

A Very Orderly Friendship: The Sino-Soviet Border under the Alliance Regime, 1950-1960

Sören Urbansky (Freiburg U., Germany)

On the icy morning of 9 December 1949, a special train from Beijing pulled into Manzhouli Station. As soon as the locomotive came to a complete stop, political cadres from Beijing, China's Northeast, and a Soviet General who had been sent in advance to the last railway stop on Chinese soil, got on the coach to greet a very special passenger. After a short while, Mao Zedong, wearing a coat and an engine driver's hat, stepped out of the train and rushed into the station building. The local residents did their best to welcome the Great Helmsman; railway staff spruced up the first class waiting hall and prepared tea. Mao chatted briefly with the stationmaster and hurried for the Moscow-bound Soviet deluxe train on the track north of the station building. This scene of Mao's first trip abroad became commonplace in Chinese collective memory.¹ At Otpor Station about ten kilometers west of Manzhouli, the Soviet Union's Deputy Foreign Minister A. I. Lavrent'ev met Mao and his entourage to accompany them to Moscow.²

Nearly three months later after prolonged negotiations in Moscow, the Chinese leader again passed the Soviet-Chinese border. In the early morning hours of 26 February 1950, he cabled one last telegram from Soviet soil to Joseph Stalin to thank him and his subordinates for the "warm and amiable hospitality."³ Though the cordial words suggested otherwise, the reception of Mao and Zhou Enlai had been lukewarm and both returned home with mixed results from Moscow. The Alliance and Friendship Treaty, signed on 14 February 1950, provided China with economic aid and security guarantees, but the Chinese delegation failed to restore sovereignty over Outer Mongolia and were forced to grant the Soviets temporary military and economic concessions in Manchuria and Xinjiang. These results, however, were not the only potholes in the bumpy road towards friendship.

The majority of studies on the tumultuous history of the Sino-Soviet relationship examine top-level foreign policy and bonds between the two parties in order to explain the ups and downs of the relationship between the two communist powers. Recent scholarship argues the fate of the alliance both on grounds of ideology and clashing state interests, but the 1950s are generally perceived as a honeymoon period, albeit marred by the seeds of future conflict.⁴ While the Moscow

¹ See the flowery recollections of Manzhouli's stationmaster Xu Liangchen: "Yi 1949 nian Mao zhuxi fang Sulian lu jing Manzhouli zhan," in: *Hulunbei'er wenshi ziliao*, vol. 5, Zhongguo renmin zhengzhi xieshang huiyi Hulunbei'er meng weiyuanhui wenshi ziliao weiyuanhui, ed., 1994, 86-87. See also *Manzhouli shi zhi*, Manzhouli shi bianzuan weiyuanhui, ed., Huhehaote 1998, 1107-1108.

² "Proekt Postanovlenia Politbiuro v svyazi s predstoiashchim prieddom tov. Mao Tse-duna v Moskvu," V. M. Molotov to I. V. Stalin, 26.11.1949, RGASPI, f. 82, op. 2, d. 1241, ll. 118-121.

³ "Telefonogramma po VCh iz Otpora v MID SSSR" V. M. Molotov to I. V. Stalin, 26.2.1950, RGASPI, f. 82, op. 2, d. 1251, ll. 125-126, quote on l. 125.

⁴ Important recent books on the relations between the USSR and the PRC up to the mid-1960s that draw on

summit in winter 1949-1950 may have improved relations on paper, it was only in 1953, with the end of the Korean War and Stalin's death, that the relationship entered its "golden years". The war had created some sense of brotherhood between the two alienated regimes and Stalin's overbearing attitude no longer burdened bilateral ties. Economic cooperation, technical assistance, and cultural exchange reached new heights; Chinese students enrolled in universities in the USSR, while Soviet specialists were sent to China. Khrushchev's criticism of Stalin at the twentieth congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) in February 1956 is often perceived as a watershed moment in the alliance's history. During the following years, deep-rooted disagreements over ideology, economy, military affairs, border territories, foreign policy, and leadership in the Communist hemisphere led to intense diplomatic quarrels and then public attacks. The sudden withdrawal of Soviet experts in 1960 and Mao's decision to end party relations in 1966 were just added problems in what was becoming a rapidly disintegrating partnership, which culminated in the violent border clashes of March 1969, a major shift in the Cold War.⁵

Two decades after the "archival revolution" in Russia, high politics between Beijing and Moscow are becoming better understood. This paper builds on such scholarship in order to look at a rather understudied aspect of the short-lived alliance: the implications these policies of friendship and cooperation had on the long, shared border and the people populating those areas.⁶ If we include Outer Mongolia as Soviet satellite state, China and the Soviet Union shared a common border of more than 12,000 kilometers – the world's longest land border. This article will focus on one small sector in the vicinity of the trilateral junction between present day Mongolia, Russia and China, namely the border region from the upper Argun River basin up to the Mongolian grassland boundary with the border cities of Manzhouli and Zabaikal'sk at the center. The construction of the Chinese Eastern Railway (CER) – the last leg of the Trans-Siberian railway – that by 1903 would link Vladivostok to Chita via Manchuria, had created new settlements such as the border city of Manzhouli (Russian: Manchzhuriia). The opposite border village Otpor (since 1958 Zabaikal'sk) was founded over two decades later. Even after the Trans-Mongolian Railway had been completed in the mid 1950s, most people and goods passed through Otpor and Manzhouli.⁷ From 1949 to the mid 1960s, the twin communities became the key economic hub for bilateral commerce and the first stop

Chinese and Russian records are Lorenz M. Lüthi, *The Sino-Soviet split. Cold War in the Communist World*, Princeton 2008; Sergey Radchenko, *Two Suns in the Heavens. The Sino-Soviet Struggle for Supremacy, 1962-1967*, Washington, D.C. 2009; and Odd Arne Westad, ed., *Brothers in Arms. The Rise and Fall of the Sino-Soviet Alliance, 1945-1963*, Washington, DC 1998.

⁵ For more on March 1969, see Ryabushkin research note in this issue.

⁶ A first publication which explores these aspects is Aleksandr Frolov's, "Prigranichnoe sotrudnichestvo sovetского Dal'nego Vostoka s severo-vostochnymi provintsiiami Kitaia v 1950-e gody," in: *Problemy Dal'nego Vostoka*, no. 3 (2007), 113-124.

⁷ Freight and passenger traffic along this new railway link via Ulan-Bator started on 1 January 1956 thereby reducing the travelling distance between Moscow and Beijing by 1,141 kilometers. Yet the Trans-Manchurian Railway and the twin border city Otpor-Manzhouli did not lose its significance. Victor P. Petrov, "New Railway Links between China and the Soviet Union," in: *The Geographical Journal*, vol. 122, no. 4. (December 1956), 471-477.

for delegations from the neighboring country. Manzhouli and Otpor were therefore the connecting hinges of the two communist countries and their ally states. Furthermore, a long history of kinship and economic cross-boundary ties across the Argun, that were only cut off during the first half of twentieth century, opens an unique window to explore to what extent these networks were reestablished again. It is for these reasons that this area makes an excellent barometer through which the impact of Sino-Soviet alliance on the borderlands can be investigated on the ground.

To understand the situation in the shared peripheries, one has to keep the transformation of the Sino-Soviet borderlands prior to 1949 in mind. When Mao passed Manzhouli twice on his train to and from Moscow, it was difficult to speak of a common Sino-Soviet borderland. Because of the Sino-Soviet conflict over the CER in 1929, and the Japanese occupation of China's Northeast from 1931, the borderlands were built up into highly militarized zones, effectively putting an end to centuries-long uncontrolled cross-border contacts. American scholar Oscar Martínez, on the basis of his studies of the border between the United States and Mexico, has called this an "alienated borderland." In such a borderland, routine interaction across the border is practically nonexistent due to animosities between the people or the states on both sides of the border. Political disputes, warfare, nationalism, ideological friction, cultural dissimilarity, religious enmity, and ethnic rivalry can be major causes for such alienation. According to Martínez classification, in such areas considerable people-to-people contacts and international trade are difficult and in many cases they even are forbidden. Through continuous tensions these areas remain economically underdeveloped and sparsely populated.⁸

Did the Sino-Soviet borderland therefore become a "coexistent", "interdependent", or even "integrated borderland" under the alliance regime? How penetrable was the border during the 1950s? This article argues that despite an ubiquitous friendship rhetoric and increasing bilateral cooperation in economy, education, culture and other spheres both countries succeeded in limiting cross-border interactions in their shared borderlands. Moscow's and Beijing's policies restricted traditional forms of border trade, informal cross-boundary cooperation, day-to-day contacts of the borderland populations thereby contradicting the proclaimed friendship. In other words, relations between the centers intensified whereas contacts in the borderlands decreased.

A war scenario with Japan at the Far Eastern frontiers was not the only reason why the people on both Argun River banks had become estranged over the years. Though the danger did not exist along the shared border with China any longer, many policies that reflected this scare continued to exist after 1945 and the whole frontier zone remained closed. The USSR Constitution of 1936 deprived local and regional administrative bodies of any decision-making power related to the neighboring country; only the highest political organs, the Supreme Soviet, and de facto the CPSU Central Committee, carried out diplomacy. Other policies also indicate that the authorities maintained a strict border regime despite friendship. Since the mid-1950s people in the Soviet borderlands again were required to obtain a special pass (*propusk*) for entering the border zone. Otpor once more

⁸ For his model of four different borderlands see Oscar Martínez, "The Dynamics of Border Interaction. New Approaches to Border Analysis," in: Schofield, Clive H., ed., *Global Boundaries*, London 1994, 1-5.

became a “closed settlement” inside a zone that was enforced by patrolling border guards.⁹ In the 1950s, the Chinese still feared an increasing Soviet influence or even the unification of their Northeastern territories with the Soviet Union, as proposed by Gao Gang.

The making of Zabaikal'sk

The Yalta Agreement had a great impact on the fate of the two border settlements. It determined that the two trunk lines of the former CER and the South Manchurian Railway (SMR) should be operated under joint Soviet-Chinese management. From August 1945, these two lines came under the joint management of the USSR and Republican China and were together known as the Chinese Changchun Railway (CCR). On 1 May 1950, seven months after the PRC came to life, the CCR was formally reestablished under joint USSR-PRC management. On 31 December 1952, the Soviet government transferred its CCR rights to the government of China without payment – this included tracks, land, rolling stock, real estate, adjacent workshops, etc.¹⁰

These new circumstances and the intensification of economic and technical ties between the two states triggered the growth of both border settlements. Within ten years time, Manzhouli's population almost quadrupled from 9,180 inhabitants in 1949 to 35,131 in 1959.¹¹ Despite the sharp increase in population the situation in the Chinese borderlands was poor. Manzhouli and Haila'er and other cities and villages were affected by the political turmoil during the first decade of communist China. Living standards were poor and residents suffered from supply shortfalls.¹²

While all the transfer of passengers and cargo prior to 1949 had been almost exclusively handled in Manzhouli, the full return of CCR to China also required a quick re-organization of infrastructure at Otpor Station. The Greater Soviet Far East (including Transbaikalia) however suffered, similar to the Chinese borderlands, from several major structural problems and obstructed the creation and development of a new border settlement on Soviet soil. Even though the state

⁹ A stamp in the passports distinguished borderlanders from ordinary Soviet citizens. When Iurii Kozlov moved to Otpor in 1953 no such special documents were required yet. Four years later, when his future wife Valentina took up residence in the Soviet border settlement the *propusk* had already been reintroduced. Author's interviews with Valentina Kozlova and Iurii Kozlov on 3 August 2009 in Zabaikal'sk.

¹⁰ *Manzhouli zhan zhi. 1901–2001*, “Manzhouli zhan zhi” bianwei hui, ed., Beijing 2002, 53-54. For the negotiations on the circumstances and reasons of the CCR's return and its impacts on the bilateral relations see Zhang Shengfa: “The Main Causes for the Return of the Changchun Railway to China and Its Impact on Sino-Soviet Relations,” in: Thomas P. Bernstein, Li Hua-yu, eds., *China Learns from the Soviet Union, 1949-Present*, (Lanham 2010), 61-78 and Zhang Shengfa: “Return of the Chinese Changchun Railway to China by the USSR”, in: Bruce A. Elleman, Stephen Kotkin, eds., *Manchurian Railways and the Opening of China. An International History*, (Armonk 2010), 171-194. On 1 January 1953 the CCR was renamed “Harbin Railway,” see “Zhongguo Changchun tielu guanliju gaiwei Ha'erbin tielu guanliju,” in: *Renmin Ribao*, 1.1.1953.

¹¹ *Manzhouli shi zhi*, Manzhouli shi bian-zuan weiyuanhui, ed., Huhehaote 1998, table on 54.

¹² The political campaigns cannot be reviewed in detail here, since they did not long affect relations in the borderlands. For the Resist America Support Korea, the Great Leap Forward and other political campaigns of the 1950s and its impact on the border city of Manzhouli see *Manzhouli shi zhi*, Manzhouli shi bian-zuan weiyuanhui, ed., Huhehaote 1998, 125-129.

encouraged immigration by material incentives and ideological appeals, a sparse and scattered population created a constant shortage of manpower. In the ten districts of Chita Province that bordered on the PRC and Mongolian People's Republic (MPR), population density was, in 1950, only 1.5 persons per square kilometer. Rural populations in some border areas even declined. Another problem was the remoteness and distance to urban and industrial centers. Chita, the provincial capital, was 6,208 kilometers from Moscow by train. Many consumer goods, machinery and even food or fuel had to be imported into the border region by train. Four years of war against Germany and the brief campaign against Japan had exhausted the country's economy. In the postwar years the region had a low priority in the allocation of capital, its economic output lagged far behind the countrywide norms, with a decline in manufacturing output. The situation for agriculture was similar. Tractors were few and dated back to the early 1930s. Only nine out of 241 *kolkhozy* in the ten border districts of Chita province had electricity in 1949 and three quarters of housing in the rural areas either needed repair or were past hope. Public health service was poor and the school system was underdeveloped and due to a lack of material incentives the severe shortage of physicians and teachers could not be reduced.¹³

Despite these obstacles, on 3 July 1954, Otpor was elevated from a station to a village (*rabochii poselok*). Population in the border settlement exploded from about 2,300 in March 1952 to 7,767 in early 1954.¹⁴ During the early 1950s, living conditions in Otpor were poor and the railway lacked manpower. Instead of the desired number of almost 1,200 railway workers, only 980 worked at the Otpor station in 1952. Railway administration could only provide half of its Otpor staff with more or less normal housing with whole families usually sharing one small room. 185 people lived in simple wooden houses or dugouts, 298 in dorms or rooms for train conductors whereas 497 of the railway employees lived in the "red village" (*krasnaia derevnia*), a train car park, which in 1952 consisted of 8 passenger and 56 heated good cars (*teplushka*). Usually three people shared one of those small basic cars. Construction lagged behind schedule. With the steady increase of railway personnel, the train car park expanded further and by the mid-1950s more than two hundred families were assigned to houses in Nagadan or other nearby villages.¹⁵

The pioneer stories Otpor veterans have to tell today often sound similar. In 1955, right after graduation from Chita Railway College, Vera Zolotareva arrived in Otpor to work at the station. Like most of the newly arrived residents she was still an unmarried teenager. In 1953, at the age of 16, Iurii Kozlov began his lifelong career on the Soviet railways at Otpor Station, which was only interrupted by one year of military service in the Far East. In the beginning he worked as locksmith, later he was

¹³ On the specifics of the Chita province border districts see "Dokladnaia zapiska o merakh pomoshchi pograničnym raionam Chitinskoi oblasti" from Voronov, sekretar' Chitinskogo obkoma VKP/b/, to G. M. Malenkov, sekretar' Tsentral'nogo Komiteta VKP/b/, 26.8.1950, GChO, f. P-3, op. 4, d. 1224, ll. 1-27, especially ll. 1-6. For a more general structural economic analysis of the Soviet Far East of the first two postwar decades see E. Stuart Kirby, "The Soviet Far East. A Broad View," in: *International Affairs*, vol. 47, no. 1. (January 1971), 63-78.

¹⁴ GARF, f. A-385, op. 17, d. 22251, ll. 2-3; GARF, f. A-385, op. 17, d. 2619, l. 12.

¹⁵ Report of Iudin, Zam. Nachal'nika Zabaikal'skoi zhel. dor., 1952, GChO, f. P-3, op. 4, d. 2354, ll. 9-17, here ll. 16-17.

retrained several times to become first a stoker and later on an engine driver. Zolotareva was lucky to share a room with five colleagues in one of the six railway dormitories. Kozlov, less fortunate, spent his first year on a *teplushka* before moving to Nagadan. His wife Valentina, who came in 1957, was shocked, once she got off the train: “What a savage landscape, I thought [*eto mne pokazalos' diko*], when I first arrived from Briansk, neither trees nor shrubs, few buildings.” When they got married in 1958, they were assigned to a newly erected two-storey building.¹⁶

Until at least 1951, the people of Otpor shared one public bathhouse. Food supply was bad; a single railway car grocery store commuted irregularly between Borzia and Otpor and canteens worked poorly.¹⁷ The new power plant lacked the capacity to supply all 8,000 inhabitants with electricity in 1955.¹⁸ Only by the mid 1950s the housing situation improved. In the summer of 1956, all families on the railway cars could finally move into newly built houses and the “red village” was closed down.¹⁹

It was not just the construction of a new settlement that was needed to create a new border of friendship. During the Sino-Soviet war of 1929 the settlement, then known as railway siding no. 86, was at the center of conflict. After Soviet troops had defeated Chinese and White Russian forces in Manzhouli and Zhalainuo'er, the railway siding, with its highly symbolic and strategic position at the border, was named “Otpor” (repulse). During the Manchukuo years, the border settlement became a highly guarded Soviet outpost. By 1953 however, provincial authorities had tried to persuade Moscow to rename the border dwelling “Zabaikal'e” (Transbaikalia), seeing that its name “at present no longer conforms to the friendly relations with the People's Republic of China.”²⁰ Other possible names circulated as well. As late as 1958 it was rumored among Otpor's inhabitants that their hometown would soon be renamed “Druzhiba” (*friendship*).²¹ Maybe bureaucrats in Moscow were alert when relations began to cool after Nikita Khrushchev's ‘secret speech’ at the XXth congress of the CPSU in February 1956. Possibly afraid that they soon might need to give the settlement a new name again, the principal decision makers opted for an unbiased geographical choice. Otpor was, in 1958, finally renamed Zabaikal'sk.²²

¹⁶ Author's interviews with Vera Zolotareva on 3 July 2007 and Valentina Kozlova and Iurii Kozlov on 3 August 2009, all in Zabaikal'sk, quote by Valentina.

¹⁷ “Spravka o sostoianii kul'turno-bytovogo obsluzhivaniia zheleznodorozhnikov Borzinskogo otdeleniia dorogi,” 1951, GChO, f. P-3, op. 4, d. 1665, ll. 35-39.

¹⁸ Report of glavnyi kontroler po Chitinskoi oblasti of Ministerstvo Gosudarstvennogo Kontrolia “O sreznykh nedostatkakh v obsluzhivanii passazhirov na pograničnoi stantsii Otpor i drugikh vazhneishikh stantsiiakh, a takzhe v passazhirskikh poezdakh Zabaikal'skoi zheleznoi doroge,” GARF, f. R-8300, op. 12, d. 2290, ll. 35-49, here l. 43.

¹⁹ “Otchet partiinogo biuro partorganizatsii stantsii Otpor za period s noiabria mesiatza 1955 goda po oktiabr' 1956 goda,” GChO, f. P-1710, op. 1, d. 32, ll. 16-31, here l. 31.

²⁰ Letter from zam. predsdatelia ispolkoma oblastnogo Soveta deputatov Chitinskoi oblasti V. L. Zhukovskii to predsdateliu Prezidiumu Verkhovnogo Soveta RSFSR M. P. Tarasova, 26.8.1953, GARF, f. A-385, op. 17, d. 2399, l. 2, see also ll. 9, 11.

²¹ Author's interview with Valentina Kozlova and Iurii Kozlov on 3 August 2009 in Zabaikal'sk.

²² “Reshenie Ispolnitel'nogo komiteta Chitinskogo oblastnogo Soveta deputatov trudiashchikhsia,” no. 204, 31.5.1958, GARF, f. A-385, op. 17, d. 3385, l. 2.

Railway traffic back on track

Though the Soviet Union had transferred its railway rights over the CCR already in late 1952 to the Chinese government it took another two and a half years until the Transbaikalian Railway handed over Manzhouli Station's broad gauge tracks and adjacent railway equipment, houses, car park etc. to China. On 1 July 1955, Chinese Railways began its independent operations at the border station and Manzhouli's more than 300 Soviet railway personnel, who had lived permanently in a dormitory attached to the Soviet consulate, returned home.²³ Other Soviet institutions and enterprises subsequently left the Chinese border city. The Soviet consulate was closed in December 1956. The Soviet Far Eastern Freight Traffic company, which employed during the 1950s up to 60 Soviet employees in Manzhouli, closed its doors in late 1962.²⁴ Most of the Soviet workers who left the Chinese border city settled in Zabaikal'sk.²⁵ Thus the full restoration of Chinese sovereignty over Manzhouli resulted in further disentanglement of the two borderlands.

Railway traffic increased steadily in the 1950s. Transbaikalian Railways inaugurated two express trains per week, which ran from Otpor to Moscow in May 1950, and the Chita-Otpor-Chita train began to operate daily.²⁶ Chinese Railways also increased their inland passenger railway traffic throughout the 1950s, with five new train connections from and to Manzhouli Station.²⁷ The railways also re-inaugurated direct international passenger service between Moscow and Beijing. Regional newspapers and the people at Otpor Station greeted the first express train with great fanfare after it had crossed the border on 2 February 1954.²⁸

Cargo traffic intensified as well. The outbreak of the Korean War in June 1950 was an important reason for a sharp increase of international cargo on the railway line. Since the second half of 1950, Manzhouli became the major hub for military equipment shipments from the USSR and its allies to the Korean peninsula.²⁹ Several civilian agreements facilitated railway cargo traffic on the railway. On 14 March 1951 Soviet and Chinese Railways concluded the "Sino-Soviet treaty of coordinated railway transport" (*Zhong Su tielu lianyun xieding*), on 1 January 1954 Chinese Railways joined the International Railway Cooperation Organization (*guoji tielu hezuo zuzhi*), and in 1956 cooperation with eleven socialist countries resulted in the further expansion of railway cargo.³⁰

²³ *Manzhouli zhan zhi. 1901–2001*, "Manzhouli zhan zhi" bianwei hui, ed., Beijing 2002, 55. See also author's interview with Vera Zolotareva on 3 July 2007 in Zabaikal'sk.

²⁴ *Manzhouli shi zhi*, Manzhouli shi bianzuan weiyuanhui, ed., Huhehaote 1998, 227–228.

²⁵ Author's interviews with Vera Zolotareva on 3 July 2007 in Zabaikal'sk.

²⁶ "Novyi grafik dvizhenia poezdov," in: *Otpor*, 10.5.1950.

²⁷ *Manzhouli zhan zhi. 1901–2001*, "Manzhouli zhan zhi" bianwei hui, ed., Beijing 2002, 159–160.

²⁸ "Poezd Pekin-Moskva," in: *Zabaikal'skii rabochii*, 4.2.1954 and "Poezd idet iz Pekina," in: *Zabaikal'skii rabochii*, 5.2.1954. See also "Beijing-Mosike shouci zhida keche jinru Sulian guojing," in: *Renmin Ribao*, 4.2.1954 and "Zai Beijing-Mosike zhida keche shang," in: *Renmin Ribao*, 14.2.1954

²⁹ *Manzhouli shi zhi*, Manzhouli shi bianzuan weiyuanhui, ed., Huhehaote 1998, 125.

³⁰ *Manzhouli zhan zhi. 1901–2001*, "Manzhouli zhan zhi" bianwei hui, ed., Beijing 2002, 129–131. See also the regulations regarding among others passenger and cargo railway traffic between the USSR and the PRC in *Zhong Su guojing tielu xieding*, Zhonghua renmin gongheguo zhongyang renmin zhengfu tiedaobu, ed., Beijing

Table 1 Annual trade volume between the USSR and China/PRC (in mln. Rubles)

Year	Export to China/PRC	Import from China/PRC	Total
1946	11.4	55.7	67.1
1947	68.9	72.2	141.1
1948	112.1	81.2	193.3
1949	179.7	128.9	308.6
1950	349.4	169.5	518.9
1951	430.6	298.2	728.8
1952	498.8	372.4	871.2
1953	627.8	427.2	1055.0
1954	683.4	520.5	1203.9
1955	673.5	579.2	1252.7
1956	659.7	687.8	1347.5
1957	489.7	664.3	1154.0
1958	570.6	793.1	1363.7
1959	859.1	990.3	1849.4
1960	735.4	763.3	1498.7
1961	330.6	496.3	826.9
1962	210.1	464.7	674.8
1963	168.5	371.7	540.2
1964	121.8	282.8	404.6

Source: *Vneshniaia torgovlia SSSR. Statisticheskii sbornik 1918–1966*, Ministerstvo vneshnei torgovli SSSR. Planovoe-ekonomicheskoe upravlenie (ed.), Moskva 1967, table 2, 66-67.

Within five years, international transit cargo increased by more than six times from 715,000 tons in 1951 to the peak of 4,379,000 tons in 1955 which would then steadily decrease from the mid 1950s onwards. In 1960, bilateral trade went into free fall though cooperation is said to have continued for a few more years in certain military fields. In terms of tonnage, the major Chinese import goods were crude oil, wood, iron and steel, while food and cement were among the main export items.³¹ The impressive figures disguise, however, that in contrast to imperial times and the tumultuous post-Soviet years, Sino-Soviet border trade amounted to less than one percent of the overall bilateral trade volume in the late 1950s.³²

Though the figures might suggest otherwise, Otpor Station throughout the first half of the 1950s

never met its goals. In order to stir up the spirit of the railway men who worked at the station, criticism of the lack of discipline and security, incomplete railway equipment and technical deficiencies became a clear propaganda theme in local papers.³³ The limited number of Soviet customs officers resulted in insufficient control and the delay of cargo clearances in the early 1950s.³⁴ Transit goods waited days, not hours, for clearance.³⁵ Even by 1956 the transshipment point (*perevalochnaia baza*) did not fully work; only roughly 85 percent of trains were dispatched on time, and the stopping time of cargo cars was almost twice as high as anticipated. Several hundred goods cars waiting for clearance blocked international and regional goods traffic.³⁶

1953.

³¹ See tables in *Manzhouli shi zhi*. Manzhouli shi bianzuan weiyuanhui, ed., Huhehaote 1998, table on 674-675. See also Lüthi, 157-180 passim.

³² Frolov, "Prigranichnoe sotrudnichestvo," 114, 118.

³³ "Bol'she vnimaniia stantsii Otpor!" in: *Otpor*, 11.4.1951.

³⁴ "Akt proverki Ministerstva gosudarstvennogo kontroliia," 3.3.1951, GARF, f. R-8300, op. 22, d. 1090, ll. 4-9, here ll. 4-6.

³⁵ "Otchet partiinogo biuro partorganizatsii st. Otpor za oktiabr' 1954 god po oktiabr' 1955 g.," GACHO, f. P-1710, op. 1, d. 32, ll. 1-15, here l. 3.

³⁶ "Na stantsii Otpor plokhoe gotoviatsia k rabote zimoiu," in: *Leninskii Put'*, 23.8.1956, "Pochemu ne

Table 2 Annual international cargo transshipment at Manzhouli (in thsd. tons)

Year	Import	Export	Total
1951	515	204	715
1952	1149	1146	2295
1953	1313	1338	2651
1954	1473	1664	3137
1955	1938	2441	4379
1956	1241	1991	3232
1957	1521	1746	3267
1958	1998	1426	3424
1959	2391	1305	3696
1960	1902	913	2815

Source: *Manzhouli shi zhi*, Manzhouli shi bianzuan weiyuanhui (ed.), Huhehaote 1998, table on 674-675.

and cold in the winter due to the broken heating system and a public telephone, even for domestic calls, was nonexistent. A lot of locals were among regular customers of the station restaurant and, after the consumption of alcoholic drinks, often created disorder.³⁸ Many of the problems continued throughout the 1950s. Station staff treated international passengers roughly,³⁹ thus interfering with the state-intended image at its borders of a civilized and advanced nation.

Distant brothers

The most visible element in cross-border exchanges of the 1950s was arguably the representation and display of friendship at the shared border.⁴⁰ In the years before PRC had been founded, Soviets and Chinese became “friends” in the borderlands. In August and September 1945 the Soviet Army defeated and deported Japanese forces in Manchuria and then occupied the area. Less than a year later, on 17 May 1946 as Soviet forces withdrew, Chinese communist forces “liberated” Manzhouli. Even prior to the CCP’s control, Soviet authorities in some cities founded local Sino-Soviet Friendship Associations to foster positive local Sino-Soviet relations. In Dalian, for

vypolniaetsia grafik dvizheniia poezdov!” in: *Leninskii Put’*, 17.3.1956. See also GACHO, f. P-1710, op. 1, d. 37, l. 21.

³⁷ Xu Zhanxin, “Canjia Aotobao’er chezhan lüke zhan she luocheng yishi jingguo,” in: *Manzhouli wenshi ziliao*, vol. 9, Zhongguorenmin zhengzhi xieshang huiyi Manzhouli shi weiyuanhui, ed., Hulunbei’er 2003, 133-134.

³⁸ Just to mention a few of the deficits passenger service at Otpor suffered from. See report of Vasiliï Zhavoronkov, Ministr Gosudarstvennogo Kontrolia “O nedostatkakh v obsluzhivanii passazhirov na pogranichnykh stantsiiakh i v poezdakh, sleduiushchikh do granits SSSR,” 10.3.1955, GARF, f. R-8300, op. 12, d. 2309, ll. 249-263, here ll. 252-254. See also GARF, f. R-8300, op. 22, d. 1090, ll. 65-67, here l. 65.

³⁹ “Protokol otkrytogo partiinogo sobraniia partiinoi organizatsii stantsii Zabaikal’sk Zab. zhel. Dorogi,” 25.8.1959, GACHO, f. P-1710, op. 1, d. 39, ll. 61-63.

⁴⁰ This was, of course, not the only topic presented in the media. Soviet national and regional papers of the 1950s were full of positive stories of the Chinese ascent into a socialist future as were Chinese newspapers with positive reports on the USSR. See e.g. the serial on the New China in Chita regional papers “V novom Kitae,” in: *Zabaikal’skii rabochii*, 5.7.1953, 9.7.1953 and 12.7.1953.

instance, the association was formed in late 1945 and in Manzhouli no later than 1946. The USSR urgently needed to polish its image in China; Soviet abuses of the civilian population during the August 1945 military campaign had to be dispelled, so that earlier images of the Russians as colonial oppressors of China's Northeast would not return. Thus, among other tasks, the spread of information about Soviet culture and politics in order to create a positive image of the USSR and to popularize Stalinist style socialism was the most central task.⁴¹

During the initial stage however, propagating friendship was rather difficult. In Manzhouli, publications intended for distribution among the locals were scarce and only available in Russian. Newspapers and journals passed from hand to hand until they dissolved, but did not reach most of the Mongols and Chinese. Russian émigrés proved to be ignorant of the new rulers culture and way of life.⁴² The association held regular gatherings of members and organized rallies on commemorative days like Pushkin's 150 birthday, as well as on Soviet and Chinese communist holidays. By 1949 the Manzhouli municipal authorities had fully adopted the Soviet repertoire of public performance. For the 32nd Anniversary of the October Revolution, about 2,000 Chinese and 200 Soviet citizens gathered in the park around the Soviet War Memorial for a minute of silence and to hear several speeches on the Sino-Soviet friendship. An orchestra played and the streets were decorated with flags, slogans and portraits of Marx, Engels, Lenin, Stalin, Mao and Sun Yatsen.⁴³ Membership tripled within two years time, rising from almost 500 members in October 1947 to 1,641 members in September 1949 – roughly 18 percent of the city's overall population.

The association tried to reach a broad audience in the border town. It ran a number of cultural circles, a theatre group, a choir, volleyball and basketball teams and also set up photo exhibitions.⁴⁴ It organized a campaign against illiteracy (*likbez*) and a Russian language-training program – each with 50 to 100 participants in 1949. The association was in charge of a small library, which soon enjoyed popularity among the Mongol, Chinese and Soviet populations of Manzhouli. The cities two cinemas, one Russian language theatre run by the Society of Soviet citizens in Manzhouli and one privately owned Chinese theatre, screened only appropriate Soviet movies and Chinese productions from the Harbin Studios. Both movie houses were highly popular among the

⁴¹ For an excellent insight behind the curtain of Soviet official harmony propaganda see Christian Hess' study on Soviet postwar presence in Dalian. Christian A. Hess: "Big Brother is Watching. Local Sino-Soviet Relations and the Building of New Dalian, 1945-1955," in: Jeremy Brown, Paul G. Pickowicz, eds., *Dilemmas of Victory: The Early Years of the People's Republic of China*, Cambridge MA, 2007, 160-183.

⁴² See letter from F. Shchegolev, Soviet consul in Manzhouli, to G. I. Tunkin of the Soviet Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 26.2.1947, GARF, f. R-5283, op. 18, d. 58, ll. 35-36.

⁴³ "Kak bylo provedeno prazdnovanie 32-i godovshchiny Velikoi Oktiabr'skoi Sotsialisticheskoi revoliutsii v OKSD g. Man'chzhuriia 7 noiabria 1949 goda," 1949, GARF, f. R-5283, op. 18, d. 72, ll. 55-57. Also on other holidays such as the Anniversary of the CCP founding on 1 July rallies were jointly organized by the local Sino-Soviet Friendship Association branch and the municipal administration. See *ibid.*, ll. 126-127. Rallies of comparable size continued on similar occasions throughout the 1950s, for instance in March 1953, when Manzhouli was in mourning after Stalin had died. More than 1,500 citizens attended the public ceremony. See "Quanguo geda chengshi renmin chentong zhuidao Sidalin tongzhi," in: *Renmin Ribao*, 10. 3.1953.

⁴⁴ "Obshchestvo Kitaisko-Sovetskoi družby v g. Man'chzhurii," in: *Russkoe Slovo*, 13.9.1949, drawn from GARF, f. R-5283, op. 18, d. 72, ll. 81-82.

Mongol, Chinese and Russian citizens. A particularity of Manzhouli's Sino-Soviet Friendship Association was the fact, that it was not only the cities' Han and Mongol populations who were Chinese citizens, but local Soviets and former Russian emigrants who could claim membership as well. I. M. Golkin, Head of the Society of Soviet citizens in Manzhouli, was even a member of the association's managing committee. Some of the managing committee members prided themselves on their revolutionary past like Zhang Yanqin who had joined the CCP in 1933 in Yan'an. The association's chief was Manzhouli's mayor Liu Fuzu.⁴⁵ Though these biographies might suggest otherwise, it was difficult to recruit cadres. At least since 1947 the mayor had headed the association temporarily, because other candidates were rejected, some even imprisoned, because of their economic background or political past as members of the Guomindang or collaborators with the Manchukuo regime.⁴⁶ Admission to the Friendship Society did not require even the most basic grasp of the culture and language of the Soviet Union. Though the alien neighbor was within visual sight, some of the leading committee members of the branch organizations in the borderlands had never, or only briefly visited the USSR borderlands, and lacked essential language skills and the familiarity with the culture of the neighboring country. The aim of the organization however was not really to bridge cultures. Though called Sino-Soviet Friendship Associations, their objective was to regulate contacts rather than unify the two peoples.

“Love is in the air”

The public representation of the encounters between the two peoples in the borderlands suggested otherwise. From 1950 onwards, Manzhouli Station became the stage for countless reception ceremonies and lavish friendship performances that were trumpeted over newspapers and booklets in both countries.⁴⁷ The story line is almost interchangeable, like this recollection of an Uzbek artistic group on tour in the PRC published in *Pravda*.

A bright, sunny day. We left the Soviet Union as our train passed the border. Man'chzhuriia Station. Even before we got off our car we heard the voices of the people who greeted us. Then we got off the

⁴⁵ “Rabota Obshchestva Kitaisko-Sovetskoi Druzhby v. g. Man'chzhuriia za 2 i 3-i kvartaly 1948 g.,” GARF, f. R-5283, op. 18, d. 72, ll. 250-272, here ll. 251, 254, 265-266; “Avtobiografia,” Chan-Ian-Chin, 10.2.1949, *ibid.*, ll. 86-87.

⁴⁶ “Iz dnevnika upolnomochennogo VOKS v gorode Man'chzhuriia Vedenskogo P. V.,” October 1947, GARF, f. R-5283, op. 18, d. 62, ll. 15-17.

⁴⁷ Until the mid-1950s *Renmin Ribao*, like other papers, ran numerous stories that included the Otpor-Manzhouli border-crossing theme. See e.g. a piece where the author tells his readers with excitement about the first female engine driver he saw at Otpor “Wo suo jiandao de Sulian funü,” in: *Renmin Ribao*, 23.12.1949. See also “Sulian dianying yishu gongzuozhe daibiaotuan li Manzhouli fanhui Mosike,” in: *Renmin Ribao*, 3.1.1953, “Sulian hongqi gewutuan huiguo,” in: *Renmin Ribao*, 12.1.1953, “Baojialiya renminjun gewutuan daoda Manzhouli,” in: *Renmin Ribao*, 1.9.1954 and “Nansilafu ‘keluo’ minjian gewutuan guo Manzhouli lai jing,” in: *Renmin Ribao*, 27.8.1955 which all, like numerous more articles, report about the greeting of Soviet and other foreign delegations at Manzhouli.

car. Enthusiastic welcomes from every direction 'Stalin, *wansui*', 'Stalin, *wansui*', 'Long live friendship with the Soviet Union'.⁴⁸

On their way home the artists experienced the same warmth of the Chinese hosts again:

On a bright chilly day we left hospitable, brotherly China. We did not want to part with our friends [...]. During the last minutes of our stay at Man'chzhuriia Station I gazed at the thousands of people who came to see us off – us the representatives of the Soviet Union. I was overcome by emotions and I began to sing a song about Mao Zedong. The crowd applauded as the train slowly pulled out of the platform.⁴⁹

Even those who did not get the special treatment of a reception because they regularly went to China for work, nevertheless got excited according to *Pravda* correspondent A. Kozhin, who was on a train together with Koreans, Czechs, and Soviet specialists. Despite the fact that it was the middle of the night, the moment the train crossed the border into China and pulled into Manzhouli station people were awake. "No one could sit anymore in the compartment. It got crowded in the aisle. People pressed against the windows. [...] Everything looked unremarkable, yet everybody was drawn to the exit, wanted as soon as possible to step on Chinese soil, catch first sight of its new life."⁵⁰ Chinese papers mimicked these descriptions, such as in the *Renmin Ribao* article that celebrated the arrival of a Soviet delegation at Manzhouli in late October 1951.

Silk banners of every color flew at the station. The railway platform is furnished with portraits of Chairman Mao, Soviet and Chinese flags flutter in the wind. A huge red cloth is emblazoned with a slogan proclaiming, 'Long live the everlasting deep friendship of the Sino-Soviet peoples' and 'The Sino-Soviet friendship is the powerful guarantee of peace in the Far East and the world.' Accompanied by music, the sound of drums and enthusiastic applause the train pulls into the station.⁵¹

Otpor became, like Manzhouli, a stage for friendship performances. Every time a special train pulled into the station, railway workers got off to wave their handkerchiefs. When young Asian delegates passed the border to attend the 6th World Festival of Youth and Students in Moscow in summer 1957 they were greeted warmly by the citizens. "Everybody went to the train station to welcome the delegations. [...] Foreigners were greeted with a brass band and dances in a friendly, you could say joyful atmosphere."⁵²

⁴⁸ "Moskva–Pekin," in: *Pravda*, 10.2.1953.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ "Nashi tovarishchi," in: *Pravda*, 24.9.1953.

⁵¹ "Sulian yishu kexue gongzuozhe daibiaotuan he Sujun hongqi gewutuan di Manzhouli," in *Renmin Ribao*, 1.11.1952.

⁵² Author's interview with Valentina Kozlova and Iurii Kozlov on 3 August 2009 in Zabaikal'sk, quote by Valentina Kozlova.

It was not only in the national papers that the border stations became a symbol of the eternal friendship between both countries. Chinese travelogue authors who visited the Soviet Union, regardless of whether they were directorate members of the Friendship Societies or participants of a youth delegation, all saw the northern neighbor as heaven on earth and its people as enlightened and charming paragons of virtue. Chinese pilgrims of that time routinely began their journey narrative with the familiar border-crossing scene, where they had to change trains and would then pass the still dwarfish wooden state gate (*guomen*) between Manzhouli and Otpor to begin their journey into the bright future.⁵³

Just as trade statistics suggest, also the sanctioned writings of that time indicate that after two decades of confrontation and mistrust, the border had become fully permeable once again. But how many borderlanders were able to cross the state line? Which forms of cooperation and encounter existed in the Sino-Soviet borderlands?

Basketball diplomacy

Beyond friendship performance, cross-border cooperation existed in disaster relief, forest and steppe fire prevention, medical assistance as well as scientific research, among others.⁵⁴ In 1956 Moscow and Beijing agreed to organize bilateral scientific research commissions to explore the boundary rivers' potentials in water transportation and energy resources. For several years scientists studied the topography, hydrology, geology of the Argun and Amur basins for joint future mining, hydroelectric and other economic projects.⁵⁵ *Renmin Ribao* in fall 1956 assured that it was “only to be expected that China and the Soviet Union work hard together to explore and develop”⁵⁶ the two border rivers and depicted the collaborative explorations as a remarkable step to further “strengthening the friendship between the Chinese and the Soviet people.”⁵⁷ Cooperation however remained brief and was soon interrupted without significant results by the chilly diplomatic breeze that would freeze the rivers again.

Hydro-geological research was just one among several fields where the brief thaw in relations created some cross-border ties. When ice floes on the Argun River threatened to cause the flooding of some 800 peoples' houses in several villages in the Three Rivers area (*Trekhreche* or *Sanjiang*) in April 1958, Chinese local authorities asked for Soviet assistance. Soviet military planes bombed the ice barrier thereby saving the villages.⁵⁸ As late as January 1960 both governments

⁵³ For instance, Wu Han, “Fang Su yinxiang,” in: Zhong Su youhao xiehui zonghui, ed., *Fang Su yinxiang*, Beijing 1950, 12. Zuo Lin, *Zai xingfu de guojia li. Fangwen youji*, Beijing 1951, 1-2. Zhong Su youhao xiehui zonghui, ed., *Fang Su biji*, Beijing 1955, 3.

⁵⁴ Frolov, “Prigranichnoe sotrudnichestvo,” 121-122.

⁵⁵ Frolov, “Prigranichnoe sotrudnichestvo,” 116-117. See also “Shi E’erguna he wei liangguo fuwu,” in: *Renmin Ribao*, 26.5.1957.

⁵⁶ “Heilongjiang jiang wei Su-Zhong liang guo renmin fuwu,” in: *Renmin Ribao*, 17.10.1956.

⁵⁷ “Zai Zhong Su youyi jiaoliu de Heilongjiang shang,” in: *Renmin Ribao*, 7.11.1956.

⁵⁸ Letter of Narodnyi komitet Avtonomnoi Oblasti Vnutrennei Mongolii, 27.5.1958, GACHO, f. P-3, op. 7, d. 243, l. 20. See also GACHO, f. P-3, op. 7, d. 239, l. 21. Already in 1957 Soviet planes had saved a Chinese

signed agreements in forest and steppe fire prevention. Volunteers from both sides extinguished forest fires near Zabaikal'sk in the spring. That same year, workers built a 60-meter wide protection belt along several sections of the border zone to prevent fires from crossing the border and several Soviet planes and helicopters started regular fire surveillance flights along both banks of the Argun River. To further enhance fire protection, bilateral commissions negotiated plans to erect watchtowers and clear the area from undergrowth in the following years.⁵⁹

Yet even at the zenith of the alliance, regional cross-border exchange beyond disaster relief was highly limited. Although "red corners" in the railway buildings, banners at the station's facades and on the streets were signs of the omnipresent proclamation of the friendship between the people of the two nations,⁶⁰ actual day-to-day contacts, even among railway men of the border stations, remained limited. Other than the three daily shifts, each consisting of 8 to 20 Chinese railway men who lived in a dormitory at Otpor station from 1952 onwards, there were literally no Chinese who lived on the Soviet side. Figures of Soviet railway men who worked in shifts in Manzhouli were even lower after 1955. They did not stay overnight but commuted from the Soviet border settlement every day by car.⁶¹ Soviet and Chinese border guard structures and the Transbaikalian and the Qiqihar Railway administrations seem to have been two of the few institutions that had established a routine exchange of delegations. In addition to top-level talks, Manzhouli and Otpor railway men held regular meetings on working experience with several hundred participants annually.

Both railway stations cooperated – apart from train cargo matters – on a limited level in other fields such as road maintenance work and medical assistance as well. Zabaikal'sk offered health care to the children of the Chinese railway men, while a Chinese doctor shared his experience in acupuncture with his Soviet colleagues.⁶² Medical assistance was also offered further downstream to the Chinese borderlanders. The press admired the Soviet altruism in wordy articles. When on 28 June 1957 Sun Meifang suddenly began to spit blood, no hospital, no Chinese doctor was within reach in her remote Argun village. The Chinese border guards called their Soviet colleagues for help. Immediately a border patrol was sent to pick up the young schoolteacher and take her to the Soviet hospital. In hospital, she was not only cured free of charge, but "with the best medication". Worried that she might feel lonely the nurses cooked Chinese dishes for her. Her child and a young Chinese pupil who was fluent in Russian were allowed to stay with her to keep her company. Between September and October 1957 alone, nine Chinese borderlanders are said to have been treated in

village from flooding. See "E'erguna hepan de youyi," in: *Renmin Ribao*, 28.10.1957.

⁵⁹ "Doklad ob itogakh raboty po sovместnoi okhrane lesov i stepei ot pozharov v 1960 godu i zadachakh na 1961 god," V. Gutorov, Nachal'nik upravleniya lesnogo khoziaistva Chitinskogo sovnarkhoza, 1961, GACHO, f. P-3, op. 7, d. 700, ll. 9-16, see also *ibid.*, ll. 1-3.

⁶⁰ See e.g. GACHO, f. P-1710, op. 1, d. 37, l. 18.

⁶¹ They numbered between 18 and 30 men. *Manzhouli zhan zhi. 1901–2001*, "Manzhouli zhan zhi" bianwei hui, ed., Beijing 2002, 239-240. See also, author's interview with Vera Zolotareva on 3 July 2007 in Zabaikal'sk.

⁶² In 1960 five meetings on technical issues with participants from both railways were held in Manzhouli and Zabaikal'sk. "Plan obmena opytom raboty mezhdru kollektivami Zabaikal'skoi i Tsitsikarskoi zheleznymi dorogami na 1960 god," GACHO, f. P-3, op. 7, d. 541, ll. 1-5. In 1959 intervals and agenda of exchange of the two railway stations was similar. See *ibid.*, ll. 11-15.

Soviet hospitals.⁶³ At Suifenhe-Grodekovo, the Sino-Soviet railway crossing bordering on Primorskii krai, medical cooperation and forms of exchange were similar.⁶⁴

Beyond exchange with economic purposes among the railway authorities and some medical assistance, other forms of regulated encounters existed as well. After a January 1956 CPSU Central Committee resolution permitted international tourism for Soviet citizens. Chita province tourist groups started to vacation in China, yet numbers were insignificant with less than a hundred tourists annually. The first Chinese tour groups visited the Soviet borderlands in 1959.⁶⁵ Membership in tourist delegations, however, was reserved for select cadres. To become part of a tour group people needed to obtain travel permissions and were asked to write a personal record (*avtobiografiia*). Yet it was not solely by Beijing's or Moscow's order by which the people in the borderland remained separated. Many of the locals, as Iurii Kozlov puts it, "simply had no desire [*prosto net zhelaniiia*]" to see the world over the other side of the fence.⁶⁶ Most of the people who had migrated to the border in the 1950s would never cross it until the late 1980s. The lack of language skills among the newly arrived borderlanders and the clash of different cultures generated indifference toward the distant neighbor. In addition, a low standard of living on both sides impeded economic incentives for informal cross-border exchange.

Besides elite tourism authorities also organized regular small delegation exchanges during national holidays. Soviet railway men from the border station visited their Manzhouli colleagues during Spring Festival, on the occasion of the PRC's national holiday on 1 October, or for the Anniversary of the Peoples Liberation Army (PLA). Other groups participated in this form of publicly communicated friendship performances too. Annually, usually on national holidays, several delegations commuted between Chita province and the Inner Mongolian Autonomous Region and other Sino-Soviet border provinces. Between 1956 and mid-1958 – the height of cross border exchange – about 20 Chinese groups visited Khabarovsk Region. Numbers in Chita Province and other borderland areas were similar, but declined afterwards and were fully stopped after 1961. Party cadres, soldiers, labor union members, railway officials – primarily recruited from the border districts as well as Chita and Haila'er – were the most frequent members of these delegations but also Young Pioneers, sportsmen and others visited the neighboring country on the provincial level to participate in public meetings, commemoration parades and sport competitions to foster "eternal brotherhood" (*brat'ia navek*).⁶⁷ Even during the alliance regime being part of a delegation or employee of the

⁶³ "E'erguna hepan de youyi," in: *Renmin Ribao*, 28.10.1957.

⁶⁴ Frolov, "Prigranichnoe sotrudnichestvo," 114-115.

⁶⁵ 1956: 98, 1957: 80, first half of 1958: 36 tourists. See letter from sekretar' Chitinskogo Obkoma KPSS Ivankin to TsK KPSS, A. S. Paniushkin, "Informatsia o kul'turnykh svyaziakh Chitinskoi oblasti s Kitaiskoi Narodnoi Respublikoi," 20.6.1958, GACHO, f. P-3, op. 7, d. 239, ll. 20-21. Numbers in Khabarovsk Region were above those of Chita Province, yet tourists were counted in the hundreds. Frolov, "Prigranichnoe sotrudnichestvo," 120.

⁶⁶ Author's interview with Valentina Kozlova and Iurii Kozlov on 3 August 2009 in Zabaikal'sk, quote by Iurii Kozlov. Though the Kozlovs spent more than half a century in Zabaikal'sk, they had never been to nearby Manzhouli, even after the border reopened in the late 1980s.

⁶⁷ Just to mention two examples, "Spravka o prebyvanii delegatsii Chitinskoi oblasti v g. Man'chzhuriia v

railway was the only chance for many people to see those across the border, as Zolotareva recalls.

Relations were very cordial. On national holidays like 7 November or 1 May, our management invited them or they invited us. These were, however, relations at an official level and I do not know about any private visits back then. Of course we knew some Chinese through our work for the railway company. Maybe there were acquaintances with [Chinese] workmates among some of our railway men and employees of the export companies who worked on the other side.⁶⁸

Being a railway employee or member of a delegation did not necessarily mean being in touch with people from across the border.

Yet some organized trips across the Argun River varied from the ordinary itinerary. In fall 1958, on the occasion of the PRC's ninth anniversary, a large youth delegation from Chita Province visited the Chinese borderlands on a five-day trip. The delegation included volleyball and basketball teams, the Transbaikalian Military district dancing ensemble, a choir of 20 singers from the Music Academy plus several translators. After an arrival ceremony at Manzhouli Station and two volleyball and basketball matches in the afternoon (which the Soviet teams won), the day ended with a mass meeting in support of eternal friendship with some 1,500 young participants.

The next morning the delegation left for nearby Haila'er. An evening banquet in a clubhouse, a highlight of the trip, "demonstrated the vivid friendship and union of the two Great peoples."⁶⁹ The Soviet delegates sang "Katiusha" and "Moskva-Pekin," and the evening went on with traditional dances by representatives of both countries. On the morning of 1 October the Soviet delegates joined the Anniversary parade with some 20,000 participants. The full program in Haila'er went on for two more days, with more concerts, visits to a school and several factories, more volleyball and basketball matches and the ceremonial laying of a wreath for the fallen Soviet soldiers of August 1945. On the last day, after three days of constant gifts and communist devotionals exchange, cordial words and phrases, and tables groaning with food and cigarettes, the program diverged from the usual friendship agenda to visit an indigenous cooperative some 40 kilometers outside Haila'er.

To many of the Soviet delegates the nomadic way of life must have been quite exotic since nomadism had been in retreat in the Soviet borderlands for quite long. Nomads had, however, also in the Chinese borderlands adapted to the new political regime. First, the Mongols showed off traditional horse riding skills, then the Soviets were assigned to small groups to be offered tea in yurts furnished with Mao portraits. The head of the cooperative lectured about the nomads past, "the

avguste 1957 g. v svyazi s prazdnovaniem 30-i godovshchiny Narodno-Osvoboditel'noi Armii Kitaia," GACHO, f. P-3, op. 7, d. 243, ll. 21-22 and "Dokladnaia zapiska o poezdke pionerskoi delegatsii g. Chity v KNR – g. Khailar," 1958, *ibid.*, ll. 44-47. See also *Manzhouli shi zhi*, Manzhouli shi bianzuan weiyuanhui, ed., Huhehaote 1998, 221-223. For Khabarovsk region see Frolov, "Prigranichnoe sotrudnichestvo," 119-121.

⁶⁸ Author's interview with Vera Zolotareva on 3 July 2007 in Zabaikal'sk.

⁶⁹ "Spravka o poezdke delegatsii molodezhi Chitinskoi oblasti na prazdnovanie 9-i godovshchiny Kitaiskoi Narodnoi Respubliki," 6.11.1958, GACHO, f. P-3, op. 7, d. 243, ll. 32-41, quote on l. 34.

destitute prerevolutionary life of the Mongols, feudal oppressors, and Japanese imperialists.”⁷⁰ The last stop on the way back home was brief and particularly delicate. The Soviet delegates met two dozen Russian émigrés most of them between 18 and 25 years old, in a Haila’er school – allegedly at the émigrés’ request. In a reserved atmosphere and with an attitude of superiority the youth delegates from across the border enlightened “these inadequately informed Russians” about Chita Province’s achievements during the last four decades and about the freedoms enjoyed in the Soviet Union.⁷¹ On the fifth day the delegation returned home after a last basketball game in Manzhouli – the Soviets defeated the Chinese again, this time by a score of 97 to 72.

The trip across the border, though still in a very formal setting, seems to be one of the rather few encounters in which delegates actually got to meet some borderlanders from across the Argun River. They might have had a chat with a Chinese sportsman after a volleyball match or with a Mongol in a yurt. The journey to the East certainly did not change mindsets of people in a fundamental way, and yet it was at least some kind of cross-border encounter. The meeting with Russian émigrés at Haila’er suggests another phenomenon that will not be discussed in detail here. These people, most of whom had left Russia during the Civil War or the Soviet Union during collectivization, were a dying species in a once ethnically heterogeneous borderland. Whereas 2,944 Soviet nationals lived in Manzhouli in 1951, only 31 were left in 1963.⁷²

Conclusion

For most of the twentieth century the Soviet-Chinese border served as a great divide. Even during the brief friendship period of the 1950s cross-border contacts remained limited to inevitable encounters and cooperation. In many ways, the 1950s were just another step towards separation. Compared to the Manchukuo years, cross-border ties in the Sino-Soviet borderlands had certainly become stronger again and yet these bonds were nothing compared to the economic and kinship networks which existed between the people of both Argun River banks up to the late 1920s. International trade, not border trade, intensified during the alliance regime. Goods now just passed through the borderland corridor. Cargo transshipment certainly created jobs in Zabaikal’sk and Manzhouli. Yet people were employed in the steppe settlements not to buy and sell on their own but to transship the goods which were bound for Moscow and Beijing, Warsaw and Pyongyang. If connections across the state border existed during the 1950s they were no longer established informally by the borderlanders but were now initiated and regulated by Moscow and Beijing.

Thus, the international cross-border economy of the 1950s did not resemble the traditional regional borderland economy that had ceased to exist in the early 1930s, with considerable people-to-people contacts beyond the state’s control mechanisms. Consequently, zones of contact between Chinese and Soviets became increasingly limited as socio-cultural and economic structures of the

⁷⁰ Ibid, quote on l. 39.

⁷¹ Ibid, quote on l. 40.

⁷² By a Soviet order dated 10 November 1945 the émigrés had been given Soviet passports. *Manzhouli shi zhi*, Manzhouli shi bianzuan weiyuanhui, ed., Huhehaote 1998, 219.

borderland were ever more disentangled under the alliance regime. Strict control was just one of the reasons. Many of the new settlers had never crossed the border. The lack of language skills and the ignorance of the different culture led in many cases to indifference toward the neighbor. Manzhouli and Zabaikal'sk, to return to Martínez's classification again, had become two detached urban centers in an "alienated borderland." Interchange across the border remained state-sanctioned because the two regimes, though friends on paper, feared nothing more than that borderlanders would actually become friends. In terms of misleading representation, however, the estranged borderlanders fit well into the overall scheme of relations of that time, as they appeared to have become closer comrades than ever before.

