

# Book Review

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**Pulford, Ed. *Mirrorlands: Russia, China, and Journeys in Between*. London: Hurst, 2019, 346 pages.**

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Embarking on the trans-Siberian journey, British anthropologist Ed Pulford explores the bridges between contemporary “Chineseness” and “Russianness.” The author situates the China-Russia borderline microcontacts in the macro-perspective of a larger historical and geopolitical context. *Mirrorlands* portrays Pulford’s travel between Moscow and Beijing. The book represents a relatively rare genre of anthropological literature—a travelogue. Generally, anthropologists avoid producing travel narratives, as such writings lack ethnographic analysis and display mostly subjective experiences. Yet, travelogues shed light on the exquisite details of intercultural encounters, otherwise omitted in the academic literature due to the need for precise focus. For that reason, travelogues like Lévi-Strauss’ *Tristes tropiques* or Michel Leiris’ *L’Afrique fantôme* are remarkably appealing. They introduce authors’ unique worldviews, attitudes, and most importantly, as with Pulford’s *Mirrorlands*, they can “bring anthropology to non-anthropologists” (Eriksen, 2006, 23).

Ed Pulford’s travel route connects two distant capitals, Moscow and Beijing, through the “*journeys in between*” in urban settings in the Sino-Russian border. Drawing from past experiences of living in the Russian Far East and Northern China, Pulford brings together memories and anthropological observations in a fascinating narrative that conceptualizes space through history. Pulford offers mirror-like representations of Russian and Chinese cultural identities, which have been mutually influenced from the seventeenth century to the present.

Pulford compares his impressions with those of his “historical travel companions” (53). In Russian Siberia, he refers to the work of Anton Chekhov, Boris Pilnyak, and Sergei Tretyakov. On his cross-border experiences, Pulford compares with journeys made by Mao’s yet-to-be classmate Qu Qiubai, Esperanto scholar HuYuzhi, and anti-Communist pioneering female travel

writer, Ethel Alec-Tweedie. Yet, unlike his companions, his consideration of the Sino-Russian border comes from the Western outsider's viewpoint, and this allows him to depict local experiences in a distant but simultaneously knowledgeable manner.

The travelogue is built around the concepts of “mirroring”—“offering an image of one to the other that appears at once inverted and yet also extremely similar” (xv). This lens is applied to describe the dynamics of Sino-Russian relations and is, at first, explained through the historical perspective—both countries, in almost the same periods, lived through imperialism, then socialism, and are now ruled by the emperor-like leaders of today—Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping (xv).

At the same time, focusing on singular points in space, the author attempts to assemble a mirroring mosaic of local representation and modern nation-based identities. It seems that Pulford is looking for places that embodied Edward Said's concept of “imagined geographies,” described as a space perception created through imagery or discourses. Starting from Moscow, this representation is found mostly in trade-connected liaison points, such as near GUM (Russia's biggest department store), where wealthy Chinese shop for luxury brands; or in the more chaotic Novocherkizovsky Trade Centre, with Chinese vendors complaining about the lack of “good” Chinese food (13–15). Similar places reflect a Russian presence in Beijing, marked mainly by the Slavic restaurants in Dongzhimen, Beijing's historically Russian quarter (279). Although there's not much visual resemblance between the two capitals, the author draws attention to their parallelism—their remoteness from the borders, socialist-style buildings, and the political importance of the central city places—Tiananmen Square and Red Square in Beijing and Moscow, respectively.

Evidently, the closer we are to the border between the countries, the more interconnected the two cultures appear. In “Multi-Ethnic Siberia” (Chapter 2), Pulford focuses on the Indigenous identities and the influence of transport routes—the Trans-Siberian Railway and the Baikal–Amur Mainline—on the perception of intercultural encounters. In Yakutsk (the capital of Sakha Republic), Pulford meets Indigenous Asian-looking Russian-speaking Sakha inhabitants, negotiating their identities between “Europe” and “Asia”—the same way that Chinese-speaking ethnic Russians negotiate theirs in Inner Mongolia. While Russian Sakha are perceived as “others,” being Asians in Russia; Inner Mongolian Russians attract a particular Western-passionate type of Chinese tourism through their “Europeanness” (31, 91). Here the two

seemingly particularly “Eurasian” worldviews with similarities in their everyday routine encounter the emergence of the symbolic European/Asian frontier. This case accurately reflects Frederic Barth’s conceptualization of ethnic boundaries, which “persist despite a flow of personnel across them,” and which is “based precisely on the dichotomised ethnic statuses” (1969, 10).

Besides ethnic divergence, Pulford draws our attention to the current “difference in physical conditions between well-invested Chinese infrastructure and its down-at-heel Russian equivalent” (74), which creates contrasting economic settings. Crossing the border from Northern Inner Mongolia back to Russia, the author refers to the Russian Far East as an “emptying breadbasket” (107). The author uses this observation to explain the estrangement of the Nanai Indigenous people from the “Russianness” and closer attachment of Nanai’s Sinicized community—Hezhe, to “Chineseness.” In a conversation with Pulford, Nanai Leonid expressed his “utopian dream” (136) to “establish a joint Sino-Russian Hezhe–Nanai ethno-tourism” (136) and, ultimately, reunite Nanai/Nezhe communities. However, his fellows on the other side of the Amur River seem to be much less enthusiastic about these ideas. Though the author refers mainly to the difference in economic conditions as a cause of such discrepancies between the two communities, it is known that there are around 12,000 Nanai people in Russia. At the same time, in China, the population of Nezhe is only approximately 5,000 people. Perhaps the more populous communities spread and develop a higher level of awareness about their ethnic identity.

Pulford’s observations on both sides of the Sino-Russian border are original, as his impressive fluency in Russian and Chinese allows him to establish trusting relations with local people. Besides, Pulford’s “English identity” provides him with a certain distance, thereby avoiding potential bias. This allows him to notice some particularly astonishing linguistic details, such as the “name-mirroring” of the Russian (Victor Tsoi) and Chinese (Cui) rock singers. The Russian version of the name Tsoi is “the Cyrillic counterpart to *pinyin* Cui” (226). Emerging at the same time, Beijing-based musician Cui Jian’s song “Yi Wu Suo You” (Nothing to my Name) and Russian rock icon Viktor Tsoi’s “Peremen” (Changes) happened to become super-popular revolutionary anthems in both countries (226).

*Mirrorlands* offers a multidisciplinary overview of the countless shades of mirrored reflections of Sino-Russian relations. We learn about Russian and Chinese history and geography by travelling to the remote northern areas of the Russian Far East and Northern China. Even though the author focuses solely on

the urban setting and a larger historical perspective, a closer look at the rural border context would help understand Indigenous inter-group dynamics and the local religious ambiance under the post-socialism conditions.

The particular genre of this book means it might not find its place on the shelves of academic literature, which is a shame, as its conceptual framework of “mirrorlands” is a good tool for researching diverse intercultural encounters. Who knows what fascinating mirroring similarities/divergences we could discover with a detailed scrutiny of borderline communities in the other parts of the world?

## References

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