

Q & A

Caroline Humphrey and Franck Billé on the Unique China-Russia Borderlands

The anthropologists describe the lack of physical bridge building, the idea of the "far east" in the Russian imagination, Putin's pivot to Asia, and the responsibility of life at the border.

BY ANDREW PEAPLE — JANUARY 2, 2022

Caroline Humphrey and Franck Billé are leading anthropologists who have spent years studying the border between Russia and China, a 2,600 mile-stretch that mostly follows the great Amur River. Their book, [On the Edge: Life Along the Russia-China Border](#), describes how the regions on either side have developed in the context of the dramatic political and economic changes both countries have undergone in recent years. The book also takes a close look at the human relations — and separations — along the border, asking what they tell us about how these two great countries operate. Caroline Humphrey is a fellow of King's College at the University of Cambridge, and founder of the university's Mongolia and Inner Asia Studies Unit. Franck Billé is program director at the Tang Center for Silk Road Studies at the University of California, Berkeley.



Caroline Humphrey.
Illustration by Lauren Crow

Q: Relations between the Russian and Chinese governments appear to have been getting closer in recent years, and between President Putin and President Xi in particular. Yet the land border between the two countries has received comparatively little attention. Could you start by explaining why you decided to focus on this area of the Russia-China relationship?

Franck Billé: As anthropologists, we are always interested in life stories. We want to see what is happening in people's lives. We always hear stories about the relationship between the two countries at the highest level, in Moscow and Beijing: yet these things can change very quickly, if, say, you have a different person as head of state who is going to make decisions. But things move much more slowly when you look at the cultural habits of the people on the ground, so we wanted to see what was happening at the border. Also, the border is a place where you

have a direct line of engagement between the two populations. So this was a very unique place to really look at what's happening between Russian and Chinese people, and to sense how things might be changing.

Caroline Humphrey: Because it's a border where these two great empires rub up against each other, it's very revealing of the different structures inside the respective countries. So you get this different organization of space, a different attitude to borders themselves. These kinds of spatial, administrative things are very evident at the border.

Despite this apparent closeness between the leaders currently, there is a continuing lack of closeness on the ground, symbolized by the lack of physical bridges between Russia and China, over the Amur River, which forms the border. Can you explain why you find this inability to agree on physical bridge building to be so revealing?

Humphrey: While the border runs along the Amur river, it doesn't go along the middle of it — it goes where the deepest channel is, which is usual in international agreements on riverine borders. In practice, the border is very often closer to the Russian bank, but it changes, so it's a bit difficult to handle. And one of the things about these bridges is that the Chinese have been much keener to build them than the Russians; they're much more interested in expanding outwards. The Chinese have agreed with the Russians that they would each build bridges up to the edge of their sovereignty. And because the deepest channel was mostly closer to Russia, this meant that the Chinese span on their side was longer than the Russian one. So you had years that went by with these weird bridges that were half built. And they were sitting out there built from the Chinese side, looming into the middle of the river. And then there was this little gap on the Russian side, which is very strange and symbolic.



Franck Billé.
Courtesy of Franck Billé

We did wonder what this delay tells us about Russia, and it was, I think, due to several things: One is the Russian obsession with security. They're really scared on several fronts, by which I mean the security services. Firstly, in the purely military sense, they want to prevent the possibility of Chinese invasion of Russia. Secondly, they don't like the idea of mass Chinese migration into the great empty spaces of the Russian Far East; they really don't like that. And thirdly, in the case of one of these bridges, a railway bridge going directly from a mine in Russia into China, they were a bit scared that if they built this bridge, the Chinese would use it as an advanced construction into Russia, and they'd lose sovereignty so that the Chinese would come to dominate this mine, and they'd be extracting stuff and taking it straight back into China.

On the Chinese side, you have a much more flexible economic system, or you did until recently, and so the companies in China were quite free, unlike the Russian ones, to build their bit of a bridge. And we describe in the book the sort of crazy mix-ups on the Russian side where things fell apart. And a further reason we focus on bridges is because they're so symbolic: everybody knows and can imagine what a bridge does: it is a built representation of contact-making between two sides, and the fact that they hadn't been built until recently and are still not operative, I think, is very indicative.

So just to clarify that there are some that have been built now, but they're still not actually working as bridges.

Humphrey: That's right. One of them is a road and rail bridge that links two cities, which are sitting on either side of the river. But they haven't actually built the bridge anywhere near these cities; it's a good 30 or 40 miles away. It's not designed to be convenient to the population. It's not really designed to have the Russians and Chinese in these two cities actually whizzing backwards and forwards.

What has the Far East traditionally meant to



The Tongjiang-Nizhneleninskoye Railway Bridge. Left unfinished for seven years, the Russian section was finally completed this year, allowing the bridge to soon open to railway traffic. *Credit: Rivers Without Boundaries*

Russia, and how have successive regimes in Moscow sought to control and develop the region?

Billé: This has been an interesting place in the Russian psyche. On the one hand, it was a place of exploration, of riches, of renewal. There's a similarity between the idea of the "far east" in the imagination of Russia, and that of the far west in the United States, for example, when Russians moved east looking for fur and gold and these kinds of things. It was a space that was imagined as holding, in a way, the future of Russia.

At the same time it's a place that is geographically difficult to access, with a very harsh climate. It's difficult to build roads, because of the permafrost. It's not a place like California, so if you look at the parallel between the U.S. and Russia, it's a different kind of land. And so it has been an interesting juncture between something that represents the future of the country, with very valuable places that countries like China might also be interested in having. But it's also a place that was only populated during the Soviet times, through incentives, with people getting higher salaries [to move there], which then evaporated after the end of the Soviet Union. It's a place that has hemorrhaged a lot of its population. It's kind of empty — there's only 5 million people in the whole Russian Far East, and most of the population is living further south, close to the Chinese border.

And on the Chinese side, how is their northeastern region seen and how has Beijing looked to develop it, particularly in recent years?

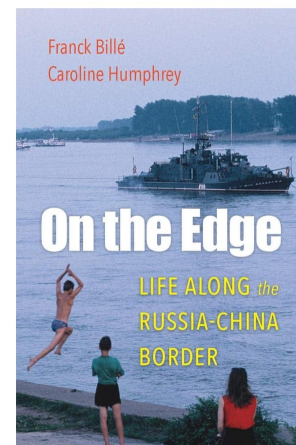
Billé: So again, there's been a change on the Chinese side. For a long time, it was also a space that was sparsely populated. It is becoming more populated now, as people move towards the edge of the country, because there is space. There are opportunities there, especially since the border opened up. Several cities on the border have mushroomed and developed through exchange with Russia.

But it's also a space that feels very far from the center. That's one of the reasons why we wanted to study that border. It's a border that's very different from any other borders. Normally, a border would be a space where you would have overlaps in terms of culture and linguistics. If you think of a place like the U.S.-Mexico border, which is very fraught and not exactly a line that's easy to cross: Yet there are still a lot of Spanish speakers on the U.S. side, there's a lot of Spanish culture.

There is nothing like that on the Russia-China border, because it was sparsely populated, then it was closed, and then people moved close to it. So you have this really hard line between the two sides, which makes it really, really interesting for us as anthropologists.

Things are changing. On the Chinese side, there is more engagement, there is more willingness to go towards the border, in order to trade and to use that land. On the Russian side, there was a sense that you had to populate the border in order to hold the territory, that you needed to have a presence; you still have the sense of that. But there are fewer people who are willing to go and move there. A lot of the people who live in the region would like to go elsewhere. So that's why there is this kind of a misalignment between the two sides.

There seems to be an attitude on the Russian side that is more defensive in nature, whereas on the Chinese side, there's more of a preparedness to see this area as an economic opportunity.



Billé and Humphrey are the authors of *On the Edge: Life Along the Russia-China Border* (2021), published last month.
Credit: [Harvard University Press](#)

Billé: Exactly. And I think that goes a long way to explain the current feelings that the local people have in that region.

Can you explain how the different governing approaches of Russia and China manifest themselves along this border area? I'm thinking of the contrast you draw between Russia's vertical approach to government and the more concentric circles of government that operate in China?

Humphrey: On the Russian side, you do have this fantastically centric, focused administrative system in which really a lot depends on the President himself and his apparatus, that then has lines going out to the edge. And that contrasts with the Chinese system. It's changing a bit right now, but it has been much more dispersed, and purposefully so. They decided to give a lot of freedom to local municipalities and local governments and city arrangements and companies, so that they would be much freer to operate.

“ **If you think of a place like the U.S.-Mexico border, which is very fraught and not exactly a line that's easy to cross: Yet there are still a lot of Spanish speakers on the U.S. side, there's a lot of Spanish culture. There is nothing like that on the Russia-China border, because it was sparsely populated, then it was closed, and then people moved close to it.** ”

Another governing aspect is that Russia has a security zone all the way along the border, which can be as little as five kilometres wide — a little ribbon along the border — and can stretch to 100 kilometres or more in width. That's an area which nobody can go into, even Russian citizens, without being given permission. The people living in those areas can't initiate very much because they're ruled directly by the FSB, the Security Bureau from Moscow. They're not ruled locally. That's another thing that keeps the Russian side in a frozen state a lot of the time.

So on the Russian side, any plans for development can get stuck anywhere along that hierarchy running from Moscow. Whereas in China, there are competing institutions, local governments and companies, and between them, development has emerged over the years in less of a top-down way...

Humphrey: Yes, that's right. It remains to be seen how that might be changing now, because Xi Jinping is definitely engaging in a tightening up of everything, and he's using the anti-corruption drive to put a halter around the necks of lots of localities. But it's probably still the case that in China, the local governors and people like that have more leeway than they do in Russia.

Billé: The fact that the cities in China have more leeway to develop is something that's helped them a great deal. Places like Manzhouli have wanted to brand themselves in a particular way. And they were able to do that. They were able to design themselves first as cities of exchange with the other side. Then, when it became more difficult for the Russians to come and trade in the border cities, they then changed their branding strategy to a more domestic one. They were able to do that because they had the space to do so; they were not directly dependent on the capital, giving them their orders.

We don't want to paint a picture that Russians are completely under the rule of Moscow and unwilling participants. Even though it's difficult for a lot of the people who live in these zones to trade or to do anything; a lot of them feel they live in a special place, because they feel they're guarding the country. They live in zones that are symbolically very important, because they are the border, so they have this responsibility. It's not just that Moscow is deciding something and people obey, they're also engaged in it.

One of the fascinating things that we've lived through over the last 30 to 40 years is that both of these great countries have been emerging from socialist systems and developing their own forms of capitalism. What did studying this border region teach you about the different economic paths that Russia and China have been on?

Humphrey: They both still have capitalism of a markedly post-socialist kind. In other words, in both countries, the major companies are very closely related to the state, perhaps particularly in Russia. And maybe the main difference in terms of how capitalism works in the two countries is what happens outside of that. In Russia, they greatly encourage enormous companies, like Rosneft and other oil and gas companies, and give them tax breaks and so on. And they very much leave the rest to their own devices, and this means that small companies and individual people who might want to do business, have to invent ways of doing that. And so there's a lot more informal stuff going on in Russia, and also a lot more poverty because a lot of people who can't hack it are left bereft.

Whereas in China, there are very strong, centrally organized policies for the alleviation of poverty and to manage migrants who are leaving rural areas and coming to the cities. It's not completely managed, but they have a much more rule bound situation than in Russia. There's also a thing they call ecological migration. One of the effects of this is to move whole populations away into some other place. This has been very harmful in a way to local cultures and indigenous peoples. But it does mean that in terms of the economy, they're a far more equal society in China.

Billé: There's also some different attitudes towards making money and doing business. There seems to be more willingness in China to trade than in Russia. Russians will sometimes say, "Oh, we're not really good at business. We don't have the mind for it." It is very interesting for us to try and see where that attitude might be coming from. We see Chinese businesses taking root in parts of Russia, where Russians would say it is difficult to do business. There seems to be less cultural reluctance in China to do that whereas in Russia, there's a sense that business goes against a certain morality.

Humphrey: I completely agree with that. There's a sense in Russia that trading is a slightly dirty business, that people are never going to do it fairly and that you're all going to be taken advantage of. And that if you fall on hard times and you have to go to sell stuff in the market, it's lowering your status. I don't think there's anything like that in China: if you want to make money there, it's good.

We tend to associate border areas, often, with corruption, black markets, and so on. Did you find much of that on either side of the border?

Humphrey: Yes [*laughs*]. There's of course oil and gas flowing out of Russia into China, which I think has a minimal effect on the local population, because it just flows through the pipelines, and they don't see anything of it, and they don't often work in these companies. But at the level of local enterprise, a very large amount of it is definitely what you would call informal and some of it is illegal, I think. And one reason for this is that there is considerable poverty, especially on the Russian side, and so people are seeking what they can to make money by selling it to China. This would vary from things like tearing up old railway sleepers, or selling off bits of disused army bases, or logging in the forests without getting the right permission; fishing, hunting, digging up ginseng roots to sell in China; medicinal herbs, because China has a huge pharmaceutical industry based on medicinal herbs, some of which

BIO AT A GLANCE

NAME	Professor Dame Caroline Humphrey
AGE	78
BIRTHPLACE	London, UK
CURRENT POSITION	Fellow, King's College, University of Cambridge
PERSONAL LIFE	Married to Professor Lord Martin Rees

is traditional Chinese medicine and some of which feeds into regular medicine. A lot of the ingredients for this come from Russia; whole villages will go off to pick whatever plant it is and sell it to China.

BIO AT A GLANCE	
NAME	Franck Billé
AGE	53
BIRTHPLACE	Brest, France
CURRENT POSITION	Program Director, Tang Center for Silk Road Studies at the University of California, Berkeley
PERSONAL LIFE	Married to Valerio, a UX designer

One of the very interesting examples of this is the Jade trade. Jade, of course, is this fantastically valuable stone that's really central to Chinese culture. But in Russia, it's called nephrite, and it has no particular value. Nobody there thought much about it until some indigenous people, one of whom was married to a Chinese woman, realized that "Oh, my God, we could actually be selling this stuff." And so in the 1990s, this huge

bonanza of mining for nephrite/Jade happened across the border in Russia. It became a massive, massive thing and brought in a great proportion of the income of one of the main areas along this border.

But then, of course, what happened is that the security people moved in, and they said all of this is illegal. And they inserted their own company, managed or related to the security services. That sort of thing has happened quite a lot along this border.

Putin has talked about pivoting Russia's focus towards Asia. To what extent do you see the results of that in the region at the moment?

Billé: With these big declarations, it takes quite a bit of time before they percolate down into the way people think of the other side. I was struck by the difference in the way in which the Russian people were talking about China before and after the war in Crimea. That seems to have energized people in some way. People would tell me, "Oh, there's a great thing that we are taking Crimea back." And there was a lot of anger towards the west, and more willingness to say, maybe we're more similar to the Chinese. So there's actually quite a bit of a purchase in these big declarations, but not if they're just empty. Because of the tension that episode created with Europe and America, I think it pushed people towards feeling more affinity towards China. Young people especially were telling me that "We are actually quite similar to the Chinese in terms of values."

“ I was struck by the difference in the way in which the Russian people were talking about China before and after the war in Crimea... People would tell me, “Oh, there’s a great thing that we are taking Crimea back.” And there was a lot of anger towards the west, and more willingness to say, maybe we’re more similar to the Chinese. ”

On the other hand, it's not the first time the Russian government has made these big declarations that they are moving towards Asia. Very often, not much comes out of it because it tends to be coming from a place of tension with the West. The West has always been the main cultural model. It's really striking when you're in a place like Blagoveshchensk, [a Russian town] just on the border... The music you hear, the films that are in the movie theaters or on TV, if it's not Russian, it's Western. There's hardly any kind of cultural engagement with China; you don't find Chinese books. Even though people learn Chinese, it seems more in a pragmatic way. If there's any kind of foreign culture that is idealized — and also hated — it would be Western culture. They're not trying to emulate Chinese culture. So there are limits in terms of this pivot to the east.

When you look at the historical relations between Russia and China, it does seem that Russians have, to an extent, looked down upon their neighbor. Your book describes how China's rapid economic rise in the last few years has complicated that relationship pattern. Does that manifest itself when you travel to this region?

Billé: When we started this project, I was particularly interested in the cities of Heihe [a Chinese city] and Blagoveshchensk, because they are so close to each other. I wanted to see how Russians were responding to the way the city on the other side was transforming from a village into a proper city. And I wanted to see whether there was a shift in terms of how Chinese were being seen by Russians.

What I found is that these changes mostly continue to be accommodated within the culturally entrenched idea of the other. People would look at Heihe as a fake, they would say, "That's not a real development." They would still assume that the Chinese were poor, that it was just a facade. These things, of course, are different, depending on who you talk to. If you talk to Russians who have travelled to other parts of China, where they've seen Beijing or Shanghai, then they see that it's not a facade, that it is actually really happening, and these cities are really modern in the Russian understanding of the term.

But there's still a lot of reluctance. Russians would still treat Chinese — especially Chinese middlemen and the Chinese living in Heihe, which is not a particularly rich city — in a derogatory fashion using the pronouns like 'ty' (like the French 'tu'), very informal, rather than the more polite form of 'you'. It's something they would not do if they were talking to Europeans, for instance. Not everybody does that, but it's something that you definitely see quite a lot. So this is gonna take some time to change.

You also write in that chapter on these two cities that in Blagoveshchensk there is a complicated interplay going on. There's a mimicking almost of what's happening on the Chinese side of the river. Can you explain that?

Billé: Early on in the research, Russians from Blagoveshchensk would just say, "That's fake, all these lights on the buildings [in Heihe]; it's just for show, they don't mean anything." They didn't see that as a real index of development and modernity, the way the Chinese would. But as I returned to the city after several years, I saw that some of the things that they had looked down upon or criticized had been taken on by the Russians.

So they also started having lights on the buildings, framing their contours at night. Part of the reason is the lights are an example of something you see and are confronted with all the time. Being so far from the capital, or from other big cities, and being so close to China, means you get influenced by Chinese models of modernity. Also, because you import building materials directly from China, you tend to import certain things that take on Chinese characteristics. Even though you might not register consciously, it is something that you see all the time and then you build it yourself. So there is a blurring of the big differences that you're struck by the first time you go there. As you get closer to the details, you'll see quite a lot of blurring of differences and mimicry going on.

Humphrey: The changing Chinese attitude towards Russia and Russians is also quite important in this relationship. The whole idea that China is an ancient civilization, with its own rules of etiquette, and politeness and good behaviour, that's been very much emphasized by the Chinese government, and it's been taken up by the people on the borderlands. And so the very people who are dealing with and trading with the Russians, who have tended to

MISCELLANEA

NAME	Caroline Humphrey
BOOK REC	The Palace of Dreams by Ismail Kadare
FAVORITE MUSIC	Classical
FAVORITE FILM	Too many to say
PERSONAL HEROES	Pianist Sviatoslav Richter (dead) and my husband Martin (alive)

treat them slightly with disrespect, are now claiming to be the civilized ones. And so you get a tension there, with Chinese people who think they're not being treated appropriately by Russians. And they don't like the fact that Russian habits are more rowdy — I mean, there's a lot of drinking in Russia. Women don't behave in the same way in Russia as they do in China. There are tensions of that kind, where each side sees themselves as a civilization that's superior to the other.

Billé: It's also evident in the way they trade. The Chinese in Heihe and border cities tend to be less polite than Chinese traders elsewhere, and less willing to bargain. They've kind of taken on that Russian kind of roughness in terms of the way they trade. I was quite shocked by seeing how some of the Chinese traders in Blagoveshchensk would talk to the customers; it was something I'd never seen in China. They're very rude to them. 'That's the price, and that's it. If you don't like it go away'... I've never seen that in China. And so there's another kind of blurring of differences there.

Caroline, I wanted to ask you about the island of Heixiazi which lies in the middle of the Amur River, between the two countries, with both countries having their areas of jurisdiction on the island. What was it about that island that interested you?

Humphrey: That island is a totally fascinating place. It's this waterlogged, marshy, nowhere. But because of where it's situated, this long, banana-shaped place in the middle of the river has become a subject of a lot of contention. Both sides claimed it initially, because they like to think of the border as being on the other side of the river from themselves, so anything in the middle of the river belongs to them. So for years, there was a sort of conflict over these islands. And as you know, Russia and China fought a war in the 1960s, over another island, down the river.

Under Gorbachev, the Russians decided that they really had to settle these border disputes. In the end, this island was divided, half and half between Russia and China. What's so fascinating is to see how the two sides of this island were treated so differently. The Russians had built an army camp on their side — again, they are always conscious of security. But the army left, and so you got a remnant population that had been there supporting the island, the army camp, a little collective farm, and lots of ruins of all the buildings.

And on the Chinese side, there had been some indigenous fishermen, but no one living there very much. They decided to involve their bit of the island in the big ecological projects they had along that bit of the river, so they turned it into a kind of nature reserve that was also a kind of tourist attraction. So they had floods of tourists. And they built all sorts of walkways and bird-watching platforms and built a bridge to it and so forth.

So you've got this massive difference on the two sides, with quite a lot of development on the Chinese side, even though it was a nature reserve, and the Russian side languishing in nothingness more or less. Meanwhile, the Russians in the city nearby Khabarovsk, concocting amazing plans for how they were going to develop this island, to turn it into a hi-tech city and so forth. None of these plans happened, of course. So that whole history, which I've only been able to sketch in, is just really fascinating because it shows the difference in the ways the two places work.

Right now they're both investing in the symbolic significance of this place. So the Chinese have built a big pagoda, representing Chinese civilization and a huge, monumental, golden statue of a Chinese character. And the Russians have built a little Christian Orthodox



A Chinese propaganda poster from 1969-1970 that reads: "Zhenbao Island will not be encroached upon." The PRC and USSR fought a seven-month long undeclared military conflict near the island in 1969, also known as Damansky in Russian. Credit: chinese-posters.net

chapel: it sits there and it's got no congregation, because it's not even near the little remnant village that's on the island. The chapel is dedicated to a war hero, and they bring over soldiers to worship there. So you occasionally get these soldiers queuing up and worshipping at this tiny little chapel. And on the Chinese side, you get the exhibition of Chinese civilization, because this pagoda is covered in wonderful carvings, with mythical animals and that kind of thing. So in that small space, you get the concentration of what the two cultures think is valuable to them.

Can we talk about the indigenous peoples in this area? What do you mean by indigenous peoples in the book, and secondly, can you talk about how those minorities have bonded across the border in some cases in recent years?

Humphrey: We use the word indigenous for all the people whose ancestors were living in that area before the Russians and Chinese came. It's a rather difficult word to use, because all of these people were pretty nomadic, and they were moving around. And some of them don't like the word indigenous, because it suggests somehow that they're tribal and exotic and primitive, and so on. They see themselves as absolutely legitimate, bona fide people of the area. So they don't particularly like the label. We use it to differentiate them from the mass of Han Chinese and Slavic Russians who came to live in the area later.

MISCELLANEA	
NAME	Franck Billé
BOOK REC	<i>The City & The City</i> by China Miéville (but Ismail Kadare's <i>Palace of Dreams</i> is another big favorite!)
FAVORITE MUSIC	Eclectic, but partial to late 70s disco
FAVORITE FILM	<i>Chungking Express</i> by Wong Kar-Wai

Some of these groups have become very tiny in number, while some of them are really large, with tens of thousands of members. What we found was a big difference in the extent to which they want to make contact with the people of their own ethnicity on the other side of the border.

In the end, we came to the view that what really mattered here was history. The groups that are conscious of their history and really make an effort to cultivate it — particularly those who have long-standing written traditions, chronicles and genealogies from before the border — have really been reviving that recently, and been setting up all kinds of mutual visits, festivals and religious pilgrimages.

Whereas some of the other groups that were less conscious of history have been far less interested in visiting people on the other side and have practically forgotten about them. In at least one case that we document, they actually now think they're different people, and they have a different name for the people on the other side. They say, "Well, they're not us, you know, they're really separate."

The larger groupings that you talk about, the ones that are more conscious of their history as an ethnicity... Where those groups have come together across the border, how has that gone down with the authorities in China?

Humphrey: China actually forbids these great meetings, because these festivals can bring in tens of thousands of people, they are big and popular, and China has altogether forbidden them on its territory. But it doesn't prevent people who live in China from going to gatherings that are being held in Russia or in Mongolia. Mongolia is a key element in all of this because these larger peoples tend to be of Mongolian cultural background. In Russia, they don't particularly like it either because it's not organized by the state. It's something separate that people locally get up and do themselves. And they're not particularly keen either on the idea that it links all these people in Mongolia and China with their own people. They haven't forbidden them, but they tried to turn it into an old Soviet idea of internationalism. They say, okay, these people are going to meet up, but don't forget that there are Ukrainians who migrated here, there are some Armenians down the road, or whatever. They try to throw in all kinds of people who actually do not have the ethnicity. And they try

to dominate it by making sure that the famous politicians who attend make long, boring speeches. They try to officialize it and rationalize it in a sort of Russian ‘mother of all the nationalities’ idea.

You’ve talked about some of the lingering mutual suspicions that the Russians and the Chinese have of each other. Nevertheless, do you find examples of close individual-to-individual interactions, intermarriage and so on?

Billé: There are some, of course, but not as much as we might expect, especially in terms of intermarriages, there’s really not so many of them. What we were struck by was the gender composition of these marriages: They tend to be between Russian women and Chinese men. And interestingly enough, that’s something that we see historically as well. There’s actually very few marriages between Chinese women and Russian men. It’s something that a number of scholars have also wondered about, trying to work out why that might be. People in the region would say, it’s because of the gender ratio, that there are more Russian women available than Russian men. It also seems to be tied to certain gender ideologies. The way Russians would describe the Chinese, for instance, they will say that the Chinese men are very hardworking and reliable, they help at home, they fully participate in domestic life. And they would say the Chinese women were capricious and difficult, that’s the image that they had.

On the Chinese side, there’s the idea that Russian men are drunk, but Russian women are beautiful. So there’s all these images of the ‘other’ that shapes relationships, I think.

There are friendships, especially if people speak each other’s respective languages. That’s something that’s also changing, with more and more Russians learning Chinese. There’s also a lot of Chinese who know Russian. So that definitely helps. But there’s some cultural stereotypes that may hinder friendship. On the Russian side, we hear sometimes that the Chinese are too business-minded, that they privilege the practicality of the exchange rather than the friendship aspect.

Because the border has been open, because there are exchanges, there are friendships forming. We interviewed a Russian person who said that his best friend was Chinese, he was invited to his wedding, and was actually the best man. This is a rare occurrence but you do have these things happening. It’s nice to see people fully engaging beyond this big divide.



Andrew Peaple is a UK-based editor at The Wire. Previously, Andrew was a reporter and editor at The Wall Street Journal, including stints in Beijing from 2007 to 2010 and in Hong Kong from 2015 to 2019. Among other roles, Andrew was Asia editor for the Heard on the Street column, and the Asia markets editor. [@andypeaps](https://twitter.com/andypeaps)

● COVER STORY



The 5G Fracture

BY LUKE PATEY

It is business gospel in the West that for a corporation to be globally competitive, it must be competitive in China. But what happens when an international company loses the chance to compete in the world's second largest economy? The Swedish telecommunications giant Ericsson shows a possible post-China future may not be as bleak as imagined.

● THE BIG PICTURE



Semiconductor Shakeup

BY ELIOT CHEN

A look at key concepts in the semiconductor supply chain and what recent events mean in the competition over its control.

● Q & A



Hal Brands On Navigating America's "Danger Zone" With China

BY BRENT CRANE

The scholar talks about his new book; why China's best days are behind it, both strategically and economically; how that could lead to China lashing out; and why he fears U.S. strategy isn't coming together...



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