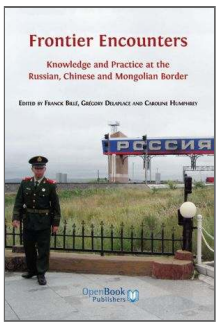

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Knowledge and Practice at the Russian, Chinese and Mongolian Border

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4. Concepts of "Russia" and their Relation to the Border with China

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4. Concepts of "Russia" and their Relation to the Border with China

Caroline Humphrey

If one thinks about what is distinctive about the Russian eastern border with China in comparison to other international borders, two elements are striking: first, that this is a centuries-old border between two post-imperial states with markedly different cultures; and secondly, that the peoples indigenous to the frontier regions, such as Buryats and Evenki, belong to the respective large "civilisations" only by a process of (incomplete) incorporation. In many respects they have more in common with their fellows immediately across the border than they do with the metropolitan centres (see Namsaraeva, this volume). One task therefore would be to characterise the social forms of frontier and cross-border populations, paying attention to their elusive features such as transient networks and non-national kinds of identity. But another task, the main focus of this paper, logically takes precedence – since the border was created in the seventeenth century by the two states of Russia and Manchu China and not by local ethnic groups – is to understand how the overarching and contrasting political cultures have respectively conceived the state and constructed its borders. This chapter, focusing on Russia, will suggest first that the existence and positioning of international borders, in particular that with China, have played an active role in certain influential conceptualisation of "Russia" as a political formation; and second, it will make the reciprocal argument that the historical evolution of notions of Russia, through the

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Tsarist Empire, the USSR, and the Russian Federation, has then impacted on how the border has been treated by the state.

The anthropology of borders has broadly taken two directions, either to emphasise the people living in frontier regions and moving across borders, or to focus on how borders are conceived as more or less powerful presences of the state (see discussion in Radu 2010: 419–10). A fruitful synthesis by Peter Sahlins makes the point that the political boundaries imposed by states have to be actualised in practice by diverse local actors with their own various interests. He argued in the case of the border between France and Spain that the presence of politically-divided ethnic groups living across the boundary "makes the problem of nation building all the more salient" (1989: 22) – and that in frontier zones of "cultural bilingualism" the process of creating French or Spanish citizens involves the agency of the people inhabiting frontier zones as well as central state projects.[1] This perspective is particularly useful for former empires like Russia and China, which both have large and heterogeneous minority populations in frontier areas.

This chapter will focus on one specific input in such processes, the role of national imagination – the changing conceptions of "what Russia is" as a civilisation – in the construction of the eastern border with China, and it attempts to explain thereby the ideological load on this border and its self-defining, other-excluding quality. I should be clear that this paper does not itself attempt to erect a model or "ideal type" of Russia,[2] but rather to point to the main streams of Russian thought on this matter, particularly in the present day. They are relevant to political policy because countless Russian (and non-Russian) writers, officials and politicians have expounded on the theme normatively, i.e. with the intent of making interventions in political projects. Yet, as I shall suggest in line with Sahlins (1989), the *local interpretations* of such ideas are currently at least as striking (if not more so) than those of the state centre.

The body of social thought that interprets Russia as a civilisation is not of course the only one in existence. Not just western but also many Russian commentators have rejected such an approach to understanding the country. For in this case "civilisation" implies not just an assemblage of mobile traits that adhere over geographical space (as was proposed by Marcel Mauss in 1930), but a cultural structure based on certain essential

1 The notion of "cultural bilingualism" comes from Yuri Lotman (1984: 3–35) quoted in A. J. Reiber (2003: 27).

2 See critique by Roberts Crews (2010) of such modes of historical writing.

values. There are plenty of critiques of contemporary attempts to prolong nineteenth-century debates about such an "idea" of Russia, exposing them as academically bankrupt, out-dated and ideologically isolationist (e.g. Miller 2008). But it is easy to see why, with the demise of the Soviet Union and consequent radical border changes, the question of what would constitute the unity of the resulting country would urgently present itself to its rulers – especially for generations used to there being such an idea in its Soviet version. They see that the global market economy into which Russia has plunged not only fails to provide such a notion but would tend to obscure it. Consequently, as Kaganskii has observed, there is a renewed demand for schemes and analogies for "a great united state power" (2004: 201). From an anthropological point of view, the normative character of such civilizational models is what makes them interesting.

This chapter will first describe some historical and contemporary models of Russia as a civilisation, along with Russian critiques of them that nevertheless keep the discussion within the civilisation paradigm. The last section of the paper discusses the implications of such ideas at the Russo-China border itself.

Changing ideas of Russia as a Eurasian country

In the wake of the defeat in the Crimean war in 1856 Russian governmental elites rejected the earlier Petrine vision of Russia as an essentially European country and turned their attention toward its Asian hinterlands beyond the Urals. Even before this, Russia had been envisioned as having a "manifest destiny", both to tame wild Siberian Nature and to civilise the stagnant Asian societies of the East. In the 1840s, Russia was already described as having a "particular mission among humanity… Russia is an entire Europe unto itself, a Europe that is intermediary between Europe and Asia, between Africa and America: a marvellous, unknown, and new country" (Balasoglo quoted in Bassin 1999: 86). Such were the grandiloquent terms in which "Russia" was discussed, but at the same time strategic and practical opportunities beckoned. General Murav'ev's campaigns to the east were impelled on the one hand by fear that Russia's Far Eastern interests were threatened by the imperialist European moves into China, and on the other by a desire to join with them in appropriating Chinese spoils. He fashioned a grand plan to overturn the border agreed in the seventeenth century and move decisively into the Amur region, eventually annexing this weakly-controlled and under-populated area in

1858 and 1860 (Bassin 1999: 116–19).[3] Not content with this success, military voices still spoke of a further expansion southwards into Manchuria. With explicit and warm reference made to the "manifest destiny" of the United States (to push westwards), the sentiment was "you will not hold back Russia's universal destiny" (Bassin 1999: 116, 218).

Such visions of Russia as rightfully present *in* Asia were not transformed into an explicit *Eurasianist* doctrine until the 1920s. The émigré authors of the movement put forward the idea that Russia is not a European country, nor an Asian one, but is "Eurasia", a separate civilisation located between the two. Russian nationalism was not distinct from, but aligned with, an imperial vision of the entire country. According to this theory, while the West was in decline, Russia, including its diverse native cultures, would experience an imminent rise and bear a civilising mission towards the East. The Eurasianists argued that the continent must develop its own independent, self-reliant, non-maritime economy; they believed that the Soviet Union could transform into this harmonious utopia, and that it was capable of evolving away from atheist and proletarian doctrines to become a national, Orthodox Christian country. A bridge between this movement, which had died away by the 1930s, and the Neo-Eurasianism that is influential today, was the work of Lev Gumilev (e.g. 2002 [1989]). His books began to be published in the 1980s and are still immensely popular.[4] Like the earlier Eurasianists, Gumilev also emphasised the "natural" determinism of continental geography. Abandoning the previous emphasis on Christianity, Gumilev extolled the strength of the great steppe empires that flourished (achieved "passionary" vigour) on the basis of their fitness with particular ecological-historical-geographical conjunctions.

Contemporary Neo-Eurasianism, whose most noted leader is Aleksandr Dugin, has taken these basic ideas, re-infused them with Russian nationalism and Orthodox Christian messianism,[5] and extrapolated them into contemporary global conditions. Dugin writes that Russia is God-chosen and destined (*obrechena*) to become the leader of a new

3 In 1858, at the conference at Aigun, Russia acquired the territory on the north bank of the Amur, and at the Treaty of Peking, signed in November 1860, exclusive rights over previously jointly held territory from the Ussuri east to the ocean (Bassin 1999: 218).

4 An indication of Gumilev's popularity among Central Asian leaders is that the Kazakh president Nursultan Nazarbaev ordered the L. N. Gumilev Eurasian University to be built opposite his palace in the new capital, Astana.

5 Neo-Eurasians have resurrected the idea that Russia is the "Third Rome", or successor to the Roman and Byzantine empires (Sidorov 2006).

planetary (Eurasian) alternative to the Western version of global relations: unipolar globalism (Dugin 2002: 13; see also Bassin 2008: 294). The idea of Empire (*Imperiya*) is central to Eurasia and the Russian people who "in their essence *are* the empire-building process, the willful geo-political factor in creating the State of the Absolute Idea" (Dugin 2004: 348–49). Dugin's geo-political vision, Bassin argues, diverges from the prewar versions of Eurasianism, since its principle is opposition to the global project of the United States after the Cold War. One of its early, more extreme, forms envisages a burst to the South, i.e. beyond the former Soviet borders, to assure the "natural-historical line of development and preservation of the territorial integrity of Russia" (Zhirinovskii 1993: blurb), while Dugin has rhetorically sought to rally the "brotherly" people of the Eurasian *landed* continent struggling against the hegemony of the *sea-born* hegemony of the Atlantic powers (Dugin 2004: 422–33). Neo-Eurasianism must be seen as a strategic response to the *post-Soviet* political environment (Bassin 2008: 283–85).

At the same time, there are strains in Neo-Eurasianism that return to certain themes of the nineteenth century: the civilising mission, the "organic" harmony that melds together the diverse peoples of Russia, the anti-mercantilism, the idea that Russia must flourish in a different, spiritually pure way. Such views have influential contemporary proponents, such as Mikhail Titarenko, director of the Institute of Far Eastern Studies, who writes that Eurasianism espouses "the principles of collectiveness (*sobornost'*), interdependence, mutual aid, co-operation of individuals and peoples, dialogue based on equal rights, of co-development, of harmony and of mutual complementarities in the relations between the civilisations and peoples of Russia, with a united common historic destiny" (Titarenko 1998: 27). This vision is implicitly opposed to the rationalist, competitive, individualistic zone of "the West" and its eastern flank is bounded by the discursive void of the other zone that is alien, China.[6]

It is not difficult to see, at a very basic level, why such a doctrine must assign great – but one-sided – importance to borders. If "geography is the fate of Russia" (Dugin 2004: 272), if "Eurasia" is defined first of all by what it is not (that is not "the West" and not "Asia") and it is conceived as a unitary, autarchic civilisation, then its external contours are *constitutional*

6 I have been unable to find a reference to China in the 507 pages of Dugin's volume outlining his geo-political strategy except as an un-named "zone of strategic interest" to both the Eurasian and the Pacific Ocean belts (2004: 181).

in what "Eurasia" is. Let us now, however, look at some Russian critiques of the idea to gain some further insights into how borders are conceived in a broader civilisational analysis.

Russia as a "border civilisation"

Accepting Russia's interstitial Eurasian position, though not the Eurasianist doctrine, some writers have argued that the whole of Russia is a border (*pogranichnyi*) type of civilisation (Shemyakin and Shemyakina 2004). Such a civilisation, balancing itself between alien "barbaric" others, manifests the restlessness of borders. Being defined primarily by the in-betweenness of its position, it accords priority to natural conditions and to maintaining the wide spaces of its realm. Because of its interstitial character, this civilisation has a constant tendency to extend, to overstep the mark, or more generally to excess. Consisting internally of countless varied elements, a "border civilization" is its own world, but one that is intrinsically heterogeneous and allows a greater role to chaos than other kinds of polity. The influential conservative thinker Il'in has indeed written that Russia is a whole cosmos – and not just a cosmos but also chaos – a "chaocosmos" (1997: 60).

In such an imaginary, there is no monolithic culture that penetrates throughout the entirety of society. Rather, as Shemyakin and Shemyakina write, the principle of border civilisation is multiplicity and the coexistence of different ways of resolving existential problems (2004: 36). Nevertheless, despite the lack of a monolithic culture or stylistic unity, Russia – albeit from different standpoints – has always seen a search for absolute good. The content of transcendental ideals may have changed through history, but the tendency to value them extraordinarily highly and to attempt to put them into practice in daily life is a constant. This has resulted in repeated attempts to broaden the sphere of the sacred and to impose liturgical time on events. With this attitude comes a corresponding lack of attention to the profane sphere of Russian life (2004: 40–41). The rest of the world, not partaking of the same holy goals, is seen as antagonistic, and self-defence against external materiality-profanity is therefore a constant preoccupation (2004: 56–57). As this chapter will show, the notion of sacred space was to become important on the Russian-Chinese border.

Russia is not only itself a "border civilisation" but also has its own frontiers, where the "chaotic" combination of restlessness, expansion and defensiveness appears even more strongly. Shemyakin and Shemyakina point to the contradictions this has engendered, for example in the case

of the Cossacks (2004: 59–60). Initially made up of rebels and runaways, they were held to manifest the ancient Russian sacred values of wilful liberty (*volya*), autonomy, and freedom without limits. It was Cossacks who launched the initial forays into Siberia and later into Manchurian lands. Indeed, they became crucially important frontiersmen along most of Russia's most precarious borders. As soon as the border with China was demarcated they established landed settlements and communities along the frontier and became its guards. From having initially set out as barely controllable freebooters, they transformed, symbolically and in practice, into a closed hereditary estate and one of the most reliable supports of the autocratic state – a point to which I shall return.

Critique of Neo-Eurasianism

Many sober Russian observers take civilisational analysis seriously because they realise the influential role it plays in political attitudes, and they are therefore all the more anxious to point out its contradictions and defects. Kaganskii (2004), for example, castigates Neo-Eurasianism for sanctioning messianistic, anti-Western, and essentialist attitudes. He writes that the concept of Eurasia proposes a macro-region that because of its vast size and variation is suitable for autarchy. But this is an idea of self-determination through space, by the occupation of territories and places, and, whatever the proclamations, in fact does not establish the values of a civilization realised through history (thus Gumilev's promotion of the Mongolian Empire as a Eurasian prototype for Russia is, in Kaganskii's view, pure nonsense, since the two are quite different in structure and culture, 2004: 205). Preoccupation with extent goes with lack of attention to the *content* of Eurasia, the reality of its internal complexity and diversity of parts. For the Neo-Eurasianists it is enough to hold that great size indicates the greatness of the state. Eurasian space is sacralised and given a mythic vertical (an allusion to a magical hierarchy of power). But Eurasia is actually manifest only horizontally, that is again extensively (2004: 206).

Kaganskii maintains that this spatial kind of self-definition, given fundamentally by the position of Eurasia, and therefore by what is not Russia, is quite different from ideas found in either the main European nations or in China. There, countries define themselves positively, by their ideals, achievements and special values, and space does not play such an important role. China as the Middle Kingdom never sees itself as "not India", for example; and its relation to the people of the steppes is one

of bearing a coherent civilisation to a hazy barbarian periphery. In other words, the centre in the Chinese case, does not define itself in space; rather it defines space (2004: 206).

The Neo-Eurasian vision, by contrast, insists on the *naturalness* of Russian borders. Not only is this a delusion, Kaganskii writes, which ignores the history of border indefiniteness and changeability,[7] but it becomes a mythology based on unacknowledged contradictions: for the theory proposes absolute laws of the spatial rightness of states but simultaneously holds that it (Eurasia) is higher than and supersedes such laws when they are applied to any other region than itself. Finally, Kaganskii observes, if we ask ourselves the question "What type of space does [Eurasianist] Eurasia correspond to?" the answer has to be cartographic space. This is a simple representation of contours and colours on a map, like a schoolroom map, or one that may indeed hang on the walls of prominent politicians or appear as background for television programmes (2004: 213), and all that the Eurasianists add to the schoolroom version is a notion of natural global zonality, on which rests their geo-political strategy (2004: 209–12).[8]

We cannot say, Kaganskii writes, whether such maps are ever used as working documents, or whether they are just "mental maps" – in all probability the latter. Nevertheless, the mental freeing of Russia from Empire has not led to construction of a non-imperial Russia. The systematic imaginative overriding of "cultural" spaces, such as demographic, land-use, ethnic, confessional, linguistic, etc. spaces, by a "natural" one, has facilitated confusion over whether what is represented is Russia as an Eternal Empire or Russia itself. It is to this confusion that the present political system corresponds, with its mono-centrism and stratification, rent-resource economic orientation, the low role given to provinces and the high importance given to external and internal boundaries (2004: 211–13).

The salience of civilisational perspectives for the Russia-China border

The ideological aspect of the Russian-Chinese border can be related to nationalism, or in this case to the conflation of the nation-state with

7 Kaganskii's critique on this point would find support in Zatsepine's study of the Amur River, which highlights the shifting and secretive character of even this, seemingly most obvious, dividing line (Zatsepine 2007).

8 Kaganskii observes that these maps, which ignore alternative projections that would reduce the size of Russia, are immediately understandable to people with Soviet education, but difficult to recognise for people brought up in other systems (2004: 211).

the post-empire. As John Dunn (2011 n.d.) has pointed out, "the two primary presences of nationalism in contemporary political life, each with protracted pasts, are as strategies for political leaders (incumbent or aspirant), and as more diffuse imaginative susceptibility to such strategies, dispersed to varying degrees across populations". There is a large literature on the influence of Eurasianism on the foreign policy of Russia's current leaders – significant according to some (Berman 2001; Sidorov 2006), negligible according to others (Schmidt 2005; Leonard 2010), and relevant primarily as a factual geography that underpins Russia's legitimate role in East Asia affairs for yet other writers (Rangsimaporn 2006).[9] I would point out only that both of Dunn's two locales for nationalism, i.e. not only among political leaders, are pertinent in our case, for contemporary Russia combines autocracy with a version of electoral democracy in what Henry Hale has called a "hybrid regime". In such a regime, public opinion, ratings and more generally the "popularity" of leaders has an important and distinctive role (Hale 2010: 35). Thus the fact that Putin has courted Eurasianist support among dispersed domestic audiences (electorates), while eschewing them in international arenas, is relevant.[10] If we are to look for *where* in Russian society the more strident versions of Eurasianism are popular, it seems that two locales are especially prominent: first among the military and security apparatuses (Rangsimaporn 2010: 382), and secondly among Asian minority intellectuals (Humphrey 2002). The former may be concerned with Russia's Great Power status and the latter with something quite different, enhanced attention to non-Russian nationalities and the promise of harmonious relations. But in either case, these two very different social constituencies relate to borders, since both of these social groups are key actors in frontier zones.

With the end of the Cold War and the healing of the Sino-Soviet split, the frontier with China has ceased to be a place of overt confrontation. On political and national security issues Russian relations with China seem excellent. Leaders meet congenially, and in July 2001 Presidents Jiang Zemin and Vladimir Putin signed a joint statement of friendship and cooperation over a wide range of issues. The treaty included recognition of the legitimacy of current borders and ratification of earlier reductions

9 Rangsimaporn points out that different nuances in the meaning of Eurasianism are reflected in Russian vocabulary. The pragmatic, factual sense is employed in official communications, using *Evroaziatskaya* to describe the country, while *Evraziiskaya* is employed by Neo-Eurasianists and by some of the civilization analysts (2010: 373).

10 For example, Putin publicly praised Gumilev at the celebration of the city of Kazan's one thousandth anniversary in 2005 (Shlapentokh 2005).

on troop numbers at the frontier. Through the relatively small number of crossing points, massive trade now flows in either direction (Davis 2003: 88–92). Today, Russian and Chinese border guards carry out joint training exercises to combat terrorist incursions, illegal migration, gun and drug running, smuggling and poaching.

Nevertheless, the Russian side of the border is still massively securitised. Adjacent to the border itself, and along its length, there is a restricted zone, to which access is limited to citizens having special passes issued by the Federal Security Service (FSB). This strip has varied in breadth through the years, sometimes limited to 5km, but sometimes and in some places expanded to include villages and well-used roads. The Border Guard Service argues for it to be widened, local inhabitants object to the inconvenience.[11]

It is along this strip of land, which is on the one hand managed centrally from the border directorate of the FSB in Moscow and on the other subject to all kinds of local practice and interventions that ideologies lay their hand, and the complex relation between the centre and the periphery becomes evident. The view of Russia as a civilisation extending its order to the brink of the wild terrain of "the other" appears, for example, in the outputs of the contemporary border guards (who belong to a Federal institution and are not necessarily local people). For example, posted on YouTube is a video that seems to be a home-made effort by the border guards: starting with an image of a frontier post against a mountain sunset, with the title "The Russian border is sacred and inviolable", it proceeds to a guards' song along with scenes of resolute military-type activity in barren landscapes. The song's repeated refrain is "The border strip eternally was and will be" and the verses frequently evoke the longing to return "home to Russia" – as though this home is indeed a civilization away from these wild parts.[12]

Inside and near to the restricted zone are many Cossack settlements, formerly the "stations" (*stanitsa*) of the Transbaikal, Chita, Amur and Ussuriisk regiments. In 1916, the Cossack population of the Transbaikal Cossack Host numbered 265,000 people, 14,500 of which served in the military.

During the Soviet period, the Cossacks were disbanded and repressed – for many of them had opposed the communists during the Civil War – and their border guard duties were taken over by the NKVD,

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11 See http://chekist.ru/article/1292. Sept-Oct 2006 (accessed 4.11.2010).

12 In Russian "The border strip eternally was and will be" reads as *"Pogrannichnaya polosa vechno byla i budet"*.

later KGB-FSB. However, in post-Soviet times, Yeltsin encouraged the revival of the Cossacks and a "brotherhood" (*zemyachestvo*) was formed among the some 6.5 million self-proclaimed Cossacks scattered in across the border regions of the Russian Federation (Galeotti 1995: 55–56). In the turbulent 1990s, Russia's leaders turned to the Cossacks for internal and external security, permitting local administrations to hire them as vigilantes and the FSB to recruit them alongside the border guards and customs officials in frontier duties (Davis 2003: 114).[13] Today, Cossacks, many of whom are still part-time soldiers, patrol the border areas close to their villages. In 2006, a conference organised by the FSB in Ulan-Ude called on the rights and duties of local militias, patrols and Cossack units to be enhanced and regularised. All of this indicates recognition by the state of the need to involve the inhabitants of the frontier region not only in making the border secure but also in participating in the work of the state. As the FSB official stated at the conference, "We need to carry out wide explanatory work among the local population and return to the principle, 'the border defends the whole people'".[14]

The Cossacks have become a significant paramilitary, but also social and cultural, force along the Russian border with China, and they are particularly relevant to this paper for two reasons. First, they see Cossack rejuvenation as an integral part of the overall rejuvenation of Russia and they strongly support the state and the territorial integrity of Russia (Skinner 1994: 1019). Second, because their numbers grew to include non-Russians during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries – around 10 per cent of the Transbaikal Cossacks are Buryats and Evenks – they embody the mixed ethnic heritage of the frontier regions and the very idea of "Eurasia". The existence of such a rejuvenated formation all along the border – hyper-loyal to the Russian political amalgam of nation and post-imperial federation – constitutes an

13 Davis writes that there are local militias in many regions of the Russian Far East, used mainly in response to rising crime rates and ineffectual, corrupt police (2002: 114–5). However, Cossacks themselves are not infrequently involved in crime and racketeering (Galeotti 1995: 58). In the early 1990s, Cossack units acquired a centralised main directorate. For border duties they are supplied with pay and weapons by whatever force employs them: the Border Guards, Ministry of Defence, municipal militias, or the Ministry of Emergencies (Davis 2002: 115).

14 According to the organisers of the conference, the need for extra vigilance was the consequence of illegal trade in arms, military supplies, drugs and psychotropic substances, the rise of illegal migration, theft of natural resources, and introduction of infectious diseases. Available at: http://chekist.ru/article/1292. Sept-Oct 2006 (accessed 4.11.2010).

important element in making it the kind of place it is.

The Buryat and Evenk Cossacks cannot totally ignore that they are not Russian, if only because they have a different appearance, but they are attached to the consolidated formation of Cossacks of Russia as a whole, which assimilated other nationalities in different border regions. In this way they separate themselves from the great majority of Buryats and Evenks who are of course not Cossacks (and have a long history of resenting the latter for their advantageous land settlements and wealth derived from customs duties at the border). The vision of "Eurasia" espoused by Buryat intellectuals is accordingly quite different from the Russian version popular among the re-emerged Cossacks. In the versions of indigenous elites, the implicit centre of the formation is no longer Moscow but shifted to their own territory, be that Kalmykia, the Altai, or the Baikal region (Humphrey 2002). The mystic aspect of "Eurasia", which in Dugin's version refers to a "world view" and a "spiritual movement" (2004: 185), is transmogrified into indigenous ancestral values of respecting/worshipping nature. The emphasis on the border shrinks away, and instead authors highlight the spreading, "super-ethnic" character of the great steppe empires along with their contemporary cultural heritage as a specific kind of ethics derived from living in a broad geographic-ecological zone (e.g. Urbanaeva 1994).

Let me return however to the views centred on the idea of "Russia". Since the Cossack revival is based on the historic role of the ethnically Slav freebooters in first conquering and then defending the border, the contemporary emphasis falls on recalling Tsarist-era social formations, values and traditions. The social, cultural and moral aspects are as important to them as the military, since it is in this way that the Cossacks assert their identity and pride in a specific way of life. Little is known of how the Buryat and Evenk members adapt to this situation.[15] Consultation of genealogies, tailors to make the correct uniforms, training in use of sabres and riding skills, well-rehearsed choirs, the swearing of oaths to serve the Fatherland, have sprung to life since the 1990s. The admission of new members is generally conducted by an Orthodox priest in a church, with each new recruit kissing the Gospel and the Cross (Skinner 1994: 1020–22).

15 It seems that there may exist a Transbaikal Cossack identity based on the experience of repression, punishment and forced dispersal under the Soviet regime. Such former Cossack families in Transbaikalia now refer to themselves in quasi-ethnic fashion as the Guran. But this half-hidden grouping is different from the public revival of Cossack institutions, which is heavily dominated by Russian cultural elements (Ivan Peshkov, personal communication).

It is in keeping with this trend across Russia that the Transbaikal Cossacks engage in ritual activities on the border with China. With this we return to the theme of sacred space and Christian civilisation that is so prominent in some versions of Neo-Eurasianism.

For the past few years, Cossack representatives have taken young people on a 1,000 km annual voyage along the rivers that form much of the border, the Shinka, Ingoda and Amur, to commemorate the exploits of the seventeenth century. They float down the rivers in self-made rafts, as did their ancestors, sometimes taking a priest aboard, sometimes mounting an antique cannon in the prow. They sing nostalgic songs and receive instruction in the moral ideals (honour, integrity) of the Cossack way of life. Along the way, they call in for religious services at local churches. The leader is quoted as saying earlier this year (2010), "in Russia there has accumulated much impurity (*mnogo nechisti*), which wants to forget the feats of the ancestors. But no way will they succeed".[16] The journey is called *pokhod* (campaign, march, crusade), which suggests that it is envisaged not just as a memorial but also as a contemporary enactment of what the border means – re-establishing Russia as a zone of purity demarcated by a militantly defended line. Meanwhile, the Chinese bank of the river is ignored.

The specifically Christian aspect of Cossack border imagination can be seen from further activities: the discovery, digging up and reburial with Orthodox rites, of the remains of the ancestors killed by Manchu forces in the seventeenth century at the fortress of Albazin on the Amur River. What is the history that the contemporary Cossacks are so determined to remember (if only selectively)? During the 1650s the Russian adventurers had built fortresses from which they induced the indigenous people – in this case Dahurs (Daurs), Buryats and Tungus (Evenki) – to pay tribute to the Tsar; at the same time they lived off the food supplies appropriated from Dahur farmers. The Manchus, who had recently come to power in Beijing, received complaints from the Dahurs. As a result, the Manchus allowed most of the Dahur to resettle on the River Nonni, well away from the Russians, causing near starvation to the conquerors of Albazin. Then, with fierce fighting, Albazin went back and forth between the Russians and the Manchus, being attacked, blockaded and razed twice, until the Treaty of Nerchinsk in 1689 settled its fate. According to the border treaty, the entire

16 *'V Rossii razvelos' mnogo nechisti, kotoraya khochet zabyt' podvigi pradedov. No u nikh ni cherta ne poluchit'sya'*, quoted in http://portamur.ru/news/detail/64218.

Amur basin was to revert to Chinese suzerainty. Albazin was levelled to the ground and the remaining sixty-six Cossacks marched for Nerchinsk, where they arrived in 1690 (Serebrennikov 1997 [1922]).

In the nineteenth century, as mentioned earlier, the north bank of the Amur was retaken by Murav'yev. It is now identified unquestioningly as Russian territory, and the site of Albazin (today a Russian village) has been opened for archaeological investigation. It is the religious aspect of all this that is highlighted by the contemporary Cossacks, and even here it is only certain aspects of the story that are told. For, interestingly, some of the Albazin ancestors had given themselves up to the Manchus during the wars, while others had been captured, and these Russians being respected for their fighting qualities were taken to Beijing to form a small privileged regiment. Some of their descendants remained Russian Orthodox Christians well into the twentieth century (Serebrennikov 1997 [1922]). However, Cossack publicity in Russia does not recall this piquant episode. Rather, it focuses on the supposition that the Cossacks killed defending Albazin, had been buried, with wives and children, without Christian rites, although each body wore an Orthodox cross.[17] Christian reburial has recently been called for. The congregations of "pilgrims" travelled to the reburial rites from many regions, stood all night, and then participated in the funeral service, which lasted most of the following day. The border, along the river-bank, has been marked in several places by a Christian cross.

Conclusion

Let me return now to the point about the intermeshing of metropolitan and local constructions of the border made at the beginning of this paper. Today, Moscow and Beijing conduct high-level agreements on the huge two-way trade between the two countries. In the contemporary global context, the Cossack rites could seem merely a local eccentricity, an archaic defiance, a touching but pointless throwback; and the Cossack revival in general is now regarded with some caution by Moscow for its potential to disturb matters on the borders.[18] In fact something similar could be said, at least regarding the apparent distance between metropolitan and frontier

17 http://portamur.ru/news/detail/64218

18 Cossacks are present in, or have claims to, many volatile and disputed regions of the former Soviet Union, such as Moldova, northern Kazakhstan, and the north Caucasus, resulting in a complex relationship with the Russian state (Galeotti 1995: 56).

attitudes, about Cossack activities in the seventeenth century. Tsar Alexei Mikhailovich, in response to a note conveying Chinese displeasure at Cossack encroachments, went so far as to plead ignorance to the Manchus that his Cossacks had ventured into this region, adding "not knowing that the Daurian lands are part of your Dominion".[19] Bassin concludes that the Russians made it quite clear during the Nerchinsk negotiations in 1689 that they were "if not anxious in any event entirely willing to sacrifice claims to the Amur valley if by so doing they could facilitate progress towards a formal trade agreement with China" (Bassin 1999: 23). This seems like a pragmatism not so far removed from the benign high-level treaties of the 1990–2000s and the grand scheme of mutually beneficial rapprochement with China.

However, running counter to this is the intense urge for national self-definition, which surfaces openly in Neo-Eurasianism and other conservative political movements. By no means all Russian citizens share these preoccupations, but if they are distributed unevenly among the population – concentrating especially in the military and security services – then it is no surprise to find them expressed most openly and unblushingly by the Border Guards and by some of the Cossacks living along the frontier.

Local sensibilities, like those of the Border Guards and the Cossacks, and many others that I have not been able to describe, contribute to the complex assemblages of which borders are made. In the ethnography I have described here, the Cossack contributions have their own specific form, which I think can be related to the notion of Russia as "Eurasia". The Christian re-burial rites and especially the *pokhod* – the voyage along the length of the "natural" border without crossing it or addressing any action towards the "other side" – reflect the spatio-geographical character of "Eurasia" and the way it is imagined not as a bridge/gateway between East and West but as an autarchic spiritual bulwark between the two.

Emotional investments in borders are not unique to Russia – one only has to think of the song "The White Cliffs of Dover", popular ever since the Second World War, with its accompanying slogan on the video on YouTube – "They stand as a symbol of indomitable British pride", all of which is associated today with a particular social environment: ex-service

19 *Russko-kitaiskoe otnoshenya*, 1, p. 299, quoted in Bassin (1999: 23)

associations, conservative fetes, fly-pasts and show-biz performances. More generally and comparatively, what becomes interesting is the social distribution of these susceptibilities to nationalism, the variety of relations they may enter with governments (encouragement, disjunction, repudiation, covert support, etc.), and the way that their symbols tend to pile onto borders.