

From Reindeer to MTV: Indigenous Performers and the Russia-China Border

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Abstract

For the northeast Asian indigenous people today known as Nanai in Russia and Hezhe in China, the inter-state border which has long divided them remains a key referent in discourses of local identity. Yet this paper suggests that for all the discussion of the Nanai/Hezhe as a “cross-border” minority, the border between them is in fact sustained by the paradoxical fact that many pay little attention to it. Through examining the life stories of arguably the most famous Nanai and Hezhe – singers and actors named Kola Beldy and Han Geng – the Russia-China border is revealed not only as a firm and strictly-policed line in physical space, but also as a gap between worlds of possibility and projected aspiration. Beldy and Han’s cases show that many borderland dwellers live with their backs to the border, subtly reinforcing the inter-state divide in everyday ways at least as powerful as official sovereignty regimes.

Introduction: The Nanai, Hezhe and the Russia-China Border¹

Ancestors of the northeast Asian indigenous people today known as Nanai in Russia and Hezhe in China were already living along the Rivers Amur, Sungari and Ussuri long before the (Manchu-)Chinese and Russian empires definitively established their respective presences in this region (see Figure 1).² But since the mid-nineteenth century the actions of these polities and their successor states – down to today’s People’s Republic of China (PRC) and Russian Federation – have had a decisive bearing on all areas of Nanai and Hezhe life. Moreover, many of the social, political and economic transformations undergone by these historically semi-nomadic fishing people, including their terminological separation into Nanai – who number around 12,000 in Russia³ – and Hezhe – of whom

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¹ Material for this paper was gathered in a number of ways. Several spells of ethnographic research in northeastern China and the Russian Far East between winter 2013 and autumn 2015 afforded opportunities to gather background information on the Nanai and Hezhe, as well as converse with the widow of one of the protagonists of this paper – Kola Beldy – in Khabarovsk. Subsequent to this further biographical information regarding Beldy and the second figure discussed here – Han Geng – were gathered from open archival and media sources (including TV and newspaper reports and social network forums), crosschecked to ensure accuracy.

² It remains unclear precisely when the Tungusic Nanai/Hezhe, possibly related to Evenk herders further west, arrived in East Asia. For some speculative early ideas on this question see Sergei Shirokogoroff, “Northern Tungus Migrations in the Far East (Goldi and Their Ethnical Affinities),” *Journal of the North China Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 62 (1926): 123–183.

³ Goskomstat, “Vserossiiskaia perepis’ naseleniia 2010 goda [All-Russian Population Census 2010],” 2010. Accessed June 27, 2018: http://www.gks.ru/free_doc/new_site/perepis2010/croc/perepis_itogi1612.htm

around 5,300 today live in China⁴ – have been directly related to the drawing of an inter-state border between them. The Rivers Amur and Ussuri, once centres of local livelihoods and cosmologies, became stretches of the Sino-Russian border by treaties signed in 1858 (Aigun) and 1860 (Peking) respectively, and since then have served as increasingly firm edges of two distinct “homelands” for each of the Nanai and Hezhe.⁵

Unsurprisingly given their history of separation, Nanai/Hezhe⁶ have long been discussed in scholarship – and have often seen themselves – primarily in terms of their status as a “cross-border,” “trans-frontier” or “divided people” (Ch. *kuajie minzu*, Rus. *razdelennyi narod*). This label looms large in both externally-projected and indigenously-generated representations of Nanai/Hezhe identity. Written works on one or both groups by indigenous, Russian and Chinese writers devote considerable attention to how the Sino-Russian border was formed, Soviet and PRC accounts respectively making for interesting comparison as each condemns the other side’s historic mistreatment of Nanai/Hezhe.⁷ Biographies of famous Nanai/Hezhe tell tales of heroic cross-border raids during common Sino-Soviet resistance to Japan,⁸ whilst, in a very different geopolitical context, mid-twentieth-century fiction focuses on clandestine Nanai/Hezhe spy-catching missions during the Sino-Soviet Split.⁹ Most recently, journalistic and ethnological work in both the Russian Far East and Northeast China since the 1990s has made much of the place of the border in Nanai/Hezhe worlds by celebrating the new, if still limited, border-crossing and “reunion” opportunities afforded by post-Soviet processes of regional “opening up.”¹⁰

⁴ Guowuyuan renkou pucha bangongshi, *Diliuci Quan Guo Renkou Pucha [Sixth National Population Census of the People’s Republic of China]* (Beijing: Zhongguo tongji chubanshe, 2010). Accessed June 27, 2018: <http://www.stats.gov.cn/tjsj/pcsj/rkpc/6rp/indexch.htm>

⁵ For more on this “homelandisation,” see Ed Pulford, “The Nanai, Hezhe and Mobilised Loyalties on the Amur,” *History and Anthropology* 28: 4 (2017): 531–552.

⁶ “Nanai/Hezhe” is a shorthand I use throughout here when discussing them together, but it is not an indigenous term among either group nor a statement one way or the other in relation to contemporary debates over Nanai/Hezhe “oneness.” Over time many ethnonyms have been used by Nanai/Hezhe themselves and by outside agents of Russian, Chinese and other states. These include “Goldy” on the Russian side, and variant terms resembling “Hejin” and, derogatorily, “Fishskin Tatars” (Ch. *yupi dazi*) on the Chinese. It was only during the twentieth century that “Nanai” and “Hezhe” became fixed and exclusive categories on the Russian and Chinese sides respectively.

⁷ Hao Qingyun and Ji Yuesheng, *Hezhezu Shehui Wenhua Bianqian Yanjiu [A Study of the Socio-Cultural Transition of the Hezhe]* (Beijing: Xuexi chubanshe, 2016); Iurii Sem, *Nanaitsy: material’naia kul’tura (vtoraia polovina XIX-seredina XX v.): Etnograficheskie ocherki [Nanai: Material Culture (from the Second Half of the Nineteenth Century to the Mid-Twentieth Century)]* (Vladivostok: Institut istorii, arkheologii i etnografii narodov Dal’nego Vostoka, 1973).

⁸ See Hapudou Juanming, *Hezhezu Renwu Zhuan [Prominent Hezhe Figures]* (Hong Kong: Guoji Yanhuang Wenhua Chubanshe, 2006); Vadim Turaev, *Istoriia i kul’tura nanaitsev: istoriko-etnograficheskie ocherki [History and Culture of the Nanai: Historical and Ethnographic Sketches]* (Saint Petersburg: Nauka, 2003).

⁹ Jun Ran, *Antude Houdai [Descendants of Antu]* (Beijing: Renmin Daxue chubanshe, 1984).

¹⁰ Ivan Beldy, ed., *My edinyi narod: o desiatiletii vosstanovleniia etnicheskikh sviazei nanaitsev Rossii i Kitaia [We Are One People: On the Ten Year Anniversary of Reestablishing Ethnic Ties between the Nanai of Russia and China]* (Khabarovsk: RIOTIP, 2002).

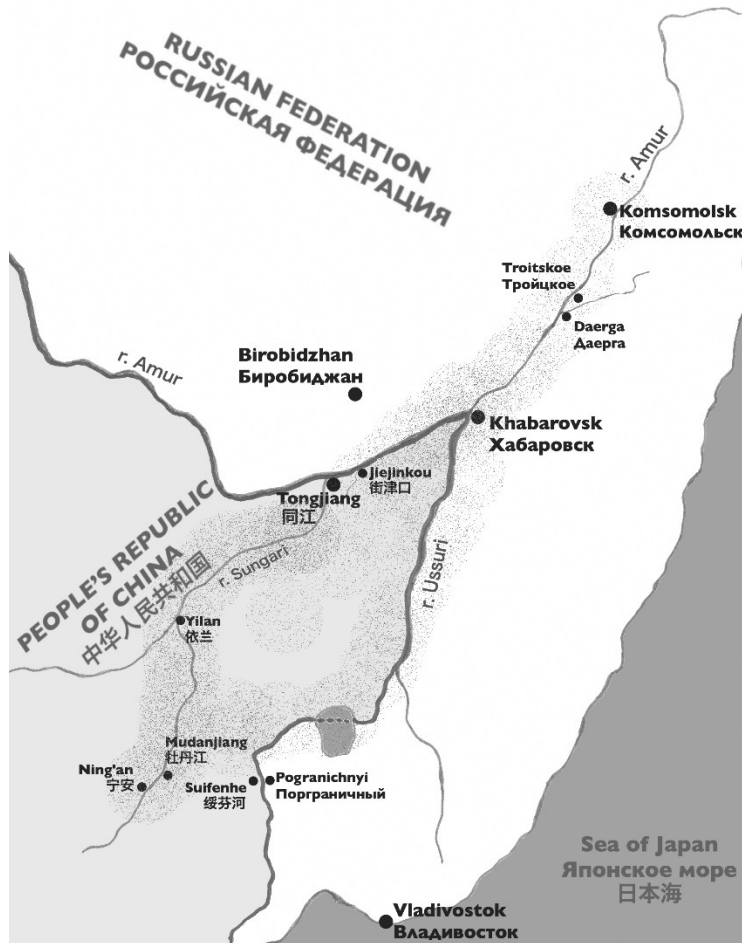


Figure 1: Map Including Shading Indicating (approximate) Range of Historic Nanai/Hezhe Habitation.

This focus on the border as an object of enquiry, or at the very least as a defining feature of Hezhe or Nanai life, has thus emerged within distinct traditions of Chinese and Soviet/Russian ethnology (Ch. *minzuxue*, Rus. *etnologiya*) and related fields. Yet in many regards this interest touches on concerns central to scholarship from the wider Western-derived field of “border studies.” Charting the role which expanding (Manchu-)Chinese and Soviet/Russian polities have had in separating Nanai from Hezhe is a project immediately redolent of Anthony Giddens’ – now contested – articulation of the inextricable connection between states and borders.¹¹ Discussion of the role of borders and communities around them in local and national politics and conflict echoes recent ethnographic work on localised borderisation processes elsewhere in Eurasia by the likes of Madeline Reeves.¹² In addition, current discussions of Nanai/Hezhe border-crossing in the post-Soviet era remind us of work conducted

¹¹ Anthony Giddens, *The Nation-State and Violence (A Contemporary Critique of Historical Materialism 2)* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1985).

¹² Madeleine Reeves, *Border Work: Spatial Lives of the State in Rural Central Asia* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2014).

in other postsocialist locations by the likes of Chris Hann & Idiko Beller-Hann on the Turkish/Georgian border,¹³ and John Urry's wider ideas concerning post-Cold War "mobilities."¹⁴

Yet I wish to suggest here that, notwithstanding the frequency of discussion of the border as a thing in itself, the divide between the Nanai and Hezhe is actually most forcefully maintained in ways which have little to do with China and Russia's northeast Asian frontiers. Rather than being a product of the official operations of the inter-state border itself – from migration to customs and visa regimes or surveillance – Nanai/Hezhe separation is in fact sustained by the paradoxical fact that many do not pay much attention to the border at all. Thus for all that there are important synergies between indigenous, Russian and Chinese studies of the Nanai/Hezhe and Western scholarly work on borders – parallels I reference below where appropriate – much of what follows is a discussion of the border which focuses on persons, places and events far beyond the banks of the Amur or Ussuri.

Specifically, I wish to bring to light the life stories of two individuals who serve, or have served, as the most famous representatives of the Nanai/Hezhe in each of their respective countries. These are Kola Beldy (1929–1993), a Soviet Nanai and Han Geng (1984–present), a Chinese Hezhe, both singers and actors who during their careers achieved national and international acclaim, though only partly because they were Nanai/Hezhe, as we shall see. As the primary material with which this paper is concerned, Beldy and Han's respective biographies, and the similarities and divergences between them, say much about Nanai/Hezhe experiences in Russia and China generally, and about the border between them. To show this, this paper examines two main questions interwoven with its accounts of the two artists' lives: 1) to what extent was the fame and success which each achieved linked to their Nanai/Hezhe origins?; and 2) what kind of emergent role was played by each figure's Nanai/Hezhe identification as their careers developed on the national and international stage? The focus here is thus rarely the border *per se*, but, it will be argued, since each biography says something significant about the specific time and place in which each rose to fame and serves as a source of information regarding the kinds of possible experiences available to Nanai in Russia and Hezhe in China, many deductions can be made about the nature of the inter-community divide.

Saying something about a border by moving far away from the actual line in physical space is in some ways a project redolent of border studies' interest in the diffuse operation of many contemporary borders. Distributed regimes of enforcement, exclusion and inclusion in political spaces such as the European Union (EU) mean that, as Étienne Balibar captures in a pithy maxim, "borders are everywhere."¹⁵ But China and Russia remain very far from forming an EU-like realm of aggregated sovereignty, and whatever the friendly atmospherics of recent years amidst regular summitry between presidents Xi Jinping and Vladimir Putin, the border between them is one whose forceful existence is by far most keenly felt in locations such as the Amur and Ussuri riverbanks. This enforcement, and

¹³ Chris Hann and Ildikó Bellér-Hann, "Markets, Morality and Modernity in North-East Turkey," in *Border Identities: Nation and State at International Frontiers*, eds. Thomas Wilson and Hastings Donnan (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 237–262.

¹⁴ John Urry, *Mobilities* (Oxford: Polity, 2007).

¹⁵ Etienne Balibar, "The Borders of Europe," in *Cosmopolitics: Thinking and Feeling beyond the Nation*, eds. Pheng Cheah and Bruce Robbins (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1998).

historical barriers erected between borderland communities by competing national centres, doubtless lie at the heart of the picture of division I paint here. Soviet/Russian and Chinese “bordering” techniques have been among the most violent recent assertions of bounded Westphalian sovereignty over place, and in the early days of both USSR and PRC nation-building, groups with known cross-border ties like the Nanai/Hezhe were persecuted and contact between them was coercively severed.

But this account which takes us temporally far beyond the heat of Stalinist or Maoist anti-cosmopolitanism and boundary-retrenchment, and spatially far from northeast Asian riverbanks to Moscow and Beijing, Gdansk and Seoul, Addis Ababa and Los Angeles, suggests that “borderisation” processes *per se* may not be the primary factor in delineating the separate lives lived by Nanai and Hezhe today. Rather I describe here a border sustained by processes set in motion by preceding acts of bordering, namely the radical divergence in aspirations and possibilities between those who live on either side of the line. The protagonists of this paper may be international celebrities, but parallel trajectories of separation also exist between much less famous Nanai/Hezhe as they forge a path through life. The dynamics that I highlight here are thus closer to those discussed by geographer Harm de Blij whose work *The Power of Place* offers rich evidence from around the world of how differences in opportunity and mobility continue to perpetuate divisions between people despite the fact that in some areas “certain global playing fields are leveling.”¹⁶

The lives of Beldy and Han are not parallel in terms of the timeframe over which they unfolded, but nevertheless demonstrate that following incorporation into the Soviet/Russian and Chinese worlds, Nanai/Hezhe on each side have long been motivated to orient themselves with their backs to the frontier. Identifying with their respective countries of citizenship and negotiating particular conceptions of Nanai or Hezhe identity emerging within them, rather than anything shared with people over the river, has long offered the primary source of possibility for achieving aspirations. As a result, an individual’s energies necessarily draw one away from the border, widening the gulf of experience separating those on each side. A border such as the Amur thus becomes a gap – a kind of possibility or aspiration gap – between metaphorically turned backs. I now move on to the first of my case studies here to discuss how this occurs.

Kola Beldy: the Sailor from the Tundra¹⁷

Although Kola Beldy later stated at interview that his date and place of birth were not confirmed, his Soviet passport recorded him as having been born in 1929 in Mukha, a now-defunct settlement in Khabarovsk krai’s Nanaiskii raion (district). His father, a hunter, was killed on the job when Kola was young and as a result he was sent to boarding school in Naikhin from where he

¹⁶ Harm de Blij, *The Power of Place: Geography, Destiny, and Globalization’s Rough Landscape* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 4.

¹⁷ A documentary about the life of Kola Beldy entitled “*Moriak iz tundry* [The Sailor from the Tundra]” was created by production company *Studiia Ivana Isacheva* for television chanel *TV Tsentr* in 2010 (broadcast January 4, 2014). This programme serves as the source for some of the artist’s biographical details provided here. Documentary available at *TV Tsentr* website. Accessed June 27, 2018: www.tvc.ru/channel/brand/id/1392

subsequently absconded aged fourteen. Finding his way to Khabarovsk and then Vladivostok, Beldy lied about his age to qualify for a cabin boy's role in the Pacific Fleet, and saw active service in 1945 during the Soviet expulsion of the Japanese from Korea. One operation he was involved in saw Beldy receive a blow to the head, and he was knocked unconscious under misdirected friendly artillery fire. In the mayhem, however, he was spared by the fleeing Japanese who, apparently misled by his "mumbling," "Asian features" and insignia-free cabin boy's uniform, mistook him for one of their own.¹⁸ Following the end of the war and a further three years as a diesel operator on a minesweeper, Beldy moved to Saratov in Russia's Volga region where he secured a place studying at the town's conservatoire, impressing neighbours with his singing and supplementing his student stipend by working in a lead battery factory.¹⁹ In Saratov Beldy married a Russian wife and in 1954 returned to Khabarovsk with her to continue pursuing his musical ambitions. Appearances with classical groups including the Khabarovsk Philharmonia, and various military ensembles swelled Beldy's local renown, and building on this he left the Far East in 1957 for the Sixth Global Festival of Youth and Students in Moscow. Beldy received a commendation for his performance there and widespread critical attention at the national level. Shortly thereafter he was signed to the *Melodiia* record label, joined the All-Russian Concert and Touring Union (*Vserossiiskoe kontsertno-gastrol'noe ob'edinenie*, later *Moskontsert*) and as a result began a life and career which would be firmly rooted in the capital, a world away from the Amur floodplains of Nanaiskii raion,²⁰ let alone the Chinese border.

In Moscow Beldy quickly assumed a professional role as "the most exotic voice of Soviet variety performance,"²¹ churning out what rock critic Artemy Troitsky later termed "tundra-orientated megahits."²² His songs, composed by Russian and Ukrainian members of the Union of Soviet Composers, speak of the charmingly naïve and "natural" lives supposedly led by the Soviet "Small Peoples of the North" (*malochislennye narody severa*), a classificatory category which persists in Russia today and includes the Nanai alongside polar peoples such as the Chukchi and Nenets, despite the fact that the middle reaches of the Amur are one of Russia's southernmost regions. Songs written by individuals who had never been to the Russian Far East or Far North, and which purported to tell the stories of many different peoples, inevitably drew on an array of muddled and stereotypical themes. Representative titles among Beldy's oeuvre refer both to distant people and places (*Song of the Besotted Yakut*, *Chukchi in a Tent Waits for Dawn*, *Narian Mar*²³) and also serve as general odes to a posited wilderness homeland (*I Will Carry You off to the Tundra*, *Reindeer Herder's Song*, *There is a Pleasant*

¹⁸ Dar'ia Ulanova, "Iunga Kola Beldy [Kola Beldy the Cabin Boy]," *Khabarovskie vesti*, May 8, 2014. Accessed December 11, 2018: <http://www.khab-vesti.ru/themes/5189-yunga-kola-beldy.html>

¹⁹ Anton Morvan, "'Tundra' saratovskogo zavokzal'ia [The 'Tundra' around Saratov Railway Station]," *Obshchestvennoe Mnenie*, March 25, 2010. Accessed June 27, 2018: http://www.om-archive.ru/opinion/index.php?ELEMENT_ID=9102

²⁰ Kino-Teatr.ru, "Kola Beldy," *Kino-Teatr.Ru Encyclopedia*, 2018. Accessed June 27, 2018: <https://www.kino-teatr.ru/kino/acter/m/star/237446/bio/>

²¹ Aleksandr Gorbachev, "Kola Beldy i Podlinnaia Istoriia 'Belogo Ostrova,'" *Afisha*, March 3, 2011. Accessed June 27, 2018: <https://daily.afisha.ru/archive/volna/archive/8804/>

²² Artemy Troitsky, *Tusovka: Who's Who in the New Soviet Rock Culture* (London: Omnibus Press, 1990).

²³ A town on the Arctic Ocean in the Nenets Autonomous Okrug.

Little Town in the North).²⁴ In each of these two- to three-minute ditties Beldy performs resonant operatic vocals backed by jangly guitar, drums, and varying combinations of piano, synthesiser, strings and woodwind. The accompanying videos, including those on a 1977 “best of” entitled *Kola Beldy Sings*, feature shots of the artist dressed in outfits ranging from unspecified ethnic robes to green shirt, blazer and enormous polka-dot bowtie interspersed with footage of reindeer sleds, snow-clad wooden towns, Arctic heavy industry, shipping, and other scenes of “northern” life.

Whilst it would be simplistic to suggest that Beldy was “used” by the Soviet authorities, the content of his songs conformed both to official portrayals of generic “northern peoples” as simple recipients of development and modernisation from a benevolent state, and cognate views among the USSR’s majority Slavic population. The musical stylings of Beldy’s songs also served the ideological interests of the Soviet cultural-industrial complex. As historian Christine Evans notes, tunes such as *I Will Carry You off to the Tundra* whose “opening guitar hook [was] reminiscent of the 1960s surf guitar at the beginning of the *Batman* theme song” showed young people that “there need not be any contradiction between appreciation for Western musical styles and belief in Soviet socialism.”²⁵ That Beldy’s work gained him widespread domestic fame suggested that this was a successful recipe, one which the singer himself played no small part in concocting.

In the wake of a performance at the 1972 Soviet “Song of the Year” competition, Beldy became a laureate of the All-Russian Contest for Variety Performers [*artisty estrady*] (1960), an Honoured Artist [*zashluzhennyi artist*] of the Yakut ASSR (1964) and an Honoured Artist of the RSFSR (1985). His biggest hit, the abovementioned *I Will Carry You off to the Tundra*, remains well known across the former Soviet space to this day. In addition, he toured extensively, primarily within the socialist and non-aligned space but also beyond. Beldy was the first Soviet performer to win a prize at the Sopot International Song Festival (later rebranded *Intervision*)²⁶ in Poland in 1973²⁷ and his touring earned him numerous gifts and awards, including a bust of the Kazakh poet and folksinger Jambyl Jabayev, a medal and golden tea set from the Ethiopian Emperor Haile Selassie and national orders of merit from Czechoslovakia and the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. In France, where he performed as a guest of the Communist newspaper *l’Humanité* he was labelled “the golden voice of the north” by the mayor of the town of Mézin, an epithet which stuck.²⁸

²⁴ The Russian names for the songs mentioned in this paragraph are, in order: *Pesnia vliublennogo iakuta, Chukchi v chume zhdet rassveta, Nar’ian Mar, Uvezu tebia ia v tundra, Est’ na severe khoroshii gorodok*

²⁵ Christine Evans, “Song of the Year and Soviet Mass Culture in the 1970s,” *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 12: 3 (2011): 636–637.

²⁶ Recent reports have suggested that the Intervision format, the Eastern Bloc’s answer to Eurovision, could be revived among countries opposing the Western hegemony over song contests: see Shang_Dog. “Intervision: The Russian Proposed Song Contest with China, Central Asia,” *Shanghaiist*, October 16, 2009. Accessed November 13, 2018: http://shanghaiist.com/2009/10/16/intervision_the_russian_proposed_so/

²⁷ Roman Waschko, “Sopot Festival Establishes New Format, Includes Disks,” *Billboard*, September 15, 1973. Accessed June 27, 2018: <https://books.google.co.uk/books?id=CQkEAAAAMBAJ&q=kola+beldy&hl=en#v=snippet&q=kola+beldy&f=false>

²⁸ Olga Beldy, “Rasskaz o nanaiskom mal’chike Kole [The Tale of Kola the Nanai Boy],” *Debri-DV*, August 16, 2015. Accessed June 28, 2018: http://debri-dv.com/article/12056/rasskaz_o_nanayskom_malchike_kole

In addition to his musical output, Beldy also made various on-screen appearances including in the 1960 Soviet film *Russkii Suvenir*. This comedy about western capitalists crashing in Siberia on a Vladivostok-Moscow flight and being persuaded to love the Soviet Union by all they see (including a beautiful lady named Varvara) has Beldy furthering his career as a representative of generalised Siberian minorities leading a positive and progressive Soviet life, even if here it is delivered with a degree of self-mockery. Around twenty minutes into the film, he leaps out from behind a tree clad in animal skins, much to the shock of the bourgeois protagonists Mr Peebles (British) and Mr Scott (American). Proclaiming that he is a shaman, Beldy promises to lead them out of the taiga, but when they lose the path and end up near an enormous dam-building project, the shaman reveals that he is in fact no such thing. Removing his bushy fur-lined hat, he instead identifies himself as a worker at the Soviet communications service who is simply dressed up for an evening drama production. The film is a gentle satire of some aspects of the Soviet communism-building project, but Beldy's role nevertheless appears to serve as a relatively serious effort to confirm that the USSR is ushering unsophisticated minority peoples into a new technologically and educationally advanced era. Indeed, Marxist notions of progress emerge even more starkly later in the film when the foreigners encounter a red-neckchiefed pioneer girl named Diamara which, she explains sweetly, is a shortened version of the Russian for "dialectical materialism."

Through this, and other filmic and musical successes, Beldy thus enjoyed a level of stardom far exceeding the wildest dreams of his Nanai coevals who spent most of the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s being marshalled and re-marshalled into various permutations of fishery and forestry collectives according to the whims of central government directives.²⁹ None enjoyed the national profile of this "sailor from the tundra" who reportedly once hosted world chess champion Anatolii Karpov in his Moscow flat, met and performed for Brezhnev and Gorbachev, and received a Volga car as a gift from Chairman of the Council of Ministers Aleksei Kosygin.³⁰ Yet Beldy's two decades as a national and international celebrity nevertheless told a distinctly Nanai story. As shown, his path to and through stardom followed a trajectory in which his ethnic identity was a key component, and just as important was the fact he came from the Russian side of the border, where he eventually returned to see out his final days. I now cross that border to discuss life on the other side of the aspiration gap.

Han Geng: Korea's Hezhe Boy³¹

Although not a direct contemporary of Beldy's – he was not yet ten years old when the Nanai singer passed away in Khabarovsk in 1993 – Han Geng has lived a life comparably rooted in his ethnic

²⁹ Turaev, *Istoriia i kul'tura nanaitsev: istoriko-etnograficheskie ocherki* [History and Culture of the Nanai: Historical and Ethnographic Sketches].

³⁰ Beldy, "Rasskaz o nanaiskom mal'chike Kole [The Tale of Kola the Nanai Boy]."

³¹ Wu Naji, "Changxiang Hanguo de Hezhezu Nanhai [Singing the Praises of Korea's Hezhe Boy]," *Zhongguo Minzu* 7 (2007). Accessed June 27, 2018: <http://wuxizazhi.cnki.net/Magazine/MZTJ200707.html> This 2007 profile in the magazine *Chinese Nationalities* (*Zhongguo Minzu*) describes Han as "Korea's Hezhe boy" and his life story as like a "Hezhe folk tale."

and national context. Born in Mudanjiang, in China's Heilongjiang province, Han left home aged twelve and several years later entered Beijing's Central University of Nationalities (*Zhongyang Minzu Daxue; MinDa*) majoring in the traditional dances of China's 56 ethnic groups (*minzu*) and minoring in ballet and martial arts (*wushu*). The fashioning of star performers from amongst China's minorities being a key element of *MinDa*'s highly intensive dance programme,³² Han quickly showed promise and was selected as a youth representative for the Hezhe at the 1999 National Day parade in Beijing celebrating the 50th anniversary of the founding of the PRC. Han's graduation performance – a composition called *Hunter (lieren)* on a distinctly Hezhe theme – also earned him second place at the China Minority Ethnic Dance Competition's "Peacock Cup (*kongque bei*)."

Towards the end of his time at *MinDa*, Han attended and passed an audition for the Korean company SM Entertainment (SME) who were seeking three Chinese performers to "train to become Asian stars."³³ Not wanting to be a financial burden on his parents after graduating, he left for Seoul and underwent a period of training still more intense than anything he had endured at university.³⁴ According to his own account, SME's regimen permitted only four hours per day for sleep amidst relentless instruction in dancing and Korean language.³⁵ The hard work paid off, however, and in 2005 Han – who would now often be known by the Korean rendering of his name "Hankyung" – was selected to be a member of Super Junior (Kor. *Syup'ōjunio*), SME's new twelve-person male act whose national and international popularity quickly exploded. Super Junior's dance and electronica-influenced musical output revolves around themes of love, loss and self-reflection sung in a mixture of Korean and English and written by specialist international pop song composers according to the bewilderingly complex division of labour which characterises the manufactured world of Korean Pop (K-Pop).³⁶ Their music videos are slick productions with inch-perfect choreographed dance routines, several outfit changes in the course of a single clip, and camera angles which alternate between shots of the impeccably dressed group dancing through futuristic black and white disco spaces to close-ups of each individual member's perfect skin, mascara-lined eyes and meticulously disheveled hair.

³² See posting: "CUN School Magazine Han Geng's Interview," www.sup3rjunior.wordpress.com, 2011. Accessed June 27, 2018: <https://sup3rjunior.com/2011/07/05/cun-school-magazine-han-gengs-interview-from-1106xx/> Han himself later spoke in this 60th anniversary interview with *MinDa*'s magazine of how hard and strict university teaching had been. After arriving late for class one day, he recalled, he and some friends were tricked by a teacher into eating a large quantity of breakfast buns before spending two hours doing stomach-churning somersaults.

³³ Han Geng, "Mianju Dang Bu Zhu Canlan de Xiaorong [A Mask Cannot Conceal My Shining Smile]," *Kehai Gushi Bolan (Zhihui)*, 2009. Accessed June 29, 2018: <http://wuxizazhi.cnki.net/Search/KHGS200908006.html>

³⁴ Yang Hongyan, "Han Geng Yong Ai de Chibang Lai Shouhu [Han Geng: Come Protect Me with the Wings of Love]," *Sheshi Zhi Chu / Life on the Edge*, 2007. Accessed June 27, 2018: <http://www.cnki.com.cn/Article/CJFDTotal-SSZC200710011.htm>

³⁵ Han Geng, "Mianju Dang Bu Zhu Canlan de Xiaorong [A Mask Cannot Conceal My Shining Smile]."

³⁶ Park Gil-sung, "Manufacturing Creativity: Production, Performance and Dissemination of K-Pop," *Korea Journal* 53: 4 (2013): 21.



Figure 2: Super Junior Performing in Thailand in 2009. Han Geng is Second from the Right
(Credit: Sry85 [CC BY 3.0], from Wikimedia Commons)

From their early years Super Junior won countless awards in Korea (including a coveted Golden Disk Disk Daesang award for their 2009 hit *Sorry Sorry*) and overseas from Thailand to Taiwan, Singapore and Japan. Today their biggest hits *Mr Simple*, *Sorry Sorry*, *Bonamana* and *No Other* all have between 75 and 150 million views on video website YouTube. Because of Han's involvement as the first Chinese (and indeed, the first foreign) performer ever to go through the training system and succeed in a K-Pop group, Mainland Chinese fans took an interest from the beginning. Seeking to tap the growing Chinese fan base, and following a policy common to many Korean management companies of selecting subgroups from larger collectives, SME chose Han to lead a smaller band 'Super Junior-M' back to his home country in 2008. The group met with immediate critical and commercial acclaim, with Han noting that he personally made over one million RMB (approx. 125,000 at the time) in their first year. Yet being back in China was not without its inconveniences, partly because Han had to serve as a translator for his Korean band-mates, none of whom could speak Chinese and knew only basic pronunciation for singing purposes.³⁷ This, and a host of other grievances including work permit irregularities during his early career, eventually led to an acrimonious split between Han and his Korean Svengalis. After a protracted legal battle which drew the sympathy of his millions of fans worldwide (who self-identify as *gengfans* or *gengsters*) he eventually parted ways with SME in late 2009.

Since then, however, Han has continued to enjoy great success, both domestically and internationally. In China itself, his notable public appearances have included performing among the celebrity-packed cast of singers on the song *Beijing Welcomes You* (*Beijing huanying ni*), the theme for

³⁷ Lordbordem, "Ex-Super Junior Member Hangeng's Recent Interview Raises Several Eyebrows," *www.soompi.com*, September 30, 2013. Accessed June 27, 2018: <http://www.soompi.com/2013/09/30/ex-super-junior-member-hangengs-recent-interview-raises-several-eyebrows/#.UwSiMHnYu0v>

the 2008 Olympic Games, as well as songs for the 2010 Shanghai World Expo, the 2010 Guangzhou Asian Games and the 2011 Shenzhen Summer Universiade. In 2011 Han also appeared as the opening act on the annual CCTV Spring Festival Gala, then and now the world's most-watched television programme. In addition to prominent official appearances, he has also continued to produce new music, releasing two solo albums, the first of which has sold over one million copies worldwide. Most of his songs – compositions in Mandarin interspersed with bursts of English – feature pulsing electronic beats and liberal use of vocoder, although his output also includes gentler ballads accompanied by acoustic guitar. Domestic and overseas accolades gained on the back of his solo work have included awards for Han's music, dancing, acting and fashion sense and, within China, even his moral conduct³⁸ and diligence.³⁹ The global scale of his success was unequivocally affirmed in November 2012 when he graduated from the Asia and Asia-Pacific rounds to win “Best Worldwide Act” at MTV's European Music Awards, following this with an MTV World Music Award for “Best Male Artist” in 2014.

Like Beldy, Han's musical career has also led to on-screen appearances, including a cameo role as Deng Xiaoping in the 2011 epic *The Founding of a Party* (Ch. *Jiandang weiye*) released to mark the 80th anniversary of the Chinese Communist Party. In 2014 Han also appeared in *Transformers 4: Age of Extinction* (and had a song on the soundtrack), playing the role of a panicked Hong Kong musician whose open-topped car is suddenly sucked up into the air by a vast evil magnetic spaceship. Although receiving near universally critical reviews, *Transformers 4* was at time the tenth-highest grossing film of all time (it has since slipped to twenty-first), in large part thanks to the involvement of a Chinese producers and actors, attracting a vast Chinese audience. Han's association with the production, as well as his MTV awards, leave little doubt about the magnitude of his global profile which continues to develop. However asynchronous, his career trajectory also makes for compelling comparison with that of Kola Beldy.

Diverging Lines

Other than the fact that both Beldy and Han were propelled from lesser-known corners of northeast Asia to become stars of stage and screen, there is, on the face of it, much that is very different about these two biographies. The staggered time periods, places and people involved, and the distinct contexts of late-Soviet modernity/socialism and twenty-first century PRC postmodernity/postsocialism, might at first appear to pose a barrier to comparison. But by laying these biographies side-by-side, it nevertheless becomes possible to reach a tentative understanding of the aspirations and possibilities

³⁸ At the 3rd Hua Ding entertainment awards in 2010, Han was the winner in the category ‘Best New Actor (Moral Cultivation)’. Please see: chinesemov.com. “Awards and Nominations Received by Han Geng,” *Chinesemov.Com*, 2012. Accessed June 28, 2018: <http://chinesemov.com/actors2/Han-Geng-Awards.html>

³⁹ East Fashion 50 Most Beautiful People, reported by: People's Daily. “2011 Zhongguo Zuimei 50 Ren: Xinggan Mein+youai Xingnan 2011 [The 50 Most Beautiful Chinese People of 2011: Beautiful Sexy Women + Friendly, Fashionable Guys,” *People.Com.Cn*, December 5, 2011. Accessed June 30, 2018: <http://chinese.people.com.cn/GB/16500162.html>

available to Nanai and Hezhe respectively over time, and thus to discuss more widely the border as a gap between these.

To return to the first of the questions raised in the introduction – key to the wider argument since it places Beldy and Han as denizens of the borderland – it is evident that the initial impetus for the fame which each later achieved had a fundamental connection to their Nanai/Hezhe origins. Neither man’s career would have been possible without this. In Beldy’s case, the particular asset which allowed him to succeed – other than being an undoubtedly very talented singer – remained the fact that he was Nanai, throughout his career. His state-employed managers at *Melodiia* or *Moskontsert* would very likely not have promoted him as a singer of songs on almost exclusively “northern” themes had he not represented such a group. The world of Soviet *estrada* was almost as micromanaged a sphere as the K-Pop milieu in which Han was later trained,⁴⁰ and Beldy’s artistic output, costumes and official appearances thus all spoke of the way in which an ambitious and talented Nanai was most likely to have his/her image crafted, and could thus best succeed, within the entertainment establishment of the late Soviet period. Beldy’s early musical activities in Saratov and Khabarovsk may have been dominated by performances of European classics, but stardom came as he stuck to minority themes. Thus notwithstanding his Moscow-based life, and the scope of his international appearances, Beldy was to a significant degree unable to leave the Amur behind. His sphere of operations expanded well beyond identification solely as Nanai, but retained the imprint of the Soviet Small Peoples of the North even as he navigated the tour routes of socialist internationalism.

At least initially, the characteristic which permitted Han to follow his own road to success was equally embedded in his Hezhe background. *MinDa*, the university whose schooling system he entered at a young age (almost the same age, incidentally, as that at which Beldy ran away to join the Navy) operates on a quota system for recruiting students from across China’s official 55 ethnic minorities. Today as then, although the largest single contingent in the *MinDa* student body is Han Chinese, the university’s structure and academic focus principally revolve around minority and ethnic concerns. The fact that Han attended *MinDa* at all, majored in ‘ethnic dancing,’ and counted representing the Hezhe at the 1999 National Day parade among his early high-profile appearances, all speak of the decisive bearing which Han’s *minzu* background had on his early success. It can be seen to have been pivotal later too, as without being in Beijing at *MinDa* in the first place, the opportunity to audition at SME would likely never have arisen.

However, on leaving the borderlands as teenagers and following paths of ambition which would see them spending the early part of their performing lives in Moscow or Beijing, both Beldy and Han entered worlds in which the specifics of their Nanai/Hezhe origins became aggregated within more generalised classificatory categories. As pivotal to Kola Beldy’s success as his Nanai background was the fact that the Nanai fall within the broader ‘Small Peoples of the North’ classification and indeed it can be argued that inherent appeal of his songs was reliant on an audience which knew or cared little about whether the Nanai actually rode reindeer (which they do not), whether the Amur region was tundra (it is taiga) or indeed whether there was any real justification for concatenating populations as

⁴⁰ Evans, “Song of the Year and Soviet Mass Culture in the 1970s.”

diverse as the Buddhist Turkic Yakuts and the animist Paleosiberian Chukchi. Indeed, one need look no further for evidence of the hegemony of a generalised notion of ‘northern peoples’ than Beldy’s involvement with the 1975 film *Dersu Uzala*,⁴¹ one of the few well-known Soviet cultural artefacts which does deal with a specifically Nanai subject. Winner of the 1976 Oscar for Best Foreign Language Film, this joint Soviet-Japanese production directed by Akira Kurosawa tells the story of the eponymous Nanai guide of pre-Soviet Russian explorer Vladimir Arsenev. Speaking later, Vladimir Vasilev, the Mosfilm director and Kurosawa’s Soviet counterpart reported that Beldy arrived suddenly on set in 1973 and announced with characteristic humour, “I am Dersu Uzala’s grandson and I want to play his grandpa!” However, the fact that Beldy had a stammer, and, as his widow Olga later noted, had an excessively ‘aristocratic’ bearing ultimately made this impossible.⁴² The role was filled instead by the Tuvan actor Maksim Munzuk with Beldy assisting the directors in developing music derived partly from that of indigenous peoples.⁴³ Tuva lies almost 3,000 km to the west the Amur, and its inhabitants have almost nothing in common with the Nanai. But where the film industry was concerned, including in contexts of international collaboration, distant minorities were relatively interchangeable, and actors like Munzuk did well to remain flexible.

The Stalin-devised Soviet nationalities system which classified the Nanai as Nanai, Tuvans as Tuvans and to a large extent determined the range of opportunities, benefits and limitations they and all other groups were subject to, was one of many political structures and technologies borrowed from the USSR by the PRC soon after its 1949 founding.⁴⁴ The status of many of contemporary China’s state institutions as Soviet facsimiles makes the Sino-Soviet/Russian border a particularly intriguing kind of possibility gap, for it often seems to operate as a kind of mirror, on either side of which very similar but separate processes occur. A comparison between Han Geng and Kola Beldy provides compelling evidence of this. To begin with at least, Han like Beldy also entered an environment comparable to that of the undifferentiated Soviet northern minority, *MinDa* being an institution whose very existence presupposes some kind of equivalency between groups designated a “*minzu*.” Like Soviet minority nationalities, *minzu* today continue to be identified primarily through an expressive repertoire of songs, dances and colourful costumes, performing their place in the wider multi-ethnic Chinese pantheon in as depoliticised (and yet therefore paradoxically highly political) manner as possible. Illustrative of the extent to which his generalised *minzu* status impacted on Han is the fact that his university days saw him form a lifelong friendship with Sun Le, a student four years ahead of him from western China’s Ningxia region and a member of the Muslim Hui minority. Sun became a mentor to Han, and subsequently his manager when he went professional.

⁴¹ Please see Yuri Slezkine, *Arctic Mirrors: Russia and the Small Peoples of the North* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994), 360–361.

⁴² GuberniaTV, “Kola Beldy. Novosti. GuberniaTV,” *GuberniaTV*, January 28, 2014. Accessed June 27, 2018: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vMAWiPTACTg>

⁴³ Kino-Teatr.ru, “Kola Beldy.”

⁴⁴ Deborah Kaple, *Dream of a Red Factory: The Legacy of High Stalinism in China* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994); Fei Hsiao-tung. *Towards a People’s Anthropology* (Beijing: New World Press, 1981).

After university, however, Han's career quickly took a trajectory in which his Hezhe background played considerably less role, however important it had been initially in determining his ability to be at a university in Beijing, attend SME's audition there, and pass it (thanks to skills learnt at *MinDa*). On leaving university, as Han himself attests in a 2009 autobiographical account, he made the challenging transition from something he tellingly referred to as "ethnic dancing (*minzuwu*)" to fast-paced "modern dancing (*xiandaiwu*)."⁴⁵ This statement from the artist himself encodes many of the notions of the Nanai/Hezhe as "primitive" and naïve peoples which are present in Beldy's songs. But in contrast to Beldy who saw his professional career as a modern Nanai tied firmly to his ethnic origins – with tundra-oriented themes being alloyed to fashionably jangly guitar hooks – growing up on the Chinese side the border and at a later date, presented Han with a sphere of possibility which allowed him to leave behind entirely any association with the Hezhe (about which his own knowledge is limited⁴⁶). At this point in time and in an "Asian" country visited by K-Pop management groups, being "modern" meant ceasing altogether to belong to a *minzu*. Han's fans, many of whom have no idea he is Hezhe or who the Hezhe are, are spread around the world far beyond the PRC's traditional socialist "friends," from Southeast Asia to Korean communities in the United States.

Little serves to illustrate the contrast between the place of Nanai/Hezhe identification at the pinnacle of each artist's career better than two video scenes where each appears alongside emblems of their unabashedly modernist Soviet and PRC contexts. Kola Beldy's 1972 video for *I Will Carry You off to the Tundra* embodies many of the tensions inherent in the relationship between the Soviet establishment and its "northern" peoples as he dances carrying a suitcase on the steps of a large passenger liner (presumably the means by which he plans to take the addressee away to the tundra) (see figs. 13–14). Aeroflot's bold hammer and sickle insignia speaks of a vast country in which technologically advanced Soviet infrastructure can nevertheless carry one off to such a distant, almost imaginary, climatic zone. However, the scene also conversely implies that the only way that Beldy – here posited as an inhabitant of that wilderness – can go there is clad in the fur-lined garb typical of many of his on-screen appearances, it mattering little that these particular items look far from warm enough for anything other than a very mild winter. Evident here is a stage-managed representation of the lengths the Soviet state went to stress the cultural particularities of minorities, even as it asserted their need to be guided towards a socialist future.⁴⁷

In contrast to Beldy's skimpy robe, Han Geng's outfit for his 2011 CCTV Spring Festival Gala (*chunwan*) appearance is a slick combination of shiny overcoat and formal attire like that which he has worn since Super Junior.⁴⁸ The year 2011 marking a milestone in the expansion of China's new high-

⁴⁵ Han Geng, "Mianju Dang Bu Zhu Canlan de Xiaorong [A Mask Cannot Conceal My Shining Smile]."

⁴⁶ Sourcing pronouncements about the Hezhe from Han himself is difficult since he rarely speaks save to highlight that, having grown up in the urban environs of Mudanjiang and Beijing, "with regard to a lot of minute details [about the Hezhe], I'm not that clear" – please see "CNNGo Interview with Han Geng – From 110420," www.sup3rjunior.wordpress.com, 2011. Accessed June 27, 2018: <https://sup3rjunior.com/2011/06/21/cnngo-interview-with-han-geng-from-110420/>

⁴⁷ These themes are masterfully explored in Slezkine, *Arctic Mirrors: Russia and the Small Peoples of the North*.

⁴⁸ China Central Television, "2011 CCTV SPRING FESTIVAL GALA," *CCTV*, February 2, 2011. Accessed June 29, 2018: http://english.cntv.cn/special/2011_spring_festival/live/

speed rail network, Han emerges from a CRH *Harmony* train amidst hordes of exuberant dancers to sing the theme song *Returning Home for New Year*. Watched annually by over 700 million Chinese people,⁴⁹ the Gala show here demonstrates how rapid infrastructural development is aiding the country's population in making their traditional annual journey home. Every year the *chunwan* features many ethnically-inflected performances demonstrating the joyful notionally song- and dance-filled lives which China's *minzu* reportedly lead across the land. But already a star of international renown, Han merely appears in the costume of today's urban Chinese middle classes, in this context firmly cementing the lack of any kind of Hezhe element in his public image.

Conclusion: Border as Aspiration/Possibility Gap

Not everybody wants to be a pop star, and this paper does not foreground consideration of the extent to which either Beldy or Han were propelled to success purely by their own desires. Indeed, given the extent to which the careers of both were forged in stage-managed environments, it is very probable that the specific wishes of the stars themselves were at any given time only one among many factors determining the paths they took. But the artistic biographies discussed here nevertheless tentatively offer a novel lens through which to consider Nanai and Hezhe experiences and the border between them over time. At once tied to this frontier (by the pivotal role which their Nanai/Hezhe backgrounds played in their early roads to success) and yet by default oriented away from it, Beldy and Han's stories demonstrate the manner in which an international border can also serve as a gulf between the trajectories of people who lead lives which are otherwise at least partially comparable.

To suggest this frame as a productive way in which to reflect on the nature of the Russia-China border is not to detract from the fact that it remains an international boundary with considerable fixity and force. As noted above, this is not a border which has become particularly distributed or diffuse, and divisions between Nanai and Hezhe do not "wax and wane" as much as Chris Rumford suggests is the case in other global contexts today.⁵⁰ Yet the biographies of Beldy and Han reveal the ways in which borders, to whatever extent they are actively enforced, may be sustained by the seemingly unrelated actions of those living out lives in distinct spheres either side of them. Whether in the twentieth or the twenty-first century, both Beldy and Han led highly mobile lives in spheres which had to a significant extent been "flattened," yet very different kinds of flattened space were available to each depending on which side of the border they were from. As de Blij has observed, the "power of place" remains formidable.

More could be said here about the broader socio-political reasons behind why Beldy and Han – and Nanai and Hezhe generally – are presented with such different ways of fulfilling their aspirations in different places and at different times. Pursuing this line of enquiry would shed further light on the extent to which the worlds of borderland dwellers have diverged within Russia and China respectively.

⁴⁹ CCTV, "2016 Yangshi Chunwan Shoushi Shuju Fabu Shouzhong Zong Guimo Da 10.33yi [Audience Figures for the 2016 Chunwan Are in: Total Audience Reaches 1.03 Billion]," *Chinanews.Com*, February 8, 2016. Accessed June 30, 2018: <http://www.chinanews.com/y1/2016/02-08/7752795.shtml>

⁵⁰ Chris Rumford, "Introduction: Theorizing Borders," *European Journal of Social Theory* 9: 2 (2006): 157.

But for our purposes here, encounters with reindeer and MTV awards attest vividly to the possibilities available within specific national contexts and periods, and thus of the border as a gap between those possibilities.