

Beyond the Amur
Frontier Encounters
between China and Russia,
1850–1930

VICTOR ZATSEPINE



UBC Press • Vancouver • Toronto

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ISBN 9780774834094 (hardback)

ISBN 9780774834117 (pdf)

ISBN 9780774834124 (epub)

ISBN 9780774834131 (mobi)

Cataloguing-in-publication data for this book is available from Library and Archives Canada.

UBC Press gratefully acknowledges the financial support for our publishing program of the Government of Canada (through the Canada Book Fund) and the British Columbia Arts Council.

This book has been published with the help of the University of British Columbia through the K.D. Srivastava Fund.

Set in Garamond by Marquis Interscript

Copy editor: Matthew Kudelka

Indexer: Sergey Lobachev

Cover design: George Kirkpatrick

UBC Press

The University of British Columbia

2029 West Mall

Vancouver, BC V6T 1Z2

www.ubcpres.ca

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Preface

When the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, vibrant cross-border trade between Russia and China emerged. In 1993, as a Russian exchange student living in China, I visited Heihe, a bordertown in Heilongjiang Province, where restless peddlers, Chinese and Russian, bargained in crowded markets and shipped cheap Chinese goods in oversized bags across the Amur River, an international border. People communicated with the help of electronic calculators and basic dictionaries. It was a chaotic place, where alcohol was cheap and trade negotiations were accompanied by drinking, shouting, and laughter. This grassroots border trade created an atmosphere of two overlapping cultures, united by economic interest and renewed curiosity about each other after several decades of ideological standoff between China and the Soviet Union. At the time, a local Chinese trader revealed to me that the Heihe municipal government hoped to turn this town into the Hong Kong of northeastern China. Returning a decade later, I did not see the same energy and optimism on the part of local traders. Cross-border trade continued, but in a more orderly fashion. Heihe had become a boom town, its best hotel complete with a revolving restaurant on the top, overlooking the underdeveloped Russian town of Blagoveshchensk across the Amur.

The Amur River – Амур in Russian, Heilongjiang (Black Dragon River) in Chinese – separates not only two cities but also two states and two distinct cultures, European and Asian. No international bridge has been built across this river, despite official plans to foster cross-border trade. The river flows from the mountains and plains of northeastern

China and Mongolia, marking the Chinese–Russian border along much of its course, before flowing through Siberia to the Sea of Okhotsk, beyond which lies the Pacific Ocean. In Heihe and Blagoveshchensk, local authorities use separate ferries for Chinese and Russians, and border guard vessels occasionally patrol the river. Winter crossings are less regulated, as people can simply walk from one shore to the other. The frozen river serves as a convenient highway.

The river is a silent witness to this region's past. The two countries disagree on the region's shared history: a visit to local museums in 2004 revealed contrasting official interpretations of the Amur frontier region's history. The Chinese Historical Museum in Aigun, an old Manchu outpost near Heihe, tells a story of Russian imperialist conquest of the lands north of the Amur. In 1858 and 1860, Russia annexed the Amur Basin and the Ussuri region under the terms of the Aigun and Peking Treaties. The Amur River became part of the world's longest border. The river acquired strategic significance: for Russia, as a route to the Pacific, and for the Qing state, as a key to the river system of Manchuria. The Chinese museum focuses on the military dimension of Russian expansionism, the seizure of Qing territory, and the destruction of Manchu settlements on the Amur. Another permanent exhibition in this museum is devoted to the tragic events of the Blagoveshchensk Massacre (1900), when Russian Cossacks killed several thousand Chinese civilians and invaded Manchuria. Life-size dioramas display in graphic detail the brutal methods used by the Russian forces to kill innocent Chinese civilians. The museum, as well as the town of Aigun, is closed to Russian visitors. Designed for the patriotic education of a domestic audience, this museum reminds the Chinese people of China's humiliations at the hands of Imperial Russia. Officially, China and Russia are now two friendly nations: Russian tourists and traders are welcome guests in Heihe. By allowing Russians into Heihe but blocking their access to Aigun, local Chinese authorities separate the past from the present and separate trade from potentially harmful historical narratives.

On the Russian side, the Blagoveshchensk Museum of Local History mentions the massacre of 1900 only briefly. Instead, it tells the story of Imperial Russia's centuries-old interest in geographic discoveries in the Russian Far East. It singles out 1689 as the year that Qing forces drove Russian Cossacks out of the Amur Basin, forcing Russia to sign the Treaty of Nerchinsk and preventing its further advance in this region. A panoramic oil painting captures an armed clash between Qing and Russian troops. It presents Manchu soldiers with evil faces, while Russian Cossacks look

like heroic victims and carry Russian Orthodox icons. Local tour guides describe 1858 as the year that Count Nikolai Nikolaevich Murav'ev, governor of Eastern Siberia (1847–61), rightfully returned empty lands north of the Amur to Russia. The museum glorifies the Russian occupation of the region. An enormous portrait of a noble-looking Count Murav'ev hangs not far from the painting depicting Russian losses in the Amur in 1689, as a tribute to the man who gained new territories for Russia. All over the Russian Far East, Murav'ev is revered as a symbol of Russia's imperial glory, as a true patriot and a national hero. A peninsula in the Russian Far East is named after him.

These local museums reduce the past of the Amur frontier region to several episodes of rivalry between imperial states, minimizing the role played by the local people and by developments on the ground. Each empire presents the region as marginal, with no significant social history of its own. Official historical writings about this region in Russia and in the People's Republic of China are politically charged. Each country stands by its own interpretation of Sino-Russian cross-border relations during the late nineteenth century; both use the past to justify their present-day concerns about a shared border. Not content with official historical narratives, which tend to focus on provincial officials and the patriotism of the local people who sacrificed themselves in the face of foreign aggression, this study illuminates the shared local history of the Russian Far East and Manchuria, analyzing that history from social, economic, and cultural viewpoints. This book is the culmination of years of reassessing the history of the Amur River.

Introduction

The Amur frontier region's geographic features, cultural diversity, and long history make it truly unique. Its scenery changes dramatically, from steppe to mountains, from wetlands to coniferous forests, and its eastern edge borders a sea dotted with islands. For millennia, the lands of the Amur River and its tributaries have been home to numerous indigenous peoples and distinct cultures, including the Xianbei, Mohe, Khitan, Tungus, Jurchen, Mongol, Korean, and Chinese. Before the Mongol Conquest in the thirteenth century, this region was home at times to great ancient states and dynasties such as the Koguryo, Parhae (Bohai), Liao, and Jin, some of which ruled parts of China. The region was conquered by Chinese dynasties and finally claimed by the Great Qing Dynasty (1644–1911), whose Manchu rulers arose from the Jurchen tribes who lived in the forests between the Sungari (Songhua) and Yalu rivers. Beginning in the mid-nineteenth century, Imperial Russia expanded into the Amur frontier region, and this pressured the Qing government to open these lands to Chinese agricultural settlement. Since then, the region has seen unprecedented economic development, including burgeoning trade, new towns, railways, and commercial agriculture. It has also become a focus of domestic and international rivalries and even military conflicts that have changed the course of Russian and East Asian history.

I use the terms “Amur frontier region,” “Amur frontier,” “Amur River Basin,” or simply “Amur” to describe the lands reached by the Amur River and its tributaries. This territory extends from the Manchurian Plain in the south to the Stanovoi Mountains in the north, and from

the northeastern edge of the Mongolian Steppe to the shores of the Sea of Japan and the Sea of Okhotsk, covering an area larger than France, Germany, and Spain combined. Until 1858, this land was part of the Qing Empire, with the northern border loosely defined along the Stanovoi Mountains. Parts of this geographic area overlap with the political and administrative entities known as Manchuria,¹ Trans-Baikal, Eastern Siberia, and the Russian Far East.

“Manchuria” refers to the administrative region north of the Shanhai Guan, or the Shanhai Pass of the Great Wall, and south of the Qing-Russian border as defined by the Nerchinsk Treaty of 1689, from which the Qing claimed its authority in the region. Manchuria borders traditional eastern Mongolian land, which was partly incorporated by the Qing into the Manchu Banner administration. This region was ruled by the Qing military administration from garrison towns, of which Mukden and Qiqiha’er were the largest. In 1907, Manchuria became a fixed administrative region comprising three provinces (Dongsansheng), with provincial centres in Qiqiha’er, Jilin and Fengtian.

The Russian Far East (Dal’nii Vostok in Russian) did not have fixed boundaries and overlapped with different parts of eastern and northeastern Siberia, stretching to the North Pacific, until 1884, when the new Priamur Governor-Generalship was established. Since then, the Russian Far East has been a fixed territorial/administrative unit composed of several *oblast* and *krai*, or provinces. Two of these provinces, Amur and Maritime (Primorskii), have boundaries with China. Together, they are referred to as Priamur’e or Priamurskii region. The Russian Far East, under different names and internal territorial and administrative divisions, survived well in the 1930s. From the mid-1920s until the collapse of the Soviet Union, it was referred to as the Soviet Far East.

This book treats the Amur frontier region as a distinct place shaped by geography, climate, migration, and trade, where local interests and developments did not always align with state-sponsored expansion initiatives. It analyzes the Amur River Basin as a place, a local experience, and an imperial policy, all three bound in a complex triangular relationship that does not easily fit any preconceived formula, because each factor interacted with the others and changed over time. Geography and climate influenced human activities in the region, affecting local trade and expansion initiatives. The region’s local societies emerged as a result of encounters between the indigenous people and the newcomers, encounters that were strongly shaped by the challenges of climate and geography. In particular,

alliances and rivalries revolved around access to natural resources. When Imperial Russia and the Qing dynasty arrived in this region in their quest for resources, their efforts were often impeded by insufficient knowledge and overconfidence in their abilities.

The natural features of Amur frontier region greatly influenced human activities there. My identification of the Amur River system as a binding factor holding together this frontier region recognizes how the region's varied topography influenced human activity along this river. Settlement initiatives, railway building, economic expansion, urban development, and war all transformed the lives of local people, but that change was distributed unevenly, and many remote parts of this region remained untouched by modern civilization. In the twentieth century, the collapse of empires in China and Russia transformed the central and regional governments as well as the political regimes and social networks in this frontier region.

Geography and climate left a permanent mark on local society. Fertile land and rich natural resources, such as minerals and furs, made it an inviting place for private and state interests. But at the same time, the harsh climate, dense forests, mountainous terrain, long distances, and bad roads made access to this region difficult. As a result, most parts of this region remained isolated and sparsely settled. Nevertheless, the vast river system provided transportation routes connecting different parts of the region. That system had long served as a natural highway for the various indigenous groups, and newcomers learned to use it as well.

On a socio-economic level, indigenous tribes and newcomers encountered each other in the Amur region. Migrants, traders, and exiles came into contact with the indigenous people, and they interacted with each other through trade or the exchange of labour. Indigenous groups, such as the Goldi and the Orochen, served as intermediaries between the newcomers and nature, facilitating access to the region's natural riches, which included furs, ginseng, and gold. As they interacted, they borrowed from each other's cultures, establishing a hybrid society, different from that of southern Manchuria or eastern Siberia. Individual traders, whether Chinese or Russian, did not wait for government approval to extract rich natural resources, and they established trading networks in forest products long before the empires moved to regulate their activities. Chinese migrants and traders were the most entrepreneurial newcomers to this region. They dominated trade with the indigenous peoples and defied official restrictions on cross-border travel and trade

imposed by the Qing and Russian states. This disregard for rules and authority characterized Amur frontier society; the imperial authorities could not effectively control the region.

On a political level, the Amur frontier region was the target of Russian imperial expansion and Qing internal colonization. After 1860, it became a border region between two empires. Russia claimed parts of it in 1858 by military occupation, forcing the Qing to sign the Treaty of Aigun, which gave Russia the northern bank of the Amur River. From the 1850s well into the twentieth century, Russia engaged in a variety of initiatives to expand its influence in the region, including geographic expeditions, production of maps, negotiation of borders, the introduction of settlers from European Russia, and railway construction. These initiatives were carried out with varying degrees of commitment. They were far from consistent until the 1890s, when Russia – like other European powers – began pursuing its imperial ambitions in China through concessions and spheres of influence. Instead of establishing firm control over the Amur frontier region, Imperial Russia moved into Manchuria (with an eye to the Korean Peninsula), launching two major colonization projects there: “peaceful economic penetration” by railway, and the military occupation of Manchuria in 1900, which lasted until Russia’s war with Japan in 1904.

The Qing’s efforts in Manchuria were more defensive in nature and led to the growing involvement of Chinese labour and trade beyond Manchuria into the Russian Far East, something that Russian and Qing officials had not anticipated. At first, Russia took advantage of Qing neglect of the Manchurian frontier. The Qing dynasty’s fiscal and military weakness during the late nineteenth century limited its ability to contain Imperial Russia’s economic and military expansion in Manchuria. Russia’s lavish financing of the Trans-Siberian and Chinese Eastern Railways was part of a long-term plan to colonize the Russian Far East and Manchuria. Ha’erbin, Dalian, and Lüshun (known in Russian/English as Harbin, Dalny, and Port Arthur, respectively) were built on the foundations of existing Chinese settlements. At the same time, the Qing reorganization of Manchuria’s frontier after 1905, part of empire-wide New Policy reforms, took advantage of Russia’s perennial weaknesses in its eastern borderlands – specifically, its sparse population and undeveloped local agriculture. Qing rulers opened Manchuria for settlement and offered its land for sale and rent, counting on Chinese migrants to strengthen the Qing border with Russia. The arrival of Chinese and Korean agricultural settlers in Manchuria helped revive the region’s agriculture, trade, and economy.

As a result, Manchuria acquired a strong regional identity, which the Russian Far East lacked.

This book focuses on the period from 1850 to 1930, when this region saw an explosion of economic and other activity. During this time, the two empires and their successor states failed to maintain a strong border. Because there was little control over the flow of people and goods across the border, existing informal cross-border trading networks and economic activities expanded, as did zones of interaction between the two empires' subjects. Facing a shortage of labour to exploit the region's rich natural resources, Russia relied on Chinese contract labour recruited from China Proper, especially Shandong and Zhili² provinces. Lacking its own agricultural base on the Amur and having failed to attract enough peasants from European Russia to feed the region, Russian provincial governments depended on agricultural products from Manchuria. Qing subjects dominated the region's labour force, replacing Russians in railway building, in construction, and in the service sector. They also displaced the indigenous people in extracting forest resources and delivering them to the growing towns on both sides of the border.

The tensions between formal imperial expansionist initiatives and local developments on the ground shaped this frontier region. These tensions were revealed every time grand plans were delayed or interrupted – for example, by the Boxer Rebellion, which spread to Manchuria in 1900. Often, state policies were ineffective because of poor management, sabotage, official corruption, and an inability to enforce the law. After the Russo-Japanese War, neither the Russian nor Qing governments were able to quickly re-establish control over this frontier. These two over-extended empires almost simultaneously began introducing radical economic and administrative reforms to strengthen their authority and the local economy (Russia in the Amur and Maritime provinces, the Qing in northern Manchuria). These efforts were hindered, however, by a lack of resources in terms of competent administrators, settlers, funding, and stable institutions. Nevertheless, these efforts resulted in short periods of economic revival, which were interrupted by civil conflicts and international competition.

This study rethinks the concept of *historical frontier* as a place where individuals, social groups, and states interact. In what follows, *frontier* (or *frontier region*) refers to a large peripheral zone defined by geography and human activity. There is no single Chinese or Russian term that captures all the complexities of the different historical references to borders and frontiers in the long imperial histories of these countries. *Prigranichnyi*

raion is the closest term in Russian: *prigranichnyi* is derived from *granitsa* (border). The Chinese terms *bianjiang* (border area, frontier), *bianjiang qu* (frontier region), and *jiangyu* (territory) best reflect this definition. The Chinese character *jiang* comprises three sub-components meaning *fields*, *territory*, and a *weapon*, which injects a “defensive” or “offensive” element into its meaning.³ In contrast, the Chinese character *jie*, in words like *bianjie* (border) and *bianjiexian* (boundary line), means a clear division or dividing line.

This book re-evaluates long-established traditions of studying historical frontiers in the West. Historians have used the word “frontier” without properly defining it in relation to a particular temporal or spatial setting. “Frontier history” as a separate field in Western historiography carries the same ambiguity as the term “frontier” itself. In the twentieth century, it has been associated with Frederick Turner’s pioneering work on the North American West.⁴ Turner used the term “frontier” to trace the history of Anglo-Saxon westward expansion in the United States and Canada. Mixed into his loose definition of frontier were the open lands of the North American West, geographic expansion, human interaction with the landscape, and social evolution. Turner’s Western frontier was more than a place; it was a migratory region, a stage of society, an imagined place.

Turner’s frontier thesis linked regional history with the history of the United States. He demonstrated that the pioneer spirit of settlers shaped the national character of the United States. His work has inspired generations of scholars. One of them, Harold Innis, similarly explained the formation of Canadian frontiers as a result of human interaction with the landscape.⁵ He focused on the extractive economy and on staple products such as fur, beaver, and cod. According to Innis, the fur trade stimulated Canada’s westward expansion and shaped Canadian history. The main actors in his economic history were the Hudson’s Bay Company and the North West Company, founded by Scottish and French traders.

Turner and Innis have both been criticized for making too many generalizations regarding frontier history and for presenting the frontier as a passive periphery waiting to be developed by a civilized core. By focusing on European agents of westward expansion, such scholarship has overlooked the role played by indigenous people in frontier trade and development and has failed to appreciate the diversity of the settlers, especially in the late nineteenth century. More recent frontier studies in North America have emphasized the dependence of white settlers on indigenous populations for the development of trade networks.⁶ They also question

the myth of the frontier spirit, or individualism, by demonstrating the role of the federal government, the British Crown, and trading monopolies in managing – or mismanaging – the North American frontiers.⁷ David Weber in his work on the Mexican frontier suggests that “frontiers usually have two sides, both of them human,” and argues that the agents of change came from both directions.⁸ According to him, Mexican frontier society and the Mexican government’s failure to manage its northern frontier should be taken into account when discussing the success of the American West.

Taking into account the approach of more recent frontier studies scholars such as Weber, this book looks at the Amur frontier region from different angles, examining local agents of change as well as state institutions. The Amur frontier region and the North American frontier were claimed by governments with different political systems, but their features were comparable: hostile climates, vast territories, rich indigenous cultures, and a history of state-sponsored expansion, railway construction, gold rushes, and urban development. Also, their indigenous populations were marginalized by the newcomers (although the North American frontier experienced more violence). This study analyzes the development of the Amur frontier region as a process in which local developments, such as trade and migration, interfered with state expansion efforts, such as agricultural settlement, railway construction, and military occupation. This study emphasizes the fluid and porous nature of this frontier, which was defined by natural conditions and human activities on local, national, and international levels.

Beyond the Amur is multidisciplinary in nature, informed by regional and national accounts of Northeast Asia. These accounts, originally published in Russian, Chinese, and English, cover history, geography, politics, economics, and culture. Three historiographic themes best explain this approach: the history of Sino-Russian relations, China’s frontier studies, and regional and local histories.

In Western countries, until recently, the history of Sino-Russian cross-border contacts has been the domain of diplomatic historians, who focus on Russian imperial expansion and Qing reactions to it. They analyze the diplomacy behind a century-old Sino-Russian debate about territorial claims to the Amur Basin. Andrew Malozemoff has analyzed tsarist expansionist policies in Manchuria, playing down Russia’s violations of previous treaties with the Qing as it formulated its policy in Manchuria.⁹ Sarah C.M. Paine, by contrast, has demonstrated that pre-1917 Russian

policies in the Far East had always been expansionist and continued to be so after 1917.¹⁰ These studies tell a plain and well-documented story of Russian expansionism from the perspective of imperial court politics. But despite their merits, neither scholar explains how Russian policies towards China were formulated and carried out on the ground, nor do they analyze the reasons for Russian successes and failures.

More recent works have interpreted Russia's imperial policies with respect to its border with China. Mark Bassin, a geographer, explores the intellectual history of Russian geographic visions of the Amur River frontier. He demonstrates how the Russian imperial government, or a powerful lobby within it, came to imagine the Amur River as a Siberian Mississippi – an allusion to similar opportunities for settling new frontiers in the Russian Far East and the American West. After Russia occupied the region in 1858, this vision proved to be an illusion, for it would have required enormous financial and administrative commitments, which the government was not willing to provide.¹¹ David Schimmelpenninck van der Oye has discussed several concepts that shaped late tsarist policy in East Asia: conquistador imperialism, Asianism (the search for Asian roots among Russian intellectuals), peaceful (economic) penetration, and the propaganda of Yellow Peril that grew out of Japan's challenge to Russia in Manchuria. Of these four, only Asianism was a Russian-born ideology.¹² He maintains that the interplay of several confusing ideologies brought Russia to war with Japan in 1904. Bassin and Schimmelpenninck focus on the Russian elite and the intellectual history of Russia. They demonstrate that Russia's imperial visions of its East Asian frontier and its Asian identity had little to do with the political or geographic reality of this frontier. For the Russian court in St. Petersburg, Qing China and Imperial Japan were distant "others," exotic lands.¹³ More than anything else, court politics determined Russia's imperial initiatives in the Amur region.

Historical writings focusing on Imperial Russia's role in China see Russia as the dominant imperial force, while treating Qing China as a passive player in the game of imperial conquest.¹⁴ The focus on elite politics obscures regional and frontier developments. This book focuses on local developments as central to the understanding of imperial policies.

Government-sponsored historical writings about this region in Russia and in the People's Republic of China (PRC) remain politically charged. Historical writings in the PRC on Qing–Russian relations have strong patriotic overtones, as reflected clearly in the title of the monumental four-volume *Sha E Qin Hua Shi* (*History of the Tsarist Russia's Aggression against China*) by scholars of the Institute of Modern Chinese History

at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences. The premise of this work is that from “ancient times the ancestors of the Chinese people lived in the valleys of Heilongjiang and Ussuri rivers.”¹⁵ The unequal treaties of the nineteenth century, the loss of 1.5 million square kilometres of Chinese territory, and the subsequent Russian occupation had long-term negative consequences for the development of Manchuria. Even the term “Manchuria,” referring to China’s three northeastern provinces (Chinese: Dongbei or Dongsansheng), remains highly controversial, for in China it evokes imperial Russian and Japanese dominance. Similar Chinese studies argue that beginning with Vasilii Poyarkov’s expeditions to the Amur in 1643, the Russian presence in Manchuria was for 260 years nothing less than a political, military, economic, and cultural occupation.¹⁶

After Sino-Russian relations improved in the 1990s, blatant criticism of Imperial Russian policies was replaced with an attitude of scientific inquiry among Chinese scholars. More recent works have moved away from a macro-narrative of confrontation towards more discrete aspects of Russia’s presence in Manchuria, such as economic imperialism, railway construction, railway administration, and the activities of Russian troops in occupied Manchuria.¹⁷ Corruption in the Qing court has become a separate theme in explaining the Qing’s diplomatic failure and the penetration of foreigners into Manchuria. Yet such topics as border demarcation, the fate of indigenous people in Manchuria, the status of Harbin as a symbol of Russian imperial gains in Manchuria, and Qing–Russian tensions over control of Mongolia are still sensitive areas in Chinese official historiography. The history of the Mongols in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries is seen as a story of Russian, Chinese, and Japanese attempts to divide and absorb their territory and to dominate regional politics.

Soviet historical accounts of Qing–Russian relations were written in a spirit of partial criticism of Russian imperial policies towards China. Even so, these accounts supported the nineteenth-century official Russian view that the south bank of the Amur River historically was part of the Russian Empire. After signing the Nerchinsk Treaty in 1689, Russia “lost” those territories to the Qing, before regaining them in the nineteenth century. In Soviet official historiography, the key argument has been that the Russians did not find any traces of Chinese civilization beyond the Stanovoi Mountains, evidence that the region never belonged to the Qing. Russian Cossacks and peasants arrived at the banks of the Amur River in the mid-seventeenth century and were first to claim the land as part of the Russian Empire.¹⁸

Post-Soviet historical writings about the history of Sino-Russian relations are less ideologically driven and are open to new interpretations. For example, Aleksei Voskresenskii applies a Western political science model of *multi-factor balance* to analyze border formation between the two empires and argues that the two empires converged as a result of their natural simultaneous expansions, which created a “contact zone.”¹⁹ Other powers were also interested in Sino-Russian frontiers. The Amur Basin was an epicentre of geopolitical, military, and economic interests, not only between China and Russia, but also involving the United States, Great Britain, and Japan.²⁰ Russian historiography gradually abandoned the macro-narrative of diplomacy, favouring instead such topics as Russian institutions in Manchuria, border negotiations, railway politics, and socio-cultural aspects of Sino-Russian relations. However, these new histories still place a high value on the role of treaty negotiations and bilateral agreements in explaining frontier history.²¹ A focus on diplomacy as an agent of historical development ignores the fact that border agreements were often ignored by indigenous people, migrants, and settlers. In the vast and sparsely populated Qing-Russian frontier region, these agreements were rarely enforced. Moreover, frontier authorities and the military rarely lived up to them.

In recent years, fewer scholars have been focusing on “Sino-Russian relations” as a separate field of study in history and international relations.²² Since the Cold War ended, scholars have focused more on separate aspects of historical interactions between the two empires, blending diplomatic history with political science, geography, economic and cultural history, and anthropology.²³

This study takes multiple approaches to the Amur frontier region; in doing so, it takes into account the well-established international scholarly field of Chinese and Inner Asian frontier studies. Owen Lattimore, who pioneered the study of China’s historical frontiers, was one of the first Western scholars to demonstrate how nomadic peoples north of the Great Wall shaped Chinese history.²⁴ Taking Manchuria as an example, he viewed the frontier’s history as a series of tribal inflows and as a meeting place of Mongol, Manchu, and Chinese cultures and political organizations.²⁵ Robert H.G. Lee developed Lattimore’s thesis further by comparing the early Qing policy of treating the Manchurian frontier as an ancestral land with its later policy of treating this frontier as a buffer zone between China Proper and any hostile power coming from the north, be it Mongol tribes or Russians.²⁶ Both Lattimore and Lee see

the Manchurian frontier as the homeland of the Tungusic people, from which the Manchus occupied China Proper.

Lattimore's work on the history of the Qing dynasty demonstrated the historical changes in relations between the Manchus in the political centre and frontier Manchus. In the process of governing China Proper, the Manchu elite in Beijing assimilated into Chinese society and became alienated from the frontier Manchu tribes. By the nineteenth century, the Qing political centre viewed its Manchurian frontier as a periphery in need of civilizing. Since Lattimore and Lee, scholars of Imperial China have tended to treat the evolving Qing policy towards the frontier as a process central to understanding the history of Inner Asia and China.²⁷

China's rulers had a strong interest in studying its frontiers, but this interest always had a political tint. Late Qing literati like Wei Yuan (1794–1856) addressed Qing concerns about its Inner Asian frontier defences, while Qing official Cheng Enze (1785–1837) organized studies of frontier geography for the purpose of intelligence gathering.²⁸ During the last few decades of its rule, the Qing government became concerned about the weakness of its northeastern frontier and launched research on historical geography and contemporary frontier conditions for defence purposes. During the 1880s and 1890s, scholar-officials Cao Tingjie, Song Xiaolian, and Nie Shicheng produced historical works, surveys, and maps of Manchuria and its borders with Russia. During the last decade of Qing rule, Manchuria became a testing ground for imperial frontier reforms, reorganizations of the frontier administration, the development of frontier economies, and preparation against threats from foreign powers. In 1911, Xu Shichang, governor-general of Manchuria from 1907 to 1909, published a comprehensive study, "Political Outline of the Three Eastern Provinces," which described in detail the topography, frontiers, frontier settlements, and administrative and military structures of Manchuria.²⁹

In the twentieth century, the study of China's frontiers in China was interrupted by war and revolution and remained highly ideological. In the 1980s, Deng Xiaoping's policies of openness inspired new interest in research on China's historical frontiers. In 1983, the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences established a centre to focus on this topic; it now publishes the journal *China's Frontier History and Geography Studies*. Research into China's historical frontiers has become more detailed and cross-disciplinary.³⁰ That said, the official goal of the new frontier studies in the PRC is to justify and preserve present Chinese borders and to protect China's sovereignty.³¹

Since the end of the Cold War, Chinese, Russian, and Western historians have become interested in the regional history of the Russian Far East and China's Northeast (Manchuria), paying attention to political, economic, social, and cultural links between them.³² This shift reflects a growing interest in the history of local societies. These studies analyze how national policies, geography, migration, trade, economic development, culture, religion, and ethnicity have shaped regional history and regional identity.

Recent historical studies of Manchuria tend to focus on administration, urbanization, and socio-economic developments during the late Qing and early Republican period.³³ Kong Jingwei, for example, demonstrates the importance of state agricultural and economic policies to the establishment of commercial agriculture and modern industry in Manchuria, despite its economic dependence on imperial Russia and Japan.³⁴ James Reardon-Anderson has written about Han Chinese settlement in Manchuria and Inner Mongolia and on the incorporation of these territories into China. He argues that Chinese migrants and settlers to Manchuria reproduced and transplanted institutions and practices from China Proper, bringing with them Chinese society, economy, and culture.³⁵ With their emphasis on regional and provincial developments, and on relations between regions and the core, these studies analyze what happened within fixed state borders, describing the formation of regional politics, society, and culture. In these current regional histories of Russia and China, Manchuria does not overlap with the Russian Far East, and informal links between them are seen as occasional and treated as marginal. In contrast, *Beyond the Amur* analyzes the Amur frontier region as a meeting place for different cultures, despite the political and administrative divisions imposed by governments.

Japanese scholars have also studied Manchuria in detail, and their studies and accounts provide another perspective on this region. During the period of Japan's sphere of influence and consequent occupation of Manchuria (1905–45), meticulous Japanese studies of its history, geography, politics, and socio-economic development were completed. In much the same way as Russia viewed northern Manchuria, Japan saw southern Manchuria as in its sphere of interest. Government-sponsored research served the purpose of preparing and justifying Japanese occupation of Manchuria.³⁶ After defeating Russia in 1905, Japan acquired the South Manchuria Railway and received special rights in southern Manchuria. Afterwards, the Japanese conducted surveys and published volumes of statistical data. The Research Bureau of the South Manchuria Railway

Company funded and produced detailed studies of local conditions in Manchuria.³⁷ After 1906, many Japanese subjects living in Manchuria left first-hand accounts of their lives in Manchuria.³⁸ Imperial Japan also paid close attention to developments in the Russian Far East and considered expanding its influence there. Russo-Japanese rivalry over the island of Sakhalin, at the estuary of the Amur River, continued until the end of the Second World War.

This book incorporates frontier, regional, and international history. It analyzes the development of this frontier region as a complex process involving human interaction with nature, bilateral Qing–Russian relations, and a struggle between state and regional authorities and between official and unofficial forces. At times, the official regional forces prevailed over state decisions, and all the while, unofficial forces tended to ignore authority, be it central or regional. Indeed, in many areas, state supervision and law enforcement were limited or non-existent. As a result, internal and external migrations overlapped, and legal and illegal trade could barely be distinguished. Weak state authority in this region posed real challenges for the Qing/Republican Chinese and Imperial Russian/Soviet governments.

Beyond the Amur focuses on the interactions of the mostly Chinese and Russian subjects of the Qing and Russian empires with a hostile natural environment, indigenous peoples, and each other. The Mongol, Korean, and Japanese historical frontiers receive less attention, as they extend well beyond the Amur frontier region. Imperial Japan's territorial expansion in China and on the Korean Peninsula greatly affected Russian and Chinese policies in the Amur frontier region and has been subject of comprehensive studies.³⁹ The Manchu identity and its complex relationship with the Han Chinese, going back to the beginning of the Qing dynasty, has received detailed scholarly attention and is not analyzed here.⁴⁰ The maritime frontier is discussed briefly in relation to the Russo-Japanese War; the region's centuries-old connections to the Pacific Ocean deserve a separate study. Finally, several aspects of this history may never be fully understood, as indigenous people, seasonal laborers, peasants, and traders, most of whom were illiterate, did not leave their own written accounts. As a result, there are few historical sources documenting the forest economy from the perspective of seasonal hunters or indigenous families, for instance.

The period covered in this study, during which state-sponsored expansion occurred on both sides of the Amur River, has been chosen to

demonstrate the dramatic changes in the Amur frontier's society. It encompasses Russia's expansion into Qing territory – the peak of which coincided with the peak of global imperialism in East Asia – from the 1890s to the end of the First World War. The arrival of multiple states to this frontier region brought new economic opportunities to the frontier people and the newcomers alike. At the same time, state authority depended on local labour and resources and on the willingness of local administrations to mediate among the various actors. The key features of this frontier during the period under investigation include its porousness, its volatility, and the tensions between the frontier society and the political centres, tensions that continued after both empires collapsed and become modern nation-states. Heavily influencing all of these features were the region's dramatic terrain and harsh climate, which made almost all human activity more difficult than in European Russia and China Proper and thus created unforeseen difficulties for expansionist initiatives.

Beyond the Amur's main objective – to describe and analyze the emergence of the Amur frontier society and how the region was claimed and divided by two states despite difficult natural conditions – is reflected in this book's structure. Each chapter demonstrates that imperial borders remained superficial despite state efforts and that the governments of China and Russia failed to keep their administrative regions of Manchuria and the Russian Far East separate from each other. Different chapters demonstrate the interplay of local, national, and international factors in shaping the frontier region and giving it a unique character. *Beyond the Amur* is organized thematically, with each chapter explaining the trends, events, or processes that contributed to the formation of Amur frontier society. It provides a panoramic or bird's eye view of this region, and then discusses particular moments in its history, or selected themes, that explain this region's transformation. Chapters 1, 2, 3, and 5 discuss local developments, while Chapters 4, 6, 7, and 8 analyze expansion processes and administrative reforms. Chapter 1, "A River Runs through It," describes the region's topography and climate and how they affected life and human activity prior to Russian and Chinese expansion into the region. Chapter 2, "They Came from Everywhere," shows that the Amur region was a place where indigenous people and migrants from different cultures met, a place where they engaged in trade and exchanged knowledge needed to live in the harsh environment.

Chapter 3, "Fur, Gold, and Local Trade," analyzes how local trade and the extraction of natural resources created unofficial networks and organizations among indigenous people and newcomers from European

Russia, Siberia, and China Proper. It shows that these associations helped supply labour in sparsely populated areas. The chapter also shows that China and Russia had little control over the region, which allowed trade to flourish unhindered by bureaucracy, much to the chagrin of the authorities. Chapter 4, “Imperial Russian Expansionism,” analyzes how the Russian elite formulated their expansionist policies, resulting in stronger Russian influence on the Amur frontier region and in Manchuria. This chapter demonstrates that official policies did not consider the difficulties of transport and communication in the region, the difficulties of attracting settlers, and the populace’s general disregard for authority. Chapter 5, “Chinese Migrants in Frontier Towns,” argues that Chinese merchants, farmers, and labourers were the driving economic force behind the urban development of the Amur frontier region, despite occasional and largely ineffective Russian attempts to limit Chinese migration into the region. Chapter 6, “A Railway Runs through It,” demonstrates the role of the Chinese Eastern Railway in the local economy and the weakness of Russian economic expansion into Manchuria.

Chapter 7, “Conflict and War,” analyzes how two military conflicts – the Boxer Rebellion and the Russo-Japanese War – affected the frontier, cross-border relations, and the international balance of power in the region. Chapter 8, “Fading Frontiers” demonstrates the efforts by provincial governments on both sides of the Amur River to introduce reforms and modernize local economies, despite civil conflict and international rivalry. Finally, this book’s conclusion emphasizes the primacy of regional developments in understanding empires and their interactions with one another and looks at the broader implications of this study for frontier, regional, and imperial history. Each chapter addresses the key findings of this book: that historical events on one side of the Sino-Russian border induced changes on the other side, and that the flow of people, goods, and ideas across this weakly enforced border and within this region flowed in more than one direction. A close look at Amur frontier society – with its diversity, trading networks, and disregard for authority – challenges imperial and national myths about predominance and about the effectiveness of state actions on these borderlands.