There are many parts of the world that do not receive much attention outside of their own resident peoples. This is an anomaly of history and its measurements of value. Why should Niagara Falls or Victoria Falls have more name-recognition than the spectacular waterfall of Ilya Muromets in the Kuril Islands? Why Paris or Capetown instead of Irkutsk? Of course, this is a complex question involving population density, songs and travel literature! But in terms of big history and universal studies, why should one place be privileged over others?

For example, the literary scholar, Gary Lawless, directly addresses this question in his article on bioregionalism and big history for his own geographic home in the Gulf of Maine, while historian Craig Benjamin assesses the significance and survival of an even more focused area – Jericho in the West Bank of Palestine.1 So too, I wish to offer a contribution to the argument that our entire planet and all of humanity

---

and life are of significance. Here, therefore is a brief but big history of my homeland.


The Russian Far East is an exotic part of our country. It makes up a third of the Russian Federation, but only about six million people live there, or just over four per cent of the overall Russian population. This territory includes the extreme northeast edge of Eurasia, from Chukotka and Bering Strait to Posyet Bay and the border with North Korea. The Far East is long in latitude, stretching from Arctic tundra in the north to temperate forest and grasslands in the south. This is a country of eternal cold and polar bears, impassable forest (taiga), and tigers.

Unfortunately, there are few English-language books about this area. An exception is John Stephan’s award-winning study, *The Russian Far East: A History* (1994). Other books do exist, but they tend to deal with the limited period from Russian colonization to the present day. In


3 For example, see the following. Sue Davis, *The Russian Far East: The last frontier?*, London: Routledge, 2003; Sharon Hudgins, *The Other Side of Russia:...
contrast, there are many fine works by Far-Eastern Russian historians, who are little known to foreign researchers.

Local scholars have made many discoveries in the archaeology, anthropology and history of the Russian Far East. In Vladivostok, for example, there is prominent Institute of History, Archaeology and Ethnology of the Russian Academy of Sciences, for which more than a hundred researchers study the past of Russian Far East. One of their


Local scholars have made many discoveries in the archaeology, anthropology and history of the Russian Far East. In Vladivostok, for example, there is prominent Institute of History, Archaeology and Ethnology of the Russian Academy of Sciences, for which more than a hundred researchers study the past of Russian Far East. One of their


From 1974 to 1979, our Institute published a preliminary version of the History of the Far East of the USSR, From Prehistory to the Present. It consisted of eleven small books, printed in a limited run for restricted discussion only. This is a style called maket in Russian. Now these copies are a rarity. Since 1989, the first four volumes have been published.
works is the multi-volume series, *The History of the Far East*, which was begun in 1989. Four volumes have been published and two are now in progress for the period between 1922 and 1945.\(^5\)

The prehistoric and historical archaeology of the Russian Far East is practically unknown in the Western world. This region is critical to American and world archaeology because the land bridge between Asia and America existed here during the last glaciation, over which the settlement of the New World passed 15,000 to 13,000 years ago, and new research is pushing this date even further into the past.

Pottery is customarily associated with the Neolithic stage of social development. Nonetheless, over the last several decades, we have found evidence of the use of clay during the Upper Palaeolithic in various regions of the world. In particular, the most ancient ceramics have been found in sites dating from 14,000 to 9000 years ago in the Far-Eastern region, such as at Sikachi-Alyan, Khummi in Priamurye (Amur River region), Ustinovka-3, and Chernigovka-1 in Primorye.\(^6\)

Neolitization (the development of Neolithic culture) in the Russian Far East led to many unique societies that specialized in


various ecological niches. Along the Arctic coasts of the northern Far East were hunters for marine animals and fishing people, while, in the interior, were reindeer-breeders and taiga hunters. In the southern Far East, within the Amur River basin, fishers and hunters resided, and a part of the southern territory was even favourable to arable farming.

Fishing has been one of the most important branches of the economy for the pre-historical and traditional peoples of the Amur, North-East coastal, and Sakhalin regions. Their most important catch has been the highly productive salmon, chiefly the Siberian salmon (*Oncorhynchus keta*). The salmon are mostly caught during their mass-spawning runs in the late spring to early summer and in the autumn (different species of salmon migrate at different times). The salmon provided Siberian peoples with a large quantity of high-calorie food.

The coast cultures preserved a Neolithic system of social organization until Russian colonization. They did not invent metallurgy. For this reason, a term vestiged Neolithic has existed in the Soviet archaeology.

The Bronze Age began in the southern Far East with a small climatic transition, which is seen by a forest expansion connected to increased wetting (humidification). This eco-climatic period likely corresponds to the Subboreal / Subatlantic boundary of the European Holocene. By the beginning of the Early Iron Age, warming occurred, which caused the spread of a mixed coniferous and broad-leaved forest. The numbers of bronze products is small, but stone imitations of bronze spearheads (*replika*) is high. For this reason, scholars have developed

---

7 Oksana Yanshina, ‘Poniatie ‘neolit’ i arkheologiia Vostochnoy Azii’ [The Definition of the Neolithic and Archaeology of East Asia], *Rossiiskii arkheologicheskii ezegodnik* 4, pp. 125-151.


9 Andrey Krushanov (ed.), *Istoriia Dalnego Vostoka SSSR s vrevneishikh vremen do XVII veka* [History of the far East of the USSR from prehistory to XVII century], Moscow: Nauka, 1979, pp. 144–172.

the terms, *Early Metal Age* or *Paleometal Age*, which we have found to be very useful concepts.\(^{11}\)

Plate 2: *The ‘Amur Nefertiti’, the carving of a woman from the Kondon culture, Lower Amur Valley, 3rd millennium BCE. Artefact held in the Museum of the Institute of Archaeology and Ethnography, Siberian Branch of the Russian Academy of Science, Novosibirsk.*

During the Iron Age in the southern Far East, the population began to engage in agriculture and develop other related resources. The Chinese chronicles mention that the Ilou (Yi-lou) people grew ‘five cereals’ – rice, wheat, kaoliang, millet, and soy beans. They also bred pigs and had skill at trapping sables for clothing and trade, especially with China. Hunting, gathering and fishing continued to play an important role in their societies, along with an increased tendency towards local wars and the creation of complexity.\(^ {12}\)

---

\(^{11}\) Oksana Yanshina, ‘Epokha paleometalla v Priamurye: problem i perspektivy issledovaniy’ [The Paleometal Age in the Amur Region: Problems and Perspectives of the Studies], *Rossiiskii arkheologicheskii ezegodnik* 3, pp. 289–337.

In the middle part of the 1st millennium CE, the Mohe (Korean: Malgal) lived in Manchuria and the Russian Far East; they were related to the Tungus peoples. The Mohe had a large number of social ranks and seven large polities (chiefdoms or tribes), which differed in the number of fighters they could provide. The best known were the Sumo Mohe, who lived in the extreme south-west of the Mohe territory, while the Heishui Mohe inhabited the north-east, in valleys along the lower courses of the Sungari, Ussuri and Amur rivers. According to the Chinese chronicles, the Mohe sowed wheat and ploughed the soil with horses, as well as engaged in breeding horses and hogs.\(^{13}\)

In 698, the Sumo Mohe chief, Da Zuorong, declared his establishment of the Bohai kingdom. Its territory included eastern Manchuria, part of North Korea, and the south-west area of Primorye. The state was divided into 15 provinces and 62 districts with 5 capitals, and maintained diplomatic relations with China, Silla, Japan, and the Inner Asian nomadic empires.\(^{14}\)

Bohai was conquered in 926, after the nomadic Khitan people created the Liao Empire (907–1125). Liao then established the puppet-state of Dongdan (Eastern Khitan) on Bohai territory. The residents of Bohai were placed under tribute, but they almost immediately rose in revolt. It was put down, but new commotions soon started. In order to liquidate the discontent, the Khitans used the traditional strategy of resettling by force about half-a-million Bohai men to lands in the valleys of the Shara-Muren and Liao rivers, between 930 and 940. Another group of Bohai people was later deported to central Mongolia.\(^{15}\)


After the Khitan conquest of Bohai, the Jurchens (successors of the Heishui Mohe) took over north Manchuria, Primorye, and the Amur valley. The Jurchens depended on the Khitans and paid a tribute to them in furs, jewels, medicinal herbs, horses, etc. Hunting falcons were especially valued and, at the request of the Khitans, the Jurchens regularly organized trips to the Ugo people (the Chinese ‘five nations’) to capture them in the lower reaches of the Sungari, Ussuri, and Amur river valleys.16

In the latter half of the 11th century, the consolidation of the Jurchens began under the leadership of the Wanyan lineage. In 1115, Aguda proclaimed the establishment of the Golden Empire of Jurchens (in Chinese – the Jin, 1115–1234) and took the emperorship. Over a period of ten years, the Jurchens defeated the Khitans and captured their

16 Yury Vasil’ev, Pogrebalnyi obriad pokrovskoy kultury (IX – XIII vv. n.e.) [Funeral Ritual of the Pokrovka Culture (IX – XIII Centuries), Vladivostok: Dalnauka, 2006.]
entire territory. At the height of its prosperity, the Jurchen Empire held all of Manchuria, the southern part of the Russian Far East, part of North Korea, and a large part of north China. The population of the Jin Empire early in the 13th century reached more than 53 million men, of which about 10 per cent were Jurchens and not less than 83 percent Chinese. As with Bohai, the Jurchens had five capital cities, with 19 provinces headed by governors-general.17

In 1206, the superpower of Genghis Khan was established on the Mongolian steppes. After four years, the Mongols launched a war against the Jin Empire. The war was protracted and lasted a quarter of a century. The Mongols sacked many cities, slaughtered entire populations, and took many skilled artisans prisoner. In 1215, the commander of Jin troops in Liaodong, Puxian Wannu, declared the foundation of the Eastern Xia kingdom (in Chinese: Dong Xia) as a buffer state. After several military defeats, he resettled his army and people in the Russian Far East. His kingdom lasted only eighteen years. In 1233, Mongol troops invaded the territory of Primorye, and Puxian Wannu himself was taken captive. Two years later, the military division (tymen) of Kaiyuan was established on his territory by order of Chagan Ögödei, the son of Genghis.18

After this conquest, Manchuria and Primorye were vacated, as Jurchen craftsmen and farmers were carried off to the towns of the


Mongol khans.\textsuperscript{19} Many of their agricultural skills were lost, which led to the collapse of their medieval civilization in the Russian Far East. It is also possible that a cold spell and forest expansion in the Late Jurchen period could have influenced their decline.\textsuperscript{20}

\textbf{Figure 1:} Tyr stele, drawing by Grigory Permikin, as seen c 1860. In Ernst Ravenstein, The Russians on the Amur, London: Trubner and Company, 1861, p. 196.

During the Ming dynasty (1368–1644), the Jurchen again followed a nomadic lifestyle, engaging in cattle-breeding, hunting, fishery, and limited agriculture.\textsuperscript{21} As China began to pursue a wider foreign policy, they sent a special expedition to the Lower Amur region in 1411, under the leadership of Yishiha, a Jurchen in the service of the Ming emperor. The mission numbered a thousand people and distributed gifts to local chiefs. In 1413, they built a Buddhist temple and stele on Tyr cliff, adding


inscriptions in Chinese, Jurchen and Mongol. After their departure, the temple was destroyed by indigenous people. A new expedition arrived twenty years later, again under the leadership of Yishiha; they restored the temple and added another inscription in Chinese. When Russian Cossacks arrived at this place, 222 years later (1655–1666), they found the ruins of the temple and stele.22

At the turn of the 16th into the 17th century, the south Jurchen chiefdoms had a second chance to make history. Known as the Manchu by this time, they established the Late Jin state in 1616. The Manchu carried out depredations in north and east Manchuria and Primorye to draft people in their army, and, as a result, the majority of the native population was consolidated in Manchuria. The expansion continued, leading to their ascendancy in China as the Qing dynasty (1644–1911).23

In the 16th century, the eastward advance of the Russian pioneers into Siberia and the Far East began. In 1632, Petr Beketov established Lensky ostrog (fortress), which paved the way for today’s city of Yakutsk. Soon afterwards, Semen Shelkovnikov established the port of Okhotsk on the shores of the Sea of Okhotsk. Vassili Poyarkov (1643–1644) and Yerofey Khabarov (1649) reached the Amur River, which became the important watercourse for the Russian advance to the Pacific Ocean. Finally, in 1648, Semen Deznev explored the strait between Eurasia and America, earlier discovered by Semyon Dezhnev and later reconnoitred by Vitus Bering.

In 1650, Khabarov established the celebrated fort of Albazin on the Amur River, as well as others. In 1682, a regional district (voevodstvo, from the Russian voevoda: military leader) was created. This expansion in the direction of the Amur resulted in conflict with the Manchurian Empire. In 1685, Albazin was besieged and the Russians forced to leave, but the fort was restored a year later. The next year, a new siege was begun by a Manchurian army eight times the size of the defenders, but the fort held out. After a truce in 1689, the Nerchinsky Peace was

---


made, under which the Russians left and control of the Amur region remained with the Manchu and the Qing dynasty.

Despite a deceleration in the eastward movement, growth on the North Pacific continued. In 1697, Vassili Atlasov mapped a route to Kamchatka and constructed its first fort. Fourteen years later, Cossacks reached the Kuril Islands. In 1732, Mikhail Gvozdev voyaged to Alaska – the westernmost point of North America was named for him: острова Гвоздева (now the Diomede Islands). As businessman Grigory Shelekhov of Irkutsk expanded his firm’s operations into Alaska, it was reorganized into the Russian-American Company (1799). It became ‘a state within a state’, taking over colonial management (an analog of the British East India Company). In 1867, Tsar Alexander II sold Russian America to the United States for only $7.2 million.²⁴

As a result, the geopolitical interests of the Russian Empire again shifted to the Amur, since the government understood the importance of this ‘oriental Mississippi’ to regional development. In 1848, Captain Gennady Nevelskoy surveyed the Amur estuary (liman) and proved its navigability, establishing the town of Nikolaevsk there in 1850. He also discovered the strait between the continent and the Sakhalin Islands, advancing southwards to survey the south-east frontier of the Russian Far East, now called Primorye or Primorskiy Kray (maritime region). In 1854, the new water road from west to east began with the first flotilla of soldiers, civilians, ‘beans and bullets’ sent aboard ships and rafts to the Lower Amur from Transbaikalia.²⁵

Because the Chinese Empire fell behind in the 19th-century arms race, it became easy prey to European colonialism in the Opium wars,

---


and was further weakened by the Taiping Rebellion. Russia benefitted from this situation. Under the Treaty of Aigun (1858), the west bank of the Amur was ceded to Russia and, after the Convention of Peking (1860), all lands east of the Ussuri River became Russian.

As a result, the towns of Khabarovsk (1858) and Vladivostok (1860) were established. The etymology of the latter toponym reveals the ambitions of the Russians in the region. It consists of two words – control (vladet’) and east (vostok). In other words, it was meant to serve as guarded portal, similar to that of the Golden Horn and Bosporus at the Byzantine capital of Constantinople.

From that time onward, the Russian Far East saw greatly increased immigration. The availability of unoccupied land served as a special impetus for peasants to move there from central Russia. From 1861 to 1881, about 12,000 men arrived overland and, afterwards, via the Amur River. In 1882, shipping lanes were opened and, by 1900, about 180,000 settlers had arrived, principally military personnel (more than 80 per cent), as well as Cossacks, peasants and convict-laborers.


---

The Trans-Siberian Railway was of great importance and one of the progressive national reforms advanced by statesman Petr Stolypin. Begun in 1891, its 10,000 kilometres of rails allowed for travel between Moscow and Vladivostok. It is the world’s largest railway but took only six years to build (except for a bridge over the Amur completed in 1916). By 1903, one could also travel to Vladivostok, and on to Port Arthur, via the Chinese Eastern Railway, which had been built from eastern Transbailakia, across Inner Mongolia and Manchuria, to Ussuriland. The Trans-Siberian Railway facilitated the migration of more than 200,000 people to the Far East before the Revolution, where they derived improvement in their living conditions.

At the close of the 19th century, the geopolitical interests of Japan and Russia came into conflict, resulting in the war of 1904–1905. Victory over Japan was thought to be easy for the Russians, but the war was lost. Most of the Russian fleet was destroyed or surrendered in the Battle of Tsushima, with the word ‘Tsushima’ becoming a byword for ‘national shame’. In the Treaty of Portsmouth, Russia lost South Sakhalin and its military bases in China, including Port Arthur.

In 1917, the Russian revolution erupted. A democratic government was first established in February, followed by a communist government in October. A deadly civil war broke out and lasted until 1922. As a result of these upheavals, a heavy task emerged for the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics to rebuild the ravished economy, strengthen borders and administration, feed people, and reorganize education and cultural institutions. The USSR actively carried out industrialization. Factories for processing resources were built and projects for production as well as the repair of marine and military equipment were carried out.


towns were established. Extensive campaigns encouraged the migration of young people to the Russian Far East. A policy of full education for the people was enacted, with new schools and higher-educational institutes opened.

At the same time, a new ideology of totalitarian society was formulated and excesses were unleashed. The Russian Far East became a symbol of the Great Purge, as many more prisoners (zek) were sent by rail to Vladivostok than had been exiled by the Tsarist government. From there, the prisoners were carried to the frigid forced-labour camps of Magadan, perceived by many as a synonym of GULAG.30

Japanese intervention in China in 1931 was the actual start of World War II, and Japan became more aggressive after its annexation of Manchuria. Conflict broke out in 1938, when the Japanese army moved into Russian territory near Khasan Lake, on its frontier with Korea and Manchuria. These incursions were finally stopped at the Khalkhin-Gol River in Mongolia, a defeat that likely prevented Japan from launching a formal war against the USSR.

After the victory over Germany, the USSR entered the war against Japan on 9 August 1945. The Soviet Army had much experience and state-of-the-art armament, which led to the defeat of the Kwantung Army in less than a month. On 2 September, Japan’s act of capitulation to the US and USSR, aboard the USS Missouri in Tokyo Bay, returned South Sakhalin and the Kuril Islands to the Soviet Union.

Although no major battles of the war were fought in the Russian Far East, the region still lagged behind in its living standards. Despite a policy of trying to keep a substantial population there, reverse migration to the west of Russia and an attitude of being just a ‘temporary resident’ took hold in the post-war period. This had been a recurring problem, and so the state again turned to address it. New jobs were created, residential buildings were erected, and the extractive industry (metals, timber and fishery) was reinforced. Khabarovsk and Vladivostok became great centres with over a half-million residents each.31


Tensions mounted with China, resulting in a Sino-Soviet divide in the 1960s. Between 1974 and 1984, the Baikal-Amur Mainline (BAM) railroad was constructed to the north of the Trans-Siberian Railway as a backup network for transportation and communication in case of war with China. In its construction and operation, many young people from all regions of the USSR took part.

*Perestroika* began in 1985 and led to a chain of events that resulted in the collapse of the USSR six years later. These events triggered profound change. During the first ten years of the new Russian Federation, the Far East was again neglected, and migration back to central Russia increased to 1.8 million people, a fifth of the population. As a result, the Russian Far East has essentially become an appendage of China, exporting its resources to the south and obtaining its supplies from there.

The region is rich in resources. Significant mineral deposits exist, including antimony, stannic tin, mercury, tungsten, lead, titanium, diamonds, gold, iron ore, and coal. For this reason, the modern economy is oriented to extraction of minerals, wood production and fishery, which accounts for 31.2 per cent of the gross regional product. Transportation,
communication, construction, trade and agriculture provide from 5 to 10 per cent, while a few per cent comes from energy, education, medicine, financial services, military security, and management. Nonetheless, the economy is irregularly developed and concentrates mainly in the south, while the northern and middle zones are nearly empty.\textsuperscript{33}

Plate 6: The Far-Eastern Federal University (foreground) and the Russian Island Bridge over the Eastern Bosphorus Strait (background). Photograph by Nokolay Kradin, 2012.

In the new millennium, the Russian government began to focus its attention on the Far East. In 2012, a summit of the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) was held in Vladivostok at the new Far-Eastern Federal University. In this educational coalition are the four largest universities of Vladivostok and Ussuriisk. New construction has taken place, including theatres, cultural centres and a casino (near Nakhodka), along with visa-free tourism. The Ministry for Development of the Russian Far East was established in 2012, as a way for the state to address the great possibilities and the great challenges faced by its people.

As we can see from this quick overview of the history of the Russian Far East, many events contributed to our modern identity, and will continue to do so in the future. We have a transitory consciousness of who we are today, and that will change tomorrow. It is an adventure in the process of humanity’s voyage together!

**Nikolay N. Kradin** (D.Sci., Russian Academy of Sciences, St. Petersburg; Ph.D., Academy of Sciences of the USSR, Vladivostok) is Corresponding Member, Institute of History, Archaeology and Ethnology, Far East Branch, Russian Academy of Sciences. His research focuses on the archaeology, history and anthropology of Inner Asian nomads, political anthropology, and world-system analysis. Nik is organizer of and participant in many archaeological and ethnological expeditions to Mongolia, Siberia, and the Russian Far East. Author of more than 500 scholarly publications, including *Nomadic Societies* (1992), *Xiongnu Empire* (1996, 2002, 2012), *Political Anthropology* (2001), *Chinggis Khan Empire* (2006, co-author), *History of Khitan Empire Liao* (2014, co-author), and *Nomads of Inner Asia in Transition* (2014). His e-mail address is <kradin@mail.ru>. 