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Informal transportation and social embedding of the railroad: the case of *okurki* on the Baikal-Amur Mainline

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the transformations of informal transportation practices in Siberia as an example of the process of social embedding of infrastructure in remote regions. Research about informal transportation is predominantly based on studies of minibuses, motorcycles, rikshaws and other small, low-performance vehicles. Meanwhile, the railroad often best exemplifies formalization, control, and surveillance, the characteristics opposite to informal practices. On the basis of information gathered from local and regional archives and semi-formal interviews with railroad workers, their families, and BAM builders (2016–2020), this paper traces the roots of embeddedness in specific norms and expectations that formed during construction of the railroad and persisted during its operation. Informal transportation became the norm and a resource for coping with a lack of infrastructure. Recent reforms have changed the railroad from a public system to a private, profit-seeking, dis-embedded enterprise. This process affects local communities' access to the railroad. Workers' trains, or *okurki*, are a last refuge for the retention of local mobility mostly in an informal way.

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Introduction

The Baikal-Amur Mainline (BAM) railroad deserves attention not only as the “last large Soviet industrial project,” but also as an agent of the state’s expansion over vast territories. In contrast to previous waves of Siberian colonization, which were largely driven by exiles, peasants, or Gulag camps, a later large, voluntary migration of people to remote regions was driven by BAM, with construction mainly taking place from 1974–1984 (Belkin and Sheregi 1985; Ward 2009). Arriving as representatives of the Soviet state and tasked with “mastering the North” (Schweitzer, Povoroznyuk, and Schiesser 2017), BAM workers formed permanent settlements with both material infrastructure and locally constructed norms and values. Over time, the railroad has grown from a National Komsomol Shock Construction Project to a profit-generating competitive company. Little has

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been written, however, about how developed transportation infrastructure fits local mobility needs.

In this article, we explore issues of social embeddedness in transportation infrastructure through a case study of *okurki*. The word *okurki* literally means “cigarette butts” and is the nickname for both the workers’ trains and regional trains operating along the BAM. The trains garnered the nickname because they are unusually short, consisting of two cars in the summer and one car in the winter. The nickname has negative connotations: the trains are not only small but also inconvenient, with passengers enduring very confined conditions. In addition, with the transition from a planned to a market-based economy, access to the *okurki* is becoming more exclusive. Their importance, however, is difficult to overestimate: for many residents of rural communities, *okurki* remain the most reliable mode of transportation. The railroad is a source of work and mobility for local communities, which in turn maintain and service it. As such, *okurki* illustrate interdependencies between the railroad and local communities that reflect the changing local mobilities and informal relationships of this remote region during the Soviet and post-Soviet periods. Our goal is to understand how the relationships formed by the informal use of *okurki* are socially embedded and woven into historical and spatial relations, and how the current state-led formalization of transportation services affects their use and local mobilities. By examining *okurki*, we aim to contribute to a broader understanding of the shifting boundaries of the state’s reach in remote regions.

First, we give an overview of the literature on the informal use of railways in remote communities and social embeddedness. While the informal use of railways is extraordinary by itself, we locate it in the wider context of post-socialist transformations in a remote region, where social embeddedness is stretched out along railroad infrastructure. We dedicate the second section to our methodology. We describe the area of study and explain why regional and workers’ trains play such an important role there. In the next two sections, we address the history of regional mobilities and the railway, with an emphasis on how informal mobility practices were formed in the region and the efforts that the state and railroad company made to formalize those practices. The following section examines the current informal use of *okurki*.

Okurki in the literature: theoretical considerations

Karl Polanyi’s (2001) notion of embeddedness, which initially examined the role of factors such as politics, religion, and social relations in economic systems, has become useful for understanding societies that follow neither socialist nor market economic pathways. The concept of embeddedness is lucrative for studies of informality in the post-socialist context (Morris 2019) – it allows scholars to take into account the formal and informal relations of infrastructure use. Rekhviashvili and Sgibnev (2018), for example, apply the concept of “social

embeddedness” to studies of informal transport in the post-socialist context. According to them, ride-sharing and other forms of informal local transportation are based on peer-to-peer relationships that are more flexible within the local context than regular public transportation. The individuals involved in these relationships have considerable experience with sharing the same space and form communities with specific, locally defined norms, expectations of conduct, and values. These observations are closely related to those of anthropological research.

There is growing attention in anthropology to social embeddedness in infrastructure. According to Star, infrastructure is always socially embedded: it is “sunk into and inside of other structures, social arrangements, and technologies” (1999, 381). Both the economic and social anthropological traditions of studies of embeddedness are highly instrumental for studying how people design, construct, maintain, and use infrastructure and allow us to question the social relations embedded in infrastructure.

Another perspective on the embeddedness of infrastructure focuses on discussions about people’s “right to the railroad.” This term is from Henry Lefebvre’s seminal work “Right to the City” (1996), in which he argued against the disenfranchisement of urban residents, or *citadins*. *Citadins*, he says, have the right to participate in decision making about changes in the spaces that they inhabit and to use and produce their space (Purcell 2002). Therefore, their rights are also embedded in the urban and transportation infrastructure based on the fact of their life in a specific place. David Harvey (2008) expanded these ideas to the consolidation of labor for infrastructural reconfigurations of Paris and New York. Similarly, Brezhnev attempted to recruit the most socially active youth for construction of the Baikal-Amur Mainline (Ward 2009). Although BAM builders came to the region as settlers directed by the state, they have since developed a strong local identity as “bamovtsy,” with specific local norms and values (Povoroznyuk 2019).

The railroad has long been a focus of scholars, who examine it as a force that formalizes and organizes peoples’ life. According to Schivelbusch (1979), the construction and functioning of the railroad are the main reasons for the standardization of time across the world and the compression of modern life in terms of time and space. Railroad infrastructure is not only an instrument of state control (Zerubavel 1981), but it is also part of the military structure at the very core of state power (Kuklina, Povoroznyuk, and Saxinger 2019). In the Russian context, ordinary people who encounter the railroad perceive it as a regulated “state within the state” (Ludmila. 2007). More recent studies of trains and railway travel further emphasize the domination of railroad infrastructure over individual and local rhythms. Peter Thomas (2014), for instance, draws attention to the important role of railways in creating new forms of commuting cultures, sociality, mass movements of people, control, and surveillance. The practices of working passengers (Letherby and Reynolds 2005; Bissell 2016), commuters’ use of travel time (Lyons et al. 2013;

Watts 2008), the establishment of traveling routines (Simonova 2007), and the relationships between passengers and landscapes (Roy and Hannam 2013) each exemplify how people have adapted and adjusted to trains and railways.

While informal relationships have constituted a major part of Soviet and post-Soviet daily lives, their connection to railways has not yet been a focus of research; nor has there been a study of informal railroad systems. Research on informal transportation is predominantly based on studies of minibuses (Rizzo 2017; Sgibnev and Rekhviashvili 2018), motorcycles (Sopranzetti 2014), rikshaws (Rahman and Assadekjaman 2013), and other small, low-performance vehicles (Cervero 2000). Russian historian Alexey Vul'fov (2007), however, was able to distinguish a railroad culture with attributes of informal relationships by examining the myths, ceremonies, symbols, jargon, and material artifacts of the everyday life of the Russian railroad. Anecdotal evidence of free riding on the railroad (Griphon 2011) has not been the focus of scholarly attention but is also valuable for this discussion. In this context, we address the issues that the social embeddedness of railroad infrastructure presents for transportation and mobility in a remote region.

Methods

This paper is based on qualitative field research consisting of participant observations and a series of focused and expert semi-structured interviews. We selected informants from settlements in the service area of commuter passenger and working trains along the BAM (not all sections of the railway are covered by passenger transportation services, despite the presence of populated areas). We collected 42 in-depth interviews in 2016 and 2017 in the cities of Severobaikalsk and Taksimo and the villages of Kholodnoie and Severomuysk, all of which are in the Republic of Buryatia, Russia. From 2018–2019, we recorded 12 additional interviews in Taksimo and Severomuysk in the Muysky district of the Republic of Buryatia. We mainly spoke with people of working age and retired workers who occasionally take regional and workers' trains. Among the interviewees were representatives of indigenous peoples, including Evenki from Kholodnoye, and labor migrants associated with late Soviet modernization projects (for example, All-Union Komsomol construction) and post-Soviet transformations of the region (gold mining and other mining projects, BAM-2, etc.).

A special group of informants consisted of employees of the railway industry. Due to certain protocols and the sensitivity of the topic (not all respondents were ready to speak openly about the informal practice of passenger transportation by service trains), we established contact with railway workers through the key informant method and random "snowball" sampling. Professionally, respondents were train drivers, conductors, cashiers, railway station workers, and retired railroad workers.

In addition, we organized several meetings with officials. We met with representatives of the railway administration, members of the Council of Veterans of Railway

Transport Workers, and employees of the combined Archive of the Severobaikalsk Station of the Russian Railways and the Museum of the Severobaikalsk region of the East Siberian Branch of the Russian Railways. We examined documentary sources from the latter two organizations, including documents from the archives of the Severobaikalsk department of the East Siberian Railway (BAMZhd) (NOD-5) (1980–2009), the Lena (1998–2008) and Severobaikalsk (1999–2010) railway stations, the Severobaikalsk Directorate for Passenger Services (Dop-5) (1986–2008), etc. In the Museum of the Severobaikalsk region of the East Siberian Branch of the Russian Railways, we found photographs and films illustrating the history of railway passenger service in BAM regions. In particular, there were photographs of the first railway stations, places for passengers boarding, and regional trains. In the documentary *“BAM. Fourth year. 1975–1978,”* a separate story is devoted to the first BAM trains. In the story, a train conductor talks about passenger service. In 2018, in Ust-Kut, Irkutsk Region, we managed to find the heroine of the film and interview her, 40 years after the documentary was originally filmed.

We not only interviewed people currently living in BAM districts but also conducted a series of interviews with former residents of the designated settlements who have since changed their place of residence. We recorded five interviews in the village of Barguzin, Barguzinsky district of Buryatia, four in Ulan-Ude, and two in Irkutsk. We gathered these interviews from 2018 to 2020, whenever it was possible to meet with former BAM residents who have some knowledge about *okurki*. We cite the sex, age, and field of expertise of each interviewee as needed.

Area of study

In post-Soviet Siberia, issues of social embeddedness and informal transportation are complicated by relations between so-called monotowns and city-forming enterprises – the factories and industries that provide jobs and infrastructural development for entire cities (Heleniak 2010; Schweitzer, Povoroznyuk, and Schiesser 2017; Stammler and Saxinger 2010). The BAM has become a region-forming enterprise, with a scale of influence much larger than that of local industrial enterprises. It exemplifies the unprecedented movement of people and the construction of new cities that took place in the North and Far East, mostly for resource extraction, but also for purposes of state security. Specific “monotowns” arose, each dependent on particular resources, industries, or enterprises and embedding life, labor, and socialization. These constitute what some researchers call a “total social phenomenon” (Stammler and Eilmsteiner-Saxinger 2010). In this sense, the BAM service area is a “mono-region.”

Local communities near the Baikal-Amur Mainline are very dependent on the railroad both as an object of infrastructure and as a state-owned organization (the Russian Railroads Company, or RZhD). Power lines are still connected to railroad substations; medical trains compensate for the absence of regular medical care in

remote settlements; and some hospitals, sanatoriums, schools, kindergartens, and local activity centers remain reliant on the budget of the railroad (owned either by RZhD or its branch organizations). In some small villages, the railroad owns unprofitable grocery stores. These stores cannot be closed because they serve as the only local source of delivered food. The railroad either directly or indirectly provides most jobs, such as railroad-dependent work in extractive industries and public and service sector jobs in shops, cafes, and the tourism industry (Municipal database 2019). These jobs would not exist without the railroad due to the prohibitively high cost of other kinds of transportation.

The railroad is also very dependent on settlements, which house the workers who maintain the railroad. The families of these workers form most of the population of the settlements, and in order to keep its workers from leaving, RZhD must provide basic local social services for its employees and their families.

Local residents who lived in the region before the railroad was built include the indigenous Evenki and Russians who settled in the region in the seventeenth century (Tulokhonov 2008) (Figure 1). Traditional activities have historically and currently come into conflict with the development of infrastructure: for example, during the construction of the BAM, wild game was poached by newcomers and was almost extirpated. Moreover, local communities were exposed to social problems (e.g. alcoholism, drug use, violence, etc.) (Forbes et al. 2009; Schweitzer, Povoroznyuk, and Schiesser 2017; Povoroznyuk 2019). In addition, in old settlements near BAM rails, such as the village Kholodnoie, passing trains sometimes hit cattle (interview with a local municipal representative, female, age 50, 2017). The intermixing of tradition and new infrastructure is also evident



Figure 1. Settlements along the Western part of the Baikal-Amur Mainline (map made by V. Bogdanov).

elsewhere in the lives of Evenki natives and Russian settlers, some of whom moved to BAM settlements and found employment that supplements their traditional subsistence activities.

State planners designated and founded settlements in particular locations depending on the demands of construction, such as Severobaikalsk and Taksimo, as future transportation hubs and industrial centers. Other settlements were supposed to provide services to the railroad and some were supposed to disappear after construction was finished, such as settlements for bridge and tunnel builders. Most of these settlements were built in new places, away from older settlements. The population in these new settlements peaked in 1989, just before the collapse of the Soviet Union (Table 1). Significant migration flows and related changes in the local population are well-documented (Belkin and Sheregi 1985; Zhelezko 1980; Migratsionnye 1993; Vlasov 2015), as are problems with housing that the incoming migrants encountered (Baikalov 2018).

Table 1. Population change in case-study settlements (Municipal database 2019; Poyasnitel'naia zapiska 2019; Fondahl 2018).

The state represented the railroad and work on the railroad as critical to the state's security and prosperity. Although the accomplishments of the construction of BAM have been debated in public discourse since the 1990s and in scholarly works (see, for example, Ward 2009), BAM construction workers often refer to the BAM construction period as “the happiest time of [their] lives” (Bogdanova 2013; Voronina 2009). The wages of BAM construction workers, or *bamovtsy*, during the main period of construction (1974–1984) were 1.5–3 times higher than those of workers in similar sectors in more populous parts of the country (for more on the salary of BAM workers, see Baikarov 2007). Moreover, BAM builders enjoyed access to scarce goods and foodstuffs through a special supply system (*otdel rabochego snabzhenia*, ORS). Despite the significant out-migration of BAM workers from these settlements during the 1990s, they still outnumber local Evenki natives and Russian settlers today.

The railroad is not only a dominating form of infrastructure, but it is also the main source of employment and a major actor in local social relationships. In the service area of the western BAM, our region of focus, there are only five settlements where the population exceeds 10,000 people, including Severobaikalsk. Severobaikalsk is listed as a single-industry town: according to the statistical data of 2016, about 34.38% of the employed population is in the transportation and communication field, predominantly working for RZhD.

Table 1. Population change in case-study settlements (Municipal database 2020; Povoroznyuk 2019; Fondahl 2018)..

Settlements	Founded in	Population in 1989	Population in 2019
Severobaikalsk	1974	28,635	23,183
Severomuisk	1976	9,833	683
Taksimo	1910	12,790	8,260
Kholodnoie	1932	367	363

Historical and spatial background of transportation in the region

Before the construction of the railroad, Evenki and Russian settlers had limited access to motorized transportation. The Evenki lived (and some still live) nomadically in the taiga forest, riding and transporting goods with reindeer and subsisting on hunting, fishing, and gathering (for more on Evenki mobilities: Mertens 2016; Landerer 2009; Povoroznyuk 2011). Evenki and Russian settlers also traveled and moved goods by boat on the main rivers and on horseback, riding along chaotic networks of trails and tracks.

When the first workers arrived, they traveled by helicopter to remote regions to clear lines and build a service road for the future railroad. Cargo was delivered in the summer by river and in the winter by “winter roads,” or roads that are only accessible after the temperature drops below freezing (Figure 2). Heavy machinery (e.g. off-road vehicles, bulldozers, and trucks) constituted the first all-season vehicles to arrive in the region. Moreover, the service roads were often too rough for use by anything but these heavy machines. In addition, the rugged terrain of the ridges and uplands that the railroad crossed was also hard for infrastructural development. Almost all of the BAM builders’ stories reference the poor road conditions:

The roads were impassable. Here from Kichera to Nizhneangarsk there were so many fatal road accidents, too many. The road itself was dangerous. To pass over these hills, you know, the car is standing almost vertically. [...] We were only able to drive using Magirus and KAMAZ [brands of off-road heavy trucks]. (Interview with a retired male BAM worker, age 60, 2017)



Figure 2. Winter road. From the personal collection of Larisa Norina, Chairman of the Council of Veterans of the BAM of the Ust-Kut District.

Despite the planners' efforts to regulate migration, families of the builders took up residence in these settlements. During the first winter of construction, the presence of those families created an urgent need for schools, kindergartens, and other social support institutions that did not yet exist. As a result, the use of older settlements' infrastructure was inevitable and required constant movement between new and old settlements. Public transportation, when state planners eventually created it, was very limited and could not address the demands of the fast-growing population.

Difficult driving conditions and limited access to transportation created local norms of travel similar to those in other remote regions (see, e.g., Argounova-Low 2012 on driving in Yakutia). According to interviewees, people commonly traveled using work vehicles and picked up passengers along the way. Passengers' efforts to pay the driver for a ride would fail because the practice was reciprocal: the drivers would pick up someone who needed a lift if he had space for a passenger because next time, he might be the one in need (there is no evidence that there were any female truck drivers in the region). Moreover, the act of giving others a lift was a local spiritual norm: the driver who did not pick up a passenger could expect bad luck during his journey.

Among the benefits that the *bamovtsy* enjoyed were vouchers for the purchase of personal vehicles. In 1975, the state issued a voucher program to attract workers; the program was maintained until 1992 (Kashin and Kozlova 2012). Through this program, the residents of the BAM settlements could get a voucher for the purchase of a car after working on the BAM for a certain period of time (that was three to five years for the BAM workers whose income was quite high) and paying for the car in installments. Cars were typically a luxury available only to those who had stood in line for decades for the opportunity to buy a car (for more on how people bought a car in the USSR, see Siegelbaum 2008). Because BAM wages were relatively high, many workers could earn the car voucher in two and a half years. The interviewees often mentioned this prospect as one of several motivations for working on the BAM. Due to poor road conditions, however, there were few roads on which they could drive those cars.

The lack of other modes of transportation and especially the poor road conditions ensure that the railroad remains the main mode of transportation in the region. The main road in the BAM service area, running parallel with the railroad, is poorly maintained. In some older settlements further from the railroad, there are no public roads at all. Residents of BAM settlements mostly prefer to travel by road in the winter, when snow cover is stable but not too deep and the snow smooths the gravel surface of the road. In 2017, local entrepreneurs established a new bus service that takes passengers from Severobaikalsk to Irkutsk in 12 hours (instead of 36 hours by train). This service is not an important source of competition for the railroad, as only a few dozen

passengers are transported by bus weekly, while the number of passengers who travel by rail from Severobaikalsk to Irkutsk is a few hundred people weekly (field notes 2016). Air travel is relatively expensive, with airfare costing two or three times more than train tickets and few airlines operating in the region. Small ships once took passengers from Nizhneangarsk, on the north shore of Lake Baikal, to destinations on the southern shores of the lake, but such voyages were canceled in 2017 – the local passenger ship company could afford neither constant repairs nor the replacement of the aging fleet.

Patterns of social embeddedness in infrastructure today, such as expectations of free transportation and the use of work vehicles for personal purposes, have historical roots. Mutual support in remote regions has been applied (mostly unofficially) to different emerging forms of transport. Limited choices when it comes to transportation mean that most informal mobility practices in the BAM region have become entangled with the railroad.

Formalizing the operation of the railroad

Railroad construction took place simultaneously at several sites between 1974 and 1989. As soon as parts of the railroad were ready, workers' trains would start moving workers and materials along the completed segments of the railroad (Figure 3). Locals were allowed to ride for free as needed, though the main function of the railroad at the time was to support construction rather than to provide transportation services.

Initially, such trains were called "*bichevoz*" ("train for hobos") although *okurki* was also in use. The seats on the *bichevoz* were first come, first served. In an unfilled car, a passenger could take a berth, while in a crowded car, passengers had to stand. In 1984, the coupling ("*stykovka*") of the eastern and western parts of the BAM was completed, and regular train traffic started. As the passenger load on workers' trains increased, rail authorities started to attach a passenger car to freight trains. They simultaneously began to formalize this arrangement, providing timetables and tickets for these added-on cars. This kind of train became a kind of substitute for commuter trains. Seats in such passenger cars, as well as in workers' trains, continued to be first come, first served. According to local residents, this practice contrasted that of regular trains with assigned seats, which is why the nickname *bichevoz* was formed (more on the distinction between *bichevoz* and *okurki*: Baikalov and Kuklina 2018).

With the official railroad opening in 1989, regional train lines were established. Although schedules and tickets were available for the one or two passenger cars attached to the locomotives, many passengers traveled for free because of a lack of access to ticketing offices (smaller stations did not have them) and long lines at existing ones. One factor that did not contribute to free riding was the fare, which was low, especially since *bamovtsy* had relatively high incomes. Theoretically, conductors could sell tickets on the train, but not every regional train had a conductor.



Figure 3. Locomotive for the workers' train (photo by the second author, September 2019).

Additionally, there was a strong social network in BAM communities, so people in charge of enforcement often looked the other way out of deference to old traditions from the period of railway construction. In this way, the informal use of the *okurki* continued to be widespread in the region, even after the railroad was officially open.

The opening of the railroad to regular train traffic had a new, another benefit for the *bamovtsy*: cargo trains could carry their personal cars to places where it was easier to drive them. One former BAM settlement resident recalled that in 1986, their

family, along with others, mounted and fixed their cars on the platforms of the cargo train and traveled inside those cars. Their journey between the Novy Uoian and Vikhorevka stations (about 900 kilometers) took two or three days. They got off the train when it made long stops (half an hour or more) at a station and walk around, eat, use the restroom, and so on. These long stops were frequent. Questions of regulations and danger did not come up in our conversation (notes from conversation with former BAM resident, age 45, 2019).

In the 1990s, while Russia endured a difficult economic transition, the railroad remained heavily subsidized, and cargo and passenger trains continued to operate successfully. Only in 2001 did the Russian Federal Ministry of Transportation start to reform the railroad system, which led to its privatization and the founding of RZhD in 2003 (RZhD Report 2008). After that, RZhD effectively owned most of Russia's railways, train stations, locomotives, and other rail-related infrastructure. Throughout the 1990s and early 2000s, several regional and long-distance trains operated within the BAM service area. According to an RZhD report (2008), 51 of the 98 rail lines that the company owns have socio-economic significance: they are unprofitable and subsidized by the federal and regional governments. In order to lessen this burden and increase profitability, the company has reduced the number of trains it operates on these lines. This decrease in service, combined with growing car ownership, contributed to passenger traffic shrinking from 174.1 billion (RZhD 2008) to 123.1 billion passenger-kilometers (RZhD Report 2015). In general, the volume of passenger travel on Russian railroads continues to decrease by 4% every year (RZhD 2015). Despite this fall in ridership, the BAM has not closed any of its stations.

In 2014, railroad authorities began constructing a second track, popularly referred to as "BAM-2." The media called this project a new impetus for the socio-economic development of the BAM service area. Authorities expected the second track to lead to an increase in cargo transportation and extraction of mineral resources. Around 87% of cargo in Russia is delivered by railroad (Rossiiskaia Gazeta 2013), and the BAM carries 3.3% of total railroad cargo and 1% of passengers (RZhD Letter 2016). Currently, the BAM railroad is mostly an intermediary: it brings coal, gas, oil, wood and other natural resources from the Eurasian West to the East, primarily to Asian markets. RZhD plans to use the second track to increase the amount of cargo that is transported on the BAM.

The infrequent (running about three to four times weekly) long-haul trains stitch together diverse regions: the BAM stretches over the territories of six federal subjects in East Siberia and the Russian Far East and is regulated from the federal center. The long-haul trains support the mobility of residents of BAM settlements and exemplify their connectivity with the state (see Pilyasov 2009 regarding the perception of northern settlements as "islands" far from European Russia). The use of these long-haul trains is supported by state subsidies that were greater during the Soviet era, though they still exist today to some extent. In particular, once every two years, all the residents of the Extreme North and of territories that are similar to those of the

Extreme North have the right to obtain federally subsidized return tickets from any point of origin within Russia (Zakon Rossiiskoi Federatsii 1993). In addition, with RZhD support, every RZhD employee is allowed free train tickets for him/herself and two dependents once a year.² In the summer, several additional southbound trains operate, connecting the BAM service area with major Russian resort areas (e.g., Kislovodsk, Anapa, and Adler)¹.

The long-haul trains carry tourists and seasonal shift workers, including people coming from outside of Russia and from the BAM service area. Most of the passenger trips bring people to and from the regions around Lake Baikal. In 2015, according to the administration of the Ust-Kut train station, most passengers from Ust-Kut traveled within the East-Siberian³ (55%), Western-Siberian⁴ (17%), and Krasnoyarsk⁵ (16%) regions of the railroad (RZhD 2016). Only 12% of passengers traveled anywhere in the European or Far-Eastern parts of the country by rail. However, with the reduction in train service in the region, seats on the trains are often sold out a few weeks in advance.

Long-haul passenger trains enjoy a certain amount of prestige in the railroad hierarchy: the trains stop for longer and at more convenient times in larger cities. For example, long-haul trains stop in Severobaikalsk, the center of the regional railroad branch, for at least 50 minutes (Figure 4). Residents can easily use the city as a point of departure and arrival. Other passengers still face issues of ticket availability – train ticket offices may not exist at small train stations or may only be open during certain hours, and the option for an electronic ticket is not always available to riders because of a poor Internet connection. Moreover, the long-haul trains make short stops in the middle of the night at smaller



Figure 4. Local entrepreneurs unload goods from the passenger/postal cars of a long-haul train in Severobaikalsk (photo by the first author July 2017).

settlements and do not stop at all in some smaller villages, barring locals from using the trains.

Regional trains in the area of study are managed by the Baikalskaya Regional Passenger Company (BSPC), the ownership of which is evenly divided between the RZhD and regional government of Irkutsk. Its service area covers the whole territory of the East Siberian railroad from Tayshet to Khani. Regional governments are supposed to cover the regional train's lost revenues on their respective territory. Consequently, the movement of regional trains is complicated by the numerous jurisdictions through which the railroad passes: while the lines of regional routes are usually located within the same region, settlements located on the edges of regions are either left without connections or serve as connection points between two regions. There is no central, organized place to get information about ticketing or schedules for all of the different regional lines.

Meanwhile, the residents of many small settlements need to go to Severobaikalsk, Nizhneangarsk, Taksimo, or other large district centers for almost every ordinary consumer service. They are required to go to these centers to manage their benefits and utilities, visit medical specialists, register and process documents, and more. Residents from small villages must travel to bigger settlements to withdraw cash. At home, there are no ATMs because of the absence of security agencies to protect them. Residents might also have to travel to bigger settlements to sell the products they collect or create as part of traditional subsistence activities, such as fish, meat, wild mushrooms, or berries. Finally, rural residents complain about the high prices in local stores, and, whenever possible, make large purchases in district centers.

In Severomuysk, authorities recently decided to liquidate the ambulance service, citing the decreasing population of the village and unprofitability of maintaining two staff members (a paramedic and a driver). After residents protested, the ambulance was saved, but people still need to travel to the central hospital for other medical services.

The importance of connections between cities for local communities is especially visible in case of Severomuysk and Severobaikalsk. On one hand, prices are lower in Severobaikalsk than in the Muysky district. The city has a greater variety of stores, markets, and cafes than does Taksimo. Fish and vegetable gardens grow better there. Many people get dressed or get their children prepared to school cheaper and faster traveling by trains to and shopping in Severobaikalsk than flying by plane from Taksimo to Ulan-Ude. On the other hand, there is a lack of jobs in Severobaikalsk; in contrast, in the Muysky district around Taksimo, there is a high demand for work in gold mining artels and logging companies. Many workers from the neighboring Severo-Baikalsky district travel on a rotating basis to earn money in Taksimo or Bodaibo, which is connected to Taksimo by road. People travel from Severomuysk to Severobaikalsk by workers' train, with a transfer in Novy Uoyan (field notes, September 2019).

hunters, and forest gatherers. The informal atmosphere of workers' trains permits dirt, odors, and strong words in conversations, all of which are part of daily life for the male residents of smaller settlements. As a result, workers' trains remain their most convenient travel option.

In 2016, railway authorities started to enforce boundaries between workers' trains and regional passenger trains, stopping the practice of free-riding on workers' trains. According to an RZhD representative, the company's main concern was passengers' safety. Local residents did not understand the decision to restrict or ban passenger traffic. The most common answer to the question "Who forbade this?" is "I don't know, someone from above, this is clearly not the head of our station." According to local logic, if railway workers are transported by workers' trains free of charge, then non-railway workers – at least veterans of BAM construction – should also be transported free of charge. By comparison, every rider must have a ticket in order to travel by long-haul or regional trains. Authorities have preserved the former Soviet system of discounts for retirees, low-income residents, "veterans of labor," and other groups on public transportation, covering a significant share of the population of remote settlements. Members of these groups are supposed to receive free or discounted tickets at ticket windows, with the ticket seller (RZhD or BSPC) reimbursed later by the regional Ministry of Health and Social Development. If ticket windows are not available, passengers can ask conductors for free or discounted tickets (interview with male, age 35, 2017).

When the ban was just introduced, former BAM builders perceived it as a violation of their symbolic rights to the road. It even led to some protests:

It happened in Taksimo, when the temperature was minus 40 degrees (Celsius). And the conductor refused to let us in, said that there was a ban. They usually permitted it, and now they refused. We felt so offended, we built that railroad, and now we are not allowed to ride on it. We got in the way as a crowd and blocked the movement of the train. We were quickly taken from there to the station building, where they allocated us a room to warm up. And right there, while waiting for the next train, we wrote official letters to everyone, from the head of the railway department to the minister of the Ministry of Railways. As a result, we obtained permission to travel on workers' trains. But after a couple of years, the road's management changed, and we were again banned from riding. (Interview with a pensioner, female, 65 years old, Severomuysk – Ulan-Ude, 2020)

The ban on the use of workers' trains is also "abnormal" for practical reasons. The interviews contain many stories about the use of workers' trains in critical situations, most often medical emergencies or death. As the people of Severomuysk say: "If something happens and there is no train, thank God, bichevoz will pass at the right time."

Coroners' and funeral services are even harder to access as they are located only in regional centers. It is impossible to transport a coffin with a corpse in a regular passenger train. For the transportation of deceased people, local residents also use workers' trains, which have a passenger car and always leave from open platforms (Figure 6):



Figure 6. A workers' train with an open platform informally used for the transportation of coffins (photo by the second author, September 2019).

Here (in Severomuysk — authors), coffins are not made, and no autopsies are performed on the dead. They do not take them with coffins into a regular carriage, only on the platform. The deceased must first be taken to the pathologist in Taksimo, then back with the coffin. And then there was a ban ... There were cases that they would come with the deceased to the train, and then they were taken back: the train did not take it. And this is a big expense: we need to agree with the transport, hire the people who will load this coffin on the platform. (Interview with a pensioner, female, 65 years old, Severomuysk – Ulan-Ude, 2020)

Local residents also prefer workers' trains because they are unwilling to wait for passenger trains and are confident in their right to the trains. For example, a resident of Severomuysk said:

The passenger train to Taksimo leaves at 8.20 and is back at 17.40. A workers' train — to Taksimo at 12.20 and back at 15.00. Naturally, those who left at 8.20 want to return at 15.00. But they have a ban on the working train, we are not let in. The railroad workers have their own passes, they are seated, but we are not. And we built this road. (Interview with a teacher, female, 66 years old, Severomuysk – Ulan-Ude, 2020)

While authorities have set up gates to prevent fare-dodgers in Russia's major cities, there are no such gates in the BAM service area, so the main instrument for enforcing the rule has been monitoring of each train. There are at least two lines in the BAM service area that still take nonticketed passengers on the workers' trains: the Severobaikalsk–Novy Uoyan train and the Novy Uoyan–Taksimo train.

On their daily journeys, when it is possible to sneak into a workers' train unnoticed, residents prefer to negotiate on the spot. The presence of a conductor is key to informal passage. A nonticketed passenger on a workers' train may not always ride for free: the locals pay the conductor directly and sometimes ask to pay later, and conductors allow this because they are acquaintances or because a passenger shares his catch of fish or meat. It is important to follow unspoken rules so as not to catch the eye of the authorities and let down a familiar conductor. Since local conductors were considered unreliable, RZhD formed a special inspection unit to supervise local conductors and fine those who allowed non-workers to ride workers' trains:

Conductors take people, give them tickets or not, I don't know, but we pay them money. Most likely, this is how money is collected. They warn us that if anyone finds out, they will fly out of work. We swear to them every time that we will not tell anyone. So here we are at the station. These privileged passengers (railway workers — authors) stand next to the train. And we, like naughty schoolchildren, wait a short distance away to see if they will let us in or not. Perhaps I am now setting people up by telling you this, but if not me, then still someone else would have told you. If there is no train on the other side, they (conductors) open the door on the side opposite to the landing so that we can be launched from the 'back door'. (Interview with a pensioner, female, 65 years old, Severomuysk – Ulan-Ude, 2020)

When circumstances make it impossible to get on the train unnoticed (for example, when the body of a deceased person is present), then people have to negotiate. They negotiate not with the conductor of the carriage but with the head of the train, station, or section of the road. As a rule, the administration of the road accommodates requests in exceptional cases. In the case of increased control or raids "from above," however, local railroad authorities prefer to not take a chance, and they refuse to transport those in need.

Along with the types of administrative pressure described in eyewitness accounts, such as raids on carriages and fines, railway employees also implement measures in places where passengers can board. They do not maintain, and sometimes deliberately destroy, approaches and entrances to small stations where workers' trains stop:

Before, there was an entrance to Kazankan, the path was trodden by people, the stairs led to the embankment, the SMP-597 was making a bridge across the river. And now the stairs were filled up, the path was gone. It's scary to walk there now. Cobblestones, boulders, slippery in winter. We asked for the stairs to be restored, but it is useless. (Interview with a teacher, female, 66 years old, Severomuysk – Ulan-Ude, 2020)

Kazankan is the nearest stop for most of the residents of Severomuysk (Figure 7). The other station, Okusikan, was maintained and served by regional trains, but it is located beyond the town's outskirts. Canceling a convenient stop in favor of an inconvenient one is another example of railroad authorities' disregard for local needs.



Figure 7. Railroad workers were loading sacks onto a workers' train in one of the BAM settlements. A local resident commented, "In front of the car, in the photo, you can see the structure, they began to build a covered stop! Finally! Yes, here we get on the regional train and the workers' train, if we are lucky. Recently, there have not been problems with this, they are letting us in!!! We even used to ride a locomotive! Very inconvenient, there were 5 of us driving. We sat on the floor." (photo by the second author, September 2019).

Retired BAM builders consider railroad workers who ride freely on the regional and workers' trains for personal purposes to be a privileged group. In practice, the situation is more complicated. There are several ways in which

railroad workers may receive free train tickets. First, they get tickets for themselves and up to two dependents (e.g. their children and/or spouse) for vacation once a year. Second, if they pursue a professional education, they can get a specific student card twice a year (interview with male, age around 35, 2017). Finally, and most importantly, railroad workers receive tickets for work-related purposes, including travel via workers' trains. The availability of a wider range of traveling options gives railroad workers advantages in other spheres. For example, workers living in smaller settlements combine their work trips to the city with their shopping trips:

Yesterday, I was in Severomuysk. People there cannot easily buy a piece of meat. When I talked with the tunnel master, he said: 'When I come to the (local) store, everything is rotten, wilted.' Therefore, when I take a report to Severobaikalsk every tenth day of the month, I bring home 20 kg to feed my family. Here (in Severobaikalsk), everything is cheaper, and the choice is greater. (Interview with a representative of RZhD, male, age 40, 2016)

It is often men who work for the railroad and take these kinds of trips, combining personal and work travel. Consequently, access to the railroad has not only reshaped local mobility patterns, but it has also impacted gender relations. In particular, shopping, usually perceived as a female responsibility, has become a male responsibility, too.

Access to railways comes at a cost – workers have a specific work schedule that interferes with the rhythm of households and other institutions in the city (Kuklina, Povoroznyuk, and Saxinger 2019). Maintenance work is conducted mostly in the field in extreme climactic conditions. After the work is done, a company automobile may take the crew back to the station. Crews, however, have a shortage of automobiles, especially ones capable of driving on rough roads. If none are available, a workers' train takes them back. The train may be scheduled to arrive a few hours after their work is completed. Workers remember how, before the reforms, the engine drivers of the cargo trains would pick them up. This practice has now been eliminated. With these logistical complications, even a small maintenance job may require the worker to spend the whole day in the field. If work ends after the departure of the workers' train, the railroad worker might need to stay overnight in the nearest settlement and return the next day.

Officially, railway workers are not allowed to travel by workers' train during non-work hours. Since these remote railroad communities are quite small, however, workers are well-acquainted with the conductors, who let them use regional passenger trains to get to their hunting grounds or fishing spots on weekends. If there are supervisors present, the worker can show his work documents and simply tell them that he was called in for an urgent issue. Supervisors may check if this is true by calling the worker's office, and if they find out that he is lying, they can fine him. In one interview, a worker lamented that inspections happen more and more often

now (interview with male, age around 50, 2016). He claimed that he would rather travel by automobile than train, but the quality of the roads is so poor that he opts instead to travel by regional train (*ibid.*). Therefore, despite complications, the workers' train remains the most affordable and convenient mode of transportation.

Conclusion

Our research shows the importance of both Polanyi's (2001) economic and Star's (1999) anthropological understandings of social embeddedness in studies of development and functioning of transportation infrastructure. Based on historical evidence, we were able to trace the mutual transformations that the railroad brought into the mobility practices in the region as well as the local norms and relationships brought into the railroad functioning. The study results conform with calls by researchers (Morris 2019; Rekhviashvili and Sbignev 2018) to move beyond distinction between formal and informal relations and contextualize socially embedded infrastructure as an inherent part of the everyday life of remote communities.

In addition to the existing discussion of the construction of the BAM being both a region- and social norms-forming enterprise (e.g. Ward 2009; Povoroznyuk 2019) we add that its population has been a part of industrial processes and infrastructure development both in the Soviet ideology and in existing management practices. Builders initially relied on the natural resources and social infrastructure of these older settlements, while traditional local and indigenous modes of transportation were disregarded and replaced by vehicles. Soviet planners neither planned for nor foresaw the difficulties that the first and second generations of BAM builders would face because of the remoteness of the region. Newcomers had to devise their own ways to cope and often reinvented norms of reciprocity and mutual support that already existed in remote regions (e.g. Argounova-Low 2012). Informal transportation practices became part of the construction process and a technique for coping with extreme environments and rigid state planning efforts. A new region formed, with the railroad embedded in its social, human-environment, and social-technological networks and relationships.

After the construction of the railroad was completed, as we have shown, some of these networks and relationships used the railroad in remote region to facilitate the traditions (e.g. hunting and fishing) and other daily activities of indigenous and non-indigenous communities. Our work not only demonstrates the manners in which local communities have adapted to the railroad, but it also shows the flexibility and ability of infrastructure to accommodate local needs. In the absence of alternative means of transportation, the railroad provides critical infrastructure for the sustenance of local communities.

The historical legacies of human-infrastructure relations are materialized in current local residents' attempts to legitimize their right to the railroad by claiming that they or their ancestors constructed it. The state partially recognizes these rights by providing social benefits to certain categories of residents, in a highly hierarchical,

formalized, and rigid manner. This lack of flexibility, however, is disruptive for local communities that depend on the railroad. The railroad corporation differentiates between local communities as either potential clients or a strictly controlled workforce. By doing so, it diminishes the right of local dwellers to mobility and increases the precarity of railroad workers' daily lives. Unlike Lefebvre's (1996) and Harvey's (2008) conclusions, it appears that the workers have already exhausted their ways to participate in decision making. Instead, deep engagement with the railroad becomes a "weapon of the weak" (Scott 1987): they combine work-related travel with travel that meets individual and family needs. Since the main task of the railroad communities is to make sure that long-haul and cargo trains operate in a timely manner, they manage to adjust and adopt the railroad to their own needs as long as the task is accomplished. The Soviet state permitted these communities' use of the railroad for informal transportation by including it in the production process and costs of construction. Some of these practices remain but become increasingly marginalized.

This paper is only a first attempt to study the use of the railway as an informal means of transportation. Further studies are needed in order to examine the spatial and social extent of *okurki* and other informal transportation practices, in addition to the social and ethnic differentiation and individual experiences of railroad users and controllers. Those studies will provide insight into the governance regime of large infrastructure systems that affect not only local communities, but also can bounce back into the centers of decision making whenever these infrastructures fail.

Notes

1. The "Extreme North" and similar territories were defined in 1967 in recognition of the extreme climate conditions and corresponding additional expenses and challenges that residents in those areas face (Ukaz 1945).
2. As Zamyatina (2014) argued, the ability to travel is highly important for the residents of remote settlements because it is almost the only way to stay connected with places in central or southern Russia.
3. The Irkutsk, Buryatia, and Zabaikalski regions.
4. The Omsk, Novosibirsk, Kemerovo, Tomsk, and Altai regions and the Republic of Kazakhstan.
5. The Krasnoyarsk, Khakasia, and Kemerovo regions.

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