# “Vasily” of China and his Russian Friends: Smugglers and their Transcultural Identities

**Sören Urbansky**

**Abstract** This article explores lives of smugglers in the Sino-Soviet borderlands during the late 1920s and early 1930s. While studying phenomena of smuggling, historians can—besides its economic dimension—also learn about identities of smugglers, which go beyond the notions of “nation” or homogenous concepts of “culture.” How was the transfer of commodities connected with smugglers’ identities, which, in turn, shaped their strategies and networks? To answer this key question, the text focuses on smugglers’ transcultural identities in the Sino-Soviet borderlands. The studied cases show how Sino-Soviet contraband networks were established through long-term social and economic contacts. Traffickers had often spent years in contact zones meeting Russians and Chinese before they came to be involved in complex activities of illicit trade. The studied cases suggest that smugglers as a social group working in a complex context can be defined as people who need to have special skills that develop from transcultural biographies.

## Introduction

Something about the man was suspicious. In the spring of 1930, Li Zhaozhi could be seen almost every day at the main railway station in Chita. The city on the Trans-Siberian Railway, some 400 miles east of Lake Baikal by train, is the administrative centre of Eastern Transbaikalia. At Chita station, Mr Li would either board a train or meet people at the platform. However, Li was not a conductor or any other ordinary railwayman. As his name suggests, his face had Asian, not Caucasian features. Police officers, railway officials and ordinary people in Chita noticed Mr Li there at the station. But what was he doing there by the tracks?

S. Urbansky (✉)
History Department, University of Freiburg, Germany
e-mail: soeren.urbansky@geschichte.uni-freiburg.de

D. Ben-Canaan et al. (eds.), *Entangled Histories*, Transcultural Research – Heidelberg Studies on Asia and Europe in a Global Context, DOI 10.1007/978-3-319-02048-8_2,

© Springer International Publishing Switzerland 2014

This article explores the lives of smugglers in the Sino-Soviet borderlands during the late 1920s and early 1930s. Although contraband trade almost always originates from economic incentives, it is not my intention to write an economic history of smuggling. While studying the phenomena of smuggling, historians can also learn about the identities of smugglers, which go beyond the notions of "nation" or homogenous concepts of "culture."[1] How was the transfer of commodities connected with smugglers' identities, which shaped, in turn, their strategies and networks? To answer this key question, the text will focus on smugglers' transcultural identities in the Sino-Soviet borderlands. By applying Dirk Hoerder's definition of the term "transculturalism," I am identifying people with transcultural identities as those who have the capacity to live and act in different cultural spaces (i.e. the imperial entities of China and the Soviet Union) and to create mixed or overlapping ways of life.[2] According to Hoerder, "[s]trategic transcultural competence involves conceptualizations of life projects in multiple contexts and informed choice between cultural options."[3] As a working hypothesis, I would suggest that smugglers often utilise their transcultural competences strategically for economic purposes. A major difference from Hoerder's adoption of this concept for migrants is that this article will deal with smugglers of whom just *some* had a migration background. So does smuggling create transcultural identities, or is transculturality a precondition for a person to become a successful smuggler?

To understand smugglers' lives in the Sino-Soviet borderlands I will be using Mary Louise Pratt's notion of "contact zones." Closely related to Hoerder's definition of "transculturalism," Pratt understands "[t]ransculturation [as] a phenomenon of the contact zone." Looking at what she calls a "contact zone"—an area that allows the intermingling of two or more cultures—Pratt explores phenomena of "transculturation" in spaces of colonial encounter. The colonial context is negligible in the setting of this article inasmuch as there was no radical inequality among colonising and colonised subjects during the period under study. However, the

---

[1] Various concepts, such as "transnationality," "hybridity," "third space," "cultures in between" and "entangled histories"—to mention just a few—advocate a shift from nation-state approaches to the study of people's agency, mentality or cultural creation and could certainly also be adapted to enable smugglers' personalities to be examined.

[2] Since the 1990s, anthropologists, historians and scholars of several other disciplines have used the concept "transculturality" in varying ways. As early as the 1940s, the Cuban sociologist Fernando Ortiz coined the term "transculturation" in a pioneering description of Afro-Cuban Culture. Among present scholars, the German philosopher Wolfgang Welsch is widely quoted but remains too normative for the case of smugglers' identities. Wolfgang Welsch, "Transkulturalität. Zwischen Globalisierung und Partikularisierung," in *Jahrbuch Deutsch als Fremdsprache. Intercultural German Studies*, ed. A. Wierlacher et al., vol. 26 (Munich: Iudicum 2006), 327–51. Dirk Hoerder's approach seems more appropriate for the analysis of smugglers' identities. Most important: Dirk Hoerder, "Transculturalism(s): From Nation-State to Human Agency in Social Spaces and Cultural Regions," *Zeitschrift für Kanada-Studien* 45 (2005): 7–20.

[3] Although quite similar to a sentence in Hoerder's 2005 article, this passage was quoted in Dirk Hoerder, "Historians and Their Data: The Complex Shift from Nation-State Approaches to the Study of People's Transcultural Lives," *Journal of American Ethnic History* 25,4 (Summer 2006): 85–96, quotation on 91.

"contact zones" concept still remains highly productive and applicable, since it offers conclusive interpretations of the life patterns and strategies of smugglers and other border-crossing agents.[4]

As a second hypothesis, I will argue that smugglers had often lived and worked in contact zones for many years before they became involved in complex contraband activities.

Before attempting to analyse smugglers' identities, one has to understand the extent to which people's lives in the border region were entangled and in what kind of contact zones they interacted. Therefore, this text will address three aspects: First, it will very briefly touch upon the borderland's multiethnic milieu and the relatively slow emergence of modern state-border controls. Second, it will sketch out how smuggling was carried out in the region by focusing on gold as a major contraband product. By examining two case studies of gold contraband networks it will, in a third section, attempt to analyse smuggler's transcultural identities.

## Porous Borders, Multiethnic Borderlands

According to Hoerder, people with transcultural backgrounds also create "transcultural spaces."[5] By the turn of the twentieth century, the Sino-Russian borderlands were in many respects "transcultural spaces"—or "zones of contact"—in which people with transcultural biographies did not care much about concepts of the nation-state. In general, the role of the nation-state, a nineteenth century construct institutionalised in the twentieth century, was of subordinate importance. This was true on both sides of the border.

Between the early 1900s and the mid 1950s, Manchuria, the Chinese borderland, was home to thousands of Russian colonists who settled along the semi-colonial Chinese Eastern Railway (CER), soon followed by even higher numbers of Russian émigrés fleeing from the Bolsheviks. Subjects of the Russian Empire and Soviet Union dwelled in the city of Harbin and the villages along the railway's right of way zone. For the most part, these people preserved their pre-revolutionary lifestyle, spoke Russian, and maintained their religious beliefs. They were representatives of a Russian "culture abroad," and were in many ways isolated from the Chinese culture by which they were surrounded.[6]

---

[4] Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes. Travel Writing and Transculturation* (London: Routledge, 1992), quotation on 6.

[5] See: Hoerder, "Transculturalism(s)," 8.

[6] See the introduction of this volume. For further reading see Olga Bakich, "Charbin, 'Rußland jenseits der Grenzen' in Fernost," in *Der große Exodus: Die russische Emigration und ihre Zentren 1917 bis 1941*, ed. Karl Schlögel (Munich: Beck, 1994), 304–28, in particular 327. For a brief history of the CER: Sören Urbansky, *Kolonialer Wettstreit. Rußland, China, Japan und die Ostchinesische Eisenbahn* (Frankfurt/Main: Campus, 2008).

The case of East Asian settlers in the Russian borderlands shows some similarities: just as China's three northeastern provinces were not an ethnically homogenous entity, the Russian Far East and Eastern Siberia were areas populated by people from many different places. By the late nineteenth century, Russians as well as ethnic minorities of the tsarist empire lived next to migrants from East Asia in these territories. Since the Qing government in Beijing had loosened restrictions on access to its provinces in the northeast, migrants of the Han ethnic majority made their way to Russia's eastern periphery by the thousands each year. In fact, long before the Russians erected their first shacks, some parts of the Russian Far East were already inhabited by the Chinese. The influx of Koreans and Japanese was also significant.[7] By the turn of the twentieth century, thousands of East Asians had settled in rural areas and in the emerging Far Eastern and Siberian urban centres Vladivostok, Khabarovsk, and Blagoveshensk. For instance, in 1912 Russians accounted for just 58 % of Vladivostok's population.[8]

Compared to the influx of Russian subjects to Manchuria, the proportion of East Asians in the eastern territories of Russia and the USSR was significantly higher and more stable. In contrast to the Russian émigrés in China's northeast, many of the Chinese settlers of Russia could often hardly be described as "purely" Chinese. The readiness of the Chinese to acculturate in an alien society was higher than that of Russians in China. Nationality in late Tsarist Russia was defined by Orthodoxy, the adoption of Russian culture, submission to state autocracy, and much less by ethnicity or race. Chinese in Russia converted to Orthodoxy, had names such as "Vasily" or "Alexei," and some—male migrants outnumbering females—were married to Russians.[9] The situation only significantly changed with the consolidation of Soviet rule. In the late 1930s, the vast majority of the Chinese were expelled from the USSR or deported to Central Asia.[10]

Why then, with so many Chinese living in the Russian borderlands, did Li Zhaozhi attract the attention of the people of Chita whenever he waited at the train station? Before the expulsion of East Asians began in Russia, the situation in Chita already differed from that of other cities on the eastern periphery. Eastern Transbaikalia was not as multiethnic as other parts of the Russian East. Although factories, construction sites and, most importantly, gold mines in Transbaikalia employed a total of approximately 20,000 "yellow workers" (*zheltie rabochie*)—as

[7] For the specifics of each of the different East Asian communities in Russia's Far East, see John Stephan, *The Russian Far East: A History* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994), 71–9.

[8] David Wolff, "Russia Finds Its Limits. Crossing Borders into Manchuria," in *Rediscovering Russia in Asia. Siberia and the Russian Far East*, ed. Stephen Kotkin and David Wolff (Armonk: M.E. Sharpe, 1995), 40–54, 42.

[9] On the issue of interracial marriages see Mark Gamsa, "Mixed Marriages in Russian-Chinese Manchuria" in this volume.

[10] The migrant's share was unstable from the beginning, but declined significantly after the region came under full control of the Soviet authorities. V. Larin, "'Yellow Peril' Again? The Chinese and the Russian Far East," in *Rediscovering Russia*, ed. Kotkin, 290–301, 297. See also: Stephan, *Far East*, 212–13.

East Asians were labelled in the polemical Russian press—their share in the region was much lower than in the Amur and Ussuri regions.[11] The same was true of Chita. With a population of some 70,000 people in the 1910s,[12] the urban centre had only a few hundred Chinese inhabitants. The Chinese of Chita mostly ran petty businesses at the city's old bazaar, the *barakholka* (rag fair), in the early 1920s before new obstacles led to a further decline.[13] The appearance of Chinese or other people from East Asia was less "normal" to the people of Chita than to those of other cities. Inevitably, many Chita citizens knew Li Zhaozhi's face. Only by removing the national tag will historians begin to see that many of the Asian migrants, although noticed by the inhabitants, still found ways to camouflage their lives and to live successfully in two different cultures. The section that follows will explore the extent of the permeability of the state border between Russia, later the Soviet Union, and China during the period under study.

What and who was crossing the border at this time? The parts of the eastern section of the Sino-Russian border under consideration, namely the region of Eastern Transbaikalia, were demarcated about 300 years ago.[14] Nevertheless, up until the end of the nineteenth century the borderland remained a relatively open space in terms of trade and travel. People could cross the state border virtually without restriction. Russian Cossack posts lay dozens of miles apart from each other. The same was true of the *kalun*, the sentry posts on the Chinese side. At the beginning of the twentieth century, the people living in the borderland still depended heavily on border trade and migrant labour. Russian Cossacks lumbered wood and grazed their cattle on the left bank of the River Argun. Chinese farmers tilled Russian soil. They supplied the cities in Russia's Far East with fruit, vegetables and grain. Subjects of the Qing Empire also worked in Russian gold mines, and traded their goods with Russians. The free port (*porto franco*) system in parts of Eastern Siberia and the Russian Far East fostered a dynamic cross-border trade and placed parts of Eastern Russia outside the customs boundaries of the tsarist empire. Only certain trade restrictions on individual products such as alcohol, opium, tea and gold were implemented during that early stage. But even these limitations were very difficult to impose due to a lack of efficient border controls.

---

[11] A polemic series of articles entitled "Regarding the question of yellow labor in Transbaikalia" (*K voprosu o zheltom trude v Zabaikal'e*) estimated the number of Chinese as of 1915 as high as 19,800 in Transbaikalia. The majority was employed in the gold mines. Chinese made up between 75 and 90 % of all miners in the goldfields. *Zabaikal'skoe Obozrenie*, 25 January 1916 and 8 February 1916.

[12] With the construction of the railway, Chita's population multiplied within a decade from 11,522 in 1897 to 74,325 in 1910. *Aziatskaia Rossiia. Izdanie Pereselencheskago Upravleniia Glavnago Upravleniia Zemleustroistva i Zemledeliia*, vol. 1 (St. Petersburg, 1914), 293.

[13] The United Association of Chinese (*huaqiao lianhe zonghui*) complained as early as 1922 to the municipal authorities, who tried to impede their manufacturing business by forcing them to move. *Gosudarstvennyi Arkhiv Chitinskoi Oblasti* (GAChO), f. R-15, op. 1, d. 50, ll. 13–14.

[14] Other segments of the Sino-Russian border section had been demarcated in the mid nineteenth century. S.C.M. Paine, *Imperial rivals. China, Russia, and Their Disputed Frontier* (Armonk, NY: Sharpe, 1996), chapter 1.

It was not until the mid-1890s that a commission of the Russian Ministry of Finance worked on a customs control system project for the Russian border section east of Kiakhta. In the early 1900s, these efforts resulted in the elimination of the *porto franco* regime and the establishment of a customs service like that on Russia's European borders. But the creation of a modern control system did not disrupt cross-border trade. Quite the opposite: Although customs illegalised much of the border commerce beyond the checkpoints, they often made its business more attractive. Further efforts to strengthen control, such as the elimination of the borderland's 50-verst free trade zone in 1913, did not significantly reduce the economic cross-border activities of the local population.[15]

The turmoil of civil war delayed economic control mechanisms on the eastern state borders of Soviet Russia. After 1922 the "Unified State Political Directorate" (*Ob'edinennoe gosudarstvennoe politicheskoe upravlenie*, OGPU)[16], the Soviet secret police agency, took charge of border control, while the importance of the customs service declined nationwide and its staff was reduced. In fact, the 1920s became the heyday of smuggling. It was not until the end of the decade that state policy regarding smuggling switched from a "soft-" to a "hard-line" approach. Cleansing campaigns and severe punishments directed to members of professional contraband networks resulted in a decrease in smuggling.[17]

However, it was not the state policy against contrabandists, but relations at the international level that terminated smuggling. The deteriorating Soviet-Chinese relationship in the late 1920s, which culminated in the conflict over the CER in 1929, resulted in an increasing military presence along the border.[18] By 1930, border control along the border to China was tighter than ever before—yet still very weak. During the 1930s, smuggling became a political act. Stalinist terror made illegal border-crossing, smuggling, and spying common—if often alleged—causes of arrests. However, the most significant reason for combating economic contraband was not the Great Terror but the Japanese establishment of Manchukuo—a Japanese puppet state in China's Northeast—that triggered a hysterical war scare in the Soviet Union's eastern borderlands which lasted throughout the 1930s and eventually brought the smuggling to an end.[19] In terms of the success in establishing a working customs control on the border with China, the first three decades of the twentieth century were a time of continuity, a time when economic border controls remained weak.

---

[15] For a comprehensive overview from the *porto franco* to the establishment of Russian customs in the Far Eastern provinces: N. Beliaeva, *Ot porto-franko k tamozhne. Ocherk regional'noi istorii Rossiiskogo protektsionizma* (Vladivostok: Dal'nauka, 2003).

[16] From 1922 to 1923 called GPU (*Gosudarstvennoe politicheskoe upravlenie*). It was absorbed into the NKVD in 1934.

[17] For the state policy against contraband trade in the Soviet Far East during the 1920s, see A. Popenko, *Opyt bor'by s kontrabandoi na Dal'nem Vostoke Rossii (1884 – konets 20-kh gg. XX v.)* (Khabarovsk: Khabarovskii pogranichnyi institut FSB Rossii, 2009), 72–118.

[18] See, for instance, Urbansky, *Kolonialer Wettstreit*, 136–43.

[19] Stephan, *Far East*, 233–5.

## Gold Fever on Both Riverbanks

The second section will explore how smuggling was carried out in the border regions. As we have seen, smuggling, as well as the fight against it, was a persistent phenomenon in the Sino-Russian borderlands. The volume and composition of export and import contraband varied over time. Both depended on many factors, such as smuggling for personal consumption or for resale, supply and demand on both sides of the border, the price and convertibility of the rouble, the harshness of punishment meted out to smugglers, the success of agitprop campaigns among the borderland population, etc.

Two products were especially popular at all times among contrabandists: gold and alcohol. Reasons for the illegal import of alcohol were similar to those for the illegal export of gold, with the most important being a substantial difference in market prices between China and Russia. The illegal trade of both was often interrelated. There was a quite important difference though between gold and alcohol, because the gold was traded globally, and alcohol remained a local or regional trade item with a shorter supply chain. Alcohol (*spirit*) and alcoholic products (such as *vodka* and *baijiu*) were the key import good smuggled into Russia, mainly produced on the Chinese side of the border and predominantly consumed by Russians.[20] The Chinese soon became the chief vodka suppliers for the Russian border population, catalysing in return the smuggling of gold, since the precious metal was also a major medium of exchange for Russian import contraband. In the following, I will focus on gold as a major smuggling ware, since it was a globally traded and smuggled item, with obvious links between trans-local collaborations in networks and world markets. It involved many different people in a highly complex supply chain of diggers, smugglers and traffickers.

Long before the tsarist government in St Petersburg considered implementing effective economic supervision along its Asian state border, the illegal gold trade had become an important factor in the borderland economy. During the last two decades of the nineteenth century, the discovery of gold triggered a rush to the Amur. The thousands of middle-class fortune seekers, "predators" (*khishchiniki*), peasants and drifters who went to try their luck came from neighbouring regions and other areas of Russia, China, and some even from abroad. Gold seekers dug along the border river's two banks, regardless of their nationality. In the 1880s, the "California on Amur" in the northernmost part of Manchuria attracted several hundred Russians from the broader Amur region. They had crossed the river to

[20] For the illegal production of alcohol and its contraband networks in the Sino-Russian borderlands, as well as its impact on morals, health, and security, see Sören Urbansky, "Der betrunkene Kosake: Schmuggel im sino-russischen Grenzland (circa 1860–1930)" in Globalisierung imperial und sozialistisch. *Russland und die Sowjetunion* in der Gobalgeschichte 1851–1991, ed. Martin Aust (Frankurt/Main: Campus 2013), 301–329.

engage in illegal gold mining on the Chinese bank in close proximity to Chinese miners, and they founded the short-lived *Zheltuga Republic*. Years later, similar "transnational endeavours" emerged on the Russian side.[21]

The gold mining industry became a significant economic sector on both sides of the border rivers. By the turn of the century, dozens of gold mines existed in Northern Heilongjiang Province in the vicinity of Heihe and Nenjiang (Mergen) as well as in northern Hulunbei'er, owned mainly by Chinese, Russian, British and American entrepreneurs.[22] Gold mining was an even more important industry on the Russian side. In Transbaikalia alone, not to mention the Amur or other regions of eastern Russia, there were 149 gold mines, almost half of which were in the Eastern Transbaikalia borderlands next to China. The annual average yield lay above 200 *pud* (3.28 t), compared to 110 *pud* (1.8 t) in the Heilongjiang mines.[23] Although the gold mining declined after 1901 in private and state-owned mines, the number of gold-diggers increased sharply. 17,210 workers, most of them Chinese subjects, were employed in the mines of Transbaikalia in 1909.[24] In the Amur goldfields, the situation was similar. The proportion of Chinese menial labourers rose from 15 % in 1900 to 76 % in 1915.[25] Not until the late 1920s did the share of Chinese workers decline appreciably.

When does cross-border trade become smuggling? Often people at the border did not regard their trade activities as a criminal act. For generations they had been accustomed to buying everyday necessities on the other side of the border without being controlled. Therefore, smuggling was not the concept that these people held. Many saw themselves as traders, because the borderline between the two empires had for decades, in Transbaikalia even for centuries, only been a border by definition, but not by substantial enforcement. An exception consisted however of entrepreneurs involved in gold, opium and alcohol smuggling. These goods had been banned from the export and import trade since the 1860s, long before custom posts were established.

Although gold was traded globally, the ways in which it reached the world market often depended on local networks. Through which channels was it smuggled, then? Who received the precious metal on the Chinese side? And how much of it was smuggled? If measured in lost customs revenue, the smuggling of Russian and later Soviet gold was the most significant contraband item. The annual outflow

[21] For the history of *Zheltuga Republic* and its mythological afterlife, see Mark Gamsa, "California on the Amur, or the *Zheltuga Republic* in Manchuria (1883–86)," *The Slavonic and East European Review* 81,2 (April 2003): 236–66.

[22] Concerning gold mining in Manchuria, see, for example, B. Torgashev, "Zoloto v Man'chzhurii," *Vestnik Man'chzhurii* 8 (1928): 47–52; V. Kormazov, "Zolotopromyshlennost' v Kheiluntszianskoi provintsii," *Vestnik Man'chzhurii* 3 (1927): 41–4.

[23] *Obzor Zabaikal'skoi oblasti za 1910 god*, [Chita, 1911], 63–9; Kormazov, "Zolotopromyshlennost'," 41.

[24] Compared to 4,686 workers in 1897 and 7,710 in 1901. *Obzor*, 69–70. A similar number worked in the mines and goldfields on the Chinese side. Ibid., 41.

[25] Stephan, *Far East*, 73.

of smuggled gold from Russia to China was an estimated 150 *pud* (2.46 t) up to and during World War I, and declined to approximately 80 *pud* (1.31 t) per annum in the mid-1920s. In other words: 20–60 % of the annual gold production was smuggled out of the Russian Far East by Chinese men and women during the last three decades of tsarist Russia.[26] As already mentioned, another major reason for gold smuggling was the difference in market price. While in 1927 the Soviet government price was 1.29 roubles per gram, the price on the Chinese market was almost 2 roubles.[27]

Up until the October Revolution, attempts by the central and regional governments to stop the illegal sale of gold abroad were often challenged by Russian mining companies, which heavily relied on the cheap labour force.[28] Chinese seasonal workers formed a major group of gold smugglers when they returned home for the winter months. High numbers of migrant gold miners and the insufficient border controls made this smuggling channel the most rewarding.[29] But various alternative contact zones existed between Russians and Chinese through which smuggling activities were carried out, such as grocery stores in the border villages where Cossacks purchased daily necessities and vodka, often in exchange for gold. Almost every day, custom officers arrested train passengers at the border train station of Manzhouli, the majority being Chinese merchants who were frequently caught with thousands of Russian roubles and gold, the weight of which was specified in the protocols in *funt* and not *zolotnik*.[30] It had been purchased in Irkutsk, Chita, or the gold mines and, as rumour had it, was sold in one or other of the first major train stations on Chinese soil: Manzhouli, Zhalainuo’er and Haila’er.[31] But the searched passengers and the customers that frequented the shops in the borderlands were only the tip of the iceberg. Contrabandists knew that they could by-pass customs guards easily. If they travelled by train, they disembarked at Matsievskaia, Dauriia, or Sharasun, the last stations on Russian territory. On their arrival in the dusty steppe villages, they consigned the smuggled goods to mounted accomplices, many of whom were Russians. The border beyond the few control posts remained almost uncontrolled and the gold passed the border smoothly on horseback.[32] If an unlikely eventuality

[26] Kormazov, “Zolotopromyshlennost’,” 46. In 1923, one third of the excavated gold in the Soviet East disappeared into the Chinese market. According to official data in 1925, 250 *pud* (4.1 t) of Soviet gold, or five million roubles, were smuggled to China. See Popenko, *Opyt*, 114.

[27] The illegal export of gold declined significantly in the late 1920s. Ibid., 114.

[28] The wage difference was not significant. In low-paid employment—the only sector in which people of both nations competed—the wages for Russian workers in Transbaikalia in 1916 were 10–20 % higher than those of their Chinese colleagues. *Zabaikal’skoe Obozrenie*, February 8, 1916.

[29] GAChO f. 107, op. 1, d. 125, l. 365.

[30] Old Russian units of measurement. One *funt* equals 409.5 g and one *zolotnik* is 4.26 g.

[31] GAChO f. 13, op. 2, d. 55, l. 2–2 obl. For further examples, see ll. 31–7 of the same file. Reports written by Russian customs officers at Manzhouli station reveal that almost every day in the winter of 1916 train passengers were caught with contraband gold. See: GAChO f. 78, op. 3, d. 77, ll. 2, 12–3, 15.

[32] GAChO f. 13, op. 2, d. 56, ll. 142, 144.

occurred and a contrabandist was caught somewhere, there were ways to negotiate with the authorities. Cossacks and customs officers were themselves often corrupt. Many were addicted to contraband vodka that was illegally imported from Manchuria. Instead of guarding the frontiers against smugglers, they became smugglers themselves.

By 1930, international confrontations had led to a considerable tightening of controls on the border. Crossing the Sino-Soviet border became increasingly difficult. Although the smuggling trade had attracted members of virtually every ethnicity and social group, it was no longer the ordinary gold miner or train passenger who smuggled the contraband. As opposed to the low risks of smuggling alcohol on the regional level, gold smuggling had become increasingly hazardous. Consequently, different smuggling networks emerged and new strategies of contraband trade had to be implemented.

## Vasily's "Russian Connection" and Ianechek's Old Friend

In the third and final section, we shall return to Li Zhaozhi. We will learn that the Chita-based Chinaman was not just some ordinary train-spotter. But was he a typical gold smuggler of his time? Did gold smugglers around 1930 differ from other contrabandists? Li's career may exemplify how customs offenders utilised their transcultural identities for economic purposes. Smugglers' mentalities, however, are hard to detect in historical sources. As is the case with other "subaltern groups," there is little archival evidence on the life of this marginalised group. The best way to explore smugglers' transcultural identities (and analyse the sophistication of contraband networks as well as the striking "openness" of the Sino-Soviet border around the year 1930) is to examine transcripts of arrested smugglers, in which the detainees were asked about their illegal careers and contacts with the "other side." Many of these transcripts are now accessible to historians.[33] I will focus on two representative cases of Chinese and Russians in the Soviet borderlands

[33] The regional archives in Chita (GAChO) alone have several thousand protocols of arrested smugglers on file. The earliest files date back to the years shortly after the Russo-Japanese War. Most of the cases were filed in the late 1920s and early 1930s. The first *opis'* of *fond* R-1243 "Zabaikal'skaia tamozhnia" alone has 1,703 files with "information on confiscated goods [*svedeniia o tovarakh zaderzhanykh*]," i.e. smuggling cases from 1930–37 (but mainly 1930–32). Soviet and Chinese subjects accounted for approximately the same numbers. Most of the questionnaires contain a list of confiscated items, the circumstances of the arrest (how far away from the state border the smuggler was when caught, whether the detained person offered resistance, etc.), interrogation protocols (including the smuggler's full name, age, place of birth, nationality, religion, education, legal and financial status, number of children, military service, party membership, political past), testimonies of eyewitnesses and family members, and, sometimes, the sentence. From the early 1930s on, questionnaires become unusable sources, because the authorities creating them were driven by political incentives.

neighbouring China.[34] Both examples of Soviet-Chinese contrabandist networks operating in Transbaikalia and beyond in the years 1929–1931 will help exemplify how transnational networks functioned during that time, and to what extent their members had transcultural identities.

The first case: the reader has already made the acquaintance of Mr Li at Chita Station. There are, however, more Chinese nationals involved in this story. The most prominent among them is “Vasily.” “Vasily” (the source only reveals his nickname) was a tall man of around 30 years of age. Fluent in Russian and dressed in a “Russian-Transbaikalian style”[35] with a short black fur coat and a hat of the same material down to his ears, he was well assimilated. “Vasily,” like many other Chinese in the Soviet borderlands, had been a migrant worker and lived in Chita since the beginning of the Russian Civil War. “Vasily” worked his way up to become a marketer. Until the mid-1920s he ran a vegetable stall at the *barakholka*, the city’s central market and a major contact zone between the Chinese and Russians of Chita (Fig. 1). It was not the last step of his career ladder. He and his companion, who the people of Chita called “Farmer” (*Krest’ianin*), did not simply sell cucumbers and onions at the main bazaar, but had a more remunerative side-line. They secretly bought nuggets and gold-bearing sand from Soviet and Chinese miners working in gold camps in Eastern Transbaikalia, and smuggled the metal to Manchuria. What awakened the suspicions of the Soviet authorities was the fact that they—like Mr Li—were frequently seen at Chita railway station whenever a train was leaving for Vladivostok. As it turned out, they employed a housewife, Maria Zemliakova, as a courier to bring the gold from Chita to Vladivostok, where it was handed over to other Chinese men who smuggled it into China.

How did it all work? Zemliakova successfully travelled three times from Chita to Vladivostok as a secret messenger between winter 1929 and spring 1930. “Vasily” and “Farmer” provided Zemliakova with gold and money in Chita. Ms Zemliakova, with a degree from an agricultural school, carried the goods during her train rides in her luggage, covered in bed linen or other harmless belongings. On her first journey, still anxious, she only took the 4,400 roubles and refused to smuggle the gold. After this first successful trip she grew bolder and accepted both gold and money. She then travelled once a month, each time carrying at least one *funt* of gold and hundreds, sometimes thousands of roubles. Upon her first arrival in Vladivostok, she waited for “Vasily” to arrive from Chita in Semenov Street, near the bazaar, as agreed. They met in house number 7 together with another Chinese man, who spoke good Russian but lived with two Chinese women. Zemliakova learned from “Vasily” that this corpulent gentleman had owned a company during the *New Economic Policy* of the 1920s, but after losing his

[34] The two examined examples are not one-off cases. Both reflect a typical pattern of smuggling at a time when border controls were becoming increasingly tight. See, for instance, the interrogations of the Chinese gold seeker Chu Jian, arrested in December 1930, as one among hundreds of filed cases with similar smuggling patterns. GAChO f. R-1243, op. 1, d. 980, ll. 1–11 obl.

[35] GAChO f. R-1243, op. 1, d. 1360, l. 4.

**Fig. 1** The *barakholka*—the principal marketplace in Chita in 1922 (*Source*: Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division Washington)

business he had not sunken into poverty. She was to meet him only once. Soon afterwards, the wealthy Chinese man left Vladivostok for Manchuria. On her second and third trip to the Golden Horn, Maria Zemliakova's liaison man was a "Chinese doctor" [*doktor-kitaiets*]. Her services were well paid. For the first trip, Ms Zemliakova was rewarded with 175 roubles, later with 200 roubles each time.[36] The source does not disclose why the gold was taken on a detour via Vladivostok, or how the gold eventually made its way to China. It is likely that the smuggling ring operated from Vladivostok. The Chinese most likely channelled the gold from Vladivostok onwards to Manchuria, or traded the gold in Vladivostok for foreign money if the exchange rate was in their favour, and then smuggled the hard currency further to China. The network seems to have functioned well, but by 1930 vigilant state authorities had also begun to focus on contraband networks in the hinterland.

Zemliakova's successful travels ended on her fourth trip on 27 March 1930 at Karymskaia station, 35 miles east of Chita, when train no. 62 was searched. She threw her belongings into the vestibule of the carriage. But this did not save her. OGPU officers found in Maria Zemliakova's luggage 1,342 g of gold and 1,755 roubles, of which only 55 roubles belonged to her. The police did not get hold of "Farmer," though, who was on the same train. He was sitting in another carriage and most likely disappeared in the nick of time. The whereabouts of "Vasily" remained unknown.[37] Why did the police not arrest him or "Farmer," the second "Russian Chinese" [*russkii kitaets*]?[38] The OGPU was clearly interested in catching the two Chinese red-handed. The house of "Vasily" in Chita, where Zemliakova was seen several times, had been searched beforehand by the OGPU. "Farmer" shared the apartment with "Vasily," who had already been arrested in the past. The authorities certainly knew who the backers were.

The police's determined search of two other Chinese passengers in the same carriage came to Zemliakova's surprise. She did not know that "Vasily" and

[36] GAChO f. R-1243, op. 1, d. 1360, ll. 6–7.

[37] GAChO f. R-1243, op. 1, d. 1360, ll. 20–1.

[38] GAChO f. R-1243, op. 1, d. 1360, l. 18.

"Farmer" had installed a tight surveillance net around her: Li Zhaozhi, whom the reader knows from Chita's main railway station, and Kang Xintian.[39] Like Ms Zemliakova, both men were searched on the spot. Li, an officially unemployed man, had 101 roubles in his pockets, the factory worker Kang only 40 roubles.[40] A large amount of money for poorly paid men, but certainly not enough for smugglers. Nevertheless, the OGPU patrol arrested all three of them. The officers knew that Li and Kang shared a flat on Shirokaia Street in Chita. Both were close friends with "Vasily" and "Farmer." According to the testimony of a Chinese witness in Chita, also interrogated by the OGPU, the four Chinese men acted as a team with Maria Zemliakova as their Russian "face:"

> This "Vasily" often travelled around, but always left Chita eastbound in the direction of Vladivostok and the two Chinese men Li Zhaozhi and Kang Xintian [...] met him at the station. I concluded that "Vasily" purchased gold and Li Zhaozhi was his aide. Once when seeking work I left Chita for the village of Tsalungui. I did not find a job and on my way back Li Zhaozhi approached me, asking whether I had brought some gold by chance. He assumed I was a gold miner. I told him that I didn't have any gold and when I asked him what his inquiry was about he did not say a word and left.
>
> There was gossip among the Chinese [in town]. They all knew "Vasily" was involved in the gold business, buying it somewhere and distributing it through this Russian woman. [...] She [Maria Zemliakova—S. U.] always came to the train station on her own, but was followed by Li Zhaozhi. Once she had entered the carriage Li shadowed her. On her last trip, when she was arrested, [...] she was given the gold either by "Vasily" or his companion "Farmer." One of the two boarded the same train but travelled in another coach, but the two Chinese Li Zhaozhi and Kang Xintian sat in the woman's coach to observe her.[41]

Interestingly, the young interrogated Chinese person refers to "Vasily" without mentioning any Chinese name. Why did the Chinese witness use the nickname, although he recalled that he had seen "Vasily" at his house and thus might have known his real name? The most likely answer is that interrogated people won't mention the names of the men behind the scenes to the police—not at any price. Only the two arrested Chinese were unable to hide behind Russian pseudonyms—if they ever had any. The authorities called them by their proper Chinese names. It is no secret that smugglers use different pseudonyms. Whether the two detained Chinese were, like Zemliakova, scapegoats for "Vasily" and "Farmer," who controlled the group, remains unclear.

Maria Zemliakova seemed to fit the needs of the Chinese smugglers perfectly: a typical Russian lady did not attract as much attention as a Chinese passenger on a Soviet train, and was less likely to be searched by the police. Moreover, she had never lived in China, did not speak any Chinese, nor was she acquainted with Chinese culture. If Ms Zemliakova had had a similar transcultural background to "Vasily" and "Farmer," then the Chinese "Vasily" and "Farmer" wouldn't have

[39] We only know the Cyrillic transcriptions of their names: "Li Chzhao-chzhi" and "Kyn Syn-tian."

[40] GAChO f. R-1243, op. 1, d. 1360, l. 20.

[41] GAChO f. R-1243, op. 1, d. 1360, l. 18–18 obl.

chosen her for the job. Zemliakova might then have figured out why the two Chinese men were travelling in her carriage, might have contacted other Chinese people in Vladivostok, etc. As it was, she remained a harmless outsider within a Chinese smuggling network.

There was something else that made Zemliakova cooperate with the Chinese men and made her invaluable to them: confidence.[42] Ms Zemliakova had known "Vasily" and "Farmer" for many years. She did not know their real names, but called them "Vasily" and "Farmer" like every other Russian. Ms Zemliakova first met them in 1920 or 1921 at the old central marketplace of Chita where she and her husband, Kuz'ma, used to buy vegetables from the grocery stalls of "Vasily" and "Farmer"—years before the authorities began to crush their and other Chinese businesses.[43] In late 1929, "Vasily" offered Zemliakova the risky courier job. According to the protocols, her husband Kuz'ma, a mid-rank official in the Transbaikal railway administration, might initially have helped them to purchase train tickets, but became increasingly worried and urged his wife to stay away from the risky business. But Zemliakova did not hesitate and accepted the offer. The prospect of easy money might have assuaged her doubts. Confidence in the Chinese seems to be no less important here: she had sometimes bought vegetables on credit from "Farmer" at the bazaar in the early 1920s. From then on, it seems that she trusted the two "almost Russian" men. People like "Vasily" and "Farmer," who lived and acted in different cultural spaces and commanded a strategic transcultural competence, could choose between cultural options. Not only did they speak Russian and dress like Russians. They also had a deep knowledge of Russian culture that enabled them to make friends with Russians who trusted them—a crucial precondition for creating a sophisticated transnational smuggling network. Many years of social confidence building and face-to-face relations certainly facilitated Zemliakova's cooperation with "Vasily" and "Farmer." Someone who called you "friend" ('*dluga*' [sic!]), let you pay another day, and appeared "almost as Russian" seemed safe to trust.[44]

Confidence in the two Chinese men did not save her from her own greed for money. The archival files to some extent dispel any ideas of Zemliakova's quest for

---

[42] There is surprisingly little research on confidence as an analytical category in history. Ute Frevert compiled a comprehensive overview on confidence in different contexts from medieval times to the present, ranging from politics over economy, civil society, military, family and friendship: Ute Frevert ed., *Vertrauen. Historische Annäherungen* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2003).

[43] GAChO f. R-1243, op. 1, d. 1360, l. 6.

[44] There are no explicit remarks about confidence as a precondition for smuggler networks in Frevert's book. Nevertheless, several factors that might influence degrees of reliance are mentioned in Frevert's valuable introduction to that volume: friendship, social confidence building, face-to-face relations, and renunciation of force. Ute Frevert, "Vertrauen. Eine historische Spurensuche," in *Vertrauen*, 7–66. Stefan Gorißen has analysed pre-industrial long-distance trade and identifies three dimensions that are crucial for confidence building among economic agents: first systematic confidence (*Systemvertrauen*), i.e. all agents involved agree on generally accepted norms, values and rules; second the social reputation of the economic agents,

an elite lifestyle. They simply provide information about a police search of Maria Zemliakova's flat, where OGPU officers found a golden ring, one golden brooch and some gold for a tooth filling worth 18 roubles.[45] She was not completely reckless or ignorant of the consequences. "Before she left [Chita] for the last time she promised it would be her last trip to make enough money for treatment at a health resort," her husband later recalled.[46] The documents remain silent about the legal outcome of the case, which for the purposes of this article is negligible.

What else does this particular case tell the historian? "Vasily" and "Farmer" were just one part of the chain, with many other people involved: a Chinese doctor and a businessman in Vladivostok, about whom the files provide very little information, Mr Li and Mr Kang of Chita, and probably others who remain unknown. But "Vasily" and "Farmer" were the key links in this chain, connecting Chinese and Russians who lacked the transcultural identities that were necessary for this border-crossing endeavour.

Scene change: the central figure of the second case study is the 36-year-old Arkadii Ianechek. The OGPU started investigations into this case one year after Zemliakova was arrested at Karymskaia station. Again it is about gold smuggling, and again there are Russians and Chinese involved. Once more, enduring contacts between subjects of the two countries seem to have helped to overcome boundaries of nationhood and ethnicity. The story's stage is Borzia, a sleepy place on the Transbaikal branch railway line, which connects Chita and the CER, one hour's train ride from the border.

OGPU investigators raided Ianechek's house on 17 June 1931. Neither Ianechek, nor his wife or their children were at home. Instead, the OGPU officers encountered four Chinese men at Ianechek's kitchen table. During their search, inspectors found various articles of silver and gold, and a gold wristwatch. Furthermore, they discovered two dresses, several suits, several metres of white silk, woollen pullovers, towels and plenty of tea—all of foreign origin. Ianechek assured them that the silver coins and the tsarist gold coinage were part of his private collection of old money, and that the children played with the Soviet silver money. According to Ianechek's claims, all of the valuables had been legally purchased. The clothes and fabric had all been used before, "some of them tens of times, others just once or twice."[47] The police priced the confiscated articles at over 2,000 roubles, and the investigating commission was in no doubt about Ianechek's contrabandist career. The inspectors accused him of the illicit importation of foreign fabrics and tea from Manzhouli, designated for the Russian consumer. In return, he purchased gold and

i.e. trustworthiness (*Vertrauenswürdigkeit*), and third personal confidence in the commercial partner. At least the latter two are applicable to Vasily's "Russian connection." See Stefan Gorißen, "Der Preis des Vertrauens. Unsicherheit, Institutionen und Rationalität im vorindustriellen Fernhandel," in *Vertrauen*, 90–118, particularly 112–5.

[45] GAChO f. R-1243, op. 1, d. 1360, ll. 7, 21.

[46] GAChO f. R-1243, op. 1, d. 1360, l. 4–4 obl., quotation on l. 4 obl.

[47] GAChO f. R-1243, op. 2, d. 8, ll. 7, 30–31, quotation on l. 30.

silver items in the USSR to sell abroad illegally.[48] Disappointed by the charges, Ianechek said:

> It is very sad that under these circumstances, Soviet citizens, whether they had returned home from abroad or lived on USSR territory for centuries, must fear confiscation of their belongings and have to keep every single customs receipt or cooperative book as long as they possess them, just to be on the safe side.[49]

His pleas did not convince the authorities. The documents with which he hoped to prove his ownership "could easily have been issued by a friend in exchange for a cup of tea."[50] Two Borzia citizens, the Chinese worker Wan Lichen and the cleaning lady Marfa Burtsova, acted as prosecution witnesses. Both incontrovertibly identified Ianechek as a smuggler. Ms Burtsova had recently observed how "some Chinese" took clothes stored at Ianechek's house in Borzia to transport them to the Belukha mine, where they exchanged the fabrics for gold and silver. Whenever the Chinese turned up at Ianechek's house, he chatted with them. According to Burtsova, the business had been going on for a year. The lady was sure that Ianechek was about to sell the gold abroad to speculators in Manzhouli.[51] Wan, married to a Russian, supported Burtsova's version in his statement. He added further allegations, claiming that Ianechek himself frequently sold contraband goods to people in the Borzia region. He received the imported fabrics from Chinese smugglers, who on their return smuggled out the gold and silver.[52]

How did it come about that Arkadii Ianechek had so many Chinese friends? Again, the biography is illuminating: Ianechek was not an ordinary Soviet citizen. Born in 1895 in Volynsk governorate (today's north-western Ukraine), father of four children, at the time of investigations he was working as an accounts clerk at Borzia's state bank branch office. But he had taken up this profession only shortly before. From 1907 to 1928 he served with the Russian and Soviet customs at different places in various positions. His longest post was at the customs office in Manzhouli, on Chinese territory, where he had worked for nine years.[53] This was plenty of time to make friends, as Ianechek himself inadvertently divulged:

> Of the Manzhouli merchants who were at my house I know only Xin Fanbin, I had neither seen the others before, nor do I have any contact with them. I met [Mr Xin] first when I lived in Manzhouli. In Manzhouli I always did business with him. But I've never sold silver and gold articles abroad and I never had the intention to sell the silver and gold items found during the search at my house.[54]

---

[48] For the investigation results, see ibid., ll. 51–53.

[49] Ibid., l. 31–31 obl.

[50] Ibid., l. 52.

[51] Ibid., l. 6.

[52] Ibid., l. 5.

[53] Ibid., ll. 7, 21.

[54] Xin Fanbin is transliterated as "Shin-Fon-Bin" in the file. Ibid., l. 7.

Xin also confessed under interrogation that he had close ties with Ianechek, and recalled that they had done business since 1922. His background also provides some insights. Like the majority of Chinese migrants in Manchuria, the 34-year-old Xin had his roots in a village of China's Shandong province.[55] After Ianechek had left Manzhouli for Borzia in July 1928, his ties to Xin Fanbin did not cease. In 1929, Ianechek hosted Xin's brother when the latter was on his way to Moscow.[56] It was also not Xin Fanbin's first journey abroad. Between 1928 and 1930 he had travelled to Moscow, Ekaterinoslavl, Kamenets-Podol'sk, and other cities in the USSR, where he sold various articles on the streets. When asked by the Soviet officials what he and the three other Chinese men were doing in Ianechek's house in Borzia, Mr Xin said, in fluent Russian, that they were on their way to the west of China to seek work. They intended to reach Xinjiang on transit through the USSR. Travelling on a shoestring budget, they decided to first only buy tickets to Borzia and stop for a flying visit to their "good friend" [*khoroshii znakomy*] Arkadii Ianechek. Mr Xin and his friends could not afford to buy a ticket for the whole trip to the west of China.[57]

The smuggling file leaves many questions unanswered. It does not disclose what business Xin and Ianechek were involved in during the "golden twenties" in Manzhouli—we must bear in mind that Ianechek was officially employed by the USSR customs service. It further seems impossible to assess whether the contemporary charges were true or false. Ianechek's and Xin's alibis both sound plausible, as do the charges and testimonies. For the purpose of this article, any legal ascertainment of the truth is once again secondary. The essential matter is that the documents reveal close contacts between Chinese and Russians, in which cultural barriers and national feelings are not evident. Reading these files, one could almost forget that in the year of 1929, China and the Soviet Union were at war—with Manzhouli as the main battlefield.

Compared to the first case and with regard to the concept of "transculturalism," both Ianechek and Xin had lived in different cultural spaces. Ianechek had worked for almost a decade as a customs officer in Manzhouli, a border city that was on Chinese territory but that had an equal share of Chinese and Russians. His job as customs inspector exposed him to Chinese people every day. The archives do not reveal whether he spoke any Chinese or had a Chinese nickname. Nevertheless, Arkadii Ianechek, in contrast to Maria Zemliakova, certainly had some strategic transcultural competence that he could summon for his smuggling trade. Xin Fanbin's ties with Russian culture were similarly close. For several years he had travelled the USSR to trade on Soviet black markets. Both Xin and Ianechek had overlapping ways of life and a profound knowledge of the "other" culture that enabled them, whenever needed, to make informed choices between cultural options.

[55] Ibid., l. 21.

[56] Ibid., l. 7.

[57] Ibid., l. 21.

## Conclusion

The studied cases offer a new perspective on the significance of smuggling along the Sino-Soviet border. Contraband trade can be of not only economic interest to historians. From smuggling networks, and from smuggler's careers and biographies, historians can also explore transcultural identities and interethnic contacts in border regions.

Smuggling along the border to China was certainly not a new phenomenon. What had changed in the late 1920s was the nature of smuggling when, due to international confrontations, the control of the border had become relatively tight. By 1930, it was no longer the ordinary train passenger or gold mine worker who smuggled. More sophisticated smuggling networks emerged and new strategies of contraband trade were implemented. By that time, it becomes apparent how the transfer of commodities was connected with smugglers' transcultural identities.

What is the significance of these two particular case studies? Did "Farmer" and "Vasily" have transcultural identities? Did they just use their transcultural identities to conduct illegal trade? What about Arkadii Ianechek, the former customs officer? Did he develop a transcultural identity, just because he traded with the Chinese? Historians must speculate to a certain extent, because the sources do not reveal how people like "Vasily" from China and Mr Ianechek defined *themselves*. Is it, then, appropriate to make generalisations based on the "Vasily" case in Chita and the "Ianechek" case in Borzia? Of course, Transbaikalian gold was not always smuggled via Vladivostok into China. The shortest route by train via Manzhouli or by boat across the Argun border river—as in the "Ianechek" case—seems to have been more common. Much of the gold, which disappeared over time, might also have ended up hidden under pillows or in hatboxes in Soviet homes. However, transcultural characters such as "Farmer" or "Vasily" can often be found in archival documents dating from around 1930. For this reason the two sources are illuminating.

The case studies of both Ianechek and "Vasily" reveal several things: First, they show how Sino-Soviet smuggling networks were established through long-term social and economic contacts. As this text has shown, smugglers had often spent years in contact zones meeting Russians and Chinese before they came to be involved in complex contraband activities. Arkadii Ianechek had worked for the Soviet customs in a Chinese city. Xin Fanbin as well as the two Chinese men, "Farmer" and "Vasily," had done business in bazaars in the Soviet Union before they set up smuggling operations. Their major co-conspirators were old friends and customers. Ianechek as well as "Farmer" and "Vasily" had known their collaborators for several years before they engaged in smuggling. These ties transformed into contraband networks in which all of the agents benefited from a transnational symbiosis. Furthermore, the "Vasily" case exemplifies how Russians such as Maria Zemliakova were utilised as "front men" coming from the Soviet hinterland. It demonstrates how ordinary Russians cooperated with Chinese smugglers, who often acted behind the scenes. Another crucial skill that

occasionally enabled people to become involved in smuggling, illustrated by the “Ianechek” case, is that of a certain professional connection, such as a career as customs officer.

Certain other patterns are obvious: Both examples suggest that smugglers as a social group working in a complex context can be defined as people who need to have special skills that develop from transcultural biographies. A striking similarity in the studied cases is that Chinese people who had lived for a long time in Russia and the Soviet Union were involved in smuggling. These people spoke Russian well and were acquainted with Russian culture. The case studies illustrate the integration of Chinese migrants into Russian, later Soviet society. What makes the two cases different is the fact that Arkadii Ianechek, although he had spent 9 years in a multicultural city on Chinese soil, had most likely not learned to speak Chinese beyond a basic pidgin vocabulary. Not all of the people participating in these networks had a migrant past. Nevertheless, because of continuing contacts to Chinese he seems to have had a certain understanding of the Chinese mentality, and got along well with Chinese people. One might similarly call “Farmer,” “Vasily” *and* Ianechek “experts” with transcultural identities. Studying these biographies, it becomes clear that smugglers used their transcultural competences strategically for economic purposes. Whether smuggling created transcultural identities, or transculturality was a precondition to becoming a successful smuggler remains open to debate. A transcultural background was certainly a precondition for successful smuggling. On the other hand, interactions in contraband networks in return reinforced transcultural skills.

**Acknowledgement** I would like to thank Frank Grüner, Madeleine Herren, Karl Schlögel and Mariko Tamanoi for comments and criticism on various aspects of this article.

http://www.springer.com/978-3-319-02047-1

Entangled Histories
The Transcultural Past of Northeast China
(Eds.)D. Ben-Canaan; F. Grüner; I. Prodöhl
2014, VIII, 238 p. 10 illus., 1 illus. in color., Softcover
ISBN: 978-3-319-02047-1