

Parting with “Asian Balkans”

PERCEPTIONS OF CHINESE MIGRATION IN THE RUSSIAN FAR EAST, 2000-2013

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In the 1990s and early 2000s, Russian journalists, officials, and scholars consistently warned about the threat of the Chinese “colonization” of the Russian Far East. The consequence, they said, could be ethnic clashes, armed border conflicts, and eventual territorial annexation by China. A former deputy governor of Siberia’s Omsk Province evocatively summed up these fears in 1997:

“First Chinese migrant, then Chinese cultural center, then Chinese company, then Chinese worker, then Chinese soldier.”

The governor of the Primorskii region, the most populous and economically developed region in the Russian Far East with Vladivostok as its capital, warned throughout the 1990s that Chinese migration was turning the Far East into an “Asian Balkans.” These warnings strongly resonated with local public sentiments. In a 2000 survey of 1,010 residents of the Primorskii region, 82 percent of respondents believed China wanted to take their province away from Russia and 46 percent feared that such a loss of sovereignty would result from the seemingly innocuous “peaceful infiltration” of Chinese migrant laborers and traders. (The survey was designed and conducted by the author in collaboration with the Russian Academy of Sciences’ Institute of History, Ethnography, and Anthropology of the Peoples of the Russian Far East.)

By 2013, these alarmist views had become significantly less common. The shift followed the arrival of a new Primorskii governor in 2001, Sergey Darkin, a Putin loyalist and a champion of economic cooperation with Asia. Soon thereafter, in 2005, the Russian parliament ratified a border settlement treaty with China. In a 2005 survey (that the author designed and conducted with the abovementioned institute)—in which 387 of the 650 respondents were the same as those interviewed in 2000—the share of respondents fearing China’s territorial claims on Primorskii had dropped by 10 percent, and of those fearing China taking over through “peaceful infiltration” had dropped by 7 percent. In 2013, a survey in Primorskii (N=680) conducted by the reputed ROMIR polling agency as part of a University of

Oslo/Norwegian Institute of International Relations project on “New Russian Nationalism” (NEORUSS) registered a further decline of those fears.¹ About 61 percent of respondents – more than 20 percent fewer than in 2000 – believed that China harbored territorial claims on Primorskii. Most importantly, only 24 percent in 2013 feared a loss of sovereignty to China through “peaceful infiltration” of migrants across the border. Also, in 2013, for the first time since 2000, more respondents said China was unlikely to enlarge its territory at the expense of Primorskii compared to those who believed it was likely (see **Figure 1** for the shifts in these views from 2000 to 2013).

The Puzzle: Geopolitical Fears and Xenophobia Stay Strong

Whereas fears of Chinese migration undermining Russia’s sovereignty over its Far Eastern regions have diminished, significant putative causes and correlates of these fears appeared to be just as strong or stronger in 2013 as compared to 2000 and 2005. In particular, the perceived scale of migration remained highly exaggerated; a geopolitical conflict with China became a stronger cause for concern; ethnic prejudice and xenophobia remained as prominent as before; the sense of China gaining more from cross-border trade had increased; and social contacts between Primorskii residents and Chinese migrants had decreased. This is what the surveys tell us specifically:

- “Demographic overhang.” In the 1990s, Russian analysts used this metaphor to warn about Chinese migration threatening the demographic identity of the Russian Far East, where fewer than 7 million Russians live with the “overhang” of the more than 100 million Chinese that reside in the three border provinces of China. This demographic reality remained as true and seemingly relevant in 2013 as it was in 2000. The related public fears also persisted. When asked what percentage of the Primorskii population were migrants (most of whom were believed to be Chinese), the modal response was 20 percent in 2000, 30 percent in 2005, and 40 percent in 2010. Reports from the Russian migration service and census data, as well as personal ethnographic observations, suggest that respondents exaggerated the scale of migration into Primorskii by more than tenfold in each survey.
- The military balance between Russia and China continues to be viewed as shifting inexorably in China’s favor. By 2013, more Primorskii residents felt China’s military would be stronger than Russia’s in ten years (see **Figure 2**). Notably, the perception of China gaining militarily on Russia grew the most from 2005 to 2013—just when fewer Primorskii respondents saw Chinese migration as a threat to Russia’s sovereignty over their region.
- Armed border clashes between Russia and China became a stronger concern in 2013 than they were in 2000 and 2005. Almost a quarter of respondents in 2013 considered

¹ The author is a participant/contributor to NEORUSS.

the repetition of violent clashes similar to those that happened over Damanskii (Zhenbao) Island between Russia and China in 1969 as likely to occur today (see **Map 1**)—compared to just 9 percent of respondents in 2005 and 19 percent in 2000. Thirty-eight percent of respondents in 2013 felt such border clashes could happen ten years into the future, compared to 19 percent of respondents in 2005 and 35 percent in 2000. Interestingly, after seven years of no activity, Google Trends in 2011 registered a rise in Google searches in Russian for “Damanskii Island” and “Conflict at Damanskii” originating in the Russian Far East.

- Xenophobic prejudice in Primorskii has remained strong. Approximately 54 percent of respondents in 2005 and 2013 agreed with the statement that all migrants, legal and illegal, and their children should be deported from Primorskii.² About half of these respondents, in each survey, agreed with this statement fully. Almost three quarters of respondents in 2005 and 2013 opposed granting all migrants unconditional residency rights in Primorskii; the number of those who fully opposed the measure shot up from 29 to 46 percent. The number of respondents who felt it would be unacceptable for their close relatives to marry an ethnic Chinese increased from about 80 percent in 2005 to 90 percent in 2013. The number of respondents supporting the slogan “Russia for ethnic Russians!” rose from 65 percent in 2005 to 77 percent in 2013.
- Gains from cross-border trade continued to be seen as accruing more to China than to Russia. In 2000, 28 percent of Primorskii respondents believed Russians gained more than the Chinese from cross-border trade, compared to 21 percent in 2005 and 15 percent in 2013. The perceived gap in relative gains in China’s favor continued to widen (see **Figure 3**).
- Social contact between Primorskii residents and Chinese migrants most likely became less frequent. In 2005, 84 percent of respondents reported some form of contact with migrants. In 2013, this number dropped to 61 percent, largely because fewer respondents reported making contact when buying food or consumer goods. The number of respondents who said they had friends or acquaintances among migrants stayed about the same—25 percent in 2005 and 27 percent in 2013. Meanwhile, the number of Primorskii residents who said they never helped migrants increased from 68 percent in 2005 to 72 percent in 2013.

In short, while fears among Primorskii residents about the loss of sovereignty due to Chinese migration declined significantly from 2000 to 2013, it was not because they felt less threatened by China’s military might, had become less xenophobic, felt they had gained more from cross-border trade, or interacted more with Chinese migrants.

² In 2000 this question was not asked.

Plausible Explanations: Stronger Sense of Moscow's Authority and In-group Gains

That said, the decline in perceived threat of Chinese "infiltration" coincides with three significant changes in respondents' views and circumstances from 2000 to 2013.

First, the number of respondents concerned that Primorskii was isolated from central Russia and from the influence of the Russian government dropped. In 2000, about 48 percent of respondents expressed concern about Primorskii's isolation; in 2005, over 53 percent did as well. But in 2013, the number of such respondents dropped to just over 34 percent, nearly 20 percentage points. In regression analysis conducted with the 2000 survey data, perceived isolation from the center was one of the strongest and most robust predictors of concern about China's territorial claims.

Second, the economic circumstances of respondents had improved significantly, probably further bolstering confidence in Moscow's authority. The median household income per person among respondents rose from about 5,750 rubles in 2005 to 17,500 rubles in 2013 (in constant 2013 rubles).³ Primorskii residents felt less abandoned by Russia's government. In 2005, 92 percent of respondents agreed that those in power did not care for ordinary people like them. In 2013, the number of such respondents dropped to 78 percent.

Third, a significantly larger number of respondents from Primorskii had traveled to China more often. When asked how many times they had visited China in the past ten years, 80 percent of respondents in 2000 said "never." This number dropped to 72 percent in 2005 and to 38 percent in 2013. Conversely, the number of respondents saying they had visited China three to five times over the preceding ten years rose from 4 percent in 2000 to 7 percent in 2005 to 20 percent in 2013.

Regression tests—controlling for multiple predictors at once—showed that these three factors had an impact on the changing views of Chinese migration in Primorskii. In 2005, those who feared being isolated from Moscow over the next 10 years were more likely to suspect Chinese territorial claims, fear loss of territory to China, and regard migration as a territorial threat. In 2013 fear of isolation subsided and no longer related to the perceived threat of losing territory to China or that such a loss could happen through "peaceful infiltration" of Chinese migrants. Yet the sense of isolation still strongly related to suspicions that the Chinese feel that the Primorskii territory should be part of China. Second, fear of Chinese intent, territorial loss, and migration were non-randomly more prominent among lower-income residents of Primorskii in 2005 but not in 2013, after the local economic situation had improved. Third, traveling to China had an impact on threat perceptions but in a surprising way. Those who said they had traveled to

³ Based on historical inflation rates calculator at: <http://fxtop.com>. The actual reported income in 2005 was 3,000 rubles.

China more in the previous ten years were also *more* likely to view Chinese migration into Primorskii as “peaceful infiltration” in 2005. As the reported number of visits increased substantially by 2013, this relationship faded away. In 2013, travel was related to none of the three indicators of threat shown in **Figure 1**. This means travel may have helped assuage fears of migration not because those who travelled became more open-minded and accepting of Chinese migrants, but because they no longer saw cross-border travel as a security issue as they traveled more often. Finally, income, travel, and the sense of isolation were not significantly related to one another—suggesting each had a different perceptual logic.

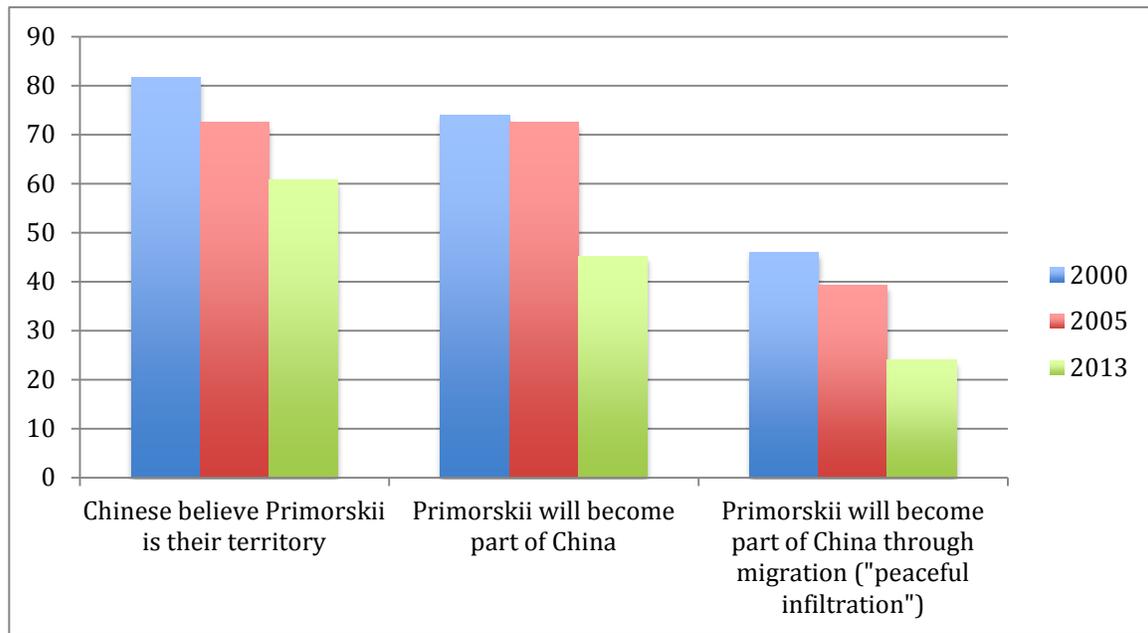
Internal Xenophobia: A Rising Challenge

This analysis suggests that inter-group comparisons—be they comparisons of military power across states or cultural proximity and economic fortunes across ethnic groups—explain less about perceived security threats arising from migration than assessments of one’s in-group strength. In particular, this appears to be the case when the “in-group” is one’s state. The perceived strength of central authority matters. The rise of the latter in the Russian Far East is consistent with the sweeping political and economic reforms Moscow undertook in the region under Vladimir Putin’s leadership. For example, there was the replacement of gubernatorial elections with appointees from the Kremlin, centralization of control over energy resources and transportation infrastructure, rapidly rising funding for the military and security forces and state orders for the military-industrial complex, development of new strategic weapons systems, and adoption of stricter border-crossing and migration-control rules. Given these developments, it is logical that Primorskii residents would see the loss of territory to China as a result of Chinese migration to be significantly less likely in 2013 than in 2000.

Other survey results, however, show that it is wise not to be complacent. For one thing, the reduced sense of isolation from Moscow still explained just a tiny amount of variation in overall threat perception. Perhaps more noteworthy, whereas Chinese migration is now seen as less of a threat to the security and sovereignty of Russia, migration in general continues to pose threats to ethnic relations in the region. In 2005, only 8 percent of Primorskii respondents said that the main threat from migration would be ethnic or religious conflict. In 2013, the share of these respondents went up to 30 percent. While more people in 2013 believed Moscow has real political and economic influence in the region, the legitimacy of and support for Putin’s presidency looked more tenuous. In 2005, only 29 percent of respondents said they did not vote in the prior (2004 presidential) election. In 2013, the share of such respondents reached 42 percent. The number of respondents who admitted voting for Putin in these previous elections (2004 and 2012, respectively) was 47 percent in 2005, but only 32 percent in 2013. Finally, at 54 percent support for the wholesale deportation of migrants in both 2005 and 2013, extreme xenophobic sentiments remained about 7 percent stronger in Primorskii than in Russia overall. This points to the possible rise of internal xenophobia—hostility directed at migrants arriving from within Russia or through other parts of Russia.

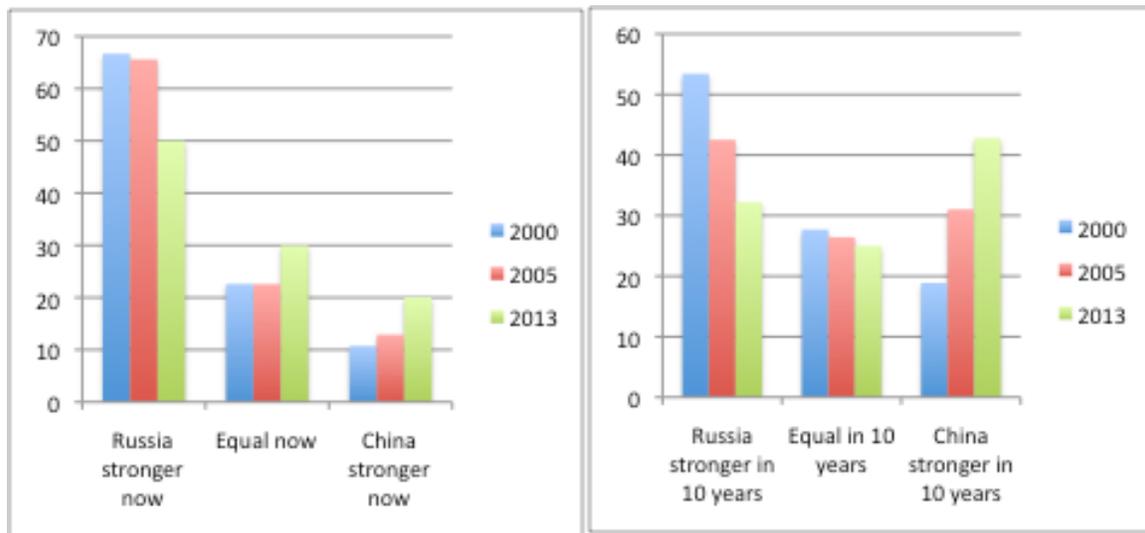
One obvious challenge policymakers need to consider is how to improve intergroup perceptions in the region. Additional regression tests show that in 2005 and 2013 respondents who had migrants as neighbors were less threatened by China’s territorial claims. The evolution of views on Chinese migration suggests that measures to increase social interactions among members of different ethnic groups—including through residency rules and residential integration—would be a good start. Effective recipes for best practices in different parts of the world abound—from the racial integration policies pursued by the U.S. Armed Forces to inter-confessional schooling practices in Northern Ireland. Similar—or innovative hybrid—approaches could help bury the specter of “Asian Balkans” in the Russian Far East, not only with respect to Chinese migrants but to others as well, particularly from the Caucasus and Central Asia. Public opinion suggests that the Russian state has become stronger even in its most vulnerable outposts. However, it may be time for the state to more actively and imaginatively generate opportunities to increase social contact between locals and migrants.

Figure 1. Diminishing fears of Chinese migration and China’s territorial claims among residents of Primorskii region, 2000-2013 (% respondents)



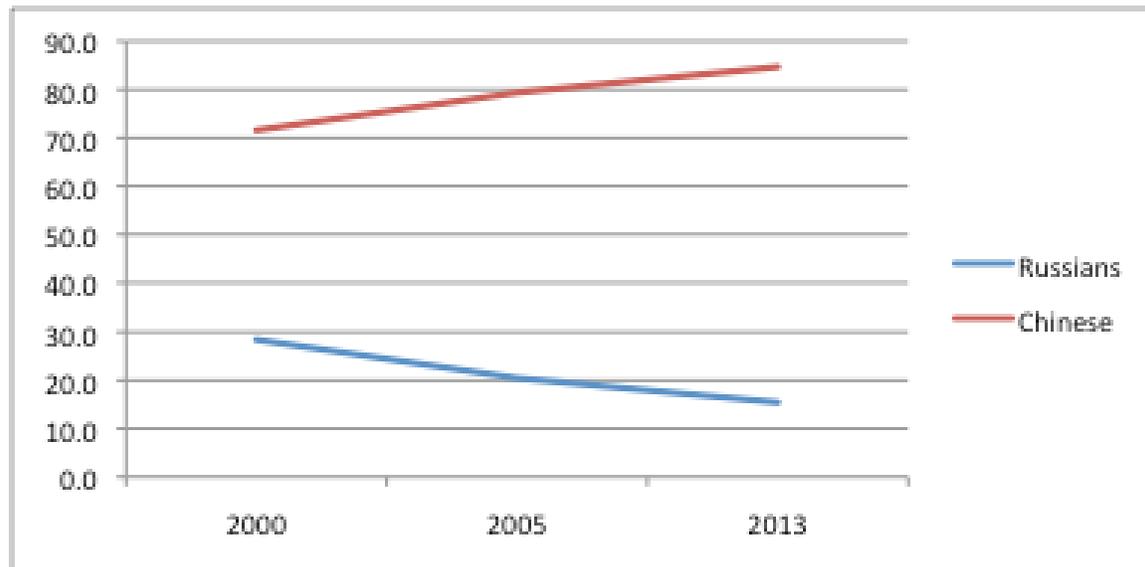
Note: Data is based on opinion surveys conducted in Primorskii region in 2000 (N=1,010), 2005 (N=650), and 2013 (N=680). Percentages reported in this table are based on the number of responses excluding the missing data (“don’t knows” and refusals to answer) for each question in each year’s survey. The missing data made up about 15 to 20 percent of the total number of responses to these questions in the 2005 and 2013 surveys and 23-25 percent in the 2000 survey.

Figure 2. Perceived military balance shifting in China's favor (% respondents)

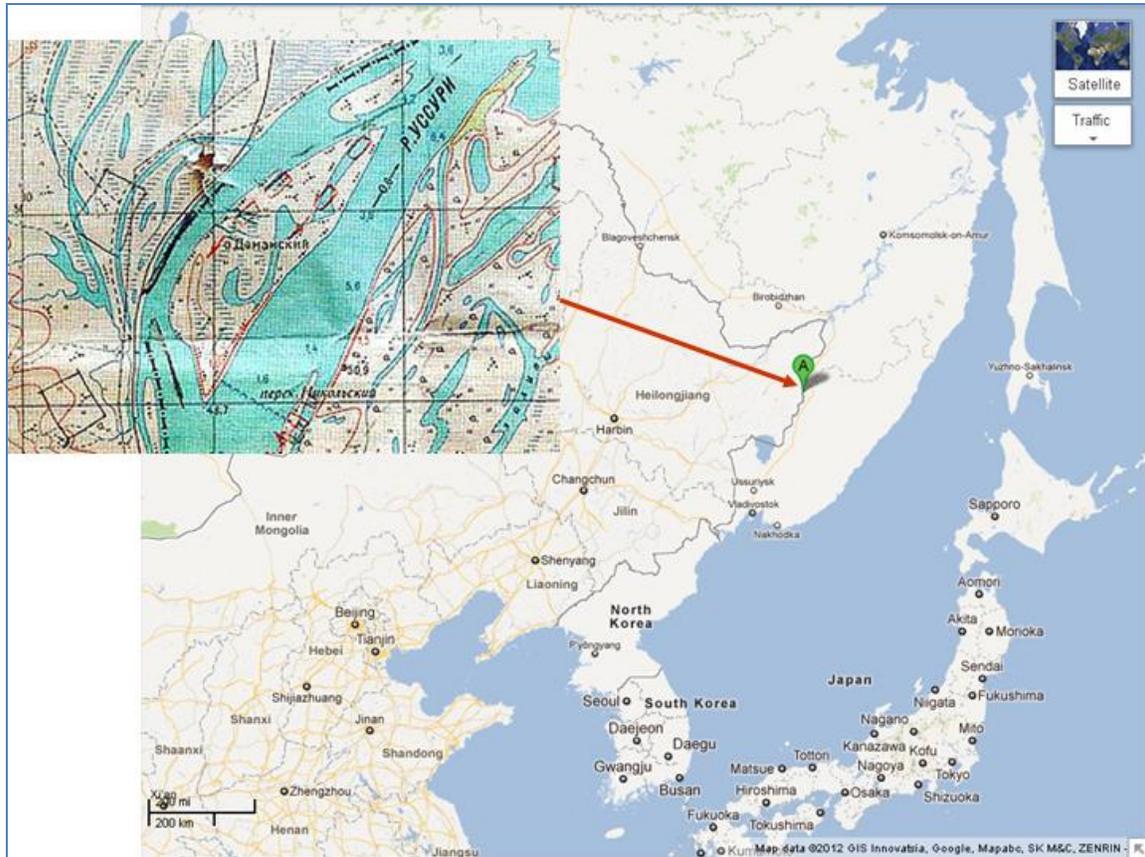


Note: Missing data excluded

Figure 3. Perception levels of who had more gain, Russians or Chinese, from cross-border trade in the Primorskii region, 2000-2013 (% respondents)



Map 1. Damanskii (Zhenbao) Island, the site of 1969 border clashes between China and Russia.



Source: www.geocurrents.info

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