

# The Frontier Zone as a Space of Geo-cultural Interaction: Cultural Intermixture along the Sino-Russian Border in the Eighteenth to Early Twentieth Centuries

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In the eighteenth century, trade became a very important communication channel of Sino-Russian cultural interaction that contributed to the diffusion of elements of Russian and Chinese material and spiritual cultures. In the same period, the Sino-Russian frontier zone, especially the trading centers of Chinese Maimaicheng and Russian Kyakhta, should not only be recognized as the focal points for the initiation of cultural intermixture, but as a specific space of geo-cultural interaction. In business and trade transactions between Russians and Chinese, among the merchants along the border, a specific business language developed: the Maimaicheng (Kyakhtinsky) patois, which greatly expanded as Sino-Russian interaction in the frontier zone increased. Thus, Maimaicheng and Kyakhta became the original venues of the cultural communication between the Qing Empire and Russia. They played a very important role in the formation of a new long-term and sustained geo-cultural space in the frontier zone. From the nineteenth to the beginning of the twentieth century, the area of Sino-Russian geo-cultural interaction expanded over the whole border region, including Harbin in Northeastern China and some Russian territories in the Far East.

## *Introduction*

“Geo-cultural space” is a system of stable cultural realities and perceptions formed in a particular area as a result of the co-existence of cultural traditions and norms, and the functioning of its own image of the world.<sup>1</sup> The term “frontier zone” was initially used to signify a “moving boundary”.<sup>2</sup> The concept gradually began to take a broader historical, geopolitical and cultural meaning. One Russian scholar notes that “frontier is a complex, multifaceted phenomenon that covers not only economical, geographical,

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1 N. A. Samoylov: *Rossiya i Kitay v XVII – nachale XX veka: tendentsii, formy i stadii sotsiokul'turnogo vzaimodeystviya* [Russia and China in the seventeenth through early twentieth centuries: Tendencies, forms and stages of socio-cultural interaction] (St. Petersburg: St. Petersburg University Press, 2014), pp. 63–75.

2 Frederick J. Turner: *The Frontier in American History* (New York: Holt, 1921). Turner claimed that American democracy was formed by the American frontier.

historical and industrial, but also philosophical, cultural, spiritual and mental aspects”.<sup>3</sup> Nowadays it is used by researchers as a term that is characteristic of the “contact zone” between countries, nations and cultures, and even to designate certain either relatively stabile or mobile conditions of cross-border communities. In this context, the “frontier zone” (or just “frontier”, Russian: *фронтир*) is often characterized as a “zone of unstable equilibrium”.<sup>4</sup>

It seems to us that the frontier zone is a specific intermediate zone between two different socio-cultural systems, absorbing significant components of both sides, while at the same time remaining different from each of them by a variety of parameters.<sup>5</sup> One of the most important features of the frontier zone is a specific community of economic life in the regions on both sides of the border, and, what is very important, a “polyphonic” culture.<sup>6</sup> Very often, the population of the frontier is economically and even culturally more closely tied to the neighboring country than to its own political, administrative and socio-cultural “center”.

In his studies on the ethnic psychology of Asian peoples, V. S. Myasnikov, the famous Russian Sinologist and member of the Russian Academy of Sciences, used the term “contact zone” to indicate that the vast areas of the Russian Far East were historically the contact zone between the Russian civilization and the civilizations of China, Japan and Korea, while at the same time being the zone of interaction with indigenous ethnic groups of the region: the Chukchi, Kamchadals (Itelmens), Ainu, Evenks, Evens, Nivkhs,

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3 A. A. Andreeva: “‘Frontir’ kak kul’turno-istoricheskaya kategoriya” [“Frontier” as a cultural and historical category], in: *Vestnik Maykopskogo gosudarstvennogo tekhnologicheskogo universiteta* 3 (2014), p. 11.

4 N. Yu. Zamyatina: “Zona osvoyeniya (frontir) i yeye obraz v amerikanskoj i russkoj kul’turakh” [Development zone (frontier) and its image in American and Russian cultures], in: *Obshchestvennyye nauki i sovremennost’* 5 (1998), pp. 75–89; T. V. Vorobyova: “Vostochnyy frontir Rossii” [Russia’s eastern frontier], in: *Vestnik KRAUNTS. Gumanitarnyye nauk* 1 (2012), pp. 5–14; L. V. Bayeva: “Tipologiya i izucheniye yuzhno-rossiyskogo frontira” [The typology and problems of studying the southern Russian frontier], in: *Vestnik Volgogradskogo gosudarstvennogo universiteta. Seriya 7: Filosofiya. Sotsiologiya i sotsial’nyye tekhnologii* 2 (2014), pp. 32–37.

5 Samoylov: *Rossiya i Kitay*, pp. 180–189.

6 D. Ya. Rezun: “Russkiy frontir na Dal’nem Vostoke” [The Russian frontier in the Far East], in: *Rossiya i Kitay na dal’nevostochnykh rubezhakh* [Russia and China in the Far East frontiers], vol. 2 (Blagoveshchensk: Amur State University Press, 2001), p. 444.

Udege, etc.<sup>7</sup> Thus, in the context of the paradigm of socio-cultural interaction, the frontier zone represents a kind of contact zone in which the processes of cultural interaction and mutual identification have been most clearly developed.

### *The Treaty of Kyakhta*

In the eighteenth century, trade became a very important communication channel of Sino-Russian cultural interaction that contributed to the spreading of elements of Russian and Chinese material and spiritual cultures. The Russian-Chinese Treaty of Kyakhta was signed by Tulišen and Count Sava Lukich Vladislavich-Raguzinskii on 23 August 1727. After the signing of this treaty, the trade between the two empires was not only regulated, but moved to a new level of intensity, and its development was objectively stimulated by the process of geo-cultural interaction. In accordance with Article 4 of the Treaty,<sup>8</sup> extremely favorable conditions for the development of bilateral trade were created, which in turn contributed to the process of socio-cultural interaction. According to the Treaty, for a period of three years only one Russian trade caravan of up to two hundred people was allowed to travel to Beijing, but despite this, and thanks to the exemption of border trade from taxation, trade activities increased significantly as compared to the previous period.

The influential Treaty of Kyakhta brought the “identification stage” of Sino-Russian socio-cultural interaction to an end. It has since been viewed as having predetermined some specific features of socio-cultural intercourse for the subsequent centuries. Socio-cultural interaction began to include wider spheres of culture as well as various aspects of daily life. At this stage, cultural adoption may certainly have been limited to certain places and social

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7 V. S. Myasnikov: “Izucheniye etnopsikhologii narodov Vostoka” [Ethnopsychological studies of the Orient], in: *V Indiyu dukha...: sbornik statey, posvyashchenny 70-letiyu Rostislava Borisovicha Rybakova* [In the spirit of India ...: Collected articles dedicated to the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Rostislav Borisovich Rybakov] (Moscow: Vostochnaya literatura, 2008), pp. 247–254.

8 V. S. Myasnikova (ed.): *Russko-kitayskiye dogovorno-pravovyye akty [Russian-Chinese treaties] 1689–1916* (Moskva: Pamyatniki istoricheskoy mysli, 2004), pp. 41–47.

groups. Such adoption and expansion characterize the “activation stage”<sup>9</sup> of Sino-Russian socio-cultural interaction. It gave rise to a new level of geo-cultural interaction.

The significance of the Treaty of Kyakhta is now readily admitted by Russian, Chinese and also Western historians due to its consideration of Russian-Chinese trade as the main communication channel for socio-cultural interaction.<sup>10</sup> To put it more precisely, trade promoted the mutual distribution of parts of Chinese and Russian material cultures throughout both empires. Kyakhta should therefore be recognized as the focal point of the initiation of the basic process of socio-cultural interaction.

A border fortress at the Kyakhta River was established by order of Count S. L. Vladislavich-Raguzinskii in 1727, the year of the signing of the Treaty of Kyakhta, on the Day of the Holy Trinity. A trading village grew rapidly around it, the first houses of which appeared already in 1728. Later, the fortress was called Troitsko-Savskaya (Trinity-Sava). The Russian Sinologist Alexander Khokhlov suggested that this name was chosen “in honor of the Sava Vladislavich-Raguzinskii”.<sup>11</sup> In fact, the origin of the name of the city played a key role in the subsequent history of Russian-Chinese socio-cultural interaction, due to the importance of the Trinity Church and the Chapel of Saint Sava (Serbian) who was the saint patron of Count Vladislavich.

The Troitsko-Savskaya Fortress was demolished in 1805, and Troitskosavsk was granted town status. The name of Kyakhta that was pre-

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9 Nikolay Samoylov: “Main Stages & Characteristic Features of Sino-Russian Socio-cultural Interaction in the 18<sup>th</sup> – Early 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries”, in: *St. Petersburg Annual of Asian and African Studies* 1 (2012), p. 57.

10 Samoylov: *Rossiia i Kitay*, pp. 117–140; Su Fenglin 宿丰林: “Cong Nibuchu tiaoyue dao Qiake tiaoyue: Jiaoliu de lishi pianduan” 从尼布楚条约到恰克条约谈 - 交流的历史片段, in: *Zhong-E guanxi de lishi yu xianshi* 中俄关系的历史与现实 (Kaifeng: Henan daxue chubanshe, 2004), pp. 17–26; Lin Jun 林军: *Zhong-Su guanxi* 中苏关系 1689–1989 (Harbin: Heilongjiang jiaoyu chubanshe, 1989), pp. 18–22; C. M. Foust: *Muscovite and Mandarin: Russia's Trade with China and its Setting, 1727–1805* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1969).

11 A. N. Khokhlov: “Kyakhtinskaya torgovlya i yeye mesto v politike Rossii i Kitaya (20-ye gody XVIII v. – 50-ye gody XIX v.)” [Trade in Kyakhta and its place in the policy of Russia and China (from the 1820s to the 1850s)], in: S. L. Tikhvinskiy (ed.): *Dokumenty oprovergayut. Protiv fal'sifikatsii istorii russko-kitayskikh otnosheniy* [Documents refute. Against the falsification of the history of Russian-Chinese relations] (Moscow: Mysl', 1982), p. 104.

served as the name for the trading settlement (*sloboda*), remained in common use. In 1934 the town was merged with the trading settlement, and since then this frontier town in Buryatia has been officially called Kyakhta.

### *The border twin-towns of Kyakhta and Maimaicheng*

In 1730, on the Qing side of the border, actually on Mongolian territory, the construction of a Chinese trading settlement started. It was given the self-explanatory name of Maimaicheng 买卖城 (Trading Town). In the early period, the people who settled in Maimaicheng were mostly natives from Shanxi Province. They were actively engaged in trade and moneylending activities. Alexander Khokhlov, by analyzing the text of the inscription on the bell from the Laoyemiao 老爷庙 temple in Maimaicheng (now on exhibit in the Obruchev Museum of Kyakhta), clarified that at that time many Chinese from Fenyang County (Fenyang xian 汾阳县) in Fenzhou Prefecture (Fenzhou fu 汾州府)<sup>12</sup> lived there.<sup>13</sup> The chief official in Maimaicheng was appointed by the *lifanyuan* 理藩院, the Chamber for External Territories, and was termed *Zarguchi* in Mongolian, and *siguan* 司官 or *siyuan* 司员 in Chinese.<sup>14</sup>

Thereafter, Chinese merchants in Maimaicheng united in companies or trading houses (*huiguan* 会馆). N. I. Lyubimov, an official from the Asian Department of the Russian Foreign Ministry who had travelled to Beijing via Kyakhta and Mongolia in 1840, wrote: “As for Chinese trading firms having trade relations with us, all in all there are seventy. [...] All of them are fully staffed with people from Shanxi province. [...] Some stores have up to twenty investors.”<sup>15</sup>

In Kyakhta, from the outset, the trade volume of goods exported from Russia was significantly larger than that imported from China. For example, in the years 1736–1740, at Kyakhta, annually 1430 wains and 96 sleds of

12 Former Fenyang County, now Fenyang City (Fenyang shi 汾阳市), is a county-level city under the administration of the prefecture-level city of Lüliang (Lüliang shi 吕梁市), in Shanxi Province.

13 Khokhlov: “Kyakhtinskaya torgovlya i yeye mesto v politike Rossii i Kitaya”, pp. 105f.

14 A portrait of one such Maimaicheng *Zarguchi*, painted in 1830 by the Russian artist Anton Legashov, is now held in the Tretyakov State Gallery, Moscow.

15 Russian State Historical Archive, Fund 796: 448-87-66.

Russian goods were exported, and only 806 wains and 37 sleds imported from the Qing Empire. The Qing authorities strictly forbade and suppressed the Mongols' clandestine trade with the Russians. Since 1772, Kyakhta became the only legal place for Sino-Russian trading. In 1775, its share was 8.3% of the total turnover of trade with the Russian Empire.<sup>16</sup> Furs took first place in Russian-Chinese trade, and in 1768–1785 furs accounted for 78.8% of all Russian exports.<sup>17</sup>

Despite the big strides in the development of the Kyakhta trade, it should nevertheless be recognized that, after it had reached its peak level, it gradually slowed down in pace. There were periods when the Chinese side restricted trading activities, and at times (though not for very long) they even suspended it altogether, quoting the most trivial pretexts. Russian historians often attribute this to the machinations of the Qing administration and its policy of isolation, as well as to the traditional restrictions imposed on the activities of Chinese merchants.<sup>18</sup> Chinese authors usually explain the failures and interruptions in the development of Kyakhta trade by the expansionist colonial policy of the Russian Empire.<sup>19</sup>

In reality, the nature and the specific features of the Kyakhta trading system were determined not only by economic and political reasons, but first of all by socio-cultural factors. For the Qing Empire, the economic aspect of the Kyakhta trading system was not paramount. Just as in the case of the Canton system of trade with Western countries through the port of Guangzhou, the Qing government was confident in the self-sufficiency of China as the center of the civilized world. Any trade relations with foreigners were treated largely as an act of mercy toward “barbarians”. According to the view of the Qing authorities, “barbarians” could not exist without the items they purchased from China. It was also believed that trade with foreigners was without any advantage for China. Thus, from a socio-cultural point of

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16 Ye. P. Silin: *Kyakhta v XVIII veke. Iz istorii russko-kitayskoy trgovli* [Kyakhta in the 18th century. From the history of Russian-Chinese trade] (Irkutsk: Irkutsk Regional Publishing House, 1947), p. 187.

17 H. Trusevich: *Posol'skiye i togovyye snosheniya Rossii s Kitayem (do XIX v.)* [Diplomatic and trade relations between Russia and China (up to the XIXth century)] (Moscow: Malinovskiy Printing House, 1882), p. 87.

18 Khokhlov, “Kyakhtinskaya trgovlya i yeye mesto v politike Rossii i Kitaya”, p. 117.

19 Wu Keming 吴克明: *Eguo dong zhengjiao qin Zhongguo shilue* 俄国东正教侵中国史略 (Lanzhou: Lanzhou renmin chubanshe, 1985).

view, by the 1840s, both the Kyakhta and the Canton trading systems were fully integrated in the perception of the Qing elite of the Chinese world order and the concept of the “ennoblement of foreign barbarians”.

For nearly two centuries, Kyakhta and Maimaicheng formed a cultural bi-unity, and a synthesis of elements of both cultures, Russian and Chinese. They became an interface of communication for the forming of a code of socio-cultural interaction. This interaction, in turn, had a great influence on the formation of a new geo-cultural space that grew along with the development of Sino-Russian trading relations. Descriptions of Kyakhta (Troitskosavsk) and Maimaicheng are found from different historical periods, and the respective sources provide a good basis for the reconstruction of the specific features of this symbiotic relationship.

Peter Simon Pallas (1741–1811) was a German physician, scientist, naturalist, zoologist, geographer and explorer, and a member of the St. Petersburg Academy of Sciences. He worked in Russia, and was appointed by a personal edict by Russian Empress Catherine II, in 1768–1774 to serve as the head of a complex expedition investigating the various areas of the Russian Empire. His notes contain some very interesting observations about the Russian-Chinese trade and the general situation in Kyakhta and Maimaicheng. Carefully analyzing the issues of trading and economic relations of the Russian Empire with the Qing Empire, he pointed out those cities, which at the time played a key role in Russia’s trade with China. About Krasnoyarsk he commented that “whatever Russian merchants transport for bargaining with the Chinese passes through this city”; and Tomsk he described as a place where “many ordinary sables and other furs (*ruhliad*) are bought for China”.<sup>20</sup> Moreover, Pallas paid special attention to the description of Kyakhta, stating: “This is the main frontier and trading place for the exchange of goods between Russians and Chinese.”<sup>21</sup>

Drawing attention to the mutual complementarity of the Russian and Chinese border trading settlements, Pallas pointed out several cases of interaction between Kyakhta and Maimaicheng inhabitants. For instance, he drew attention to the fact that there were problems with the drinking water in Ky-

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20 P. S. Pallas: “Puteshestviye po raznym provintsiyam Rossiyskogo gosudarstva” [Travel to different provinces of the Russian state], in: *Rossiya XVIII v. glazami inostrantsev* [The 18<sup>th</sup> century Russia through the eyes of foreigners] (Leningrad: Lenizdat, 1989), p. 460.

21 *Ibid.*, p. 478.

akhta: the river was so shallow that it could be crossed without getting your feet wet, and the water from the wells contained bitter salt. “For this reason, the wealthy Chinese merchants, who were great lovers of tea, allowed us to take pure water from the spring at the bank of the Kyakhta River, which was located near the border on the Chinese side.”<sup>22</sup> On the other side, the Chinese tradition of drinking tea had spread also in the Russian trading settlement, and in this regard the Russian merchants sometimes even surpassed their Chinese trading partners:

The best citizens in Kyakhta – the Russian merchants, managers or clerks of the major Russian firms – gradually had made a fortune. Here, everywhere they have regular feasts as you will not find them in any Siberian city, except for Irkutsk. But interactions with Kyakhta residents used to be much nicer since they would not bother you that much with their tea. Every merchant shows off by providing guests with all varieties of tea, one after another, as many as he has to offer.<sup>23</sup>

In 1802, Flügeladjutant Count Alexander von Benckendorff (1782–1844), who later became well known as the founder of the Gendarmes and the Secret Police of Imperial Russia, visited Kyakhta as a member of an expedition led by Count Göran Magnus Sprengtporten (1740–1819). He wrote a very informative report on his journey to Siberia that also includes a description of Kyakhta and his meetings with the Chinese in the frontier area. Benckendorff described Kyakhta and Maimaicheng as “the place that excited my curiosity the most” and gave a detailed account of the two trading settlements. He wrote that without any problem he was allowed to visit the Chinese trading town, which he refers to as “the Chinese part of the whole”:

We were allowed to enter the Chinese part, and Chinese officers gave us a dinner party in the manner of their country. We were treated to an endless variety of dishes in tiny porcelain cups and in so small portions that they barely could be tasted. The base of all the dishes was flavored Chinese vinegar that was entirely without salt, and there was lamb, and various sweets and pastries. It should be noted that houses here are very well kept and almost all built identi-

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., p. 479.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., pp. 479f.

cally: the kitchen, as polished like the other rooms, was located in the courtyard, and the furniture was covered with black lacquer.<sup>24</sup>

Benckendorff also mentioned a Chinese temple in Maimaicheng with “lots of pagan idols”, which was shown to the Russian travellers. According to Chinese tradition, guests were welcomed with fireworks consisting of large numbers of small firecrackers.

Count Alexander von Benckendorff emphasized that the Chinese never violated the Russian border, and if any Mongols tried to steal cattle or horses, the Chinese authorities would return the stolen items, and the thieves would be punished by death. They also extradited deserters and escaped criminals from the Russian side. Benckendorff was struck when he learned that the Chinese were so confident in the stability and durability of their institutions and of the political situation that they planned administrative measures for many years into the future:

While we were in Irkutsk, the governor received a notice from the Chinese ruler in Urga that in the next fifty years all inspection stations would be supervised by a general appointed from Beijing. In Europe we issue orders for months and years while in China it is for half a century!<sup>25</sup>

He also made an interesting remark on the situation in the Amur region: “Since the conquest and destruction of the Albazin fortress, the Amur River is completely deserted; neither Chinese nor Russians dare to swim there, and the banks are doomed to remain empty and lifeless.”<sup>26</sup>

V. P. Parshin, a Siberian writer, educator and historian, in his *Journey to Transbaikal Territory*, published in 1844, listed the main buildings in Kyakhta: a wooden church and a new stone church which was under construction; the house of the chief of the border guard; the “Rhubarb Yard” (rhubarb played an important role in Russian-Chinese trading); and a school where 25 Russian children were taught. In that school there was also one young Chinese child who privately learned reading and writing the Russian language.

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24 A. Kh. Benckendorff: “Moye puteshestviye na kray nochi i k granitsam Kitaya” [My journey to the edge of the night and to the borders of China], in: *Nashe naslediyе. Istoriko-kul'turnyy zhurnal* [Our heritage. Historical and cultural magazine] 71 (2004), p. 70.

25 Ibid., p. 71.

26 Ibid.

Parshin noted that trading was the main activity in Kyakhta, without which the existence of the city was simply unthinkable. He listed the main goods of mutual Sino-Russian trade in that period: on the Russian side, it was not only “soft stuff” (i. e. furs), but also lambskin, cloth, Moroccan leather (saffian), plush, animal skin, and red deer antlers; on the Chinese side, it was silk fabrics, tea and, in small quantities, porcelain. According to Parshin’s description, communication between Russian and Chinese merchants in Kyakhta was very casual, and was held almost in an atmosphere of friendship. “From morning to evening, the Chinese constantly come to Kyakhta not only at trading time. They go from house to house, smoke tobacco, and talk with each other and with the Russians. [...] They are everyday guests, ‘friends’, as they are called by the Russians.”<sup>27</sup> Parshin also paid attention to the fact that the Chinese in Maimaicheng were more skilled in gardening than the Russian residents in Kyakhta.

Descriptions of nineteenth-century Chinese Maimaicheng can be found in numerous publications of the time. In 1840, V. V. Gorskiy, a Russian Sinologist and student at the Russian Ecclesiastical Mission in China, travelled to Beijing via Kyakhta. He wrote the following about Maimaicheng:

It made a better impression than Troitskosavsk. The streets in Maimaicheng are arranged in long, straight lines across the city, in all directions, starting from the main tower, which is the center and the node of the whole city. Along the streets, there are almost continuous lines of wooden one-story buildings that are two and a half fathoms high, with no windows to the street, and with flat roofs which end in an angular shape and are somewhat curved upwards. The buildings are so skillfully plastered with greyish, white clay that they seem to be made from stone; moreover, the clay prevents the wood from decay.<sup>28</sup>

Parshin also mentioned that the entrance gates to Maimaicheng featured small towers the roofs of which were decorated with dragons roughly carved from wood. Access was free only for Russian merchants, whereas other Russians could only enter by special permission, or during the Chinese New Year celebrations. For the celebrations, all the Russians rushed from Kyakhta

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27 V. P. Parshin: *Poyezdka v Zabaykal'skiy kray* [Journey to Transbaikal territory] (Moscow: Stepanov Printing House, 1844), p. 95.

28 V. V. Gorskiy: “Stranitsa iz istorii pravoslavnoy russkoy missii v Kitaye (Pis'ma missionera)” [A page from the history of the Russian Ecclesiastical Mission in China (Letters of a missionary)], in: *Bogoslovskiy vestnik*, January 1898, p. 92.

to Maimaicheng “to watch the illuminations and the fireworks, the firing of rockets and the bright flowers raining down like a cascade of white roses”.<sup>29</sup> Both Russians and Chinese crowded the narrow streets that were decorated with colorful lanterns, watching the performances of actors and magicians. Parshin drew attention to the fact that only men lived in Chinese Maimaicheng, and that women were not allowed to stay there, and even the *Zarguchi* could not live there with his family.

The various descriptions of Maimaicheng by Gorskiy, Pallas, Parshin, Benkendorff, the artist Andrei Martynov and others emphasize that the planning and building of this “trading town” was typical for a Chinese city with all its attributes, though only in miniature. Likewise, Kyakhta with its Trinity-Sava fortress, Posad<sup>30</sup> and Gostinyi dvor (i. e., rows of shops) could serve as a model for a typical Russian town.

Houses in Maimaicheng were built in Chinese style, however, the interior furnishing would typically be a blending of Chinese and Russian elements, some with Russian stoves and beds, while others combined European mirrors with Chinese stove beds (*kang* 炕). The pictures hanging on the walls were painted by Russian artists, supplemented with samples of Chinese calligraphy.

The historical sources dating back to the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries convince us that in architecture, economy, and everyday life culture, Kyakhta and Maimaicheng represented a peculiar bi-unity of two initially dissimilar socio-cultural types, based on their inherent cultural characteristics. While complementing each other economically, these two trading towns not only attracted socio-cultural interaction between Russians and Chinese, but also actively forged a new geo-cultural space that gradually expanded due to the mutual introduction of cross-cultural elements.

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29 Parshin: *Poyezdka v Zabaykal'skiy kray* [Journey to Transbaikal Territory], p. 409.

30 “Posad” was a settlement in the Russian Empire, sometimes surrounded by a defensive wall and a moat, usually adjoining to a fortress or a kremlin.

“Kyakhta common language”

For the interaction of business and trade between Russian and Chinese merchants in Kyakhta and Maimaicheng, a special business language was being developed: the Maimaichensky (or Kyakhtinsky) patois. This patois was the first variety of Russian-Chinese pidgin the use of which greatly expanded in the process of intensified Sino-Russian interaction in the frontier zone. The great Russian lexicographer Vladimir Dal (1801–1872) considered the “Kyakhtinsky language” to be a Russian language, but distorted in a Chinese manner, devoid of any declensions and conjugations, and with vowels inserted between double consonants.<sup>31</sup>

The first scientific description of a special “Kyakhta common language” (Russian-Chinese pidgin) was presented by father Iakinf (Bichurin) (1777–1853) in the newspaper *Moscow Telegraph* in 1831.<sup>32</sup> The article by this outstanding Russian Sinologist provided 15 sample phrases of this idiom. Moreover, he also mentioned the existence of special handwritten glossaries with Russian translations, written in Russian letters that were widely used among Chinese merchants. Some contemporaries noticed the dominant tendency toward the unilateral (one-way) use of the “Kyakhtinsky language”. According to scientific studies, fictional accounts, memoirs and newspapers of the time, it would seem that only the Chinese side made use of the Kyakhtinsky (Maimaicheng) patois for intercultural communication. The Russians, on the other hand, whose language provided the basis for Russian-Chinese pidgin, continued to speak their native language, although sometimes they would add elements of pidgin to their speech in order to be better understood by their Chinese dialogue partners.

G. Shukhart drew attention to the geographically widespread use of Russian-Chinese pidgin in the second half of the nineteenth century:

Maimaicheng is not the only place where this interesting jargon is being used, for it is also spoken along the Siberian-Chinese border, in particular in the Aihun-Blagoveshchensk area and around Vladivostok. It should be termed more

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31 Vladimir Dal: *Tolkovyy slovar' zhivogo velikorusskogo yazyka* [Explanatory dictionary of the living great Russian language] (Spb.-Moscow: Wolf Printing House, 1881), vol. 2, p. 230.

32 Iakinf (Bichurin): “Pis'mo iz Kyakhty” [Letter from Kyakhta], in: *Moskovskiy telegraf* [Moscow Telegraph] 42.21 (1831), pp. 141–144.

generically as the “Sino-Russian dialect”, thus we could speak of the Maimaicheng patois of the Sino-Russian dialect. This is the language of commerce.<sup>33</sup>

It is also essential that, as noted by contemporaries, Russian-Chinese pidgin was not being used by any other ethnic group as a language for intercultural communication with Russians. Thus, it may be said that the Kyakhtinsky (Maimaicheng) pidgin, as practiced in the eighteenth to nineteenth centuries, was the inevitable result of intensive Russian-Chinese trading relations in Kyakhta and a necessary precondition for the functioning of Sino-Russian socio-cultural interaction. At the time, the Kyakhta-Maimaicheng frontier zone was the site of an intercultural communication process and the focal point of socio-cultural interaction between Russia and China. The phenomenon of the continuous use of Russian-Chinese pidgin until our present time has been an essential component of the formation of the geo-cultural space of the frontier zone. From the nineteenth to the early twentieth century, the Sino-Russian contact zone expanded significantly and eventually spread all along the borderlands.

### *Specific features of the Sino-Russian Frontier Zone*

Until the middle of the nineteenth century, under the rule of the Nerchinsk and Kyakhta treaties, the Amur Region was perceived as a “no man’s land”. It has nevertheless attracted some population, some of whom escaped from state control on either the Russian or the Chinese side. The Russian people there developed a typical “frontier mentality”. Their attention to their own “center” as well as to their neighbors continued even after the signing of the Russian-Chinese treaties of Aihun 璦琿 and Beijing that marked the beginning of the state-controlled settlements in the Amur Region.<sup>34</sup>

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33 G. Shukhart: “Maimachinskoye narechiye” [Maimaicheng adverbs], in: *Russkiy filologicheskiy vestnik* 12.4 (1884), pp. 318–320.

34 D. Ya. Rezun: “Russkiy frontir na Dal’nem Vostoke” [The Russian frontier in the Far East], in: *Rossiya i Kitay na dal’nevostochnykh rubezhakh* [Russia and China in the Far East frontiers], vol. 2 (Blagoveshchensk: Amur State University Press, 2001), pp. 444–448.

In the nineteenth century, at the time of stagnation in the development of barter trade in Kyakhta, frontier trading activities intensified. However, these trading activities cannot be considered actual cross-border trade, because they were neither officially organized, nor approved by the state authorities. In the second half of the nineteenth century, in the frontier zone, there occurred quite natural contacts between lieges of the Russian and the Qing Empires, a spontaneous illegal trade at a fairly large scale. As the Russian scholar Alexander Korsak wrote in the mid-nineteenth century, even the Transbaikalian population, which lived at a short distance from Kyakhta, would not buy any Chinese tea or cotton fabrics on the Kyakhta market, but rather smuggled it over the border. The Chinese, on their side of the border, got Russian furs, cattle and grain in the same way.<sup>35</sup>

The great Russian writer Anton Chekhov (1860–1904), whose letters travelled through the Priamursky region and by ship along the state frontier, in 1890, brilliantly described the situation and atmosphere in the Amur frontier region. The Amur River separated the two empires, but at the same time brought them together: “On the left bank is Russia, and on the right one is China. I watch in any direction I want. If I wish to see Russia, I watch here; and if I wish to see China, I watch there. China is deserted and wild, just like Russia: villages and lodges are hardly ever to be seen.”<sup>36</sup> Chekhov very accurately described the atmosphere that prevailed in the settlements on the Russian bank of the Amur. He experienced a kind of “frontier spirit”: “I’m in love with the Amur and would willingly live here for two years. Here it is beautiful and spacious, free and warm. Even Switzerland and France have never known such freedom. The lowliest exile at the Amur breathes more freely than the highest general in Russia.”<sup>37</sup>

In the development of the Sino-Russian socio-cultural interaction in the Amur frontier zone, a special role is attributable to the agricultural sphere. Early contacts between the Russians and the Chinese in the Amur region date back to the seventeenth century, when the region became a kind of zone

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35 A. Korsak: *Istoriko-statisticheskoye obozreniye torgovykh snosheniy Rossii s Kitayem* [Historical and statistical review of trade relations between Russia and China] (Kazan: Ivan Dubrovin Publishing House, 1857).

36 Anton Chekhov: *Sobraniye sochineniy v 12-ti tomakh* [Works in 12 volumes] (Moscow: Goslizdat, 1963), vol. 11, p. 460.

37 *Ibid.*, p. 461.

of socio-cultural interaction. There is evidence that some types of wheat later grown in Manchuria were derived from the Siberian varieties discovered in the region by Russian explorers. The construction of the Chinese Eastern Railway and the rise of its economic and cultural center, Harbin, enhanced the cooperation between Russia and China also in the agricultural field. Active cross-fertilization between the two cultures was found in manufacturing, education, and even in domestic life.

Intensive borrowing of Russian farming methods occurred throughout Manchuria at the turn of the twentieth century.<sup>38</sup> The extent of this influence grew steadily: in agriculture, new crop varieties appeared, and Chinese peasants acquired seeds and cultivation skills from Russian farmers. Russian varieties of potatoes, tomatoes, cucumbers and cabbage were widespread in the Northeastern Chinese provinces. In the daily Chinese diet, Russian plants, such as onions, turnips, parsley, dill and horseradish, became common. Rye, a kind of grain that previously had been completely unknown in Northeastern China, was being acclimated. The cultivation of flax was stimulated by the production of fabrics that were popular among the European population of Manchuria.<sup>39</sup> The emergence of a technically so demanding crop as hops, in Manchuria, was closely associated with the beginning of production of the famous Harbin beer around 1900.

Harbin residents began to bake and sell Russian bread. The Chinese gradually also became accustomed to it. Since then, in the language of Chinese residents in Harbin, some special words appeared that have remained in use until nowadays, such as *lieba* 列巴, or *da lieba* 大列巴 (from Russian *khleb*, “bread”), for Chinese *mianbao* 面包.

Especially important for the economy of Northeastern China was the beginning of sugar beet cultivation. Nowadays, the area of Harbin and the nearby counties of Hulan 呼兰 and Acheng 阿城 are recognized as the main centers of sugar production in China. The initial impetus to create a sugar industry in Manchuria had been given by Russian entrepreneurs who in 1908 built the earliest two sugar factories in Acheng and Hulan counties.

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38 G. P. Beloglazov: “Russkiy faktor v sel’skokhozyaystvennom komplekse Man’chzhurii” [Russian factor in the agricultural complex of Manchuria], in: *27-ya nauchnaya konferentsiya “Obshchestvo i gosudarstvo v Kitaye”* [The 27<sup>th</sup> conference on “Society and the state in China”] (Moscow: Nauka, 1996), pp. 143–146.

39 Ibid.

Russian agronomists developed the first planting beets that brought good harvests. This was the beginning of entirely new trends in the economy and socio-cultural life of Manchuria.<sup>40</sup>

Due to the contact with Russian immigrants, some Chinese began to consume milk and dairy products, which resulted in the breeding of dairy cattle. This in turn stimulated the rise of new economic sectors in Northeastern China – dairy farming and the meat-dairy industry. Russian gardeners in Manchuria were growing different varieties of apples, pears, plums and berries, including more than 120 varieties that were new to the area. Since that period, horticulture and garden berry cultivation became an important branch of agriculture in Manchuria.<sup>41</sup>

### *Conclusion*

Merchant interaction in Maimaicheng and Kyakhta became the main channel of intercultural communication between the Qing Empire and Russia. These two border towns played a very important role in the formation of a new long-term and sustained geo-cultural space in the frontier zone. From the nineteenth to the beginning of the twentieth century, the area of Sino-Russian geo-cultural interaction expanded over the whole border region, including Harbin in Northeastern China and some Russian territories in the Far East. It can be concluded that the Sino-Russian frontier zone, since its inception, has been a space for active social and cultural interaction and served as a contact area within which representatives of the two empires interacted in various fields.

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40 Ibid.

41 G. V. Melihov: *Man'chzhuriya dalekaya i blizkaya* [Manchuria distant and near] (Moscow: Nauka, 1991), p. 271.