

1 Bright Lights across the River

Competing Modernities at China's Edge

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Introduction

It is 9 p.m. and the entire city of Heihe on the other side of the Amur River lights up. All the high-rise riverbank buildings suddenly sparkle in a wide array of bright colours and a laser light dances across the sky. With pop music blasted across loudspeakers, the Chinese city has taken an air of festivity. Yet this is an ordinary day: two hours later the lights and the music will go off, only to return the next day at the same time.

On the opposite side, the sleepy Siberian city of Blagoveshchensk looks upon this quotidian spectacle with a certain level of ambivalence. 'It's just a show to attract Russian tourists'; 'it looks really beautiful from here'; 'they're powering these lights with Russian electricity they buy at discount prices, it makes me angry' were some of the various comments and responses my questions elicited. While the majority of respondents did not necessarily voice positive assessments, the importance of the light-show for the city of Blagoveshchensk was undeniable.

For some Blagoveshchensk residents, the show was nothing but a glitzy façade of modernity, barely concealing the poverty, dirt and uneducated rural population of the 'real' Heihe. For others, it was the trademark of a new frontier town, built with the purchasing power of their Russian neighbours, and symbol of a renewed, economically confident China. For most, however, the symbolic importance of night-time Heihe clearly reached beyond the image of economic success that the Chinese city was celebrating: Heihe's bright riverbank was also a reflective surface, a mirror reminding uneasy onlookers of their own failings. Indeed, while Heihe is booming and expanding ever more rapidly, Blagoveshchensk remains beset by multiple

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administrative and political hurdles, which together severely inhibit its growth.

China's meteoric rise over the last decade has catapulted the country centre stage, spawning a vast quantity of books and articles in a broad range of academic fields. Core foci in this literature have been the evolution of China's role in the region and issues of security and stability. China's rapid growth into a position of world power, against a backdrop of unresolved territorial disputes with several of its neighbours, have made borders a central concern (Chung 2004, Li 2008, Fravel 2008, Elleman et al. 2012). Indeed, despite China's insistence on its good-neighbourly intentions and commitment to a 'peaceful rise' (*heping jueqi* 和平崛起), anxieties about China-dominated futures endure (Billé 2008, 2015).

If China's active involvement in Asia and the profound changes in international relations this is likely to have for the region have been explored by numerous authors (Evans et al. 2000, Shambaugh 2005), comparatively less attention has been given to the social and cultural reverberations of China's rise on its immediate neighbours. Those in the national centres have been familiar with a particular imagination of China, but this is different in the frontiers where neighbouring is an everyday reality. Russian views in border cities such as Blagoveshchensk, for example, dramatically differ from Moscow's xenophobic narratives of 'Yellow Peril' and doomsday scenarios. Local views are not necessarily always positive, especially since China's rise has largely taken place at the expense of Russia's position in the region. Indeed, as China's only European neighbour, China's rise has been symbolically potent for Russia, and the sudden reversal of established cultural hierarchies where Russia had always enjoyed a dominant position has been a source of anxiety. Nonetheless, local views remain significantly more multifaceted and complex than those heard in the capital. They also frequently echo narratives heard elsewhere, notably in nations neighbouring China's western and south-eastern borders where the 'Chinese dream', particularly among the younger generations, is steadily gaining ground.

Historian David Ludden (2003: 1062) famously reminded us that all too often 'we imagine that mobility is border crossing, as though borders came first, and mobility, second'. The truth is more the other way around. Borders, he contends, are sociopolitical constructs that slice across ethnic and cultural continuums. While his point is well taken, at times the drawing of boundary lines has preceded the peopling of national peripheries, resulting in two groups on either side having little in common. The 2,500-mile border separating Chinese Manchuria from the Russian Far East is such a case.

If some indigenous groups such as Buryats or Evenki are found on both sides of the border, the vast majority of inhabitants, as I discuss below, are in fact Russians on one side and Chinese on the other. Similarly, frontier cities such as Blagoveshchensk, which were founded and developed when the other side was either unpopulated or insulated behind an iron curtain, have grown largely along national ideals and benchmarks, and differ, in fact, little from other towns in western Russia.

The novel situation in which the two sides suddenly found themselves after 1989 when the border opened is an apt illustration of the generative power of neighbouring. If, as numerous postsocialist examples have shown, renewed contact with a long lost neighbour does not necessarily lead to a smoothing out, let alone disappearance, of sociocultural differences, cross-border engagement can be genuinely transformative. The trajectory of Blagoveshchensk's and Heihe's urban development over the last two decades is a clear testament to this force.

The argument developed in this chapter is strongly indebted to the work of Anna Tsing, and particularly to her notion of 'friction' (2005). The reverberations of her analysis, whereby 'cultural diversity brings a creative friction to global connections' (Tsing 2005: ix-x), are especially potent here given that both Russia and China see their mutual border as a fault-line between two world cultures or 'civilizations'. As the ethnography of this chapter illustrates, friction can, through quotidian engagement, lead to an increasing enmeshing of lives, worldviews, and aspirations, as well as generate social and cultural transformations.

My argument is also inspired by Taussig's work on mimesis (1993) which productively fuses together the seemingly incompatible tension between, on the one hand, a readiness to adopt elements of the neighbour's culture and, on the other, a persistent emphasis on differentiation and uniqueness. Mimesis is thus not a matter of slavish reproduction (see Bosker 2013). What the urban evolution of Blagoveshchensk and Heihe represent is, in fact, what Kenzari (2011) refers to as 'mimetic rivalry', with each city borrowing inspiration from its neighbour but appropriating it in unique and original ways. Mimetic practices thus lead to cultural friction and exchange, and, perhaps more importantly, to commensurability. Indeed, to be recognized by the Other as different, one must ultimately be comparable, and therefore recognizable in intelligible ways.

Background

Blagoveshchensk was established in 1858 at the location of the fort of Albazino, the first Russian settlement on the Amur River. Meaning ‘Annunciation’ in Russian, its foundation was symbolic. It not only marked Russian territorial advance eastwards but represented a beacon of progress and civilization in a continent perceived as feudal, despotic and stagnant.¹ Blagoveshchensk, just like the neighbouring towns of Khabarovsk and Vladivostok became in the space of a few decades a vibrant ‘center of economic life of the Russian Far East, matching the cities in European Russia in terms of size and architecture’ (Zatsepine 2011: 107). Comparisons with European cities were common and highly symbolic. Although at some point in Russia’s history some thinkers, notably the intellectual current known as the Slavophiles, had advocated embracing Russia’s own Asian cultural heritage and cultivate links with Asian societies (see Laruelle 2007), the dominant Russian worldview has consistently looked to the west for inspiration. The use of Asia as a terrain onto which political and cultural aspirations could be actively projected was in fact made explicit by Fyodor Dostoyevsky in the late 1880s: ‘In Europe we were hangers-on and slaves, but in Asia we shall be the masters. In Europe we were Tatars, but in Asia we too are Europeans’ (Dostoyevsky 1993: 1374). Thus, even at the height of the Sino-Soviet friendship, the tacit cultural hierarchy was clear to both sides: China was the younger brother (*mladshii brat*), to be guided by a technologically and ideologically more advanced Russia towards a bright communist future.

An important port on the Amur River, Blagoveshchensk’s growth was fuelled in no small part by Chinese labour. By the end of the nineteenth century, the town had a sizeable Chinese population who worked as traders and manual labourers. In 1900, during the Boxer Rebellion (*Yihetuan yundong* 义和团运动), fearing that the 8,000 Chinese residents may form a ‘fifth column’, Blagoveshchensk’s authorities decided to deport the Chinese community in its entirety. They were driven out of the city at bayonet point and made to swim across the river. Those who were too old or too frail to comply were ruthlessly killed. Altogether, about 5,000 Chinese men, women and children died on that day (Dyatlov 2003, 2012, Qi 2009: 76-79, Zatsepine 2011).

A few years later Chinese migrant workers were again visible in Blagoveshchensk. But throughout the 20th century Sino-Russian relations

1 Note also in this regard the meaning of Vladivostok as ‘Ruler of the East’.

remained strongly shaped by political events. The installation of a Communist regime in China in 1949 was followed by a period of intense cultural exchange and political and ideological collaboration between the two nations. However, this period was short-lived and relations between the PRC and the Soviet Union quickly deteriorated. Soviet attempts at moving away from the excesses of Stalin's policies were poorly received by Mao Zedong who considered this departure from communist orthodoxy a betrayal of shared political ideals.

The territorial disputes that had soured much of the modern period before 1949 once again took centre stage, spearheaded by Mao Zedong's famous statement in July 1964 that Tsarist Russia had stolen 580,000 square miles through 'unequal treaties' (*bupingdeng tiaoyue* 不平等条约) that Qing China had signed under duress. In 1969, border skirmishes on Damansky Island (in Chinese *Zhenbao dao* 珍宝岛) almost led to open warfare. These events resulted in the hermetic sealing of the Sino-Russian border. From then until 1989, the two sides became completely isolated from each other. The closure of the border signalled the reinforcement of a geopolitical fracture as well as a strong social interruption: numerous ethnic groups, such as the Buryat Mongols or the Evenki who traditionally straddled the border and nomadised across the international boundary line, suddenly found themselves cut off from their relatives on the other side.

The three decades between 1960 and 1989 are commonly referred to as the Sino-Soviet Split (*Zhong-Su jiaowu* 中苏交恶; *Sovetsko-kitaiskii raskol*). The period was characterized by pervasive suspicion on both sides and constant propaganda. Slogans such as 'You are living on the border, stay vigilant!' (*Zhivësh na granitse, bud' bditelen!*) and 'Border under lock (*Granitsa na zamke*)' were continually reiterated. During the Chinese Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) Chinese counter-propaganda was also blasted across the Amur River. In recounting stories about this difficult period, my interlocutors in Blagoveshchensk mentioned that even innocuous behaviours such as looking at the other side of the river with binoculars could potentially lead to being questioned by the police.

Becoming Neighbours Again

The opening of the border in 1989 signalled a change of pace in the relationship between Russia and China. Suddenly Russians were able to cross the border and engage socially and commercially with the Chinese on

the other side. This shift was especially meaningful for Blagoveshchensk, which, as a border town, had been subjected to very strong restrictions with regards to mobility. Not only had it been closed to Chinese visitors, Russians themselves, if they lived elsewhere, had only been able to enter the town with a special permit. Overnight, from a remote town on the edge of the national polity, Blagoveshchensk found itself at a crossroads between two widely divergent cultural realms, as well as at a unique juncture of commercial contact. Once again it became possible for people to renew ties with relatives on the other side, though many had irretrievably lost all traces or even memory of their foreign ancestry by then (Shishmanova 2011). One of my interlocutors, Andrei,² with ginger hair and typical European features, told me that his family had successfully concealed their Chinese heritage during the latter part of the Soviet period. For those mixed Russians who had phenotypically Asian features, alternative family stories were painstakingly (re)constructed. Many tried to pass for another Asian group, for Koreans for instance. Maria's family, ethnically very mixed, had to resort to such practices, especially because of her grandfather's high social position. The political atmosphere was such in those years that her grandfather even concealed his heritage from his own wife, who only found out after several years of marriage. On the Chinese side, individuals with mixed heritage were compelled to do the same, some carefully dyeing their hair black in order not to attract undue attention (Shishmanova 2011).

Thus, in many cases, by the time the border reopened and it was safe again to renew contact with the other side, all details about relatives had long been lost. For Andrei and Maria, China was as mysterious as it was for most of Blagoveshchensk inhabitants. In the late socialist period, study of the Chinese language had been actively discouraged and many faculties of Sinology, in both Russia and Mongolia, were closed down. With the border hermetically sealed, borderlanders on either side knew virtually nothing about their neighbours.

It was precisely this sense of unknown that drove so many Russians to cross the Amur River in the early 1990s to see for themselves what China was like. This 'ethnographic' interest was compounded with the sudden opportunity for Russians to purchase items that were not, or no longer, locally available. Andrei, who began his career as a *kirpich*, literally a 'brick', the local term for a person who buys large amounts of goods abroad and carries

2 All names are pseudonyms.

them back across the border,³ explained that the first few years of the 1990s were characterized by a mad rush, with over 2,000 people a day pushing and shoving to get on boats in order to complete as many trips as possible.⁴ 'It was really crazy. You didn't see many intellectuals (*intelligenty*) then'.

In the first few years of the 1990s Heihe was little more than an outgrown village. The only restaurants available were street stalls, and most commercial activities also took place by the roadside. As Andrei recalled:

You would see old ladies sewing Adidas trousers right there on the street. On one side they would have the material, on the other the trousers ready to wear. They sold these to Russian visitors who knew full well they were fake goods,⁵ but they were very cheap. They were very bad quality though and wouldn't last long. At times the seams would fall apart even before you had reached the Russian shore.

For both sides, the sudden opening of the international border meant a propitious meeting of complementary desires. Over the last two decades this intense flurry of commercial activity has been a defining factor of dynamic development for the two towns. For Blagoveshchensk, whose financial support from the capital has long dried up, survival without neighbouring Heihe would be very precarious. The Chinese goods and produce available across the border have provided a real lifeline for the Russian town. In the case of Heihe, the existence of Blagoveshchensk has played an even more fundamental role and it has very rapidly grown into a town whose size and modernity have come to rival Blagoveshchensk's. In fact, the town has thrived precisely because of its location. The centre of Heihe is explicitly geared towards the Russian market: the vast majority of shops have signs in Cyrillic and most Chinese residents know at least some basic Russian. Heihe is a booming town, set to surpass its Russian counterpart in a few years in terms of number of residents.

3 In the late 1990s, traders realized that delegating the actual cross-border transport and having a team of *kirpichi* bringing goods from China would lead to higher returns. These former *kirpichi* are commonly known as 'lamps' (*fonari*). In other parts of the Russian Far East, notably in the Primorskii krai, *kirpichi* are referred to as 'camels' (*verbliudy*).

4 Initially there were no restrictions on weight. Rules have tightened considerably since then, with a maximum weight of 50 kilograms per day (as of November 2011) provided the traveler has spent at least three days outside Russia. For stays under three days the maximum allowance is 20 kilograms.

5 In the early 1990s fake Adidas trainers were sold in Blagoveshchensk as 'Abibas'. The name has stuck as shorthand for fake goods.

This newfound symbiotic partnership between the 'twin cities' is perceived by both parties as a guarantee for future success and development. To reinforce existing links, more and more international cultural events are being organized by the two localities, such as Sino-Russian art exhibitions, or an annual swimming competition across the river called 'Sino-Russian Heilongjiang Friendship' (*Zhong-E Youyi Heilongjiang* 中俄友谊黑龙江).

In practice, however, the two cities' (and indeed the two countries') dramatically different approaches to neighbouring emerge particularly clearly through urban practices and the use of space. The physical coming together of Russia and China at Blagoveshchensk is, to a large extent, an exceptional situation for Russia. Despite a 2,500 mile-long land border, the two countries hardly ever physically touch but remain 'insulated' by supplementary demarcation lines and restricted areas. Thus a 'border zone' (*dublirovanie pogranichnoi polosy*), a strip of land extending up to 18 miles inland on the Russian side, runs parallel to the international boundary (see Billé 2012). This border zone is restricted to both foreigners and Russians. 'As a result, the wildlife there is very rich' explains Alexandr, an economist at the Amur State University. 'One time I saw a bear there. I was on the Chinese side [where there are no restrictions], and I saw the Russian embankment, which only our border guards get to see'. At other points along the border there are also zones of fortification (*ukreplennye rayony*) which typically include obstructions and minefields.

This cautious outlook is also visible in the very layout of the city. Blagoveshchensk seems to be inward-looking, almost turned on itself. The main avenue, ulitsa Lenina, runs parallel to the Amur River, but at some distance from it. There are no large unobstructed vistas looking onto the other side. To a visitor, it feels in fact as if the river was largely irrelevant. Similarly, the few hotels that are situated near the river do not capitalize on their location, with the best rooms facing away rather than towards the river. This could not contrast more with Heihe's layout. There, the entire city faces Russia, with the tallest and most modern buildings, including the best hotel in the city, standing right on the river bank.

To an extent, differences in layout are understandable. Heihe is a new city that has grown and developed in response to cross-border trade with Russia. By contrast, Blagoveshchensk is much older and for the largest part of its history it had no neighbour to look at. Originally founded as a military outpost, architecturally the city retains a certain defensive quality, such as the lookout posts which, until recently, were still found all along the river bank, a legacy of the Sino-Soviet period. But this seems to be only part of the story. In the twenty years that elapsed since the border

opened, Blagoveshchensk's river bank remained completely undeveloped. Heihe's embankment on the other hand was turned into a pedestrianized promenade, lined with trees, small parks, and – in the summer – cafés and small restaurants. As was described at the beginning of this chapter, at night the whole area illuminates in a bewildering array of colours, and a laser beam dances in the sky, occasionally prodding the sleepy Russian shore on the other side. This marked imbalance in fact prompted a Chinese architect and friend of mine to remark on the contrast, describing it as a 'hot face pressed against a cold ass' (*yi zhang re lian tie zai leng pigu shang* 一张热脸贴在冷屁股上).

This stark difference is to an extent predicated on the commercial exchange taking place between the two cities, with Heihe's riverfront essentially functioning as a giant billboard seeking to attract customers. The city of Heihe is replete with Russian symbols, from statues of bears on the embankment to *matrioshka*-shaped trash cans, and the street signage includes Russian in addition to Chinese and English. Blagoveshchensk's residents tend to perceive the inclusion of these symbols as a means to attract them through the recreation of a familiar environment, but the strategy has been quite different. In recent years, Heihe has in fact styled itself as a window to Europe, with a whole section of Hailan Street lined with shops selling a wide range of goods, from Russian fur hats to European style paintings. By replicating Russian symbolism, the city of Heihe offers Chinese tourists a 'mini Russian experience'. Visitors can take short cruises along the Amur River, and on their return, shop for Russian goods in Heihe itself without having to physically cross the river – an experience which involves obtaining an international passport (*huzhao* 护照) and spending considerable sums of money.

In fact, this situation is not unique to Heihe, and several other Chinese border cities have followed a similar trajectory. Manzhouli, on the border with both Russia and Mongolia, has exploited its geographical position to attract Chinese tourists looking for a 'European experience'. Its buildings mimic European architecture and a number of somewhat surreal theme parks have also mushroomed close to the border gates (*guomen* 国门), like for instance a '*matrioshka park*' representing famous Russian and Western personalities and including seemingly random personalities such as Charlie Chaplin, Audrey Hepburn and Jesus.

This strategy is somewhat reminiscent of the process of 'mimetic condensation' described by Joseph Rykwert (2000: 150) whereby remote and sacred places were miniaturized for pilgrims who were unable to reach them. This move has enabled cities like Manzhouli and Heihe to benefit

from both Russian consumption and from domestic Chinese tourism and to develop rapidly as a result. The inclusion of Russian symbols in the form of statues, monuments and architecture is also intimately tied to the city's international ambitions. Like the city of Manzhouli, Heihe was among the 40 or so Chinese cities that announced, as early as the 1990s, their intention to become 'global cities' (*quanqiu chengshi* 全球城市) (Gu and Sun 1999).

By contrast Blagoveshchensk's central symbols reflect an unambiguous intent to draw a clear separation between itself and its neighbour. In addition to the numerous zones of separation described earlier that insulate Russia from China, the city of Blagoveshchensk, through its statues, monuments and memorials, is structurally insistent on defining itself as Russian rather than liminal. Thus the monument that dominates Ploschad' Pobedy (Victory Square), Blagoveshchensk's central square, is a monumental arch bearing the inscription 'The land of the Amur was, is and will be Russian (*Zemlya amurskaya byla, est' i budet russkoi*)'. The same inscription is also found on a monument on the edge of the city, erected by General Governor Korsakov in 1868, a large mural depicting the Amur River marking the border with China.

In addition to the emphasis placed on protection and clear demarcation, Russian attitudes also index a high degree of passivity. Changes on the Russian side in the post-socialist period have occurred primarily in response to particular stimuli rather than as proactive measures, and have frequently been cosmetic rather than truly transformative. In 2012, Russia unveiled a new iconic structure: the longest suspension bridge in the world, connecting the city of Vladivostok to Russky Island, home to a mere 5,000 people and host to the APEC Summit held in September 2012 (Nemstova 2012). By contrast, not a single bridge connects Blagoveshchensk to Heihe – nor indeed any border cities over the long Amur River – despite repeated Chinese offers to bear the entire cost of the project.

A crucial difference between the two cities of Heihe and Blagoveshchensk – as well as several others on the Sino-Russian border – is that Blagoveshchensk has suddenly, and unwittingly, found itself in the position of neighbouring. Originally an outpost of European presence in an uncharted East, the city did not need to actively engage with anyone. It merely acted as a beacon shining a light onto a dark and mostly empty space. Over the last two decades, as the small village of Heihe grew into a full-size town, Blagoveshchensk has seen its significance as model of modernity significantly weakened.

This notion of a beacon extends, of course, beyond the metaphoric. The significance of physical illuminations is in fact crucial given the importance

of electrification campaigns in the early socialist period and their significance with regard to modernity.⁶ Electric light, through its powerful association with notions of higher understanding and culture, was seen as the metonymic emblem of a single grand narrative, that of modernity itself (Sneath 2009: 87). The common power outages and theft of copper and aluminum wires, which have occasionally plunged sections of Siberian cities into darkness since the early 1990s, are thus frequently seen as nothing less than the failure of this modernist grand narrative. As Oushakine (2009: 21) writes, people routinely complain of being left in the dark (*ostavili v temnote*) and of being cut off from the rest of the world (*otrezali ot mira*). In the context of Blagoveshchensk, the fact that it is the Chinese side that is now brightly illuminated is therefore symbolically potent as well as a destabilizing factor.

From a position of cultural isolation, and despite a structural reluctance to engage, the city of Blagoveshchensk now finds itself in a close, indeed symbiotic, relation with Heihe. In line with Anna Tsing's (2005) seminal work on global interconnections, I suggest that relations between these 'twin cities' are perhaps best understood through Tsing's fertile metaphor of friction. My use of friction in this context primarily denotes an affective force, not reducible to negative or positive outcomes, but potentially spanning both. Friction stands here as the generative energy produced through the physical and involuntary coming together of two different polities. As I will argue in the following sections, this friction is proving to be a truly transformative force. In the case of Blagoveshchensk in particular, the very presence of Heihe on the other side of the river has acted as a reflective surface, mirroring Russia's own dreams, aspirations, and limitations with regard to progress and modernity.

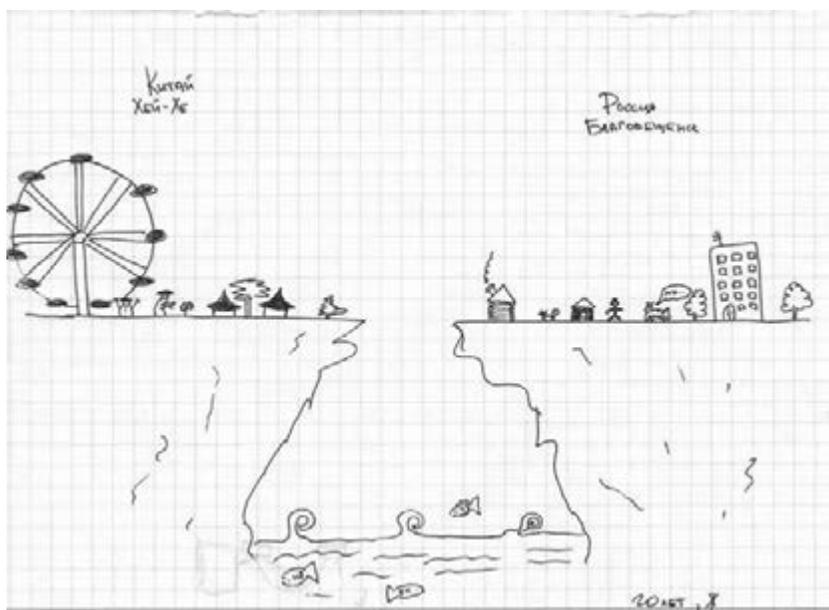
Neighbouring Through Engagement

As the boat approaches the Russian bank, Sasha reminds me to set my watch back. The two cities may be right across from each other, and separated by a 500-meter stretch of water, they are nonetheless two time zones apart. This temporal rupture, adding to the bureaucratic hurdles and the endless queues for tickets, increases the sense of distance between the two cities.

6 Indeed, the first Soviet plan for national economic recovery and development – 'State Commission for Electrification of Russia' or GOELRO – was a major restructuring of the Soviet economy based on total electrification of the country.

Similarly, the immediately visible somatic differences in the population of these border cities make the two environments oddly bipolar: apart from Russians and Chinese, there is very little distinctive ethnic diversity.⁷ This contributes to the peculiar sentiment that one is crossing from one world into another. The idea that the river marks a civilizational fault line is very much present in the minds of local people. The assumption of both Russians and Chinese that they are fundamentally different from each other is in fact shaping interactions between the two groups.⁸ This notion of cultural chasm was a recurrent motif in interviews. It was also graphically conveyed in some of the drawings made by classes of students at the Amur State University, depicting the twinned cities of Heihe and Blagoveshchensk as separated by an abyss or even as distinct planets.

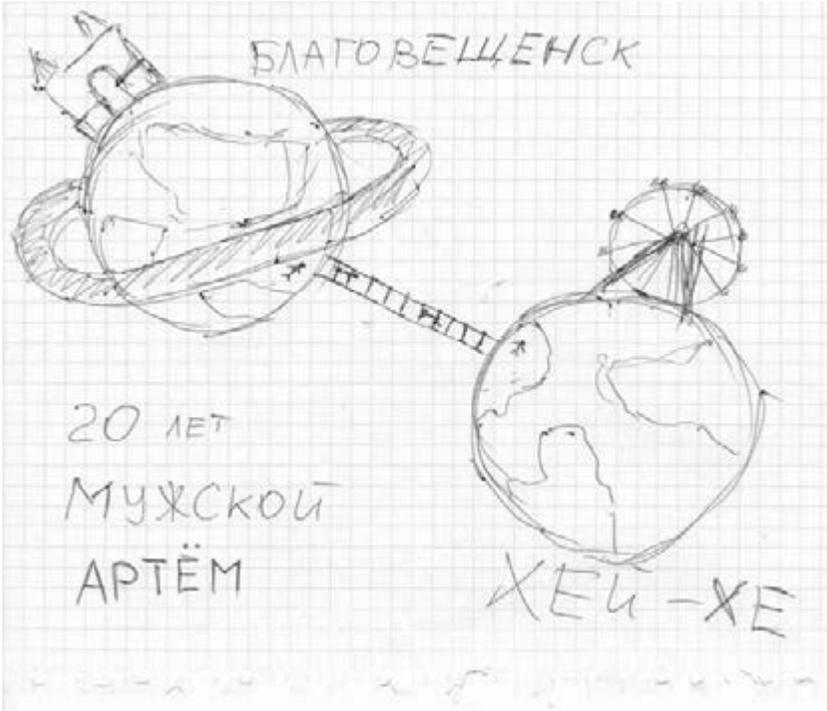
Figure 1.1 Depiction of Heihe and Blagoveshchensk by a 20 year-old female student, Amur State University, Blagoveshchensk, 2011



7 In reality diversity is anything but absent. There are sizeable groups of Armenians and Azeris in Blagoveshchensk, and Heihe is home to a number of national minorities, such as Manchus and Tatars. However, this inner diversity tends to remain invisible to the other side.

8 Other Russian borders in Asia elicit similar discursive practices. The boundary with Japan, in the Kurile archipelago, is also touted by Japanese guidebooks as Japan's border with Europe (Morris-Suzuki 1999: 58).

Figure 1.2 Depiction of Heihe and Blagoveshchensk by a 20 year-old male student, Amur State University, Blagoveshchensk, 2011



For Sasha, a Russian entrepreneur in his early 20s who relocated to Heihe a couple of years ago, the sense of unbridgeable difference has very much faded away. Initially attracted to China because it was unknown and mysterious to him, he has now fully acclimatized to living there. Having gained full fluency in Chinese, he has recently persuaded his retired mother to move in with him. But despite the lower cost of living on the Chinese side, very few Russians have followed his example. His decision to live on the other side of the river is frequently met with inquisitive looks and raised eyebrows.

Nonetheless, throughout my fieldwork, it clearly emerged that old stereotypes are slowly losing ground, particularly among the young generation who have spent more time in China. In the two decades since the border opened, residents of Blagoveshchensk have become increasingly accustomed to the cultural divide. In addition to the commercial interactions between the two cities, local Russians now spend the majority of their holidays in China: in Heihe for public holidays and short breaks, and further inland,

in Harbin, Beijing, Beidaihe or Sanya for longer holidays. For the younger generations, this has often meant that they have been spending time in China regularly from a very young age. This increased interaction has also led to greater interest in Chinese culture and traditions, such as martial arts and cuisine. Russian infatuation with Chinese food has in fact led to a veritable proliferation of Chinese restaurants in Blagoveshchensk, which are now three times as numerous as establishments serving Russian food. This transformation of the local dietary landscape has brought with it a slew of new practices, such as the widespread use of chopsticks and a taste for Chinese alcohol (*baijiu* 白酒).

In conversations with me, many interlocutors emphasized the sense of familiarity and closeness they associate with Heihe. 'It's not really China', I was told. 'Heihe is an area of Blagoveshchensk (*Heihe – eto rayon goroda*)'. 'It's a place where you go spend a weekend, have nice Chinese food, and have fun with your friends'. The liminality of Heihe was tied to a large extent to the fact one could navigate it without knowing a single word of Chinese, since most Chinese in Heihe know at least basic Russian. And although the city may differ in its cultural outlook, the frequency with which Russian visitors bump into friends and encounter familiar faces lends the experience a certain sense of familiarity.

Just as Heihe is seen as not quite Chinese, locals also perceive Blagoveshchensk as having a certain liminal quality. If my interlocutors never claimed that Blagoveshchensk was not (or even not wholly) Russian, they were keen to draw my attention to the existence of a Sino-Russian pidgin and to the many Chinese words that pepper local Russian speech. The most common example I was given was the verb *chifanit* (to eat, from *chifan* 吃饭) and its derivatives *pochifanem* ('let's go eat') and *chifan'ka* (restaurant), but other terms such as *fanzi* ('apartment', usually of poor-quality, from *fangzi* 房子), *laovaiskii* ('foreign', from *laowai* 老外) and *sesechki* ('thanks', combining *xiexie* 谢谢 with the diminutive suffix *-chki*) were also mentioned. Other expressions such as *mne mafanno* ('it's inconvenient to me', 'troublesome', from *mafan* 麻烦), *khaovarit'sya* ('fun' or 'to have fun', from *haowanr* 好玩儿) or *tinbudun* ('cannot understand' or 'someone a little dumb', from *tingbudong* 听不懂) are less commonly used but were known to some respondents.

What struck me as particularly fascinating in these discussions was perhaps not the existence of these terms but the persistent affirmation that a form of pidgin was in use between the two cities. This insistence concerning the emergence of a Sino-Russian pidgin has in fact been the subject of recent book-length studies by two Russian scholars (Oglezneva 2007, Perekhval'skaya 2008). While the classification of these linguistic

forms as 'pidgin' remains somewhat contentious, what these scholarly discussions do index is the embryonic emergence of local identities, divergent from national norms, and bridging the cultural and linguistic divide. The enthusiasm of respondents for the topic clearly extended beyond actual practices, as only a few interlocutors were able to cite more than two or three words.

The apparent desire of Blagoveshchensk residents to attenuate the linguistic gap that separates them from their neighbours is also seen in the increasing popularity of Chinese, which has become one of the most popular foreign languages in Blagoveshchensk, ranking a close second after English. Around 1,000 students study Chinese full-time, while another 1,500 study it as a minor subject in evening classes. A Confucius Institute (*Kongzi Xueyuan* 孔子学院) was also recently established in the city through which a further 250 students, including a class of retirees, are currently enrolled. In addition, the Institute is also providing free classes for government customs and administration, with the view to facilitating international contact and exchange.

In part, this growth reflects a stronger interest for Chinese language and culture, but for the majority it simply represents a key to future success. Thus an ever larger number of parents are registering their children in Chinese language classes or paying for private tuition in order to give them a competitive edge. Chinese is seen primarily as a useful tool to guarantee access to the international labour market as well as permanent outmigration. This keen interest in Chinese is therefore mostly strategic. In this regard it is noteworthy that the recent increase in the number of Chinese language classes is not taking place at the expense of English. Chinese is merely studied in addition to it.

Irrespective of individual motivations, linguistic and cultural engagement with China has led to better knowledge about the country and impacted significantly on Russian worldviews and geopolitical imaginations. A closer examination of attitudes of Blagoveshchensk's residents, particularly those of the younger generations, thus highlights the current coexistence of two competing geopolitical mental maps, one with Moscow as reference point, the other resolutely turned towards China. Preliminary interviews carried out with three classes of students at the Amur State University suggest that differences in world-views are to an extent tied to social background. Students who have had little or no personal experience of China are predominantly from families one might call 'socialist intelligentsia': their parents are educated professionals such as teachers and doctors, with a high social status during the socialist period but with

limited financial resources today. The fact that the vast majority of these students have been to Moscow and cities in western Russia suggests that their worldviews (or at least those of their parents) remain firmly anchored to Moscow and 'the West'. By contrast, for children of traders who have had extensive contact with China, Moscow appears to have lost much of its relevance as a cultural benchmark. Most of these students have not visited Moscow, and their responses overall underscored the sense of unbridgeable distance they felt separated them from the capital. For this group, the future was unquestionably found in 'the East', specifically in the cities of eastern and southern China such as Shanghai or Shenzhen.

The growing importance of China as cultural benchmark has been paralleled by a decrease in Moscow's capacity to shape ideas of the future and modernity. Particularly among Blagoveshchensk's economically more successful social strata, the megalopolises of southern China have largely eclipsed the lure previously emanating from Moscow and St Petersburg. While some segments of Russian society remain attached, culturally and geopolitically, to the models inculcated during the socialist period, it is likely that the current trend favouring China will continue to expand given that the old 'socialist intelligentsia' tends to be less financially successful. Chinese and Asian cultural models are also gaining ground among the younger generation through anime and martial arts, and it is also from China that fashion trends predominantly originate.

Mimetic Neighbouring

The significant divergences in Heihe's and Blagoveshchensk's structural outlooks described earlier contribute to making these two cities diametrically different. But a closer look at their evolution and emergent architectural practices reveals a number of fascinating parallels. Indeed, if in its urban development Heihe appears to take the lead, the process is in reality far less one-sided. Heihe's urbanization model in fact closely follows Russian unspoken assumptions about what a city is supposed to look like. Thus throughout the course of its development, Heihe has replicated Blagoveshchensk's structural and urban features. A giant Ferris wheel, brightly illuminated at night and three times larger than the Russian one, was for example built in Heihe recently, and strategically erected right opposite Blagoveshchensk's main intersection.

Similarly, Heihe's urban landscape is dotted with statues, an established feature of Russian (and other European) cities, but a far less common

occurrence in Chinese cities. In addition to the Russian-themed features discussed above, a number of statues, sculptures and memorials are also found in the town, especially along the riverbank. In most cases the symbolism is readily understandable, such as the black dragon stele representing the Amur River (Black Dragon River or 黑龙江 in Chinese). Other times, like in the case of a very large statue of a woman holding a child, entitled simply 'Mother' (*muqin* 母亲), the meaning is less clear, though it may be another reference to Russian literature, specifically to Maxim Gorky's eponymous novel.⁹ As the statue is not accompanied by text in Russian or Chinese, this is a reference unlikely to be picked up by visitors. Generally, these statues often appear not to be responding to an economic or affective need, but to be there simply for the sake of being there. Not because of a particular event to be commemorated, but because the presence of statues is inherent to what a modern and developed city should be like.

In the introduction of a volume focusing on emerging practices in Asian cities, Aihwa Ong (2011b: 4) notes that urban transformations involve 'unavoidable practices of inter-city comparison, referencing, or modelling'. Her argument builds upon Anderson's notion of 'spectre of comparison' (Anderson 1998: 2) which Ong defines as the 'distance to be travelled in order to catch up with the development benchmark and metropolitan ideals established by and in the West' (Ong 2011b: 14). While she points out that a number of Asian metropolises have in fact developed independently of an ultimate reference to the West, it is arguable that cities in 'twinning city' settings develop dialogically rather than with a single centralized model in mind. This point appears to be largely supported by the urbanization process witnessed in Heihe, where the focus is less on innovation than on one-upmanship with the construction of structures that are similar to those found in Blagoveshchensk, only newer, taller, bigger.

Of course, both cities also have a 'national frame of reference', and Blagoveshchensk and Heihe's development is largely modelled on trends seen in Moscow and Beijing respectively. But through direct competition, twin cities are also drawn together and tend to gradually come to take on similar features. Blagoveshchensk, despite its overall structural reluctance to engage, has thus adopted some of the urban trappings characteristic of China. For instance, the two Siberian tigers that flank the entrance doors of the main shopping mall, on 50 Let Oktyabrya Street, appear to be a localized version of the Chinese practice of placing lions by the entrance of significant

9 I am grateful to Adam Chau for pointing out this connection. Gorky's book is in fact a 'signature piece' of Russian literature for Chinese readers (Zhang, personal communication).

buildings. Similarly, the novel use of lights on the façade of buildings, or the blaring out of music in public spaces, lend the city a certain Asian flavour. In adopting such features, Blagoveshchensk is neither styling itself as an Asian city nor consciously emulating Heihe – all my Russian interlocutors were adamant about that. It is simply developing and modernizing itself using a repertoire of available markers of modernity.

Throughout the last two decades the two cities of Heihe and Blagoveshchensk have thus continually borrowed from a common pool of 'building blocks' to develop into modern cities, complete with statues, lights and the use of English. For a long time, the night-time lightshow example set by Heihe was resisted by Blagoveshchensk residents who declared finding the lights and laser beams garish and in poor taste. It seems however that these aesthetic assessments were mixed with considerable envy and with the realization that the Russian town did not have the financial wherewithal to compete with its Chinese neighbour. This suddenly changed after Vladimir Putin's official visit in summer 2011, when the Russian president urged Blagoveshchensk's residents to take their neighbour as model. This later led to the allocation of central funds for a complete redesign of the Russian riverbank. By October, excavation works had begun and trucks were dumping sand all along the banks of the Amur to create prime riverfront real estate. A little over a year later, the first section of the new embankment opened to the public, with a second section scheduled for early 2014 and the third and final section by the summer. This came as a pleasant surprise for the majority of Blagoveshchensk residents who were steadfastly convinced the project would never go ahead. The popular consensus deemed the new riverbank a resounding success, in fact 'much better than Heihe's'. Replete with historic monuments and military statues, the rather imposing embankment exudes ethnic pride and renewed confidence. Its very structure is strongly reminiscent of military fortifications and incorporates in fact the shape of the Soviet lookout towers in the outline of its outer vertical wall. In this sense, it differs starkly from Heihe's embankment, which is redolent with Russian symbolism and actively seeks to foster a sense of good-neighbourliness.

Other dramatic transformations in the course of the last few years have been the city's policies with regard to public illumination. Having long criticized Heihe's practice of night-time 'light shows', Blagoveshchensk now appears to be following suit. As the municipality's principal architect explained in a newspaper article, the city should elicit a festive mood (*prazdnichnoe nastroyenie*) when one walks around it at night. If ideally the local authorities would like all buildings to be lit, precedence will be

given to historically important buildings found on the principal thoroughfares. That these measures are Blagoveshchensk's 'tailored response to its Chinese counterpart (*svoeobrazny otvet kitaiskoi storone*)' is clear from the priority given to the riverbank: even before the central Lenin Street and 50 Let Oktyabrya Street, the very first place to be illuminated will be Krasnoflotskaya Street, a minor road running right along the embankment (Zrazhevskaya 2011).¹⁰

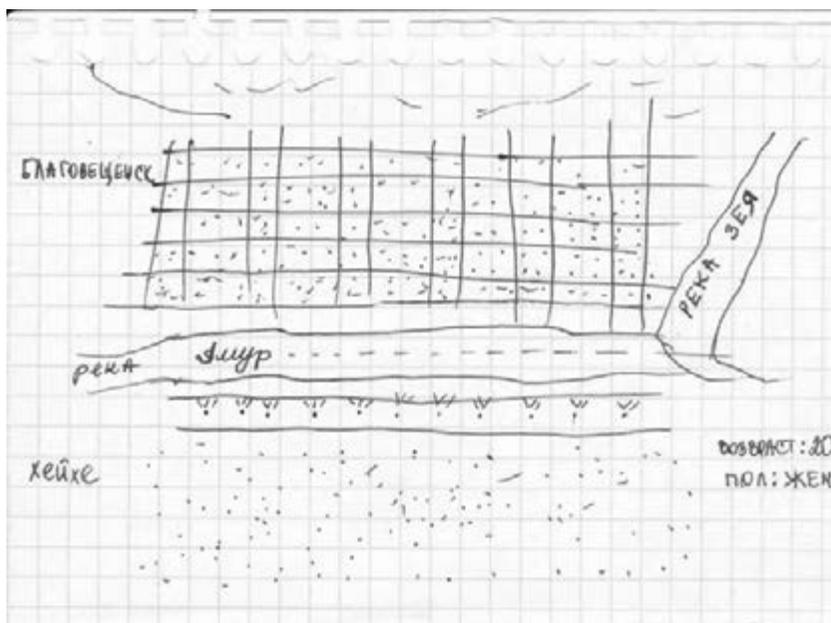
What this sudden evolution clearly signalled was the readiness of Blagoveshchensk to engage architecturally with Heihe, and to engage with it on *Chinese terms*. Traditionally, Siberian ideals of urban modernity had revolved primarily around the human struggle over nature, with smooth and straight roads figuring as crucial markers of this modernity. In their conversations with me, Blagoveshchensk residents routinely mentioned roads in their inter-city comparisons. Several proudly pointed out Blagoveshchensk's grid-like regularity,¹¹ and this aspect was in fact a feature that was frequently emphasized in the drawings as well. According to Maria, a political scientist working at the Amur State University, the Russian cultural preference for grid-like regularity as marker of progress and modernity is even stronger in a town like Blagoveshchensk which was a military outpost and retains this 'Roman fort' quality. 'We are still modernists here', she quipped. 'Blagoveshchensk hasn't reached post-modernism yet!'

In most interviews, respondents explicitly contrasted what they saw as the 'real' modernity of Blagoveshchensk with its wide, straight and tree-lined avenues, as opposed to the bright, shiny, but essentially 'fake' Chinese-style modernity. Heihe's riverfront development – the only surface of Heihe visible from the other side of the Amur – was consistently described to me as a Potemkin village, a visual trick performed by the Chinese. It was nothing but '*pyl' v glaza*', I was told, a show intended to attract Russian customers. My Russian interlocutors pointed out the discrepancy they saw between, on the one hand, the surface image of the city as a success story and emergent modernity and, on the other,

10 Evidently Blagoveshchensk seeks to avoid the occasional, but smarting, questions from visitors who, pointing at the bright lights of Heihe, ask the way to the city center.

11 However, people also commented on the high quality of the roads in China. Tanya, who lives in Heihe and works remotely with her main office in Blagoveshchensk, pointed out: 'Roads in Russia are very bad. Actually we have a saying – "There are two evils in Russia: idiots and roads" (*v Rossii dve bedy: duraki i dorogi*). Our roads are full of potholes and are often quite dangerous. When Putin came to visit, they resurfaced all the streets where his car was going to pass through. But only those!'

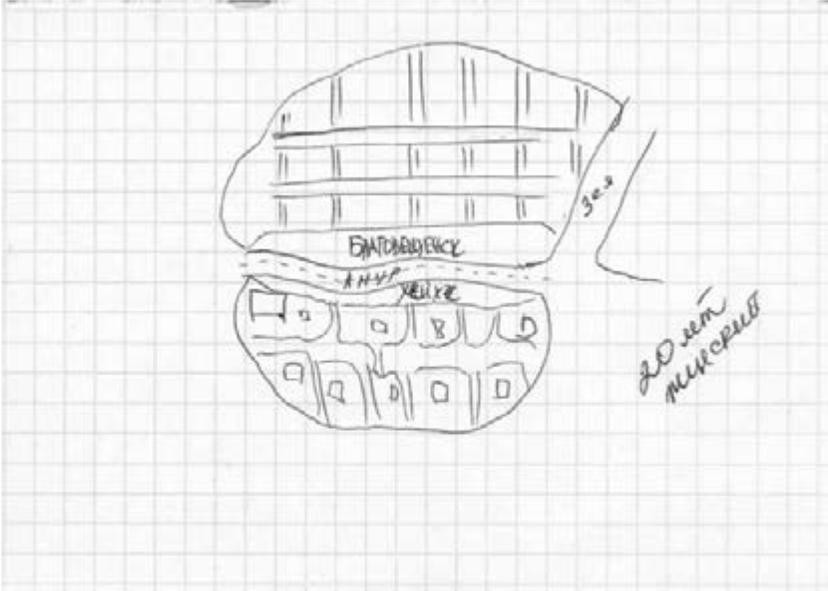
Figure 1.3 Emphasis on the linear and grid-like quality of Blagoveshchensk in student drawings, Amur State University, Blagoveshchensk, 2011



the ‘real’ Heihe – poor, dangerous, and with a low level of ‘culture’. As a result of these discursive practices, Heihe’s modernity has consistently been described as a two-dimensional surface dedicated to exchange with Russian customers. In interviews, my interlocutors equated it essentially with a ‘bazaar city’, thereby rendering invisible other forms of urban development and commercial exchange in which Russians do not figure (Billé 2014).

Russian compression of Heihe into a singular surface also means that Blagoveshchensk has long dismissed Chinese realities as a mere illusion and has resisted engaging with its Chinese neighbour on an equal footing. A consequence of viewing Heihe as a surface is of course that the observer’s gaze, unable to pierce it, is reflected back, thereby turning the surface into a mirror. This reverberating process is graphically evident from one of the drawings made by one of the students. Unable to see beyond the riverside front, the focus of the gaze is turned upon Blagoveshchensk itself. As a result, and despite their avowed shallowness and artificiality, the bright lights of Heihe function as a reflective surface which returns to Russian onlookers the comparative lack of development of their own

Figure 1.4 Emphasis on the linear and grid-like quality of Blagoveshchensk in student drawings, Amur State University, Blagoveshchensk, 2011



city.¹² Genuine or not, Heihe's surface has become one of the main sights of Blagoveshchensk. Indeed, night-time Heihe even features among some of the very small selection of postcards and souvenirs available in Blagoveshchensk.

The mimetic quality of the relationship between the two cities is greatly facilitated by a shared understanding of the nature of urbanism and modernity. As mentioned earlier, Heihe's evening lightshow gains potency precisely because of the significance of light and electricity in Russian culture. Similarly, other aspects characteristic of contemporary Chinese urbanism, such as monumentalism or iconicity (Ren 2011; Woodworth 2011), are also foundational to Russia's experience of urban modernity (Stites 1999). The reflective quality of Heihe's surface is thus closely intertwined with wider notions of projection, mimesis and alterity.

12 Projection is seen from the Chinese side insofar as Heihe's night lights – and in particular the laser beam mentioned earlier – also function as a torch illuminating the other side. No longer just a two-dimensional façade, the riverbank thus gains considerable depth as well as agency to act upon the other side. I am grateful to Marilyn Strathern for suggesting this active dimension of the Heihe riverfront surface.

As the anthropologist Michael Taussig (1993) has shown, cultures continually borrow from each other through a dual process of imitation – mimicry – and differentiation – alterity. This argument holds true for urban staging of modernity, where urban symbols become part of the overall grammar. As I illustrated earlier, this is particularly the case with cities in ‘twin city’ settings such as Blagoveshchensk and Heihe which are drawn into a continued dialogue. Surface inscriptions are particularly powerful here since they are the ones where identities tend to be marked and displayed (Anzieu 1995 [1985]).

Borrowing and imitation, as Simon Harrison has eloquently argued, are fundamental processes to the production of difference insofar as ‘people should differ from one another intelligibly’ (Harrison 2006: 44-47). As Richard Handler has shown in the context of Quebec, ‘Like a row of ethnic restaurants in any North American city ... nations and ethnic groups participate in a common market to produce differences that make them all the same’ (Handler 1988: 195). Thus Heihe’s installation of a larger Ferris wheel, its erection of taller buildings, and its display of brighter lights are all inscribed within a dual ‘process of mutual identification with each other as well as competitive differentiation from each other’ (Harrison 2006: 46). Similarly, Blagoveshchensk’s decisions to landscape and redesign its riverbank and to illuminate the buildings that line the Amur River constitute a sign of engagement, competition, as well as self-redefinition. One-upmanship is thus not simply a passive copying of the Other, but a more complex and inherently dialogical process whereby the ‘groups concerned are making claims to equality as well as to superiority’ (Harrison 2006: 46). This uneasy melding of mimesis and rivalry comes in fact close to Singh’s concept of ‘agonistic intimacy’, which he defines as ‘relatedness whose coordinates are not predisposed entirely toward either oppositional negation or communitarian affirmation’ (Singh 2011: 431).

Concluding Remarks

In the last two decades since the Sino-Russian border opened, the two cities of Heihe and Blagoveshchensk have witnessed a dramatic transformation. From a small village, Heihe has mushroomed into a sizeable town which now rivals Blagoveshchensk in terms of density and urban modernity. If Blagoveshchensk appears to have remained mostly stagnant, the transformations the town has experienced have been no less radical. The opening of the border has led to the city’s loss of significance with regard to national

security. No longer a closed city guarding the border with an enemy state, Blagoveshchensk has become peripheral and remote from the point of view of the capital.¹³

While its ties to Moscow and western Russia have weakened, the Russian town has, by contrast, grown very close to its Chinese neighbour. Economically dependent on each other for their survival, the two cities are commonly described as in symbiosis with one another. Visually they also mirror each other. In a process of mimetic condensation, Heihe has taken on Russian symbols and reinvented itself as a Russian theme park. For the Russians on the other side of the Amur River, the very surface of Heihe acts as a mirror reflecting the aspirations and failings of their own city.

This mirroring process recalls Žižek's discussion of the dual nature of the neighbour, who stands as both the same and Other: 'beneath the neighbour as my semblant, my mirror image, there always lurks the unfathomable abyss of radical Otherness, of a monstrous Thing that cannot be gentrified' (Žižek 2005: 143). The mirror image that informs the relationship between Heihe and Blagoveshchensk is similarly a dual one. The ties that bind the two cities may be close, but they have not attenuated the sense that the river marks some kind of civilizational fault-line. More than two decades after the border reopened and relations normalized between the two sides, the idea endures that Europe and Asia are two different and incompatible civilizations (Fond Obshchestvennoye Mnenie 2007, Ponkratova et al. 2009). But at the same time, the sentiment that Heihe is not quite Chinese, not quite Other, was made explicit in interviews. Food in Heihe was consistently described as 'too Russified', not Chinese enough. Heihe's Chinese residents similarly tend to be seen as having changed through their contact with Russians and to have become different from other Chinese. The picture of Heihe that emerged in discussions with my interlocutors was thus one that was both the absolute Other in the Žižekian sense *and* a part of oneself (an area of Blagoveshchensk itself, a '*rayon goroda*'). Relations to the national capital were similarly fractured: Moscow was both the ultimate cultural reference point *and* the absolute remote.

It is precisely in this heterogeneity of views that the destabilization of cultural values (and the unseating of Blagoveshchensk as outpost and

13 The sense of remoteness increasingly associated with Moscow is both physical and symbolic. Travel from Blagoveshchensk to Moscow has become extremely expensive – to the extent that it is now cheaper to travel via Harbin and Beijing. On visits to Moscow, Blagoveshchensk residents are also surprised to discover that in the capital no-one seems to know where Blagoveshchensk is. Whereas Blagoveshchensk was a strategically and symbolically important city during the Soviet era, it has become a non-place (cf. Augé 1992, Brown 2003).

cultural beacon) gains palpability. The conflicting views expressed by my interlocutors should not necessarily be interpreted as symptomatic of a deep social fracture, with Blagoveshchensk society neatly divided into two moieties. The idea that these positions represent the extremities of a wide spectrum – ranging from very negative ideas of China predicated on demographic imbalance and alleged irredentist ambitions to extremely enthusiastic attitudes about China and Chinese culture – is also somewhat misleading. In fact, much ambivalence was present within individuals. Thus even the most staunchly pro-Chinese interviewees, such as students who spoke fluent Chinese and dreamed of moving to China to live and work, occasionally juxtaposed both positive and negative assessments.

As I have shown in this text, the friction generated by close contact between two neighbours has not necessarily always been a positive one, as the example of the Blagoveshchensk massacre in 1900 makes clear. However, as affective energy, neighbouring is ultimately transformative. It can, though not always, attenuate the sense of social and cultural distance between two polities, but more importantly the ‘art of neighbouring’ compels both parties to engage with each other in ways that are comparable and commensurable.

While the drawing of national borders has, in most countries, tended to slice through ethnic and cultural continuums, the 2,500 mile border separating Chinese Manchuria from the Russian Far East is somewhat unusual. While some groups autochthonous to the region do straddle the international boundary line, the vast majority of inhabitants are Russians on one side and Chinese on the other. The two groups moved to the region in fact long after the border was fixed, many of them through national relocation programs (Breyfogle et al. 2007) and for several decades were not allowed to interact. Throughout that period, these Russian and Chinese borderlanders did not reside at a site of exchange but, on the contrary, at a remote location, on the very edge of their respective polity. The dialogical and mimetic rapport established between the two border cities of Heihe and Blagoveshchensk in the last two decades has therefore, through sheer proximity, brought the two populations together. Unable to sustain the fiction of cultural separateness (see Tsing 2005: ix-x), the two cities have been compelled to (re)conceptualize themselves as one constituent in a symbiotic pair rather than separate entities. Thus, through the formation of countless commercial, cultural, social and linguistic ties, the energy generated through this neighbouring ‘friction’ has encouraged both cities to develop in increasingly commensurable ways, in spite of the structural differences that continue to visually set them apart.