This ambitious book runs along three parallel tracks. It tells the history of the city of Harbin in northeastern China; it gives an account of the life of Baron Roger Budberg, a physician with Russian citizenship who spent most of his life in that city; and it discusses, from several angles, the cross-cultural interactions between Russians, Chinese, and other nationalities and ethnic groups in Harbin during the first half of the twentieth century. Gamsa has published extensively on Harbin’s history and his ability to draw on sources in Russian, Chinese, and other languages makes him particularly qualified for presenting the complexities of the topic.

Harbin has a fascinating history. Today it is among the twenty largest cities in China, but it was founded by the Russians in connection with the construction of the Chinese Eastern Railway as late as 1898 in what was then a sparsely populated area. Despite its extreme Manchurian climate, with very hot summers and freezing-cold winters, it soon developed into an important commercial center and a meeting place for immigrants, particularly from Russia and north China. When the Bolshevik Revolution brought down the tsarist empire in 1917, the Russian population became further divided into Reds and Whites, thus adding to the multitude of identities already represented in the city. The focus of the book is on these flexible and multilayered ethnic and national identities and how people from different backgrounds perceived and interacted with each other.

The life history of Baron Roger Budberg (1867-1926) is used to analyze and illustrate these issues. Budberg grew up inside the Russian Empire in a rich and powerful Baltic German family. He trained as a physician and was placed in charge of a hospital in Manchuria during the Russo-Japanese War (1904-5). After the war, he settled in Harbin where he practiced as an obstetrician-gynecologist and played a crucial role in the preventive and medical work among the Chinese population when the plague hit Harbin in 1910-11. In 1915 he was arrested as a German agent but returned to the city after his release, still full of belief in his mission.

What makes Budberg a particularly suitable protagonist in relation to the focus of the book is that he was one of the few members of the Russian community in Harbin who decided to “go native” in an environment with little social interaction between the two main ethnic groups. He was full of admiration for the culture and way of life of the Chinese and fiercely and frequently criticized
the Russians as barbarians. He learned the Chinese language and won, under his Chinese name of Doctor Bu, the trust and admiration of the Chinese population of Harbin. He was also determined to find a Chinese wife at a time when there were “hardly any unions across the racial line that separated Asians and Europeans” (pp. 104-105). His first attempt to arrange a marriage failed, as the Chinese family of the potential bride preferred to give her to a “poor Chinese” rather than to a foreigner, but at the age of forty he managed to marry a fourteen-year-old Chinese girl whom Gamsa speculates he may have found in a refuge for prostitutes. He took care of the girl’s education and, though marrying a child was probably considered shameful by the Russian community, it was yet another example of how he followed the social morals of the Chinese at a time when taking young concubines was quite normal. The couple only had one child, a daughter, and they named her Zhong-De-Hua, which can be translated as Chinese-German Flower, as a symbol of Budberg’s cross-cultural project. He thus stands out as a unique personality with an extraordinary history and a remarkable determination to adapt to Chinese culture.

The chapters of the book alternately deal with phases in Budberg’s life (chapters 2, 4, and 6) and aspects of ethnicity, identity, and interactions across cultural divisions in Manchuria in general and Harbin in particular (chapters 1, 3, 5, and 7). Chapter 8 looks at the legacy of Russian-Chinese contacts in the city, while the epilogue follows up on the later fate of some of the persons related to Roger Budberg and further describes how “old Harbin” is remembered today in communities around the world. In this way, we follow the history of Harbin even after the death of Budberg and through the period of Japanese occupation from 1931 to 1945, which created a new scene for performing ethnic and national identities, as the Japanese turned the population into citizens of their new construction: the Manchukuo or Manchurian Empire.

In his introduction, Gamsa explains that he has combined the histories of Budberg and Harbin in this way because “by separating the narrative of an individual’s life in the city from the general story, we may see better where the two intersect and where they clash” (p. 12). He convincingly demonstrates that while Russians and Chinese generally had little knowledge and interest in each other” (p. 10), there were remarkable exceptions, who were determined to bridge ethnic and national dividing lines, and Budberg’s story shows the far-reaching consequences such behavior could have.

Gamsa’s narrative works best when the histories of Budberg and Harbin directly overlap. I personally found the information on Budberg’s many relatives and relations in Europe and Russia less interesting, and the story of Harbin after Budberg’s death is quite sketchy. But the sections on Budberg’s life and work in Harbin that fill most of the book fully demonstrate the potential of Gamsa’s approach. The sections on the social and cultural context also work very well, particularly chapter 3, “Intermediaries and Channels of Communication,” which among other topics discusses how people in Harbin coped with language barriers and how a scholarly community of sinologists emerged. Here Gamsa gives a fascinating account of the complicated and fluctuating linguistic situation in the city and of the people who made a career of facilitating interaction between ethnic groups.

The author builds on an impressively broad range of sources. Budberg himself was a prolific writer, and his many private letters to family members as well as his publications on medical and cultural issues make it possible to follow the development of his life and his thoughts on China. Gamsa also had access to private papers from Budberg’s family and was able to interview some of his relations. Archival sources from several
countries, not least Russia and the Baltics, are frequently quoted, and a more than forty-page list of published sources—in, by a quick count, Russian, Chinese, German, English, and French—bears witness to the thoroughness and dedication with which the author has approached his subject. In sum, the book builds on impressive research, contains stimulating discussions of the relationship between biography and general history, and thus deserves to be read not only as the story of a remarkable man but also, more broadly, as a fascinating attempt to understand the life of an individual in the context of his multicultural environment.

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