be conceptualised as a firm line, Chinese perceptions are significantly more zonal and frontier-like. I suggest however that the predominance of one particular model is not necessarily culturally specific but that both models coexist and fluctuate in a dialogical process.

A strong differentiator in the way Russians and Chinese currently visualise 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 (see Ryzhova, this volume) and tends therefore to be perceived as a source of anxiety. This divergence, whereby the Chinese display more proactive and entrepreneurial attitudes while the Russians remain on the defensive, is in fact also played out in the linguistic realm, with more Chinese proficient in Russian than the other way round.

Undeniably, Russian fears of Chinese encroachment are linked to China’s demographics and fast-developing economy. Russians routinely imagine masses of Chinese pressing against their border, encouraged to migrate through state incentives. These perceptions are also escalated by the situation at home: at the same time as China is imagined bursting at the

separated the polity from the enemy, by definition an eminently mobile line of both contact and separation.

seams and hungry for land, inhabitants of Russia's Far Eastern provinces see their region as becoming depleted, weaker, and increasingly abandoned by the state (Hill and Gaddy 2003). It is precisely this combination, these feelings of abandonment in the face of a populous China allegedly eager to recapture lost territories, that proves so anxiogenic. Dyatlov (2008) notes that the arrival of Chinese migrant workers has been described as a "second coming" (*vtoroe prishestvie*): the continuation of prerevolutionary migration trends that had been stemmed by the Soviet government.² In other words, the presence of Chinese individuals on Russian territory is seen as indexing both the raw demographic power of China, and the weakness of a Russian government no longer able to keep them out. Alexseev (2006a: 46) provides a similar explanation for these Russian anxieties. He argues that the perceived uncertainties about the government's capacity to care turn exaggerated claims into a sensible psychological coping strategy.

And these concerns do, indeed, appear to be widely exaggerated. Research carried out by local scholars suggests that prevalent fears are not supported by facts (see Alexseev 2006a: 2–15). While Russian media assert that Chinese migrants routinely evade immigration restrictions and stay behind, data tell a different story. In Primorskii Krai in 2000, only 82 Chinese failed to return home, i.e. a proportion amounting to 0.03 per cent of the total number of Chinese visiting the region that year. The following year, in 2001, the number had dropped further, to 15 people, i.e. 0.01 per cent (Larin 2005: 51). Instead of the tidal waves and invasions described in the Russian media (see Dyatlov 2008), the majority of the Chinese working in the Russian Far East typically stay for the duration of their contract and then return home. Indeed, surveys carried out among them indicate they do not consider the region an attractive prospect for long-term settlement (Hill and Gaddy 2003: 181). For their part, Chinese scholars are careful to distinguish them from traditional migrants (*yimin* 移民) and sojourners (*huaqiao* 华侨), preferring to refer to them as overseas workers (*waipai laowu* 外派劳务) instead (Wishnick 2005: 80).

While demographic imbalance and socioeconomic factors go a long way to explain these sentiments, similar fears of Chinese expansion are also prevalent on Sakhalin Island, despite the presence of only a few hundred Chinese there (Larin 2005: 58),³ suggesting that the cause of these anxieties

2 Dyatlov points out that these perceptions have often been consciously manipulated by "interested parties" for various personal and political reasons.

3 In Sakhalin's capital, public demonstrations against Chinese encroachment led to sweeping raids being carried out, but these raids produced barely a dozen Chinese

might be located elsewhere. In fact, the dangers thought to originate from China are largely associated with a phantasm of China pertaining to the realm of the imaginary, a “would-be China” as Lomanov (2005: 71) has phrased it. Given that China is not making any territorial claim,⁴ and is on the contrary trying to resolve outstanding issues, and given that despite fears of being overrun by the Chinese, actual numbers are hardly threatening (the total annual percentage of Chinese workers employed in the RFE has never exceeded 0.2 per cent of the total work force there,⁵ Larin 2005: 55), the issue appears to be less one of actual socioeconomic threat than a misalignment between official statements and imagined intentionality.

This misalignment may be due, in part, to the different concepts of the border held by Russians and Chinese. Specifically, what does elicit Russian anxieties may be less a matter of aggressive and imperialistic designs on the part of China than her considerably more supple understanding of “borders”. Before I go on to develop this argument, it may be useful to draw a brief comparison between the two sets of lexical resources available to Russian and Chinese speakers to refer to borders.

In modern Russian, the concept is expressed by two terms, largely synonymous: *granitsa* and *rubezh*. *Granitsa* is etymologically related to *gran'*, meaning “facet” or “edge”, while *rubezh* comes from *rubit'* (to cut, chop) and was previously synonymous with *zarubka*, meaning “cut” or “notch” (Shanskii and Bobrova 1994). The semantic fields delineated by the two terms show some similarity with the opposition found in English between “border” and “frontier” with *granitsa* indicating a linear demarcation and *rubezh* denoting a fuzzier differentiation between Self and Other. However, in most linguistic contexts *rubezh* appears to be losing ground in favour of *granitsa*.⁶ In other words, a shift in the semantic landscape concerning borders, and specifically a “linearisation” of the concept, is discernible in the lexical resources available to Russian speakers. This linearity is also visible in the adjectival forms of the term *granitsa* like *pogranichny* and *prigranichny* and particularly in words derived from both *granitsa* and *rubezh*, such as “foreign” (*zagranichny*) and “abroad” (*za granitse*, *za*

nationals (Alexseev 2006b: 142).

4 Although this is not China's official position, some Chinese groups do make such territorial claims.

5 Since 2005, changes in the calculation methods have increased this percentage to 3 to 4% for the Amur *oblast* (Ryzhova, personal communication).

6 The term *rubezh* is never used for instance to speak of an actual border with another nation. Its use is virtually limited to set expressions such as *za rubezhom* (abroad).

rubezhom), with the preposition *za* (over, across) which clearly constructs the border as a line rather than a zone.

This makes for a stark contrast with modern Chinese where the lexical landscape referring to borders is much broader (see Table 1). The principal lexemes used to refer to borders are *jiè* (界), *jìng* (境), *jiāng* (疆) and *biān* (边) and these are used in combination with each other as well as with other characters to form a wide array of words. While *jiè* and *jìng* unambiguously denote a linear concept of boundary and limit, *jiāng* and *biān* are more polysemic. On its own, *jiāng* can mean both “boundary” and “dominion” (as in Xinjiang 新疆, literally “new dominion”). Similarly, *biān* translates in various ways depending on context. Its primary meaning is that of “side”, but it can also mean “border”, “boundary”, “edge” or “margin” when combined with another character (i.e. *biānjiè* 边界: territorial boundary; *biānjìng* 边境: border area; *biānjiāng* 边疆: borderland, frontier; *biānmín* 边民: frontiersman; *biānqū* 边区: border region). Thus the lexical wealth of Chinese points to conceptualisations of the border that extend beyond a linear perspective and are significantly more zonal. While in Russian (like in French or German) no clear lexical distinction exists between the concepts of “border” and “frontier”, the numerous Chinese terms convey a range of images of a border – as a line, as a liminal zone, as a margin.⁷

边 (<i>biān</i> : side, edge, margin, border, boundary)	
边界	<i>biānjiè</i> – territorial boundary, border
边境	<i>biānjìng</i> – border (area), frontier
边境线	<i>biānjìngxiàn</i> – borderline, demarcation line
边疆	<i>biānjiāng</i> – border area, borderland, frontier
边缘	<i>biānyuán</i> – edge, fringe, periphery
边沿	<i>biānyán</i> – edge, fringe, margin
边民	<i>biānmín</i> – frontiersman
边区	<i>biānqū</i> – border area, border region
边塞	<i>biānsài</i> – frontier fort/fortress

7 The linguistic landscape I have sketched here focuses on the terms used in Russian and Chinese, however along the lengthy Manchurian border numerous minority groups are found whose concepts of “border” may not necessarily dovetail with those of the dominant groups. The Mongolian cairn system (*oboo*) that dots the landscape for instance functions as a mark of physical as well as spiritual boundary.

界 (jiè: boundary, scope)	
国界	guójiè – national boundary
疆界	jiāngjiè – border, boundary
分界线	fēnjièxiàn – border, boundary
界限	jièxiàn – demarcation line
境 (jìng – border, boundary)	
国境	guójìng – national territory/border
国境线	guójìngxiàn – national boundary
边境	biānjìng – border (area), frontier
境界	jìngjiè – boundary; realm
疆 (jiāng – border, boundary, dominion)	
疆域	jiāngyù – territory
边疆	biānjiāng – border area, borderland, frontier
疆界	jiāngjiè – border, boundary
缘 (yuán – margin, edge)	
边缘	biānyuán – edge, fringe, periphery
塞 (sài: strategic pass)	
边塞	biānsài – frontier fort/fortress

Table 1: Overview of the Chinese semantic landscape for the term “border”⁸

This, I suggest, has an important resonance for the ways in which speakers conceptualise the border and it may help understand the customary visualisation by Russians of the border as a national and ethnic fault line susceptible to be crossed and requiring protection⁹ (see Humphrey, this volume), while the Chinese imagine it as a more supple zone, at times rich in opportunities, at other times as regions of danger.

8 The headings in the table are morphemes rather than words *stricto sensu*. The semantic neighbourhood they delineate is refined through association with other morphemes, creating words, given as examples underneath.

9 This may help explain the defensive attitudes frequently displayed by Russians and their reluctance to enter into collaborative ventures. Alexseev (2006a: 238) notes for instance that Russian fears about Chinese poachers stealing Russian frogs have not translated into business opportunities. Yet, the breeding and harvesting of frogs to meet the huge demand of the Chinese market could potentially turn into lucrative opportunities for local inhabitants.

The formation of the Chinese state has often been described as a process of gradual expansion outwards, slowly incorporating lands on its margins (Fairbank 1968, Tu 1994) in a process of Sinicisation or “cooking” of surrounding barbarian groups (Fiskesjö 1999). From a cultural centre located in the North China Plain, China is perceived to exist “at the centre of an ever-widening series of concentric borderlands” (Potter 2007: 240). The centre, or “core”, noted Sinologist Owen Lattimore (1967: 41–42), was known as “central plain” (*zhongyuan* 中原) or “inner China” (*neidi* 内地) and referred to the densely populated, ethnic Han region running from north to south along the coast. The periphery, also known as “frontiers” (*bianjiang* 边疆) or “outer China” (*waidi* 外地), enveloped this Han heartland to the north, west, and southwest.

While the process of Sinicisation is somewhat problematic since it assumes a unidirectional transformation and assimilation (Crossley, Siu and Sutton 1991: 6; Billé 2009), what interests me here is the assumed survival of this model. In fact, a large share of anxieties about China gravitates precisely around this idea, namely that China continues to perceive itself as a cultural centre radiating outwards, and that formal demarcation (and resolution) of her national borders continues to exist in parallel with an ever-advancing cultural front.

Earlier, I defined “borders” as the territorial limits of a nation state and “frontiers” as the process of expansion of a political entity. Ethnographic data from various parts of the world, like South-East Asia (Carsten 1998) or Europe (Wilson and Donnan 1998: 8–9) suggest that nations were defined historically by their centres and that they articulated on “ties of fealty between persons, not on the unambiguous mapping out of space” (Carsten 1998: 218). It is only later, as nations expanded and unclaimed lands shrank, that attempts were made to “resolve these difficulties by delimiting a precise boundary” (Prescott 1987: 46).¹⁰ From a people-based understanding, what was then witnessed was a gradual “territorialisation” of the state (Sahlins 1998: 37), i.e. a decline in relationships-inflected views of the nation and a progressive isomorphic identification between the physical and cultural extent of the state.

Traditionally, China’s views of her borderlands were predominantly negative: borderlands were places of banishment as well as spaces

10 The Peace of Westphalia, signed in 1648 and signalling the establishment of the modern state system, has generally been seen as the critical event in this conceptual shift (Pan 2009: 20).

generating cycles of crisis and catastrophe (Woodside 2007: 21–22). But if these territories formally included within the nation were seen, and frequently continue to be seen, as not quite Chinese and peopled by non-Han groups, the misalignment between political boundaries and cultural frontiers also has a formative impact on common perceptions of territories lying outside the current borders of the PRC. Regions such as Mongolia or parts of the Russian Far East, notably the Maritime region (*Primorskii Krai*), are not considered Chinese yet remain perceived as somewhat less foreign (Billé 2012).¹¹ Frequently described by Chinese nationalists as regions that have broken away (see Zhang 2005: 110–11), these are liminal regions, not currently under Chinese control but with strong cultural and historic ties to China (see Nelson 1995).

Given China's use of history as a dominant state narrative and its routine insistence on being the country with the longest unbroken existence, historical and archaeological claims suggesting that these outlying regions were previously "Chinese" (in a national rather than ethnic sense) are frequently understood as territorial claims.¹² Russians living in the Russian Far East have often perceived the Chinese presence as a political and strategic phenomenon rather than a social, economic or cultural one (Larin 2005: 48). Hostile intent is also frequently ascribed to the existence of Chinese names to refer to local (Russian) cities (Alexseev 2006: 111). Traditionally the Chinese name for Vladivostok was *Haishenwei* 海參崴, Khabarovsk was called *Boli* 伯力, and Ussuriisk was known as *Shuangchengzi* 双城子. While these locales tend today to be referred to by their Russian names, i.e. *Fuladivosituoke*, *Habaluofisike* and *Wusulisike*, these transliterations have not wholly displaced former names. As historian James Stephan (1994: 19) noted, in the 1970s, Soviet archaeologists and historians were careful to cleanse the territories included within the Russian borders from Chinese historic presence by renaming over a thousand locales.

The attempt by Soviet, and later Russian, government to draw a sharp separation from China and to remove all ambiguity from the border has

11 The fact that, during the Ming dynasty, titles were bestowed upon tribal units as far north as the Uda River and the shore of the Sea of Okhotsk (Waldron 1990: 75) has provided a historical rationale in China for considering vast expanses of Siberia as "historically Chinese".

12 There also tends to be some confusion between the claims of the PRC and those of the nationalist government in Taiwan, the latter indeed laying claim to Outer Mongolia, Tuva and some parts of the Russian Far East.

also left its traces on the physical landscape. As is clearly visible on aerial and satellite pictures of the border (see map of the Manzhouli/Zabaikalsk border crossing, Appendix II: 245), the Russian state border is paralleled by additional markings and lines of defence, reinforcing further this sense of separation. Specifically, two kinds of demarcation are seen at this particular point: a no-man's land (*dublirovanie pogranichnoi polosy*) that frequently includes ploughed out strips and which, at some points along the border, may extend to widths of several miles; and a zone of fortification (*ukreplennye rayony*), which typically includes obstructions and/or minefields.¹³ Also visible on aerial photographs is the so-called "Chingis Khan's Northern Wall" (Severny Val Chingis-Khana), a 340-mile long demarcation line established by Jurchen rulers during the Jin dynasty (1115–1234) in the first and unsuccessful attempt to insulate themselves from the Tatar and Mongolian tribes to the north (Logvinchuk 2006). Today, this line has become a "relict boundary", defined by Prescott (1987: 14) as a boundary that has been abandoned but endures through the differences in the landscape that have developed during its lifetime.

On the Chinese side, by contrast, there does not appear to be such an aspiration to hermetically insulate the national body from Russia or to expunge all traces of former Russian presence. In Harbin, for instance, numerous Russian buildings remain in the old quarters and several Orthodox churches have survived the Cultural Revolution (see Lahusen 2001). In fact, in recent years, the city has actively tried to capitalise on its Russian heritage: today, Harbin is one of the largest centres in China for the study of Russian and it is also there that the main Russian-language news website in China operates.

I argued earlier that the concept of border in the Russian and Chinese imaginaries differ in significant ways, as is suggested by the lexical categories used in these two languages. While in Russia the border is usually visualised as an inflexible boundary line, the limits of the nation in the Chinese national imaginary are much less rigid. Of course, at an official political level, the boundaries of China are just as fixed and subject to policing practices as the Russian ones. However, another dimension also exists in which the extent of the nation is much fuzzier. When speaking with Chinese citizens outside Inner Mongolia for instance, Mongols often

13 This particular fortification zone in the vicinity of Zabaikalsk was implemented in March 1966, as a result of the Sino-Soviet split.

note that their interlocutors are never quite sure whether Mongolia forms part of the nation or not. While these responses may be due in part to confusion between “Mongolia” (Mengguguo 蒙古国) and “Inner Mongolia” (Neimenggu 内蒙古) – the latter being a province of China – and also to a general lack of interest about those neighbouring nations that are perceived as less economically developed, I suggest that it also indexes a certain disconnect between the physical extent of the nation and the cultural realm.¹⁴

However tempting it may be to see this fuzzy conceptualisation of frontiers as something specifically Chinese, it is important to note that Chinese ideas of the border have fluctuated significantly throughout history. At specific times, like during the Ming dynasty, the northern border was perceived as more linear and less ambiguous than during the preceding dynasty (see Waldron 1990). Indeed, my overall reading of Chinese borders as zonal may feel somewhat counterintuitive given the commanding presence of the Great Wall as signal of political and cultural discontinuity.¹⁵

In the same way, if Russian ideas of the border with China appear to be more rigid, this has not always been the case. In addition to the two words discussed earlier, *granitsa* and *rubezh*, a third term, *krai*, is also occasionally used that comes even closer to the more fuzzy delimitation evoked by the English “frontier”. Etymologically, the word is related to the term *krayati*, a dialectal variant of *krait* meaning “to cut”. Historically, *krais* were vast territories located along the periphery of Russia and the term is still used in the name of administrative divisions, notably those bordering China. And if today *krai* is never used to refer specifically to the border, the concept remains embedded in names like Ukraine, literally “on the edge” [of Russia].

While traditional scholarship on borders has tended to see frontiers chiefly as pre-modern phenomena, to be later superseded by borders (see Prescott 1987), it would seem that the process whereby one particular model gains prominence cannot be simply attributed to a historical process

14 Waldron notes that in the earliest period of its history, the idea of clear boundaries was not a particularly strong one in the Chinese tradition: “Early texts were rather vague about China’s borders: they described not a single frontier, but rather a series of zones”. Similarly, “differences among the peoples were not of quality, but of degree” (Waldron 1990: 42).

15 On ideas of the Great Wall as a transition zone, see Lattimore (1967). See also Waldron (1990) on the cultural construction of the Great Wall as a singular structure.

of development from a pre-modern political system to that of a nation-state, nor indeed to cultural specificities. If Russian concepts of the border appear to have changed over time from a zonal to a more linear understanding, the fluctuations seen in the Chinese cultural region suggest that the two models can, and do, coexist side by side.

I argued earlier that Russian concerns about the Sino-Russian border are inherently tied to the increasing economic and political power of China, and that these fears are exacerbated by the feeling that the RFE is economically and demographically weak, compounded by a pervasive sense of having been abandoned by a geographically distant centre.¹⁶ In this sense, it would appear that the predominance of one particular conceptual model of the border is highly contextual and that it emerges in dialogue with the other nation beyond the boundary line but also with the indigenous minority of peoples residing in the borderlands.

Consequently, boundaries with different neighbours are likely to be conceived differently. If Russia's boundary with China is conceptualised as an inflexible line, other Russian borders, and particularly borders that previously demarcated republics within the Soviet Union, will not necessarily share the same rigidity. Over the last two decades for instance, Russia's border with the Ukraine has gradually been transforming into a "proper" state border, equipped with complete border-crossing infrastructure such as customs posts and border guards (Popkova 2001). Nonetheless, it remains a highly porous border, and, importantly, does not elicit the kind of anxiety seen at the border with China.¹⁷ Similarly, if China's view of her northern border with Russia may appear in many ways to be akin to a frontier, this is not necessarily true of her other boundary lines, notably in Xinjiang (see Anthony, this volume). In that part of the country, in stark contrast to the restoration and packaging of Russian architectural heritage for tourism purposes, the modernisation of Uyghur cities has sought to efface all traces of otherness. This difference is also played out in the realm of social exchanges: while at the Sino-Russian border more Chinese usually speak Russian than Russians speak Chinese, at the border with Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan Chinese businessmen and traders tend

16 In fact, this very sentiment of distance may index a continued conceptualisation of the nation as radiating from the capital.

17 Attitudes are of course eminently unstable. Thus a recent article reports the increased sense of threat associated with neighbouring Belarus, currently ranking fifth among countries perceived as constituting a risk for Russia, ahead of Iran, Iraq or Chechnya (Smirnov 2011).

to rely on local Kazakhs and Kyrgyz as cultural and linguistic mediators (Babakulov 2007).

In fact, if political geographers and International Relations scholars are quick to describe frontiers as older concepts that have faded in favour of the more linear understanding of borders, certain state practices suggest the survival of a more complex and multifaceted outlook.¹⁸ This coexistence is visible for instance with respect to coastal waters, conceptualised primarily as an outward extension of a given country's territory but considerably complicated by diverging, and at times conflicting, definitions. Thus, due to the existence of offshore islets (some of which may be submerged at high tide) and underwater geography (such as the position of the nation in relation to the continental shelf), zones of ownership occasionally overlap, with one country owning fishing rights over the seabed and another the rights to the mining activities and to the harvest of sedentary species of fish (Prescott 1987: 24).

To conclude, rather than view "borders" and "frontiers" as mutually exclusive regimes that are culturally-embedded or specific to certain modes of governmentality (see Foucault 2004), I suggest that the two in fact frequently coexist. If current Russian and Chinese terminology indicates significant variation in the ways in which the nations' boundaries are conceptualised, it is crucial to look at how these concepts and understandings play out at various endpoints of the nation and how they fluctuate in time and space. As cogently pointed out by Pavel Baev in reference to Russia, when "some parts of the state start to drift away, borders are declared sacred and inviolable, but when there is a chance to add a piece to the state – then borders are taken as conveniently expandable" (Baev 1996: 4, quoted in Kuhrt 2007: 3).

In other words, frontiers are not merely phenomena that gradually become superseded by borders. Rather, the two concepts denote different attitudes about Self and Other, attitudes that are inherently variable and shifting. Even after borders have ossified into rigid and linear boundaries, relict frontiers such as the "Chingis Khan's Northern Wall" or the

18 As Delaplace (Introduction, this volume) nicely illustrates with the story of Gaston Lagaffe, a border is rarely conceptualised by the state as two-dimensional. A border is in fact a line of demarcation with infinite depth, both subterranean and aerial. Indeed, a crucial factor in territorial disputes has consistently been the resources the soil is known or believed to contain. Similarly, with the advent of air transportation and the emergence of the concept of "national airspace", the boundaries of the nation have also extended upwards.

“Willow Palisade” (see Bulag, this volume) frequently leave their imprint on the geographical and social surroundings. These physical traces of past national and imperial incarnations, like tidemarks, enframe liminal zones where national identities and values routinely find themselves reinforced, contested and challenged.