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Comparing Russia and China through their Borderlands: A Review of *On the Edge*, by F. Billé and C. Humphrey

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On the Edge: Life along the Russia-China Border

by Franck Billé and Caroline Humphrey

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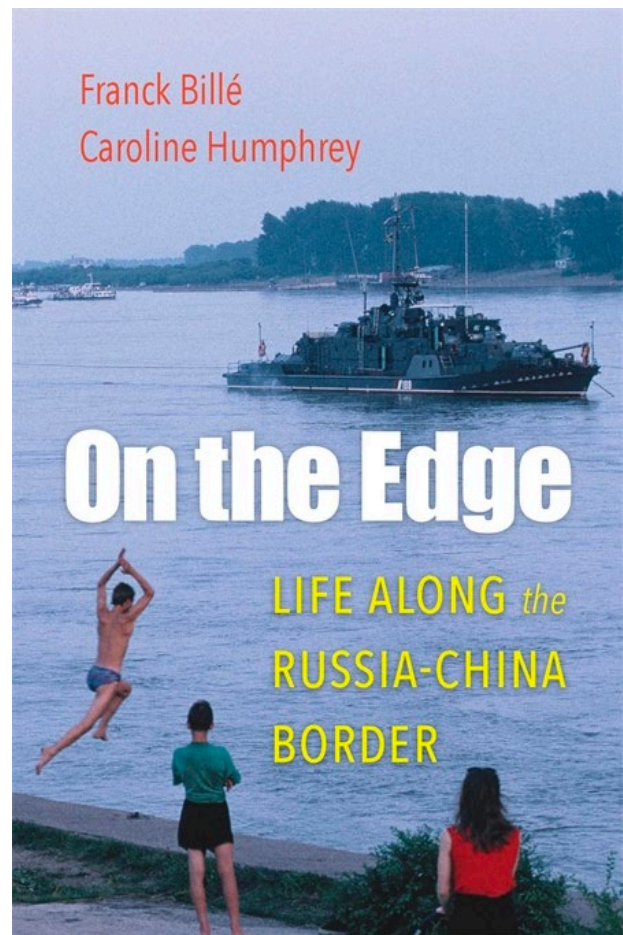
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376 pages.

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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



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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 Billé 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", Billé 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/Chinese). In Chapter 2, "Standoff in the Border River", 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 Billé 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", Billé 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: Blagoveshchensk (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.

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