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Introduction

MANY RIVERS UNITE rather than divide, even if they represent borders between states. For a long time the Argun, a river marking the boundary between Russia and China, was no exception. Until well into the twentieth century nomadic peoples crisscrossed the river to let their animals graze on summer and winter pastures in the rolling steppe. To sedentary borderland peoples the river had an equally uniting quality, as it provided a living for settlers on both sides, regardless of nationality. Cossacks residing near the Argun visited Chinese territory to hunt game and to lease land from the Mongols for raising hay. Others bartered in the stalls of Chinese petty traders. Chinese migrants from provinces south of the Great Wall worked as hunters and gold miners on both shores of the river. Many were fluent in Russian and dressed in Russian style, wearing short black fur coats and hats with flaps covering the head and ears. Some settled in Russian villages, were baptized, and married Russian women. Those who had not assimilated through marriage or religion nonetheless came into contact with people from across the river, often communicating in pidgin.

This overlapping and mingling of distinct nomadic and sedentary cultures and European and Asian civilizations along the Argun came to an end only when the border gained geopolitical significance in the late nineteenth century. During the following decades the imperial interests of Russia, followed by the Soviet Union, would clash with those of Qing (later Republican) China and Japan. Subsequently, the world's two large leviathans of communism would hail their friendship and stage their enmity. At that juncture the centers of power strove to seal national limits, a protracted process resulting in the disintegration of transborder relations between different peoples. Within less than a century the states had by and large succeeded in suppressing traditional borderland cultures by halting existing cross-border networks of kinship and friendship and destroying cross-border land use and economy through rule of law, physical force, deportation, reeducation, and propaganda. Only after the disintegration of the Soviet Union would China and Russia reopen their common border.

This oscillation of the rigidity of the Russia-China border—soft, hard, soft—contradicts teleological assumptions of borders' irreversible evolutionary movement from indefinite zones toward precise lines of demarcation. However, in this case, the image of a common, functional boundary is not completely obsolete. Even more than a quarter of a century on, artifacts such as abandoned observation towers and rusted barbed-wire fences remind the visitor that the states' military power was once a formidable physical presence on the soil of the borderlands. Today, despite emerging transborder entanglements, such as trade, tourism, and overlapping Russian and Chinese cellular telephone networks, the boundary is not completely fossilized. The Argun demarcates two distinct regions on its opposite banks—one in Russia, another in China. The majority of the people living in the Russian borderland are Russian: they speak Russian, live in Soviet or old Russian-style houses, watch *Vremia* news, and dress similarly to people in other parts of rural Russia. On the Chinese side of the border, passports identify the majority of settlers as being ethnically Han. People on the right bank speak Mandarin, watch the evening Beijing-time *Xinwen Lianbo*, and wear Chinese-style garments. Beyond phenotype, language, and culture, however, many additional borders exist. No statistics on food consumption are available for this particular borderland. Yet it seems safe to assume that potato and rice consumption preferences would, most likely, accord with the red line on the map. These contemporary differences point to deep-rooted structures that define the culture and language of the people who populate the borderland today. Presently the Sino-Russian state border coincides with cultural and linguistic limits. How, then, did the red line come to be such a stark line of separation? And how did it become possible for so arbitrary a division to permeate almost every part of the typical border dweller's life?

In searching for answers to these questions, this book traces the transformation of the Sino-Russian border from an open interimperial frontier into a division of bordered lands in the modern sense—that is, a landscape divided by congruent lines of economic, political, social, cultural, ethnic, and psychological differences. The evolution of the border dividing the two largest Eurasian empires entailed a gradual process of brokering: between diverse groups of the local borderland society, between the different political powers claiming sovereignty over the boundary and adjoining territories, and between political metropolises and peripheral borderland populations. The central argument put forward in this book is that both people *and* states were responsible for the making of the Sino-Russian border. This creation evolved as a complex set of successive and yet often overlapping and interlinked government policies. The ultimate goal of these programs was to eliminate ambivalence and extend the metropolises' control over the periphery to the very boundary of the state (and

often further afield). But the mixed local population played a significant role in both supporting and undermining processes of border making. The present work thus examines how central authorities tried to establish control at the state boundary and in the frontier zone and borderland, how local people strove to subvert such efforts, and how, sometimes, they became agents of state power themselves or fell victim to its abuses. By doing so—and by combining a history from above with a history from below—this book examines the policies implemented by the metropolises and recovers the flexibility of the strategies and practices pursued by ordinary people in coping with the border's remakings.

Empires and Peoples, Frontiers and Borderlands

The study of the multiple ways in which the Sino-Russian border was negotiated on the ground remains a lacuna in the scholarship. Such neglect is all the more striking in light of the landmark's geopolitical significance and pivotal role in world history, its unique and radical changes over time, and the growth of general academic interest in borders. When it is a focus of research, the borderland has been analyzed within conventional vertical, centrist, macro perspectives of diplomatic, economic, or military history, in which power flows only from the metropolises to the periphery, uninfluenced by any interactions around the border itself.¹

Therefore, this book puts forth a radically new perspective: by focusing on the lives of people on both sides of a closely defined area, it follows the formation and transformation of this extensive Eurasian land border over the *longue durée*. Beginning in the late seventeenth century, when both empires first attempted to demarcate their common frontier, this work traces the border's history until the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, when it was finally reopened. Over this extended time span, but particularly during the last century, multiple new border regimes followed one another rapidly, with each shift bearing profound effects on residents throughout the border world. Quite often, the frontier and borderland had their own timeline. Changes occurred there earlier or later than in the metropolitan centers of China and Russia. The borderland underwent radical changes, from a vaguely demarcated interimperial frontier, roamed by nomads, Cossacks, savvy contrabandists, and other highly mobile people, passing it via barge or on horseback, to a tightly patrolled borderland, where most locals accepted the idea of national territorial sovereignty, knowing their neighbors across the river only from state propaganda—although they could still gaze across the border from peaks atop the steppe hills.

Recent debates on old notions of frontiers and borderlands have influenced this work.² While distinctions between frontiers and borderlands are

becoming more nuanced, the emphasis of current research has shifted toward the concept of borderlands, urging recognition of cross-cultural perspectives and interpretations of developments across peripheries. Borderlands are indeed seen as crossroads where interactions between the local populace and the state are frequently overtly visible. In borderlands, where the power of rivaling empires or nation-states is still fragmented and mechanisms of control are still weak, local societies are able to challenge, subvert, and negotiate hegemony. Precisely this discrepancy between the power aspirations of the political centers and realities on the periphery shaped the gradual evolution of modern state borders, in all their surprisingly persistent ambiguity and unpredictability.³

In this book “frontier” refers to a remote, sparsely populated, and vaguely defined territory lying beyond the periphery of two or more core powers. Metropolises expand culturally, economically, and politically over time into this intermediate zone of contact. They are contested by rivaling imperial powers and local populations and characterized by permanent negotiation and compromise. A frontier becomes a borderland when it is incorporated into the expanding core of one or more nation-states or empires through a prolonged process marked by changes in the form of centralizing policies. “Borderland” thus denotes the territorial entity emerging from the frontier on the periphery of a polity during the competition of empires or nation-states and the creation of a rigid, well-defined, linear boundary by substantive, state-imposed changes to economic, political, military, ethnic, social, and cultural environments, processes often shaped by violence, forced population movements, and subjugation of outsiders. While borderland describes a clearly defined broader ambit with inner and outer limits—in which the international border shapes social and economic networks directly, a distinct set of laws operates, and the access of ordinary people is restricted by dint of state policy—“border” refers to the area immediately adjoining the boundary. The “boundary” is thus the line—the dash on the map, rock marker, fence, or guard post—that indicates the territorial limits of state sovereignty.⁴ In the end, however, any overly rigid definitions make the complex story of a gradually consolidated frontier too simple. An orthodox terminology with clear distinctions entails the danger of deception and must fall short of explaining the complex nature of a borderland where some locally rooted and contingent characteristics of the frontier continue to coexist.

In contrast to insular Britain, which *had* an empire overseas, Russia and China *were* land-based empires.⁵ Together they both divided Inner Asia—Manchuria, Mongolia, and Xinjiang—into separate spheres of interest by the end of the eighteenth century. In spite of their different social and economic structures, both powers displayed some similarities in imperial practices on

their shared frontier: as continental empires, they conquered territories on their margins.⁶ To incorporate these areas, which Owen Lattimore called defensive “inward-facing frontiers,” into increasingly multicultural systems of rule, both imperial powers relied on co-opting indigenous elites, most importantly by preserving some of their privileges.⁷

In the nineteenth century the world witnessed the formation of modern nation-states.⁸ Drawing precise state boundaries to define and defend the national territory as “decision space” was a major component of this process. Territorial orthodoxy found its strongest form, perhaps, in the fascist and communist regimes of the twentieth century. Only with the end of the bipolar world, the rise of global capitalism, and the growing importance of supranational structures and the renaissance of regionalism have inscriptions of territorial identity and unique social formations declined.⁹

The global tendency toward territorial state formation also developed in the Qing (1644–1912) and Romanov (1613–1917) imperial states. Despite many of their fringes still being inhabited predominantly by indigenous pastoralists, hunters, or fishing people, the territorial boundaries of the Romanov and Qing empires were simultaneously colored by the idea of a homogeneous sovereignty, one increasingly intolerant of competing authorities, alternative meanings, and uncontrolled passage.¹⁰ Attempts to eliminate ambiguity at the peripheries outlived the old regimes and intensified when their successors (the Soviet Union, Manchukuo-Japan, and the People’s Republic of China) introduced even more extreme forms of territorialization, capable of profoundly altering social dynamics in the borderlands. While the communist governments in Moscow and Beijing were not qualitatively different in their closed border regimes, their coercive monopolies were far more sweeping than those of many other states. As a consequence, within just a few decades’ time, a complex amalgam of geostrategic aspirations, competing ideologies, and radical plans to alter the life of each and every person living in the contested regions resulted in the leapfrogging transformation from a premodern, interimperial Eurasian frontier into a borderland between two centralized regimes possessing clearly coded, demarcated spaces.¹¹

In that process, borders provided crucial state-building functions by helping to prevent secession, perform external security duties, surveil society, and control the domestic economy. They formed separate national identities for the same ethnolinguistic groups and, as highly politicized symbols, became sites of social change. While, for example, the historian Peter Sahlin has shown how localism formed national identities on the Franco-Spanish border in the Pyrenees, processes of local co-optation and compromise took place to a much lesser degree in Inner Asia.¹² When the borderland was incorporated into the periphery of the postrevolutionary state—the successor to a former

multicultural empire—as a distinctive administrative unit it gradually ceased to be a hybrid place of mutual accommodation between empires and the non-state world of local populations.

This reorganization of social, economic, political, and cultural space through the projection of centralized state power into the borderland did not stop conflicts over political or cultural belonging among the local populations. Quite to the contrary, such struggles persisted, played out among the competing imperial entities, both in the metropolises and among the borderland peoples who sought ways to fight against assimilation and conversion and to preserve independence or at least autonomy and mobile forms of life.¹³

The relationship between core and periphery thus remained dynamic and fluid, marked by strong influences moving in both directions, prompting questions regarding the role of the locals at the outermost periphery of the state. For how long did social actors below the level of decision-making elites have a say in how the border was run? In what ways did they support or undermine policies of border formation enacted by the state? By narrating a comprehensive history of the Sino-Russian border through a regional lens and making use of a long perspective, this book uncovers the complex interplay of people *and* states. It demonstrates that the local population, far from living at the end of the world, played a more significant role in the story of territorialization of the state than has been previously acknowledged.

First, historical work of this scale occupies a vital role in defining zonal and lineal notions of borders. Concepts of borders held both by different generations of state agents in the metropole and by different cohorts of locals in the borderland changed over time. Rather than being divided by state boundaries, the traditional frontier society maintained ties of kinship, economy, language, and religion stretching across it and had a distinct character of its own. In many cases internal boundaries between banners or tribes were often more strictly enforced than the essentially permeable international boundary. But—unable to cross the locked international border any longer, lacking interest and sufficient language skills—later cohorts of border dwellers stand in stark contrast to earlier generations, often implicitly supporting national territorial sovereignty claims.

Second, this study shows how formal command wielded by a centralizing power does not inevitably result in the establishment of territorial control over a borderland and its subjects. Due to the porous nature of a vast continental border, insufficient resources of overextended empires, conflicting objectives of adjacent regimes, and the absence of modern infrastructure to connect peripheral regions with imperial capitals, centralizing powers were often unable to invigilate their shared outward-facing border, even if they grew increasingly intolerant of any local exchanges across the boundary. This inability was

rooted in traditional practices and fluid forms of interaction among different groups in the borderland. Even those who had originally been sent by the state to staff sentry posts would not necessarily follow the government's agenda.

Third, this work illustrates the circumstances under which old frontiers and modern state borders have existed simultaneously. With the introduction of railroads, the metropolises authorized a particular form of border crossing through a narrow corridor and in doing so fostered new processes of border making. Modern means of government control were not, however, introduced all at once along the entire state border. And—however or wherever introduced—these did not perfectly serve the state. In fact, they were used to counter central aims quite often, as they served to ground novel zones of contact between the native and the global worlds and to create a very different social fabric. Along with these, a new form of border was built.

Fourth, this approach exemplifies circumstances under which command over the borderlands can tighten. Particularly during military confrontations and internal struggles, metropolises allocated significant resources to monitor the state border more efficiently, implemented new regimes of border maintenance to isolate the borderland from inside and outside, and gradually replaced disloyal people with those deemed reliable citizens. The reciprocity between the power center and its brokers on one side and a partially remade borderland population on the other not only increased the legitimacy of a coherent bounded space but welded subjects and ruler together in more complementary ways.

Finally, it is instructive to study how open borders are closed and closed borders are opened. While a border of friendship between ally states may be depicted officially as open to everyone, it still can be impassable to most locals. A guarded border of conflict, by contrast, may remain surmountable for certain privileged individuals and groups. The discrepancy between rhetoric and reality is also an indicator of how the power of the metropole over its periphery has grown stronger or become weakened.

These five contrasting but complementary topics indicate the main themes treated in this book. They serve as an array of lenses focusing attention on distinct but interrelated ways in which borders are shifted and relocated over time.

The Argun Basin

The steppes and taiga forests of Inner Asia have rarely favored sedentary powers since humans began to populate the great Eurasian landmass. Extreme climate, difficult topography, and untraversable distances between the Sea of Japan in the east and the Altai and Tianshan mountains in the west kept the

settled civilizations of Asia and Europe at bay. In fact, Inner Asia is more remembered for nomadic conquerors, most notably Chinggis Khan, the great Mongol ruler, who created the largest land empire of all time in the thirteenth century.

Some boundary relics of earlier cultures remind us, however, that demarcation and territorial defense are not a Russian or Chinese innovation in this region. The so-called Wall of Chinggis Khan, a historic fortification curving some five hundred kilometers gently from present-day eastern Mongolia into China and Russia, is still visible on aerial photographs. Its name is misleading as, in fact, it was the Jurchen rulers of the Jin dynasty (1115–1234) who established this earthen berm in an unsuccessful attempt to insulate themselves from the Mongolian and Tatar tribes. Flattened by centuries of erosion, the wall is in some places still recognizable from the ground as well, for instance, at the southern edge of Zabaikalsk, a small settlement on the China-Russia border just footsteps away from the corroded fence.¹⁴

Initially, Ming and Muscovite rulers took little interest in colonizing the immense territories or erecting new fortifications. Another four hundred years or so would pass until Inner Asia became the zone of direct contact between the Russians and Chinese in the seventeenth century and their rulers slowly began to consolidate their respective frontiers. In the mid-nineteenth century it became the longest international land border the world has ever known, stretching roughly 12,000 kilometers from the Central Asian mountain ranges through the Inner Asian steppes and along meandering river valleys up to the Sea of Japan. Today, following the independence of Mongolia and the disintegration of the Soviet Union, China and Russia still share a common border of about 4,200 kilometers along the Argun, Amur, and Ussuri rivers and a small strip of land measuring a mere fifty-five kilometers in the Altai Mountains—the world's sixth-longest international border.¹⁵

The Sino-Russian frontier remained scarcely populated well into the twentieth century. While today Han Chinese and ethnic Russians together form the overwhelming majority of the population along the three great border rivers, these areas have been home to a number of highly distinctive indigenous people. By far the largest ethnic minority groups are the agricultural Koreans and the Buriat and other mobile livestock-raising Mongolic-speaking people.¹⁶ Much smaller in numbers are the Tungusic-speaking hunting, gathering, and fishing tribes.

Just as the autochthonous people of the Qing-Russian frontier, the Russians and Han Chinese who live in the provinces adjacent to the Ussuri, Amur, and Argun rivers are by no means culturally and ethnically homogenous. Old settler peasants and Cossacks arrived in the territories between Lake Baikal and the Argun River beginning in the seventeenth century. Cossacks settled on

separated lands as horse-raising farmer-soldiers on the outer edges of this frontier with the Chinese Empire. These women and men adapted to local conditions and native customs to survive in this inhospitable world. Over time they mixed with the indigenous inhabitants of the region. Only the Old Believers, who were forcibly resettled to the region in the eighteenth century, would live a life in nearly complete isolation having rejected the reform of the Russian Church by Patriarch Nikon. At the turn of the twentieth century different kinds of migrants, far greater in number, were pouring into the Russian territories adjacent to China from European Russia. Encouraged by agrarian reforms and the construction of the Trans-Siberian Railroad, these new settlers were competing with the earlier peasants and herdsmen for the best pastures.¹⁷ New voluntary and involuntary waves of migration occurred during Soviet times, among them townsmen, mine and forestry workers, agricultural workers on state farms, military personnel, and railroad employees. These various groups of Russians are to be understood here as *rossiane*—a community most easily defined by its use of the Russian language.

Chinese migration to the Sino-Russian frontier increased in the late nineteenth century, once restrictions against Han migration into Manchuria had been lifted.¹⁸ Seasonal laborers, temporary refugees, as well as poor farmers and other settlers who had the intention of staying permanently flooded the Chinese Northeast. Immigration from provinces south of the Great Wall accelerated with the introduction of modern and efficient transportation during the early twentieth century. In the second half of the twentieth century the movement of people to China's northern frontier was the result of clear strategic, economic, and political motivations formulated in Beijing, driven by land reclamation, national security interests, and the assimilation of minority peoples. Today Han Chinese in the border areas far outnumber the ethnic Russians across the Argun, Amur, and Ussuri.¹⁹

Situated at the very heart of the vast Inner Asian frontier, the Argun marks the boundary between Russia and China for 944 kilometers. The resulting area constitutes the oldest boundary section between the two powers to survive subsequent territorial changes. Moreover, the area stands for two different sorts of borders. The river is generally crossed and the rural Russian, Chinese, and native worlds are intricately interwoven. Only a short ride away, however, a railroad town represents a very different social fabric, and along with it a new form of border. These different realms make the Argun basin a powerful lens through which to view the history of the Sino-Russian frontier and borderland.²⁰

The core area to which we will confine our attention is the upper basin of the river located between the Great Xingan Range in the north and east and the Gobi Plateau in the south and west in today's Sino-Russian-Mongolian



FIGURE 0.2. Time-collapsed map of the Argun borderland, showing important settlements from the eighteenth century to the present.

border triangle. It comprises about seventy thousand square kilometers—approximately the size of the Republic of Georgia. The edges of this region roughly represent the outer limits of the free trade zone introduced in 1862 and the separate administrative structure of the border districts that were established from the late 1920s onward. They can be roughly demarcated as follows: The gently sloping plain of the Aga Steppe where the Borzia River flows into the Onon defines its limits in the West. Olochi, a Cossack village on the middle reaches of the Argun, marks the northern fringe. The foothills of the forested slopes of the Great Xingan, separating the Hulunbeir Plateau from the Manchurian Plain, signal its limits in the east. The Hailar River, a tributary of the Argun and by some considered as simply its upper course, and the shallow Lake Hulun (or Dalai) represent its southern edge.

The Argun constitutes a number of wandering channels running through swamps in a wide valley that gave the river its name.²¹ Often separating into two or more distinct arms, the waterway runs relatively slowly north-northeastward through to its joining with the Amur. Because of its winding nature it often covers three times its linear distance. Its main stream has frequently changed in the past, sparking conflicts over the sovereignty of its hundreds of islands, some of them mere sand bars while others are very large pristine pastures. Along its upper reaches the Argun meanders through a slightly rolling and grass-covered steppe that is linked to the Mongolian plains. A boreal taiga forest belt blankets the riverbanks along its middle and lower reaches. Today the Russian territory on the left bank belongs to the Chita region in Transbaikalia.²² The Chinese bank to the right is part of Hulunbeir,²³ the northeastern tip of the Inner Mongolian Autonomous Region in China, named after the two lakes that are located in the south of this region (Hulun and Buir). Russians call this region “Barga,” a term adopted from an old Mongol tribal name.²⁴

Extreme continental climate was pivotal in the formation of this frontier region, perhaps more so than the impact of colonists, soldiers, and railroad men. The climate ranges from humid taiga forest in the north to semiarid steppe in the south. Weather patterns are harsh everywhere, with extremely cold but clear and windless winters and short but hot summers. Temperatures can fall as low as fifty degrees Celsius below zero in January. Rivers and lakes usually freeze in late October, and their ice cover melts before May. In July the thermometer goes up to thirty-five degrees Celsius, though absolute maximum temperatures are often higher. Heavy summer rains regularly cause the Argun and its tributaries to flood.

A great diversity of ecosystems characterizes the region. While rivers and lakes abound with sturgeon, Manchurian trout, Amur grayling, pike, and catfish, the stony and poor-quality soils of the floodplains, wetlands, steppes, and

mountains are rarely suitable for farming. The broad valleys of the Trekhreche (Three Rivers) triangle on the Chinese bank of the Argun, drained by the Derbul, the Gan, and the Khaul, represent the most fertile areas in the region. But even in this delta plowing and harvesting are possible only during the short four- to five-month vegetation period. The temperate grassland steppes are home to Mongolian gazelles, roe deer, red foxes, gray wolves, and Siberian marmots. The grasslands are used as pastures and hayfields. While the rolling foothills rising gently above its shores are often barren, the slopes of the Great Xingan to the east are thickly forested with larch, birch, and pine. The mountains, with peaks between one thousand and fifteen hundred meters, are home to fur-bearing animals such as reindeer, sable, and squirrels.

Climate and topography posed challenges to overland travel and communication between sparsely populated areas of the indigenous people and early Russian and Chinese settlers. Rivers were often the preferred means of transportation as dirt roads and random tracks were easily passable only during the cold and dry season. People navigated the waterways in barges, dugout canoes, or rafts to transport people, livestock, and goods. When winters turned the Argun into a frozen road for sledges or carts pulled by horses, the scattered outposts came within easier reach of each other, thereby refuting the geodeterminist idea of a river as a natural border.

Until the late nineteenth century there were no significant settlements in this vast and thinly populated territory on the Argun. The only nearby town was Hailar, founded as a garrisoned outpost of Manchu banner troops in the eighteenth century. Established around the same time, Abagaitui was one of the few Cossack villages to dot the Russian bank of the Argun. In 1903 the construction of the Chinese Eastern Railroad, the last leg of the Trans-Siberian Railroad, finally linked Chita and Vladivostok through Manchuria, stimulating the establishment of new settlements and replacing rivers as the main means of communication. Of these, the border town of Manzhouli at the very center of the region under study became the most important. The railroad transformed the frontier from a remote no-man's-land into a center of cross-border economic exchange, with Manzhouli emerging as the major economic hub for Sino-Russian commerce. On Russian territory, just across the international boundary, Railroad Siding 86 developed into a small border station called Otpor, later renamed Zabaikalsk when it was upgraded to an urban-type village during the 1950s.

These bustling twin communities and the yurts dotting the steppe and sleepy villages nestled on the river surrounding them make for an excellent prism through which to view the different kinds of borders and to study the various phenomena of border making and border breaking in the numerous waxing and waning zones of contact between diverse groups of borderlanders.

As a territorial unit, the Argun borderland was (and is) a space in which many different kinds of interactions between Russians, Chinese, and autochthonous borderlanders were possible—some fostered by the states, others by geographic position. The lush grasslands, sparkling rivers and forested hills on the Argun were places where people ventured inside and out and traveled on foot or by animal carts, barges, and trains, bringing along different things and ideas. People went into this space partly because they wanted to pass from China into Russia and vice versa. Others lived on the Argun because they wanted to trade things with each other or because they needed access to the pastures for their animals or proximity to the river to fish. It was this complex setting of interactions that the states wanted to control and ultimately shut down, making such movements impossible.

Looking beyond the big politics that formed this border to focus instead on the everyday life of the locals, practices in the borderland, and entanglements of local communities with the wider world is a difficult endeavor. Nomads with mobile lifestyles and contrabandists with secret trade networks were illiterate or had no interest in writing proprietary documents. The same holds true for train conductors and border guards. This limitation must be kept in mind while tackling the project of narrating everyday encounters in remote contact zones. Yet writing about this border has proven to be more challenging than penetrating the subaltern spheres of the local people, as we also have to deal with a range of archival cultures. In China more than in Russia, borderlands and minority issues remain sensitive topics in national historiography and the politics of history. Many collections of primary sources for the region and period under study are incomplete or classified at present. The Russo-centric imbalance of the archival sources was reduced in our case for two reasons: Archival records bearing on shared state borders are of course based in at least two countries and, luckily, some Chinese correspondence ended up in foreign archives.²⁵ In addition, newspapers, ethnographic surveys, local gazetteers, and the field notes of travelers located in libraries and private collections offer a bottom-up perspective for writing borderlanders back into history. Finally, oral history has been a valuable source of information. The interviewees featured in this book, locals from both sides of the steppe hills, worked as train engineers, clerks, farmers, and teachers. Their commonplace professions and other facets of their life stories make their narratives indispensable to the task of deepening our insight into everyday social practices characterizing the Argun basin.

A few final words on the structure of the book: the chapters progress from the seventeenth century to the late twentieth century, privileging thematic coherence over strict chronology. Chapter 1 reviews the affairs of frontier people from the first direct but sporadic encounters between Russians and

Chinese, as they took place during the seventeenth century—when both empires first attempted to demarcate a common frontier—to the end of the nineteenth century, when railroads and other elements of modernity began to alter life on the Argun, intensifying and regulating exchanges across the border. Chapter 2 covers the introduction of more assertive policies to govern the international border at the turn of the twentieth century that were replacing long-pursued *laissez-faire* practices. It examines the framing of local disputes over territorial boundaries in national terms as well as the reorganization of customs and sanitary borders as part of a general evolution toward a territorial boundary. By focusing on the distinct social and ethnic fabrics of Manzhouli and its pastoral surroundings, chapter 3 studies the revolutionary political struggles and indigenous secessionist movements following the collapse of imperial rule in China and Russia in 1911 and 1917, respectively. Chapter 4 introduces collectivization and other radical early Soviet programs of domestication that prohibited rather than regulated cross-border contacts and shows how they altered the political, ethnic, economic, and social landscapes in the upper Argun basin. Chapter 5 explores impacts of the Sino-Soviet conflict of 1929 and the 1931 Japanese occupation of Manchuria that affected the Argun borderland, compelling the regimes to considerably increase their peripheral power. Chapter 6 examines the period between the late 1940s and the early 1960s. Despite being marked by an increasingly ubiquitous rhetoric of friendship and bilateral cooperation, the period's border connections were no longer established informally but overseen by Moscow and Beijing. The Sino-Soviet split in the 1960s and 1970s, discussed in chapter 7, had a lasting influence on the situation along their border, with dire consequences for the economy and demography of the Argun borderland. While the Beijing-Moscow trains were filled no longer with Soviet or Chinese citizens but with passengers from North Korea and Vietnam, propaganda campaigns resuscitated old motifs of infiltration, sabotage, espionage, and disinformation, imbuing the border with new legitimacy as a space of enmity. Chapter 8 traces developments during the 1980s. It explores how the border between the two communist states became permeable again, through both policies adopted by the central governments and local populations' strategies.

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