Comparing Russia and China through their Borderlands: A Review of *On the Edge*, by Franck Billé and Caroline Humphrey

Emmanuel Brunet-Jailly *

* Emmanuel Brunet-Jailly, PhD, Chief Editor, *BIG_Review*; Professor of Public Administration, University of Victoria, Canada. Email: ebrunetj@uvic.ca, Twitter: @ebrunetj

*On the Edge* presents some of the major findings from *Where Rising Powers Meet*, a research program held at the University of Cambridge. Frank Billé and Caroline Humphrey take the view that life in borderlands has much to teach us; their book details the enriching views of ‘borderlanders.’ They discuss what we learn about China’s and Russia’s centres when we look at them from those borderlands. Indeed, both countries work fundamentally differently. China is swift in its actions and builds equipment. It is keen to learn from local populations. Whereas Russia on its side of the border does not seem able to deliver equipment, and/or enlists volunteers (to prevent local self-organising groups) to manage policy consultations.

Although in parts controversial, the determination of China’s borders is well documented in western literature; according to Howland (1996), Harrell (1995) Endymion (2000) these are imperial borderlands overwriting
the human geography of at least 55 minorities. During
the early Qin and Han eras (Tang, Song, Ming and
Qing dynasties) these remained both borderlands and
frontiers. Diana Lary (2007) in *The Chinese State at the
Border* interrogates the stability of China’s border since
the third century and documents how fluid those regions
remain until the 18th century, when progressive imperial
overreach started to transform those regions. The early
Soviet and Communist era was a period of unique
friendship, which lasted between about 1949 and 1953
when Khrushchev engaged in reforms. Tensions between
China and Russia then were revived. A dispute regarding
the position of the boundary line across the Heilongjiang
or Amur river, whose thalweg seem irrelevant in winter
months because once iced-over it turns out to be a
highway for trade flows, also justified multiple conflicts.
The peaceful resolution of those took nearly 20 years
and was only ratified in April and May 2005, and in 2008
for the eastern part of the boundary line. Respected
Japanese scholar Iwashita’s own discussion of A 4000
Kilometer Journey along the Sino-Russian Border also
documents intense activities on the Chinese side of the
Heilongjiang River but illustrates China’s new posture
vis-à-vis its borders with Russia (and also with Hong
Kong, Macau, Taiwan, and the China Seas). However,
Iwashita, for instance, notes that border disputes become
boundary line demarcation disputes, and ultimately
are resolved. Indeed, the relationship between both
countries in our early part of the 21 century is stable.
Our understanding of the relationship, however, remains
informed by state-centric and geopolitical views; this is
not a view from the ground, or the perspective of the
people that live along the shared boundary line.

This is where Billié and Humphrey innovate brilliantly with
On the Edge, a book that discusses and contextualises
our current knowledge of Russia and China focusing
on the borderlands alongside the Shilka, Argun, Amur,
and Ussuri Rivers; they write “we describe what is
actually happening, record real-life events, and explain
the experiences of citizens of Russia and China as they
deal with both the policy injunction from above and
their encounters with one another” (2). Their book is
divided into seven chapters, an introduction, and a Coda.
Notably, the book has 58 pages of notes, 22 pages of
references, and an 18-pages index.

In the Introduction and Chapter 1, “Border Spaces”, Billié
and Humphrey set the stage of Russia’s “administrative-
territorial monster” (37), its anisotropic strength
expanding across its eastern expanses in a linear, colonial
manner, whereby margins are sparsely populated, and,
of China’s circular and wave-like swelling and expansion
across waters and lands from a Manchu center, and
today’s resulting densely populated and entrepreneurial
borderlands. In the middle, the Shilka, Argun, Amur, and
Ussuri Rivers have lost their status as transportation
corridors: these are rivers with no bridges. There is a rail
connection at the land border of Zabaikal/Manzhouli;
a known customs bottleneck where train cars linger to
adapt from a larger to a narrower rail system (Russian/
the authors detail the actions of each center into
their peripheries: China’s may be evolving into a more
centralised system, but its borderlands are also managed
by innumerable organisations that participate in making
the border region. This is in great contrast with the sparse
organisation on the Russian side, highly dependent on
the views and resulting political patronage of the center.

Chapter 3, “Making a Living in the Cross-Border Economy”
is a review of how there are many more Russians on the
ground in China, than the reverse. That despite Russian
media portraits, Chinese in Russia work contracts and
do not settle. Suggesting that for China, cooperation in
the region is functional and inclusive (as illustrated by
the controversial Road and Belt initiative launched by Xi
Jinping in 2013), whereas for Russia it is territorial and
historical, i.e. serving the maintenance of a post-Soviet
geopolitical order. Chapter 4, “Indigenous Peoples of the
Borderlands”, one of the four most outstanding chapters
of this book (Chapters 4, 5, 6 and 7) Caroline Humphrey,
thanks to detailed interviews, describes and analyses the
lives of Indigenous communities in those borderlands.
As policies succeed in further differentiating them across
the borders, in the face of growing poverty and uncertain
futures for their youths, Indigenous communities in Russia
are seeking more independence from the federation.
In China, communities are trading their-identities-and-
lands into tourism ventures. However, thanks to religious
activities and rituals those communities also reinvent
their cross-border relationships. China in particular does
not like it, but electronic networks interfere and enhance
communal relationships. In “Friends, Foes, and Kin
across the Border” (Chapter 5) Francois Billié explores
and questions young Chinese and Russian people to
assess how genuine the relationship is: he argues that it
is shallow. The Russian side’s primary goal is borderland
delineation and separation, whereas, on the Chinese side,
economic and touristic reasons drive a lot of business
arrangements. In parts both central governments,
thanks to transfers of populations into the borderlands
have succeeded in maintaining a social and cultural
distance across the border. In Chapter 6, “Resources and
Environment”, Billié explores through more interviews the
role of poaching and conservation in the borderlands.
The chapter is counterintuitive: poaching is active but
conservation as well thanks to a convergence of both
academic cooperation and national image-building
exercises serving both Putin and Xi, resulting in the
preservation of the Amur Leopard, the Siberian Tiger,
and concurrently the formation of a nature reserve larger
than the United States’ Yellow Stone National Park.
Chapter 7, “Bright Lights across the Amur” comes back
to fundamental disparities in population (i.e. millions
pressed against the border on the Chinese side while
on the Russian side, a land mass nearly one third of the
whole country, is inhabited by only six million people.
This sets the stage for a comparison of the development
of two cross-border cities: Blagoveschensk (Russia)
and Heihe (China), and to conclude that after years of “hermetic closure of the international border”, the two cities are becoming similar through “borrowing, inspiration and mimesis” (267). In the Coda, “Bridging the Gap” the discussion comes back to fundamental lessons: the absence of working bridges, and concurrent planned but non-existent thriving economic exchanges. But also, China’s long hand inclusive developments contrasts deeply with Russia’s vertiginous top-down approach to controlling territory.

All in all, this is a rare and outstanding book; China and Russia specialists and graduate students will learn a great deal from reading this beautifully crafted exploration of the Chinese–Russian borderlands.

Works Cited


