

Russian Perceptions of Chinese Immigration: Between Alarmism and Utilitarianism

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Official statistics on the number of Chinese coming to Russia are often unreliable. This means estimates are frequently given but these can vary greatly. The first kind of estimation is the alarmist estimation. According to this estimation, the number of

Statistical data

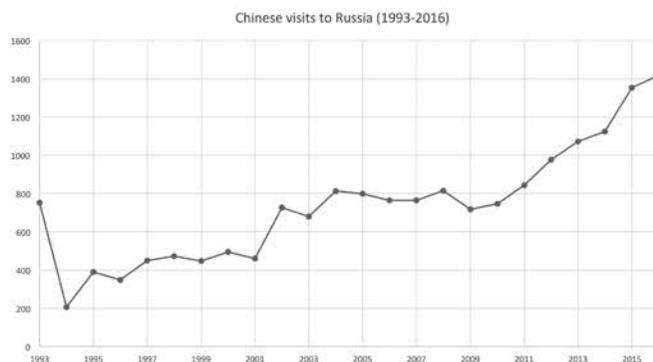
It is difficult to find trustworthy estimations on the number of the Chinese in Russia. Here are available figures:

- a) Soviet and Russian censuses: 1989 – 11 thousand, 2002 – 35 thousand, 2010 – 29 thousand.

The problem with censuses is that they poorly cover immigrants and those groups, who are not much willing to be counted (as they are afraid of prosecution). At the same time, Russian census workers could evade dealing with those ethnic communities who don't speak Russian well and could be quite able to falsify results.

- b) Typically, Chinese citizens entered Russia several hundreds of thousands times per year (many of them could cross the border several times per year each). The record figure – 1417 thousands of border crossings - was reached in 2016.

Statistical data



Estimations

Available estimations of the numbers of Chinese visitors vary greatly. Usually, these estimations do not specify whether annual or an average “snapshot” number of immigrants is meant.

- 1) Alarmists (including scholars and officials) argue that from 1,5 to 12 million of the Chinese reside in Russia and that the Chinese already prevail in some borderland areas.

Usually, no justification is provided, sometimes differences between the annual number of entries and departures are referred. Most likely, these differences is actually caused by long-term stays, departures via different regions and countries (Belarus), and inaccuracies in recording those who depart.

- 2) According to Russian Chinese Studies scholars, demographers, and competent immigration and security officials, the average number of Chinese in Russia is between 200 and 600 thousand.

Most of these experts do not believe in ‘too small’ figures of Russian censuses.

Chinese coming to Russia rose from 1.5 to 12 million. Alarmists argue that Chinese already prevail in some border areas of Russia. But usually no justification for this claim is provided.

The second kind of estimation is more moderate. According to this estimation, the average number of Chinese in Russia is between 200,000 and 600,000. Moscow is probably the main point of destination for Chinese coming to Russia, because it offers the largest opportunities. In terms of the sending region of China, Heilongjiang is in first place. It provides migrants to the Russian Far East, but some other regions provide immigrants to the regions of the European parts of Russia.

The majority of Chinese immigrants to Russia are either short-term or seasonal. This is a particular characteristic of those Chinese immigrants who come to the Russian Far East. It is also argued that there are no Chinese diaspora in the Far East, because China is nearer so there is less need to consolidate. There is a Chinese diaspora in Moscow that is a well-organized community, with financial services and media. These communities are isolated from the social environment because of poor command of Russian, and limited acceptance of ‘strangers’ by Russians. However, there are still no Chinatowns in Russian cities.

A large number of Chinese visitors are low-income rural dwellers. There are some negative perceptions of these groups. According to some sources, the Chinese are supposedly ill-mannered, unkempt, dishonest, and aggressive. These are supposedly characteristic of rural uneducated Chinese immigrants to Russia. These characteristics were extrapolated to Chinese as a whole in the 1990s. However, these stereotypes gradually weakened as Chinese immigration flows diversified, and as more Russian Far Easterners visited China.

In terms of activities carried out in Russia, Chinese visitors can be divided into the following groups:

- **Tourists**

Tourists have generally been welcomed by Russian authorities since the 1980s. The problem is group tourist trips quickly started to be abused for shuttle trade and illegal employment. As a result, bilateral regulations for visa-free tourism and requirements about minimal number of people in such tourist groups were tightened. In the 2010s, bilateral management and logistic efforts boosted the number of Chinese tourists almost twofold.

- **Traders**

This category increased in importance in the 1990s. Some of them are shuttle traders. Some bought goods imported by companies and were often involved in schemes to evade duties. The Russian government, however, toughened conditions for goods imported by individuals. Consequently, in 2000 informal cross-border trade was carried out mainly by Chinese companies that resorted to using Russian citizens rather than Chinese borderlanders.

- **Agricultural workers**

The Chinese have a reputation for being an excellent agricultural workforce because Russian agricultural workers are generally considered to be heavy drinkers. However, perceptions of Chinese farm workers are controversial. Some are said to have abused harmful fertilizers to obtain more crops, leaving behind exhausted and contaminated soil. There is a trend of decreasing the number of Chinese agricultural workers in the Russian Far East.

- **Construction workers**

Construction workers are also considered to be a cheap and industrious workforce. The number of Chinese construction workers started to rise in the 2000s. However, recently because of the Russian economic crisis and the crisis in construction, the number of Chinese has started to decrease.

- **Students**

Students are a very interesting case. Students generally are welcomed by Russian universities. Russia is also willing to attract and to assimilate well-performing Chinese students. The problem is that Russian higher education is considered as the cheaper and easier option for those who failed to enter decent Chinese or Western universities. In many cases, even formally reputable Russian universities act as “diploma mills” for Chinese students who don’t even know Russian by the end of their studies. I have met many such Chinese students in Russia.

- **Loggers**

Loggers employed by Chinese-owned companies are also controversial. Such companies are typically negatively framed in Russian sources as non-transparent, predatory towards the environment, and involved in customs fraud.

● Law-breakers

The most frequent kind of violation is of immigration regulations. Also, there is some information about Chinese organized crime groups that are targeting fellow Chinese and being involved in gambling houses, brothels and extortion. Such criminals also cooperate with Russian organized crime and corrupt officials.

Alarmist sentiments were extremely widespread in the 1990s, but centralization and establishment of better relations with China softened them to some extent, but they are still here.

There are roughly three peaks to alarmist statements about Chinese made by Russian MPs of the State Duma (the lower house of parliament). The first peak is connected to a Russian decision to cede some islands to China during territorial settlements. The second peak is about Russian-Chinese agreements on development of the Far East, and the third peak is for facilitations of the visa regime for Chinese.

In Russia alarmism can be high and moderate. It can also be focused on current and on future trends. Most Russian scholars of China are not alarmist, or even moderate alarmist, regarding past and future trends. In the first half of the 1990s, Russian scholars of China frequently appeared in the media and significantly contributed to reducing or softening alarmist sentiments.

Here are some influential arguments regarding present alarmism. The first argument is that the actual number of Chinese is supposedly huge. In some settlements it is said to exceed the number of local inhabitants. However, there is no evidence confirming this statement. The fact that the Russian-Chinese border is heavily patrolled is important to remember.

The second argument is that Chinese tend to pursue short and long-term policies of “creeping occupation” of the Russian Far East. In China there are some maps in which Russian territories are marked as belonging to China. Nevertheless, there is no serious evidence of such malicious policy. Also, Russian-Chinese relations are good and China needs access to Russian raw materials rather than physical control over these territories.

The third argument is that Russian policies allow China to bring its workforce and take control of agricultural land. However, Russia needs this Chinese workforce to cultivate abandoned land.

Another argument is that Chinese immigration is harmful for economic and social reasons. For example, that Chinese immigration encourages criminals to enter Russia, and that agricultural and logging activities damage soil. However, the real problem is Russian authorities who fail to regulate these activities.

The second kind of alarmism is future-oriented. Alarmists of this kind, including some scholars, argue that the current situation is unproblematic but that things could change in the future. Such a change is especially likely if Russian-Chinese political relations worsen, or if the economic conditions in China deteriorate. Nevertheless, we

should remember that the Chinese population is aging and that recent Chinese policy is increasingly oriented towards internal consumption. Also important is that Chinese salaries are rising in comparison to Russian ones. These considerations will work to reduce labor immigration.

Now for a tongue-in-cheek look at some especially delirious statements by Russian politicians and experts about Chinese immigration. They include the following:

1. Russian girls who make love with Chinese boyfriends get venereal diseases that can't be cured with domestic drugs. Chinese are also immune to these drugs. Possibly such diseases were produced artificially to ensure the expansion of China.
2. Russia removed nuclear mines on the former Soviet-Chinese border. Now, Russia doesn't know what to do there. It is very difficult to constrain the growth of numerous ethnic immigrants across multiple checkpoints. A possible response following such logic - nuclear mines for checkpoints.
3. The census failed to detect 8 million Chinese immigrants, because a huge number of them are living in the forests.
4. An analysis by retired intelligence officers stated that there are 6.5 million Chinese people in Russia. Most supposedly entered Russia illegally despite the Russian border being heavily protected.
5. Finally, the government urgently needs to pay attention to what is happening in Siberia and the Far East. These territories are rapidly being populated by Chinese citizens. Many women in the Far Eastern region have two husbands: one Russian and one Chinese. The Russian one earns more money for the family, the Chinese one educates the children and does housework. Furthermore, many consider such relations normal. The author of this statement is Director of the Department of the Institute of Social Politics of the Russian Academy of Science.

My last point is about measures to counter Chinese immigration that have been discussed or implemented. Statements have been made about toughening the immigration regime, strictly observing quotas, and stopping shadow economic activities. Some argue that Chinese immigration should be facilitated. Advocates of facilitation argue that Russia badly needs a workforce so it should attract more Chinese immigrants. In particular, Russia should look to attract skilled immigrants and students. Russia should remove unnecessary bureaucratic barriers and do its best to become more attractive for Chinese immigrants. This approach is assimilation, and concerns educated people, specialists, and students. Russia should welcome these categories of immigrants while being restrictive to others. Another approach is counterbalancing. According to this view, Russia needs Chinese immigrants but it should also attract immigrants from other countries to counterbalance Chinese immigration. Lastly, there is bilateral cooperation which involves cooperating with China to regulate illegal immigration.

These are my conclusions. First, Russia's attractiveness for Chinese labor immigrants is decreasing because of the recent decline in the value of the Russian ruble. It is also decreasing because of restrictive trends in Russian immigration legislation. At the same time, the number of Chinese tourists is increasing. Second, China understands Russian concerns and fostering Chinese immigration to Russia is not a priority for Beijing. Third, although popular alarmists' sentiments against Chinese immigration in the post-Soviet period have tended to decrease, such feelings still exist. Ironically,

such sentiments are nearly inversely proportional to the number of Chinese actually coming to Russia. Therefore, alarmist sentiments were intense in the 1990s, but now they are probably at their lowest level. Meanwhile, the number of Chinese coming to Russia is actually increasing. Nevertheless, alarmist sentiments are fueled by poor transparency in Russian-Chinese cooperation in the context of Russia's eastern pivot. They are also encouraged by internal interests. For example, those who address the problem of resettlement of the Russian Far East cite Chinese expansion as one argument for why money should be given to them.

Discussant's Comments

Jong Seok Park (Kyushu University)

Regarding the first speaker's presentation I'd like to raise several small questions and one big one.

First, two small questions: What do you mean by the term "first marriage"? Marriage by who? Secondly, you describe the 'feminization of immigrants'. Do you think this is a new phenomenon, or not?

Secondly, my big question. I understand that your approach is strongly based on your sense of altruism or idealism about this topic. Overall, I agree with your attitude and approach, but I also feel some concerns about such an approach. There is a possibility of demonizing men seeking foreign brides in South Korea and Japan. Conversely, there might also be a possibility of victimizing female marriage migrants. I think such marriages are based on mutual interest and/or mutual consent. Your approach might fail to capture the harsh realities of human life. For example, you assume that human beings should not be treated as a commodity. I agree with this but isn't the essence of marriage basically about commoditification? For example, you explained about a South Korean man who married a Vietnamese woman after only knowing each other for a few hours. What does this mean? This is a negotiation and a transaction. I think we need to capture the harsh realities of human relationships. Only through such an understanding might we construct a better solution.

Now I will move on to the second presentation by Yuji Fukuhara and Mitsuhiro Mimura. Firstly, I appreciate your hard-earned information about North Korean workers in Mongolia. This kind of information is hard to get. As Yuji Fukuhara explained, he had to use special connections to get this kind of information.

Now my comments and questions. I have a comment about naming. In the paper, the authors simplified 'North Korea' to 'Korea'. If you use North Korea to describe Korea, and there is no reference to 'South Korea' then such a simplification is not a problem. However, the paper also refers to South Korea. Korea and South Korea are even used in the same sentence with Korea indicating North Korea. This is, I think, not so desirable.