Myth of the Chinese migration to Russia

Rising levels of migration from China to the states of the former USSR are often perceived as the onset of territorial expansion of ‘the Red Dragon’, setting out on ‘a road of a thousand miles, starting with a small step’. The fallacy of this belief is overcome through immersion into migration trajectories and the prospects of China and its neighbors.

Chinese migration to Russia has a long history of its own. It was a tsarist government that first expressed interest in a Chinese labor force in a bid to reclaim Siberia. With enviable regularity, it issued circulaires for the payment of elevated levies to obtain ‘Russian tickets’ which were the basis for a residence permit, for settlement and the right to work for people of China on the territory of imperial Russia. As a stronger empire, Russia signed the Treaty of Aigun on the transfer of the left bank of the Amur river, under its jurisdiction in 1858 and sought to impose its rules of the game on its Asian neighbor even back then.

According to the laws of the 1860s, land ownership tax relief and tax exemptions on the territory of Outer Manchuria and the Far East were granted only to Russian citizens; according to the laws of the 1890s,
property confiscated from Chinese smugglers was used to remunerate ‘catchers’ – local administration; according to 1912 laws, a ban on the residence of the Chinese domestic passport holders with imperial visas was introduced in the territory of Primorskaya Oblast.

In the 1890s, the passport fee for Chinese people visiting Russia was impressive: 5 rubles, out of which 4 rubles 10 kopecks was tax which benefitted the tsar’s treasury, 60 kopecks was stamp duty and 30 kopecks went towards covering administrative expenses. Incidentally, passport fees for residents of the Russian empire differed: 10 kopecks were to be paid for a passport issued for one year, 50 kopecks – for two years, one ruble – for three years.

Despite these crippling terms and discriminating laws, the Chinese continued to go to Russia. The tsarist administration, fettered by the lack of human resources in the Far East and Siberia, was forced to support ‘the influx of the yellow race’ in order to reclaim the territories. It also made efforts to maintain a ‘peaceful life’ for the local, Russian, population in parallel.

The recent past of both states (the Soviets’ rise to power and the Cultural Revolution in China) created a migration vacuum between China and Russia. For a long time, the states of the Soviet Union and the People’s Republic of China (PRC) belonged to different migration systems and were not countries of vigorous migratory exchange. A new migration milestone in cooperation between Russia and China emerged with the collapse of the USSR and the emergence of shuttle migration. A lot of water has passed under the bridge since then, the distribution on the political world map has changed, and Chinese migration to Russia has become more diverse from a geographical point of view, and much more dynamic.

As of July 2, 2015, 167,325 citizens of China legally resided on the territory of the Russian Federation (RF), although, according to various estimates, the actual number of Chinese migrants ranges from 400,000 to 1 million. Chinese migrants live in Khabarovsk Krai (3,898), Moscow (3,222), Primorsky Krai (2,857), Krasnoyarsk Krai (2,436), Novosibirsk Oblast (1,926), Sverdlovsk Oblast (1,772), Saint Petersburg (1,578), Irkutsk Oblast (1,118), Amur Oblast (672) and other Russian cities and localities. Tourists from China rediscover their northern neighbor, whereas Chinese business penetrates various spheres of the Russian economy. However, the numbers for Chinese migration and its impact for Russia has remained a contentious issue until now.

The peak of labor migration from China to Russia was in the years 2007-2009 – in those days, citizens of ‘the middle country’ constituted 11-13% (281,700 in 2008 and 269,900 in 2009) of the total number of workers within quotas on the territory of Russia. In 2012, the proportion of Chinese workers in the Russian labor market diminished, falling to 6% (or approximately 59,000 people) of the total number of foreign workers. In 2015, a quota for access to the domestic labor market of Russia in the amount of 80,662 people was introduced for migrant workers from China. It is the largest quota relating to the Russian labor market permitting foreign citizens’ entry into the territory of the RF under the visa procedure. As a comparison: worker quotas allocated by the government of the RF in 2015 stipulate that 54,730 citizens of Turkey, 47,364 citizens of the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK), 3,012 citizens of India and as few as 800 citizens of Germany can work on the territory of the RF. These figures pale in comparison to the flow of a million migrant workers from countries of Central Asia entering the territory of the RF under a visa-free regime.

It is important to recognize that labor migration from China to Russia is concealed from statistical observation as it is classified as business migration or tourist migration. However, analysis of similar data does not give grounds to maintain that there is a circumspect migratory expansion of China to the territory of Russia underway.

Citizens of China place only third after Poles and Finns in the overall list of foreigners entering Russia under the visa procedure. According to the data of the Border Service of the RF, out of the 32,421,490 foreigners who entered the territory of the RF in 2014 via the visa procedure as few as 1,125,098 were citizens of China. Furthermore, 303,353 of them entered the territory of the RF for business purposes and employment (295,203 in 2013) while 409,817 (372,314 in 2013) of them as tourists.

The number of citizens of China interested in Russian citizenship is usually subject to even greater
exaggeration. According to the 2010 census, as few as 28,943 citizens residing on the territory of Russia consider themselves Chinese. For comparison, according to the 1897 census, 57,459 Chinese (47,431 men and 10,028 women) were registered on the territory of the Russian empire; 42,823 (74.5%) of them lived on the territory of the Far East and Primorye. Today, 99% of Chinese respondents interviewed in the European mass of Russia and 89% of those residing on the territory of the Far East stated that they had no interest in Russian citizenship.

Most researchers agree that the Chinese are striving to ‘live in China and do business in Russia’. And this is a totally different trajectory of migratory flows. A case in point – information regarding the agreement between the authorities of Zabaykalsky Krai and Chinese companies on the 49-year lease of plots of Russian land for reclamation and tillage which stirred up Russian media and subsequently prompted a reaction from the local population. Three provinces of the PRC bordering on the Russian territory - Heilongjiang, Jilin and the province of Nei Mongol (Inner Mongolia) - have approximately 100 million residents in total as of today, whereas as few as 6.2 million people live in the Far Eastern Federal District and 19.3 million people live in the Siberian Federal District (Zabaykalsky Krai is a part of it).

And it turns out the fear of migration from China shared by Russians is related to its ‘demographic’ might. After all, when we consider the 1,364 billion Chinese persons residing on 9.6 million km² of land and the 143.8 million Russians settled on 17.1 million km², the figures become incomparable. Besides, it is currently beyond Russia to resist China’s economic power, too: the latter has the economy ranked first in the world in terms of cumulative purchasing power of the total population and second in terms of produced gross domestic product ($10,360 billion).

History has come full circle: contemporary Russia (in line with its predecessor – imperial Russia) is experiencing an irrational fear of ‘an influx of the yellow race’ borne out of distrust for local administrations that consider Chinese ‘newcomers’ to be an additional source of income for the state treasury and for them personally. This is also accompanied by a fear of a ‘new revision of history’ under the pressure of the growing economic power of the ‘middle country’. After all, the most recent renaming of more than 500 settlements from Chinese into Russian in Outer Manchuria and the Far East was carried out as late as in 1972 on the Decree of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic (RSFSR). However, all of these life circumstances have little in common with the reality of migratory flows from China to Russia.

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