

“Competing Imperialisms in Northeast Asia: from an idea to a project”

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A few years ago, with Dr Emma Reisz I considered the study of borderlands and customs, in particular the China’s custom on the Russian border and how it could be defined: global, transnational or cross-border. From that research it became evident the beneficial use of traditional written sources in combination of more modern methodology such as database and visualisation, especially map representations. The initial pilot project successfully proved the research team with a networking frame, abundant sources, new ideas and fresh historical approaches, and a collaboration with colleagues from Saint Petersburg State University. Therefore, we decided to continue and look for a bigger context: Northeast Asia was the place.

The case studies, where I concentrate my attention, is the border town called in Chinese Suifenhe (Heilongjiang Province), bordering with Pogranichny (Primorsky Krai) literally meaning “border town”. The spot in the map is at the junction for many important research questions: how was life and work for those leaving at a border town between China and Russia along the Chinese Eastern Railway? Why was Suifenhe opened as a treaty port by the 1860 treaty? Why and how did the Chinese customs station opened in 1907 operate? Why did they choose to make prisoners of war exchanges at Suifenhe after world War Two? And not least, why did China’s central bank approve a pilot program for direct use of cash ruble in Suifenhe city in 2015?

These are some of the many questions that this locality provided to me, but those very same questions are indicative of a cross-border reality, where many countries may dispute one another on their authority and territoriality, which imperialism is the climax. Since none of the countries present in Northeast Asia can claim their territorial authority for unceasing centuries, it means that they - China, Russia, Japan and Korea, and many Western powers present in China at the turn of the 20th century -all were competing at certain degree to hoist their flag in the region.