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Social Crisis, Ethnic Distance and Memory along the Chinese—Soviet Border. The Chinese Russian Old-Settlers narratives about the "Chinese" Famine and Cultural Revolution in Inner Mongolia

The relationship between individual and social in the perception of traumatic events has been a problem of stable concern of ethnographers and social anthropologists.[1] This complicated relationship between the biological and cultural nature of Famine and Mass Violence experience provoked suspicions about the possibility of explanation of the research phenomena in question. The critique went to basic assumption of biomedical approaches to nutritional and violence crises and provoked new questions about emotional, institutional and social aspects of research investigation. The situation of distancing from others stemming from a different cultural status can change the optics of perception considerably and result in completely different adaptation strategies. Internal and external perception of a given community as partly alien to the dominant ethnic group develops more determined survival strategies (including greater solidarity, support received from befriended communities, and efforts to receive special treatment from the state) at the time of traumatic disturbances. Viewing complex and often chaotic socialist modernization processes (repressions, expropriations, fighting reaction, *etc*.) in clear terms of an ethnocultural conflict offers a possibility to focus on the defense of the material, symbolic and cultural capital of a given community.

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[1] M.J. Maynes, J.L. Pierce, B. Laslett, *Telling Stories. The use of Personal Narratives in the Social Science and History*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca and London 2008, p. 1.

The GLP Famine[2] and the Great Cultural Revolution[3] were extraordinary tragic events in the post-war history of China. The controversial legacy of these events has always inspired research interest in China and abroad. The development of oral history and research devoted to memory has offered an opportunity to confront archive research on the above-mentioned traumatic events with the subjective dimension of trauma. It is worth noting that for various reasons the opinions of small ethnic minorities in Northeastern China have not been analyzed thoroughly. The lack of research concerns especially concerned the cases in which a minority status was combined with the residence in the Chinese-Soviet Border Area and an ex-émigré status.

The border system in Inner Asia (the border triangle of the USSR, PRM, and PRC) was a part of the Cold-War Sino-Soviet border management model in the area. The model was characterized by the closed-border policy, special attention from state authorities to the supervision of border communities (special rights, movement control, the propagandist idea of a border as a bastion, *etc*.), and a very strong connection between socialist modernization and militarization of the area (on the economic, cultural and social levels).[4] In each case concerning the Russian, Mongolian and Chinese border regions the application of that model provoked similar results: mass migration of new inhabitants, a special role of military institutions, and a deep experience of socialist modernization. The transborder quasi- indigenous Inner Asian communities (Russian Old-Settlers, Transbaikalian Cossacks) have very traumatic experience of the time: coercive separation from family members, social death in their own countries, demonization as spies and bandits and very long isolation from the place of birth and members of the communities in other countries. That situation created a special opportunity as regards the investigation of special contacts of the communities in question both with the dominated (Han Chinese) and subaltern (Mongol) local societies at

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[2] Great Leap Forward Famine—a social catastrophe in China caused by attempts to increase the paste of industrialization in the years 1958–1961. The tragedy resulted from simultaneous occurrence of terror, expropriations, and the collapse of agriculture. Thus, F. Dikkotter called the GLF Famine „one of the most deadly mass killings of human history," see F. Dikkoter, *Mao's Great Famine. The History of China's most Devastating Catastrophe*, Bloomsbury, London 2011, p. xiii.

[3] The Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution in China was a sociopolitical turmoil that took place from 1966 through 1976 (black decade). Millions of people in China were violently persecuted (beating, imprisonment, rape, torture, harassment) or forcibly displaced during the Cultural Revolution.

[4] И. Пешков, *Граница на замке постсоветской памяти. Мифологизация фронтирных сообществ на примере русских из Трехречья*, In: В. Дятлов (ред.) Миграции и диаспоры в социокультурном, политическом и экономическом пространстве Сибири. Рубежи XIX–XX и XX–XXI веков, Иркутск: Оттиск 2010.

the time of socialist modernization.[5] This paper aims at showing—using the example of Three-River Delta Russians memory practices—the relationship between the special Ethnic status and memory of the social modernization trauma in the Chinese-Soviet border area. The group in question consisted of Transbaikalian-Cossack and Transbaikalian Old-Settler immigrants to China, who wanted to avoid Soviet Mass Violence. Most of them settled densely on the Derbul, Haul, and Gan river banks. That was what the term 'Three-River Delta' stems from.

The Mixed Communities in the Trap of Chinese-Soviet Border Management

The assumption of the target ethnic, confession and political coherence of the borderland area is crucial for the Russian (Tsarist) colonial experience in Asia, which based on agrarian use of nomadic frontier land and forced extruding of disloyal nomadic population to Ottoman Empire, Afghanistan and China.[6] This model of target coherence included a special policy of frontier disloyalty prevention practices based on re-orientaion of indigenous nomadic population towards Russia by controlling the transborder movement, the separation of religious institutions from the authorities outside Russia, state support for migration and active militarization of indigenous population. In the eastern Siberian case, the "coherence" in Transbaikalian borderland was understood as a Russia-oriented agro-nomadic space with the essential role of military institutions and cultural domination of Orthodox communities.[7]

   In contrast with Central Asia, the "Siberian waste area" was not conceptualized as the "sleepy Orient", but as a culturally exotic space.[8] In this cultural context modernity in Siberia was implemented from the Center to the Periphery in a non-evolutionary way and in extraordinary forms. In the southern part of Eastern Siberia the Siberian project was very different from the one in the northern part of Siberia. The difference was caused by the government's perception of the "vacant" land in Inner Asia as a reservoir for mass peasant migration. The process was based on

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[5] For the Chinese-Mongolian relations in Inner Mongolia see: U.E. Bulag, *Collaborative Nationalism. The Politics of Friendship on China's Mongolian Frontier*, Lanham 2010.

[6] А. Вишневский, *Серп и рубль. Консервативная модернизация в СССР*, О.Г.И., Москва 1998.

[7] I. Peshkov, *Zakładnicy „wyobrażonej przeszłości". Problemy tożsamości etnicznej i kulturowej Guranów Zabajkalskich w Syberii Wschodniej*, "Lud," Vol. 92, 2008.

[8] M. Bassin, *Inventing Siberia*: *Visions of the Russian East in the Early Nineteenth Century*, "American Historical Review," 1991, 3 (93).

the mass migration of peasant settlers from the western part of Russia and the policy of "ruralization" of nomadic communities. Before the beginning of the 20th century the ideal border settler from the Russian point of view was conceptualized as a member of military (Cossack) or cultural (Orthodox peasant) colonial formations. The mixture of three strategic areas of state policy (concerning the land suitable for agriculture, railroads, and border management) provoked strong pressure concerning de-nomadization and acculturation of the indigenous peoples of Transbaikalia. As a result, the mixed population of Southern Siberia could reproduce the Eastern European peasant style of living and participate in Russian culture demonstrating the Eastern European identity (of Orthodox peasants).

The appearance of Russians in Eastern Siberia caused the emergence of a row of groups of a near-indigenous status based on the metisation of Russians, Buryats and Evenks. These mixed communities are referred to as the "Old Settlers" (*starozhily*). Their mixed origin has been at the core of the Old Settlers' identity: there is a sharp line between the Old Settlers and the Natives, on the one hand, and between the Old Settlers and the newcomer Russians, on the other. Such communities consist of members imaginarily related to the first Russian migrants to Siberia (until the late 18th century). The conquest resulted in the development of new forms of ethnic and cultural identity based on cultural syncretism and metisation of the members of the analyzed groups with the inhabitants of the region. The shaping of new mixed cultures in Siberia manifested by their "connecting" to great historical constructions. It showed new communities as resulting from the orientalization process of the ancestors of the first-wave settlers in Siberia. These mixed communities need to keep the balance between Russian culture and the elements of the indigenous one. The existence of this balance is possible thanks to their including themselves in the narrative that is understandable for everyone and justifies the contact with indigenous culture and territory. The Russianization and Westernization of the past did not collide with the strong oriental elements of their culture.[9] In the case of mixed communities forgetting is more important than memory. Forgetting in a systematic way offers a possibility of very good adjustment to social and ethnic changes and preserving the local inter-racial relations and cultural prestige of the community. If the next generations recognize themselves as products of the first inter-race marriage, the mixed communities can retain a special race position (*mestizo*) and the role of a very important component in the region's culture.

The specificity of Eastern Transbaikalia as regards most part of its population was the overlapping of the quasi-indigenous status and the

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[9] I. Peshkov, *op. cit.*, 2008, p. 30.

Cossack estate. This cultural pattern is very important to understanding the Soviet policy towards Transbaikalian border areas. The hostile attitude of the communist authorities to the Cossacks (decossackization, dekulakization, and deportations) and the new socialist border regime provoked radical ethnic and social changes in the area. Local and indigenous inhabitants still played a nominal role in the symbolic and political life of the region, but generally most inhabitants had a migrant origin and very weak ties to the non-socialist period of the region's history and culture. In that context active border cleansing policy finally isolated the new Soviet Transbaikalia from old social and cultural structures. The first three decades of the new system were particularly traumatic for the analyzed groups. Their mass migration to China began in 1918 and initially it concerned only richer Cossacks escaping to avoid decossackization practices.[10] In time, because of terror, starvation, and persecution, they were joined by Russian peasants, the Old Believers, and the Evenki. A large percentage of Cossacks in the first immigration wave established the models for perceiving migrants to borderline territories for a long time (they were perceived according to their origin and political views). Soviet propaganda for many years defined both countries of exile as places of refuge of politically active White Cossack emigrants.

The Three-River Delta Russians experienced the time of cultural and economic domination in their area of inhabitance,[11] the genocidal policy of Soviet military troops in 1929 and strong repressions after the "liberation" in 1945.[12] The community strengthens the Russian elements of its identity and totally "forgets" about its mixed origin. The elements of Tungus and Mongolian cultures are excluded from the narrative, although everyone is aware of them. The group's Orthodox identity has been reinforced, its members have been provided with strong missionary activity (among the Evenki and Mongolian), and they generally reveal a tendency to stick to their "purely Russian" identity. The strengthened Russian identity can improve the status of the community as a cultural center of the region. In that case the border was played a crucial role in their social status, models of adaptation and contacts with regional authorities. A very special form of emigration (10-20 km from place of birth) and the domination of ex-Russian citizens in the area was a result of the cultural transition of the area and the big influence

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[10] И. Пешков, *Гураны, семеновцы, местнорусские. Специфика идентичности и культуры забайкальских гуранов в Монголии*, Россия в Монголии: История и современность, Улаанбаатар 2008.

[11] E.J. Lindgren, *An Example of Culture Contact without Conflict: Reindeer Tungus and Cossacks of Northwestern Manchuria*, "American Anthropologist," 1938, Vol. 40(4).

[12] I. Peshkov, *People in the Shadow of the Soviet Border. Politicization of Quasi-Indigenousness on the Russo-Chinese Frontier*, in print.

of the Russian lifestyle on all inhabitants of the area. In many cases border localization stopped acculturation processes and caused greater acceptance of the Russian lifestyle from Chinese and Japanese authorities as "natural." That introduced the quasi-indigenous population into the political sphere of border management and joined the questions of cultural syncretism and metisation (cultural coherence) with the imperative of frontier loyalty in the borderline areas (political coherence). Before 1945 Soviet and Japanese intelligence forces were competing for the soul of that mainly illiterate village community. In the period of Cultural Revolution the local Russians were accused of illegal communication with the Soviet intelligence.

From 1945 until 1956 the analyzed community was the object of the sovietization policy of the institutions in borderline territories. The USSR turned Russian private schools into Soviet state schools, organized access to Soviet propaganda movies, Soviet consulates encouraged to return "home."[13] Following 1956 the mass migration to the USSR and Australia started. Nowadays, the number of Cossack descendants in the region is rather minimal. The ones who decided to stay in China were mostly of mixed origin (Chinese and Russian) or poor, without relatives in the USSR. In that period we can talk about *new Russian community in Inner Mongolia* dominated by the people of a very low status in the former Russian community: Orthodox women with Chinese husbands, people from mixed (Chinese-Russian) families and poor Russian peasants excluded from two important networks of social support: the Cossack and Old Believer ones. Radical changes in the structure and cultural background of the communities did not concern the inter community racial order. It is very important since the local racial discourse has had a big influence of Sino-Russian cultural and geopolitical competition. Racial differences combined with civilizational differences. The people from mixed families were recognized as Mestizos only in the case of Chinese socialization of their parents (mainly Han Chinese). In 1966 the "dark decade" (the Cultural Revolution) in the life of the community started, since all the Russian (Orthodox) people were accused of believing in superstitions and espionage on behalf of the USSR. Apart from the physical extermination of its numerous members, the group experienced drastic bans on speaking or using Russian (even at home) and on practicing its religion. As a result most of the group members born in the late 1960s have problems with speaking Russian or do not speak the language at all. The situation of the group improved considerably following 1978 and nowadays one can even talk about a special support policy as regards the community.

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[13] Ibid.

Memories About (Distance and) Trauma

The borderline territory witnessed the emergence of a sub-culture based on the Siberian model of mixed peasant communities.[14] The feature of this model is a network of remembering and forgetting practices which help the group to position it as a part of the Russian world and to impose its own racial hierarchy in the region. In this context memory is constant support of Russian elements and "forgetting" about non-Russians. In the situation of multicultural orientation the main goal was realized through strong dramatization of acculturation pressure and past traumas. Because of predominant illiteracy on the part of the older generation and the Chinese socialization (education) of the younger part the community does not participate in Russian historical mythology (in its Russian, Soviet or post-Soviet versions). The members do not differentiate between the World Wars and they express ambivalent attitude towards most historical dilemmas experienced by today's Russians.[15] The basis of their historical memory is their own version of their history (the oral version), which consists of the declaration of their Russian origin and the three traumas connected with the attempts to modernize the region: the Russian Civil War (the reason for their presence in the area), the Japanese occupation (perceived negatively), the GLF Famine and to a greater extent the Cultural Revolution.

In all three cases the group distances itself from the events, not sympathizing with any side of the conflict and perceiving itself as a passive victim: *they came*, *they took*, *they broke*—it is always "them." The communists took the land in Transbaikalia, the Japanese occupied it, and Chinese caused the GLF and the Cultural Revolution.[16] The group remains a passive bystander. The group suggested the division between Chinese (radical ideological) and local Russian (normality and common sense) worlds. This pattern transferred into narratives about the Great Famine. Because the strong agrarian skills, relatively long sedentarily stage, support from friendly nomads and special food rights of ex-Russian citizens the community memory transformed the experience of the Famine into the mostly "Chinese issue." It was Chinese from the perspective of both its reasons and consequences. The causes given by the representatives of the community can be divided into global

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[14] Ю.В. Аргудяева, *Русское население в Трехречье*, "АТР," 2006, No. 4.

[15] И.П. Башаров, *Русские Внутренней Монголии краткая характеристика группы*, In: Б.В. Базаров (ед.), Азиатская Россия: миграция, регионы и регионализм в исторической динамике, Оттиск, Иркутск 2010.

[16] I. Peshkov, *Rosjanie z Mongolii Wewnętrznej w cieniu projektowanej i praktykowanej przeszłości. Pułapki rosyjskości retrospektywnej na pograniczu rosyjsko-chińskim*, "Lud," 2010, Vol. 94, p. 225

and local. The global ones include predominantly excessive radicalism of Chinese communists in the 1950s, poverty and unfriendly politics of the USRR in relation to China. The respondents generally agreed with the Maoist interpretation according to which the famine was caused by suspending economic aid and forcing China to pay its debts to the USSR. It showed that the ethnic distance and suggested difference from the Chinese world went hand in hand with the acquisition of basic propaganda models of the time. The local reasons concern the inadequacy of migrants from the South, the lack of contact with nomads that could supply the Chinese with food and the harsh social policy of the state. The migrants from the south faced radically different climate and living conditions. The respondents in turn viewed themselves as hosts of the area (they had inhabited it before the Chinese arrived) who had special rights, qualifications and connections with nomads that enabled them to transform the tragedy of the Great Famine into the drama of undernourishment. Such a combination allowed for transferring the responsibility for the results of famine onto the social and economic weakness of starving people. The community in question excluded itself from the "Chinese tragedy." Even people originating from very poor families (with strong starvation experience) distance themselves from the famine experience.

The experience of the Cultural Revolution, however, is the most important for the analyzed group. The memories of that trauma are essential when it comes to the group's relationships with the Russians from Russia. It often happens that someone approaches the visitor and says: "They treated us terribly back then", and goes away. Apart from the natural concentration on the trauma this practice has a communicative dimension. The memories of the Cultural Revolution evoke empathy and sympathy on the part of all the representatives of the Russian world. The differences in experience are disregarded—what counts is ethnic solidarity. The Cultural Revolution destroyed the local social order changing the dominant group into the "pariah," preserving, however, the internal racial differentiation of the community. Before the Cultural Revolution the analyzed group was divided into three parts: the pure Russians (whose parents were not the PRC citizens), the so cold half-Russian people (Mestizos with a Chinese parent) and the russified Orthodox Mongolian and Tungus. Paradoxically, the traumatic events only strengthened that division.[17] That changed the perspective and character of memories. At least some of the "pure Russians" say that their

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[17] Caroline Humphrey described similar phenomena using the example of the "u" people in her brilliant paper *The Fate of Earlier Social Ranking in the Communist Regimes of Russia and China*, In: R. Guha and J. Parry (eds.), Institutions and Inequality: Essays in Honor of Andre Beteille, Oxford University Press, Delhi 1999.

life was better, because they were forbidden to attend meetings (a state secret). Nonetheless, they could neither speak their language nor practice their religion. They were also attacked in the streets and experienced other unpleasant situations. Their memories are very distanced—they describe the world of madness as seen by peasants. They concentrate mostly on defending their own world—hiding icons, attempts to save Orthodox churches, ethnic solidarity. The Chinese (apart from family members) are viewed as strangers. The attacks of youth storm groups have been described from the perspective of a human versus bestial conflict, where the human represented the world of an Orthodox village and the bestial—Communist hysteria: "The Chinese behaved like animals, they entered houses and broke everything they found." It is a significant manifestation of distance. As Steven Shekespeare wrote referring to *The Animal That Therefore I Am* by J. Derrida,

> The border between human and its other are negotiable and cultural. … As Derrida has argued, even to speak of "animals" as if that word has to power to gather an unimaginable diversity of being under one heading, is a travesty. It is projection of human colonizing power.[18]

Nowadays the group is not numerous and consists mainly of elderly women. Gender specificity of the respondents offers a possibility to see the Cultural Revolution through the conflict between "sarafans" and "trousers": "*We had to dress like Chinese women—we started wearing trousers.*"

The second group had a much worse life. Its members had to take part in the ongoing events. They were beaten and murdered much more often. Nevertheless, they participated in the life of the outside world because of their knowledge of its language and culture, and their status. Their memories also describe the Chinese as "them," but the Cultural Revolution is associated most of all with meetings and the bad behavior of the neighbors. The memories are dominated with violence and the lack of understanding as regards persecutions. They include descriptions of torturing, self-accusations, suicides. Nonetheless, these people go beyond the we versus them framework. They talk about Chinese victims, indoctrinated youth, and the mistakes made by politicians. The danger of their situation was having a Russian mother and living in the borderline area. They were accused of illegal communication with the Soviet intelligence. The memories of the Orthodox Mongolian and Evenki are dominated with the dilemma related to renouncing the assumed Russianness (the Orthodox faith) and with the price paid for keeping their faith (years in prison).

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[18] S. Shakespeare, *A Walk on the Wild Side: Church and Identity beyond Humanism*, "Journal of Anglican Studies," 7(1), p. 19.

Following the Cultural Revolution religion and contacts with Russian culture became of secondary importance—it is history and the society that defined the group consisting of the above-mentioned communities as Russian. The Cultural Revolution trauma strengthened its identity and status in the region destroying the world of the Three-River Delta. The radical change in status (for the better) and opening the borders included the analyzed group in Chinese-Russian borderline relations as a "middleman." Nevertheless, it has been undergoing radical transformation. The structure of the Siberian sub-culture is no longer adequate for both post-Soviet Siberia and modern Inner Mongolia.[19] The group has been learning to be Russian, both for the Russians and the Chinese. It has been ceasing, however, to be Eastern European and becoming a Chinese minority with strong Russian identity.

The fundamental ways of conceptualization of both traumatic experiences are "distancing oneself" from it and transforming the experiences of the murderous politics regarding borderline ethnic minorities introduced by the local originators of the Cultural Revolution into a Chinese and Russian cultural conflict, in which the Russian community fell victim of ethnic persecution. Regardless the radically different tone of the stories about the Great Famine (ranging from humorous to pitying) and the Cultural Revolution (a solemn tragedy), in both cases the group has created an ethnic distance from the Chinese, which allowed for presenting all the events from the symbolic perspective the Chinese versus the Russian. That in turn enabled not only preserving an illusion of an independent outlook on the world, but also created the perspective of "special rights stemming from the experienced injustice" in relation to China and Russia. The above demonstrates a considerable influence of cultural, and thus social and institutional conditions on the way people experience traumas. Conscious alienation from the dominant group and minimalization of the conflict with the state offered a possibility to concentrate collective effort on the survival and transformation of the experienced trauma into social capital in the form of special injustice-related rights granted by the governments of China and Russia. In that context the ethnic distance from general social processes evoked by memory practice appears to be a powerful factor deforming both the way of experiencing traumas and post-traumatic adaptation.

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[19] I. Peshkov, *Lokalne wymiary projektu syberyjskiego w regionach przygranicznych. Pamięć, tożsamość i status miejscowych Rosjan w Mongolii Wewnętrzne*, In: M. Pietrasiak i M. Stańczyk (eds.), Problemy społeczno-gospodarcze Syberii, Wydawnictwo IBIDEM, Łódź 2011, http://www.wsmip.uni.lodz.pl/jednostki/strona_zakladu_azji/Ksiazka-o-Syberii-INTERNET.pdf

Conclusion

The key feature of socialist modernization was routine use of mass violence both as a tool to eliminate the existing sociocultural structures and as a basic mechanism of social regulation. The literature related to the subject lists a number of issues connected with repressions, deportations and conscious provocation of malnutrition and famine in agricultural areas (connected with the preference of industry to agriculture). The social costs of this model of modernization as well as its destructive consequences for the society's everyday life have been subject to numerous analyses, both descriptive and theoretical. Nonetheless, the cases of the long-standing use of mass violence towards the near-indigenous groups inhabiting North-Eastern China have hardly managed to attract researchers' attention. There are a few reasons for such a situation, i.e. the groups' lack of clear ethnic designata, the distant geographical situation of their dwelling places, and their inability to overcome their own denial practices. The groups' cultural specificity and the process of their exclusion from the socialist modernization project in Inner Asia have not been fully analyzed. Such a situation can hardly be considered as satisfying. Thus, the perspective regarding the relations of the near-indigenous communities with the Socialist state constitutes a promising field for studies. We are dealing with a special situation here, i.e. mixed ethnic groups favored by the previous colonial system became the victims of both organized and unorganized violence despite the simultaneous activation of the new ethnic and racial order. Mixed communities that originated as a result of one colonial and modernizing project were consciously and systematically eliminated after the introduction of another. From that perspective their ways of surviving and recollecting traumatic experiences constitute an invaluable source for research regarding both historical events and the role of cultural factors (ethnic distance) in microcommunities' adaptation to social crises.

Ivan Peshkov

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A b s t r a c t

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of issues connected with repressions, deportations and conscious provocations of malnutrition and famine in agricultural areas (connected with the preference of industry to agriculture). The social costs of this model of modernization as well as its destructive consequences for the society's everyday life have been subject to numerous analyses, both descriptive and theoretical. Nonetheless, the cases of the long-standing use of mass violence towards the near-indigenous groups inhabiting North-Eastern China have hardly managed to attract researchers' attention. Such a situation can hardly be considered as satisfying. This paper aims at showing—using the example of Chinese Russian memory practices—the relationship between the special ethnic status and memory in the social modernization trauma in the Chinese-Soviet border area.