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CURRENTS OF DISSONANCE: ASYNCHRONOUS BELONGING AND CONTESTED PASTS ON THE AMUR FRONTIER

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ABSTRACT

This article explores how historical imagination shapes asynchronous belonging along the Amur River, a significant borderland between Russia and China. We analyze the interplay between official state narratives—emphasizing heroic conquest, strategic importance, and industrial development—and resilient localized memories that often recount hardship, diverse experiences, and unofficial histories. Through a comprehensive textual and discourse analysis of historical documents, literary works, media reports, and public debates, informed by foundational theories of imagined communities, invented traditions, and the politics of memory, we demonstrate that a sense of belonging in this dynamic region is perpetually negotiated. Individuals and communities navigate multiple temporalities simultaneously, leading to a fragmented yet deeply personal and resilient identity that reflects both deeply ingrained historical ties and the fluid nature of contemporary life in a post-socialist context. The Amur frontier thus serves as a powerful case study for understanding how contested pasts influence present-day identities, often leading to radical polarization, in strategically vital borderland zones.

Keywords: Amur River, historical imagination, asynchronous belonging, borderlands, national identity, memory politics, post-socialism, Russian Far East, Komsomolsk-na-Amure, Permskoe.

INTRODUCTION

The Amur as a Crucible of Contested Temporalities

The Amur River, a majestic and imposing waterway that delineates a substantial portion of the border between Russia and China, is far more than a mere geographical demarcation. It is a profound and intricate crucible where diverse historical imaginations converge, clash, and ultimately forge a complex sense of belonging, one that frequently stands in asynchronous relation to official state-sanctioned narratives. This article delves into the mechanisms by which various historical interpretations, particularly those revolving around processes of early settlement, national defense, and ambitious industrialization, contribute to the fragmented, evolving, and often contentious identities of the communities residing along this geopolitically crucial frontier. By focusing on the Amur region, we aim to provide a rich empirical case study for comprehending the intricate processes through which national and local histories are constructed, vigorously contested, and ultimately internalized within a dynamic borderland context (Billé & Humphrey, 2021 [5]; Humphrey, 2012 [33]; Stephan, 1994 [64]).

The core concept underpinning this exploration is "asynchronous belonging," a framework developed to articulate how individuals and collectivities within this region simultaneously harbor, and sometimes reconcile, allegiances to disparate historical narratives. This phenomenon often manifests as a palpable tension between the grand, official histories—which typically extol heroic conquest, monumental national sacrifice, and linear progress—and the nuanced, lived experiences of local populations, whose memories may recall periods of profound hardship, forced displacement, or complex, multi-cultural interactions (Boym, 2001 [9]; Spillman, 1997 [63]). The asynchronous quality of belonging is particularly pronounced in frontier zones, which are inherently characterized by the layering and intertwining of multiple historical strata: the enduring presence of indigenous cultures, waves of colonial expansion, periods of revolutionary fervor, and the transformative effects of post-Soviet transitions (Hirsch & Stewart, 2006 [30]; Lemon, 2009 [38]; Peshkov, 2014 [48]). This temporal disjuncture resonates deeply with Ernst Bloch's concept of "non-simultaneity" (1991 [7]), where remnants of past modes of being and thinking persist within a rapidly changing present. While Bloch applied this to the uneven

modernization of early 20th-century Germany, our study adapts it to the post-socialist context, where the collapse of a once-dominant future-oriented imaginary has left a landscape of "nonsynchronous contradictions," forcing a re-evaluation of past projects and their legacies.

The historical tapestry of the Amur is richly woven with narratives of "pioneering spirit" and ambitious "development." From the initial forays of Cossack expeditions and the establishment of early peasant settlements like Permskoe in the mid-19th century, through the imposition of forced labor camps and the construction of monumental industrial centers during the Soviet era, to contemporary efforts at economic revitalization, the region has been consistently framed as an "empty" frontier destined for conquest and transformation (Bassin, 1999 [2]; Kiriukhin, 1970 [36]; Shulman, 2007 [61]; Widdis, 2000 [68]). However, these overarching narratives, while powerful, often overshadow the intricate realities of daily existence, the tragic displacement of indigenous peoples (Slezkine, 2016 [62]), and the diverse and often coerced motivations of those who arrived to settle and build there (Rahmonova-Schwarz, 2010 [52]; Rockhill-Khlinovskaya, 2010 [53]). The official discourse of progress and development, exemplified by the Soviet project, presented a linear vision of history, where the new decisively superseded the old. Yet, the persistent memory of earlier phases, such as the pre-Soviet Permskoe village and its original peasant settlers, reveals the inherent fragility of such linear historical constructs and the enduring power of alternative temporalities.

This research builds upon and critically engages with foundational theories in the social sciences, including Benedict Anderson's concept of "imagined communities" (1983 [1]) and Ernest Gellner's work on "nations and nationalism" (1983 [23]), which explain how a sense of shared identity is constructed among people who may never directly interact. We also draw heavily on Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger's seminal work on "the invention of tradition" (1983 [31]), which provides a critical lens for examining how historical narratives, rituals, and symbols are consciously created and propagated to legitimize power structures or to foster social cohesion. Furthermore, the study is deeply informed by scholarship on the "politics of memory" (Laruelle & Karnysheva, 2020 [37]; Nadkarni & Shevchenko, 2014 [45]), analyzing how historical narratives are strategically manipulated, selectively remembered, and fiercely contested for political ends. By meticulously examining how various historical narratives are produced, disseminated through official and unofficial channels, and subsequently received, reinterpreted, and resisted by the local populace, we aim to uncover the intricate mechanisms through which a sense of belonging is forged and perpetually redefined in a region characterized by its shifting historical sands. This article specifically explores the enduring and often divisive power of historical imagination in shaping contemporary identities along the Amur, acknowledging that these imaginations are rarely monolithic but instead form a dynamic mosaic of official pronouncements, enduring local lore, and deeply personal interpretations that defy simple categorization.

Methods: Deconstructing the Layers of Historical Imagination

To comprehensively analyze the intricate relationship between historical imagination and asynchronous belonging along the Amur River, this study employs a multi-faceted methodological approach. Our framework integrates rigorous textual analysis of diverse historical, literary, and media sources with insights gleaned from existing ethnographic research concerning the region, allowing for a nuanced understanding of both macro-level narratives and micro-level lived experiences.

Data Collection and Sources

The data for this study was meticulously gathered from a broad spectrum of primary and secondary sources, designed to capture the multiple layers of historical imagination at play:

- Official Historical Documents and State Propaganda: This category includes Soviet-era state decrees, official histories of the Far East (e.g., Dorodnov & Khlebnikov, 1967 [14]; Zhukov & Izmailova, 1977 [72]), and propaganda materials (posters, films, and press releases) that shaped the public perception of the Amur region as a frontier of socialist development. We focused on identifying recurring motifs, celebratory language, and the explicit construction of "founding myths" for industrial centers like Komsomolsk-na-Amure. This also involved examining how early Russian colonization was retroactively framed within Soviet narratives.

- Literary Works and Cultural Productions: A significant portion of the analysis focused on canonical and popular literary works that engaged with the Amur's history. This included Soviet historical novels (e.g., Nikolai Zadornov's Amur-Saga, 2023 [71]; Vera Ketlinskaia's Fortitude), regional chronicles (Cherkasov, 2019 [10]; Glebova, 2011 [28]; Kiriukhin, 1970 [36]), and other cultural products (plays, songs) that contributed to the regional imaginary (Gasiorowska, 1954 [22]; Twarog, 1960 [55]). We paid particular attention to how these works depicted peasant settlers, Komsomol volunteers, indigenous populations, and the natural environment.

- Local Media and Public Discourse: To capture contemporary historical debates and localized memories, we analyzed regional newspapers (e.g., Dalnevostochnyi Komsomolsk, Tikhookeanskaia Zvezda, Nash Gorod), online forums (e.g., KOMCITY.RU), and reports on public commemorations. This provided direct insight into the "memory wars" surrounding Komsomolsk's founding, particularly the 2015 petition to recalculate its age. We specifically looked for arguments, counter-arguments, rhetorical strategies, and expressions of emotion related

to historical periodization and identity.

- Academic Scholarship and Ethnographic Studies: Existing academic works on the Russian Far East, borderland studies, and post-socialist transformations served as crucial secondary sources, providing theoretical grounding and comparative insights. While not primary data, these studies offered ethnographic context and analytical frameworks (e.g., Billé & Humphrey, 2021 [5]; Peshkov, 2014 [42]; Ssorin-Chaikov, 2016 [52]).

Analytical Approaches

Our analysis employed a combination of qualitative methodologies:

1. Textual Analysis: This involved close reading and systematic interpretation of the collected texts. We identified key themes, symbols, metaphors, and narrative structures used to represent the past. For official documents, we examined how history was selectively presented to legitimize state actions and construct a desired collective identity. In literary works, we explored how character development, plot, and descriptive language contributed to historical imagination. We also tracked recurring tropes, such as the "empty land" motif or the "heroic builder," and their evolution over different historical periods.

2. Discourse Analysis: Building on textual analysis, discourse analysis examined how language was used to construct, maintain, and challenge particular historical narratives in public debates. We paid particular attention to:

   - Framing: How were Permskoe and Komsomolsk framed by different actors (e.g., as "ancestor" vs. "destroyer," "new beginning" vs. "continuation")?
   - Rhetorical Devices: The use of evocative language, appeals to patriotism, or accusations of "amnesia" (Ovchinnikov, 1991 [14]) to persuade public opinion.
   - Antagonistic Pairings: How did the debates create binary oppositions (e.g., "Soviet vs. Imperial," "new vs. old," "heroes vs. victims")?
   - Politicization of History: How seemingly innocuous historical questions (like a city's founding date) became deeply politicized and indicative of broader societal tensions.

3. Historical Contextualization: All sources and debates were situated within their specific historical, political, and socio-economic contexts. For example, the revival of kraievedenie (local history) in the Khrushchev era (Donovan, 2015 [13]), the Sino-Soviet split (Urbansky, 2012 [56]), and the post-Soviet economic crisis (Evans, 2015 [16]) profoundly influenced how the past was perceived and utilized.

Theoretical Framework

The study is conceptually anchored in several key theoretical lenses:

- Imagined Communities and Invented Traditions: Drawing on Anderson (1983 [1]) and Gellner (1983 [23]), we analyzed how national and urban identities are constructed through shared narratives and symbols among people who may not have direct personal ties. Hobsbawm and Ranger's (1983 [31]) concept of "invented tradition" allowed us to critically examine how historical narratives are consciously crafted or re-articulated to serve contemporary political or social needs. This framework was particularly useful for deconstructing the "founding myths" of Komsomolsk and the later attempts to "restore" Permskoe's historical standing.

- The Politics of Memory: Inspired by scholars like Laruelle & Karnysheva (2020 [37]) and Nadkarni & Shevchenko (2014 [45]), this framework enabled us to analyze how historical narratives are not neutral but are actively mobilized, contested, and manipulated in power struggles and identity formation. The debates around Komsomolsk's age provide a compelling example of memory being a site of fierce political and social conflict.

- Asynchronous Temporalities and Chronotopes: Building on Bloch's "non-simultaneity" (1991 [7]) and Wirtz's "asynchronous belonging" (2016 [59]), as well as Bakhtin's concept of chronotopes (Lemon, 2009 [36]; Wirtz, 2016 [59]), we explored how different historical periods and their associated values, ideologies, and memories coexist and interact in the present. This concept is central to understanding the fragmented sense of identity in the Amur region, where the imperial, Soviet, and post-Soviet pasts continue to exert influence in often contradictory ways. The "problem of beginnings" (Said, 1975 [47]) for cities and nations (Bérubé, 2002 [3]; Çinar & Taş, 2017 [12]; Spillman, 1997 [50]) is central here, as the choice of a founding moment presupposes an answer to when a community acquired its defining characteristics.

- Nostalgia: Svetlana Boym's distinction between "reflective" and "restorative" nostalgia (2001 [9]), further refined by Fritzsche (2002 [21]), helped differentiate the longing for past elements from attempts at full-scale historical reconstruction. This concept was vital in analyzing how the past was invoked, either to mourn a lost future or to propose alternative historical lineages.

By integrating these robust methodologies and theoretical frameworks, this study aims to provide a comprehensive and nuanced analysis of how historical imagination shapes the complex and often asynchronous sense of belonging experienced by people living along the Amur River.

Results: Unraveling the Strands of Amur's Historical Fabric

The analysis reveals that the Amur River region is a vibrant and intensely debated arena where multiple, often deeply conflicting, historical imaginations vie to define a sense of belonging among its inhabitants. These imaginations are rarely monolithic; instead, they

represent a dynamic interplay of official state narratives, deeply rooted localized memories, and individual interpretations, all contributing to a pervasive and often politicized asynchronous sense of identity [38, 59].

State-Sanctioned Narratives: Forging a Hegemonic Past

Official historical narratives, largely codified during the Soviet era and selectively maintained or reinterpreted in various forms today, consistently emphasize the heroic pioneering spirit and the paramount strategic importance of the Amur region. These narratives serve as powerful tools for state-building and territorial legitimization, constructing a specific narrative of Russian presence and development.

Imperial Foundations and the "Amur Euphoria"

The narrative often begins with the mid-19th century incorporation of the Maritime region into the Russian Empire following the 1858 Aigun Treaty. This period, characterized by a surge of fascination known as "Amur Euphoria" (Bassin, 1999 [2]), saw the establishment of a chain of peasant settlements along the river, including Permskoe, founded in 1860 by settlers from Russia's Perm province. These early endeavors were romanticized as acts of bold exploration and expansion, asserting a foundational Russian claim to the territory (Cherkasov, 2019 [10]; Kiriukhin, 1970 [36]). While initially driven by pragmatic goals of facilitating shipping and settlement, these historical moments became imbued with a deeper symbolic meaning: the "taming" of a vast, "empty" frontier and the extension of Russian civilization eastward (Widdis, 2000 [68]). However, this early enthusiasm waned as the economic realities of the region proved challenging, plunging it back into relative obscurity until the Soviet period.

The Soviet Epoch: Komsomolsk, the "City at Dawn"

The 1930s marked a dramatic resurgence of state interest, driven by growing military threats from Japan. This led to an expedited industrialization campaign, culminating in the construction of Komsomolsk-na-Amure, envisioned as a colossal military-industrial complex. The official Soviet narrative of Komsomolsk's founding was meticulously crafted around the heroic feat of the pervostroiteli (first-builders), predominantly Young Communist League volunteers recruited from across the USSR (Bone, 1999 [8]; Shulman, 2007 [49]). The city was publicly hailed as a "City at Dawn," a living testament to socialist modernization, internationalist unity, and the triumph of human will over an unforgiving taiga. Publications like Tikhookeanskaia Zvezda (1932 [62]) actively propagated this myth, proclaiming "Permskoe is no more, now it's Komsomolsk," symbolizing a radical break from the pre-Soviet past and the ushering in of a new, revolutionary era.

This carefully curated narrative, however, often deliberately obscured less palatable aspects of the construction, notably the extensive use of Gulag prison labor. Thousands of inmates toiled in brutal conditions, a history largely excluded from official historiography for decades (Bone, 1999 [8]). The persistent public glorification of the Komsomol pioneers through films (Komsomolsk, 1938), novels (Fortitude), and plays reinforced a romanticized vision of the Far East, primarily aimed at incentivizing migration to the sparsely populated region (Shulman, 2007 [49]; Widdis, 2000 [68]). This selective amnesia, characteristic of "invented traditions" (Hobsbawm & Ranger, 1983 [31]), served to present a cohesive and ideologically pure historical lineage for the burgeoning Soviet state.

Geopolitical Imperatives and Deep History

The geopolitical context, particularly the Sino-Soviet split in the 1960s, further shaped the state-sanctioned historical narratives. Beijing's irredentist claims to the Soviet Far East (Stephan, 1994 [53]) generated renewed territorial anxieties in Moscow. This led to a strategic need for "deep history," prompting a conscious effort to amplify the region's "Russian" pre-Soviet past. While initially ambiguous about incorporating pre-Soviet history, the Soviet state increasingly normalized ethnically marked discourses of "Russianness" as a source of sovereignty in the region (Mikhailova, 2008 [39]; Urbansky, 2012 [56]).

This period saw a resurgence of interest in 17th-century Russian conquests and settlements, often presented as direct antecedents to Soviet endeavors. Literary works like Gavriil Kungurov's Albazin Fortress (reprinted 1973) and historical collections such as Amur—the River of Feats (Kiriukhin, 1970 [36]) drew explicit parallels between Cossack explorers (like Vassilii Poiarkov and Erofei Khabarov) and Soviet builders, portraying them all as "patriots" asserting "sacred Russian land." Even Nikolai Zadornov's Amur-Saga, a pre-war novel chronicling Permskoe's peasant settlers, found favor with Stalin for demonstrating the historical Russian presence, interpreted as a strategic asset against China's claims (Zadornov, 2007 [60]). The 1970s also witnessed massive renaming campaigns to erase historically Chinese toponyms, further asserting Russian historical dominance (Stephan, 1994 [53]). This demonstrated that even during the Soviet era, "deep history," including that of Permskoe, was kept "ready to be taken off the shelf and amplified in moments of geopolitical tension."

Localized Memories: Contesting the Official Narrative

Alongside these dominant state narratives, a vibrant and often dissenting array of localized memories has persisted, presenting a more nuanced, complex, and sometimes dissonant picture of the Amur's past. These unofficial histories often challenge the heroic ideals and linear progression presented by the state, revealing the human cost, the complexities of everyday life, and the diverse origins of the region's inhabitants.

Permskoe's Silent Presence to Post-Soviet Reawakening

During much of the Soviet era, the memory of Permskoe was not entirely obliterated but existed in an implicit hierarchy, integrated into a linear narrative of progress where the "remote and forsaken" village was spectacularly transformed into a "proud modern city" (Museum of Regional Studies exhibition, 1947 [19]). Early Soviet historiography sometimes depicted interactions between Permskoe residents and Komsomol members, even portraying "old-timers" as helping "new arrivals" (Grachev, 1965; Khlebnikov & Dorodnov, 1967 [14]). However, Permskoe's physical traces were systematically erased as Komsomolsk grew, with its church converted and then bulldozed, and its houses demolished by the 1960s. The "future-oriented, utopian city" had little interest in preserving the material heritage of its predecessor (Ssorin-Chaikov, 2016 [52]).

The turning point for Permskoe's memory came with Glasnost and Perestroika in the late 1980s, which opened a space for re-evaluating Soviet history. Local historians and journalists, like Svetlana Vishniakova, began openly discussing the direct historical continuity between Permskoe and Komsomolsk. Vishniakova, in her 1988 article, explicitly stated that "Komsomolsk's history did not start in 1932" [12]. She argued for "a restoration of historical justice," asserting that "the roots of Komsomolsk's 'family tree' reach into the last century" (Vishniakova, 1989 [13]). This was echoed by I. Ovchinnikov's 1991 publication, "The Wheel of Forgetfulness," which lamented the "stubbornness" of forgetting Permskoe's history, warning against becoming "amnesiac Ivans" who reject their roots [14]. These voices directly challenged the Soviet-era "myth of the city of youth" and sought to include the "brave and freedom loving Russian people" who founded Permskoe into the city's heroic narrative.

The Politicization of Memory: Komsomolsk's "Original Sin"

With the collapse of the Soviet Union in the 1990s and the accompanying economic crisis (Evans, 2015 [16]), the debate surrounding Permskoe intensified. Komsomolsk, once a symbol of Soviet triumph, suffered massive deindustrialization and out-migration, leading to a profound "devaluation that was both economic and symbolic." In this context, the proponents of Permskoe's recognition, such as journalist Anton Ermakov, saw the recalculation of the city's age to 1860 (Permskoe's founding) as a "restoration of historical justice," grounded in the 1932 decree's use of "transformation" rather than "liquidation" [17].

However, this initiative sparked fierce resistance from those invested in preserving Komsomolsk's Soviet identity, including members of the "socialist People's Power movement." They dismissed the decree's wording as a "historical accident" and viewed the proposal as an "attempt to 'rewrite' the city's history, erase its Soviet identity and trivialize the heroic efforts of the city's builders" [1]. Opponents frequently suspected "ulterior motives" and "nefarious agendas," alleging a "coordinated attack on Soviet memory aimed at further justifying neoliberal policies" (Oushakine, 2009 [41]). The debate around Permskoe thus became a proxy for larger ideological battles over the Soviet legacy, particularly the uncomfortable truths about Gulag labor which had emerged during Glasnost. Some even described the shift as reimagining Komsomolsk's construction as the "end of Permskoe's idyllic life" rather than a "new beginning," casting the "progress" as an "original sin" [15].

Multi-Ethnic Perspectives and Competing "Founding Moments"

The multi-ethnic fabric of the Amur region further complicates these memory wars. The presence of indigenous peoples, like the Nanai (whose Dzemgi settlement existed long before Permskoe), represents an even deeper historical layer. When some debaters sarcastically questioned why Dzemgi wasn't chosen as the city's "starting point," proponents of Permskoe quickly dismissed it as irrelevant to "Russian statehood" [19]. This highlights how the search for "deep history" was often selective, prioritizing a specifically Russian lineage over indigenous or other non-dominant narratives, even as it sought to challenge the Soviet-centric view. This selective commemoration reflects the inherent biases in the construction of national identity, often marginalizing non-hegemonic histories (Slezkine, 2016 [51]).

Asynchronous Belonging: Navigating Layered Temporalities

The persistent collision and coexistence of these divergent historical imaginations—state-sanctioned heroism, localized hardship, imperial legacy, and Soviet industrial myth—result in a pervasive condition of asynchronous belonging. Individuals in the Amur region are compelled to navigate multiple temporalities simultaneously, drawing upon different historical narratives based on context, personal experience, and ideological alignment [59].

For many residents, pride in Soviet industrial achievements (e.g., the Komsomolsk aircraft and shipbuilding plants) coexists with an awareness of the human cost and the loss of pre-Soviet ways of life. This internal tension often manifests as nostalgia (Boym, 2001 [9]), not necessarily a simple longing for a specific past, but a complex engagement with its fragments, perhaps a yearning for the sense of collective purpose or perceived stability that the Soviet era once offered (Fritzsche, 2002 [21]; Nadkarni & Shevchenko, 2014 [40]). This "reflective nostalgia" (Boym, 2001 [9]) is distinct from the "restorative nostalgia" that fuels attempts to erase Soviet symbols or fully reinstate imperial pasts.

The debates, exemplified by the KOMCITY.RU forum, clearly showed this asynchronous navigation. While 53.8% of polled respondents considered Permskoe and Komsomolsk "two different inhabited localities," rejecting the merger, 28.3% agreed with considering Permskoe's age, and 17.8% expressed no interest in history, reflecting

a spectrum of engagement with the past [20]. This spectrum underscores that historical narratives are not passively absorbed but are actively engaged with, resisted, or ignored based on personal relevance and identification.

Furthermore, the physical landscape itself contributes to asynchronous belonging. The decaying Soviet-era infrastructure—abandoned factories, derelict Houses of Culture, unfinished construction projects—stands as a stark material symbol of a "deferred" Soviet future that never fully materialized (Ssorin-Chaikov, 2016 [52]). These "ruins of socialism" constantly remind inhabitants of a past project whose end goals shifted and whose promises remained unfulfilled, creating a tangible sense of temporal disjuncture and exacerbating a search for new anchors in history. The ongoing economic struggles and out-migration from Komsomolsk only deepen this sense of historical instability, prompting a perpetual search for a usable past to justify presence and provide a future trajectory. The Amur, therefore, becomes a site where belonging is perpetually negotiated, reflecting both deeply rooted historical ties and the fluid, often contentious, nature of contemporary identities.

Discussion: The Unsettled Temporalities of a Borderland

The findings presented vividly illustrate that the Amur River region is not merely a geographical frontier but a profound locus of historical and temporal contention. The pervasive condition of asynchronous belonging underscores that identity formation in this borderland is a dynamic, often fraught, process resulting from the complex interplay between hegemonic state-driven narratives and resilient localized memories. This asynchronous nature is not a passive coexistence of different temporalities; rather, it represents an active and often politicized negotiation, where individuals and communities strategically engage with distinct historical periods to construct their contemporary identities and make sense of their present circumstances.

State Narratives and the Construction of "Founding Moments"

The enduring prominence of state-sanctioned narratives centered on heroic conquest, national defense, and monumental industrial development on the Amur (Bassin, 1999 [2]; Kiriukhin, 1970 [36]; Shulman, 2007 [49]) reflects a fundamental strategy employed by nation-states globally to solidify territorial claims and foster national unity, especially within strategically vital frontier zones (Anderson, 1983 [1]; Gellner, 1983 [23]). These narratives frequently employ a "founding moment" rhetoric, a common practice in nationalist myth-making that aims to create a deep sense of historical legitimacy (Çinar & Taş, 2017 [12]; Ellis, 2000 [15]; Portnov & Portnova, 2015 [43]; Said, 1975 [47]; Spillman, 1997 [50]). The selection of a city's "founding moment" is far from an innocuous historical detail; it implicitly answers the profound question of when a given community acquired its defining characteristics, which are then envisioned to extend continuously into the present and shape the future of its descendants (Bérubé, 2002 [3]; Freeman, 2010 [20]).

In the Soviet context, Komsomolsk-na-Amure's establishment in 1932 was explicitly framed as a radical break, a revolutionary "new beginning" that eclipsed the "insignificant" peasant village of Permskoe. This "invention of tradition" (Hobsbawm & Ranger, 1983 [31]) served to highlight the unique, transformative power of the socialist project. The selective emphasis on the Komsomol volunteers and the deliberate omission of Gulag labor from official accounts created a pristine, ideologically pure founding myth, designed to inspire and legitimize. However, this purity was inherently fragile. The post-Soviet revelations about Gulag history and the broader deconstruction of Soviet myths exposed the gaps and contradictions within this official narrative, paving the way for the re-emergence and politicization of alternative historical accounts, particularly that of Permskoe.

The Persistence of Localized Memory and the Roots of Contestation

The remarkable persistence of localized memories, which often diverge from or explicitly contradict official histories, underscores the inherent resilience of grassroots historical imagination (Humphrey, 1992 [32]; Peshkov, 2014 [42]). These memories, transmitted through oral histories, family narratives, and informal community archives, illuminate the profound human cost of grand state projects, the complexities of forced and voluntary migration (Rahmonova-Schwarz, 2010 [45]), and the rich cultural specificities of diverse ethnic groups, including indigenous populations (Slezkine, 2016 [51]).

The post-Soviet re-politicization of Permskoe's memory is a direct consequence of this underlying tension. What was once a "deep history" that could be selectively integrated into the Soviet narrative (especially during periods of geopolitical tension, like the Sino-Soviet split) became, after 1991, an "alternative origin story." This shift was driven by a desire among some segments of the population to find a past untainted by the perceived moral failings of the Soviet regime (i.e., Gulag labor, political repression) and to establish a historical lineage that could offer meaning in the face of widespread deindustrialization and economic decline. Figures like Svetlana Vishniakova (1988 [12], 1989 [13]) and I. Ovchinnikov (1991 [14]) actively championed Permskoe, viewing the historical amnesia about it as a symptom of a broader Soviet "iconoclasm" that severed "historical links of times and generations."

However, this effort was met with fierce resistance from those who remained deeply invested in Komsomolsk's Soviet identity. For them, acknowledging Permskoe's seniority was not merely a "technical-historical inaccuracy"; it was an existential threat to the city's very "essence" and the valorization of the pervostroiteli's

sacrifice. This highlights a crucial aspect of the "politics of memory" (Laruelle & Karnysheva, 2020 [37]): historical narratives are not simply about what happened, but about who we are and who we wish to be. The debates over Komsomolsk's age exemplify a zero-sum game, where recognizing one historical contribution is perceived as diminishing another, creating a "yawning chasm" between societal segments. This is profoundly different from the earlier Soviet-era tendency to simply subordinate or strategically incorporate older histories; the post-Soviet context witnesses an explicit mutual rejection.

Asynchronous Belonging: A Condition of Post-Socialist Flux

The concept of asynchronous belonging (Wirtz, 2016 [59]), adapted from Bloch's non-simultaneity (1991 [7]) and Bakhtin's chronotopes (Lemon, 2009 [36]), is crucial for understanding the fragmented sense of identity in the Amur region. It posits that individuals do not simply discard one historical narrative for another, but rather hold multiple, sometimes contradictory, temporal understandings simultaneously. This dynamic allows for a flexible and adaptable sense of self, essential for navigating the volatile political, economic, and social landscapes of a post-socialist borderland. For instance, a Komsomolsk resident might express genuine pride in the city's Soviet industrial might while simultaneously lamenting the current decay of its infrastructure, a tangible manifestation of a "deferred" and "unfinished" Soviet future (Ssorin-Chaikov, 2016 [52]). This "living in two places" (Rockhill-Khlinovskaya, 2010 [46]) or navigating multiple temporalities is a defining characteristic of post-socialist frontier experiences.

The observed nostalgia (Boym, 2001 [9]) in the Amur context is complex. It is not necessarily a "restorative" longing for a full return to the Soviet past, as Fritzsche (2002 [21]) argues nostalgia often acknowledges the impossibility of return. Instead, it frequently functions as a "reflective" engagement with elements of the past—a search for the sense of purpose, community, or state support that characterized the Soviet era, which are largely absent in the precarious post-Soviet present (Nadkarni & Shevchenko, 2014 [40]). This nostalgia often serves as a moral and political language to articulate critiques of market reforms and contemporary social problems. The debate over Permskoe's relevance, therefore, is not just about historical accuracy; it is about finding a "usable past" (Gellner, 1983 [23]) that can provide meaning and direction for a future that remains largely undefined.

Broader Implications and Comparative Insights

The Amur case resonates with broader patterns observed in other post-socialist cities and borderlands. In Priargunsk, for example, the collapse of "frontier socialism" led to a "depoliticization of the local past" and the integration of previously demonized Chinese borderland communities (Peshkov, 2014 [42]). In St. Petersburg, the post-Soviet period saw debates over "scientific reconstruction" versus "new oldbuild" in restoring historical architecture (Kelly, 2015 [34]), and topynomic changes reflecting a shift in temporal boundary-making (Marin, 2017 [38]). These examples highlight that while the specific historical content varies, the underlying dynamic of re-evaluating and contesting the past in the wake of systemic change is a shared feature of post-socialist transformation.

However, the Amur also presents unique characteristics. Unlike some regions where a "White-Red" fusion has led to a degree of societal cohesion and new nationalist consensus (Laruelle, 2009 [33], 2016 [34]; Laruelle & Karnysheva, 2020 [35]), the Amur region, particularly in places like Komsomolsk-na-Amure, demonstrates an active rejection of such a fusion. The deep reverberations of Soviet collapse, made tangible by decaying infrastructure, render the grand narratives of national greatness less convincing. This "failure to articulate a new orienting mythos" for the Russian Far East (Pulford, 2024 [44]) has led to an intense politicization and mutual rejection of rival historical imaginaries. The symbolic and material landscapes of cities like Komsomolsk thus become battlegrounds where the unresolved tensions of the past are continually re-enacted, leaving communities struggling to forge a unified sense of identity and direction for the future. The very visible manifestations of failed Soviet industrial projects, such as abandoned factories and unfinished constructions, serve as constant reminders of a past that did not lead to the promised future, intensifying the search for alternative historical anchors.

Conclusion: The Enduring Unsettled Frontier

The Amur River frontier stands as a compelling and poignant testament to the multifaceted nature of historical imagination and its profound, often turbulent, impact on shaping a sense of belonging. Our comprehensive examination reveals that identity in this dynamic region is not a static construct but an asynchronous and perpetually negotiated state, born from the intricate interplay between dominant state-sanctioned narratives and resilient, deeply personal, localized memories. This constant interplay ensures that the frontier remains "unsettled" not just geographically, but temporally and existentially.

Official histories, consistently emphasizing themes of heroism, conquest, and the strategic imperative of the Amur (Bassin, 1999 [2]; Kiriukhin, 1970 [36]; Stephan, 1994 [53]), are meticulously crafted to forge a unified national identity. These narratives, disseminated through a vast array of state apparatuses, educational systems, and cultural productions (Donovan, 2015 [13]; Spillman, 1997 [50]), aim to instill patriotic pride and unwavering loyalty by framing the region's past as a triumphal story of collective achievement. However, as our analysis demonstrates, these grand narratives frequently gloss over the profound complexities and immense human

hardships of settlement, the tragic displacement of indigenous populations (Slezkine, 2016 [51]), and the diverse, often coerced, motivations that drew people to the vast expanses of the Far East (Rahmonova-Schwarz, 2010 [45]; Shulman, 2007 [49]). The inherent tension between the glorious ideal and the grittier reality of historical experience forms the bedrock of asynchronous belonging.

In stark contrast, localized memories, often passed down through generations or meticulously preserved within families and smaller communities, present a more nuanced, intimate, and at times, overtly dissenting view of the past. These accounts frequently highlight personal struggles, the harsh realities of forced labor (Bone, 1999 [8]; Savenkova, 2001 [48]), and the unique cultural specificities of various ethnic groups that have inhabited the region for centuries. The persistent existence of these parallel narratives contributes significantly to an asynchronous belonging, a condition where individuals may simultaneously hold allegiance to different historical interpretations and temporal frameworks. This enables them to experience a fragmented, yet deeply personal and resilient connection to the region (Wirtz, 2016 [59]). This phenomenon is often underscored by complex forms of nostalgia, which, while occasionally aligning with official state narratives, can also express a profound longing for lost elements of the past or serve as a subtle, yet powerful, critique of contemporary realities (Boym, 2001 [9]; Fritzsche, 2002 [21]; Nadkarni & Shevchenko, 2014 [40]).

The Amur River frontier, therefore, is not merely a geographical boundary awaiting definitive historical inscription; it is a vibrant, living site of ongoing historical production and contestation. The continuous re-imagination and re-evaluation of its past are profoundly influenced by evolving geopolitical landscapes (Billé, 2016 [4]; Billé & Humphrey, 2021 [5]; Pulford, 2024 [44]) and the ever-shifting socio-economic realities of the post-Soviet era. This dynamic ensures that the sense of belonging within the region remains fluid, adaptable, and often profoundly unsettled. Understanding this asynchronous nature of identity is paramount for comprehending the intricate complexities of contemporary life in borderland regions, where history is not a static record to be simply recalled, but a living, breathing force that actively shapes individual aspirations, collective identities, and political consciousness. The debates around Komsomolsk-na-Amure and Permskoe are not just academic discussions; they are deeply felt struggles over meaning and future trajectories.

Further research could productively delve deeper into the specific ways in which contemporary artistic, literary, and digital media works continue to shape popular historical imaginations and memory practices in the Amur region. Investigating how new generations, born after the collapse of the Soviet Union, engage with and inherit these layered and often conflicting historical narratives would also provide invaluable insights. Furthermore, comparative studies with other contested borderlands globally could yield rich analytical insights, allowing for a broader understanding of the universal and particular aspects of asynchronous belonging in frontier zones characterized by layered histories and ongoing geopolitical significance. The Amur's past, as this article vividly demonstrates, is not simply a historical record; it is a dynamic, multi-layered, and perpetually unsettled frontier that continues to define its present and fundamentally shape its future.

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