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CHINESE MIGRATION TO RUSSIA: MISSED OPPORTUNITIES

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Reading the Russian news media in the two decades since the demise of communism, one might conclude that the Russian Far East will soon be a Chinese province. Russian commentators consistently warn that Chinese migrants will flood—or have already flooded—into the country's vast and increasingly less populated far eastern regions. The threat is framed primarily in terms of relative demography: the population on the Chinese side of the Russia-China border is 20 times that on the Russian side. At a time when migration is central to political debates in Europe and the United States, the discourse in Russia remains at the extreme edge of the spectrum.

In the present paper, we seek to separate the rhetoric from the lived experience of Chinese migration to Russia. We ask why a situation in which

lemma provoked by Russian "immigration phobia." Larin (2006) suggests that while the discourse has become more balanced, popular myths remain entrenched. Exaggerated reports in the Russian media and excessive claims by Russian politicians have been widely repeated. Many of these depictions have overstated the number of Chinese in Russia while invoking a familiar litany of problems attributed to migrants: imperiled public health, crime, intermarriage, and their appropriation of jobs from locals. If in the 1990s local and regional officials voiced the most exaggerated claims, in the Putin era excessive rhetoric has been common at the highest levels.

Evgenii Nadzarenko, governor of Primorskii Kre5[o46(71(5[o46((i)-5(8(r)-15(r)-(h)-

timates for Azerbaijanis (2 million), Uzbeks (1.5 million), and Armenians (1 million).[3]

Chinese analysts have discussed the reasons why Russian media exaggerate Chinese migration. The analysts suggest that doing so increases readership while distracting people from the real problems facing the country (Deng 2005). Sergei Grigorievich Pushkarev, director of the Far East Labor Organization, offers a similar analysis: "Russian media are another barrier to attracting more Chinese workers. They present Chinese migrants and workers in a negative way, influencing public opinion and, in turn, the political strategies."[4]

Russians' preoccupation with a supposed impeding Chinese influx derive overwhelmingly from a deeply held belief that demographic imbalance generates migration (Vitkovskaia 1999b, p. 184). While Russians emphasize structural factors, assuming that empty spaces require settlement, migration theory portrays labor migration as a complex and networked process driven primarily by wage differentials and household strategies (Hatton and Williamson 200(373.33 Tm[0g)-47(i)-2(e)-27(s)]TJETEMC /Span <<2-2(e)-27

Taiwan, and South Korea, population growth and urbanization did not generate large-scale out-migration. Despite substantial out-migration since the late 1980s, the Russian Far East and parts of Siberia may still be *overpopulated* given the cost of development in those areas (Hill and Gaddy 2003; Kolesnikov 2006; Kontorovich 2000).

In addition to the structural factors that dominate much of their discussion, Russians' assumptions about an impeding influx of Chinese are driven by imperfect information and misperceptions about history, government policy, and the desirability of living in Russia. For instance, some Russian scholars cite the region's history as a basis for their concerns about Chinese

Fear of Chinese population pressure is ironic given that China's one relatively successful demographic program has been to *limit* population size through the one-child policy. There is no evidence of a national program to settle Chinese in Russia. Some regional governments in China do have programs for sending workers abroad, but the numbers involved suggest that Russia is a relatively low priority (Harbin Municipal Government 2007).

While there is no grand strategy, Chinese emigration trends *are* influenced by government policy at both the central and local levels (Xiang 2003). Chinese local governments play a crucial role in sending labor to the Russian Far East, sometimes directly mobilizing worker groups and more frequently facilitating the activity of Chinese businesspeople who organize labor migration.[8] Chinese local officials track the return of their citizens, so workers in government-organized programs are far more likely to abide by the terms of their contracts than those who cross the border

government-encouraged migration to western regions of the country, an enormous "floating population" of labor migrants represents both a basis

sibly leaked from the 2003 census: the number of Chinese in Russia was

confirms that Moscow is viewed as a more difficult place to live, but more rewarding economically.

Abelsky (2006) quotes Andrei Zabiako, head of the Religious Studies Department at Amur State University in Blagoveshchensk, who conducted surveys in the region: "The number of Chinese in any given place within the Russian Federation corresponds to the number that makes economic sense to the Chinese themselves. No more and no less." Zabiako points out

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The legislation has had an impact on Chinese traders, but it has not always improved conditions for either the traders or the local Russian population. For instance, it has increased Chinese traders' sense of insecurity about their future in Russia. Many remain unaware of the specific meaning of the law and of their legal rights, relying on other Chinese workers for information (Larin 2008).[15] Another consequence of the 2007 law has been greater Chinese segregation and social isolation. It also has caused financial losses; Chinese traders either have to sell their goods at low prices and leave Russia or hire Russian sellers, paying them daily salaries and a percentage of their retail profits. In summer 2007, the daily salary paid by a Chinese trader to a Russian seller in the cities of Vladivostok and Khabarovsk was about $8, in addition to 7 percent of gross trade revenue.[16]

Despite the problems, many Chinese traders have sought to continue working in Russia. (In some towns as many as 80 percent of Chinese retail workers have stayed.) They circumvent the new restrictions by registering their own businesses, transforming their outdoor trading stands into indoor kiosks, or hiring Russian salespeople. Although profits have decreased, in

allotments. Company managers in Suifenhe have stated that these policies are beneficial to large Chinese businesses, as they should have greater opportunities to export goods that previously were sold by individual traders.[18] This favorable reception could be a sign of collusion between Chinese business interests and Russian officials.

Laborers

Chinese laborers work primarily in construction, agriculture, and forestry. They generally come to Russia under fixed contracts for specific periods of time. They tend to be the least visible of the Chinese in Russia, often living in barracks and rarely venturing out on their own. The resulting lack of social contact between these workers and Russian residents contributes to Russian myths about Chinese migration. In these exaggerations' most extreme form, some commentators suggest that millions of Chinese live in secret settlements deep in the woods, unknown even to the Federal Security Service.[19]

Most laborers are recruited in groups to work on specific projects and tend to live and eat at or near their work site. For security reasons and because of their lack of Russian-language skills, most Chinese workers are not permitted to leave their work site without supervision.[20] Chinese workers receive only limited training prior to going to Russia, ranging from a few days to two months and rarely including language training.[21]

Some Russian migration specialists suggest that migrants compete with Russians in the labor markets. They assert that particular jobs have become "reserved" by the migrants over the years and thus are available only to them. According to these scholars, jobs have been taken through fierce competition with local residents (Mukomel 2005). Migration theory suggests that this is a common pattern (Massey et. al 1993). This view seems to be widespread among the public, with 35 percent holding negative opinions about migrants primarily because of the belief that migrants take away

head movement that often enjoys tacit—and sometimes even open—police approval. On a broader level, the Russian education system has failed to compete effectively with those of Australia, Europe, and the United States in attracting Chinese students. Russian institutions are only now waking

were reasonably aligned. Yet, despite wild claims by some on the Russian side, migration was quite modest.

they felt helpless when confronting Russia's bureaucracy.[28] Chinese scholars point to Russia's high tariffs and nontransparent tariff policies for production materials and personal goods brought to Russia by Chinese workers as

Although most migration to Russia is from former Soviet republics, representing 56 percent of all labor migrants in 2006,[33] the maximum immigration potential of the Russian diaspora probably does not exceed four million, mostly from Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan (Zaionchkovskaia 2005; cf. Riazantsev and Grebeniuk 2008). The most optimistic views, based

Western demographers attribute the higher birthrate to a larger number of women in the prime childbearing-age cohort, a situation that will alter drastically in the coming decade.[39]

The conflicting accounts point to a continuing contradiction between those seeking to regularize and encourage mutually beneficial labor migra-

China's Northeast has been substantially restructured and has attracted significant foreign investment. Foreign investment in Heilongjiang Province grew at an annual rate of 19.67 percent over the past two years.[43] Most of this investment went into the manufacturing sector, including raw materials, chemicals, electromechanical products, advanced agriculture, automobiles, and technology.

DEMOGRAPHY

Even if conditions could be created to attract Chinese to work in Russia, China's own demographic situation increasingly makes labor migration less likely. Data from the United Nations Population Division indicate that the size of China's working-age population will peak in 2015 and begin to decline shortly thereafter (Bergston, et. al, 2006). Labor shortages were evident in some parts of China, such as Guangdong Province, in 2004 and 2005 (Bergston, et. al, 2006). Reports from the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences warn that labor shortages will become significant by 2010.[52] The need for a strong labor force to maintain China's economic growth will make organized policies on outward migration even less likely.

The shift in the configuration of the age pyramid as the full impact of the one-child policy is felt means that the burden on China's working-age population will, by the 2030s, become the most daunting in the world. Lack of a well-funded pension system exacerbates the problem, forcing the elderly to rely on their children or on the "informal" safety net. In 2002, only 55 percent of the urban work force and 11 percent of the rural work force were covered by China's public pension system (Jackson and Howe 2004). This system will come under increasing pressure by 2020, when

tal, Russians might provide some of the needed personnel. We have already noted, in the present paper, both the thin character of regionalism in Northeast Asia and the increase in cross-border economic activity during 2005–08. Instead of a massive flood of Chinese into Russia, greater cross-border interaction has led to substantial growth in the number of Russians working and living in China. This phenomenon is counterintuitive for Russians accustomed to viewing China as "underdeveloped." But China is *both* a less expensive place to live *and* a place where development has been more rapid than in many regions of Russia. China has replaced Egypt as the second most popular destination for Russian tourists. (Turkey remains number one.) In addition to the growing number of Russians studying and working in China, pensioners are finding it attractive to sell their property in Russia, move to China, and live on the difference.[55] In border cities such as Heihe, new apartment buildings are attracting Russian buyers. Russian families in the Far East are sending their children to Harbin and other cities to learn Chinese in the hope that they will forge careers in business. Chinese universities and industrial laboratories are recruiting Russian specialists. Unlike Russian universities, they do not discriminate against foreign degrees. According to Sapozhnikova (2006), nearly all the Russian students who went to China after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 remained there. Those who go now and succeed in learning the language likewise tend to stay.[56]

problems as global demand for Chinese exports declined. Factories in the southern industrial zones began to lay off workers and even to shut their doors.[58] However, economic conditions in Russia deteriorated even more quickly, creating fears of unemployment there. This has produced a crisis for migrants from the Caucasus and Central Asia.[59] Many Chinese migrants left Russia in the wake of the 1998 economic crisis (Vitkovskaia 1999a). The current economic crisis is likely to have a similar impact. Fewer traders are crossing the border, and Chinese officials have expressed concern about the consequences of reduced opportunities in Russia.[60]

Ecological Disaster in Northeast China

Ecological disaster on the Chinese side of the border could also alter the equation. More than 100 million people in China's three northeastern provinces found themselves without adequate water supplies, significant population movement could result (Economy 2004, 2007; Shapiro 2001).

Popular myths about Chinese migration to Russia's Far East are pervasive and, like all myths, difficult to kill. They include assumptions that population imbalances and "empty" spaces inevitably result in population movement; that China's leaders are carefully managing Chinese migration to regain territories lost in the 19th century; that vast numbers of Chinese are prepared to return to resettle ancestral territories; and that hordes of impoverished Chinese workers are desperate for the "good life" in Russia. The mythology and Russian official and popular reactions have deterred Chinese labor migration during a period when it might have been possible to develop productive cross-border relationships. The changing situation in Northeast China and the ongoing global economic crisis make significant labor migration to Russia less likely. While China will experience serious unemployment as millions of workers in the coastal industrial zones return to their villages, Russia's industry is in even worse shape. There is no prospect for significant demand for labor in the short term. Even if oil prices rebound while China's economy stagnates, economic development in the Russian Far East is likely to lag.

Our data further suggest that the net effect of Russia's immigration/emigration nexus is a net decline in human capital. Along with traders, students, and entertainment workers, a growing share of the Russians working in China are individuals with a higher education and professional skills. Most Chinese working in Russia are doing manual labor or are engaged in retail trade. Better-educated Chinese tend to locate in European Russia, viewing it as a stepping-stone to more western parts of Europe. Chinese who do well in the Russian Far East either return to China to establish

the issues, while many Chinese have moved on to the 21st century. Some of the Chinese we interviewed suggested that, as one said, "there are not many examples of migration from the more developed country to the less developed country." Yet myths continue to trump reality. In a theory akin to spontaneous generation, Russians continue to believe that empty territory attracts migrants from a more populous neighbor. Available cases suggest that this is hardly an automatic process.

The push factor that *could* generate a significant movement of Chinese to the Russian Far East is ecological disaster. China's record in protecting the environment is abysmal. If water shortages or other forms of environmental degradation were to make life in China's border regions unviable, population movement could be significant. As in Central America and Southeast Asia in the aftermath of hurricanes or typhoons, these would be "environmental refugees" rather than labor migrants.Barring extraordinary circumstances, the number of Russians living and working in China may, in time, outstrip the number of Chinese doing so in Russia. Given that prospect, the history of Chinese migration to Russia in the late 20th and early 21st centuries is likely to be portrayed not as a major population shift but, rather, as a missed opportunity.

Notes

1 Takafumi Nakai, "President Putin's Understanding of the Far East," ERINA-The Economic Research Institute for Northeast Asia, Chronicle, http://www.erina.or.jp/en/Opinion/2000/Russia/nakai.htm, accessed October 22, 2008.

2 "Putin Says Russia Needs a More Liberal Migration Policy," BBC Monitoring International Reports, March 2005 from a Channel One broadcast.

3 Malumian, Marietta, "Podkhody k nelegalam raznye, tsel odna," [Approaches to Illegals Differ, but the Goal is the Same], *Novoe vremia*, No. 110, November 6, 2008.

4 Interview, Vladivostok, July 9, 2007.

5 Karlusov and Kudin 2002; Deng 2005. Marks (1991, pp. 153–54) notes similar unfounded concerns about an influx of Chinese in the decades before 1917.

6 One of the authors attended the meeting. Russia and China signed a formal agreement on border demarcation in 2008. Li Xiaokun, "China, Russia Sign Border Agreement," *China Daily*, July 22, 2008, http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2008-07/22/content_6865847.htm.

7 Interview with Elizaveta N. Teliushkina, vice minister of the

9 One of the authors conducted extensive interviews with Russian scholars and officials, as well as Chinese migrants in the Russian Far East, during August-September 2007.

10 Author interview, Moscow, April 2002.

11 Ekspert, 23 September 2003.

12 *Demoscope Weekly*, 27 October-4 November, 2001.

13 "Migration and Mobility in the Eurasian Region – Prospects for the Future," Council of Europe Committee of Ministers, Resolution 1639 (2008).

14 Interviews with directors of labor-exporting firms in Heihe, Suifenhe, Dongning, and Manzhouli.

15 Interviews from the Russian Far East, 2007.

16 Interviews at Vladivostok and Khabarovsk markets, August 2007.

17 Interviews, Chinese markets in Vladivostok and Khabarovsk, August 2007.

18 Interview with Sun Chanbing, director, *Suifenhe Pengbo Jingji Maoyi Gongsi*, May 12, 2007.

19 E. V. Gilbo, "Russia in the 21st Century: A Geopolitical Tragedy?" http://www.headway.us/read.php?i=243.

20 Interview with Xufu Qi, director of *Feisiliao gongsi*, Heihe, May 23, 2007.

21 Interviews with company managers and government officials in Suifenhe, Heihe, Dongning, and Manzhouli.

22 This legend has been repeated in a number of interviews with both government officials and ordinary people.

23 Interview withViktor Vladimirovich Saikov, Khabarovsk, July 13, 2007. Saikov's impression is supported by Chinese government officials in Heihe and Suifenhe, as well as Professor Viktor Diatlov, a migration and diaspora expert at Irkutsk State University.

24 Interviews with Chinese students at three universities in Harbin, Heilongjiang Province.

25 For a sampling, see http://rupoint.co.uk; http://www.russianlondon.ru/newspaper and http://www.russian-society.org.uk.

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