

## Anti-Chinese Sentiment in Russia:

### Threats of “Chinese Invasion” or Fears of Russian Xenophobia

Try googling the keywords “Russian Far East” and “China” (“*Dal’nii vostok*” and “*Kitai*”), and you will be overwhelmed by various disturbing titles regarding this problem in the first several pages of the search results. For example, among the results from Russian sources we have “China Takes the Russian Far East” (*Pravda*) and “China is Buying the Russian Far East” (*Express Gazeta*). Results from English sources are similar, where typical titles include “China Looms over the Russian Far East” (*The Diplomat*) and “Russia’s Far East Turning Chinese” (*ABC News*).

Indeed, Russia has all kinds of reasons to be seriously concerned with the increasing Chinese migration into Siberia and its Far East, not least because of Russia’s demographic crisis, signs of which proves to be especially salient in the Far East. A 2002 study shows that the entire Russian Far East is home to 7.4 million people, while in the cross-border north-eastern provinces of China reside 102.4 million people. While the density of population in the Russian Far East is only 1.2 people per 1 km<sup>2</sup>, the density of population in China’s northeast is 124.4 people per 1 km<sup>2</sup>.<sup>1</sup> According to a 2009 report, each year, there are over 100,000 new foreign migrants into the Russian Far East, among which over 90 percent are Chinese migrant workers.<sup>2</sup> In addition, the fear of Chinese taking the Russian Far East arises from the historical fact that a sizeable portion of the area north of the Amur River, which now constitutes part of Russia’s Far Eastern Federal District, was Chinese territory until it fell under Russian control as a consequence of the

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<sup>1</sup> Dudchenko, G. (2002). Kitai i Dal’nii Vostok Rossii: k voprosu o demograficheskom disbalanse, *Vestnik Yevrazii*, № 3, 2002, pp. 142-149.

<sup>2</sup> Ross, R. (2009). The Rise of Russia, Sino-Russian Relations, and U.S. Security Policy, *Royal Danish Defense College*, pp. 1-8;

signing of the Treaty of Aigun in 1858 and the Treaty of Beijing in 1860, which have always been labeled as “unequal treaties” by the People’s Republic of China.

Nevertheless, these data and facts alone do not give sufficient credit to the disturbing wording of the news titles from both Russian and international media cited earlier. Are these claims merely exaggerated stunts, or do they reflect the real concerns of the Russian residents in the Far East? This essay will provide some insights into average Russian people’s views and expressions in regard to the problem of Chinese migrants in Russia’s Far East by analyzing relevant online discourses. The sources for my analysis come primarily from LiveJournal (*Zhivoy Zhurnal*), one of the most popular social networks in Russia, where Internet users can keep blogs, journals or diaries.

At the center of my discussion is a LiveJournal community named “Community against Chinese Expansion” (*Soobshchestvo protiv kitaiskoi ekspansii*), which was created in 2006 and currently consists of 73 members. On its introduction page, the community explains the reason for which it was created as follows: “Everyday, hundreds of illegal Chinese immigrants move to Russia, most of which settle in Siberia and the Far East; and soon, our country will have a large China Town, covering the territories from the Pacific Ocean to the Ural Mountains, which will not be prevented by the laws established by the Russian Federation; and we must fight against it, otherwise it will be too late.”<sup>3</sup> Below this short introduction is a parody of the Soviet propaganda poster “The Motherland is Calling” (*Rodina Mat' Zovyot*), on which the word “Mother” (*Mat'*) is replaced by “Mao” and the face of the mother is replaced by Chairman Mao’s face.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Community Profile. [Web log message] Retrieved from <http://ru-antikitai.livejournal.com/profile>. (2012, March 20).

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

This community's blog has posted 124 journal entries over the past 5 years. The first blog post talks about how a Russian customer got beaten up by several Chinese merchants at a local market. This story ends with two outrageous sentences in capital letters: "YOU DO NOT BELIEVE IN THE CHINESE EXPANSION? THEN SOON THEY WILL COME TO YOU!"<sup>5</sup> The most recent entry was posted in January 2012, in which the author first cited the old Soviet slogan "Russian and Chinese are brothers forever" in an ironic way, and then posted dozens of pictures on which you can see all kinds of Russian-Chinese bilingual shop signs, menus and commercials, a phenomenon not uncommon in the border areas.<sup>6</sup> Recurring themes on the blog include the illegality of Chinese immigrants in Russia (both in the Far East and in other regions), construction and agricultural jobs taken by Chinese immigrants, conflicts between Chinese workers and Russian locals (also between Chinese and Russian students), quality problems of Chinese consumer goods and industrial products sold in Russia, territorial and border disputes between the two countries, and ecological and environmental threats that China and Chinese migrants have posed to the Russian Far East.

While most blog posts from this anti-Chinese LiveJournal community, to different extents, reflect the realistic concerns of Russians about Chinese migration in the Russian Far East, some other posts from this community are purely attacks or mockeries on Chinese people. For instance, one entry talking about some "interesting facts about China" writes as follows: "If you kill one Chinese in one second, you will have to shoot without

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<sup>5</sup> rem\_bulgari. (2006, October 30). Untitled. [Web log message] Retrieved from <http://ru-antikitai.livejournal.com/486.html#comments>. (2012, March 20).

<sup>6</sup> brusilov\_14, (2012, January 16). Russkii s Kitaitsem Brat'ya Navek. [Web log message] Retrieved from <http://ru-antikitai.livejournal.com/56767.html>. (2012, March 20).

a break for 38 years to kill all the Chinese.”<sup>7</sup> Another entry under the sarcastic title “Unable to feed even their own people properly” cites a piece of “funny” news, which reported a food poisoning case in St. Petersburg, where 26 Chinese tourists got sick after visiting some Chinese restaurants.<sup>8</sup>

One can reasonably argue that this anti-Chinese online community represents only the concerns of a small group of radical Russian nationalists, and thus cannot account for the opinion of a larger population. However, the popularity of this topic was made evident by Russian Internet users’ active responses to a November 2011 blog entry titled “Chinese Garden” (*Kitaiskii ogorod*), which was written by an independent LiveJournal blogger Ilya Varlamov. The blog post documented the conditions of a Chinese *ogorod* in the Chelyabinsk *oblast* with first-hand photographs and short descriptions. Recalling the introduction of the anti-Chinese LiveJournal community talking about a China Town extending from the Pacific Ocean to the Ural Mountains, it seems that it is the Chinese *ogorod* that has settled on the Ural field.

Nonetheless, should the Chinese workers thus be seen and portrayed as invaders? The Chelyabinsk *oblast*’s agricultural sector has employed approximately 2500 Chinese workers, and the volume of fruits produced by Chinese in the Southern Urals is one of highest in Russia. It is ironic that while the locals are still arguing about whether the Chinese should be allowed to work the lands, the governor of the Chelyabinsk *oblast* has translated his website into Chinese. Yet, as Varlamov’s pictures show, the Chinese farmers work and live “in slave-like conditions.” What makes their life even harder is the

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<sup>7</sup> beloyar. (2007, December 6). Mozhet i staroe, no s yumorom. [Web log message]. Retrieved from <http://ru-antikitai.livejournal.com/2007/12/06/>. (2012, March 20).

<sup>8</sup> beloyar. (2009, August 13). Dazhe svoikh nakormit’ne smogli normal’no. [Web log message]. Retrieved from <http://ru-antikitai.livejournal.com/2009/08/13/>. (2012, March 20).

fact that very few of them can speak Russian, and they hardly interact with the locals. An especially uneasy statement for the Russian readers in this post may be that “Chinese workers are doing what should have been done by local farmers, while the locals angrily look at their new neighbors but still do nothing.”<sup>9</sup>

This short and simple blog post received over 800 comments within only two days. A quick look at some of the most-replied-to comments will give us a sense of how the Russians see this issue. Again, we see the Russians’ deep concern about the possibility of Chinese taking Siberia and the Far East: “Soon they will have bit off the floor of Siberia and the Far East thanks to the wise policy of the government.” On the other hand, we also hear a completely different voice: “The Chinese are doing a good job. We should not fight them, but learn from them!” Not surprisingly, such a somewhat naive “liberal” view was immediately refuted: “In such working conditions, they will die like flies. I am sure that they will be buried there as cattle. A Russian will never work under such conditions, even if he is a liberal pig.” Some took a further step to warn others about the threats: “The enemy crept up unnoticed.” “Enemies are everywhere. The Chinese sell vegetables that are grown with tons of pesticides and poisons, while growing healthy vegetables in separate gardens for themselves.”<sup>10</sup>

It can be seen that while Russian Internet users hold different opinions regarding the specific measures that should be taken to tackle the problem of increasing Chinese migration into Russia, almost all of them express deep concern and tend to see it as a threat to Russia’s security and the Russian people’s safety if the Russian government does nothing about it. Moreover, not a small number of the opinions we see include

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<sup>9</sup> zyalt. (2011, November 9). Kitaiskii ogorod. [Web log message]. Retrieved from <http://zyalt.livejournal.com/477621.html#comments>. (2012, March 20).

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

accusations of Chinese immigrants' various improper and illegal activities. Finally, some of them go to the extreme of personal attacks aimed at China as a nation.

In fact, Russian mistrust and hostility toward the Chinese have deep roots. The Sino-Soviet split from the 1960s to the 1980s has left an irremovable imprint on subsequent Sino-Russian relations. In his 1969 letter to the USSR's First Deputy Chairman of the Council of Ministers Alexei Kosygin, Vsevolod Ivanov, a Russian/Soviet writer and journalist who spent 23 years living in China and then returned to Khabarovsk, passed on the words of a "highly intelligent, honest Russian patriot" as follows: "Tell the people in Moscow not to trust the Chinese in any agreement they make, if it cannot be reliably backed up. In my experience, the Chinese do not abide by any agreement."<sup>11</sup> This statement proves to still be relevant 40 years later. Two examples are the unproductive decade-long negotiations on a gas deal between the two energy giants and the oil pricing dispute which broke out within less than one year after the Russian-Chinese oil pipeline opened in January 2011.

However, as the case of Chinese *ogorod* in the Chelyabinsk *oblast* shows, Chinese migrant workers in Russia, legal or illegal, would not be there if they were not really needed. Russia fears losing the Far East and Siberia, first because of its own demographic crisis and the fact that many young Russians are leaving the region now that the Soviet-era controls on population movement are absent. On the Chinese side across the border, migration into the Russian Far East also has spontaneous motivation: it is to a great extent driven by the high unemployment rate and social tensions in China's northeast caused by massive layoffs of state owned industries and slow economic growth

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<sup>11</sup> Ivanov, Vs.N. Mir nichego ne znaet o Kitae, *Ruskolan'*, Retrived from <http://ruskolan.xpomo.com/liter/china.htm>. (2012, March 20).

in the region. Given these conditions, the trend of Chinese migration to Russia is almost unstoppable. Therefore, a better question to ask would be: Will Russia and China be able to maintain a balance between the profits that both sides want to reap from this migration trend and the tensions it creates between Russian locals and Chinese migrants?

Indeed, the communist style Sino-Soviet brotherhood has long ago become obsolete. Today one of the most frequently used descriptors for Russian-Chinese relations is “Strategic Partnership” (*Strageticheskoe partnerstvo*), a realist diplomatic rhetoric on a state-to-state basis which tells nothing about what is happening on the ground. But in regard to the problems associated with Chinese migration in Russia, it is exactly what happens on the ground that calls for attention and intervention by local governments and state authorities. Efforts on both improving the legal system and promoting cultural exchanges and cross-cultural communications are imperative. The proposed idea of a Chinese “invasion” of the Russian Far East is most likely an unrealistic story, yet the potential for Chinese immigrants becoming the target of Russian xenophobia is a realistic scenario.

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