

APPEARANCE AND APPLIANCE OF THE TWIN-CITIES CONCEPT ON THE RUSSIAN-CHINESE BORDER

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ABSTRACT:

The article is devoted to the city pair of Blagoveshchensk (Russia) and Heihe (People's Republic of China), the only city pair in Russian-Chinese borderland that describes itself with the term "twin-cities". The current contribution reconstructs the history of appearance of the twin-cities concept in Russian-Chinese agenda. On the basis of interviews and questionnaires collected in the cities in question the paper examines specificity of understanding of "twin-cities" concept and its practical execution in the Asian context. Exploring the extent to which the twin-cities relations model is applicable to Russian-Chinese border cities, the author concludes that cooperation predominantly exists in a form of bilateral annual events in various spheres (culture, education, sport, etc.) and dialog between delegations of region's/city's representatives, not in a form of direct people-to-people or institution-to-institution cooperation. The lack of local initiatives to cooperate (almost zero-amount of initiatives not from region's/city's administrations) is named as a main drawback of Blagoveshchensk and Heihe relations. While planned character of cooperation makes the calendar of joint events stable and predictable, it also keeps Russian-Chinese cooperation staying on the ritual level and prevents it to become a necessary part of everyday life.

1. INTRODUCTION

The destiny of developing Russian Far East in general and the Amur Oblast in particular has been an urgent issue for last decades. The most frequently discussed topic usually is its role in the global division of labour. Currently the Amur Oblast government named tourism as one of the tools for diversification of the regional economy (Postanovlenie Pravitel'stva Amurskoi oblasti, 2011). In the search for touristic attractiveness of Blagoveshchensk, the centre of the Amur Oblast, the concept of «twin-cities» with the Chinese city of Heihe on the other bank of the Amur River was put forward (Kontseptsiya razvitiya goroda Blagoveshchenska, 2013).

2. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The paper examines the issue of twin-cities using this term in a narrow sense, with geographical proximity as an important criterion (as opposed to the broad sense of the twin-cities where the distance between cooperating cities doesn't matter).

It is assumed that entering into the twinning relations implies creating an agglomeration or as figuratively Pertti Joenniemi and Alexander Sergunin said applying the term "twin-cities" by cities indicates that "two aspire to become one" (Joenniemi, P. & A. Sergunin, 2011). Pooling resources gives access to the economy of scale effect which helps to cut double costs and thus to get a mutual benefit.

The author's approach to interpreting border areas relies on admitting the fact of their coexistence simultaneously within a united transborder space and in various administrative and socio-cultural environments of neighbouring states (Mikhailova, 2013). In the most visually imposing way such systems could be observed in cities, divided by the border as the city-pair of Blagoveshchensk and Heihe is.

3. METHODS

The paper relies on academic literature and research fieldwork in the selected cities. The fieldwork was aimed to explore two layers of perception of relations between Blagoveshchensk and Heihe – an expert perspective based on the interviews of people who are involved in carrying out cross-border activities within their professional duties and residents' opinion extracted from filled in questionnaires.

The article is built on analysis of sixty questionnaires (fifty from Blagoveshchensk residents and ten from Heihe residents) and eight interviews (four from Blagoveshchensk experts and four from Heihe experts). The objective shortcoming of the fieldwork is that it was done only with Russian speaking respondents and lacks opinions of Heihe residents who don't speak Russian.

The analysed sections of the author questionnaire comprise of four units – 1) awareness of the concept "Twin Cities"; 2) attitude towards the city on the other side of the border; 3) perception and evaluation of collaboration between cities and 4) expectations and proposals for cooperation between Blagoveshchensk and Heihe.

Due to low amount of collected questionnaires in Heihe, only qualitative analysis is applied to them in the paper. Questionnaires of Blagoveshchensk residents are interpreted both quantitatively and qualitatively.

Interviewees included state representatives (regional and municipal servants), experts working in the field of mass media and higher education. Seven out of eight interviewees for ethical reasons are cited anonymously with using the author system of coding. The list of interviewed organizations is in the appendix 1. The explanation of the author's coding system is available in appendix 2.

3. GEOGRAPHIC SPREAD OF THE TWIN-CITIES CONCEPT

Originally, the term "twin cities" came into existence to describe the American pair of cities Minneapolis and St. Paul, located on different sides of the domestic U.S. border. Both cities are located in the Minnesota State. While a less populated St. Paul is the administrative center of this U.S. State, Minneapolis keeps the status of the biggest city in Minnesota. Together they comprise an agglomeration known as "Twin-Cities".

In course of time, the concept "twin cities" began to be a characteristic for cities, separated by the outer boundary of the states. Particularly demanded this theoretical construct became in European continent from the beginning of 90s (Joenniemi, P. & A. Sergunin, 2013). The model of "twin cities" was widely interpreted as a "laboratory of European integration" (Schultz, 2002). According to this concept, twinned cities should turn into platforms for implementation of pilot projects for the equalization of regional development and thereby serve as examples of multilateral cooperation.

4. APPEARANCE OF TWIN-CITIES CONCEPT IN RUSSIAN-CHINESE BORDERLAND

Appearance of the term "twin-cities" in Asian continent is slow because the concept itself is a western model. For example, there are several paired border settlements on the Sino-Russian borderland – all of them are located in immediate proximity to each other and are separated with the Russian-Chinese state border but nowadays only city pair of Blagoveshchensk and Heihe is trying to use the model of "twin-cities" to describe their relations and refer to some commonality of interests.



Figure 1. Map of Russian-Chinese borderland (Author)

- 1 – Amur Oblast (Russia)
- 2 – Heilongjiang Province (China)
- 3 – City pair of Blagoveshchensk and Heihe

In academic literature various terms are used to define relationship between a city pair of Blagoveshchensk and Heihe but the most common version is either "border cities" (Yangduo 2004, Xengwei 2007, Ryzhova 2008, Burashnikov 2011) or "twin cities" (Press Service of the Consulate General of People's Republic of China in Khabarovsk 2005, Ryzhova 2009, Chinese Internet Information Centre 2011).

All experts interviewed on the Russian side of the border underlined that the term "twin-cities" was suggested by Chinese. The time of dating this fact varies between period five-ten years ago (2009 and 2003 respectively).

The Chinese expert interviewees named 2005 as the year of appearance of the "twin-cities" concept on the agenda of the Heihe municipal government. That year was marked by the visit of Wang Zhigan, a prominent Chinese journalist to whom the authorship of idea to use the "twin-cities" for branding of Heihe is attributed. The concept got a new slogan – "Two countries, one city" and mainly is expected to come true within economic and humanitarian cooperation. In 2006-2007 the idea of the twin-cities was proposed to the Russian side but it hasn't gained support for that time (interviewee E).

Although Russian side didn't agree to apply the term "twin-cities" to Blagoveshchensk and Heihe, in 2007 the municipal government of Heihe invited the representatives of Blagoveshchensk municipal administration and Amur Oblast administration to visit the festival "Summer of Twin-Cities". In that time the term got publicity in local (Leto gorodov-bliznezov, 2007), regional (Heihe hochet stat' bliznezom Blagoveshchenska, 2007) and national mass media (Priamurye i Kitay gotovyat festival prigranichnyh gorodov, 2007) for the first time.

The interest to use the "twin-cities" as a brand has come back to the Russian-Chinese negotiations agenda in 2011 when during the trilateral Russian-Chinese-Mongolian Tourism Forum in Manchuria the project of reconstructing the central embankment in Blagoveshchensk was presented (Kuzmina, 2011). Nowadays this project is known as the "Golden Mile" project.

Today the "Golden Mile" project is one of the most significant investment project of the Amur Oblast in the field of tourism and the main (and the only official) context of using the term "twin-cities" to Blagoveshchensk and Heihe on the Russian side. The project was presented to Russian Government in January 2013 (Shuvalovu v Priamur'e predstavili proekty, 2013) but still didn't get the federal approval. Interviewees on the Chinese side were unconfident about the exact content of the project and claimed that they wait till the project is officially approved (interviewee E).

4.1. Portraits of two cities in question and their disparities

Blagoveshchensk and Heihe are two cities divided with 800 meters of the Amur River which at this area coexists with the Russian-Chinese state border. Thus, one could say that Blagoveshchensk and Heihe in terms of their geographical position represent a traditional example of twin-cities directly facing each other.

Blagoveshchensk is the administrative centre of the Amur Oblast and the fifth biggest city in Russian Far East - from the end of 1980s the city keeps its population a bit higher than 200 000 inhabitants: by 2008 the population of Blagoveshchensk was 212 500 inhabitants (Kontsepsiya

razvitiya goroda Blagoveshchenska do 2020 goda, 2008). The city of Heihe is a new centre of North-Eastern China and during last 20 years is experiencing a remarkable growth which by now has resulted in around 170 000 inhabitants (interviewee F). The city of Heihe is an administrative centre of the Heihe urban district, one of eleven urban districts in the Heilongjiang Province. Thus, despite relatively close number of population two cities have two strong asymmetries – in statuses and character of urban development.



Figure 2. Map of Blagoveshchensk and Heihe

As it was stated in interview B, the Russian-Chinese cross-border cooperation could be better understood if one pays attention to a contradiction between inertness from the Russian side of the border and an abundance of initiatives coming from the Chinese side.

One of reasons for such intense activity of China was named a clear through structure of the Chinese Foreign Affairs Office that works with a formula "signal from the centre - the initiative on the ground." For example, the Chinese Foreign Affairs Office in Heihe is an authority with double subordination - as it combines complying the policies of both municipality and the Office of Foreign Affairs in Beijing.

Russian municipalities don't have any planned interaction with Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs that's why all ideas of joint development of border cities are difficult to implement (interviewee B). As practice shows, in Russian context projects of creating a transborder agglomeration usually are cascaded from above or vice versa should get the authorization from the centre.

5. TWIN-CITIES AS A STRATEGY OF TOURISTIC ATTRACTIVENESS

On Chinese side the term "twin-cities" has been widely used for place promotion of Heihe in China since 2005 and could be assessed as a success story if we consider that in 2013 Heihe was visited by 4 million of Chinese tourists.

Blagoveshchensk has more modest results: as the Minister of Foreign Economic Relations, Tourism and Business of the Amur Oblast Igor Gorevoy mentioned in the interview to the author, in 2012 the city had 38 000 Chinese tourists which

equals 15 % of all Chinese tourists received in Russia in that year.

Amount of Chinese tourists is dominating in the flow of international incoming tourists in Amur Oblast for a long time - since Blagoveshchensk has lost the status of the closed city. Till 2005 the main touristic attraction of the Amur Oblast's centre for Chinese was gambling. After the national ban to have slot machines the tourist flow from China has decreased almost twice and reached the point of 10 000 people per year. By 2010 the number of Chinese tourists came back to 20 000 people. The cooperation programs are named as a crucial instrument for revitalizing the touristic flow from China to Russia (Postanovlenie Pravitel'stva Amurskoi oblasti, 2012).

Although these numbers don't look convincing enough, the Amur Oblast administration treats touristic industry as the potential provider of sound income for regional and municipal budgets in 20-30 years. The argumentation for this is that tourism as an industry of producing impressions allows entering the huge Chinese market without competition because if a person wants to visit Russia – he or she should cross to Russia (interview A). While production of any goods is cheaper in China, none "Russian village"* could be compared to experience of visiting Russia itself.

6 % of Blagoveshchensk respondents have never been to Heihe, while other 94 % from time to time are visiting the other bank of the Amur River. The majority of those who go to Heihe, cross the Russian-Chinese border couple of times per year (60 %), other 30 % go several times per month, 6 % - several times per week and 4 % couple of times per day. As a purpose of visiting Heihe 74 % of Blagoveshchensk respondents named tourism and 46 % - shopping (it was a multiple choice question where respondent were allowed to select several variants).

There is also a psychological issue on the frequency of exchanging visits between these twin-cities: as we can see from the survey, Russians go to Heihe to feel abroad, to change the scene, to consume goods and services of other origin, while according to interview E, F and G, an average Chinese resident doesn't go abroad frequently or even hasn't been abroad (for better understanding interviewees used an example that if a Chinese person have been abroad it is considered a great achievement and a fact to be proud of). If a Heihe resident doesn't have to cross the Russian-Chinese border because of work or studying on the Russian side, with high probability we can say that if he or she has resources to cross the border, he or she will visit Blagoveshchensk once while Blagoveshchensk residents in general go to Heihe on relatively regular basis treating this activity a part of their annual life routine.

As interviewees E and H pointed out, the main cause for incoming migration to Heihe is work-related issues – people are coming either due to relocation of the organization they are working for (the relocation of the power plant of the city Bei'an to Heihe could be shown as an example) or due to their search for a better life. The last category of adventurers contains people both from other Northern-Eastern and Southern provinces of China. Many of them don't succeed in adapting to the Northern weather and climate, give up seeking for their fortune and go back to their home places. Such a rapid increase

* So called «Russian village» was built in a distance of 20 km from Heihe city centre as a venue for filming a movie «A zori zdes' tikhie» [“The Dawns Here Are Quiet”].

of population and intense migration flows mean that almost everybody is relatively new in Heihe.

Thus, Russian population base visiting Heihe is quite stable while Chinese people visiting Blagoveshchensk are mostly changing. In other words, we can't expect Blagoveshchensk and Heihe to follow the traditional European "twin-cities" pattern when two cities represent two constant audiences visiting each other from time to time and making stable contacts on the other side of the border.

According to the conducted survey, the residents of Heihe appreciate in Blagoveshchensk its cleanness, fresh air and politeness of its dwellers. The residents of Blagoveshchensk among considerable features of Heihe named low prices of goods and wide variety of available services, different culture, good roads, everything in order and possibility to take inexpensive flights to other touristic destinations.

Answering the question of priorities of cooperation between Blagoveshchensk and Heihe, Chinese respondents named culture and transport while Russian respondents named trade and tourism. Both Russian and Chinese named education as another substantial field of cooperation.

"Trade", "market" and "entrepreneurs" were named as the main engines of cooperation between Blagoveshchensk and Heihe by Russian respondents, while Chinese respondents named "municipal and regional administrations".

These facts reflect two different approaches to interpret cooperation. During last 20 years of market economy Russians get used to respect natural character of economic cooperation even though the chief dimension of Blagoveshchensk participation would be transit and trade broker roles. Planned economy of People's Republic of China and its hierarchical structure of decision-making has taught Chinese residents to underline the importance of administrative bodies as actors which initiate or give authorization for all economic activities.

6. ROLE OF MASS MEDIA IN POPULARIZATION OF TWIN-CITIES RELATIONS

52 % of Blagoveshchensk respondents wrote that they have come across the term "twin-cities" before filling in the questionnaire but only 4 % said that they applied this term to Blagoveshchensk and Heihe city pair. 24 % of respondents who know the term have learned about twin-cities from the Internet, while 43 % from TV.

In general it is fair to say that media coverage of relations between Blagoveshchensk and Heihe usually followed the dialog of three administrations: Amur Oblast, Blagoveshchensk municipality and Heihe municipality.

The Amur River flood of August 2013 brought attention of Russian audience both to Blagoveshchensk and Heihe simultaneously. It was almost the first time when two cities were put forward in the Russian national media together without administrative support.

The flood of the Amur River in August 2013 added a new dimension to Russian-Chinese negotiations – namely, the necessity of cooperation with China to prevent and overcome natural disasters. As a result, the recent dialog between Russian and Chinese companies responsible for water management in the region was focused on building a joint Russian-Chinese

flood-resistant hydropower plant on one of tributaries of the Amur river (Rusgidro and San'sya obsuzhdayut protivopavodkovye GES na pritokah Amura, 2013). This initiative of uniting efforts could add a new role to the cooperation between two border cities – Blagoveshchensk and Heihe.

6.1 CONCLUSIONS

The article has proved that the term "twin-cities" was brought to the Russian-Chinese agenda by Chinese in 2006 and got support from the Russian authorities only in 2011. The expert interviews have shown that the term doesn't satisfy either Russian or Chinese party and is used by them in different contexts for their own purposes. Thus, the consent on using the term "twin-cities" doesn't come into place between Blagoveshchensk and Heihe.

Exploring the extent to which the twin-cities relations model is applicable to Russian-Chinese city pair of Blagoveshchensk and Heihe, the author concludes that cooperation predominantly exists in a form of bilateral annual events in various spheres (culture, education, sport, etc.) and dialog between delegations of region's/city's representatives, not in a form of direct institution-to-institution or people-to-people cooperation which is the main feature of twinning relations in European context.

Relying on the fieldwork in Blagoveshchensk and Heihe, the author admits high influence of region's/city's administration in maintaining interaction between cities. The lack of local initiatives to cooperate (almost zero-amount of initiatives not from region's/city's administrations) is named as a main drawback of Blagoveshchensk and Heihe relations. While planned character of cooperation makes the calendar of joint events stable and predictable, it also keeps Russian-Chinese cooperation staying on the ritual level and prevents it to become a necessary part of everyday life.

On the other hand, the recent discussion on the uniting efforts for overcoming natural disasters could be seen as the first initiative to cooperate not close to the border but across the borders.

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Appendix 1.

List of interviewed organizations

Organizations interviewed in Blagoveshchensk

1. Ministry of Foreign Economic Relations, Tourism and Business of the Amur Oblast;
2. Unit of Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Blagoveshchensk;
3. Newspaper “Amurskaya Pravda”.

Organizations interviewed in Heihe

1. Unit of Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Heihe;
2. Heihe University;
3. Newspaper Heihe Zhibao.

Appendix 2.

Explanation of interviews' coding

1. Interview A – with Igor Gorevoy, Minister of Foreign Economic Relations, Tourism and Business of the Amur Oblast. Interview by author. Tape recording. 24 minutes. Blagoveshchensk, May 15, 2013.
2. Interview B - Interview by author. Tape recording. 78 minutes. Blagoveshchensk, May 24, 2013.

3. Interview C - Interview by author. Tape recording. 36 minutes. Blagoveshchensk, May 14, 2013.
4. Interview D - Interview by author. Tape recording. 31 minute. Blagoveshchensk, May 20, 2013.
5. Interview E - Interview by author. Tape recording. 60 minutes. Heihe, May 16, 2013.
6. Interview F - Interview by author. Tape recording. 21 minutes. Heihe, May 16, 2013.
7. Interview G - Interview by author. Tape recording. 16 minutes. Heihe, May 16, 2013.
8. Interview H - Interview by author. Tape recording. 25 minutes. Heihe, May 17, 2013.