

# EDGAR KATTAI'S *UNDER THE FLAGS OF TEN NATIONS*: THE LITERARY RECEPTION IN LATVIA'S CULTURAL SPACE

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## Abstract

*Under the Flags of Ten Nations* (2000) is examined as a work of life-writing that articulates the biography of Edgar Kattai across shifting historical, political, and cultural contexts. The motif of “ten flags” functions as an organizing metaphor for multiple and intersecting national and transnational affiliations, destabilizing assumptions of coherent identity. Through reflexive narration, spatial metaphors, and the alignment of private experience with public history, the autobiography converts personal memory into a form of cultural mapping. This approach enables comparative analysis linking individual life trajectories to broader social and historical processes, positioning the text within debates on cultural memory and transnational autobiography. In the Latvian cultural context, Kattai's work contributes to discussions of history and identity, expanding the literary canon and offering analytical frameworks for examining the relationship between personal narrative and collective memory.

**Keywords:** *Edgar Kattai, life-writing, Latvian literature, collective memory, historical narrative, transnationalism.*

## Introduction

According to an expert in Chinese history and philosophy, Dr. Kaspars Eihmanis in his short essay *Edgar Kattai: Bibliography* (2023) mentioned that Edgar Kattai comes from a multinational family background [Sadovska 2004: 7], however, when

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recounting the story of his father, Karl Kattai (*Kārlis Katajs*), Edgar Kattai reflected that during the Russian Tsarist period and later, his surname was always written with a slight hint of Estonian linguistic influence [Eihmanis 2003: 4].

Having spent over three decades in Manchuria, an era marked by successive periods of Chinese, Japanese, and Soviet hegemony, he authored a comprehensive work of cultural history in 2000. Published by *Jumava*, the work *Under the Flags of Ten Nations* delineates not merely the significant biography of Edgar Kattai, but also the wider historical and social dynamics connected to occurrences. [Lagzdina 2000: 8] The text offers clear political and cultural critiques that reflect Latvia's shared historical experience and the development of national identity in relation to the Far East. In the concluding remarks, Edgar Kattai appears to anticipate possible criticism and therefore states that:

*Upon finishing the last page of my Chinese chronicle, I am already confronted with accusations that the author has 'omitted this detail and neglected to portray that aspect. My intention, however, was never to compose a definitive account of China and its people. I have simply narrated the quotidian trajectory of my own life, which I lived shoulder-to-shoulder with Chinese, Russians, Japanese, Koreans, Jews, Tatars, Poles, and, inevitably, fellow Latvians—all of whom fate had conglomerated in an extraordinary, and now vanished, segment of the world known as Manchuria.* [Katajs 2000: 239]

When examining Edgar Kattai's identity, it is important to remember that Latvia's cultural self-identity is a multifaceted phenomenon, shaped by the interplay of historical and socio-cultural factors [Burima 2013: 24]. Kattai's life in the Far East strongly shaped his personal and cultural identity. The region's diverse historical and cultural environment, where different traditions and value systems interact, encourages the reinterpretation of meanings and concepts. This process reshapes models of identity and helps explain how individuals such as Kattai integrate global and local cultural influences into their self-understanding [Šķilters 2010: 3]. Regarding Edgar Kattai's national affiliation, he personally commented on the course of his life in an interview for the journal *University Newspaper No. 9*:

*Until 1945, I was an inhabitant of the state of Manchukuo, but I was never a citizen of either China or Manchukuo. I possessed a Latvian passport; however, in 1946, I exchanged it for a Soviet one because there was no other alternative.* [Sadovska 2004: 7]

An article entitled *Latvians in China* (1 April 1990) discloses a significant detail about Latvian citizenships, which are residents in China:

*In the beginning of August 1919, the Chinese government declared that, based on a newly passed mandate, it would regard the Latvians residing in its lands not as Russians, but as nationals of a separate country, one with which China had no formal agreement.* [Fišere 1990: 63]

However, by 1923, the situation had shifted. Peter Mezhak (*Pēteris Mežaks*, 1858–1941), an officer and a leading figure in Harbin's Latvian community, conveyed that China did not grant official status to Latvian passports. Consequently, Latvians living in China found themselves obliged to obtain Chinese passports. For any community members who planned to depart from their autonomous communities, the requirement was to swap their original national passport for a specific travel document for departure [Fišere 1990: 63].

### **Methodology and genre of *Under the Flags of Ten Nations***

This study employs the technique of concept mapping to analyse each chapter of the work by Edgar Kattai *Under the Flags of Ten Nations* with the aim of uncovering how the creation of literary maps can both validate meaning and challenge prevailing critical assumptions. According to Frances Slack, a researcher at Sheffield Hallam University, concept mapping is a valuable method for identifying fundamental ideas within a collection of documents or a specific research area. She further suggests that concept maps can serve as a useful tool for generating additional search terms during the literature review process, clarifying the structural organization of the review, and enhancing understanding of theoretical frameworks, key concepts, and the relationships among them [Alias & Suradi 2008]. This methodology also is connected directly with the principles of narrative cartography. In other words, narrative cartography is the graphic representation of the spatial world of a text, a world built from an author's memory, cultural tradition, and invention [Ryan 2020: 1].

Before analysing Edgar Kattai's *Under the Flags of Ten Nations*, it is important to identify its genre. At first glance, it appears autobiographical, as Kattai writes about his own life and personal experiences. However, it is closer to a memoir because it focuses on a specific period rather than his entire life. Julia Novak, a research fellow at the University of Vienna, notes in *Experiments in Life-Writing* (2017) that modern life-writing often blends fact and invention, challenging traditional distinctions between the real person, the storyteller, and the character [Novak 2017: 2–3]. According to Robert MacDougall, a history professor at Western University, a memoirist acts as a witness, focusing on events that most shaped their awareness rather than cataloguing personal thoughts. This approach creates a connection between writer and reader through shared reflection [Cooper 1910: 344]. Similarly, American novelist Anna Roberson Brown Burr (1873–1941)

distinguished memoirs from autobiographies, noting that memoirs offer intimate accounts of specific periods rather than complete life stories [Burr 1909: 21]. In *Under the Flags of Ten Nations*, Edgar Kattai explains that his goal was to introduce Latvian readers to China and its culture. Drawing on personal experience and oral accounts from friends, students, and colleagues in Harbin, he documented historical events from his life there up to 1955 [Katajs 2000: 238].

### **Living under ten flags: Political power and personal identity in Kattai's memoir**

In Edgar Kattai's memoir the used term "ten flags" represent not only the succession of different political powers and regimes under which Kattai lived, but also the different life stages, -from childhood till adulthood. Therefore, using the concept of mapping, we can visualize his life's journey as a timeline overlaid onto a map of Manchuria, with each flag symbolizing a shift in sovereignty, authority, and the political atmosphere Edgar Kattai experienced firsthand.

In the opening chapter of his book *Under the Flags of Ten Nations*, which details his parents' arrival in China and the formation of a Latvian identity abroad, Edgar Kattai describes the inception of the Chinese Eastern Railway. Drawing from Kattai's account, in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Russian Foreign Minister, Count Sergei Witte (*Сергей Юльевич Витте*, 1849–1915), successfully persuaded the senior Chinese statesman Li Hongzhang (李鴻章, 1823–1901) to grant the Russian Empire permission to construct a major railway across Manchuria. This line was to extend to Vladivostok, with a branch leading to the naval port of Port Arthur [Katajs 2000: 7–9]. Conversely, according to the November 1925 edition of the journal *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, Li Hongzhang, who served as a special envoy for the Qing dynasty (1636–1912) government, was officially dispatched to St. Petersburg. His mission was to meet with Tsar Nicholas II (*Николай II Александрович*, 1868–1918) of Russia to negotiate the railway construction plan and discuss China's involvement throughout the project. As a result of Li Hongzhang's significant efforts, the private Chinese commercial enterprise known as the *Chinese Eastern Railway Company* was established on Russian soil. This private corporation was primarily utilized for commercial and cultural purposes, rather than serving as a strategic route [Wang 1925: 58–59].

### **The five colors and the Chinese trio**

The Republic of China (1912–1928) represents Edgar Kattai's early childhood. According to Lane J. Harris (2008), the five colors of the Republic of China flag symbolized the country's five primary national groups: Han, Manchu, Mongol, Hui (Muslim), and Tibetan. Harris argues that when a state is formed before a shared

national identity exists, political elites use flags to promote unity by presenting the population as a single group and minimizing ethnic differences. Drawing on Alfred North Whitehead's (1861–1947) concept of fallible symbolism, Harris shows that the early Republican flag reflected ongoing struggles over national identity and the emergence of an inclusive, Han-led nationalism [Hariss 2008: 82–83]. Therefore, this theoretical framework is applied to a Latvian narrative, where a close reading reveals the local population depicted as dependent on a self-sufficient Chinese labour trio. The essay argues that the same processes of symbolic negotiation that define national emblems are at work in structuring hierarchical relationships within literary accounts of cross-cultural encounters.

### **From postal flags to the second flag: State-making and individual identity in East Asia**

Scholars have often overlooked institutional flags, viewing them as symbols of limited interests rather than tools of state-building. This study argues that in the early twentieth century, Chinese postal flags played an important role in state formation due to unstable political conditions. According to Nicholay Ryabchenko (*Николай Павлович Рябченко*) Sun Yat-sen (孙中山, 1886–1925) believed that Japan could support China's future if it abandoned imperialism and helped end unequal treaties, thereby promoting Sino-Japanese cooperation and Asian solidarity [Рябченко 2016: 14–15]. Latvian independent researcher Aldis Bergmanis in his article *Latvians in the Far East: Return to Homeland in 1920–1930* (2010) had mentioned that most of historians often assumed that the Far Eastern Republic, which was referred to Chita Republic and ruled by communists, was created to stop Soviet Russian forces from fighting the Japanese army in the Vladivostok area [Bergmanis 2010: 73].

In book *Under The Flags of Ten Nations*, Edgar Kattai gave a statement that his identity Latvian is not completely gone and forgotten, but it was hidden beneath a “second”, imposed identity necessary for survival:

*Not only did the flags change, but also the surnames of some people. Documents show that on April 2, 1927, Pastor Kastlers married Kārlis Kattai to Anna Ozoliņa, who had abandoned the thought of returning to Latvia and had gradually grown accustomed to the new living conditions, which at first had sometimes seemed strange to her, but not entirely undeserved. Only little Edgar still, as instructed, called her “aunt”.* [Katajs 2000: 15–16]

In the book *Fascism in Manchuria: The Soviet-China in the 1930s* (2017), postdoctoral researcher of history at Heidelberg University Susanne Hohler has described that the legal predicament of Russian émigrés in Harbin intensified when China ceased recognizing passports of Russian Empire, rendering them stateless.

The 1924 Sino-Soviet Agreement,<sup>1</sup> which restricted railway employment to Chinese and Soviet citizens, forced difficult choices: some acquired Soviet citizenship, others became outwardly Soviet, but inwardly opposed, and many who remained stateless lost their jobs [Holzer 2017: 23].

The concept of the second flag encapsulates the complex interplay of state formation and layered identity in early 20<sup>th</sup>-century in East Asia. While scholarly work often overlooks institutional flags, they functioned as crucial tools of state-making in volatile contexts, as seen in the flags of the Republic of China. This period of geopolitical struggle, exemplified by the partitioned Far Eastern Republic, forced individuals into a stateless condition. As vividly illustrated in Edgar Kattai's memoir, this meant living under a different flag – an imposed political reality that demanded pragmatic adaptation for survival, while one's true Latvian identity was suppressed, not forgotten, beneath the surface of daily life and administrative changes.

### **Beyond political decrees: National identity through domestic cultural practice**

This chapter of Edgar Kattai's life did not represent a governing power over Harbin, but rather the cultural and national identity of his family:

*Aunt Anna tried, as much as possible, to maintain a Latvian spirit in our family. This was reflected not only in the placement of the Latvian flag – the third in my life – on the chest of drawers. We also subscribed to the newspapers “Jaunākās Ziņas” and “Atpūta”, a few records with Latvian folk songs and Reiter's choir played at home, I had a Latvian alphabet, a book of Latvian folk tales, and the unforgettable “Zuzīte” by Poruks, for which I received more than one good slap from the nervous Aunt Anna. Those old letters simply wouldn't stick in my head! I breathed a sigh of relief when Latvia switched to the new orthography. My home-school teacher had worked for several years as a governess in Moscow and Ukraine before the First World War [...] She had a good command of the Russian language and made sure that I not only chattered in Russian – which I had been doing since early childhood, as we were surrounded by Russians – but that I also learned to read and write in Russian, alongside the Latvian language [...] Adopting to the Russian lifestyle, for the Orthodox Christmas and Easter, Aunt Anna would set the table with various delicacies, including pork ham, Riga sprats and smelts, various sausages, salads, and, of course, high-quality Russian vodka, bought from the Greek Antipas, and wines from the Georgian Havtasi. [Katajs 2000: 25–26]*

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<sup>1</sup> The 1924 Sino-Soviet Agreement was an agreement between the Republic of China and the Soviet Union that aimed to improve relations after the tensions caused by the Russian Revolution.

Edgar Kattai's narrative demonstrates that the Latvian cultural practice was not maintained by political decrees alone, but through the daily, often arduous, efforts of individuals like Aunt Anna – via subscriptions to Latvian periodicals, folk music, and writing. This personal and intergenerational struggle cultivate a national spirit amidst a dominant Russian linguistic environment, which is presented from a microhistorically counterpart to macro-political projects. Edgar Kattai's transnational life exposes the limitations of nation-centred life writing and represents a new life-writing approach that studies identity formed through border-crossing, multilingualism, and migration.

### **Two flags, two worlds: Education, identity, and geopolitics in republican-era Harbin**

Edgar Kattai was fortunate enough to receive proper Western education in the international Harbin gymnasium, which was ruled by Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA). It is worth noting, YMCA pupils embraced Western education yet emerged with a stronger Russian identity. Therefore, this Edgar Kattai's life stage was surrounded by two different words – USA and Russia. According to researcher Tomas Tlustý (*Tomáš Tlustý*), the YMCA, founded in London in 1844 by George Williams, is a global youth organization with a religious foundation. It was not only focused on sports but promoted holistic development, combining physical, mental, and spiritual growth. This idea is symbolized by the red triangle in the YMCA emblem. Therefore, physical education in the YMCA must be understood as part of its broader educational and moral goals [Tlustý 2015: 27–28]. From Edgar Kattai's perspective, the YMCA was a normal school with strict rules of dress and behaviour. As Susanne Hohler notes, although organizations like the YMCA promoted cross-ethnic cooperation in Harbin, their influence was limited, and ethnic identity remained stronger than any shared civic identity [Hohler 2017: 74]. Edgar Kattai's description of elite school in Harbin reflects a deliberate, institutional form of integration – embodied by the YMCA's universalist ideals – that stood in contrast to the city's broader ethnic segregation. While such environments fostered a temporary, cosmopolitan identity, they remained exceptional spaces, ultimately overshadowed by the stronger pull of ethnic and communal affiliations outside the school walls. As Edgar Kattai began his studies in YMCA, at that point in his life he had witnessed two new flags:

*With the start of the school year, my life entered under two flags. Above the school building flew the flag of the USA, but at various school events and celebrations, the old Russia's white-blue-red flag was also invariably raised...*

[Katajs 2000: 26–27]

After the 1924 Sino-Soviet agreement, control of the Chinese Eastern Railway was shared between Soviet and Chinese authorities. While Soviets managed the railway, Harbin's social and cultural life remained influenced by anti-Bolshevik Russian emigrants, creating two separate worlds: pre-revolutionary Russian culture and growing Soviet influence. This division prevented a unified Russian community in the city [Chiasson 2010: 6]. Under the Bureau of Russian Émigré Affairs in Manchukuo administration, all adult Russian émigrés<sup>2</sup> were compelled to register to obtain legal status and essential documents. Failure to comply resulted in the denial of employment and education. These coercive measures pressured many Soviets, including former Chinese Eastern Railway staff and merchants, to assume émigré status out of necessity [Moustafine 2013: 151]. Even though the Soviet administration controlled the Chinese Eastern Railway, some areas of northern Manchuria resisted Soviet influence. As historian Erwin Oberländer notes, the Russian Fascist Party, an anti-Bolshevik émigré group, adopted Italian Fascism as a model to challenge the Soviet regime. Rejecting the White movement's failures, they promoted fascism as an alternative to communism and sought international alliances, especially with Japan. The chief-editor of the party's journal *Nash Put'* (*Наш Путь*) Konstantin Rodzaevsky (*Константин Владимирович Родзаевский*, 1907–1946) gained influence in Manchuria after Japan established Manchukuo in 1932 [Oberländer 2013: 159–162]. Edgar Kattai recalled how Japanese aggression, encouraged by the Russian Fascist Party, caused chaos in Harbin. According to his account, the party played a provocative role in 1932, collaborating with Japanese forces while the Kuomintang and Chinese military offered little resistance. This allowed the party to gain influence among émigrés through foreign support rather than popular backing [Katajs 2000: 28].

### The rising Sun over Harbin

During his later schooling at YMCA, Edgar Kattai experienced the introduction of the Japanese (Rising Sun) and Manchukuo flags. Those two flags covered the main events that happened in Harbin from 1932 till 1945: the Japanese direct military occupation of Manchuria in 1932, the Soviet Union's sale of the Chinese Eastern Railway to Japan government in 1935 and being Japanese puppet state of Manchukuo till August 1945. Being a young child, at the age 9, Edgar Kattai really recalled the moment that had changed his life and forced him further to hide his true national spirit and identity to survive:

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<sup>2</sup> During the later occupation of Manchuria registered individuals were issued identification badges – first in Tsarist flag colors (initially striped in white, blue, and red), later as numbered aluminum discs, derisively called “dog tags”.



*I saw Japanese troops for the first time on 5 February 1932, when they marched into Harbin. The overseas soldiers were not very tall but broad-shouldered, dressed in warm overcoats with earflaps on their caps trimmed with Zakka braid. Nearly everyone had a wristwatch and a fountain pen in his pocket. They smiled and honoured children with candies. But over the city unfurled the symbol of Japan – a war flag with a red sun-disc on a white background. Thus, I found myself already under the sixth flag of my life.* [Katajs 2000: 29]

This passage presents life writing as a way of mapping experience, linking personal memory with political authority. The narrator contrasts friendly gestures, such as giving candy, with the presence of a powerful national flag. The Rising Sun represents another forced identity, showing how large political events become part of an individual's everyday life.

Latvians in Harbin feared for their consul, Peteris Mezhak (*Pēteris Mežaks*, 1858–1941), due to his past role in the Russo-Japanese War, but the Japanese took no action against him:

*The Latvians of Harbin, for their part, were worried about the fate of the Latvian consul, Peteris Mezhak because he, having been a general in the Russian army, during the Russo-Japanese War had presided over a court-martial that sentenced two Japanese spies [...] to death; the Japanese later erected a monument to them on the outskirts of Harbin. However, no reprisals were taken against our grey-haired consul. The Japanese know how to honour even their adversaries.* [Katajs 2000: 29]

This moment shows Harbin's divided loyalties and the Japanese use of calculated restraint. After 1 March 1932, Harbin became part of Manchukuo, which introduced a new flag symbolizing the solidarity of five ethnic groups<sup>3</sup> [Katajs 2000: 29]. For Edgar Kattai, this period meant living under another imposed authority, the seventh "flag" of his life. Despite the creation of Manchukuo and economic hardship, his daily life changed little, and his school experiences fostered cultural adaptability, though the Japanese occupation left a lasting impact.

Continuing analyzing "flags" as metaphorical mapping, Edgar Kattai's identity in the below mentioned quotation is marked as a rootless observer, defined by loss and displacement. While others celebrate a return to a homeland, his world fragments – symbolized by the replacement of quality European goods with inferior substitutes –

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<sup>3</sup> The five colours of the flag were meant to represent the "solidarity of five ethnic groups", with each colour standing for a different group: Manchus, Japanese, Chinese, Koreans, and Mongols.

marking his unstable position between collapsing empires and eroding cultural touchstones:

*The year 1935 arrived, marked by a sensational event – the Soviet Union sold its share of the Chinese Eastern Railway to the Manchukuo government. The compensation was laughable—only 140 million yen, of which the Japanese paid a meagre 23 million. Consequently, the railway workers who were Soviet citizens, along with their family members, began to depart for the USSR.*

[Katajs 2000: 42–43]

Kattai shows himself as a careful observer of political falsehood. While obeying official rules, he reveals everyday disrespect for the emperor, exposing the regime's lack of real legitimacy:

*Once, at a Latvian gathering, I learned from a stamp collector that there was a philatelic society in Riga that published a philately magazine called “Baltica”. Soon, my name, fields of interest, and address appeared in the pages of this publication. I acquired quite a few correspondents who supplied me with Latvian stamps, first-day covers, and magazines. My parents grumbled a little that I was spending a lot of money on postage stamps for letters and, again, spending less time with my schoolbooks, but they eventually got used to it. As a result, I more frequently visited the nearest post office to affix envelopes with stamps featuring the image of Pu Yi, the Emperor of Manchukuo. Those stamps were highly valued in philatelic circles at the time. If there were no witnesses at the post office now of mailing the letter, the postmaster would slap the postmark, mutter “bu yao”, and vigorously stamp it right over the emperor’s face. Thus was manifested the “loyal subjects” love for their pitiable emperor – a marionette in the hands of the Japanese occupiers.*

[Katajs 2000: 67]

Kattai's experience under the sixth and seventh “flags” reflects adaptation to occupation, everyday resistance, and the quiet preservation of his Latvian identity.

### **From Harbin to Soviet Latvia: The final journey**

In the final chapters of *Under Flags of Ten Nations*, Edgar Kattai's life reflects a journey from statelessness toward a complex, uncertain homeland. Kattai kept his Latvian passport until 1945, even though it was practically invalid, as Latvia had been forcibly absorbed into the USSR in 1940 following the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact [Prikulis & Abene 2017: 10]. Yet, Edgar Kattai carried passport “always”. This act is profoundly significant from a tangible Link to a “lost world”. In other words, the passport was a physical relic of an independent Latvia and his identity as its citizen. It represented a national identity that existed before Soviet domination:

*Major Koziks had a conversation with me, asked about my background, and looked through my Latvian passport, which I always carried with me. Koziks dismissed my remark that this document no longer had any significance, and that it was time to throw it out. "Do not be hasty to do anything rash. Soon a decree from the USSR government will be published regarding the granting of citizenship to Russian emigrants and Baltic Germans living abroad. Then this passport will still be very useful to you. I see that you will use it."* [Katajs 2000: 131]

Kattai can be seen as stateless. His Latvian passport existed, but Latvia's sovereignty had been erased by the Soviet Union. It gave him no real protection and made him vulnerable to assimilation. Caught between a lost past and an imposed future, he fully belonged to neither, which sharpened his ability to observe and understand his world.

After Chairman Mao Zedong proclaimed the founding of People's Republic of China on 1 October 1949, in Tiananmen Square in Beijing [Zhang & Zhai 2019: 419], the new chapter of Edgar Kattai's life began. During that initial period in Harbin, Edgar Kattai was incorporated into the state's framework as a public servant. This status, justified by the official doctrine of working for the collective good, came with specific material benefits, including freedom from income taxes. His situation demonstrated a clear divide: while he enjoyed the advantages of being part of the new system, other segments of society, such as private landlords, were burdened with fiscal duties:

*On the other hand, after working a full ten years in Red China, I did not have to pay a single cent of income tax into the state treasury.* [Katajs 2000: 189]

Kattai's memoir critiques Soviet withdrawal from Northeast China, showing its social and cultural impact. The 1952 transfer of territories revealed Soviet weakness and undermined the local Soviet population's status, marking the end of Soviet extraterritorial authority:

*On 31 December 1952, the USSR government presented the People's Republic of China with an invaluable and mind-boggling New Year's gift. It was announced that the Soviet Union would transfer the ownership rights of the Chinese Changchun Railway to China without any compensation and would renounce the use of the naval base in Port Arthur. Subsequent developments proved that this was a prudent solution, but at the time, such a decision dealt a monumental blow to the local Soviet citizens' self-esteem. We understood that our era here had ended; we just didn't know in what specific way the finale would manifest itself. This soon became clear. The seconded Soviet railway workers began to return to their homeland, and the administration of the Chinese Eastern Railway, which*

*had now gone from semi-legitimate to fully legitimate, gradually also dismissed the local Soviet employees.* [Katajs 2000: 217–218]

The most unexpected and perhaps happiest moment of Edgar Kattai's life took place after 1 May 1954, when Orthodox Eastern celebrations were taken place:

*It was announced in various places that the USSR government had decided to involve Soviet citizens permanently living in China in the cultivation of Russia's untouched and virgin lands. [...] All Soviet citizens could go to the USSR, as well as non-citizens from mixed families (a small number of Chinese), and non-citizen Europeans who, for some reason, did not have a passport from their own country (a few Poles, Czechs, Serbs, Greeks, etc.). They would receive passports upon arrival in Soviet land.* [Katajs 2000: 224–225]

On 20 May 1955, Edgar Kattai's departure symbolized an existential transition, because his gesture of waving farewell to an empty landscape represented a deliberate closure with his personal history in China. This act of leave-taking marked a definitive break from his past, as he moved toward an uncertain future under the symbolic authority of Soviet Latvia:

*My request was fulfilled. As we passed through the settlement, I stood by the window and waved... To whom? Neither Veismanis, nor Bērziņš, nor other acquaintances were there anymore – they had all already left. Perhaps to the house where I was born, or to my mother's and grandmother's long-demolished graves? With these waves of the hand, I was probably settling all accounts with Buhedu, Harbin, Manchuria, and the whole of China in general, because ahead of me awaited the tenth symbol of my life – the flag of Soviet Latvia.*

[Katajs 2000: 237–238]

### **The literary reception: Mapping the critique and cultural impact**

It is important to note that Edgar Kattai was proficient in both Chinese and Japanese. In analysing the article *Our Language* by Latvian linguist Janis Kushkis (*Jānis Kušķis*, 1930–2022), Edgars Vimba, a lecturer and biologist at the University of Latvia, particularly highlighted a phrase included in the book by Edgar Kattai's *Under the Flags of Ten Nations*: “Arrived on the 6<sup>th</sup> day of the 12<sup>th</sup> month of the 9<sup>th</sup> year of the Kangde era (1942)” [Katajs 2000: 101]. Comparing this with examples mentioned in the article *The Inertia of the Soviet Era?* published on 19 October 2000, in Journal No. 42 *Literature and Art in Latvia*, such as Zenta Mauriņa's *Collected Works* (1939–1940) and Vilnis Reguts' work *Constellations Visible in Latvia* (1998), Edgars Vimba points out the enduring influence of the Soviet mindset on the language

development of citizens in free Latvia. Edgars Vimba notes that when examining historical events in Latvia during the 1920s–1930s, time was often divided similarly to BC and AD. Events were dated by referencing specific historical benchmarks that had acquired symbolic significance. Returning to the phrase, – *arrived on the 6<sup>th</sup> day of the 12<sup>th</sup> month of the 9<sup>th</sup> year of the Kangde era (1942)*”, Edgars Vimba indicates that the formulation used by Edgar Kattai does not conform to the chronological frameworks imposed during the Soviet era [Vimba 2000: 14]. Based on the Japanese chronological dating tradition, the system of era names was adopted not only among the Han people but also in other East Asian societies influenced by Chinese culture. Japan is the only country where this tradition has been preserved to the present day. The era’s name denotes the period of a ruler’s reign, and the authority to determine it belongs solely to the ruler; it was used both by his subjects and by subordinate dynasties [Saito 2022: 64].

However, by analysing carefully Edgar Kattai’s work *Under The Flags of Ten Nations*, we could find that the author had used the Japanese chronological dating tradition twice during the “seventh flag” period. The first time it was used what the founding of Manchukuo was found:

*On 1 March 1934, Manchukuo – the Empire of Manchuria – was proclaimed, and the Supreme Leader of Manchukuo was transformed into an emperor. A new calendar system began, and on all official documents, the previous era of “Datong” (Great Unity) was replaced by the “Kangde” era (Tranquil Virtue). Thus, January-February of 1934 was considered the 2<sup>nd</sup> year of the Datong era, but in March of the same year, the 1<sup>st</sup> year of the Kangde era began. Such actions, of course, did not inspire enthusiasm among the masses of Chinese inhabitants, but the ever-merry Russian emigrants began singing a cheerful little song with an ironic refrain: “Harbin is a beautiful place, Harbin is a good thing, in this far-off Manchukuo, and now Manchudikuo<sup>4</sup>!”* [Katajs 2000: 36]

It may be believed that Edgar Kattai refused to retroactively apply Soviet or Western chronological frameworks to an East Asian context. This corrected the historical record and forced the Latvian reader to engage with the event on its own terms. For sure, we can tell that Edgar Kattai did not just study Chinese culture, he lived in that culture. This lived experience allowed him to grasp the cultural subtleties, traditions, and social norms that are essential for both precise historiography and authentic translation.

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<sup>4</sup> Manchukuo (often misspelled as *Manchudikuo*) was a Japanese-controlled puppet state in Manchuria, created in 1932 after Japan’s invasion of the region.

According to PhD researcher Diāna Komova in her doctoral thesis *Edgar Kattai's translation of modern Chinese literature and its influence in Latvia* (2024), the translation of Chinese literary works into Latvian represents a highly specialized endeavour demanding substantial temporal resources, skilled labour, and professional expertise. Beyond mere linguistic competence, success in this field requires a deep immersion into the associated cultural and historical subtleties, as well as societal practices and conventions. These considerations indicate that Edgar Kattai has attained notable distinction in this domain. His prolific output of Chinese and Latvian translations is complemented by his extensive residence in China, which provided him with exceptional access to cultural understanding that fundamentally supports his translational achievements [Komova 2024: 35]. On 8 September 2005, in an interview titled *China and Latvia in Cultural Contact* published in *The Official Newspaper of the Republic of Latvia (Latvijas Vēstnesis)* Edgar Kattai, who was then an Honorary Doctor of the Latvian Academy of Sciences, told journalist Aina Rezeniece: “a stop must be put to translating Chinese books from English, because these translations differ from the original as much as heaven from earth” [Rozeniece 2005].

## Conclusion

This study examines Edgar Kattai's memoir *Under the Flags of Ten Nations* as a work that connects personal life with major historical and cultural changes in twentieth-century Manchuria. The memoir serves as an example of how different political regimes shaped Kattai's identity and everyday experiences. By combining personal memories with historical events, Kattai constructs a chronological narrative of his Harbin years that helps readers understand how national identity can change when a person moves across borders, languages, and cultures. His story also reveals how Latvian communities lived abroad and how they kept their cultural roots.

Through his memoir, Edgar Kattai acts as a pivotal bridge between Latvia and China, leveraging his profound, experience-based knowledge of East Asia to correct Soviet-era misconceptions. He achieves this by deliberately using based on personal experience historical terms, explaining local customs, and portraying the complex rivalries between the Russian, Chinese, Japanese, and Soviet factions in Harbin. Kattai's principled approach to language and context means his contribution extends far beyond translation; he is a cultural interpreter who successfully shifted Latvian literary views on China by directly confronting the lingering influence of Soviet thought.

Overall, *Under the Flags of Ten Nations* plays an important role in Latvian literary reception. It expands the understanding of Latvian life-writing, encourages readers to look beyond national borders, and offers new ways to study how identity is formed in multicultural and politically unstable environments.

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