In the Streets and Bazaars of Harbin: Small Businesses of Merchants, Peddlers & Moneychangers and Daily Life in a Manchurian City in a Transcultural Perspective, 1898-1932

From the very beginning of Harbin’s existence in the late nineteenth century, trade and commerce played an important role in the economic and social life of the town. Naturally, when Harbin developed in the 1920s from a small Chinese Eastern Railway company town into an administrative center of the Manchurian region and a booming multicultural city, trade and commerce became even more significant, since they form a sound basis for work and prosperity. Depending on the point of view, regional or international trade activities based in Harbin are particularly relevant; the same holds true for the small businesses of merchants, peddlers and moneychangers in Harbin’s daily life. These everyday business connections and their consequences for social life with a focus on the Russian, Jewish, Chinese and Japanese populations in the period from 1898 until approximately 1932 are the topic of this project.

When one considers transcultural processes, it becomes evident that the sphere of trade and commerce is composed of a multitude of individuals or groups from different national and cultural backgrounds who bring together different values, mentalities and customs as well as diverse competing interests. It is hardly an exaggeration to consider the sphere of trade and commerce as one of the most open, “permeable” and multicultural areas of social life in the city of Harbin. Other areas of urban life, such as education, culture, religion, administration, municipal politics, clubs and societies as well as all sorts of leisure activities, were for the most part characterized by a far higher degree of ethnic, religious or cultural separateness and exclusiveness.

The merchants represented an important social group in the town society of Harbin also in view of the absolute as well as relative figures. If the circle of buyers and the families of the Harbin merchants are at least partially included in the population group of the town that is to be examined, it soon becomes clear that one is dealing here with one of the numerically largest and, in view of the reconstruction of day-to-day life in the town, one of the most relevant groups within the population. The fact that far more attention is paid in the research literature to the decidedly smaller group of financially strong salespeople and traders may in particular, among other reasons, be due to the complicated state of the source material in the area of trade. This central research area is indeed completely absent in Harbin research, which has become increasingly diversified in the last ten years. With regard to other towns in
Manchuria, there are also practically no investigations available that focus on trade and daily life.

Trade was carried out in all districts of Harbin, predominantly in the form of small stalls, stands, tables, or directly on the ground in countless streets and markets of the town, and in the shape of peddlers, who trundled from door to door with their wares. However, in all likelihood, these trade activities were spread out unevenly in the districts and suburbs of Harbin in terms of their type and extent. It is at least to be suspected that this fact was closely connected with the highly diverse ethnic and national constitution of the districts, their differing infrastructure, and the role of the town administration, but possibly also with the varying cultural traditions and practices of the traders and buyers.

To what extent though can the area of trade and street selling in Harbin be described as an urban space in which frequently cultural borders were crossed and transcultural exchange processes or conflicts arose?

On the one hand, trade, street selling, money exchange, etc. represented an area in which practically all population groups in Harbin were active and came into contact with each other on a daily basis. This routine commercial contact had the effect of significantly extending or altering the “classical” range of goods offered by the traders, as well as their circle of customers, within a relatively short period of time. To a certain extent the daily commercial contact also lead to a familiarization, or partial acquisition, of the business practices and mentalities of those with different nationalities and cultures. Also with respect to language, important impetuses for the adoption of language skills, although mostly to a very limited extent, were given by trade and street selling. The phenomenon of the Sino-Russian pidgin, which is the topic of a PhD project in the framework of this research group, can be cited as an excellent example for a transcultural occurrence between Russians and Chinese.

An examination of retail trade also appears particularly profitable with regard to investigating the question of the extent to which the various political and social upheavals and shifts were reflected at the day-to-day level in a multicultural city. Therefore the research project also pursues the central question of the extent to which the varying shifts in the political climate had an impact on different areas of daily urban life, how the concrete living conditions of particular population groups evolved (or did not evolve), and how they possibly changed the coexistence of the varying population groups in the urban arena.