

BEYOND THE BORDERS

Franck Billé

Surface Modernities: Open-Air Markets, Containment and Verticality in Two Border Towns of Russia and China¹



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This article focuses on the contrasting urbanisms that characterize the two cities of Heihe and Blagoveshchensk on the Sino-Russian border. Since 1990, with the bulk of international trade taking place on the Chinese side, Heihe has rapidly developed into a modern town; by contrast, Blagoveshchensk appears sedate and almost stagnant. Another stark contrast between the two cities is in the ways in which ideas of modernity are spatialized through their urban practices, with Blagoveshchensk demonstrating a preference for horizontal functionalism while Heihe largely follows the iconic and vertical model found in the megacities of the Chinese south.

Foregrounding this very spatial imbalance, the paper argues that the Russian association between horizontality and modernity unwittingly collapses Heihe's riverfront skyline into a smooth surface lacking depth, and renders invisible those economic drivers that operate below this surface as well as along a vertical axis. As a result of this, spatiality provides an initial cultural grid through which the development, success and modernity of the Other is assessed.

The methodology followed in this article is primarily anthropological. The research was carried out in October and November 2011. A dozen semi-structured and open-ended interviews were conducted with informants of diverse ages and social backgrounds, including businessmen and women, academics, young professionals and students. This research was funded through a grant by the Newton Trust (Cambridge, UK).

Key words: Sino-Russian border; urbanism; space; verticality; trade; open-air markets.

Introduction

The American sociologist Neil Fligstein has noted that market society's dynamism is too often explained in narratives of rational supply and demand spurred by technological advances. Yet, he argues, this dynamism is made possible because of the extensive social organizations that undergird these environments.

¹ I am grateful for the many comments I received from colleagues as I was writing this paper. I wish to thank in particular Caroline Humphrey, Marilyn Strathern, Paula Haas, Nayanika Mathur, Hyun-Gwi Park, Barbara Bodenhorn, Yuri Slezkine, Natalia Ryzhova and Zoya Kotelnikova.

These forces, he contends, “are not exogenous to market society, but endogenous to these social relations” [Fligstein 2001: 3]. Thus, the survival of social institutions cannot be limited to economic efficiency, and social forces are an inherent part of what constitutes the “architecture of markets.”

This article follows Fligstein in that it seeks to include social processes in its analysis of the structure and dynamics of material production and consumption [Fligstein 2001: 6]. It departs from Fligstein, however, insofar as it foregrounds actual physical architecture and urban spatiality. Focusing on the “twin cities” of Blagoveshchensk and Heihe, I look at the ways in which the two cities are spatially organized, and in particular at the contrast in their use of vertical and horizontal space.

This opposition between horizontality and verticality, according to Chinese geographer and theorist Yi-fu Tuan, is fundamental to the human understanding of place. These two different axes stand “symbolically as the antithesis between transcendence and immanence, between the ideal of disembodied consciousness (a skyward spirituality) and the ideal of earth-bound identification. Vertical elements in the landscape evoke a sense of striving, a defiance of gravity, while the horizontal elements call to mind acceptance and rest.” [Tuan 1974: 28]. Thus, as he explains in a more recent article [Tuan 2007: 29], very tall buildings in the city’s skyline mostly cater to the needs of business and financial aspirations while “work devoted to the body and to the running of government seem to require a feeling of stability and *gravitas* that is best projected by low-lying buildings.”

I am charting in this article the evolution of these urban spaces, particularly the emergence of open-air markets in Blagoveshchensk in the early 1990s. I show that such commercial spaces have largely been perceived to be incompatible with Russian modernity, and therefore subject to sociopolitical pressure towards containment and invisibility. The ‘modernizing’ transformation of these spaces, specifically the will to relocate them away from the surface of the street and into containing structures, has frequently used the Chinese bazaars and markets as counter-examples. However the reduction of Chinese commercial practices to street-level bazaars has rendered invisible other forms of economic activity, specifically those taking place along a vertical axis.² By privileging the very space in which commercial activities occur, my aim is to demonstrate that spatiality acts as a prism through which economic exchange gets interpreted.

The analysis proposed in this article is primarily anthropological. The ethnographic research I carried out in October/November 2011 in Blagoveshchensk was based on a dozen open-ended interviews with a wide range of informants³ — many businessmen and women, as well as academics, young professionals and students of different ages and social backgrounds. In addition, three group discussions took place at the Amur State University. The pool of informants, recruited through the snowball method, was explicitly chosen to be cross-societal rather than limited to a specific segment which may have led to a skewed perspective. The aim of this cross-societal ethnography was not to provide a comprehensive analysis of representative views but merely to offer insights into some of the emergent social and economic dynamics that are found locally.

The perspective of this research is also phenomenological insofar as it seeks to foreground the subjectivity and somatic experiences of my informants in registering their response to the visual stimuli of Heihe’s skyline. In this regard, it responds to Patrik Aspers’ [Aspers 2006: 127] assertion that a phenomenological approach is fundamentally and ideally suited to the study of holistic environments.

² The focus on Russian perspectives in this paper is due primarily to space constraints, but also to the actual imbalance of human and goods traffic between the two cities. While Russians in Blagoveshchensk can easily cross into China and stay there without visa for up to a month, for Heihe Chinese, border crossings require considerable financial and time resources. As a result, only Heihe effectively functions as a space of encounter between the two groups.

³ To protect the anonymity of my informants, all names in the text are pseudonyms.

The first section of the paper provides a brief overview of the history of the two cities of Heihe and Blagoveshchensk since the border reopened in the late 1980s. The paper then describes the enduring contrast between the two, as well as their diverging views of urban development. Whereas Heihe has been characterized by the comingling of modern buildings and open-air markets, the Russian city of Blagoveshchensk has shown a consistently strong emphasis on containment of commercial activities. Using insights from psychoanalytical theory I suggest in the third section that the street surface plays a preponderant role in local Russian culture and that it acts as the primary site where urban modernity is mobilized and displayed. I then illustrate in the fourth section that this cultural focus on horizontality has occluded Heihe's more recent economic development as a boom town in which Russian purchasing power has been playing an increasingly marginal role. Finally, as I argue in the conclusion, a cultural emphasis on particular spaces or planes acts as a grid through which visions of Self and Other are interpreted and given weight. These anthropological and psychoanalytical dimensions can, I suggest, usefully supplement economic and sociological studies of interethnic border trade.

Twin Cities

The two Manchurian cities of Blagoveshchensk (Russia) and Heihe (China), standing across from each other on the Amur River, are the point along the 2500 mile border where Russian and Chinese urbanisms come closest together. Economically co-dependent, these 'twin' cities are nonetheless very different kinds of siblings. While in the last two decades Heihe has grown at breakneck speed, the town of Blagoveshchensk has been comparatively stagnant. The two cities are a unique site insofar as they mark a clear boundary between two very different kinds of worlds, Europe on one side and Asia on the other. The idea that the river marks a civilizational fault line is very much present in the minds of the local people, the assumption of both Russians and Chinese that they are fundamentally different from each other in fact shaping interactions between the two groups.⁴

While Heihe and Blagoveshchensk may be separated by only a 500 meter stretch of water, they are nonetheless two time zones apart. This temporal rupture, added to the bureaucratic hurdles and the endless queues for ferry tickets, increases the sense of distance between the two cities. Similarly, the immediately visible somatic differences in the population of these border cities make the two environments oddly bipolar: apart from Russians and Chinese, there is very little ethnic diversity — at least visibly. This contributes to the peculiar sentiment that one is crossing from one world into another. An additional factor reinforcing this cultural fracture even further is the relatively recent history of the border's hermetic closure, a condition that ended in the late 1980s. Following the border disputes of the early 1960s that eventually led to the so-called 'Sino-Soviet split', the international boundary was heavily guarded and militarized, and supplemented by restricted zones — in fact still present on the Russian side. During this period, it was virtually impossible for people to cross over or to communicate. Blagoveshchensk itself, as a militarized town, was closed to foreigners as well as to non-resident Russians.

The border opened in the late 1980s and people were finally able to cross the river and trade with the other side. But the long separation has left its mark and the two sides have developed largely independently from each other, each having its own national center as its frame of reference. As a result, the two cities look very different, sound very different, and have a generally very different feel.

Due to myriad administrative and political reasons, the vast majority of local Sino-Russian commercial exchange takes place in Heihe. In the early 1990s, when financial subsidies from Moscow began to evaporate and many staple goods became increasingly difficult to obtain, the opening of the international border meant

⁴ Other Russian borders in Asia elicit similar discursive practices. The boundary with Japan, in the Kurile archipelago, is also touted by Japanese guidebooks as Japan's border with Europe [Morris-Suzuki 1999: 58].

sudden access to cheap Chinese goods for Russians. Finally able to cross the Amur River to shop, Russians returned home with enormous quantities of goods, from clothes and shoes to kitchen equipment and electronic appliances. This led to the emergence of the shuttle trade phenomenon, with Russian traders (*kirpichi*) crossing the river to buy in bulk and trying to complete as many trips during the day as possible.⁵ If the *kirpichi* are not a phenomenon specific to the city of Blagoveshchensk or even to the Russian Far East, they are nonetheless a potent symbol of the Amur oblast's post-Soviet border identity. The statue of a *kirpich* was thus erected in Blagoveshchensk's centre, with the inscription in Russian “Труду и оптимизму амурских предпринимателей” — “In recognition of the labor and optimism of Amur's entrepreneurs”, acknowledging the economic and symbolic importance of these commercial activities for the region overall (Fig. 1). In response to this sharp rise in demand, the small settlement of Heihe rapidly grew into a sizeable town, today of comparable dimension and population with Blagoveshchensk.

A significant consequence of international trade taking place exclusively on the Chinese side has been the transformation of Heihe into a center of economic activity explicitly focused on Russia. Indeed, most commercial establishments in Heihe, at least in the area in the immediate vicinity of the riverbank where most of the exchange occurs, display signs in Russian and most traders are at least commercially functional in the language. The street signage throughout the city is also trilingual, in Chinese, Russian and English – the latter a nationwide policy. In addition, numerous statues and ‘urban furniture’ in Heihe are Russian-themed, such as statues of bears on the riverside promenade, or statues in the shape of *matryoshki*, or Russian nesting dolls.



Fig. 1. Statue of a kirpich, Blagoveshchensk

⁵ Some of these traders realized that delegating the actual cross-border transport and having a team of *kirpichi* bringing goods from China would lead to higher returns. These former *kirpichi* are commonly known as *fonari*. In other parts of the Russian Far East, notably in the Primorskii krai, *kirpichi* are referred to as *verbliudy* (“camels”).

Interestingly, Heihe has also styled itself as a window to Europe: it attracts not only Russians but also Chinese tourists to whom it offers a ‘mini Russian experience’. Without having to physically cross the river — an experience that involves obtaining an international passport and spending considerable amounts of money — Chinese tourists can take mini cruises along the Amur river, and shop for Russian goods in Heihe itself, typically on Hailan street, a section of which is lined with shops selling a bewildering range of goods, from Russian fur hats to European style paintings.

For Russians, the economic miracle experienced by Heihe, which, from a small settlement has now mushroomed into a thriving city, has also been a common source of resentment. Particularly irritant for Blagoveshchensk residents has been the blatant ways in which Heihe has sought to advertise its newfound modernity. Every evening at 7 p.m. (corresponding to 9 p.m. in Blagoveshchensk), the entire riverfront of Heihe illuminates in a wide array of colors and a laser beam dances in the sky, occasionally prodding the sleepy Russian shore on the other side. For Russian onlookers, this night-time lightshow is primarily a huge billboard seeking to attract Russian customers. It is also seen as a show of force, demonstrating China’s new economic might and reflecting the comparative dimness of Blagoveshchensk on the other side. The electricity required to power the Chinese ‘light shows’ is routinely claimed to be Russian electricity, allegedly supplied at cheaper rates. This widespread belief that the physical energy powering China’s development is Russian echoes fuzzier ideas that Heihe has flourished ‘on the backs of Russians’, specifically through Russian consumption. There is also resentment at the use of matryoshka-shaped trashcans, considered by some as a lack of respect for Russian culture, but also emblematic of the ways in which China, from younger brother following a more enlightened older sibling, now appears to have taken the lead.

As these examples suggest, new urban practices are always symbolically charged. A city’s decision to erect certain statues, to place key buildings in prominent locations or to light up particular buildings is molded by cultural traditions but also sheds light on underlying cultural assumptions about the nature of modernity. This holds true for sites and practices of economic exchange. In both Blagoveshchensk and Heihe, differences in the use of space and in the marking of that space frequently reveal the two cities’ implicit futural investments.

Visibility and concealment

The decade following the collapse of the Soviet Union was characterized by a complete transformation of economic patterns, with a widespread demonetization and deficit of staple goods leading to the emergence of barter and other forms of unstructured economic exchange. One of these forms was the bazaar, an organic and somewhat haphazard coming together of buyers and sellers, centered around products that suddenly were no longer available in shops.

When these bazaars, or street markets, gained visibility in Blagoveshchensk, they tended to be associated with the Chinese, who figured prominently as traders and economic partners. More importantly, these markets quickly became a central feature of Heihe since, as described above, it was there that most of Sino-Russian commercial activities were taking place. In the early 1990s, these commercial sites in Heihe were extremely rudimentary. The only restaurants available were street stalls, and most commercial activities also took place by the roadside. In fact, these streets themselves were often little more than dirt tracks. As an entrepreneur I’ll refer to as Andrei told me:

You would see old ladies sewing Adidas trousers right there on the street. On one side they would have the material, on the other the trousers ready to wear. They sold these to Russian visitors who knew full well they were fake goods, but they were very cheap. They were very bad quality though and wouldn’t last long. At times, the seams would fall apart even before you had reached the Russian shore.

If Russian buyers did not seem to mind too much the lack of quality and the elementary structures they encountered in Heihe, the emergence of similar economic phenomena at home in Blagoveshchensk proved far more problematic. In Blagoveshchensk, just as in the rest of Russia, bazaars were seen as "dangerous places". Yet, their footprint in the city kept expanding. As Caroline Humphrey [Humphrey 2002] noted, "Bazaars, widely condemned as shady places of speculation, unmoral behavior and lack of civilization, (re-)emerged as central nodes in trade networks and the universal centre for private consumption." Bazaar traders were seen as shady characters, particularly in the first decade, when economic and commercial exchange remained heavily inflected by socialist moral precepts and a deeply internalized repugnance for 'non-productive' profit obtained from buying and reselling. In a recent article, Oleg Pachenkov suggests that these associations remain largely current. The open-air market is perceived as a shameful, almost criminal place [Pachenkov 2011: 190], inhabited by the "downtrodden who feel that they do not measure up to social standards" [Pachenkov 2011: 191].

This socialist morality was also lined with an ethnic dimension since members of ethnic minorities often came to dominate economic exchange, with Russians relegated to the more passive role of buyers. Although Blagoveshchensk is not a rich city and therefore does not attract many incomers, there are a number of outsiders, mostly from the Caucasus and Central Asia, in addition to Chinese traders. As a rule, each group has a specific niche: the Chinese sell goods produced in China, Tajiks those from Europe while Armenians and Azeris sell what Russians produce. Uzbeks focus on export, specifically to Yakutia, in the very far north of the country, since the city of Blagoveshchensk functions as an informal corridor (*neformalny korridor*) for Yakuts. The reappearance of Chinese traders after decades of absence was most problematic, leading to fears of Chinese invasion, the mushrooming of Chinatowns and eventual territorial loss. Concerns have hinged in particular on the growing economic disparities between the two sides, and on the potential transformation of the Russian Far East into a 'natural resource appendage' [Kuchins 2007] for an energy-voracious Chinese powerhouse.⁶

In March 2007 new regulations were introduced prohibiting foreigners from selling on the market as well as near places where medicine and alcohol were sold.⁷ The rule remained in effect for four years. Local Russians generally supported the new rule because they wanted Russians to trade, however this decision merely led to the closure of the majority of bazaars, with the number plummeting from a total of around 80 to less than ten. During that time, consumer demand for goods never ceased.

Another important aspect of these new economic spaces was the overwhelming presence of women. As a group, women were hit particularly badly by the collapse of the Soviet Union and the resulting rise in unemployment and non-payment of wages [Ashwin 2000]. Initially, many of them started selling items they owned on makeshift flea markets, and later took a more active role in shuttle trade, importing goods from other towns as well as abroad. It is likely that the preponderant role played by women contributed in some way to the negative evaluation of open-air markets and bazaars in post-socialist Russian society.⁸ Indeed, the reversal of social roles attendant to political upheavals appears to have been an important factor. In an analysis of the role of barter in Buryatia, Caroline Humphrey [Humphrey 2000] makes an argument germane to this point.⁹ She showed that the new social structures demanded by barter involved levels of trust which, far from cementing social relations, introduced instead new kinds of stress.

⁶ The reopening of the border in 1990 triggered strong anxieties and misgivings among Russians regarding alleged Sinicization (*kitaizatsia*) of the Russian Far East and potential balkanization. If the city of Blagoveshchensk is relatively tolerant of a Chinese presence, it was nonetheless the site of a massacre, in 1900, in which over 5000 Chinese residents were killed [Dyatlov 2003; Qi 2009].

⁷ On issues of ethnicity and illegality in connection with unregulated markets, see discussion of Moscow's Cherkizovski market in: [Mörtenböck, Mooshammer 2008].

⁸ While bazaars are largely unpopular in Blagoveshchensk and in western cities such as Moscow or St Petersburg, farmers' markets are gaining ground. As in Euro-American settings, these forms of open-air markets have positive associations [Pachenkov 2011].

⁹ Humphrey notes that in the case of barter, however, exchange is mostly carried out by men [Humphrey 2000: 81].

But if gender and social role reversals are certainly central factors behind the Russian aversion to bazaars and open-air markets,¹⁰ what I wish to suggest here is that the very place where these exchanges occur has also contributed to the low status of these commercial forms. In both official and informal discussions, the driving argument that bazaars are primitive, uncivilized and transitory, and that they need to be replaced with ‘modern’ trade formats (see: [Humphrey 2000: 260; Spector 2008: 47]), has frequently highlighted the lack of a physical structure for housing these economic exchanges. Indeed, one of the reasons why the March 2007 decision to close the bazaars in Blagoveshchensk received widespread support was because of its intention to introduce a more ‘civilized format’ (*tsivilizovanny format*), specifically a move from the street to an indoor space, and including a formal division between selling areas and storage areas, as well as the presence of cash registers. The separation between ‘living area’ and ‘shop’ is often absent in Heihe, particularly in small commercial establishments where the presence of a bed close to the cash register is a common occurrence. This lack of formal division is a particular point on which several Russian informants commented during interviews. These were in fact the kind of examples my Russian interlocutors would provide when discussing ‘primitive’ and ‘uncivilized’ commercial practices, the most primitive of all being the practice of selling goods directly on the street. In other words, the division between ‘uncivilized’ and ‘civilized’ was predicated on the space where the activity was carried out rather than on differences between economic systems (which tend to remain shrouded in mystery for most non-specialists anyway). It is important to note here the dual meaning of the Russian expression “*na ulitse*”, meaning both “on the street” and “outside”. The commercial activities are not simply taking place on the roadside but “outside”, i.e. outside of (*vne*) man-made structures. This distinction is not merely linguistic. As it will become apparent shortly, it is in fact central to the argument of this article.

When Chinese traders (often coming on tourist visas) started operating in Blagoveshchensk, they began by selling their goods and produce on the street, directly on the ground, on a tarpaulin. Later, with some pressure from Russian municipal authorities, they started selling on stalls and finally, in the last few years, most exchanges have been taking place in dedicated trade centers. The shifts have been structural rather than economic, suggesting that ideas of ‘commercial modernity’ are predicated primarily on the space in which exchanges take place.

To an extent, this is also true in the Chinese context where a similar trajectory from open-air markets to shopping malls has been witnessed. However the coexistence of both forms appears to be less problematic in China where bazaars remain common.¹¹ Every morning for instance, between 6 and 9 a.m., Hailan street in central Heihe is closed to cars and turns into a large street market. Farmers from all around the district come to sell fruit, vegetables, clothes and other household goods, displaying their goods on tarpaulins placed on the pavement. By 9 a.m. all the traders have gone and the ‘normal’ urban activities of Heihe resume. The temporal bracketing of street market activities is ensured through a special time window enabling farmers to sell their produce without incurring fiscal liabilities. Without this tax break or indeed the possibility to sell directly on the street, it is unlikely farmers would be able to sell their goods in Heihe.

If these markets are not necessarily the image of successful urban modernity that Heihe municipal authorities are keen to project, open-air markets are not as problematic there as they seem to be in Russia. Even in large Chinese cities such as Hohhot (*Huhehaote*), the administrative capital of the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region, the cohabitation of large avenues and street markets is common. In Russia, by contrast, these bazaars are largely perceived to be incompatible with ideals of modernity. To a degree, these ideals bear the imprint of Western economic models introduced in the early 1990s [Humphrey 2000: 260] but they seem to have sometimes preceded the emergence of the market. During the Soviet period, there was for example a large

¹⁰ However, the situation cannot be reduced to this causal link. What facilitated the involvement of women in these exchanges was also the already low status of bazaars and the reluctance of men to participate in them.

¹¹ In their seminal book, architects Bill Hillier and Julienne Hanson [Hillier, Hanson 1984] suggest that the physical patterning of space is always culturally specific, each society organizing space according to certain principles, or syntax.

bazaar in Blagoveshchensk, at the intersection of two central avenues, on the location of the principal *Yarmarka*, or trade center. Deemed too close to the city center and to administrative and government buildings, it was moved three blocks away. This reluctance to tolerate open-air markets in central locations continues to be seen with the general displacement of shopping precincts away from city centers that is taking place in a number of Russian cities, such as St Petersburg for instance. This consistent drive to displace and/or contain bazaars (in the literal sense of placing them into containing structures) appears to be predicated less on a reluctance to participate in the bazaars' loosely organized form of economic exchange, than on the cultural assumption that bazaars are generally incompatible with urban modernity. This was indeed the official rationale behind the closure, in 2003, of the dozens of flea markets that had emerged in St Petersburg in the early nineties. In preparation for the celebration of the 300th anniversary of the city, open-air markets were eliminated in order "not to disgrace and shame the city in the eyes of the respectable foreign guests" [Pachenkov 2011: 198]. The sole surviving market, the Udelniy flea market, located in the city's outskirts, is not even mentioned in tourist guides [Pachenkov 2011: 182]. Seen as incompatible with the modern face of the city, it simply does not figure in official discourse.

The numerous kiosks and other private commercial spaces that came to punctuate the urban landscape of post-socialist Russia in the 1990s, while not as problematic as bazaars, were also seen as not fully integrated within the city's fabric. Informally referred to as "lumps" (*komok*, from *kommercheskii kiosk*) or "commercial dots" (*kommercheskaia tochka*), they tended to be perceived as "something that broke out of the existing environment (lumps) or as something that only punctuated it (dots)" [Oushakine 2009: 20]. The disjunctive nature of these new commercial forms was also visible through the new naming practices that accompanied their emergence. Unlike the generic and descriptive names (such as 'Secondary School Number 17' for example) that had previously mapped out the urban environment, private shops and kiosks were given exotic names, a tendency which Oushakine sees as symptomatic of an attempt to "reconfigure public space by establishing new historical and geographic connections" [Oushakine 2009: 17].

As historian Dipesh Chakrabarty [Chakrabarty 2002: xix] famously argued, 'modernity' is a notion that stubbornly eludes definition. If in both Russian and Chinese contexts, terms such as 'progress' (*progress/jinbu*) and 'backwardness' (*otstalost'/luohou*) continue to bookend the teleological march towards a modern society, *what* modernity might be remains very cloudy. What is perhaps clearer, for Russians and to a large extent for Chinese as well, is *where* that elusive modernity might be located. For Russians, modernity is undeniably 'the West', or more precisely a fantasy of the West, imagined as sanitary and rational, i.e., without street markets, and with all commercial activity contained within structures. The imaginary dimension is fundamental here — if in their urban development Russia and China have global cities such as New York or London in mind, they are not following a single, linear path (see: [Ferguson 1999; Hosagrahar 2005]). In fact, despite a similar architectural compass, structurally Heihe and Blagoveshchensk differ fundamentally from each other.

Differences in ideas of future and modernity thus extend far beyond the visibility or invisibility of bazaars and the two cities of Blagoveshchensk and Heihe do differ in substantial ways in their very structural organization. Blagoveshchensk appears inward-looking, almost turned on itself. The main avenue, ulitsa Lenina, runs parallel to the Amur River, but at some distance from it. There are no large unobstructed vistas looking onto the other side. To a visitor, it feels in fact as if the river were largely irrelevant. Similarly, the few hotels that are situated near the river do not capitalize on their location, with the best rooms facing away rather than towards the river. This could not contrast more with Heihe's layout. There, the entire city appears to be facing Russia, with the tallest and most modern buildings, including the best hotel in the city, standing right on the river bank.

To an extent, differences in layout are understandable. Heihe is a new city that has grown and developed in response to cross-border trade with Russia. By contrast, Blagoveshchensk is much older and for the largest part of its history had no neighbor to look at. Originally founded as a military outpost in 1856, and heavily

guarded and militarized in the second half of the twentieth century, architecturally the city retains a certain defensive quality, exemplified by the lookout posts found all along the river bank, a legacy of the Sino-Soviet split. However this seems to be only part of the story. In the twenty years that elapsed since the border opened, Blagoveshchensk's river bank has remained undeveloped. Heihe's embankment, on the other hand, has been turned into a pedestrianized promenade lined with trees, small parks, and – in the summer – cafés and small restaurants. As mentioned previously, the contrast becomes even starker at night when the whole riverbank on the Chinese side illuminates. This marked imbalance in fact prompted a Chinese architect and friend of mine to remark on the contrast, describing it as “*yi zhang re lian tie zai leng pigu shang*” (一张热脸贴在冷屁股上), literally a “hot face pressed against cold buttocks.”

On the other side, the tranquil city of Blagoveshchensk looks on this quotidian light-show with a certain level of ambivalence. Various kinds of comments and responses were elicited by my questions. Some of these comments were positive (“it looks really beautiful from here”), others skeptical (“It's just a show to attract Russian tourists”), yet others very critical, asserting that the lights were being powered with Russian electricity bought at a discount. If the majority of assessments were not necessarily positive, the importance of the lights for the city of Blagoveshchensk was undeniable. The topic regularly came up in conversation, and night-time Heihe even featured among some of the very small selection of postcards and souvenirs available in Blagoveshchensk.

The symbolism of these lights is also crucial given the importance of electricity and electrification campaigns in the early socialist period and their significance with regard to modernity. Electric light, with its powerful association with ideas of higher understanding and culture, was seen as the metonymic emblem of a single grand narrative, that of modernity [Sneath 2009: 87]. The common power outages and theft of copper and aluminum wires, which have occasionally plunged sections of Siberian cities into darkness since the early 1990s, are thus frequently seen as nothing less than the failure of this modernist grand narrative. As Oushakine [Oushakine 2009: 21] writes, people routinely complain of being left in the dark (*ostavili v temnote*) and of being cut off from the rest of the world (*otrezali ot mira*). The fact that it is the Chinese side that is now brightly illuminated is therefore very potent as well as a destabilizing factor.

The symbolic significance of night-time Heihe for Blagoveshchensk residents thus clearly extends beyond the image of economic success story which the city of Heihe is celebrating and advertising. For some, it is nothing but a glitzy façade of modernity, barely concealing poverty, dirt and a rural uneducated population. For others, it is the trademark of a new frontier town, built with the purchasing power of their Russian neighbor, and symptomatic of a renewed, economically confident China. For most, Heihe's bright riverbank is also a reflective surface, a mirror reminding uneasy onlookers of their own failings. Indeed, while Heihe is booming and expanding ever more rapidly, Blagoveshchensk remains beset by a host of administrative and political hurdles which together cohere into severe growth inhibitors.

These various readings of Heihe's riverfront, beyond their divergences in interpretation, all share the common assumption that a city's progress towards modernity is legible primarily at its surface. The surface I have discussed here is of course a double one, in fact two different and intersecting surfaces: the horizontal surface of the street — with its association with the ‘uncivilized’ open-air markets, and the vertical surface of the riverfront with a brand of modernity that is problematically positioned with regard to authenticity.

In the next section I will unpack the multiple nature of surface as marker and projection of Self. I will show that the surface of the city is where modernity is displayed and manifest, yet at the same time the surface can also act as concealment device and be viewed as a symptom of superficiality. As a consequence of this, the modernity of the Other tends to be collapsed into a flat, brittle surface lacking depth. In fact, as I will then argue in the final section, the primary focus on surface frequently obscures forms of modernity that are found

on other planes. The vertical plane in particular, literally cutting across horizontal surfaces, offers insights into a city's development strategies and its inchoate trajectories that are not yet visible at the surface. Similarly, the façade of the riverbank occludes what is actually taking place behind it and which remains invisible to most Russian visitors.

Surfaces

The most immediate image associated with surfaces is perhaps the analogy of a cover. This potent metaphor for the separation of the visible from the hidden was productively employed by Sigmund Freud in his reading of the human psyche as divided into different strata and particularly in his opposition between conscious and subconscious. In his description of the relationship between the two, Freud compared consciousness to the surface of the skin, a "shield protecting the personality against disruptive stimuli" [Williams 2008: 48]. This shield, or cover, is essential to the very existence of the conscious self, but only to the extent that it remains invisible. The structural overlap between the psychological and the urban is clear here insofar as the proper functioning of cities is reliant on an invisible network of sewers, cables and sub-surface connections. But while this subterranean grid is hidden, it remains nonetheless what powers the visible and makes it possible.

This metaphor of surface as a cover extends seamlessly to ideas of deception and trickery, and to the binary opposition between superficiality and depth. By concealing the inner workings of the self/city, the visible surface remains 'skin deep' and a mere illusion. This dimension was made explicit with many residents of Blagoveshchensk in my conversations with them. Heihe's riverfront development – the only surface of Heihe visible from the other side of the Amur – was consistently described to me as a Potemkin village, a visual trick performed by the Chinese. It was nothing but "*pyl' v glaza*" or dust thrown into the eyes, I was told, a show intended to attract Russian customers. My Russian interlocutors pointed out the discrepancy they saw between, on the one hand, the surface image of the city as a success story and emergent modernity and, on the other, the 'real' Heihe – poor, dangerous, and with a low level of 'culture'. For them this discrepancy was reflected in the very structure of the city, with the tall modern buildings and the main pedestrian street along the Amur river contrasting with the roads further inland where, allegedly, houses are falling apart and people are dressed shabbily. The façade of Heihe was depicted as an elaborate sham, a commercial lure without any substance. As a 20-year old male student at the Amur State University ("AmGU") explained, "*The new Ferris wheel they've built, twice as high as the one in Blagoveshchensk, is just across from Blagoveshchensk's main artery, so that when people come to our city, the Chinese wheel is the first thing they'll see*".

But if the overwhelming majority of my Russian interlocutors were quick to dismiss Heihe's 'riverfront show' as a pointless exercise that was not fooling anyone, it seems that these evaluations were mixed with the realization that Blagoveshchensk did not have the financial wherewithal to compete with its Chinese neighbor. This suddenly changed following Vladimir Putin's official visit in summer 2011, when, then acting as Prime Minister, he urged the city's residents to take their Chinese neighbor as model. This statement later led to the allocation of central funds for a complete redesign of the Russian riverbank.¹² By the time of my visit in October 2011, excavation works had begun and trucks were dumping sand all along the embankment to create prime riverfront real estate.

Despite their shallowness and artificiality, the bright lights of Heihe functioned as a reflective surface which returned to Russian onlookers the comparative lack of development of their own city. Genuine or not, Heihe's surface had become one of the main sights of Blagoveshchensk. Even though, as will be discussed below, the picture projected by Heihe was to some extent at odds with local Russian concepts of modernity, it had nonetheless the power to imprint upon Blagoveshchensk. In fact, if the two cities have, overall, a 'national

¹² This move is part of larger government plans to develop the Russian Far East through the creation of a "mega state corporation" [RIA Novosti... 2012].

frame of reference' and are thus developing primarily on benchmarks found in their respective capitals, they are also drawn together through direct competition and inter-city comparisons. As a result, Blagoveshchensk has adopted some of the urban trappings characteristic of China, such as the use of lights on the façade of buildings, or the blaring out of music in public spaces. In integrating such new features, Blagoveshchensk is neither styling itself as an Asian city nor consciously emulating Heihe; it is simply developing and modernizing using a repertoire of available markers of modernity.

The reflective quality of the surface is thus closely intertwined with wider notions of projection, mimesis and alterity. Surface inscriptions are particularly powerful since they are the ones where self identities tend to be marked and displayed. As the anthropologist Michael Taussig [Taussig 1993] has shown, cultures continually borrow from each other through a dual process of imitation — mimicry and differentiation — alterity. This argument holds true for urban stagings of modernity, where urban symbols become part of the overall grammar. This is particularly the case with cities in 'twin city' settings such as Blagoveshchensk and Heihe which are drawn into a continued dialogue. Thus if Blagoveshchensk has recently adopted certain 'Asian' urban features into its developmental model, Heihe has similarly integrated 'European' elements such as statues, common in Russian (and other European) cities, but much less so in Chinese cities.

A good illustration of this is the signage decisions that were taken by both Heihe and Blagoveshchensk municipalities. In the latter, all street names are given in both Russian and English, while in Heihe they are in Chinese, Russian and English. Given the complete absence of foreign tourists in either town, the presence of English should not be construed in utilitarian terms but perhaps primarily as a marker of modernity — not as bearer of linguistic meaning but as a meta-sign in itself. In fact, one may even make the argument that the ubiquitous Russian signs in the center of Heihe also are, at least in part, meta-signs and indexical messages given that a substantial majority of them are either misspelled or do not convey much information. Many for example only bear the Russian word for 'shop' (*magazin*), without any indication as to the kind of wares on offer. For the Chinese shop owners, the presence of Russian script on their shop front matters for what it indirectly signifies — commercial acumen as well as full active participation in Heihe's economic boom. Such usage of Russian and English may be productively put in dialogue with the current trend in the UK and other European countries of using QR codes¹³ in marketing material. As journalists Villamor & Frost [Villamor, Frost 2012] have pointed out, these codes are often positioned in hard-to-scan places, such as roadside billboards or on the back of moving vehicles. While the authors are clearly irritated by the uselessness of these codes, they are perhaps missing the point. Just like the use of English in Heihe and Blagoveshchensk, what these codes in fact do is simply indicate the participation of advertisers in novel practices of e-commerce which, by extension, posit them as modern and successful.

What the above suggests is that the surface of the city is always symbolically significant. Like the skin of an individual, where clothes, makeup or tattoos constitute resources for an individual to stage her personhood, the urban surface is where a city's identity is mobilized and displayed [Ahmed, Stacey 2001]. To return to the psychoanalytical interpretation discussed earlier, it is worth noting that it was in fact Freud who introduced the notion of 'surface entity' [Freud 1962: 26], later developed further by Didier Anzieu [Anzieu 1989]. For psychoanalysts such as Anzieu, the skin is more than a mere stage or interface between external stimuli and internal drives; in fact, it is precisely in this interweaving of inside and outside, that the self is located.

These psychoanalytical insights have import for understanding the presence and visibility of street bazaars in Blagoveshchensk. Russian reluctance to fully integrate bazaars in local commercial practices extends beyond any economic dimension, or even issues of sanitation and safety. What is at stake here is the very 'face' of the city. The drive to 'contain' these practices, to relegate them to indoor spaces and to transform them

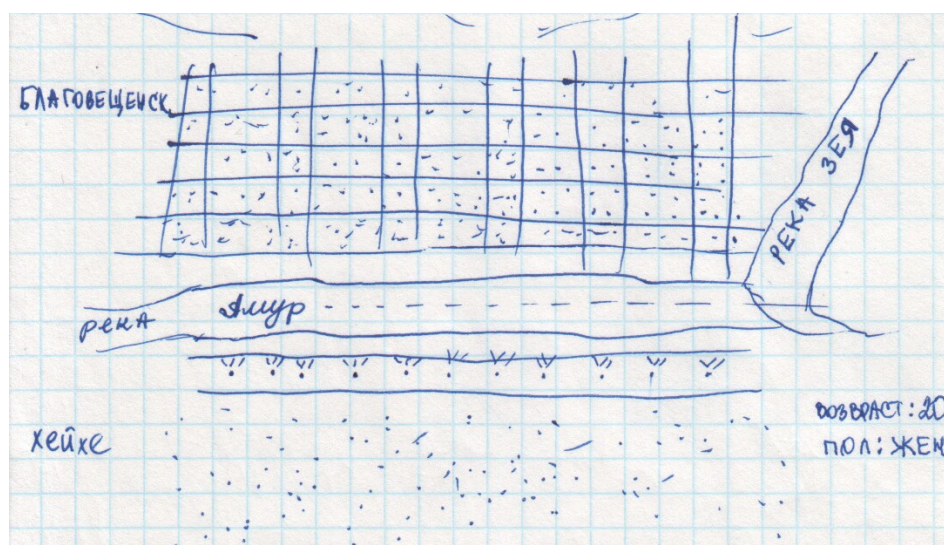
¹³ QR codes, or Quick Response codes, are a type of matrix barcode consisting of black modules (square dots) arranged in a square pattern on a white background which can be scanned by most mobile devices.

structurally into ‘shopping centers’ is, as argued earlier, testament to Russian aspirations to emulate certain western practices [Humphrey 2000: 260]. It may also suggest a predominant cultural focus on ‘surfaces’. As I will develop in the following section, modernity in the Russian context tends to be overwhelmingly associated with the horizontal plane. It is there, at the surface, that ‘space’ is turned into ‘place’, wilderness into civilization.

Similarly, this preponderant Russian focus on horizontality also acts as a prism through which the modernity of Others is evaluated. This has unwittingly compressed Heihe into a two-dimensional surface dedicated to exchange with Russian customers, equating it purely with a ‘bazaar city’ and rendering invisible other forms of urban development and commercial exchange in which Russians do not figure. Indeed, despite widespread assumptions that Heihe is reliant on Blagoveshchensk for its continued evolution — even survival — recent developments suggest that Russian consumers are no longer what powers Heihe’s continued urban expansion.

Horizontality and verticality

Whenever they described their home city to me, residents of Blagoveshchensk frequently made explicit reference to the city’s grid-like regularity. For many of my interlocutors, the network of wide tree-lined avenues intersecting at perpendicular angles was a source of pride. It made their city a place that was both pleasant to live in and modern. When I asked students at the AmGU to draw the two cities of Heihe and Blagoveshchensk for me, this grid was a dimension that was consistently emphasized (Fig. 2, 3).

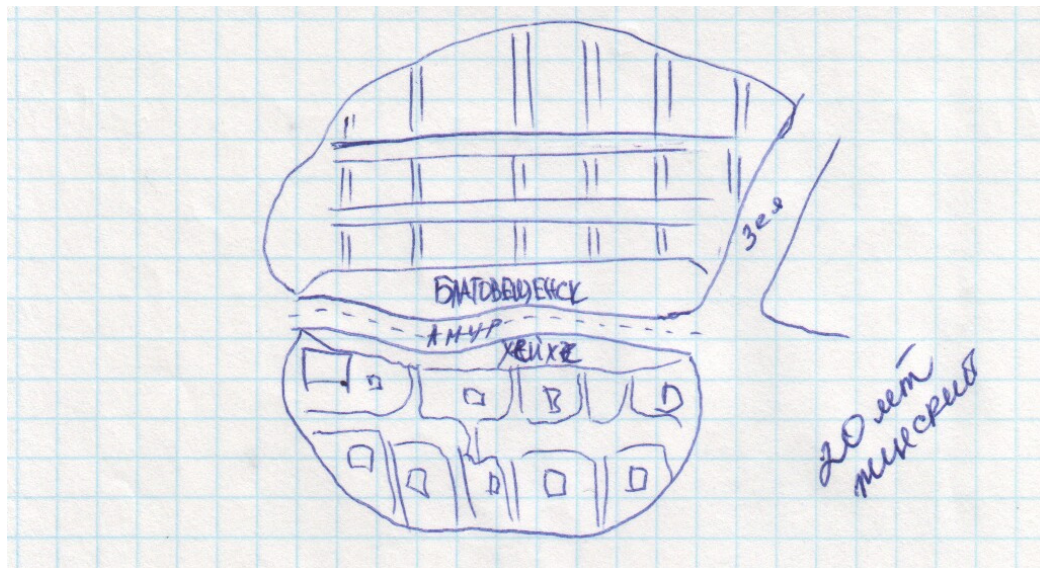


Note: In the city of Blagoveshchensk (shown on the top) the gridded streets are emphasized. The dots on both sides of the river represent the two cities’ inhabitants.

Fig. 2. Contrasts in student depictions of Heihe and Blagoveshchensk

If regularity in the urban road network is of course not exclusive to Russia — indeed most American cities are built on a similar regularity — there is perhaps something specific in the cultural significance this appears to have in the Russian context. As Chinese geographer Yi-fu Tuan has noted [Tuan 1977: 56], if for Americans the open plains figured in social imaginations as a symbol of opportunity and freedom, for Russian peasants, boundless space was seen primarily as a source of anxiety: “It connoted despair rather than opportunity; it inhibited rather than encouraged action. It spoke of man’s paltriness as against the immensity and indifference of nature”. In fact, throughout Russian history the image of a seemingly boundless territory (*neob’yatny prostor*) has been a powerful symbol of identity [Widdis 2004: 33]. More so perhaps than in other cultural

settings, the marking of this geographic space has been perceived as inherently tied to the country's destiny¹⁴ and to claims of modernity and 'civilization'. Thus, because of a "persistent belief that all its territory must be populated to be possessed and governed" [Hill, Gaddy 2003: 15], Russia saw the emergence of numerous midsize cities throughout the vast Siberian expanses. As a result, Russia's demographic distribution contrasts starkly with other countries of low population density such as Canada or Australia where distribution is less homogenous. According to Irina, a political scientist working at one of Blagoveshchensk's institutes, the Russian cultural preference for grid-like regularity as marker of progress and modernity is even stronger in a town like Blagoveshchensk which was a military outpost and retains this 'Roman fort' quality.¹⁵



Note: The orthogonal quality of the road layout is also emphasized here in the city of Blagoveshchensk (shown on the top).

Fig. 3. Contrasts in student depictions of Heihe and Blagoveshchensk

Essential to this mesh-like horizontal layer are, of course, the roads themselves. On this point, a fascinating tension between 'structure' and 'surface' emerged in interviews and informal conversations. While Blagoveshchensk's gridded road network was seen and described as superior to Heihe's less rigid infrastructure, the actual surface of Russian roads was deplored. Tanya, a young woman in her thirties, who lives in Heihe and works remotely with her main office in Blagoveshchensk, pointed out: "Roads in Russia are generally very bad. As the saying goes — "В России две беды: дураки и дороги" — "Russia has two kinds of trouble: idiots and roads". Our roads in Blagoveshchensk are full of potholes and are often quite dangerous. When Putin came to visit, they resurfaced all the streets where his car was going to pass through. But only those!"

The higher quality of the road surface in China, by contrast, was a point consistently arising in all inter-city comparisons. Although, as with the riverfront surface discussed in the preceding section, the smooth roads of Heihe were read primarily through an imagery of deception and concealment. Metaphorically, this reading of the surface resonated with widespread Russian perceptions of Chinese culture as mysterious and impenetrable, and with pervasive suspicions that Chinese operate in Blagoveshchensk behind 'seemingly Russian' businesses.

¹⁴ One may recall for example Aleksandr Dugin's claim that "geography is the fate of Russia" [Dugin 1997; Oushakine 2009: 59]. See also discussion in: [Oushakine 2009: 59].

¹⁵ In fact, this grid is not a feature of all Russian cities. Older cities such as Moscow or Irkutsk, having evolved organically over time, are not built on such a regular pattern. Despite having been founded in the 1850s, Blagoveshchensk developed into its current form largely in the 1940s and 1950s when industries were established and many people were relocated there from western Russia.

Paradoxically, it is precisely beyond the surface — both behind the riverfront façade and underground — that clues to Heihe's continued urban growth and emerging modernity are to be found. If, undeniably, the city's riverbank is staged as a large billboard advertising the city's newfound wealth and economic prosperity, it seems nonetheless premature to brush it aside as a mere illusion. Contrary to common Russian claims that all the tallest buildings in Heihe are pressed against the river, and that they conceal an economic and cultural poverty, Heihe's 'hinterland' is in fact where the newest and tallest developments are to be found. In recent years, a manic construction project has taken place on the southeastern edge of the city, but because most Russian visitors rarely venture beyond the main shopping streets running immediately parallel to the riverbank, these developments have not been visible to them. Yet, it is in these outer layers, rather than the immediate façade, that the bulk of Heihe's urban modernity is sited.

In fact, except for its central node overtly focused on Russia, Heihe is very much a 'typical Chinese city', displaying a strong preference for upward construction. Dutch architectural theorist Rem Koolhaas has pointed out this modern evolution in Chinese construction projects, concluding that "the skyline rises in the East" [Koolhaas 2004]. Similarly, in an analysis of recent urban practices in China, Aihwa Ong has drawn attention to the emergence of hyper-architecture and to what she terms the 'spectacularization of urban success' [Ong 2011: 207]. Of course, China does not have an exclusive claim to vertical modernity, but the preponderance of such forms in China clearly emerges in comparisons contrasting Heihe and Blagoveshchensk. In the latter, high-rises are both less common and less central to the self-image the city seeks to project. In fact, the tallest, most modern structure, right in the center of Blagoveshchensk is the Asia hotel, a Chinese-made, Chinese-owned building. At 65 meters, the building dominates the city and offers panoramic views of Heihe from its top-floor rotating restaurant. It is also the best hotel in the city, and is advertised in Heihe as "Blagoveshchensk's Chinese people's hotel" (中国人的饭店).

In Heihe, the best hotel is the Heihe International Hotel (Gostinitsa "Mezhdunarodnaya" / 黑河国际饭店) (Fig. 4). Sited on the riverbank, it is the tallest building in that part of town. It is also one of the buildings brightly illuminated at night. Despite its prime location and alleged Russian focus, it is mostly patronized by non-Russians. Overwhelmingly, it is Chinese businessmen who stay there. In fact, in stark contrast to the many small businesses at street-level in that part of town, the Heihe International Hotel is one of the few commercial places where Russian is not spoken. Thus, unlike local shopkeepers who hail potential customers with emphatic 'Druga! Druga!',¹⁶ the hotel staff, from the reception desk to the bellboys, do not speak even rudimentary Russian. A vivid symbol of the reduced role played by Russian purchasing power in the development of Heihe, and emblematic of the opposition between the economic realms of the horizontal and vertical planes, is the presence of the Russian-language sign of the hotel, discarded and forgotten on the roof (Fig. 4).

Interestingly, the 'rooftop view' of Sino-Russian economic exchange finds an unlikely mirror image in the activities taking place below ground. Running directly under one of the main commercial streets where Russians come to shop is a long underground corridor focused largely on Chinese customers. The corridor is about three meters wide, with small commercial outlets on both sides, each side occupying roughly the same footprint as the main passageway. It extends for several blocks under Xing'an Street (兴安街), from Ying'en Road (迎恩路) to Dongxing Road (东兴路), with a food court at its western end. The corridor runs along a single east-west axis, except for a short section branching out from the middle of the corridor and extending south for one block.¹⁷ Unlike the space just above, at street level, where Russian shoppers get constantly hailed by shopkeepers and middlemen (*pomogaiki*) and where shop windows display various signs in Russian, shoppers below ground are rarely interpellated and nearly all signs are in Chinese. There are, in fact, very few

¹⁶ Druga, from the Russian *drug* ("friend"), is a linguistic form that has become emblematic of Sino-Russian commercial encounters. The prevalence of such speech practices has been hailed by several Russian scholars as nothing else than a re-emergence of the trade pidgins that existed in the region prior to the Russian Revolution [Oglezneva 2007; Perekhval'skaya 2008].

¹⁷ A tarpaulin at the end of the small section suggests this section is unfinished and may be extended further later.

Russian shoppers. Below ground, as in Heihe's best hotel or around the urban development taking place on the southern edge of the city, Russians are conspicuous by their absence.

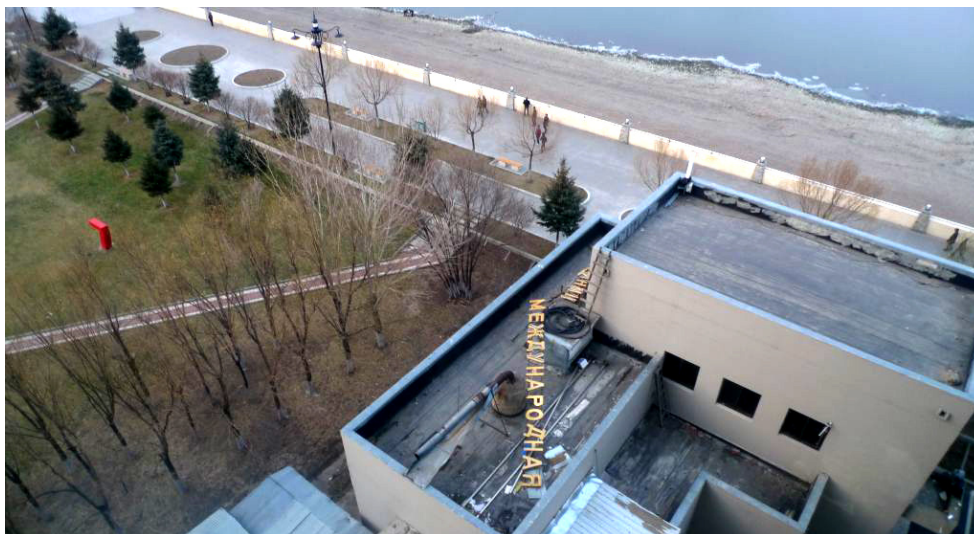


Fig. 4. Discarded Russian sign on the roof of the Heihe International Hotel

In fact, the majority of the goods on display, particularly in underground spaces but also more and more at street level, is now intended for the internal Chinese market. A clear indication of this trend is the increasing difficulties encountered by Russian women to find clothes that fit them. Whereas in the early 1990s clothes were produced specifically for the Russian market, in recent years the focus has shifted in favor of local consumers.

In part, this shift is attributable to changes in Russian customs regulations. In the early 1990s Russians could bring up to a hundred kilos of goods per trip, but over the last decade the quota has been significantly reduced, down to a mere 10 kg a day. Recently the quota was again increased, to 50 kg a day, provided the carrier has stayed for a minimum of three days in China. This means that the earlier *kirpichi* activity is no longer sustainable. At present, when individuals do work as *kirpichi*, it is merely because they happen to be going to Heihe anyway, so they might as well bring the maximum quota of goods back with them and offset the cost of the trip.

While the implementation of these new customs regulations has had wide repercussions for Blagoveshchensk residents, Heihe does not appear to have suffered. According to Ivan, an economist at the AmGU, currently only 5% of goods on sale in Heihe are targeted at Russian customers, with the remaining 95% at the Chinese. *“Russia has merely been an accelerator for Heihe’s development. The city has now gained its own momentum. Should the border close tomorrow, Heihe would continue to thrive. For Blagoveshchensk, however, things would become much more difficult.”*

Conclusions

I have shown in this paper that for Russians in Blagoveshchensk, urban modernity is primarily a surface phenomenon and that this cultural focus strongly shapes the ways in which the neighboring city of Heihe is perceived. I have talked here about two kinds of surfaces. One of them is the horizontal surface, dominated by street bazaars and open-air markets, and perceived by Russians to be the ‘real’ Heihe: peopled by rural inhabitants who are uneducated, rude and uncivilized. Another surface is the vertical plane visible from Blagoveshchensk, the hypermodern, loud and garish riverfront, interpreted as a mere visual trick but at the same time generative of resentment and reflective of Blagoveshchensk’s own failings.

I have suggested that this intersection between the horizontal and the vertical is a fertile one. The local Russian focus on the horizontal plane as the site where modernity is enacted and displayed tends to obscure and occlude the commercial and social phenomena occurring above, and below, this surface. Seen through this cultural prism, the horizontal plane is thus a productive space of modernity, while the vertical is illusory, and in the case of Heihe's relation with Blagoveshchensk, perceived as exploitative.

In interviews and discussions, verticality was never emphasized, even though Blagoveshchensk also has a number of high-rise buildings, notably the hyper-modern Asia hotel. Instead, the elements consistently accentuated as markers of progress, modernity and civilization, were all located on the horizontal plane. They were the gridded structure of the transport system, the quality of the roads, the cleanliness of the pavements. As I have argued, the drive to contain the unregulated (or 'uncivilized') activities that take place at street level, and to literally push them off the street, has taken precedence over potential practical benefits such as cheaper goods. Consistently described as criminal, dirty and uncivilized, open-air spaces of commercial exchanges are perhaps threatening first and foremost structurally.

The focus on horizontality does not seem to be present, at least not to the same extent, in Heihe. As I have shown, if the structural trajectory towards containment is also there, with a clear move towards shopping malls and other 'modern' commercial formats, the plane given most prominence is the vertical one, and this would seem to be the trend in China overall, where the current emphasis is on architectural spectacles. The activities taking place on the street, literally on the pavement, with the presence of carts and donkeys, may not be the kind of urban modernity cities like Heihe are necessarily keen to project, but this does not seem to be seen as a threat to their development plans the way it is in Russia.

Of course, the relationship Blagoveshchensk residents have with Heihe extends beyond, and is considerably more complex, than what I have described here. A dimension I touched upon earlier is the reflective nature of Heihe's riverbank which returns to Russian observers the comparative lack of development in their own city. But the horizontal plane of Heihe is also a surface onto which things can be actively projected. A fascinating aspect of the relationship between these 'twin cities' is the status of Heihe as a place of enjoyment for Russians. While Blagoveshchensk residents voice uneasiness about the emergence of bazaars in their city, they clearly relish indulging in these very same activities on the other side of the river. In Heihe, these non-modern, 'uncivilized' commercial activities can be freely enjoyed without threatening self-perceptions about one's position relative to 'modernity'. So perhaps another emergent dimension here is that of the surface as a site onto which affect and desires are projected; an externalization of activities that are secretly desired but do not quite fit within the structure.

Projection is also seen from the Chinese side insofar as Heihe's night lights — and in particular the laser beam mentioned earlier — also function as a torch illuminating the other side.¹⁸ No longer just a two-dimensional façade, the riverbank thus gains considerable depth as well as the capacity to act upon the other side. I mentioned earlier the symbolic reversal of social and cultural hierarchies signified by the bright lights of Heihe. Perhaps the most telling aspect of this transformation is Blagoveshchensk's recent decision to revamp its own embankment. By responding to Heihe's visual clues, Blagoveshchensk is not only taking a more proactive role in this dialogical and mirror-like urban evolution, it is also communicating its readiness to engage with Heihe's vertical modernity.

¹⁸ I am grateful to Marilyn Strathern for suggesting this active dimension of the Heihe riverfront surface.

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