

# **MINORITIES IN THE POST-SOVIET SPACE THIRTY YEARS AFTER** THE DISSOLUTION OF THE USSR

**EDITED BY** PAOLA BOCALE, DANIELE BRIGADOI COLOGNA, LINO PANZERI



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The cover illustration by Daniele Brigadoi Cologna is a watercolor rendering of the Chinese character chū 出 "to exit, to grow out of" in small seal script.

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## Quaderni del CERM Centro di Ricerca sulle Minoranze dell'Università degli Studi dell'Insubria

# Minorities in the Post-Soviet Space Thirty Years After the Dissolution of the USSR

Edited by Paola Bocale, Daniele Brigadoi Cologna, Lino Panzeri

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### **Preface**

This volume presents selected and edited papers and keynote lectures from the international research conference "Minorities in the post-Soviet space thirty years after the dissolution of USSR", held in Como on December 1-3, 2021. The conference was promoted and coordinated by the Centre for Research on Minorities (Cerm), a cross-institutional and interdisciplinary research network based at the University of Insubria.

When the Soviet Union broke apart in 1991, the Russian Federation and the newly independent republics of the Baltics, the Caucasus and Central Asia engaged in redefining their national identity in a challenging regional and global context. The stances and policies towards the minorities living in these countries became part of the striving towards national independence and identity formation. Despite vastly different post-Soviet nation-building trajectories, the development and implementation of state policies towards minorities had similar relevance and importance across the region. Thirty years after the end of the USSR what is the situation of minorities and minority issues in the countries that emerged from that multi-ethnic state? How have the former republics – including Russia dealt with their minorities and minority affairs? To what protection and rights are minority communities entitled to?

Studies of the dissolution of the USSR and of nation-building in the independent post-Soviet states have flourished over the past decades. However, despite the relevance of the theme, there is a dearth of specialist publications which address the many issues related to minority communities in the post-Soviet space. This volume attempts to fill this gap by providing a collection of essays covering some of the most relevant aspects of the contemporary status and situation of minorities in the area.

Several institutions and individuals deserve thanks for contributing to the realization of the conference and this volume. We are particularly grateful for funding from the Department of Human Sciences and Local Innovation, and the Department of Law, Economics and Culture of the University of Insubria which made it possible for us to pursue this exciting field of research and realize the conference. We would also like to thank all contributors to this volume for the effort and energy they have dedicated to their pieces. This volume is a truly international collaborative endeavour, in which authors come from a wide range of post-Soviet and European countries.

The work of the conference has contributed significantly to our understanding of the impact of the dissolution of the USSR upon the minorities living in the former Soviet bloc. It is our sincere hope that this book will help other researchers and the broader public to gain awareness and knowledge of minority issues in the post-Soviet space.

Paola Bocale Daniele Brigadoi Cologna Lino Panzeri

Como, Italy

### The Chinese Diaspora in the Post-Soviet Space

#### Daniele Brigadoi Cologna

Encompassing about 40% of the Eurasian landmass, the former Soviet Union was heir to a great many land corridors historically connecting East Asia with Western Europe and the Mediterranean, from the ancient caravan routes crisscrossing the Inner Asian steppes, to the gargantuan engineering achievement of the Trans-siberian Railway. As it shared a 7.500 km long border with China, it is not surprising that several of its Soviet Socialist Republics not only featured havens of Chinese diasporic communities. which often traced their origin back to Tsarist times, but also served as important way stations of modern Chinese migration flows. In the early twentieth century, between the two World Wars, the Trans-siberian Railway transported hundreds of migrants from Zhejiang to Moscow, from where many then moved on to Berlin and Paris, eventually settling down in many countries of continental Europe. Italy's own oldest Chinese diaspora traces its origins back to these early flows of Zhejiang migrants. At the turn of the century, during the brief period of the Qing dinasty's active engagement with the world economy that followed the quelling of the Boxer uprising by the main imperial powers, several groups of Zhejiang merchants took part in Imperial trade delegations to the International Expositions of 1904 (St. Louis, Missouri, USA) and 1906 (Milan, Italy). Their forays abroad - which drew upon previous, less glamourous endeavors by individual trailblazers across Eurasia - paved the way for the first protracted mass migration from mainland China to continental Europe. Tightly knit family and business networks among different lineages hailing from a few dozen specific villages in southern Zhejiang provided business and work opportunities abroad to a select group of kinfolk and business associates. These networks enabled the creation of a socio-economic opportunity structure that facilitated migration and settlement in different European countries. Their villages of origin were primarily located in the interior of the coastal port of Wenzhou, on both sides of a mountain divide that separates today's Qingtian district (Qīngtián xiàn 青田县) in the Municipality of Lishui (Lìshuǐ shì 丽水市), from the districts of Wenzhou-Ouhai (Wēnzhōu-Ōuhǎi 温州-瓯海), Rui'an (Ruì'ān 瑞安) and Wencheng (Wénchéng 文成) in the Municipality of Wenzhou (Wēnzhōu shì 温州市) (Thunø 2013; Brigadoi Cologna, 2019a, 2019b).

The earliest structured migration from Zheijang was originally directed at Japan, where migrant workers from Qingtian and the Wenzhou hinterland had settled in Japan since the 1910s. This migration picked up the pace in the early 1920s, but most were forced to leave the country in the wake of the 1923 Kantō earthquake, after a wave of anti-Korean riots not only ended up killing thousands of Koreans, as they were wrongly accused of having spread the fire and thus targeted as scapegoats by roving bands of distraught and enraged Japanese citizens, but the wave of xenophobia spilled over into the mass murder of other Asian foreigners, namely the Chinese. Prudent estimates report the killing of over 700 Chinese Zhejiang migrants. As the Japanese authorities finally managed to quench the rioting, they opted for the mass internment and subsequent repatriation of most Chinese survivors. Several among the earliest Chinese migrants to Italy survived the ordeal, like Ou Lisang (Wu Lishan) and Hu Suzan (Hu Xizhen) who were interned in the Chinese refugee camp in Narashino until they could be repatriated back to Shanghai.

Although migration to Japan reprised temporarily during the early 1930s, the Kantō earthquake, as well as the Jinan incident five years later, eventually spelled the progressive decline of Chinese migration to Japan. Yet those who had been forced to cut short their migration project opted for a different destination where they could pursue their quest for a better life, traveling to continental Europe instead. Some chose the sea route from Shanghai to Marseilles via the Strait of Malacca, Colombo and Suez. But many others, especially during the late 1920s, opted for the long train ride across the Eurasian continent on the Trans-Siberian railway, which in those years was finally open to regular passenger travel after the turmoil of the October Revolution and its tumultuous aftermath (Wolmar, 2013). In 1925, the early pioneers of this migration who did not reach Europe by boat travelled by rail. The

Schlesischer Banhof in Berlin (today's Berlin Ostbahnhof) was at the time a veritable Gate to the East - the starting point of the long journey across the continent to distant Tokyo - so Germany became one of the first West European nations to witness the arrival of these Zhejiang traveling peddlers of household wares, which were called *Hausierer* in German (Amenda, 2006: 66; 134-36). But most of these migrants travelled on to the Marais district in Paris, where they could find Chinese merchants who could provide them with new merchandise.

In the summer and fall of 1925 they soon started spreading out to hawk their wares in cities and market fairs across France and Spain. Yet by the end of the year, they were confronted by a tightening of laws regulating the peddling of merchandise by foreigners in France and Spain, a turn of events that eventually forced them to try their luck in Italy. Thus, in the winter of 1925-26, a large group of several hundred Zhejiang Chinese, all of them male and purporting to be traveling salesmen peddling various wares. but especially keen on the kind of fake pearls that were all the rage among ladies in those years, entered Italy from France. The Fascist government, alerted by its police force, which suspected these young men to be former soldiers, possibly even sympathizers of the revolutionary Canton government (then aided by Soviet military advisers), and genuinely feared they could be Bolshevik spies. Most were deported in 1926 and 1927. Yet those who staved opened the way for future prospective migrants, which they generally recruited among their kith and kin in their home villages. The land route across Eurasia became again very dangerous during the rising tensions among the Soviet Union and the Japanese Empire over Manchuria, but after Japan succeeded in propping up its puppet-state of Manchukuo in 1931, Stalin three years later finally decided to sell the Chinese Eastern Railway (the Manchurian leg of the Trans-Siberian railroad) to the Japanese: this was advantageous to the Zhejiang migrants who had opted to stay in Japan or Korea after 1923, but who now considered it increasingly unsafe to remain on Japanese-controlled territory, and were joining the ever larger group of Zhejiang migrants who were linking up with their kin in Western Europe. In the early 1930s, a small number of Chinese migrants had managed to settle down in Italy by establishing small workshops producing leatherette wares, such as wallets or belts, and silk ties, which they supplied to fellow countrymen who could peddle them on the streets and at marekt fairs across the coutnry. Calling upon their relatives already abroad or ready to leave their home villages to join them, they consolidated a chain migration process that would endure - albeit with long pauses during and after the Second World War - to this very day.

Historically, Chinese settlers were a common sight in the border regions of Russia and the former Soviet Union, especially along the banks of the Amur River, in the cities of Khabarovsk and Vladivostok. The Amur River basin may have seen a small number of Chinese settlers as early as the fifteenth century, but hunters, herders, fishermen and ginseng diggers from Northern China, as well as deported convicts and fugitives from Qing law, became even more common during the Qing dynasty, which extended its control over Dauria (or Transbaikalia) and the Siberian Northeast up to the Sea of Okhotsk. This region has often been referred to as "Manchuria" by European historians, as it was the historical homeland of the Jurchen people that invaded and then ruled northern China as the Jin dynasty (1115-1234 C.E.), and then established the gargantuan Qing dynasty four centuries later (1636-1911 C.E.), changing their ethnonym to "Manchu". The Chinese, though, know this area simply as Dongbei (Dōngběi 东北), "the Northeast". Well before the foundation of the Soviet Union, Chinese farmers and traders were settling down in the Northeast, especially in the southern river valleys of the Suifeng, the Daobi and the Oula, as well as along the coast of the Sea of Japan (Alexeeva, 2008: 20), while migrant Chinese would mainly continue to pursue seasonal work in the areas ceded to Tsarist Russia after the Treaty of Beijing in 1860 (Maslow, 1998; Alexeeva, 2008).

From 1860 to 1917, great numbers of Chinese migrant workers, mostly from Shandong and Dongbei, travelled freely to the Russian Far East and Siberia as they were employed as workers on the construction and maintenance of the railroads, the clearing of forests, the exploitation of gold mines and the construction of the harbor of Vladivostok (Maslow, 1998, p. 330). Until the 1880s, the Russian government favored the settlement of Chinese pioneers in the Far Eastern wilderness, giving them permission to buy arable land with a 20-year tax exemption (Alexeeva, 2008: 21). This policy changed by the turn of the century, when Russia feared that China might one day use the pretext of a large ethnic Chinese population to annex territories north of the Amur river, but efforts to curb migration and settlements were largely nominal as they were difficult to enforce. The very expansion of Russian power in the region required an ever growing number of workers, and Russian (but also American and German) private enterprise operating in the region began actively recruiting Chinese

migrant labor before and after the Russian-Japanese war of 1904-1905. According to the first universal census carried out in Russia in 1897, 57.000 Chinese were living in the country at the time, about 41.000 of them in the Siberian Far East. In the 1910s, after the completion of the Transiberian railway, their numbers swelled to 100.000 - 250.000, according to different estimates (Alexeeva, 2008: 22). As World War I led to severe labor shortages in Russia, in 1915 the government sanctioned the recruitement of Chinese indented labor to be employed throughout the country, not just the Russian Far East, Estimates of the total number of Chinese workers recruited by the Tsarist government during the war vary considerably, from a minimum of 30,000 to a staggering half million, and some sources claim that they were even used close to the Eastern front (Maslow, 1998: 330). These complex flows of migrant workers helped consolidate the first core Chinese communities in the main urban centers of the Russian Far East, such as Khabarovsk, Blaogoveshchensk, Ussurivsk, and especially Vladivostok, These border settlements unnerved both Tsarist officials before and Soviet officials after the Revolution, even though the turmoil of the Great War, of the Revolution and the ensuing civil war gradually turned many Chinese away from the Siberian borderlands, be it to escape enrollment in the Red Army (which, according to Chinese and Russian sources, could count on up to 40,000 Chinese soldiers who were former indentured workers) or, in the case of well-off merchants and landowners, violent persecution (Larin, 1998:288-289). At the eve of Japan's invasion of China, in 1937, about 24.600 Chinese still lived in the Russian Far East, at least half of them in the so-called Millionka, or Vladivostok's Chinatown, an overcrowded and dilapidated neighborhood in the city's center (Sarkisova, 2015; Jersild, 2019). Chinese and Koreans living along the Siberian frontier were often portrayed by Soviet propaganda and by the NKVD kommissars as disorderly and politically unreliable, prone to unhealthy habits, such as gambling and narcotic use, and even as harboring counterrevolutionary tendencies. Their mobility across the frontiers of Russia, China, Mongolia, Manchukuo and Korea, was also considered hazardous for the security of the Soviet border in the late 1930s. Thousands of inhabitants of the Millionka were arrested and deported in 1936, after a dozen Chinese were identified by the NKVD as operatives spying for Japan. After Stalin and Chiang Kai-shek signed a peace treaty, the Soviet regime began treating suspect "diaspora nationalities" as political enemies and began ordering their deportation. In the winter of 1937, NKVD

head Nikolai Ezhov issued an order to "immediately arrest all Chinese, regardless of their citizenship, who are engaged in provocative activities or have terrorist intentions". In the following year, more than 11.000 Chinese in the Far East were deported to China, Kazakhstan or far-flung rural areas in the Siberian hinterland (Jersild, 2019). By the start of World War II, the swift eradication of the Chinese historical presence in the Russian Far East was almost complete, yet it left behind a lasting stereotype of a minority marked by distrust, viewed as socially unhealthy and politically suspect. After the war and the victorious Chinese revolution, the Soviet Union and China entered a phase of "great friendship", which allowed for increased Chinese mobility on Soviet territory. At the height of this period of political concord, in the mid-fifties, the Chinese community numbered about 350,000 (Maslow, 1998: 329). But it was not going to last: as the relations between the two major Communist Parties and their respective countries degenerated into a bitter ideological confrontation, fierce border skirmishes along the border once again marked the Chinese living in the Soviet Union as unreliable, and they again were suspected of being spies and "fifth columnists" (Maslow, 1998: ibidem). Migration to the USSR dwindled down to a trickle, and most Chinese living there were forced to move back to China. Only the collapse of the Soviet Union and the social and political liberalization of the 1990s made it possible once again for Chinese mobilities to reprise towards or across Russia and the many independent nations which were configurating a new post-Soviet space.

Throughout the twentieth century, the presence of Chinese citizens in the Soviet Union ebbed and waned, with a strong concentration of Han Chinese in the Russian Far East (particularly in Vladivostok, Blagoveshchensk, Khabarovsk, Irkutsk, Ulan Ude and Chita) and a smaller, but persistent, presence in Moscow, as well as in Central Asian cities like Karaganda and Tashkent. While the Chinese living in the Far East were mostly Northeasterners from old Manchuria and Shandong, in the 1920s and 1930s Moscow became an important hub for Zhejiang migration to continental Europe. These «old Chinese communities» then played an important role in facilitating the reprisal of outmigration from the PRC during the 1980s and 1990s, when Moscow once again became a crucial hub for migration to Western Europe. By the mid-nineties, according to a IOM report quoted in Maslow (Maslow, 1998), expert estimates put the number of Chinese living in Russia at about 200.000, mostly living in the Siberian Far East, but with about 10.000 residing

in Moscow and a smaller contingent in St. Petersburg. In the first decade of the twenty first century, the growing number of Chinese migrants travelling across or settling down in the Russian Federation rekindled old anxieties and fears of an encroaching "silent Chinese expansion" in the Russian Far East, but the stellar growth of the Chinese economy also purported to be a lifebuoy for the economically struggling borderlands north of the Amur river (Burbeau, 2002; Lukin, 2003). The migration of Han Chinese from Zhejiang, Fujian and Dongbei to Western Europe across post-Soviet space peaked during the 2000s, and then started to decline sharply in the following decade. New flows of students, traders, specialized workers, and expatriate entrepreneurs became gradually more prominent, sometimes following the expansion of Chinese logistic development initiatives such as the One Belt One Road project (also known as the New Silk Roads) (Frankopan, 2018). Before the Covid-19 pandemic, an increasing number of university students from all over the PRC moved to the main Russian universities, especially in Moscow and St. Petersburg, but the pandemic and Russia's invasion of Ukraine have halted this student migration almost completely. Yet in the former Soviet republics of Central Asia as well as in Eastern Europe, these new kinds of Chinese mobilities still hold their sway and may very well become building blocks of a new, highly skilled and more diverse Chinese diaspora, both in terms of class background and in terms of areas of origin.



The Eurasian Routes for Zhejiang, Fujian, and Dongbei migration flows during the 1990s - 2000s

Source: illustration by D. Brigadoi Cologna, based on accounts of Zhejiang migrants of the 1990s and 200s.

Apart from Han Chinese, the mobility of Chinese subjects during the Oing dynasty, and of Chinese citizens after the fall of the Empire in 1911, also involved many other ethnic minorities, most of them nomadic peoples who had inhabited the Inner Asian and East Asian borderlands for centuries. Whether they be hunter-gatherers like the Orogen and the Hezhen (also known as Nanay or Goldi) from the Tungus forests of the Northeast, nomadic reindeer herders like the Evenki, traditional pastoral nomads such as the Mongols, Kazakhs, Kyrgyz, Tajiks, Uyghurs, and Tatars, or sedentary herders, farmers or city-dwellers such as the Dungan (known in China as Hui), Russians and Koreans, these peoples often crossed the border between the Russian and the Chinese Empire, and later the Soviet-Chinese border, in both directions, according to the economic or political contingencies of the day that drove them from one place to another. Besides Russia and Mongolia, these mobilities also involved Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and, especially. Kazakhstan. As had already been the case during the 1960s. after the famine years engendered by the disastrous economic policies of the Great Leap Forward, the growing repression of the Uvghur and Kazakh minorities in China's Xinjiang Autonomous Region during the last fifteen years has once again prompted mobilities across the Chinese-Kazakh border, both legal and illegal, voluntary or forced. These mobilities overlap with the growing presence of highly mobile temporary Han Chinese workers, and Kazakhstan may well become a crucial new hub of Chinese migration throughout post-Soviet space in the near future (Sadovskaya, 2018).

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