

Prof. Valentina Morozova - Borderlands of Culture: Russia, China, and the Spaces Between

Welcome to this episode of Exploring the Humanities, Women's Voices from the Hong Kong Polytechnic University. Our podcasts allow us to showcase the exciting and innovative work being done by our colleagues in the humanities. Intersecting with fields as varied as aviation, mental and physical health, virtual reality, Gen AI, design, neuroscience. I am Renia Lopez from the Faculty of Humanities.

With us today, we are very lucky to have Professor Valentina Morozova, Professor of Chinese Philosophy. She works in the Department of Chinese Philology at Herzen State Pedagogical University of Russia in St. Petersburg. Professor Morozova, thank you so much for joining us. To start with, could you tell us a little bit about your background and your main areas of research?

- Thank you very much for the invitation and thank you to The Hong Kong Polytechnic University for hosting this meeting. I'm really glad to be here. It is a pleasure to talk about my work in such a relaxed format and to share these ideas with a wider audience, not only with researchers or specialists.
- Speaking about my academic journey, it began with a deep fascination for language and culture. I'm a professor of Chinese Philology. And so, the Chinese language, the world of Chinese language, is my entry point. Over time, I became captivated by what happens between cultures, especially in the places where they really meet each other. This is the "Borderland", especially my native Russian-Chinese borderland. It is the space where the Russian culture and the Chinese culture connect. It is Zabaykalsky Krai (Забайкальский край) in Russia and Dongbei, Northeast China. My Doctoral dissertation focused on the unique regional culture that emerges in the Russian-Chinese borderland.

Let's develop this idea of the borders. The first question is, why focus on these specific areas? Why these borders? Is there a personal reason for this as well?

- So, you know that for me, "border" is not just a term or a concept. It was my living space. In Chinese, we say it as "sheng huo kong jian". So, it comes first, my personal life, not my academic research. And I shared a small story with today's students [in a lecture]. Many, many years ago, when I was crossing the Russian-Chinese border, the border officer took

my documents and smiled and said that I probably felt that I was both a citizen of Russia and China.

Why would he have said that? What was in your passport?

- I think it was the way I gave my passport to him because I put my two fingers above [the passport] and this is a characteristic of traditional Chinese culture. And so, if the Chinese see that, they definitely understand that you know something about traditional Chinese culture.

I'm assuming that we're talking about the border regions closer to Vladivostok. Am I right there or is this border a lot bigger than those areas?

- You are partly right because you know that the border between Russia and China is the biggest border in the world and that is why we have many, many small and big cities situated along the border line. And most people think that it is only Vladivostok. Maybe you are familiar with Blagoveshchensk. But nevertheless, we also have Zabaykalsk, Lake Baikal.
- So, when we speak about Russian borderlands, most people think of Vladivostok as a huge multicultural hub and the Pacific gateway of Russia. But nevertheless, as I have mentioned, the Russia and China border is the biggest in the world. So that is why “borderlands” has no formal lines or formal spaces because it is formed by people, by travelers, by students, by shopkeepers, by those who are active along these borderlands. So that is why we include Harbin [as a borderland]. Harbin is not a border city. If we look through official documents, it is not a border city. But nevertheless, the influence of Russian culture in Harbin is very vast.

And what about the ethnicity of the people living in these borderlands? Are they mixed or do they tend to be either Russian, Chinese or something else?

- It is a very interesting question and I devoted a whole paragraph in my doctoral research to this question because the first vector of my answer is that the minorities who are living along the borderlands are a phenomenon because they are the same [on both sides]. For example, in Chita, in Zabaykalsk, in the Russian side, we have minorities such as Buryats, Daur, Evenk, they all live in the Chinese borderland also.
- The second vector of my answer is that, for instance, in Russian language, we have the

word “Volost”. Volost, means some kind of small territory where one minority lives. And in China, we have Enhe and we name it Russian Volost in China.

- We also have such a phenomenon as irredentism. So what does it mean? Irredentism is a modern concept and it means that, for example, pensioners, Russian pensioners, go to live in borderland Chinese regions. It is not just about minorities; it's just about the phenomenon of people who live along the borderlands.

And in terms of the languages found in those borderlands?

- Yes, Thank you. Your questions are very interesting. So maybe you can think that the Russian-Chinese borderland is full of phenomena, but it's really so. Because if we speak about language, we should note the concept of Pidgin language.
- So what does it mean? So it's not a bird. We know that Pigeon is a bird. But Pidgin is a kind of oral language. It does not exist in the writing variety. For example, if we take, for instance, “khleb”, or “bread”, a [Russian] person who doesn't know the Chinese language, uses the term “Lieba” and the Chinese person who doesn't know Russian language uses “LieBa” (列巴). They can't write this word, but they just copy what they are hearing. And this is “LieBa” (列巴) [bread].
- Or, another example, “GuNaing”, it means girl in Chinese. So the Russians who don't speak Chinese, they just hear and copy “GuNaing”. This is the Pidgin language, and it is frequently used now in the borderland territories.

So basically, in these borderland territories, what we're finding is a slightly different culture, which is a mix of Russian, Chinese, maybe even some other things. So, the culture is being developed by the people who live there, who transact with each other every day.

- Yes, you are right. I wanted to use Chinese because in Chinese we say “BaiFenZhiBai”, meaning 100%. So, it is a cultural phenomenon, and it is the concept of my doctoral paper. The phenomenon of regional culture, what is this phenomenon? This phenomenon is in the words, it's the language and some cultural-specific behaviour. And as we have discussed during the lecture, there are a lot of kinds of regional cultures. Because in Moscow, we have a regional culture, in St. Petersburg, or in some small cities like Chita, they all have [their own] regional culture. But regional culture, city-living and living in the borderland, have its own peculiarities. And that is why we speak about the model of

regional culture's dialogueism, not dialogue, but dialogueism.

So tell us, what is dialogueism? And what is the difference between that and dialogue?

- I use very simple words, for example, dialogue: It is two cultures. And so one culture is eager to give something to another, and the second culture is eager to get this. And this is the dialogue, because one culture lacks something and it takes this cultural potential from another. When we speak about cultural dialogueism, these cultures are the same, and they just react or take a dialogue like partners.

And this is the work that you focus on, right? In some of your papers, you talk about the differences between intercultural communication, intercultural interaction, and intercultural dialogue. What are the differences between these three terms? Because many people probably think they are the same.

- Yeah, so most of the students think that communication and dialogue are the same, but nevertheless, there is one peculiarity. Let's speak about communication and dialogue. When we speak about communication, we mean when two people communicate with each other, they use gestures, they use language, they use characteristics of high-context cultures or low-context cultures. But when we use "dialogue", we mean that cultures communicate.

So going back to the borders and the practical interactions that we see in these borders, what are the things that you focus on? What are the things that really interest you?

- I focus on such cultural phenomena in the borderland which create a new kind or a new type of culture. It is not Russian culture. It is not Chinese culture. It's some kind of trans-border cultural phenomenon. So this is what I focus on.

Can you give us some specific examples?

- Yes, I can. There is a very famous Matryoshka [Russian doll], situated in the borderland, Chinese city of Manzhouli (满洲里). It is a very tall doll, a nested doll. And it is a Russian symbol, but it is situated not in the Russian borderland, but in the Chinese borderland. They say that this Matryoshka is the biggest in the world, and it is in the book of Guinness.

And in terms of what it looks like, does it look Russian or does it have Chinese

characteristics?

- No, no, no. It looks correct. But the square of the Matryoshka contains not only this one giant Matryoshka, it includes more than 30 other Matryoshkas. And they don't have Russian traditional cultural characteristics because in Russian, everybody knows that Matryoshka has the face of a person. But in Manzhouli (满洲里), you can see different portrayals, even some related to politics, political matryoshkas or animal matryoshkas. This is their Chinese interpretation of this doll. And of course, everybody knows that the matryoshka comes from Japan. Yes, it is a Fukurama doll, but nevertheless, everybody also knows that if you just hear "matryoshka", you just imagine Russia. Am I right?

Absolutely. Only that I don't think everybody knows they come from Japan. This is something new.

- Oh, some new information.

Absolutely. So is this square a tourist attraction, specifically?

- Yes, of course, of course, because not every Chinese can go across the border, it is simpler to visit Manzhouli (满洲里) to see what the Russian culture is like, and not to cross the border itself.

From what you have seen both in China and Russia, do you think that the connection between the two countries is strengthening? Are the cultural ties becoming stronger?

- Yes, you are right, definitely. And so, we can speak about student exchanges and academic tourism, etc.

So why are all of these cultural exchanges not only in the borderlands, but also between big cities, why are they important?

- It is important because we should develop our intercultural mutual understanding, because it is the first step to create a peaceful dialogue among cultures, among civilizations. And if we don't have culture, we don't have anything.

So when we're talking about tourism, one of the things that we're seeing more and more of is that tourists are driven by social media. Can you tell us more about that?

- Yes, because in the borderlands, most people use Chinese social apps. Things like

Weixin, WeChat, and Little Red Book. I mean “Xiaohongshu”. And that is why they are interested in Chinese “wanghong”. So in English, it is “celebrities”.

- If the people who live in the Russian borderlands go deeper in the Chinese social media, they become more and more interested in Chinese cities. We name them “wanghongchengshi” (Internet-famous city 网红城市). For instance, the best example is the city of Chongqing. Before [social media] we didn't know about the city. But when we go deeper into the Chinese social media, we see there's a metro going through a building, and a city which is formatted or formed as multi-level or multi-scale buildings. It's very interesting. And that is why today, tourists from Russia, they don't visit only Beijing or Shanghai or Hong Kong. They are eager to visit these “wanghongchengshi” (Internet-famous city), the small cities, which nevertheless, have some interesting things inside.

So again, the power of the internet.

- Yes. And one more thing. For the people who live in the borderland, if they don't know Chinese, how do they use this social media? So of course, they use some technical instruments. And so, they are frequently using Chinese social media.
- Also, they frequently use Chinese chopsticks to eat. When I go back to central Russia, to the federal state, my friends and my colleagues cannot use Chinese chopsticks. But in the borderland, everybody can use them.

And moving forward, what about AI? And how is AI going to be affecting borderlands and the work that you do on intercultural communication? What are your thoughts on this?

- Oh, yes. Every day we hear: “AI, AI, AI”. So this morning, I woke up and I switched on the news on TV. And there I heard: “AI, AI, AI”. But there is one peculiarity about AI and the Chinese culture and language. Everybody knows that China is also represented by DeepSeek. But I noted that if I use AI (of course, I use it, everybody uses it nowadays) it is very difficult to rely on an intercultural dialogue with AI concerning Chinese culture. Because AI, ChatGPT, DeepSeek, and even Qwen (because DeepSeek and Qwen, they are Chinese models), it is very strange, but they don't understand the specificity of Chinese culture. For example, in the Chinese language, we have such words as “jiaoshou”, “laoshi” [“teacher”]. We meet our teacher in school or “laoshi”, this is your main teacher in life. These terms [“jiaoshou”, “laoshi”] are confused by AI because it doesn't understand what is the difference between “xiansheng”, “laoshi”, “jiaoshou”. AI understands professor,

teacher, and master as the same terms. So just a very small example.

Thank you very much. Do you have any last thoughts that you would like to share with our audience?

- Yes, so one more time, thank you to The Hong Kong Polytechnic University and to the city of Hong Kong. I think that is the best place to conduct intercultural, multicultural research. Thank you very much for arranging this meeting. Thank you and thank The Hong Kong Polytechnic University.

Thank you for joining us on Exploring the Humanities from the Hong Kong Polytechnic University. For more episodes or information, visit our website or follow us on Spotify. Stay tuned for discussions with leading voices from the Faculty of Humanities and beyond.