

"The Chinese are Coming: Public Opinion and Threat Perception in the Russian Far East

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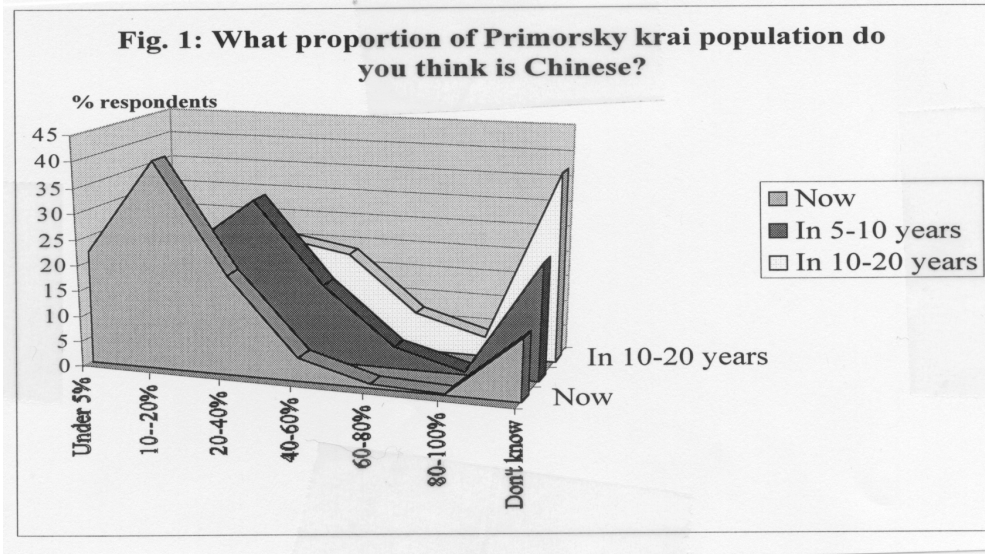
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Perceptions Matter: Sensing a Swelling Wave of Chinese Migration

Unpublished data from the passport and visa registration service of Primorsky krai, interdepartmental memos from the Pacific Regional Directorate of the Russian Federal Border Service, and this author's interviews with the chief of Primorsky krai Migration Service together suggest that the number of Chinese migrants in Primorsky krai at best amounts to approximately 1-1.5% of the local Russian population on any given day. The actual number of Chinese migrants cannot be significantly higher. Putting Russian statistical data and official statements to test, this author conducted systematic visual observations on four trips to Primorsky krai (Primor'e) in 1999 and 2000 and found no evidence of Chinese presence that would be even remotely similar to the Chinese presence in New York, San Francisco, or even Moscow.

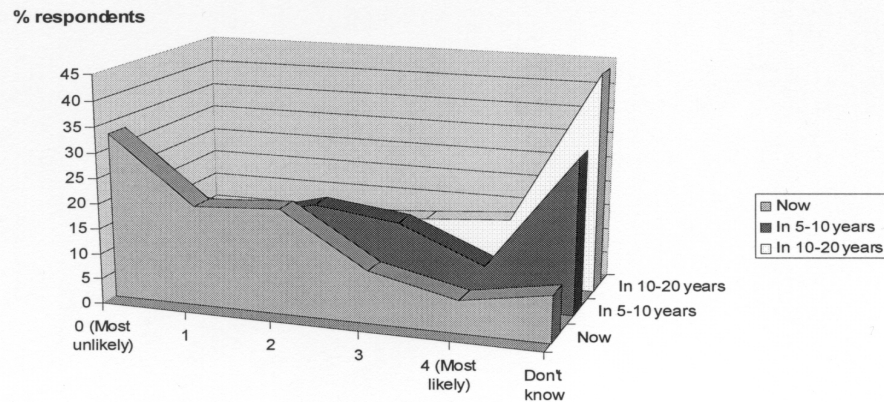
Yet an opinion survey designed by this author and conducted in September 2000 by the Center for the Study of Public Opinion at the Vladivostok Institute of History, Ethnography and Archaeology of the Russian Academy of Sciences shows that local Russians significantly overestimate the scale of Chinese presence in Primor'e. The survey (described on page 5) included 1010 respondents selected randomly from six locations within Primorsky krai. When asked what proportion of the Primorsky krai population was Chinese, 46% of respondents (not including the "don't knows") said this proportion amounted to 10-20% (the modal response). Looking to the future, most respondents (41%) said the proportion of ethnic Chinese would grow to 20-40% in 5-10 years, while another 20% said it would become 40-60%. Moreover, this survey reveals a strong perception that Chinese migration in Russia's southernmost Pacific province is much more likely to increase than to stay the same or decline in the next 20 years. For example, respondents who estimated that at present up to 5% of the local population was Chinese are most likely to believe that 10-20% of the local population would be Chinese in 5-10 years. The same holds for those who said this proportion would be 10-20% in 5-10 years, and then rise to 20-40% in 10-20 years. Figure 1 graphically illustrates this prevailing perception that Chinese migrants will keep coming like a swelling tidal wave.



Are Chinese Migrants a Threat?

In general, most respondents (about 40%) said that Chinese migrants posed no or very little threat to Russia as a whole, although close to one third of respondents see this migration as a strong threat. However, the largest proportion of respondents believes that Chinese migrants pose a strong or very strong threat to the Russian Far East and to Primorsky krai (43 and 55% respectively). At the same time, most of Primor'e's residents (42% of respondents) appear to believe that despite a threat to Primorsky krai, Chinese migrants posed no threat whatsoever to them personally.

Insecurity perceptions are manifest in a widely held view in Primor'e that China is nursing territorial claims on the Russian Far East. Excluding the "don't knows," almost 82% of those polled say the Chinese see Primorsky krai as historically belonging to China, and 74% of respondents feel that China will, in the long run, annex Primorsky krai or parts of it. The perception of a Chinese takeover threat also fits into a "tidal wave" pattern similar to the perception of increasing migration. For example, most respondents believe that military clashes with China over border territories--such as the one at Damanski Island in March 1969--are unlikely at present. In the next 5-10 and 10-20 years, however, they see such military conflicts as more likely than not (Fig. 2). The future is rather dark for Primor'e residents--the more they look ahead, the greater their anticipation of hostile actions by China amidst increasing uncertainty.

Fig. 2 How likely are border clashes with China?

These perceptions appear paradoxical since about three times as many respondents see interstate relations between Russia and China as positive than as negative, now and 20 years into the future. In this regard, they see no threatening tidal waves, but rather a calm sea of good intentions. Also, over the same time horizon, most Primor'e residents believe that the balance of military power will favor Russia over China. Then why would respondents feel insecure?

Sources of Insecurity

- Most respondents do not associate the military power balance between Russia and China with the likelihood of Chinese takeover of Russian territories in the Far East (the statistical correlation is insignificant and close to zero). Of those who said Primorsky krai or parts of it would be taken over by China, only 19% said this would happen through the use of force.
- Relations between Moscow and Beijing are, in fact, inversely related to threat perception: 25% of respondents in the group (those who believe Primorsky krai will be taken over by China) feel that Moscow is simply likely to negotiate Primor'e away. This perception is consistent with the message of Governor Nazdratenko's campaigns throughout most of the 1990s, in which he persistently accused Moscow of neglecting Russian interests in the Far East.
- From among 57% of respondents in the sample who see Chinese takeover as imminent, 56% believe the main threat comes from seemingly mundane, routine activities of Chinese nationals in Primor'e, such as work, trade, tourism, and marriages. In a sense, this logic can be described as a "demographic security dilemma." A local Russian respondent who fears that through these routine activities the ethnic Chinese would settle down, start families, have children and invite friends and relatives over from across the border could never be certain whether the real intentions of Chinese migrants in the area are offensive or

- cooperative. With the worst case scenario haunting one's views, insecurity perceptions can quickly spiral out of control, as bad intentions are more likely to be ascribed to good ones than the other way round.
- Ethnic stereotypes therefore play a large part in perceptions of security. In my survey, the Russians in Primor'e appear to view Chinese migrants as distant, socially undesirable, and fiercely protective of their cultural values. Asked about stereotypes contrasting Chinese migrants from Russians, twice as many respondents saw the Chinese are more hardworking, entrepreneurial, and greedy; three times as many respondents saw them as more sly; and almost 20 times more respondents saw them as less generous than ethnic Russians. Moreover, 56% of respondents disapprove of their relatives marrying Chinese citizens and another 50% believe that Chinese migrants in Primorsky krai cannot be assimilated (only 4.7% of respondents approve of Russian-Chinese marriages). In other words, if Chinese migrants settle down in the area, they will not play by local Russian rules but gradually impose their own way of life and will ask for autonomy and protection from across their border. In fact, opposition to one's relatives marrying Chinese citizens and support for complete closure of the Russian-Chinese border are closely related.
 - Insecurity is also likely to arise out of perceptions of economic uncertainty and relative deprivation. Thus, in the survey, respondents seem to have mixed views of the economic impact of Chinese migrants (see Table 1 on page 5), giving grounds for perceptions of uncertainty. On the one hand, the respondents see Chinese migration as predominantly beneficial to agriculture, trade, availability of consumer goods, and the budget. They also see the economic activities of Chinese migrants as helping to reduce prices. On the other hand, the same respondents associate the Chinese presence with more harm than good when it comes to local industry, job availability, the environment, and crime. Most respondents, however, feel that the Chinese are the ones receiving the net benefits of these exchanges. If any Russians are to benefit, respondents believe, they are mostly likely to be smugglers. This is how Primor'e residents evaluate the relative gains of the main actors in cross-border trade with China:

	Percent saying that:	
	Russians Gain a lot	Chinese Gain a lot*
"Shuttle" traders (private citizens)	59% (15%)	74% (15%)
Private companies (businesses)	50% (26%)	56% (31%)
Government budget	24% (27%)	45% (35%)
Smugglers (illicit traders)	73% (19%)	73% (22%)
N=1010		
*The sum of responses with scores of 3 and 4 on a 0 to 4 scale, as percentage of the total. The number of "don't know" responses as percentage of the total is in parentheses.		

In other words, Russian respondents feel that the benefits of economic exchanges with China disproportionately benefit Chinese citizens and the Chinese government, plus a small group of smugglers on both sides. The majority of the local Russian public feels deprived relative to these groups.

Responding to the Chinese Challenge

In the survey, respondents were given 17 policy options on how to respond to Chinese migration and asked to rank them on a scale of -3 (most hostile) to +3 (most accommodating). For example, if someone felt the borders should be totally closed they would choose -3, but if they favored totally open borders they'd chose +3. Those favoring some intermediate measures would choose scores in between. The results reveal several trends:

- Most respondents prefer hostile political and military measures to counter Chinese migration. About 65% of respondents said they favor closing the border with China to crossings, including 25% who favored complete border closure. Less than 1% of respondents favored opening the border completely. Approximately 57% of respondents favor supporting the Cossacks or other voluntary paramilitary groups to ensure order in the face of Chinese migrants, and 70% of respondents came out against Russia's arms sales to China. Deportation of illegal Chinese migrants--which in practice means most of the migrant traders and workers in Primor'e--was favored by 89% of respondents, and denial of permanent residence by 78%.
- Primor'e residents are less hostile when it comes to economic measures in response to Chinese migration. Hostility increases if economic activity is associated with the migrants' proclivity to settle in the area. Thus, 36% of respondents favor a ban on Chinese citizens trading in Primor'e (29% oppose such a ban), and only 27% of respondents favor raising taxes and duties on goods imported from China (36% oppose such raises). But when it comes to Chinese citizens' right to land ownership in Russia, 96% of respondents are against it. Similarly, 60% of respondents want a ban on Chinese migrant labor, the latter being associated with longer presence of Chinese citizens in Primor'e, and hence greater proclivity for local settlement and marriage. At the same time, 64% of respondents favor development of cross-border tourism. Even though statistically tourism is the largest source of Chinese illegal migration in the region, the notion of tourism as a temporary and regulated activity is not linked with long-term stay and migrant settlement.
- Primor'e residents oppose social accommodation of Chinese migrants in the area: 48% of respondents want to ban or never allow Chinese-language media, 42% prefer to ban or never allow intermarriages between Russians and Chinese, and 76% want to ban or never allow Chinatowns in Primorsky krai.

- At the same time, regulated cultural exchanges with China are favored by most Primor'e residents in the survey (71%). About 56% of respondents support the idea of setting up Chinese cultural centers in the area, and 62% favor increasing Chinese language instruction in the local schools.

Implications for Security Policy

These responses suggest that while local residents have a reservoir of good will and cultural interest in China, perceptions of political, demographic and economic insecurity overwhelm such positive feelings. The data also shows how few Chinese migrants in the area it takes to trigger powerful latent hostilities. The interethnic tolerance threshold among the local Russians appears to be precariously low. Given existing demographic trends, which favor large-scale import of Chinese labor in the Russian Far East in the future, these attitudes point to the potential for violent conflict. However, the perception of economic benefits and the yearning for regulated cultural exchange suggest that there is a window of opportunity to promote cooperative interethnic relations in the area (especially in the next 5 years). This is the opportunity for governmental and non-governmental organizations to develop cross-cultural education opportunities and design public and private institutions to which both sides can take their grievances so as to diffuse disproportionately heightened perceptions of insecurity at the juncture of Eurasia's two largest powers.

Table 1.								
HOW DO CHINESE PEOPLE IN PRIMORSKY KRAI AFFECT:								
	-3	-2	-1	0	1	2	+3	Hard to say
	(negative effect)			(no effect)			(positive effect)	
Industry	12.5	18.7	16.2	23.2	9.2	6.7	2.2	11
Agriculture	12.5	11.9	12.7	13	17.8	14.7	8.9	8.6
Trade	7.6	7.7	10.3	10.4	25.5	19.8	12.5	5.2
Prices	7.8	5.5	9.7	12	25	21	11.4	5.4
Job availability to Russian citizens	17.6	17.4	19.9	15.3	12.5	7.2	1.8	7.2
Opportunity to make money for Russian citizens	13.1	15.5	18.2	16	14.4	10.4	3.5	7.5
Assortment of available goods	3.3	1.8	6.4	8.4	26	27.3	22.3	3.4
The environment	23.4	17.9	21.9	26.8	1.7	1.2	0.3	5.6
Budget revenues	7.1	10	9.2	25	17.5	8.3	4.3	17
Crime levels	15.4	19	24.8	26	1.3	1.4	2.9	8.6

Survey Information:

The sample was stratified by location (border vs. non-border), population change and nonulation densitv. rural-urban nonulation split. and economic indicators

(average wage purchasing power and trade with China). The areas include the cities of Vladivostok and Artem and the counties of Ussuriisk (including the city of Ussuriisk), Dalnerechensk, Khasan and Lazo. Voting districts served as primary sampling units (psus). In cities the psus were selected randomly (by drawing lots) and in rural areas where voting districts vary significantly in size, by random selection proportionate to estimated population size (a method which ensures random representation of small and large size psus without skewing the sample toward either one or the other unit type). The number of dwellings in each psu was then counted and classified by type and proportions of residents in each psu by dwelling type were estimated. Interviewers then selected the dwellings and the respondents randomly by drawing lots. This procedure improves on ROMIR and VTsIOM sampling methods that are based on various types of quota sampling where interviewers are allowed to choose respondents themselves. For more information, please contact the author.

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