

Eurasian Zones of Contact workshop report | 17th May 2024

The Eurasian Zones of Contact workshop was held on 17 May 2024 in the UCD Science Hub. Co-organised by Jennifer Keating (School of History) and Julia Schneider (University College Cork), the event was funded entirely by the Humanities Institute under the 'Transnationalising the Humanities' funding strand. With the aim of creating a space in which international scholars working on the Russo-Qing borderlands from the eighteenth to early twentieth centuries could come together to exchange ongoing and future research plans, the workshop successfully broke down the geographic and disciplinary divides that very often mitigate against fruitful dialogue between scholars of Russia, China and Central/Inner Asia. Using the idea of 'contact' and 'interaction' across borders as our main theme, we interwove papers from both sides of the Russo-Qing border in order to begin to reconceptualize this political divide as a highly fluid zone of contact and exchange, both spatially and intellectually. While conventional histories of the two empires have treated them as two separate political entities, the workshop content spoke to the depth and vibrancy of emerging work that adopts transregional and transnational approaches to overcome the narrow, traditional idea of 'territory' in this region.

Our speakers represented a wide range of institutional backgrounds: we were delighted to welcome speakers from Germany, the UK, the US, and Austria, who presented on topics including the Chinese diaspora in the Russian Far East; foreign policy and trade relations between the Russian and Qing empires; religion and capital in the Chinese borderland; mobility practices and border crossing across this lengthy land border; and imperial subjecthood in the steppe, among other topics. The programme of ten speakers was carefully balanced to include six PhD/early career scholars, alongside four professors from Bochum, Leeds, Vanderbilt and George Washington Universities. Our closing roundtable focused on more practical questions of future research agendas and the important issue of how (and whether) to conduct research on very politically-sensitive geographies, including advice for younger researchers in establishing themselves and their research in light of current political uncertainties. We were very happy to welcome a number of PhD students and a Postdoctoral Fellow from UCD, and also to be able to continue our day of discussions over a relaxed dinner in the evening. Many thanks indeed to the Humanities Institute for generously supporting this event: our participants all spoke very warmly of how the workshop had gone and how rare events like these are, and we are currently in conversation about bringing together a special issue of journal to publish some of the papers and findings from the day's discussion.

Jennifer Keating
9 August 2024