Military and Trade Diasporas at the China-Russia Border: Friendship and Suspicion between Kiakhta and Maimaicheng

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Abstract This presentation looks at imperial-period engagement of the Russian frontier town Kiakhta and its residents with Maimaicheng (買賣城, literally ‘trade town’) - a neighboring trade outpost on the Qing side. My ‘fieldwork between folders’ has revealed that restrictive legislations of the Qing Empire and of the Tsarist Russia concerning border trade and migration into Kiakhta- Maimaicheng trading zone was easily violated on the ground by merchants coming there from different parts of the Qing and Russian empires. Exploring a wide range of military (including custom service) and trade diaspora groups that operated in Kiakhta and Maimaicheng, and taking a close look at their functions, duties and particularly narratives about each other, I demonstrate that all these diverse ethnic and social groups, despite mutual misperception, suspicion, mistrust, and even absence of a common language, created a unique and vibrant border community together, which was to a certain extent ‘detached’ from their imperial centers in Beijing and Saint-Petersburg. Moreover, Kiakhta and Maimaicheng regularly celebrated their holidays together, had their rituals of friendship, gift exchange and twinning arrangements between the Qing and Russian side residents. As a conclusion, I will suggest that close relations between Kiakhta and Maimaicheng inhabitants to a great extent were imbedded in a complicated web of unofficial relations based on co-ethnic (e.g. Mongols from Russian side – Mongols from the Qing side), common religious (followers of Tibetan Buddhism and Islam from the both sides) and professional ties (merchants–merchants; smugglers–smugglers); that all of them seemed to be in opposition to imperial bureaucracy represented by a Qing Manchu official jarguchi (Manch. or Ch. banshi siyuan) in Maimaicheng and the Governor General of Troitskosavsk fortress in Kiakhta, whose task was not only to facilitate trade relations, to impose taxes, but also to organize intelligence surveillance against the neighboring state.

Dr. Sayana Namsaraeva is an anthropologist and Research Associate at Mongolia & Inner Asia Studies Unit (University of Cambridge) and a member of the interdisciplinary Research Project ‘Where Rising Powers Meet: China and Russia at their North Asian Border’ under the leadership of Professor Caroline Humphrey. As a part of the large research agenda, Sayana looks at the China-Russia-Mongolia border in its Transbaikal juncture (外贝加尔地区) in historical and present day perspectives by comparing border twin cities interaction between Kiakhta (恰克图) and Maimaicheng of the late imperial period, and between Zabaikal’sk (外贝加尔斯克) and Manzhouli (滿州里市) at present. Her recent contributions to China Border Studies have appeared in Frontiers and Boundaries of China (2012) and Frontier Encounters: Knowledge and Practice at the Russian, Chinese and Mongolian Border (2012). More about her earlier research on ethnic groups divided by the Russia-China border: http://www.cam.ac.uk/research/features/life-on-the-divide-the-buriad-people-and-the-worlds-longest-border

All seminars take place on Wednesdays (unless otherwise arranged) at 5pm in rooms 8 & 9 in the Faculty of Asian and Middle Eastern Studies, Sidgwick Avenue, Cambridge. Tea will be served at the same venue at 4:45pm. All are welcome.