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Geopolitics in Glass Cases: Nationalist Narratives on Sino–Russian Relations in Chinese Border Museums

IACOPO ADDA & YUEXIN RACHEL LIN

Abstract

History museums, their narratives of a nation's past and their construction of collective memory are important but oft-neglected dimensions in international relations analyses. This article examines three border history museums on the Chinese side of the formerly contested Sino–Russian frontier. It argues that their nationalist representations of Sino–Russian history challenge assessments of the recent level of rapprochement between Moscow and Beijing on the international stage and the robustness of a possible future alliance or semi-alliance. Hence, this article raises the question of the role of historical memory in the evolution of the Sino–Russian partnership since the fall of the USSR.

INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS EXPERTS FREQUENTLY DESCRIBE Sino–Russian relations as evolving towards a semi- or even full-fledged alliance. Their analyses are based on several perspectives, from the evolution of diplomatic relations and growing economic integration between both countries, to the political similarities in their power structures and the impressive level of military cooperation since the 2000s. However, insufficient attention has been paid to internal discourses of historical memory, which is surprising given the troubled history of the Sino–Russian border regions. Most geopolitical studies merely relegate Sino–Russian border history to an introductory section, without considering how it may be used to construct ideological arguments that could contradict high-level official statements of bilateral friendship.

Museums on the China–Russia border and the historical narratives they present are oft-neglected but important keys to understanding these issues. Since they reach mainly

We would like to thank Professor Samuel Guex of the University of Geneva for providing the translations of the Korean text in Figure A2. This work was supported by the GenEx Joint Seed Funding 2020, an initiative by the universities of Geneva and Exeter. The research by Yuexin Rachel Lin was conducted during a postdoctoral fellowship at the University of Exeter.
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domestic audiences, they can reveal different political priorities than those presented internationally. An earlier work on Russian border museums analysed their treatment of the Nerchinsk Treaty, revealing significant tensions between Russia's patriotic historical narratives regarding its past activities in the region and present-day claims of Sino–Russian friendship (Adda 2021). This article focuses on the representations of border history in three equivalent museums in China: the Heilongjiang Provincial Museum, the Chinese Eastern Railway Impressions Hall and the Aihui Historical Museum, visited in August 2018 and 2019. It shows how they promote nationalist views for internal consumption and construct problematic images of Russia.

First, this article addresses theories in heritage and museum studies on the creation of national identities and exertion of political control. Next, the history of the Sino–Russian border, diplomatic relations and current geopolitical situation are tackled. The broader context of Chinese museology will be considered before analysing the three museums in depth. We argue that contradictory tensions exist in their representations of Sino–Russian history, which juxtapose discourses of reconciliation and rivalry. Finally, we conclude by comparing our findings with a previous analysis of history museums on the Russian side of the border. We show how the competing historical memories portrayed on both sides challenge assessments of the level of rapprochement between Moscow and Beijing on the international stage—up until the 'no limits' friendship declared before the February 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics[1]—and the robustness of a possible future alliance or semi-alliance.

Except where explicitly stated, this article makes no claims about the factual accuracy of the museums' narratives. Instead, it is interested in their representations of history and their dissonance with official diplomatic discourses.

Museums, memory and the nation

Since the late 1980s, the 'new museology' has scrutinised the purposes of museums, their contents and displays, and the socio-political contexts of curation (Vergo 1989). Tony Bennett drew on Foucault to argue that museums were refashioned during the nineteenth century into public spaces of representation, privileging didactic functions according to the new political imperatives of the modern nation-state. This created a citizenry capable of monitoring, regulating and civilising itself (Bennett 1995, 2004). Hence, the selective nature of how museums represent knowledge, and how these choices relate to regimes of power, are critical issues. In public museums, narratives of the nation-state and its interests tend to be preeminent. Their institutional status and opaque decision-making invest nationalist narratives with authority and legitimacy (Macdonald 1998, 2006; Smith 2006).

This works on two levels. First, museums often craft narratives that define national identity (Smith 2006). Sharon Macdonald stated: 'The museum is an institution of recognition and identity *par excellence*. It selects certain cultural products … a process which recognizes some identities and omits to recognize and affirm others' (Macdonald

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[1] 'Joint Statement of the Russian Federation and the People's Republic of China on the International Relations Entering a New Era and the Global Sustainable Development', 2022, available at: http://en.kremlin.ru/supplement/5770, accessed 3 May 2022.

2006, p. 3). By employing particular representations of place and culture, museums frequently construct the characteristics of national groups, depict the boundaries of the nation-state and engender affective responses to national identity (Whitehead *et al.* 2015, p. 53). Second, they can spread nationalistic ideas by investing these identities with an aura of exceptionalism. Since the establishment of the nation-state, nationalism has emerged as a device to create social cohesion through affirming the uniqueness of the history of one people in one land (Smith 2006, pp. 17–23). Hence, public history museums do not just preserve and display the past; they legitimise and foster a national-political sense of belonging distinct from, or even competing with, other groups. Like other heritage practices, they select artefacts, traditions and landscapes from the past as anchors for a nationalising conception of identity (Smith 2006, pp. 19–36).

Scholars have drawn on Gramsci's theories on the manufacture of consent, which is related to the concepts of hegemony and the 'historical bloc' (Bennett 1995; Mason 2006). Gramscian theory holds that a dominant class can maintain power through a hegemonic takeover of the ideological domain (Grisoni & Maggiori 1975, pp. 161–62). In such conditions, the dominated class perceives its own interests as coinciding with those of the ruling class, thus constituting a 'historical bloc' (Gramsci 2014). The stronger the hegemony of the dominant class over society, the greater the engagement on the part of the ruled in preserving the system (Canfora 1987, p. 593). Accordingly, cultural heritage and its affective potential serve as 'instruments of political direction' to strengthen ideological hegemony and manufacture consent (Canfora 1987, p. 587). Laurajane Smith's proposition that 'there is, really, no such thing as heritage', thus, appears less provocative than instructive. Instead, 'there is rather a hegemonic discourse about heritage, which acts to constitute the way we think, talk and write about heritage' (Smith 2006, p. 11). Such an 'authorised heritage discourse' perpetuates a consensus version of history that regulates present-day tensions (Smith 2006, pp. 4, 22–3). Indeed, where elites frame the nation-state as a locus of political loyalty, nationalist affinities engineer social cohesion, ensure the stability of a political regime and enhance support for specific policies.

Memory practices involving a nationally inflected narrative of the past are an important means of strengthening nationalist mobilisation (Macdonald 2013, pp. 11–2). Pierre Nora conceptualised *lieux de mémoire* as symbolic sites where a physical entity is invested with meaning in the collective memory, thus helping to create a sense of shared identity (Matten 2012, pp. 5–6; Denton 2014, p. 11; Varutti 2014, p. 103). Museums are one such place, where visitors engage in selective 'acts of remembering', including homogenous, top-down, state-sanctioned 'political memories' (Assmann 2008, pp. 55–6; 2018, pp. 215–21). Through the emotive interactions between curator and audience, museums enshrine transgenerational memories that come to be recognised as 'their' history (Smith 2006, p. 46; Assmann 2008, pp. 65–7; 2018, pp. 216–18), thereby reinforcing patriotic feelings of belonging.

Museums can also be prime sites for conflict over how history and memory are constructed, their exhibits becoming arenas in which political and geopolitical contests are waged (Winter 2016, pp. 31–3). One central idea is the possession of a specific land by the national collectivity (Winter 2015, p. 1011). Museum narratives help to conceptualise this possessive relationship as enduring, even primordial (Denton 2014, p. 27). They may legitimise the collectivity's claims to have special rights to possess the national territory and define all the above *vis-à-vis* an external Other. In this context, history and memory become collective possessions as well (Macdonald 2013, p. 12), something a nation 'has' which can be weaponised against other states to stake claims over contested territories, in a heritage arms race aimed at defining who possesses the 'truer past' (Macdonald 2013, pp. 13–4; Assmann 2018, p. 220).

Frontiers, where territorial possession may itself be questioned, starkly illuminate these issues. Here, museums and other memorial sites describe 'constitution moments' and display identity objects that link the borderlands to the nation-state (Whitehead *et al*. 2015, pp. 18–20, 53). As *lieux de mémoire*, they prompt audiences to 'remember' how certain lands were won or lost. They pit the collective memories of one community against those of (geo)political contenders, deploying rival assertions over who possesses a 'truer' version of the past. Like the castles dotting marcher lands, moreover, frontier museums' presence in the locality of contestation allows them to embody incidents of conflict and occupy disputed space.

This article applies these theoretical frameworks to three museums on the Sino–Russian frontier. They are part of a constellation of frontier *lieux de mémoire* that convey the historical memory of the region and are explicitly tasked with providing nationalist education through the manipulation of this memory. It argues that these museums embody China's ambivalence regarding the legacy of Russian imperialism, and its own present-day aspirations in Eurasia.

Historical background

In ancient times, Greater Manchuria was the stage of intricate interactions between sedentary, sinicised dynasties to the south and the Turkic, Mongolian, Tungusic and other nomadic populations of the north. Muscovy's colonisation of Siberia fundamentally altered this dynamic. Its encroachment into Yakutia and Transbaikalia in the first half of the seventeenth century culminated in a push towards the Amur. Here they were opposed by the Qing army, which intervened to support local resistance and assert Qing territorial claims. An episodic, small-scale war lasted from 1652 to 1689, when a peace treaty was signed in Nerchinsk. This treaty fixed the first Sino–Russian frontier. Beijing cut the Russians off from the Amur basin but accorded them some trade and diplomatic privileges. The *status quo* that followed the Nerchinsk peace lasted almost two centuries. The Qing's Manchu rulers considered Manchuria the cradle of their dynasty, and they built the 'Willow Palisade', a system of physical and administrative barriers, to shield it from Han immigration, leaving northern Manchuria sparsely populated until the late nineteenth century (Mancall 1971; Miasnikov 1987; Perdue 2009).

From the nineteenth century, however, Qing China was increasingly confronted by European imperial powers. Russia took advantage of China's weakness after the Second Opium War (1856–1860) to conclude two important treaties, the 1858 Treaty of Aigun and 1860 Treaty of Peking, resulting in significant territorial concessions by China. Russia obtained all the territories north of the Amur and east of the Ussuri rivers. Important cities in the Russian Far East (RFE), such as Blagoveshchensk, Khabarovsk and Vladivostok, were founded on this territory. Both treaties are still considered 'unequal' by China for having been extorted by an imperialist power.

Russia then turned to Manchuria. Following China's defeat in the First Sino–Japanese War (1894–1895), it obtained a concession to construct and manage the Chinese Eastern Railway (CER) connecting Chita to Vladivostok with a shortcut through Harbin. During the Boxer Rebellion in 1900, Russia invaded Manchuria. Violence against Chinese occurred in Russian territory, especially in Blagoveshchensk, where racism and mass hysteria led to the drowning of Chinese civilians in the Amur by Russian authorities (Paine 1996; Stephan 1996; Bassin 1999; Diatlov 2002).

The 1917 Bolshevik Revolution brought remarkable changes. Despite strong Soviet support for the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), the Mao–Stalin entente that followed the CCP victory in the Chinese Civil War did not survive the Georgian dictator. From the late 1950s, controversies over the frontier re-erupted, refuelling irredentist claims by China over the territories ceded in the Aigun and Peking treaties. Beijing accused the Soviet regime of reviving Tsarist-era imperialism, leading to the 1969 Sino–Soviet border conflict that froze relations for two decades (Westad 1998; Wishnick 2001; Shen 2020).

Post-Soviet geopolitics

In the late 1980s, Mikhail Gorbachev's unilateral move to scale down military tensions on the frontier enabled new negotiations to resolve territorial disputes over islands in the Amur and Ussuri rivers. Progress on border issues led to more open dialogue. A shared interest in countering US hegemony internationally also drew Moscow and Beijing closer together. From the mid-1990s up to President Vladimir Putin's decision to invade Ukraine in February 2022, Russia embraced a realist geopolitical standpoint and endorsed the idea of constructing a more balanced, multipolar world, a position supported by China. From the 2000s, internal politics also fostered mutual understanding, as both countries implemented authoritarian policies of social and civil control. This brought about a notable 20-year diplomatic, economic and political rapprochement, allowing Moscow to partially balance its economic and trade dependence *vis-à-vis* the European Union, especially after the 2014 Ukrainian crisis. Beijing secured a friendly partner in a context where its economic and geopolitical rise was viewed with anxiety and distrust. Eurasia became fertile ground for this collaboration, witnessing the creation of multilateral organisations such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, and of ambitious economic and development projects such as China's One Belt, One Road (OBOR) and Moscow's Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) (Mankoff 2011; Kaczmarski 2015; Bolt & Cross 2018).

A rich scholarship analysing Sino–Russian rapprochement has emerged (Wishnick 2017; Lukin 2018; Korolev 2019; Korolev & Portyakov 2019; Lukin 2020). Questions have been raised on the quality and durability of this strategic partnership, described by Bobo Lo as an 'axis of convenience' (2008). As this axis survived several crises through the 2010s, the debate expanded to include the possibility of a partial or even full-fledged alliance (Maçães 2018; Korolev 2019). Nevertheless, some of Lo's remarks on the structural weaknesses underlying Sino–Russian relations are still compelling (Lo 2017; Bekkevold & Lo 2019; Kuteleva & Ivanov 2022). Enthusiasm over the prospects for fruitful economic integration and development was frequently accompanied by suspicion (Tikhvinskii 2011). China's internal narratives regarding the frontier issue have been one potential complicating factor.

Museums in China

Scholars of Chinese museums have emphasised the central role played by nationalism since their appearance in the early twentieth century. After the foundation of the PRC in 1949, the CCP fostered museum creation and, strongly influenced by Soviet models, used them to spread Marxism–Leninism. A shift occurred in the late 1970s, when China's economic reforms signalled new political priorities. As marketisation and globalisation were further accentuated in the 1990s, socialist ideas eventually lost persuasiveness. Han-centric nationalism gradually re-emerged as the source of CCP legitimacy and the chief means to engineer social cohesion (Su 1995; Denton 2014; Lu 2014; Varutti 2014). This was especially important after the 1989 Tiananmen Square protests that challenged the CCP's hegemony. Also, in the following decades, China's ethnically diverse and relatively economically deprived borderlands expressed strong opposition to the Han Chinese leadership, in the form of riots, armed attacks, protests, demonstrations and school strikes. As the number of museums in China has increased exponentially from 1,397 in 2000 to 4,873 in 2016 (Lu 2014, p. 198; Bollo & Zhang 2017, p. 28; Maags & Svensson 2018, p. 28), they are again an important means of fostering nationalist sentiment and rallying support for the CCP's policies of 'socialism with Chinese characteristics'. As Tracey Lu put it: 'Museums are part of a monolithic and authorized discourse about the history, the culture, the people and the landscape of China … to construct or enhance Chinese identity and to promote nationalism and patriotism' (Lu 2014, p. 214). However, the ghosts of Maoism still haunt museum halls alongside new, nationalist forms of memory-making (Flath 2012; Denton 2014).

The CCP party-state's leading role in museum management is enshrined in the Chinese Constitution, which charges it with promoting the development of museums to 'serve the people and socialism'.[2] Most museums are operated by or linked to central or provincial state authorities, with top personnel appointed by the government (Lu 2014; Varutti 2014). Museum regulations reiterate their pedagogical functions in 'safeguarding national security and ethnic unity, promoting patriotism … enhancing social harmony, and moving forward social and ethical progress'.[3] In 2008, the State Bureau of Cultural Heritage encouraged all museums and memorial sites to not charge entry fees, to 'strengthen the construction of civic virtue'.[4] Financial support was provided for this. Criteria for the ranking of museums were disseminated and First Class museums receive preferential treatment.[5]

Finally, Chinese museology does not adopt a critical approach. It takes the pedagogical and patriotic functions of the museum as a given, and often adopts similar language to state pronouncements (Wang 2001, pp. 46–8, 113; Dong 2004, pp. 4, 8–9; Qiang 2014, pp. 30, 41, 105–6). Most curators and museologists concentrate instead on the best way to fulfil educational tasks and serve the public by popularising civic and nationalist messages. Thus the museum profession in China diverges from that in countries where dissonance is seen as important and sometimes even encouraged (Macdonald 1998, pp. 170–91; Ariese *et al*. 2019, pp. 8–13; Valverde 2020). Chinese museums may therefore illustrate how an uncritical approach to heritage can be part of the construction of a Gramscian 'historical bloc' by the state.

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[2] Constitution of the People's Republic of China, 2004, available at: http://www.npc.gov.cn/zgrdw/englishnpc/Constitution/2007-11/15/content_1372963.htm, accessed 17 September 2020.

[3] 'Regulations on Museums', 2015, available at: http://gl.sach.gov.cn/#/home/gov-info-disclosure?ID=2770&a=keyWord&b=&legalType=null&displayDateStart=&displayDateEnd=, accessed 17 September 2020.

[4] 'Guanyu quanguo bowuguan, jinianguan mianfei kaifang de tongzhi', 2020, available at: https://baike.baidu.com/item/关于全国博物馆、纪念馆免费开放的通知/15884818, accessed 17 September 2020.

[5] 'Bowuguan pinggu zanxing biaozhun', 2012, available at: http://www.chinamuseum.org.cn/plus/view.php?aid=79, accessed 17 September 2020.

The Heilongjiang Provincial Museum

Two of the museums examined here are located in Harbin, Heilongjiang Province. Harbin's founding is itself contentious, with China claiming that the settlement preceded the arrival of the Russians. Nevertheless, Harbin developed alongside the construction of the China Eastern Railway and was a vanguard of Russian power. It developed a vibrant culture influenced mainly by Russian and Jewish émigrés, the majority of whom left China after 1949. Much of Harbin's urban landscape evokes this heritage. Russian buildings, such as the much-photographed St Sophia Cathedral, are listed as historically significant, and Stalin Park along the Songhua River is a significant landmark.

The Heilongjiang Provincial Museum (HPM), which became the provincial museum in 1954, embodies this Russian influence. It occupies the former 'Moscow shopping arcade' (*Moskovskie torgovye ryady*), a 1906 art nouveau Russian building, now nationally listed as part of a state-sponsored drive to preserve buildings deemed to be of cultural and patriotic importance (Maags & Svensson 2018, p. 18). The CER's Society for Manchurian Studies held its first public exhibition there in 1923, to which the museum traces its history. It has two permanent exhibitions: one on Heilongjiang and another on the city's Russian community; the latter has won a national commendation.[6] Free to enter since 2008, the museum was given a First Class ranking by the National Cultural Heritage Administration in 2012 on the basis of its administrative and collections management, facilities and public engagement (Bollo & Zhang 2017, p. 29). Most visitors are Chinese, although the expositions' main panels are translated into English and sometimes Russian. This caters to international and Russian visitors, in particular from the RFE. Nevertheless, much information is only in Chinese and, according to our observations, the translations are not always intelligible.

Manchurian and national identity

The first exhibition, titled 'An Exhibition of Historical Relics from Heilongjiang, Centred Around Sushen Family's Ruins' (the museum's translation of the Chinese title: *Heilongjiang lishi wenwu chenlie–yi Sushen zuxi yicun wei zhongxin*) presents a narrative of the region's history that links its indigenous inhabitants to the Han culture of the

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[6] 'Heilongjiang Eqiao wenhua wenwuzhan ronghuo quanguo bowuguan shida jingpin zhan youshengjian', 2018, available at: http://www.hljmuseum.com/system/201805/103254.html, accessed 4 May 2022.

Central Plains. Its sections on ancient and dynastic history depict a supposedly clear line of descent for Heilongjiang's 'most representative nationalities' (in the Chinese text: *zui juyou daibiaoxing de tuzhu minzu zuxi*): the Sushen to Mohe to Jurchen and Manchu lineage. The definition of 'most representative' privileges those who created political groups closest to Chinese dynastic models. This glosses over the numerous nomadic populations that inhabited and influenced the region and downplays the non-Han cross-pollination that occurred. The exhibition therefore ascribes a very specific identity to Heilongjiang: that of the homeland of the Jurchen-Manchu people.

Manchuria's status as an integral component of the Han Chinese state is never in doubt. The Jurchens' contributions to the multi-ethnic Chinese state are repeatedly highlighted, in order to depict 'a historic long-scroll drawing of joint creation of Chinese civilisation by all the nationalities' (the museum's translation of the Chinese text: *yifu Huaxia gezu renmin gongtong chuangzao Zhonghua wenming de lishi changjuan*). A panel on the origins of Jurchen Jin culture (1115–1234) explains how these people enriched Chinese civilisation. Great stress is also laid on what these ethnic groups owed to Central Plains Han culture. The foundation of the Bohai Kingdom (698–926)—which spans the frontiers of Manchuria, the RFE and North Korea—is attributed to the Sumo Mohe ethnic group and characterised as 'subordinate' (*lishu*) to the Tang. Government administration, architecture, Confucianism, Buddhism and even dress styles are credited to the 'wholesale absorption' (*quanpan xishou*) of Tang culture. Unlike the Bohai expositions in the Arsen'ev Museum in Vladivostok and the National Museum in Seoul, the HPM mentions neither Korean and Tungus influences on Bohai, nor the state of Goguryeo, from whose ashes Bohai rose after it was destroyed by a Silla–Tang alliance. Hence, any historical role played by ancient Korean civilisations in Bohai is erased.

The activities of the Khitan Liao dynasty (916–1125) that succeeded Bohai are also minimised. Although the Khitan script is described as contributing to the Jurchen written language, the Khitans themselves are portrayed merely as oppressive foreign invaders from whom the Jurchens finally liberated themselves. Similarly, the section on the Jin dynasty highlights the adoption of Han script, Confucianism and Central Plains-style governance and military administration. Finally, the impact of the non-Han Mongol Yuan dynasty (1271–1368) is effectively erased. Its importance is acknowledged only insofar as the Ming 'abolished' (*feichu*) its administrative structures and 'eradicated' (*saoqing*) its power in the region. However, a large map of the Yuan Dynasty's Liaoyang Administrative Province reminds visitors that not only all of Manchuria but also Sakhalin and other northern regions were then controlled by Dadu (Beijing), the capital of the Yuan dynasty.

Political use of maps

Having established the region as the Jurchen-Manchu homeland and linked it decisively to the wider Chinese nation-state, the museum then adopts an expansive and deliberately ambiguous definition of the limits of these territories. In fact, despite the exhibition's title, the HPM does not tackle the history of Heilongjiang Province alone, but that of an entire region defined as the cradle of the Jurchen-Manchus, including Jilin and Liaoning as well as parts of the RFE. Historical political maps are extensively used to visually demonstrate the changing contours of Chinese and Manchurian territory. Yet their exact boundaries are blurred in ways that an average visitor may not detect.

At the beginning of the exhibition, visitors see a large-scale map that purports to show the locations of ancient tribes relative to the first politically unified Chinese dynasty, the Qin (221 BCE–206) (see Figure A1 in the Appendix). A visitor may associate its shape with the territory of modern China. On closer inspection, though, it displays an entity far bigger than today's PRC. It depicts the borders of Qing China at its greatest extent (1757–1839), including Xinjiang, Mongolia, and Russia's Primor'e, Priamur'e and Sakhalin. The use of a Qing map to demarcate Qin ethnic configurations almost two millennia before is a deliberate conflation of vastly different times and contexts. This encourages the visitor to associate the territory of the fatherland with its most extensive Qing boundaries, which becomes a benchmark that frequently recurs throughout the exposition.

This instrumentalisation of territorial boundaries appears in the exposition's map of the Bohai state, which is especially interesting when compared to similar maps in Vladivostok's Arsen'ev Museum and the Seoul National Museum (see Figures A2–A4).

The Korean map is the most expansive, with Bohai extending as far as the Liaodong Peninsula; the Russian one stops short of the peninsula but shows Silla sharing a land border exclusively with Bohai. Finally, the Chinese map shows a more modest Bohai state, with both it and the Tang sharing a land border with Silla. None of these maps is dated. Each embodies competing imaginings of Bohai, linked to political tensions over its territorial and cultural inheritors.

Maps are therefore used to link the entirety of Greater Manchuria, as well as large swathes of the current Russian Far East, within the borders of an expansively defined 'China'. Upon reaching the Qing (1644–1912) section of the exposition, the visitor re-encounters a familiar territorial shape that is no longer internally divided (see Figure A5).

Once again, this map has no date, but almost does not need one: it represents an ideal concept, not a specific state at a particular period. Indeed, the Qing map, in this framework, constitutes the fulfilment of the Chinese nation's teleological, historical destiny, as well as the contributions of the Jurchen-Manchus to its grandeur. The introduction to the Qing section makes this abundantly clear. The Manchu conquest of the Ming Empire is not described as a 'foreign invasion'. Instead, the Manchu are credited with creating a 'stable and unified multi-nationality country', ending the 'pattern of antagonism' between northern nomads and agricultural peoples that had allegedly persisted since the Qin. It fails to mention the Manchu 'Willow Palisade' policy that aimed at preserving the ethnic purity of the Manchu homeland and their traditional lifestyle. The panel even quotes an anachronistic patriotic song from the Second Sino–Japanese War (1937–1945) emphasising Manchuria's integral place within China. According to this narrative, when the tsarist Russians arrived on the Manchurian frontier in the seventeenth century, their encroachment was not merely a contest over territory but a first assault on an idealised Chinese 'geobody' (Callahan 2009, p. 144).

China under attack

The first exhibition concludes with the Russian–Qing conflict over the Amur. Unlike in the previous sections, the panels are not translated. This excludes foreign visitors—most likely

Russian—given the sensitivity of the topic. The overriding motif is one of *la patrie en danger*, creating a sense of insecurity over China's frontiers and the predatory intentions of its neighbours. Breaking with the chronology of the exposition, a panel on Japanese explorer Mamiya Rinzo's expedition to Sakhalin (1808) describes how the Russians 'continually expanded' (*buduan kuozhang*) into the area now constituting the RFE in the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries, and the Japanese 'drooled over' (*chuixian*) Sakhalin. Just as the Qing fulfilled China's putative territorial 'destiny', therefore, it was threatened by greedy antagonists eager to erode its rightful frontiers.

This part of the exposition culminates in a large oil painting depicting the Battle of Yakesa (1685); the Russian name, Albazin, is not used. Painted by Ren Mengzhang in 1982, it shows a demoralised group of Cossacks in dark colours, humbly surrendering to a colourful, proud and ethnically heterogeneous army led by Qing officials. The interpretative text highlights that the Nerchinsk Treaty was an 'equal' one:

> The tsarist Russian invaders … recklessly invaded our country's territory [*woguo de lingtu*]. The various ethnic groups in the Heilongjiang region waged an unyielding and unrelenting struggle … seizing victory in the self-defence battle of Yakesa. In 1689, China and Russia signed the Treaty of Nerchinsk on the basis of equality [*zai pingdeng de jichu shang*].

A map is shown of the Russian colonial push towards the Amur, the Qing lines of advance to Yakesa/Albazin, and the territorial boundaries demarcated in Nerchinsk (see Figure A6).

The multiple readings of this map represent the various narratives of the exhibition thus far. It reinforces the story of foreign encroachment, national defence and territorial claims. On a deeper level, however, it deploys political and chronological ambiguities that create the perception that the Nerchinsk Treaty not only delineated the Qing's frontiers, but also caused it to lose territories. The map's white section, 'China', confronts a darker section labelled 'Russia'. This white section adopts a maximalist interpretation of the extent of Qing territory in the period from the first Cossack expeditions to the Amur up until 1689. No dates are given to show the evolution of Qing borders. Such an omission allows the map to show all of Mongolia, Tuva, Buryatia and Transbaikalia as part of China from 1652 to 1689 when, in fact, large stretches of this territory were dominated by Khalkha Mongols and Buryats before the arrival of the Russians, and the Khalkha leaders definitively submitted to Beijing only in 1688 (Perdue 2015, pp. 122–53; Natsagdorj 2018, pp. 8–15). The Khalkha Mongols and Buryats are literally erased from the region's history in order to reinscribe their lands as part of a monolithic, idealised Qing territory. The map's insert, therefore, shows that all the territories from east of Lake Baikal to Nerchinsk were lost following the treaty.

Subsequently, the theme of *la patrie en danger* mutates into a more emotional *la patrie violée* as the exposition closes with the nineteenth century's 'unequal treaties'. A map titled 'Tsarist Russia's Partitioning and Occupation of Chinese Territory' shows the lands transferred to Russia through the Aigun and Peking treaties as well as other agreements concerning Central Asia. The range of 'lost territories' is extremely wide, from the Ferghana Valley to Vladivostok, and the map's key emphasises the hundreds of thousands of square kilometres lost in each treaty. By depicting the extent of territorial losses, the map amplifies their shocking effect and thus the overarching patriotic narrative.

Furthermore, this map is not unique to the HPM but has been extensively reproduced with the same title and labels in other museums, textbooks and websites.[7] It has become an integral part of the national discourse surrounding China's victimhood at the hands of Russian imperialism, a *lieux de mémoire* reminding viewers of the fatherland's wrongful dismemberment.

This message is also anchored in the martyrdom of Heilongjiang General Shou Shan, described as heroically resisting the Russians during the Boxer Rebellion and committing suicide 'for the nation'. Overall, the exhibition's final section functions as an *inter nos* for Chinese visitors, with national victimhood set against patriotic valour and national humiliation partially redeemed by self-sacrifice. English translations only reappear in the epilogue, but the text bears no relation to the nationalistic messages previously disseminated, merely praising the virtues of the Heilongjiang people and their contributions to national history. A Chinese-speaking visitor and a foreign tourist could depart with very different feelings.

Rehabilitating the Russians

In 2017, the museum added a new permanent exhibition to showcase the artefacts and culture of the Russian émigrés in Harbin. It is more modern than the 'glass-case' approach of the one above, using multidimensional artwork, aesthetic lighting, video clips, architectural models and a train track representing the Chinese Eastern Railway. Russian tourists are targeted through translations of the most important panels into Russian and English. The exposition recreates an artificial space where Russian culture is accommodated by a confident but receptive Chinese host culture.

Compared to the previous exhibition, the image of the Russians as incorrigible national antagonists is reversed. Their influence on the development of Harbin is celebrated. Due to the Russians' colonial railway project, the CER, Harbin acquired wealth, municipal facilities, healthcare, education, scientific research facilities and other markers of Western-style modernity. Marxist–Leninist interpretations of Russian colonialism are therefore juxtaposed uneasily next to a glowing assessment of its contributions to the city. Even the Chinese-only panels lack strong anti-colonial rhetoric. A few panels recall that this line was 'built by Imperial Russia' or a 'model of colonial railway development' (*zhimindi tieluye fazhan de dianxing*), but the image of an imperialist enemy eroding China's autonomy is significantly toned down. An isolated instance mentions how the CER brought 'countless suffering' (*wushu kunan*) to the Chinese people, but quickly emphasises that it brought modern science and technology. The Russian imperialist adventure in Manchuria and the Liaodong peninsula (1890–1905) is avoided. No mention is made of the Russian concessions obtained in Port Arthur and Dalian that the CER served. Even the Russo–Japanese War (1904–1905) is credited with turning Harbin into a military base, thus accelerating its development. Indeed, the very fact that the CER infrastructure was built on the basis of a territorial concession under a Russian-dominated enterprise, the CER Company, is omitted. On the contrary, photographs emphasise the collaboration between Russian specialists and the Chinese population in accomplishing this great endeavour. China's attempts to reclaim its sovereignty in the CER concession are barely mentioned. In short, claims of imperialistic Russian behaviour are relatively understated.

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[7] 'Aihui tiaoyue', 2020, available at: https://baike.baidu.com/item/瑷珲条约/359519?fromtitle=中俄瑷珲条约&fromid=1173227, accessed 17 September 2020; 'Eguo qinzhan woguo damianji lingtu', 2020, available at: https://zhongxue.hujiang.com/tiku/p1883427, accessed 17 September 2020.

The exhibition also ascribes all manner of positive attributes to the Russian community and turns them into an object of ethnographic analysis. Visitors learn that Russians were highly educated and that thanks to the Russian intelligentsia, art and culture flourished in Harbin after 1917. Urban planning and architecture, entirely credited to Russian architects and engineers, are singled out as tangible *lieux de mémoire* that still contribute to the uniqueness of the city. Hence, it is stated that Harbin's streets are lined with a variety of 'glorious' (*huihuang*) European and Chinese buildings. The aesthetics of this exposition evoke a European *belle époque* style. Finally, dioramas depicting Russians in the intimacy of their homes along with artefacts and pictures of daily life project an aura of exoticism on the city's history.

All this allows Harbin to positively integrate Russian culture and position itself as a cosmopolitan city. Multiple panels emphasise its 'prolonged and frequent interaction between Chinese and foreigners', resulting in a 'mixed Sino–Russian appearance' (*Hua-E zachen*) that influenced food, lifestyles and art. Its inhabitants are praised as open and inclusive, pioneering Western culture in China. One panel mentions how the United Nations recognised Harbin's century-old musical tradition—attributed by the exhibition to Russian émigrés—by giving it the title of 'Musical City' in 2010. Another lists Russian foods, now marketed in sinified form as uniquely Harbin products, such as Hotel Moderne (*Madieer*) ice cream and Churin (*Qiulin*) bread and sausages. Far from being an unwelcome symbol of imperialism, therefore, here the Russian legacy in Harbin becomes the city's brand, akin to the reframing of the Italian concession in Tianjin and the foreign presence in Shanghai (Denton 2014, p. 90; Maags & Svensson 2018, pp. 67–89; Ariese *et al*. 2019, p. 14).

Since this exhibition is very recent, its political meaning can be considered in light of the Sino–Russian rapprochement that strengthened after the 2014 Crimean crisis. With Western sanctions enhancing Sino–Russian relations, the new political agenda called for both countries to convey messages of bilateral friendship and mutual trust. However, as the HPM and its contradictory narratives demonstrate, this has not wholly replaced the discourse of nationalistic resentment, which overlap. The incoherence of this double narrative may be related to geography and, especially, the level of self-confidence recently displayed by the Chinese state. The Russian émigré exhibition can confidently present a sanguine interpretation of the past, since Chinese control over Harbin and its wider region is no longer under threat. There is no longer any Harbin Russian community strong enough to protest clichéd representations of their culture and identity. Hence the museum can be generous, even paternalistic, towards 'its Russians'. By contrast, the exhibition on Heilongjiang tackles the history of a broader territory, including those regions portrayed as unfairly lost. Hence, a dilemma emerges between a narrative of friendly neighbourliness that relegates controversies to the past, and one of nationalistic indignation and social mobilisation to extinguish nineteenth century humiliations.

Chinese Eastern Railway Impressions Hall

The valorisation of Harbin's Russian past and its projection into a resplendent future reach their peak in the Chinese Eastern Railway Impressions Hall, opened in 2017 and free to enter. It is not a museum in the traditional sense. Chairman of the Harbin Municipal History Research Association Li Shuxiao, who was involved in conceptualising the exhibits, emphasised that the museum does not prioritise artefacts. Instead, it is meant to be experiential, allowing 'common folk' to 'transcend time and space and interact with history' (*chuanyue shikong, chumo lishi*) (Wang 2017). It is part of the CER Park, constructed in 2016. The park—a green corridor running along the decommissioned CER track—centres around the 1901 Binzhou River Bridge and a cluster of CER heritage buildings listed in 2013. People can visit the Hall alongside other recreational activities, thus infusing daily life with Harbin's history according to the latest trends in Chinese museology (Guo 2006, p. 125; Shan 2011; Wei 2019, p. 109). Its explanatory panels are translated into Russian and English, although timelines and photo captions are only in Chinese.

The Hall's designers went further than in the HPM, immersing visitors in an idealised vision of Russian Harbin. It resembles the former Harbin central station, which lost its original Russian facade in 1959. Large-scale, interactive multimedia reproductions of the Songhua waterfront and the European-style Jihong Bridge—painstakingly recreated from old photographs—allow visitors to nostalgically re-imagine Harbin's past. The Hall not only offers an overwhelmingly positive interpretation of Russia's influence on the city but also renders it in 'Disneyfied' (Lee 2012, pp. 206–7, 227–28), consumable form, exploiting the cultural capital of Harbin's European exoticism and uniqueness.

This is part of a recent trend in Chinese cultural politics aimed at establishing municipal memorial sites that help 'to "brand" a city, making it more identifiable and competitive in the global marketplace' (Denton 2014, p. 23), attracting investments and tourism (Varutti 2014, p. 47). Moreover, these politics reinterpret 'historical national collections (in this case, heritage) in order to contextualize societal changes brought about by contemporary globalization' (Whitehead *et al*. 2015, p. 30). Looking at the past, the Hall recalls the first decades of the twentieth century as a golden age for Harbin, in which the Russian railway created the city's brand. Looking at the present and to the future, it describes the 'brilliant' history of the CER as the ancestor of the most recent infrastructure projects connecting Harbin to the rest of China, as well as the ambitious OBOR initiative. This interpretation climaxes in recalling Xi Jinping's slogan of the 'Chinese Dream', one of his major ideological themes since 2012 (Wang 2014; Loh 2019).

All of these ideas are conveyed in a solemn, dark marble slab in front of the Hall. Its inscription, signed by 'The People's Government of Harbin', sets out the CER Park's mission and contains significant contradictions: its English text opens with 'Tsarist Russia grabbed the privilege of building the … CER', yet proudly styles Harbin as an 'Oriental Moscow'. Similarly, the Hall's exposition states that the CER was constructed due to tsarist Russia 'bribing and coercing' (*youpo*) the late Qing Government and seizing railway rights. However, the blame is never absolute. For example, its English text describes the Russian-built Binzhou Bridge as having fulfilled its 'glorious century mission' as part of the CER. The Hall entrance features a quote from Hu Shih, one of the leaders of the early twentieth-century reform movement but no friend of the CCP. His description of Harbin as ‘the junction of Eastern and Western civilisation’ (*dongxi wenming de jiaojiedian*)—taken from his essay ‘Manyou de ganxiang’ (‘Impressions on My Wanderings’) (Hu 2014)—is a philo-Eurasianist trope and hints at the link between the CER past and the OBOR future. This is made explicit in the exposition’s preface, which, in English, describes the CER as the driving force behind Harbin’s emergence as an ‘international metropolis’. The text casts the CER as a precursor to OBOR and an ‘old and familiar track’ to the realisation of the aforementioned ‘Chinese Dream’. It concludes, ‘CER Impressions Hall is intended to recall the past in the light of the present, foresee the future by reviewing the past, inherit history and realise new missions’.

The exposition stresses the Russian community’s contributions to Harbin’s modernisation, lauding its music and architecture and crediting the city with introducing Western high culture to China. Overstatements on the achievements of Harbin abound; it is lauded for having kept pace ‘with many Western metropolises’. The exposition stresses the unprecedented dynamism brought by the CER: migration, civilisational contact and cross-cultural fraternisation. Numerous photographs portray Chinese and Russians harmoniously constructing the railway. However, some curatorial choices inadvertently display the real power relations then. One notable photograph shows a Russian surveyor in what appears to be a colonialist cliché, lounging comfortably while under the protection of six Chinese subordinates (see Figure A7).

However, the museum’s Chinese-only panels form a counterpoint to this euphoric narrative. They present extensive timelines of CER and Harbin history that reiterate key nationalist themes. For example, they emphasise that Harbin predated the arrival of the Russians. Following the Russo–Japanese War, the Russians and Japanese jointly ‘carved up China’s Northeast’ (*guafen Zhongguo Dongbei*). The efforts of ‘Chinese authorities’—namely, the Manchurian militarists of China’s warlord era—to roll back Russia’s rights over the CER after 1917 are also detailed, including the expulsion of Soviet railway personnel and the 1929 Sino–Soviet conflict. In its inward-facing narrative, therefore, the Hall provides a painstaking account of the ‘recovery’ of the CER. While portraying Harbin and the railway as a *belle époque*, Sino–Russian idyll suspended in time, it also highlights their status as contested colonial territories, with Russia and Japan as antagonists.

The Hall’s outward-facing narrative differs little from that of the Russian émigré exposition in the HPM. Russia’s establishment of the CER is credited with creating a brilliant past and a blueprint for the future. The city draws on this legacy for its branding efforts. At the same time, a counter-narrative is promoted to Chinese audiences that appeals to memories of the Russians’ colonial arrogance. Both narratives coexist without synthesis. They represent two ways of talking about Sino–Russian relations politically; both have contemporary significance and are thus difficult to combine. The HPM and the Hall also show when, and in what context, a particular narrative is exploited. Historical memories of national humiliation are especially pertinent for internal audiences. By contrast, narratives of lasting friendship and cooperation target both Chinese and foreign audiences. Hence, a non-Chinese-speaker receives a version of history where the current Sino–Russian geopolitical rapprochement is more of a historical constant rather than a recent phenomenon. A Chinese visitor, by contrast, receives contradictory messages in which the Russians are portrayed simultaneously as enemies and friends. By representing both narratives, the CCP can draw on one or the other depending on the circumstances.

Aihui Historical Museum

The Aihui Historical Museum (AHM) is the most unequivocal in its nationalist messaging. Founded in 1979, it is in the former town of Aigun (Aihun in Chinese, today Aihui) on the Russian border, where the 1858 Aigun Treaty was signed. The town was destroyed during the Russian invasion of 1900. Aihui is therefore a literal landmark in China's history of 'humiliations'. Its importance in national memory-making is represented in its state-level accolades. As signs on the museum grounds state, it is a National Protected Cultural Heritage Site (*quanguo zhongdian wenwu baohu danwei*) and its permanent exhibition was in the top ten nationwide in 2002.[8] Furthermore, it was among the earliest to be listed as a National Patriotic Education Site in 1997, a First Class museum in 2008, and a National Defence Education Site in 2009.[9] Access is relatively difficult, requiring a 40-minute drive from the nearest town, Heihe. Maps, dioramas and artwork form the majority of exhibits; few artefacts are featured. Tickets are free and Chinese-speaking docents run tours almost continually. Most significantly, the museum is well-known for barring visitors with Russian passports (Billé & Humphrey 2021, p. 198)—curiously, however, most explanatory panels are translated into Russian as well as English.

This museum can be understood as a secular temple, sacralising the tragic legacy of the land it occupies. It is surrounded by a quiet park with a large footpath leading to the main edifice. Each visit is akin to a pilgrimage, and like in *a via Crucis*, the visitor encounters 64 stones flanking the path at regular intervals. Each bears the name of one of the 64 villages recognised as Chinese enclaves in Russia according to the Aigun Treaty and annexed by Russia during the Boxer Rebellion. Significantly, Russia can be seen across the Amur River from the museum gardens. The Kuixing tower in front of the museum is presented as the only building to have survived the Russian onslaught. The whole site has thus been assembled to convey a sense of deep solemnity. Upon approaching the staircase, the visitor is met with a monumental bas-relief, depicting a bucolic showcase of the life that the region's indigenous populations were supposed to have led in a sort of atemporal but joyful past. This idyllic scene is counterbalanced by a statue of a mother cradling her dead daughter, reminding visitors that this antique Eden was destroyed by catastrophic events. The museum explains the genesis of this cataclysm.

As in any other temple, this museum presents several frequently-repeated mantras to the visitors, beginning in the entrance hall. The first mantra comprises the toponyms of the territories attributed to China by the Nerchinsk Treaty and subsequently lost. The second rehearses the square kilometres of territory ceded by China to Russia and the dates when the fatherland's legitimate possessions were painfully amputated from China's geobody. At the centre of the hall, an imposing, multi-coloured map is projected on the ground showing, in stages, the formation of the Sino–Russian frontier, from Nerchinsk to the early twentieth century. This is in fact an animated copy of the ‘Map of Tsarist Russia’s Partitioning and Occupation of Chinese Territory’ in the HPM. It shows the magnitude and location of the 600,000 sq km ‘North of Heilongjiang and South of Outer Hinggan mountains’ (in the Chinese text: *Waixing’anling yi nan, Heilongjiang yi bei*) lost under the Aigun Treaty, and of the 400,000 sq km ‘East of the Ussuri River and Kuye island [Sakhalin]’ (*Wusulijiang yi dong, baokuo Kuyedao*) lost under the Peking Treaty. These mantras are also engraved on the entrance hall’s marble walls.

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[8] 'Jingpin jiang', Chinese Museums Association, available at: https://www.chinamuseum.org.cn/detailss.html?id=22&contentId=109, accessed 4 May 2022.

[9] 'Benguan rongyu', available at: http://www.aihuihistorymuseum.org.cn/about/honor, accessed 4 May 2022.

The museum presents two main themes: the tragic history of Aigun and the *longue durée* of Sino–Russian confrontation over Manchuria. Mirroring the narrative of the HPM, the museum puts forward a maximalist claim of a monolithic ‘big Qing’ empire from the dynasty’s foundation, establishing the region’s identity as part of China. Visitors are invited to visualise the region as Chinese territory through a series of maps, all of which portray vast swathes of Russia’s Amur and Maritime provinces and Sakhalin as being under Chinese administration since the Tang. This culminates in a map of the Qing empire in 1820, where China’s borders are presented at their fullest extent. The region’s ethnic groups are controversially described as having ‘related bloodlines’ (*xuemai xianglian*) to the people of the Central Plains, with whom they created China’s ‘glorious history’ (*huihuang de lishi*). Their ‘innumerable, intimate and inseparable’ (*qiansi wanlü mibu kefen*) ties to central China are justified by archaeological evidence. They are all represented as leading ‘peaceful and stable lives’ (*heping anding*) under the Qing government until the arrival of the Russians.

The Russians are vilified throughout the account of their arrival into the region. The first Cossacks to reach the Amur, Vasilii Danilovich Poiarkov and Erofei Pavlovich Khabarov, are labelled as ‘unfriendly guests’ (*busu zhike*; *nezvannyi gost’*) who brought ‘catastrophe’ (*jienan*; *bedstvie*) or ‘great disaster’ (*juda de zainan*; *bedstvie*) to all the ethnic groups of the frontier. Artwork and a diorama illustrate known incidents of Cossack-perpetrated violence, especially massacres. Pages from a Russian historical document describe how episodes of cannibalism in Poiarkov’s expedition earned the hostility of local peoples, who initially led the resistance to the Russians but were unable to stop the invasion. The Qing leadership was thus obliged to defend its ‘sovereignty and territorial integrity’ (*guojia zhuquan he lingtu wanzheng*) through force of arms.

Once again, the resulting battle at Yakesa/Albazin is characterised as self-defence. Here the narrative is built on Manichean contrasts *via* images depicting key events of the war. Hordes of unruly and brutal Cossacks face a disciplined and heroic Qing army, and the Russians’ savagery is met by constant attempts by Qing diplomats to find a peaceful solution. In the artwork portraying bilateral meetings, Qing officials are pictured as wise, dignified and assertive. The Russian representatives seem to bear the weight of their guilt, hardly daring to look their counterparts in the eye.

The Nerchinsk Treaty is represented in a diorama reproducing the meeting between Fedor Golovin and Prince Songgottu in a yurt, solemnly standing while exchanging signed copies of the treaty. Nearby, a Chinese-language panel contains a benevolent quote from Kangxi, stressing how his imperial territory (Nerchinsk included) should not be readily conceded to the Russians. However, he favours a compromise, should the Russians extradite certain indigenous aristocrats. Left unsaid is that these fugitives fled the Amur basin and submitted to the tsar following a Qing resettlement campaign, which evicted most of the indigenous population (Perdue 1998, pp. 167–69).

The diorama is one of the most important elements of the museum, symbolising the moment in which the two empires signed a durable peace in an environment of mutual respect and on an equal footing (see Figure A8). It also embodies the moral victory of the Qing, as Beijing successfully pursued diplomatic solutions and defended its interests from a position of military strength.

With China's borders now defined in the Nerchinsk Treaty—here the museum repeats the toponymical mantra—the narrative shifts to the Qing government's attempts to consolidate its control over Greater Manchuria, including the building of forts, opening up of farmland and the levying of taxes and tribute. Borders were regularly patrolled and boundarymarkers maintained. As a result, the exhibition claims the region experienced one-and-a-half centuries of peace, 'social economic growth and stable development' (*shehui jingji dedao wending fazhan*). Aigun, the seat of the Heilongjiang general, became an impressive walled town. The Willow Palisade is omitted. Visitors are thus given the impression that the region was effectively administered and settled by Qing authorities. This is to be understood as a direct response to Russian/Soviet historiography, which frequently portrays nineteenth-century Priamur'e and Primor'e as almost empty, sparsely populated by indigenous peoples and outside of Beijing's direct jurisdiction (Krushanov 1991, pp. 105–202; Petrov 2003, p. 12).

From this apotheosis, the museum explains China's subsequent humiliations through the intersection of Qing internal decline and continued Russian aggression. Thus, 'facing its powerful neighbour Tsarist Russian invasion of Heilongjiang basin again, Qing government was not able to defend itself'. The Russians are portrayed as dissatisfied by Nerchinsk, and their subsequent encroachment on Qing territory is described as 'illegal' (*feifa*; *nezakonnaya*). The construction of forts in Nikolaevsk is said to have taken place 'by force' (*qiangjian*; *prinuditel'no*). Blagoveshchensk, founded in 1856 as a military outpost across the Amur River from Heihe, is described as 'under occupation' (*qinzhan xia*; *pod russkom igom*). As before, the exposition represents Russian forces as predatory and uncivilised while confronting honourable Chinese administrators. Moreover, having demolished demigods in the Russian pantheon of RFE history—such as Poiarkov and Khabarov—by exposing their brutality, the museum's narrative now targets the most important one of all: Governor-General Nikolai Nikolaevich Murav'ev. Here, the man whose statues imperiously dominate the Zolotoi Rog in Vladivostok and the Amur in Khabarovsk cannot hide his deep shame before the Vice-General of Aigun, Fu Lehong'e (see Figure A9).

Simultaneously, Qing China was 'besieged by internal and external forces'. A Chinese-language panel explains that as the Russians were advancing, the Qing were preoccupied with the Taiping Rebellion. The visitor is left in no doubt that domestic disunity weakened China, leading to the cataclysm of the Aigun and Peking treaties. Given the treaties' historic importance, however, further explanations are surprisingly lacking in detail. A terse panel merely repeats the two mantras of the lost territories (see below), listing their locations and sizes. As in some Russian border history museums (Adda 2021, pp. 14–5), nothing is said about the context in which these treaties were signed. The only 'external force' in the museum's narrative is the Russians.

Two visual representations of the Aigun Treaty are shown. One is a copy of a 1947 painting by V.E. Romanov, preserved in the Grodekov Regional Museum in Khabarovsk. The second is a diorama at the centre of the room. Unlike in the Nerchinsk diorama, where both diplomats stand and exchange copies of the treaty, here Murav'ev is the only one looming over the table, watching sternly as Qing representative Yishan reluctantly signs the treaty (see Figure A10). Their posture symbolises the treaty's inequality, as the balance of power was drastically in Russia's favour.

Whereas the museum characterises the post-Nerchinsk period as one of Qing consolidation, the post-Aigun situation is one of continued 'plunder' (*lüeduo*) and 'tragedy' (*beiju*) by the Russians, who did not shrink from violating the terms of the treaty. The creation of the so-called 'Zheltuga Republic' in 1883 by pioneers, gold-seekers, bandits and fugitives is an example: 'Soon after the signing of the "Treaty of Aihui", Tsarist Russians began to plunder the golden resource in cross-border area … in China'. Its narrative is grounded on an important omission: the Zheltuga Republic was a multi-ethnic, autonomous mining settlement formed by Russians, Chinese and Manchus, among others, free of any state control (Gamsa 2002). This allows the museum to gloss over lapses in Qing local administration, previously praised as thorough and effective. Moreover, it provides a creative counter-narrative to Russian and Western historiography, which frequently cites cases of Chinese illegally exploiting natural resources in the Russian Far East. Here, the Russians are the illegitimate plunderers and the victorious, law-enforcing state is the Qing, which expelled the illegal miners 'to run the gold mine and create a boom economy in the border town'.

The museum then draws on a more significant instance of treaty violation: the 64 villages north of the Amur River preserved under Chinese administration by the Aigun Treaty. They are described as 'the richest region on the left bank' (*zuoan zui fushu de diqu*); that the inhabitants were Manchu is mentioned only in the English translation. Drawings show Russia's treaty infringements in the 64 villages, although these are not explained and tsarist Russia is said to have 'eventually swallowed up this land' (*zuizhong haishi yao tunshi zhekuai tudi*). Hence the symbolic and emotive aspects of the loss of the 64 villages—already encountered in the museum garden memorial—are more important than the presentation of facts.

Finally, the museum concludes with the Sino–Russian conflict that followed the Boxer Rebellion. Here the exposition creates maximum emotive impact, culminating in a vivid depiction of two tragic events: the Blagoveshchensk massacre and the destruction of Aigun. Introductory panels describe the massacre as a 'tragedy' (*dacan'an*) that 'shocked the world' (*jushi zhenjing*). Paintings show the Chinese residents of Blagoveshchensk and of the 64 villages being assembled, taken to the banks of the Amur, forced into the water and shot. The visitor is then guided to a special room dedicated to 'recreating' (*zaixian*) the 'human tragedy' (*renjian canju*) of the massacre, showcasing a semi-panoramic painting and a diorama in the foreground. A panel explains that the painting was based on the Aigun County Annals as well as Russian, US and Japanese sources.

Upon entering the darkened room, the visitor is confronted by Russian soldiers violently herding defenceless Chinese into the river, showing no mercy to women, children or the elderly, while their houses are set ablaze. The scene becomes even more harrowing as the lights are turned off for a multimedia presentation. Two recorded narrators reiterate

Blagoveshchensk's original status as Chinese territory and the background to the massacre. They describe the Russians falling 'like wolves' (*lang yiyang de*) upon the peaceful Chinese, forcing people into the water. The 'bodies of the Chinese' are said to have 'floated on the Amur, stained red with blood' (*Zhongguoren de shiti piaofu zai xianxue ranhong de Heilongjiang shang*) whose corpses floated on the water as Russians machine-gunned them. Many more were killed over several days. Dramatic music is punctuated by screams. Lights are shone on the panorama to illustrate the narration and create animated effects.

Similar techniques are used for the Russian destruction of Aigun. Before a walk-through diorama in a darkened room, an introductory panel explains how 10,000 Russian soldiers destroyed Aigun in August 1900 and emotively introduces the diorama's characters. The visitor is then immersed in a street scene of Aigun, walking amidst rubble and corpses. A narrator describes each of the life-size figures in an impassioned voice. The Aigun vice-governor prepares to commit suicide for his failure to defend the country. Three wounded artillerymen stage a heroic last stand. Their courage is counterbalanced by scenes of pathos: a mother carrying her lifeless child and an old woman with her late husband's memorial tablet, waiting for death.

The narrative in these last sections is multi-layered. Firstly, it makes multiple references to external sources, to counter attempts to refute its accounts. For instance, Lenin is quoted at the entrance to the Blagoveshchensk massacre room, describing the horrific actions of Russian soldiers and tsarist policy as 'criminal' (*fanzui*). Secondly, descriptions of atrocities are intense and reinforced with audio-visual media to complete the visitors' catharsis. Finally, and most importantly, the museum makes an explicit link to the present day. The voiceover in the Blagoveshchensk massacre presentation concludes:

> The wheels of history are continually turning, the strength of peace and justice are continuously improving the relations between China and Russia. We hope that generations of friendship and no more enmity will be the lasting theme in the relations between the people of both countries. But we cannot forget this part of history and must remember this lesson: The backward will be beaten.[10]

Hence, the AHM closes with a moral that is at once conciliatory and strongly patriotic. Its final panel emphasises in English that memory 'does not mean revenge' (in the Chinese text: *bushi yao jizhu chouhen*) but should drive new generations 'to devote to seizing the present day, opening up a new era' (in the Chinese text: *bawo jintian, kaipi weilai*). Yet it imparts a patriotic lesson strongly influenced by a fatalistic Social Darwinism: 'Weak to be bullied, lags to be beaten' (in the Chinese text: *ruanruo bei ren qi, luohou yao aida*; in the Russian text: *Slabye byt' obizhat', ostal'nye byt' pobitym*). To prevent a repetition of China's past tragedies, visitors are invited to 'build strong national strength, consolidating national defence and strong military'. A final sentence reiterates the need to constantly build socialism with Chinese characteristics and 'achieve the great rejuvenation of

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[10] Translation by Yuexin Rachel Lin.

Chinese nation!' The political function of this museum, as a vehicle for CCP propaganda, is made explicit.

Despite its protestations of present-day Sino–Russian friendship, the museum's historical narrative and its emotively nationalist representations are designed to provoke a sense of injustice. A temple to the *longue durée* of Sino–Russian conflict, it lacks any examples of positive collaboration between the two countries and does not concretely justify the final, short conciliatory statements. As a member of the national community, a Chinese visitor is encouraged to interiorise the injustice inflicted on China and its people. The repetition of historical victimhood throughout the exposition, moreover, unsettles the current border *status quo* by implicitly casting doubt on its legitimacy and characterising it as an unresolved grievance. Hence it imparts a sense of moral incompletion as Russia's past wrongs have not been redressed. Crucially, Social Darwinist beliefs are not condemned but are presented as the inevitable dynamic that governs relations between states, as well as the fate that befalls weaker populations. This leads one to question how China defines its policies now that it is the stronger of the two powers.

Conclusions

In a previous article on Russian border history museums, important issues were highlighted regarding their representations of the Nerchinsk Treaty and the colonial nature of Russia's conquest of what became the Russian Far East (Adda 2021). Our article confirms that this treaty is a delicate issue in the historical narratives of both Russian and Chinese museums. This is due to the differing nationalist narratives which frame the historical role of this treaty. In museums in the Russian Far East, it is seen at least as an unsatisfactory agreement that blocked Russian access to the Amur for almost two centuries; in some cases, it disappears from the historical narrative (Adda 2021, pp. 11–9). In Chinese border museums, it represents the highest point in Sino–Russian diplomatic relations before the tragic 'century of humiliation'. Both narratives draw on a teleological representation of Primor'e and Priamur'e as integral parts of their national territories. Historical events and significant geographical locations are ideologically weaponised in order to support competing definitions of the regions' identities. Bohai history is instrumentalised in order to link or detach Primor'e and China. Cossacks and Russian explorers can be heroes or foes according to which bank of the Amur the museum occupies. The Aigun and Peking treaties are other focal points of divergence between Russian and Chinese border museums. In the Russian Far East, they are described positively, but their broader contexts are consistently omitted and Chinese perspectives are not taken into account. In Chinese border museums, they represent two catastrophic events that led to decades of violence from Russia and amputated a significant part of Chinese territory. Because these narratives fundamentally relate to definitions of Russian and Chinese sovereignty, they are irreducibly opposed. This tension is clearly perceptible on both sides of the Amur.

By examining three Chinese museums, this article sheds light on some of the inward-facing messages they disseminate regarding frontier history. Unlike the official pronouncements of Sino–Russian friendship, these are far more ambiguous. Emotionally charged nationalist rhetoric regarding past injustices coexists alongside glowing depictions of cosmopolitan prosperity under Russian imperial domination. Nevertheless, several key themes can be identified. The history of the frontier is given a Sino-centric spin in order to tie it firmly to the Han Chinese territorial core and detach it from other ethnic groups and states. Relations of colonial dependency imposed on indigenous populations are glossed over to justify their absorption into a monolithic Han China. Tsarist Russia's encroachment into the Amur region is thoroughly vilified in ways that maximise its affective impact. Although Russian contributions to economic development are praised, representations of Russian culture carry more than a whiff of exoticism. The continued use of maps and mantras allows visitors to see Qing China at its greatest territorial extent as the teleologically rightful patrimony of China. They are repeatedly invited to visualise, measure and locate the lands lost to Russia. All this is underscored by a Social Darwinist interpretation of history that encourages domestic visitors to support China, not only to surpass the achievements of the past with OBOR, but also to prevent further assaults on Chinese interests.

These reflections therefore provoke larger questions about historical memory in Sino–Russian relations. The crux of the matter concerns the ongoing relevance of the past into the present. Given the pedagogical mission of Chinese museology and its constant injunction to 'not forget history' (Denton 2014, pp. 136–37), we can see that past grievances play a vital political role in the present day. This desire to keep past resentments burning consistently appears in Chinese border museums. Since it is an inward-facing discourse, foreigners are excluded from this exercise in national commemoration—Russian tourists are barred from the Aihui Museum and translations are not provided for the more sensitive panels in Harbin museums. In museums in the Russian Far East, similar techniques are used to avoid challenging Chinese visitors' sensibilities on controversial issues and to whitewash and legitimise the history of Russia's control over its far eastern territories (Adda 2021). Hence, there is an awareness on both sides of the border that the stridently nationalist messages meant for domestic consumption can have an impact on audiences from the 'other side'. Ironically, this mirrors the avoidance in the diplomatic arena of controversial issues in Sino–Russian history that could easily escalate into patriotic and ideological confrontations. Here, on the contrary, the oft-repeated mantra is that Sino–Russian relations happily improved in the last decades thanks to the successful settlement of the border issue. So, while bygones may be bygones on an official, international level, if state-sanctioned history museums purposefully leave room for a highly emotive sense of unsatisfied injustice, how are Chinese citizens supposed to forget? The same question applies to Russian citizens, if they are not confronted by the excesses of their colonial endeavours in the Russian Far East and see them only through the lens of border defence.

As the 'memory wars' in Eastern Europe over World War II demonstrate, nationalist interpretations of the past and their weaponisation in the public sphere can impact international diplomacy (Amacher & Berelowitch 2013; Fedor *et al*. 2017; Amacher *et al*. 2020; Rudling 2020). Our analysis thus offers a useful supplement to geopolitical assessments of the Sino–Russian partnership. Indeed, without considering Chinese and Russian narratives concerning the history of the border regions, the significant discrepancies between state-to-state diplomatic discourses and patriotic ones targeting local populations would be overlooked. With this in mind, the prospects for a potential Sino–Russian alliance do not seem very plausible. The current Sino–Russian partnership, although officially strong, may still stand on feet of clay. If circumstances change and bilateral relations deteriorate, nationalistically-inflected rhetoric could easily be mobilised. The state may not be able to place limits on popular nationalism once it is invoked.

The recent events following Russia's invasion of Ukraine have borne out the fundamentals of our analysis. Sino–Russian relations continue to appear rhetorically solid, but practically ambiguous or even opportunistic. One important example is how China juxtaposes its endorsement of Russia's accusation that NATO is a destabilising world alliance, with declarations of its commitment to respecting the territorial integrity of all sovereign states. China has repeatedly urged the belligerents to resolve hostilities peacefully within a United Nations framework, while itself shying away from taking a firm stance when voting on many specific resolutions. Crucially, as of May 2022, China has abstained from providing decisive economic or military support to Russia (Carlson 2022; Kireeva 2022; Sun *et al*. 2022; Wang 2022).

This article did not take into account curatorial processes or the visitor, although other studies of Chinese museums show that audiences are largely amenable to nationalist messages (Denton 2014, p. 267; Lu 2014, pp. 136–38). Such questions could direct future scholarship.

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Appendix

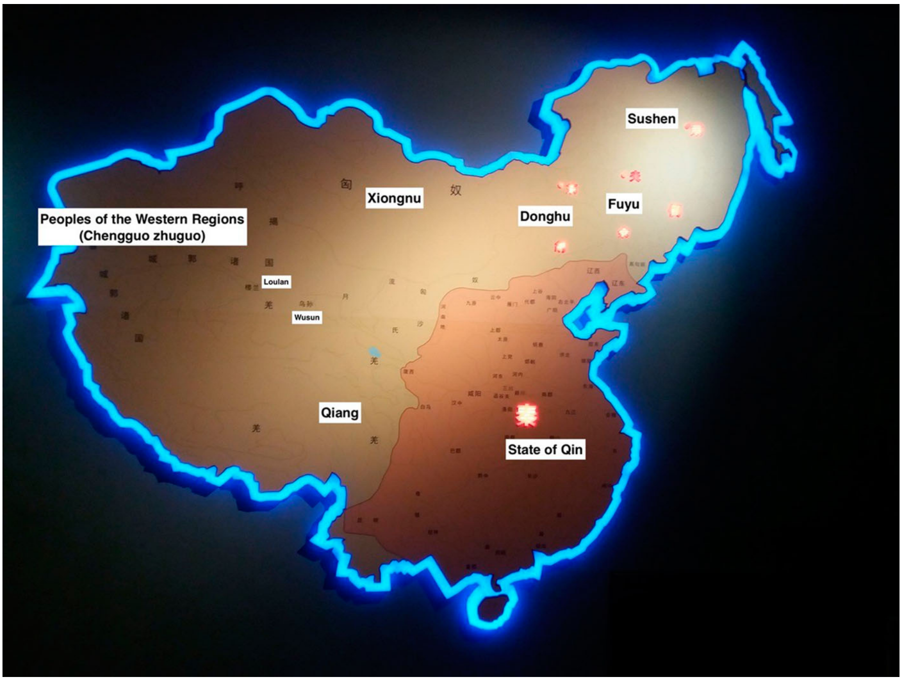
Sushen
Xiongnu
Donghu
Fuyu
Peoples of the Western Regions
(Chengguo zhuguo)
Loulan
Wusun
Qiang
State of Qin

FIGURE A1. ENTRANCE MAP, HPM, 7 AUGUST 2019
Note: Translation, Yuexin Rachel Lin.
Source: Iacopo Adda.

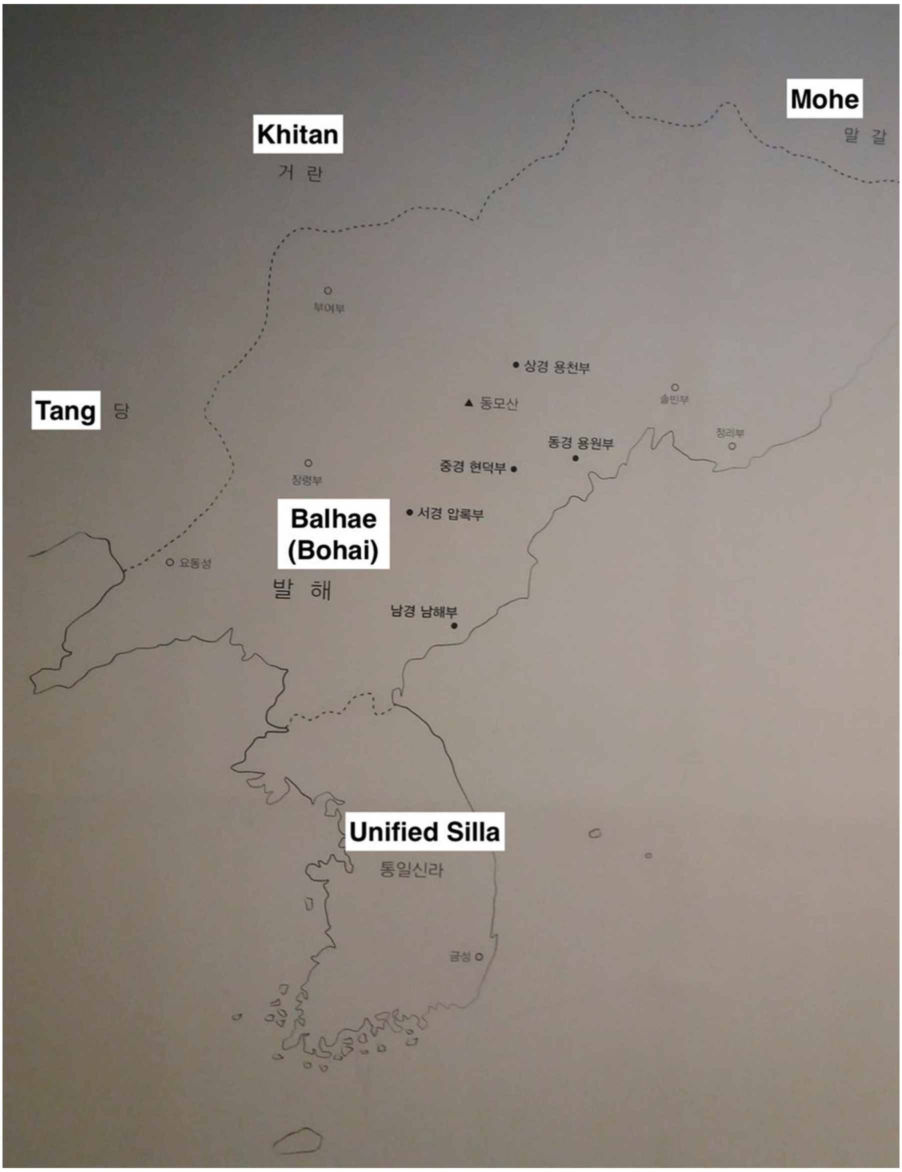
Khitan
거 란
Mohe
말 갈
부여부
상경 용천부
Tang 당
동모산
솔빈부
정리부
동경 용원부
중경 현덕부
장령부
서경 압록부
Balhae
(Bohai)
요동성
발 해
남경 남해부
Unified Silla
통일신라
금성

FIGURE A2. Bohai Map, Seoul National Museum, 7 June 2019

Note: Translation, Samuel Guex.

Source: Iacopo Adda.

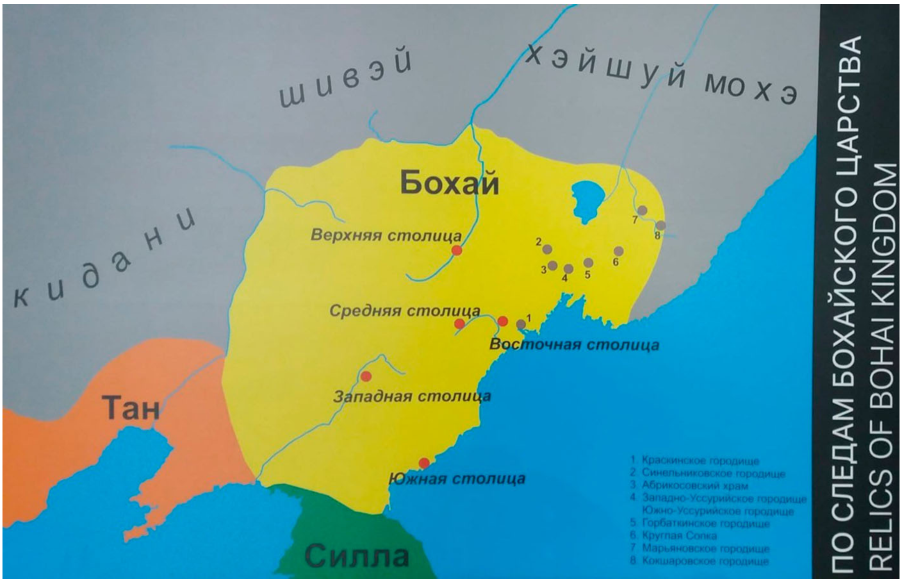
шивэй
хэйшуй мохэ
Бохай
киданы
Верхняя столица
Средняя столица
Восточная столица
Западная столица
Южная столица
Тан
Силла
1
2
3
4
5
6
7
8
1 Краскинское городище
2 Синельниковское городище
3 Абрикосовский храм
4 Западно-Уссурийское городище
Южно-Уссурийское городище
5 Горбаткинское городище
6 Круглая Солка
7 Марьяновское городище
8 Кокшаровское городище
ПО СЛЕДАМ БОХАЙСКОГО ЦАРСТВА
RELICS OF BOHAI KINGDOM

FIGURE A3. Bohai Map, Arsen’ev Museum, Vladivostok, 6 May 2019

Source: Iacopo Adda.

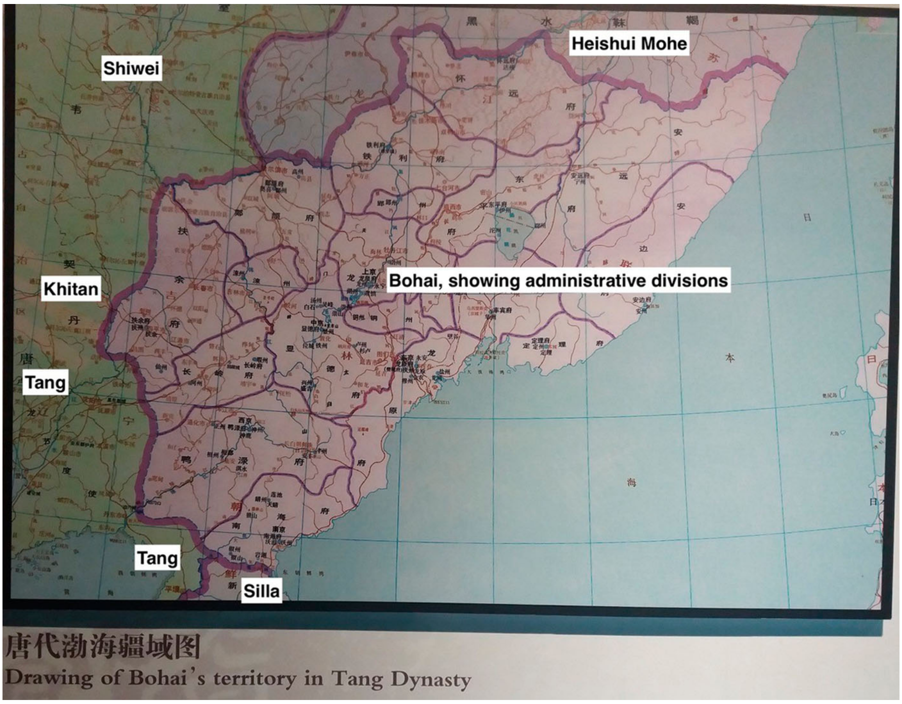
Heishui Mohe
Shiwei
Bohai, showing administrative divisions
Khitan
Tang
Tang
Silla
唐代渤海疆域图
Drawing of Bohai’s territory in Tang Dynasty

FIGURE A4. Bohai Map, HPM, 7 August 2019

Note: Translation, Yuexin Rachel Lin.

Source: Iacopo Adda.

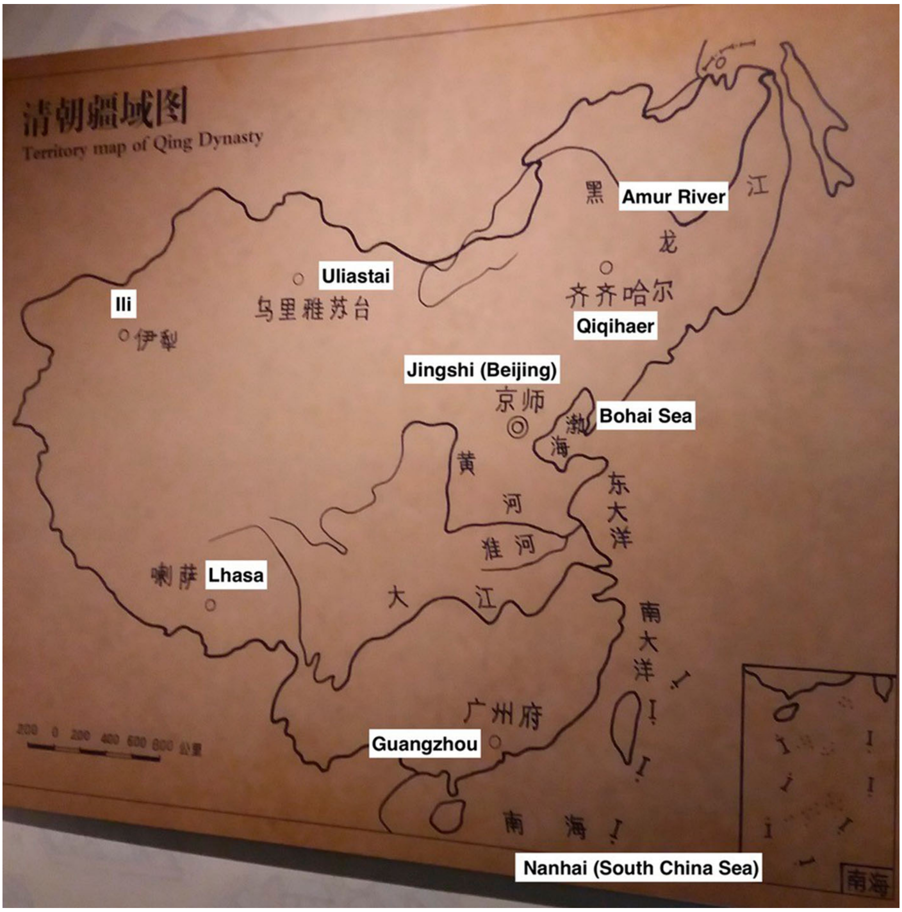
清朝疆域图
Territory map of Qing Dynasty
黑
Amur River
江
龙
Uliastai
乌里雅苏台
Ili
伊犁
齐齐哈尔
Qiqihaer
Jingshi (Beijing)
京师
渤
Bohai Sea
海
黄
河
东
大
洋
淮河
喇萨
Lhasa
大
江
南
大
洋
广州府
Guangzhou
200 0 200 400 600 800 公里
南
海
Nanhai (South China Sea)
南海

FIGURE A5. QING MAP, HPM, 7 AUGUST 2019

Note: Translation, Yuexin Rachel Lin.

Source: Iacopo Adda.

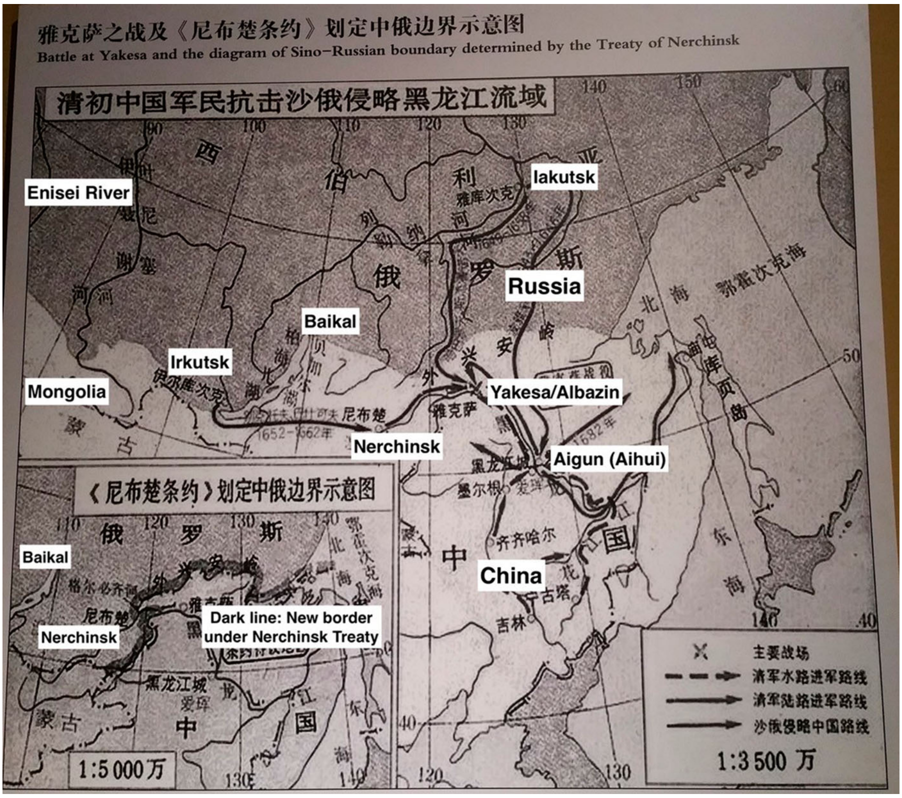
雅克萨之战及《尼布楚条约》划定中俄边界示意图
Battle at Yakesa and the diagram of Sino–Russian boundary determined by the Treaty of Nerchinsk
清初中国军民抗击沙俄侵略黑龙江流域
Enisei River
Iakutsk
Russia
Baikal
Irkutsk
Mongolia
Yakesa/Albazin
Nerchinsk
Aigun (Aihui)
China
1652–1662年
1682年
《尼布楚条约》划定中俄边界示意图
俄罗斯
Baikal
Nerchinsk
Dark line: New border under Nerchinsk Treaty
蒙古
中国
1:5 000万
主要战场
清军水路进军路线
清军陆路进军路线
沙俄侵略中国路线
1:3 500 万

FIGURE A6. Map of Qing Resistance to Tsarist Russia, HPM, 7 August 2019

Note: Translation, Yuexin Rachel Lin.

Source: Iacopo Adda.

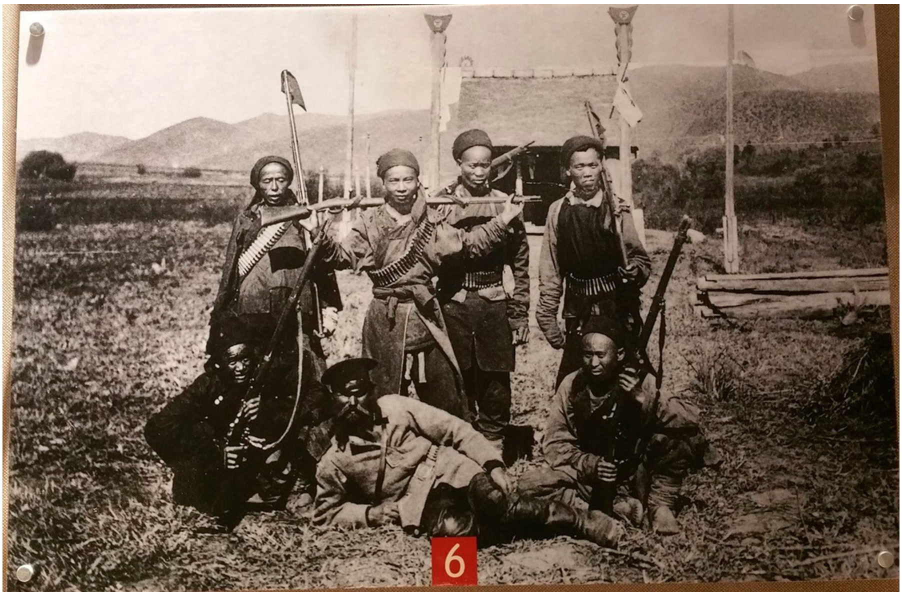

FIGURE A7. Russian Surveyor and Chinese Guards, CER Impressions Hall, 9 August 2019
Source: Iacopo Adda.

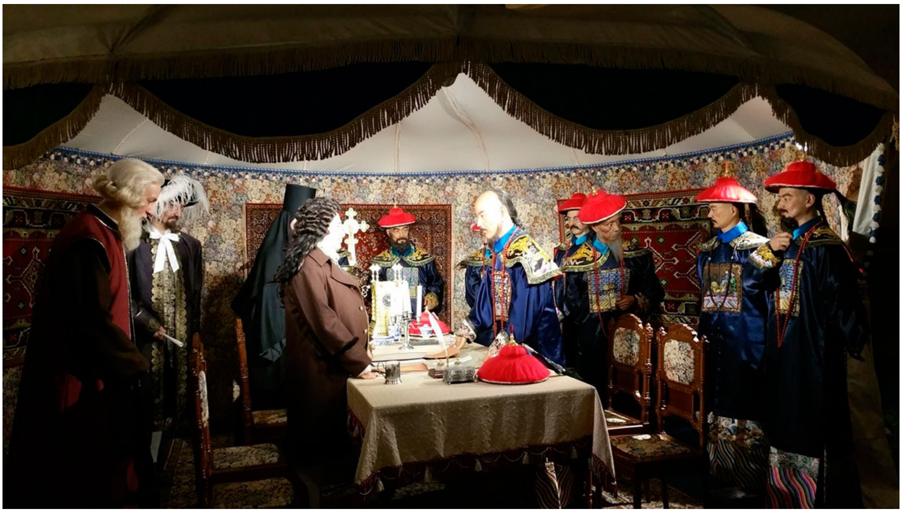

FIGURE A8. Nerchinsk Treaty Diorama, AHM, 12 August 2018
Source: Yuexin Rachel Lin.

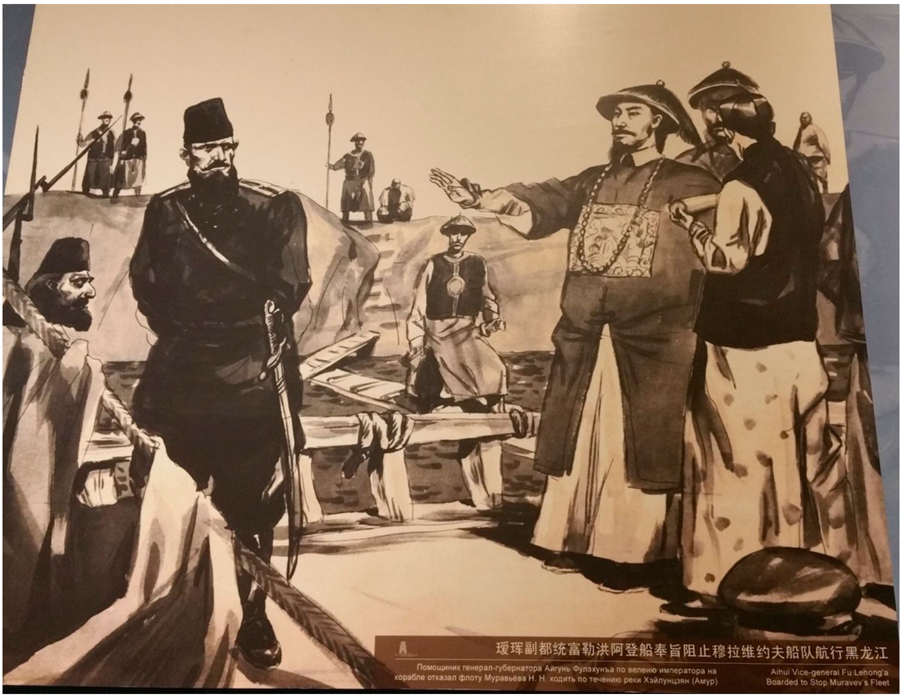
瑷珲副都统富勒洪阿登船奉旨阻止穆拉维约夫船队航行黑龙江
Помощник генерал-губернатора Айгунь Фулэхунъа по веленю императора на корабле отказал флоту Муравьёва Н. Н. ходить по течению реки Хэйлунцзян (Амур)
Aihui Vice-general Fu Lehong'a Boarded to Stop Muravev's Fleet

FIGURE A9. Fu Lehong'e Confronts Murav'ev, AHM, 11 August 2019
Source: Iacopo Adda.

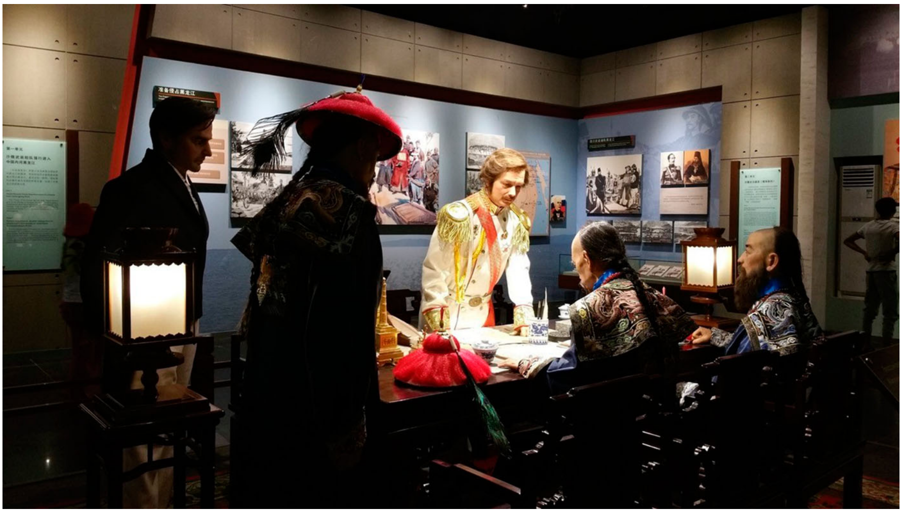

FIGURE A10. Aigun Treaty Diorama, AHM, 12 August 2018
Source: Yuexin Rachel Lin.