

Ethnic Ghettos and Transcultural Processes in a Globalised City

New Research on Harbin

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Harbin was founded in 1898 by the Russians along the tracks of the Chinese Eastern Railway, an extension of the Trans-Siberian railway towards Vladivostok. In just a few decades it developed rapidly into a globalised city in the middle of so-called Manchuria, a semi-colonial region in northeast China. The articles in this special issue deal with the history of Harbin and Manchuria in the first half of the twentieth century, with one exception focusing rather on the aftermath of Harbin's history in the present day. The contributors focus in particular on transcultural processes, namely the interplay between the various ethnic groups that inhabited the city. Key concerns include voluntary or forced interaction and the transgression of boundaries between the different parts of Harbin society and the consequences of these transgressions. The articles convey an impression of how Harbin's varied communities dealt with ongoing political instability, language differences, cultural clashes, conflict resolution, and the local impact of global challenges.

Transcultural processes can be understood at the same time as a specific expression or result of worldwide entanglements. Interest in the phenomenon of globalisation, which has greatly increased in recent years, has also enriched our understanding of the significance of global interconnectedness and cultural processes of exchange in various historical contexts. "Globalisation" is thereby no longer only a central concept of modern social science; it also has established itself as an important concept in history and cultural studies—despite initial reservations on the part of historians.¹ In particular, areas such as the history of international trade, migration research, and the history of international relations can quite reasonably be analysed from the perspective of "globalisation" and thereby contribute to research on the history of globalisation.² A global perspective has also altered examination of the history of regional and local developments, not least in view of the study of colonial or imperial contexts. "Faraway" places and local processes at the periphery of empires no longer appear in the research as more or less the last links in a chain of diverse developments and events emanating from the centre, but instead meet with particular interest as cultural contact zones and crossroads, as they highlight in a special way the diversity, complexity, and multidimensionality of encounters and processes at the frontiers between cultures.

The city of Harbin in the first half of the twentieth century represented this kind

of cultural contact zone and intersection point between global and local developments, in which border-crossing and transcultural processes were an everyday occurrence, constantly undermining and challenging anew tendencies towards (ethnically or culturally motivated) disassociation and ghettoisation, where such were present. The cultural polymorphy of the region known as Manchuria in the West began with Han Chinese migration in the 1870s, continued with the Russian expansion into the Far East in the late nineteenth century, and was ensured by regional and global migration in the first half of the twentieth century. With the changing powers of the twentieth century—Russian, Chinese and Japanese—there arose a wide field of European-Asian interaction characterised by complex mutual influences.

As part of Russia's economic expansion in the Far East Harbin served as a railway depot and administrative centre of the Russian Chinese Eastern Railway.³ Inhabited by Chinese (both Manchu people and Han Chinese), Russians, Japanese, Jews, and Poles, as well as people of many other nationalities, Harbin grew into a vibrant border town among three empires—China, Russia, and Japan. As a result of its unique position, the city emerged in a nearly government-free space, on Chinese territory under the administration of the Russian Chinese Eastern Railway Company; until 1932 it was neither controlled nor ruled by the Russian Empire, the Soviet Union, or China.⁴ Harbin was a cosmopolitan city for much of its history until the Second World War. Furthermore, it was a strategic commercial and military base for all its rulers: first the Russians, then Chinese, and ultimately the Japanese, who took over the city in 1932. As the hub of the Chinese Eastern Railway, Harbin attracted a huge volume of regional and international trade that was unsurpassed by any other city in Northeast China for many years. Harbin was a boomtown, comparable in its growth rate to St. Petersburg or San Francisco during the Gold Rush.⁵ In 1903 Harbin had approximately 50,000 to 60,000 inhabitants. By 1912 this had grown to 75,000 inhabitants (among them 39,000 Russians and approximately 35,000 Chinese, along with another 25,000 in the adjoining Chinese settlement of Fujiadian). There were also 936 Japanese inhabitants and approximately six hundred persons of other nationalities, including French, Germans, Austrians, Turks, and Greeks.⁶ Around 1915, Harbin already had a population of 110,000 inhabitants, in the 1920s up to two hundred thousand, and around 1930 about three hundred thousand inhabitants; in 1937, when the formerly separated Fujiadian was already part of "great Harbin," the entire population was 457,980. Of these, 393,145 were listed as "Manchurians," as inhabitants of the newly announced Japanese puppet state Manchukuo, 26,347 as Japanese, 4,355 as Koreans, and 34,133 as foreign, basically White Russian emigrants from the Soviet Union.⁷ A large number of those fit for work were employed at the various plants and institutions of the Chinese Eastern Railway Company or were involved in trade and all kind of services. The population grew continuously, mainly due to migrants from Soviet Russia and different regions of China.

The manifold encounters between these Asian and European populations coincided with regional political shifts that helped to create a specific and extraordinary kind of global community in the city of Harbin. Therefore the cosmopolitan city of Harbin may best be described as a cultural "contact zone" and "border town," despite being located five hundred kilometres from the Chinese-Russian border.

Harbin occupied a border position not only because of its ethnic and cultural diversity, but also because of its politics and administration.

Since the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of constructing the Chinese Eastern Railway, this region of northeastern China attracted international attention. There is a considerable amount of academic writing on the Chinese, Russian, Soviet, Japanese, and other imperial histories of Manchuria.⁸ However, up to the present day various important aspects of the region's history and that of its major cities have largely been ignored by nationally-focused historiographies and scholars. Thus, in its first decades, Harbin research was shaped for the most part by approaches that told the history of the multicultural city from the respective national and cultural perspectives. Despite the high quality of individual studies, and an emphasis on multi-ethnicity, a picture of a city took shape that primarily was characterised by the existence of cultural borders and ethnic ghettos.⁹ From this viewpoint, researchers' frequent references to the international and cosmopolitan character of the city remained in essence superficial. No less problematic is the often-presented picture of general harmony in everyday life among the different ethnic groups and cultures in Harbin. This also needs to be reassessed.

For the most part, the historiography of Harbin still falls into the categories of Russian, Jewish, Chinese, and Japanese narratives. Comparative, transnational, or transcultural approaches are only now being established in Harbin research, albeit gradually and cautiously.¹⁰ It is only since the late 1990s, encouraged by the centennial anniversary of the town's foundation in 1998, that a broader international interest in Harbin can be observed—one that attempts to take into account or unite various perspectives on the history of the town.¹¹ This new interest has generated more sophisticated studies of Harbin that tackle new questions, the most important of which include the identity of emigrants, social problems, the city's religious and cultural life, and the interaction of single communities with other population groups in Harbin.¹² Western research in particular has now focused more intensively on the role of the Chinese community and Harbin's importance for Chinese national identity.¹³ Even though research on individual national and ethnic communities is already underway, there remain many unanswered questions about the interaction of local and global developments and about transcultural processes in the global city of Harbin.

This special issue on "Ethnic Ghettos and Transcultural Processes in a Globalised City—New Research on Harbin" emerged from discussions at a workshop of the Cluster of Excellence "Asia and Europe in a Global Context" at the University of Heidelberg that was held in April 2008. The four contributions here attempt to detect and characterise the links and fissures between local and global processes in Harbin, as well as the border-crossing processes among the cultures interacting in Harbin, by discussing selected topics, including language, trade, contact with epidemics, and historiography. The contributors study processes of exchange and conflict between Harbin's multiple ethnic and cultural communities between the city's foundation and the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949. Olga Bakich (Toronto) explores the use and function of Sino-Russian pidgin as a contact language between Chinese and Russian-speaking residents in Harbin. Frank Grüner (Heidelberg) focuses on bazaars and street trade as cultural contact zones and areas of conflict for different population groups in the city. Cornelia Knab

(Heidelberg) demonstrates how the Manchurian plague epidemic of 1910/11 challenged cooperation between Chinese and foreign powers in dealing with cross-border phenomena like the pneumonic plague. And, finally, James Carter (Philadelphia) analyses the ways in which Harbin's past has been and most likely will continue to be exploited for political and economic purposes in the future.

Hence, this publication aims to contribute to expanding knowledge about Harbin's history by offering a vision of interaction and transcultural processes between population groups that at least partly revises the image of a multicultural city consisting fore and foremost of ethnic ghettos.

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Notes

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- 1 Osterhammel, "Globalizations."
 - 2 Osterhammel and Petersson, *Geschichte der Globalisierung*, 16-20.
 - 3 See Bakich, "Origins of the Russian Community," 304-28; Elleman and Kotkin, *Manchurian Railways and the Opening of China*; Chang, *International Controversies*; Nilus, *Kitaiskaia Vostochnaia Zheleznaiia Doroga*; Quedstedt, "Matey" Imperialists?; Romanov, *Russia in Manchuria*; Urbansky, *Kolonialer Wettstreit*.
 - 4 For the history of Harbin, see among others Bakich, "A Russian City in China," 129-48; idem, "Charbin," 304-28; Carter, *Creating a Chinese Harbin*; Chiasson, *Administering the Colonizer*; Clausen and Thøgersen, *The Making of a Chinese City*; Taskina, *Russkii Kharbin*; Wolff, *To the Harbin Station*.
 - 5 Cf. Karlinsky, "Memoirs of Harbin," 284-90.
 - 6 See for this, U.S. Consulate, Harbin, China, May 24, 1912; Consular Posts: Harbin, Manchuria, China; Vol. 8: Dispatches sent to the Department of State; Vol. IV: 1912, 59: Reports on Commerce and Industries, 1911; Records of Foreign Service Posts, Record Group 84 (RG 84); National Archives at College Park, MD (NACP).
 - 7 See Bureau of Information Manchukuo State Council, *An Outline of the Manchukuo Empire*, 25-28.
 - 8 A few selected "classical" reference works and the most significant recent contributions are Ablova, *KVZhD i rossiiskaia emigratsiia v Kitae*; Chang, *International Controversies*; Chiasson, *Administering the Colonizer*; Clyde, *International Rivalries in Manchuria*; Elleman and Kotkin, *Manchurian Railways and the Opening of China*; Glatfelter, "Russia, the Soviet Union, and the Chinese Eastern Railway," 137-54; Kinnosuke, *Manchuria: A Survey*, in particular 48-139; Lattimore, *Manchuria: Cradle of Conflict*; Masafumi, "The China-Russia-Japan Military Balance," 1283-1311; Tamanoi, *Crossed Histories*; Urbansky, *Kolonialer Wettstreit*; Wolff, *To the Harbin Station*.
 - 9 See Aurilene, *Rossiiskaia Diaspora b Kitae (1920-1950)*; Melikhov, *Rossiiskaia emigratsiia v Kitae*; idem, *Belyi Kharbin*; Kradin, *Kharbin - Russkaia Atlantida*; Taskina, *Russkii Kharbin*.
 - 10 See for this the following report on Harbin research; Gamsa, "Harbin in Comparative Perspective," 136-49.
 - 11 Lahusen, "A Place Called Harbin," 400-10; see also idem, *Harbin. Histoire, mémoire et différence*; idem, "Dr. Fu Manchu in Harbin," 143-62; idem, "Remembering China," 253-68.
 - 12 Bakich, "Émigré Identity," 51-73; idem, "Charbin"; Carter, "A Tale of Two Temples," 97-115; Fogel, "The Japanese and the Jews," 88-108; Meyer, "Garden of Grand Vision," 327-52.
 - 13 Clausen and Thøgersen, *The Making of a Chinese City*; Carter, *Creating a Chinese Harbin*; idem, "Struggle for the Soul of a City," 91-116; Chiasson, *Administering the Colonizer*.