

Billé, Franck and Caroline Humphrey. *On the Edge: Life along the Russia-China Border*. Cambridge, MA & London, UK: Harvard University Press, 2021. xiii + 376 pages.

On the Edge is a comprehensive study of the geography, history, culture, and economy in the Russia-China borderlands. Through juxtaposed comparative lenses, Billé and Humphrey presented a panoramic landscape that showcases primarily the disparate natural and cultural tapestries on each side of the border, but also some discernable signs of cross-border integration. Drawing from their rich field observations and interviews, Billé and Humphrey unravel the varied interpretations of national interests that register the political tides of Moscow and Beijing, focusing on the Russia-China borderlands.

Billé and Humphrey distinguished the operational differences in the similarly centralized political systems in Russia and China. In the hyper-centralized and personalized Russian system, Moscow extends direct rule to the peripheries leaving little room for flexibility short of a top-down extension of Moscow's will. By comparison, the Chinese system is nestled in an extensive bureaucratic system. While Beijing controls the policy decisions, it does not necessarily have full control over how the policies are implemented away from Beijing, therefore leaving sufficient possibilities for local flexibility and ingenuity, especially in the remote peripheries.

Billé and Humphrey noted that following the Soviet Union's devolution in the early 1990s, the close-down of the military bases, national factories, and research facilities in its borderlands resulted in the loss of government subsidies that once sustained the border communities. Responding to such dramatic economic deterioration is the rapid population exodus from the borderlands to western Russia. Those that remained, largely the indigenous populations, are left with few alternatives. Many begin to explore new ways to sustain themselves, leading to the mushrooming of illicit underground cross-border economic endeavor. This is made possible by the concurrent economic take-off in China that has rippled through its

border towns. Russian consumers are pursued as a source of their economic growth. In addition, the Chinese are hungry for the rich resources of fauna, flora, minerals, gemstones in Siberia. Before Moscow could recover full control over its border trades with China, the locals have already developed informal networks of cross-border trades as means to subsidize their livelihood outside the purview of the Russian official channels.

Billé and Humphrey observed that cross-border exchange has resulted in some integration, but most such signs tend to be superficial rather than substantial. While the economic wellbeing of Russian border towns begins to intertwine with those in China, the residents continue to hold a West-oriented Russian attitude of cultural superiority against the Chinese. Marriages between Russians and Chinese are rare and occur only occasionally for economic convenience or other practical purposes. Even people with the same heritage backgrounds living on different sides of the border find themselves more different than similar as their cultural identities are forged by the political history in their domicile countries. In Russia, government sponsored infusion of Russians to the borderlands lasted until the 1990s, resulting in more fluid identities among the border ethnics. In China, government sponsored designations of ethnic statuses since the 1950s have yielded more stable cultural identities among its border ethnics. Recent attempts in transnationalism for some cross-border ethnic groups are limited to gatherings for annual cultural events or festive celebrations.

Russians' distrust against the Chinese and their contempt for the rapid vertical expansion in China's border towns are often mixed with their own self-aggrandizing nostalgic traditions of gridiron urban design and horizontal development. Moscow's deeply rooted mentality of borderlands as a manifest of national security concern continues to dominate its borderland development or rather lack of development, therefor lack of any significant transportation

infrastructure that would facilitate efficient interaction with China. Thus the largely wilderness Russian border landscape with little urban development and a very small population is in stark contrast to China's border landscape where thirteen times more population are creating bustling urban life and economic growth. Yet China's dense transportation trunklines stop abruptly at its northern border because of Moscow's cold shoulder.

China's border towns customarily feature Russian cultural symbols prominently in pronounced public display and in their commodities, whereas Russia's border towns make no similar attempt. The contrast is especially sharp on the border riverfronts. China's riverfront is developed to actively promote and advertise to attract the Russians, whereas Russia's riverfront remains largely unchanged as if stuck in the Soviet era. While the unfounded fear of a Chinese influx to take over Siberia appears to have paralyzed the Russians, the Chinese have shown no particular interest in long-term residence in the uninviting Siberia, most are happy just as transients. While the Russians are burdened by anxiety that China would make Russia its resource appendage, China, instead, is avidly pursuing Xi's Belt and Road Initiatives to grow its global market and resource supplies, including those in Russia.

Although China's border towns attribute their initial growth to Russian consumers, they have since reoriented their economic base to their own consumers as China has become the economic big brother. The weak Russian border consumer base has lost its appeal. Taking advantage of the frontier locations, China's border towns are poised as exotically foreign tapping China's strong southern and eastern consumer base. In theme park style, Russian culture villages, commodities, museums, and restaurants have created a strong border industry catering to the exotic craving Chinese consumers as Russian border towns become less relevant to their economic growth.

On the Edge is Billé and Humphrey's attempt to bridge some gaps in the paucity of information on the realities of Russia-China borders. It compares the manifested Russian and Chinese state systems through meticulous depiction of the lived realities, thus a valuable addition to border studies. While the comprehensive nature of this study makes it a challenge to the general public, those interested in Russia-China borderlands will surely find it a valuable resource.

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