

## **SINO-RUSSIAN RELATIONS: THE ISSUE OF CHINESE EMIGRATION**

**Yu Zheng**

**The Institute of Russian, East European and Central Asian Studies, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, Beijing**

The emigration of Chinese into Russia has never been a primary issue in the meetings and discussions between Chinese and Russian government officials. The in/outflow of Chinese has been documented, effectively obviating the need to discuss Chinese emigration at the official level. The issue that the Russian government seems to be reluctant to speak about is what the Russian media bring up repeatedly. Although more than ten years have passed since the disintegration of the USSR, along with the communist system, the Russian people seem to think that Russia may once more fall under communism, this time under China. The Russian mass media, especially in the Russian Far East, have reported widely exaggerated numbers of Chinese in Russia. They seem to think that the emigration from China has been arranged and is being conducted by the Chinese government, which supposedly wants to obtain that which cannot be obtained with force—the expansion of territory. That Russia will change and become Chinese<sup>1</sup> and that Russia will become a province of China<sup>2</sup> are two of the major themes the Russian media are propagating among the Russian people. It should be pointed out that there are more objective viewpoints based on investigation and research conducted by Russian scholars.<sup>3</sup> However, these viewpoints do not appear to be widely supported by the public because only a small number of scholars hold those viewpoints.

It may be obvious that the Chinese government has never in the past planned and is not currently planning emigration to any specific country in the world. On the contrary, the Chinese government has gradually strengthened its control of illegal emigration from China. In fact, there are no massive migrations from China to Russia. Therefore, there can be no massive illegal migrations either. But the negative propaganda in Russia continues to have a very damaging effect on bilateral trade and people exchanges between China and Russia.

### **China's National Policy concerning the Entry and Exit of Its Citizens, including Measures against Illegal Migration since the 1980s**

Prior to the 1980s, China's national policy on the exit and entry of its citizens and foreign citizens was very strict. Since then China has reformed its policy towards a more open stance. Accordingly, the number of Chinese citizens traveling out of the country and the number of foreign citizens coming to

China has increased rapidly. In response China's legislature has had to gradually strengthen the laws in this area.

In November 1985, the Standing Committee of China's National People's Congress approved the Law on the Entry and Exit of Foreign Citizens and the Law on the Entry and Exit of Chinese Citizens. In July 1995, China's State Council approved the Act on Frontier Checking of the Entry and Exit and promulgated the act in September of the same year. The act contained regulations about the entry, exit, transit, length of stay, and travel of foreign citizens in China. It also contained regulations regarding the entry, exit, private travel, and punishment of violations for Chinese citizens. At present, the main purposes of foreign travel that are considered appropriate for Chinese citizens are to visit relatives and friends, to take care of settlements in foreign countries, to study in foreign countries, and to maintain professional duties. After receiving a passport, Chinese citizens are allowed to go to foreign embassies and consulates and apply for a visa. They may then travel abroad with their valid passport and visa.

In March of 1994, the Standing Committee of China's National People's Congress approved the Additional Stipulations on Chastising Crime of Illegally Organizing and Transporting Persons across the National Frontier. These articles were added to the Criminal Law of the People's Republic of China (PRC), which had been revised in March of 1997. Clearly, strong authority from the legislature has supported the efforts against illegal emigration from China.

In May 2000, China's Ministry of Public Security issued the Act of Frontier Management on Ships along the Coasts. This act was dutifully incorporated into the provinces and autonomous regions of coastal China, effectively ending the previous system of different rules for different provinces. This act has also played an extremely important role in protecting China from the illegal entry of foreign citizens and controlling illegal emigration of Chinese citizens.

Without a doubt, China has accomplished much in the last 20 years, especially in the areas of legislative and federal power. China's political situation has stabilized, the protection for the public has improved, and the living standards of the population, especially in several regions, have risen considerably. Yet China's economic development lags behind developed countries, and this results in illegal immigration of foreign nationals and illegal emigration of Chinese citizens. The majority of illegal emigrants are peasants from the coastal regions of China. International criminal groups collude to offer illegal travel to Chinese peasants who are eager to go abroad in search of a better life. Because peasants often have little knowledge of the national laws regarding exiting China, criminal organizations have no trouble tempting them away from China. However, illegal emigration from China exceeds the norms only in a few regions and is very small in absolute terms or as a proportion of the total number of illegal migrants in the world.

Illegal Chinese emigration has been located to certain processes. First, an individual may choose a country from which it is relatively easy to obtain a visa, travel to that country with a valid visa, and then slip through to a Western European or North American country. Second, Chinese citizens may travel abroad with false documents. The Chinese in this group will alter their passport by putting in a different identification photo or otherwise altering the passport. Third, some individuals hide in shipping containers or in other places on ships to escape from the routine customs and border inspections. Fourth and finally, Chinese citizens slip through weak points in the federally enforced check points either on land or on the seas. In response to the knowledge that Chinese citizens have been misusing their passports, the Chinese government has strengthened the operation of its passport offices. The government has increased its vigilance at every stage of passport procedures, including application, approval, frontier check points, and patrols along the coasts.

The judicial department of China has taken a strong stance against illegal emigration, especially against the illegal organization and transportation of Chinese citizens across Chinese boundaries and forgery, alteration, and sale of immigration documents. In June 2000, the twelfth edition of the Chinese passport was issued. This edition was produced with a high level of technical expertise, which should make it more difficult to forge or alter passports. In addition, the regional departments of China have been using television monitoring systems in governmental offices on land and on the ships which began patrolling the Chinese seas in 1998. All of these measures have enhanced the Chinese government's ability to control illegal emigration and immigration.

While the judicial branch has been strengthening its enforcement of laws and punishments, the Chinese government has also been increasing its cooperation with the countries that share its borders in order to improve the exchange of information and technology against illegal immigration. Illegal Chinese emigrants in foreign countries have been repatriated in shiploads when their Chinese citizenship has been confirmed. International cooperation in repatriation has played an important and active role in the effort against illegal emigration.

According to China's Ministry of Public Security, Chinese governmental offices along the nation's border handled 315 cases of illegal emigration between 1999 and 2001. These offices reported seizing 2,057 illegal emigrants passing to and from China in the frontier areas. In 2001, Chinese authorities on the seas dealt with 540 cases of illegal emigrants and apprehended 2,480 illegal emigrants. In 2002, the numbers decreased by 22 percent and 54 percent, respectively. These figures demonstrate that illegal emigration of Chinese citizens by sea has been dealt with effectively. In addition, Chinese officials arrested 2,715 organizers and transporters of illegal emigrants, 511 of them being convicted as felons.<sup>4</sup>

In summary, the various efforts of the Chinese government over the course of the past decade in the customs offices, over land, and on the sea have reduced the scale of illegal emigration of Chinese citizens.

### **Chinese and Russian Policies concerning the In/Outflow of People: Bilateral Agreements and Their Results**

In the early 1990s, the flow of Chinese nationals across the Chinese-Russian border increased due to the expansion of trade between the two countries, especially between the Chinese and Russian frontiers. In 1982 the two governments signed an agreement to restore the validity of a 1958 trade agreement. The earlier agreement put a stop to the flow of Chinese and Russians over the Chinese-Russian border in the 1960s and 1970s. At that time, travel cooperation was worked out between Heihe City, China and Blagoveshchensk, USSR whereby each side limited the number of tourists traveling to the other side to a maximum of 100 per day. Because of Soviet regulations, the “tourists” were not allowed to sell the goods that they might have brought with them. They were allowed to buy only a few local goods and bring them back to their country. On the eve of the disintegration of the USSR, trade between the border provinces of China and Russia stood at one hundred million Swiss francs, and there were more than 10,000 Chinese citizens in the Russian Far East working under labor contracts under a bilateral agreement.<sup>5</sup>

On December 27, 1991, the Chinese government recognized the independence of the Russian Federation and the two countries agreed that the diplomatic relationship that had existed between China and the USSR would continue. New bilateral trade links were established quickly. In early March 1992, the two sides concluded the Agreement on Trade Relations between China and Russia. The agreement provided for the building of zones for cooperative development on the Russian side of the Sino-Russian border. In May of the same year, the construction of a zone for mutual trade between Manchuria City, China and Zabaykalsk City, Russia began. In August 1992, Deputy Prime Minister Tian Jiyun’s visit to Moscow resulted in the signing of the Agreement on Principles of Sending and Accepting Chinese Citizens in Russian Enterprises, Joint Companies, and Departments. These agreements promoted the frontier trade and mutual visits of citizens of the two countries, and Chinese citizens going to the Russian Far East increased rapidly. During the first visit of President Boris Yeltsin to China in December 1992, the leaders of the two countries signed a joint statement, which pointed out, “Both sides should create beneficial conditions for the trade links within the framework of the agreements and protocols between the countries, including the trade links between the regions along the frontier and on the basis of direct contacts between enterprises, organizations, and entrepreneurs.”<sup>6</sup>

It should be noted that a bilateral agreement from the Soviet era stipulated that Chinese and Soviet visas must be remitted for the citizens from either country who carried diplomatic, public, and ordinary passports. For the first two years after the disintegration of the USSR, this requirement was still valid and provided the convenience for mutual visits of the citizens of China and Russia.

On December 9, 1993, at the request of Russia, the Chinese and Russian governments signed the new Agreement on the Remittance of Visas for Persons with Diplomatic and Public Passports and the Agreement on the Visas for the Citizens Coming and Going. The two agreements became effective on January 28, 1994, just 30 days after signing. The first agreement stipulated that the regulation of visa remittance was changed to the regulation of visa requirement for all Chinese citizens with either an ordinary public passport or a diplomatic passport. The new visa regulations did not play a positive role in bilateral trade. On the contrary, these measures drastically reduced the number of Chinese citizens going to Russia, especially in the frontier regions of Russia and, consequently, cut the volume of trade and other forms of economic cooperation in the frontier regions.<sup>7</sup>

Meanwhile, the Chinese government has taken steps to simplify the procedures for the entry of Russian citizens into China to promote exchange between the two countries. In February 1998, the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs sent the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs a note concerning the Agreement for Building Sino-Russian Mutual Trade Zones and Simplifying Visa Procedures for the Entry of Russian Citizens. The note stated, “in order to further consolidate Sino-Russian trade relations and promote economic prosperity in the frontier areas, China and Russia agreed to simplify the procedures for the entry of Russian citizens into the trade complexes in Manchuria City, Heihe City, and Suifenhe City, China in the frontier areas. Russian citizens with a valid passport are allowed into the above trade complexes under the visa remittance after checking with the departments of customs and frontier defense, but they are forbidden in other areas than the trade complexes.”<sup>8</sup>

Early in the new century, at the suggestion of the Russian government, China and Russia continued to strengthen the management of their respective citizens' travel between the two countries. On February 29, 2000, the two sides concluded the Agreement on Citizens Coming and Going. The new agreement became effective on May 25, 2001 and invalidated the previous agreements (the Agreement on the Remittance of Visas for Persons with Diplomatic and Public Passports and the Agreement on the Visas for the Citizens Coming and Going). The new agreement stipulated that after May 25, 2001, citizens of each country, except diplomats and employees in land, sea, and air transportation, were required to obtain a valid visa to visit the other country. On November 1, 2002, the Russian government published the Law on the Status of Foreigners in the Russian Federation, which provided that all foreign residents, regardless of nationality and occupation, must obtain a migrant card. In order to prove their

status and occupation, all foreign residents were asked to show to the local police their migrant card together with their passport, visa, and a document that shows they were permitted to reside in the Russian Federation. According to the regulations of the Migration Department of the Russian Federation, the deadline for obtaining the migrant card was February 15, 2003. However, as of early February, only a small number of foreign migrants had obtained a migrant card. For example, in Moscow alone, only 30,000 out of the estimated 800,000 foreign residents or more in the city had obtained their migrant card. At present, Chinese citizens in Russia are mainly permanent personnel working in official agencies, students, businesspersons, and laborers in Russian companies. Among these groups, the businesspersons and laborers have the greatest difficulty in obtaining the required migrant card.<sup>9</sup>

Since 2002, the Russian government has continually published several laws and decrees. Based on the new regulations, Russian companies are required to provide documentation on their tax situation and financial standing to the relevant governmental department as a precondition for receiving a permit to employ foreign workers. Because of this paperwork, many companies have lost and will continue to lose their eligibility to invite foreign workers. A great many Chinese laborers and businesspersons are anxious that they may have to return to China on account of expired documents.

These Russian restrictions began early in the new century. For the last two years, Chinese citizens with a valid visa issued by the Russian embassy often failed to go through customs at Moscow airports. Most of the Chinese citizens that were denied exit or entry in Moscow were laborers and businesspersons who were unfamiliar with Russian laws and language. After paying many fines, they typically had to return to China. Russian customs officials explained that the Russian companies that had invited these Chinese citizens to work for them had lost their standing with respect to foreign employment.

Under these circumstances, many Chinese citizens face difficulties in entering and exiting Russia. The application process for Russian work permits has been suspended since August of 2002 and this has forced some Chinese citizens to return to China, while others have been waiting a very long time for approval of the applications they had already submitted. The Russian media reported that the number of Chinese citizens who work as laborers or businesspersons in Russia would decrease by roughly 50 percent by 2003.<sup>10</sup>

In summary, the number of Chinese citizens in Russia has been drastically reduced due to the Russian regulations. As a result, Sino-Russian trade has not increased as fast or as much as it could have during this period. For example, due to the new visa regulation that became effective in early 1994, the overall volume of foreign trade in the Russian Far East decreased by 30 percent from the previous year and trade between Russia and China specifically dropped by 79 percent. In Khabarovsk Krai, trade decreased by 83 percent; in Amur Oblast, by 80 percent; and in Chita Oblast, by 83 percent during the

same period.<sup>11</sup> In addition, the share of Sino-Russian trade in China’s total trade fell from 2 percent in the second half of the 1990s to less than 2 percent in 2002.

**Some Issues concerning the Chinese Migration to the Russian Far East**

The Controversy over the Number of Chinese Migrants in the Russian Far East

Since the 1990s, Chinese government agencies and academic institutions have not conducted any systematic investigations or surveys about Chinese migrants in Russia, including the Russian Far East. In the strict sense of the word, “migrant” means the populations who migrate across a border with the aim of long-term or permanent settlement in the destination country. Therefore, it is doubtful that the information that Russian scholars have obtained through local surveys reflects accurate information on Chinese “migrants” in Russia. The real number of Chinese migrants in Russia is very small. As for the Chinese government and academic institutions, they have not recognized that there has ever been a massive wave of Chinese migrants to Russia. It follows logically that, in their view, neither could there be a massive wave of Chinese migrants to the Russian Far East.

It is quite possible that when conducting the surveys, Russian scholars thought that “Chinese migrants” meant those Chinese who permanently live and/or routinely conduct business in Russia. Under this definition, Westerners, Japanese, or Koreans who do business in Russia should also be seen as migrants.<sup>12</sup> In the opinion of one Russian scholar, however, Westerners, Japanese, and Koreans are not considered “migrants” because they “leave the country when their contracts expire.”<sup>13</sup> According to the scholar’s own logic, Chinese citizens who periodically travel between China and Russia should be seen as a case similar to a Westerner, Japanese, or Korean who does the same. As this demonstrates, there are inconsistencies in the popular beliefs of the Russian people, which are also apparent at the scientific level. The crux of the issue is that if these Chinese who often leave and return to Russia are not seen as migrants, then it would make no sense to discuss “massive waves” of Chinese migrants in the Russian Far East.

**Table 1. The Length of Chinese Respondents’ Stay in Russia**  
(Share of respondents, %)

	Khabarovsk			Vladivostok		
	1999	2001	2002	1999	2000	2002
Less than 1 year	24.6	17.6	51.4	23	46	65.3
1-4 years	21.2	45.6	37.9	51	26	23.5
Over 4 years	15.1	26.5	10.7	10	21	11.2
No answer	39.1	10.3	—	16	7	—

Source: Vilya Gelbras, “Chinese Migration to the Russian Far East,” in Tsuneo Akaha, ed., Human Flows across National Borders in Northeast Asia, Seminar Proceedings, United Nations University,

Tokyo, Japan, November 20-21, 2002, Monterey, CA: Center for East Asian Studies, Monterey Institute of International Studies, January 31, 2003, p.140.

Furthermore, according to Dr. Larin, “[N]ot more than 30,000 Chinese were simultaneously in the Russian Far East”<sup>14</sup> in 1999, and the number was not significantly different in 2002.<sup>15</sup> If the Chinese who live in the Russian Far East for more than four years are seen as migrants, their share of the total number in 2002, shown in the above table, was roughly 10 percent, so they should have been about 3,000 in number. The Chinese prefer to live in Khabarovsk and Vladivostok because of the areas’ climate and location, so the Chinese migrants in the rest of the Russian Far East should be lower than 10 percent of the total number, that is, far less than 3,000 persons.

#### The Issue of the Chinese Government’s Plan to Organize Emigration to the Russian Far East

Since 1992, there have been a great many articles and reports in the Russian media that seem to believe that the Chinese government has organized and encouraged emigration of Chinese citizens to Russia, especially the Russian Far East. As with most reports on the number of Chinese citizens in Russia or the Russian Far East, this viewpoint is utterly groundless. President Jiang Zemin addressed this belief in September of 1994 and stated,

In recent years, because of the situation of rapid expansion of bilateral exchanges, there has emerged some out-of-order phenomena in the fields of frontier trade and people coming-and-going. I want to point out that the disorder has occurred because of the actions of individuals, not because of any policy of the two governments.<sup>16</sup>

In fact, even in 1992 and 1993, when the visa was remitted to Chinese citizens with ordinary public passports, the number of Chinese who went to the Russian Far East was limited, especially when compared with the vast population of China. According to Russian scholars, “the number of Chinese in the Far East in 1992-1993 did not exceed 50,000 to 80,000, including some 10,000 to 15,000 legal contract workers and 10,000 to 12,000 students.”<sup>17</sup> The head of the Primorye passport and visa service stated, “there were only 37 permanent Chinese residents registered in the Krai in 1999.”<sup>18</sup> It needs to be stressed that the Chinese shuttle trader, who often leaves and returns to Russia for individual business and always brings money obtained in Russia back to China, does not intend to live in Russia for a long period of time.

An article published in Moscow in August of 2003 also discussed this problem and stated that “the surveys revealed an interesting trend. Chinese migrants in most countries want to leave the homeland permanently, but Russia generally cannot retain them. The majority of Chinese come here to

do business only for one or two months, or, if they are contract workers, 10 months. Therefore, it may be only an illusion that Chinese laborers can reconstruct the Far East. Moreover, the survey shows us that our neighbors are so scared of the Russian departments at various levels that they need to offer bribery to all Russian personnel, including the staff in the frontier stations and in customs. All people recognize that Russian policemen can be avaricious and they are anxious that the ‘bare-headed gang’ are lawless.”<sup>19</sup>

### The Issue of Chinese Territorial Interests in the Russian Far East

The popular and much discussed topic of the Russian media is that China aims to take back the territory it lost to Russia in earlier history. Even after the Sino-Russian Treaty of Good Neighborliness, Friendship, and Cooperation was signed in July 2001, Russia’s viewpoint was that “the treaty of 2001 states PRC’s official abandonment of any territorial claims against Russia. The fact is that the treaty is in force only for twenty years on behalf of the government, but the ordinary Chinese who arrive in Russia have their own understanding of who is the real owner of the land they want to settle. Often they directly say that the territory will be returned to China soon.”<sup>20</sup> This Russian contradicts himself when he points out in the same article that “one of the most important conclusions from the research was that the largest concentration of Chinese migrants in Russia are found not in the Russian Far East, but in European Russia.”<sup>21</sup> According to this logic, the Chinese go to European Russia because they think they are the real owner of territory there, including Moscow and Saint Petersburg, and that those two cities will be returned to China. Could that viewpoint be right?

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, international research about the issue of in/outflow of Chinese nationals in Northeast Asia has not only academic significance, but also real-world significance that can be used for clarifying the relevant problems in the mutual policies and mutual relations among the countries of the region. The Russian academic institutions conducting local surveys and opinion polls should be urged to provide only the facts, so that objective researchers can deduce logical conclusions about the issues from the data obtained. Those logical conclusions can be beneficial to the Chinese and Russian governments as they work to develop relevant policies for a practical solution.

---

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> O. Zhizni, "Russia Will Change To Be Chinese," The Morning, April 23, 2002.
- <sup>2</sup> A. Milofzofrov, "Russia Will Become a Province of China," The Morning, May 28, 2002.
- <sup>3</sup> Professor Victor Larin of the Far Eastern Branch of the Russian Academy of Sciences has offered these objective and fair assessments on the basis of local survey data.
- <sup>4</sup> The data are from the Department for Entry and Exit Management of China's Ministry of Public Security.
- <sup>5</sup> Yu Guozheng, ed., Zhong'e guanxi zhongde eluosi yu yuandong (The Russian Far East in Sino-Russian Relations), Changchun, China, 2000, p.78.
- <sup>6</sup> People's Daily, December 19, 1992.
- <sup>7</sup> See, for example, Li Xuejun and A. Tkalev, ed., Ezhong guanxi: shiji zhijiao de qiusuo (Sino-Russian Relationship: a Search at the Turn of the Century), China's Nationality Press, 2001, p.50.
- <sup>8</sup> Office for Policy Study, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, ed., Zhongguo waijiao (Chinese Diplomatic Yearbook), Beijing: World Affairs Press, 1999, p.254.
- <sup>9</sup> Office for Policy Study, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, ed., Zhongguo waijiao (Chinese Diplomatic Yearbook), Beijing: World Affairs Press, 2001, p.272.
- <sup>10</sup> Yue Songlin, "eluosi xianqi banli yiminka, zhongguo shangren wanglai nandu zengda" (Transacting the Migrant Card for the Limited Time in Russia and Difficulty Increasing for Going-and-Coming of Chinese Businessmen) , Huabqiu shibao, February 10, 2003.
- <sup>11</sup> Eastern Business, Nos. 13 and 15, 1995.
- <sup>12</sup> Vilya Gelbras, "Chinese Migration to the Russian Far East," in Tsuneo Akaha, ed., Human Flows across National Borders in Northeast Asia, Seminar Proceedings, United Nations University, Tokyo, Japan, November 20-21, 2002, Monterey, CA: Center for East Asian Studies, Monterey Institute of International Studies, January 31, 2003, p. 141.
- <sup>13</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>14</sup> Victor L. Larin, "The Skies Envoys in the Far East: Answer to Alarmists," Diaspora, vol.2, no.3 (2001), p. 87.
- <sup>15</sup> Vilya Gelbras, "Chinese Migration to the Russian Far East," in Tsuneo Akaha, ed., Human Flows across National Borders in Northeast Asia, Seminar Proceedings, United Nations University, Tokyo, Japan, November 20-21, 2002, Monterey, CA: Center for East Asian Studies, Monterey Institute of International Studies, January 31, 2003, p. 137.
- <sup>16</sup> People's Daily, September 4, 1994.
- <sup>17</sup> V. Larin and A. Rubtsova, "At the Crossroads: Russian-Chinese Border Interaction," in edited by D. Papademetriou and D. Meyers, Caught in the Middle, Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2001, p. 233.
- <sup>18</sup> Ibid., p. 257, note 5.
- <sup>19</sup> Y. Savenkov, "The Syndrome against China," New Times, August 3, 2003.
- <sup>20</sup> Vilya Gelbras, "Chinese Migration to the Russian Far East," in Tsuneo Akaha, ed., Human Flows across National Borders in Northeast Asia, Seminar Proceedings, United Nations University, Tokyo, Japan, November 20-21, 2002, Monterey, CA: Center for East Asian Studies, Monterey Institute of International Studies, January 31, 2003, p. 134.
- <sup>21</sup> Ibid., p. 132.