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Chinese Migration to Russia as Revealed by Narratives in Chinese Cyberspace

Artem RABOGOSHVILI

Abstract: The article provides a seminal analysis of the electronic resources in the Chinese cyberspace devoted to the labour migration of Chinese people to Russia. The author focuses on the online narratives and media stories published on three types of electronic resources – government websites of the northeast provinces of the PRC, online reports by the Chinese news agencies, and postings on bulletin board systems (BBSs) in order to find answers to the following research questions: 1. What is the role of Chinese migrants' narratives circulated via different electronic resources on the Internet in the reproduction of the state-regulated imagination of Russia? 2. To what extent have different types of electronic resources (government websites, news agency websites, BBSs) been used to renegotiate this imagination? The research has revealed that the websites of PRC government bodies tend to convey a rather consolidated understanding of Russia as a destination country, frequently publishing the narratives of successful migrants online. The mass media reports tend to provide regular coverage of a broader range of themes related to migration, including those related to the legal and economic vulnerability of Chinese labour migrants in Russia. The semi-anonymous and non-official character of the bulletin board system in turn has allowed its participants to make enquiries about or engage in the discussions of aspects of migration that would never be covered or described in detail by official sources such as government websites.

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Keywords: China, online narratives, media stories, government websites, transnational imagination

Dr. Artem Rabogoshvili is a research fellow at the Siberian Studies Centre of the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology in Halle, Germany. Working in the field of social anthropology and history, his current research interests include comparing ethnic minority issues and migration policies in Russia and China, the history of Sino-Russian relations, and the formation of the Chinese diaspora in Russia.

E-mail: <rabogoshvili@eth.mpg.de>

Introduction

After years of political split, Russia–China relations began to improve starting in the 1990s and experienced further upswing in the first decade of the 2000s. The political rapprochement between the two countries led to the unprecedented rise of human exchange and opened up new perspectives in their relations. Since the 1990s, border trade has evolved into a major factor in the development of Sino-Russian relations and has facilitated the rapid growth of commercial cities on the Chinese side of the border such as Manzhouli, Heihe and Suifenhe (Larin 2007). Labour migration of Chinese people to Russia has become yet another conspicuous dimension of the bilateral relations and as such has been the focus of extensive academic research (Gelbras 2005; Portyakov 2006; Larin 2006, 2009).

Many Chinese migrants have chosen big Russian cities like Moscow or Saint Petersburg as suitable places for studying, doing business or as the jumping-off point to move further westward to Europe. These migrants often remarked on and left their impressions about their Russian experience on their personal blogs or on electronic bulletin boards. At the same time, the Internet has been used by the Chinese authorities as an important medium for providing regular information about the economic conditions, business opportunities, and even the tourist destinations on the Russian side of the border. As Internet usage is becoming extremely widespread in the present-day PRC, and as online resources in the form of webpages, bulletin board systems (BBSs) and blogs are providing a new, quality platform for Chinese netizens to express their identities, there is a growing rationale for conducting research to identify how the Internet in the PRC is utilized by different social actors to present different perspectives on labour migration, and to determine the extent to which the Chinese cyberspace, constituted by different electronic resources, is a part of the social reality surrounding labour migration to Russia.

With regard to the social reality of migration, I assume that as a social process involving constructing, legitimizing and maintaining social truths, much of it is influenced by the current domestic discourses, defined here as systems of thought composed of ideas, attitudes, courses of action, beliefs and practices that systematically construct the subjects and the worlds of which they speak (Lessa 2006: 283). In his insightful article on the origin of the Sino-Soviet political split of the 1960s, Ted Hopf (2009) provides a comprehensive analysis of how a change in the domi-

nant discourse in the Soviet Union under Nikita Khrushchev, which concurred with the persistence of the pro-Stalinism model in Maoist China, led to the change in Sino-Soviet relations. Moscow's policy shift toward more liberalization, underpinned by the wide public support for the dismantling of Stalinism in the Soviet Union, formed the historical background against which the new identity of the Soviet people was to be constructed. The new self-understanding of Soviet society, proclaimed by the official rhetoric and manifesting itself in a vast array of traditional mass media, required the state authorities to reformulate Soviet political relations with a plethora of countries, including the PRC. From the perspective of societal constructivism, as Hopf would suggest, the Sino-Soviet split of the 1960s was the logical result of the change of identity relations between the two states, caused by the process of identity re-building in Soviet society, which also led to the construction of the new socially embedded understanding of the significant other (Hopf 2009).

Following the formation of the Russian Federation and the start of the economic reform in the PRC, both states embarked on a new cycle of identity-building in which migration issues came to figure centrally. In the Russian Federation, the problems of the shrinking population and the growing deficit of labour resources were frequently referred to in order to legitimize the use of labour migrants from abroad. In the broader sense, foreign migrants from Central Asian states and eventually China were seen as possible substitutes for the diminishing Russian population (Zayonchkovskaya and Korobkov 2004). However, the inflow of labour migrants to Russia, complicated by the economic difficulties inside the country, led to a rise in anti-migrant sentiments and xenophobia among the local population in most of the big Russian cities. In particular, the anti-Chinese attitude in Russia has been associated with the fear of Chinese expansionism and the ability of the Chinese people to resist cultural assimilation. Along those lines, Russian authorities have come to perceive labour migrants from Central Asia – who share a Soviet cultural legacy with the Russians – as preferable to Chinese migrants (Panarin 2000). The anxiety over Chinese colonialism is reflected in Russian migration legislation and has influenced the populist rhetoric in the public sphere (Alexeev 2006), even though most Chinese citizens in Russia are seasonal workers or sojourners. As an example, I refer to the survey conducted by Wishnick among 250 Chinese workers in Heilongjiang Province that showed a pattern in migratory labour: The majority of

respondents (76 per cent) stayed less than one year at a time and travelled back and forth from China to Russia over only a five-year period (Wishnick 2008).

In the reform-era PRC, the position of the Chinese state on the migration of its citizens underwent a radical change from a complete ban on internal and international migration under the Maoist period to a vigilant but encouraging new migrant policy. Focusing on recent migrants, who were seen as more educated and more committed to China than early overseas Chinese, the PRC government constructed a discourse framing new migrants (新移民, *xin yimin*) as pioneers of modernization both at home and abroad (Pieke 2004; Kuhn 2008; Nyiri 2010). The current nation-building project that included Chinese migrants as an organic part of the Chinese nation has been spread through diverse accounts of migrants, in the written press, on television, and via the Internet (Sun 2002; Barabantseva 2010). Thus, Chinese authorities have exerted cultural authority over the representation of migration in the mass media, while the narratives of migrants, especially those who proved successful or displayed innate moral qualities abroad, have come to be a popular genre of media stories (Nyiri 2010).

The constructivist approach, as espoused by Hopf, provides the theoretical groundwork for my analysis of the Chinese Internet. In order to capture the character of the new identity of the Soviet people, Hopf resorted to the discourse analysis of literary texts of different genres published in the period immediately before and after the dismantling of Stalinism in the Soviet Union. Following the logic of constructivists, the analysis of literary sources can be used to comprehend the self-understanding of Soviet society at a given point in time; by corollary, this allows us to explain the state-to-state relations in that period. By analysing online narratives and media stories selected from different kinds of electronic resources (government websites, news websites, BBSs) on the Chinese Internet, I attempt to capture that current, socially embedded understanding of the Russian Federation as a destination country for Chinese migrants, which I term here “transnational imagination”.

In this article, the research questions are formulated as follows: 1. What is the role of Chinese migrants’ narratives, circulated via different electronic resources on the Internet, in the reproduction of the state-regulated imagination of Russia? 2. To what extent have different types of electronic resources (government websites, news agency websites, BBSs) been used to renegotiate this imagination? In analysing online

narratives about the migration of Chinese people to Russia, which I selected from the online resources named above, my objective was to identify how the pragmatics of online narratives about migration to Russia determine the distribution of those narratives on certain types of electronic resources in the Chinese cyberspace.

Throughout the paper, I argue that migrants' narratives circulated via government websites are aligned to contribute to the state-controlled imagination of Russia as a destination country for the new Chinese migrants, whereas narratives circulated through other types of electronic resources (news reports, BBSs) provide more critical and/ or nuanced representations of the destination country and facilitate digital discussions about the role of Chinese people abroad.

Research Design

The search for answers to the research questions was organized by the author in the course of the longitudinal observation process on the Chinese Internet and included 1) reviewing the contents of those websites of the PRC that might publish information on the issue of labour migration to the Russian Federation, and 2) subsequently monitoring for updates of that information at later stages. For analytical reasons, I concentrated on working with three groups of electronic resources: government websites (PRC government and government agencies at the central, provincial, sub-provincial levels), news agency web portals, and the bulletin board system websites.

In designing the research, I was aware that the Internet-based news agencies of the PRC are still controlled by the state to a considerable extent, so I expected that they would probably promote similar attitudes and focus on similar cases as the official (gov.cn) government websites. The rationale for a separate treatment of the websites of the Chinese news agencies here was that news agency reports by their very nature can presumably cover a wider range of themes relating to migration and be more regularly updated than information on the government websites. Concerning the investigation of BBSs, it was my intention to include them in the scope of the research so as to capture the putatively alternative visions and perceptions of migratory experiences to Russia, as BBSs are increasingly used as platforms for expressing a diversity of opinions on the Chinese Internet, which appeals to a very broad public (Giese 2005; Kang 2008; Zheng 2008).

Having identified the main types of electronic resources I designated for review and monitoring, I will now specify the range of materials used as well as the principles of analysis of the online materials. First, I focused on the official websites of government structures at different levels, such as the provincial and municipal governments, departments of human resources and social protection, departments of commerce, centres for the instruction and relocation of rural labour forces within northeast China, as well as a plethora of websites devoted to the development of business and cultural ties with the Russian Federation.

The second group of materials comprises the online news reports of the state-run news agencies of the PRC, including *People's Daily*, *Xinhua News Agency*, China Central Television, *China Daily*, China Radio International and a number of online newspapers. The third group of materials was formed by the online stories published as postings or re-postings on the Chinese BBSs that were devoted to Russia or Russian–Chinese relations – for example, the Chinese–Russian trade forum (中俄贸易论坛, *Zhong E maoyi luntan*) and the Chinese–Russian online forum (中俄在线论坛, *Zhong E zaixian luntan*). Aside from that, I resorted to a number of other widely known public BBSs, offered by such providers as sina.com, sohu.com, tieba.baidu.com in special thematic sections devoted to the same issues.

At this point, it is necessary to elaborate on the term “narrative”. Described in general terms, narrative is the encoding of previous experiences that took place at a specific point in time or over a specific interval in a story-world in the past (Polanyi 1985: 41). Narration is generally defined as a basic dynamic principle of discourse that along with prescription, description and argumentation comprises different forms of sequencing of linguistic utterances, or discursive modes. Prescriptions, descriptions and argumentations are always, explicitly or implicitly, framed by a narrative setting, either in an overarching discourse or in the very process of living the experience (Brandt 2004). Presumably, narrative analysis is the best way to get an insight into the way social reality is constructed in a particular context (Berger and Luckman 1966; Polanyi 1985; Klapproth 2004).

I assume that web resources (government websites, news reports and BBSs) on the Chinese Internet present migration stories embracing different discursive modes framed by a narrative setting. To clarify this point, it is necessary to distinguish here between two levels of analysis: narrative pragmatics and narrative semantics (Brandt 2004). The concept

of narrative pragmatics should bring our attention to such issues as who those social actors standing behind the production of online narratives on the Chinese Internet are; why the particular migration stories were published there; and what the expected audience is that they target. The concept of narrative semantics should enable us to respond to the issue of how the internal structure of the narrative was constructed in coherence with the existing pragmatics.

It would be also useful to make a distinction between the terms “migration story” (used interchangeably with “media story”) and “online narrative”. I see “migration story” as a more technical term that corresponds to any account of an individual’s or group’s migration provided by the mass media, while the term “online narrative” denotes a textual fragment, published on one of the public Internet resources and reflecting on the migration experience of an individual or a group of individuals. In the course of the research, I used the aforementioned electronic resources to select the media stories that present accounts about the Chinese migration to Russia in narrative form.

Media stories about the experiences of Chinese migrants abroad pervading the Chinese Internet today are confined to certain types of virtual spaces, where they are made public and can be viewed by any Internet user. As these virtual public spaces have sometimes very different functional and structural characteristics, the migration stories are published in accordance with their pragmatics; hence, one cannot expect the story of an unlucky migrant to be published on the website of a migrant recruitment agency. It follows then that the publication of a narrative online is primarily the result of one’s personal decision – be it the author of the narrative or any other social agent – made considering at least some calculated effect this could produce. Yet, even though the author of the narrative is aware of the possible effect of the publishing (that is, of the narrative pragmatics), he may not necessarily be reflective about the implicit model of the narrative – that is, about its inner structure – regularly reproduced in other people’s narratives spread by the mass media. Hence, the analysis of the selected materials was undertaken in order to reveal the interplay of the narrative pragmatics and the narrative semantics, and thereby clarify how the state-regulated imagination of the migrant’s destination is reproduced or renegotiated in the Chinese cyberspace.

The paper is structured as follows. First, I look into the ways in which the official government websites of the PRC come to facilitate

labour migration from China to Russia through the discursive mode of their online narratives and media stories. Second, I analyse the news reports about the experience of the Chinese people in Russia, trying to identify the prevalent discourses produced by the Chinese mass media on this topic. Third, I consider the growing importance of BBSs as an electronic resource in the Chinese cyberspace capable of contributing to the transnational imagination of Russia.

PRC Government Websites and Migration to Russia

With the rapid popularization of the Internet in the PRC, government structures on various levels have shown their interest in utilizing the opportunities of the web by creating one's own websites and promoting the idea of the Chinese "e-government" (Xu and Astone 2004). According to the official statistics, in the period from 2004 to 2010 the number of websites on the PRC government domain – gov.cn – rose from 16,326 to 52,155 (CINIC 2005: 5, 2011: 24). Obviously, the increasing presence of the PRC government's electronic resources in cyberspace provides an opportunity for the central and local authorities not only to improve the interaction between the state and its citizens and produce a positive image of the Chinese state authorities on a global scale, but also to strengthen control over the flows of information. Indeed, as soon as the importance of the Internet for the national modernization project had been recognized by the top Chinese leadership, most provinces, autonomous regions, and municipalities set up a leading group on informatization. Prefectures, cities and counties have also formed informatization bodies, giving shape to a nationwide informatization leadership structure (Zhang 2002). In the field of labour migration, the use of the Internet has enabled the PRC government to exercise more control over the movement of people by providing regular work-related information. Over the past several years, the Ministry of Commerce and the Ministry of Human Resources and Social Security, each responsible for different aspects of employment and labour export, have been particularly active in using their websites to publish information on the legislation and working conditions in destination countries.

One of the issues surrounding the efficiency of the PRC government websites is the degree of their interactivity and their capacity to get feedback from their potential audience. Admittedly, numerous websites

of the central and local governments of the PRC with well-designed portals provide citizens the opportunity to contact the respective authorities via e-mail or electronic message boards. The official website of the Ministry of Commerce of the PRC, for example, hosts a special message board where all visitors to the website can leave publicly viewable messages on any number of issues. Despite that, a lack of interactivity, along with non-standardization of URLs and website names, incomplete contact information, and a low level of professionalism in page design, can still be considered the general weaknesses of China's government websites (Zhang 2002). The problem of accessing government websites for the purpose of contacting the state authorities or acquiring the required information probably has as its underlying basis the existing digital gap between the administrative units and, more generally, between the urban and rural areas in the PRC, determined by such reasons as the high costs of Internet-compatible equipment and the low levels of education and income in rural areas (Giese 2003; Guo and Chen 2011). Despite that, the importance of developing commercial ties with Russia required the governments of the northeast provinces to utilize the Internet and create special websites devoted to the bilateral economic cooperation. Below, I provide two tables showing information about the provincial-level and city-level websites catering for the needs of the Chinese entrepreneurs who would like to start businesses in Russia.

Besides using the Internet to develop commercial relations with the Russian Federation, Chinese authorities of different levels have used cyberspace to publish information about the villages and townships that have economically benefitted from the development of trade with Russia or from the organization of labour export to this country. Some of the websites of the provincial or municipal governments – as well as of the state-run employment agencies in northeast China – tend to provide information on the employment and career opportunities in Russia in the form of narratives of successful migrants. Reflecting on the origin and circulation of the migrants' stories on the Chinese Internet, some further arguments can be made. First, the accuracy of some stories published online cannot be verified as many of them relate individual experiences and biographical facts of the migrants. Probably of more importance here is the expected effect that such stories can potentially produce. Local authorities and government departments for labour relocation are the major actors behind the circulation of migrants' stories in this segment of cyberspace, and for practical purposes they may opt to publish

the stories of successful migrants. I do not mean to imply that other kinds of stories are never to be found on the government websites; rather I mean to emphasize that the narrative pragmatics can explain the distribution of these stories in the Chinese cyberspace to a considerable extent.

Table 1: Selected State-affiliated Websites for the Development of Economic Cooperation with Russia

Name of Website in Chinese	English Translation	URL of the Website
满洲里中俄互市贸易区	Chinese–Russian Manzhouli border trade zone website	<www.mzlezhsmyq.gov.cn>
中俄万能信息网	Chinese–Russian Universal Information Network	<www.86007.net>
俄罗斯贸易信息网	Russian Trade Information Network	<www.russiainfo.cn>
中俄贸易信息网	Chinese–Russian Trade Information Network	<www.info668.com>
黑龙江中俄信息网	Chinese–Russian Information Centre of Heilongjiang Province	<www.hljzew.gov.cn/>

Source: Author's compilation.

Table 2: Selected Municipal Government Websites Providing Information about Russia

Name of Section Devoted to Russia in Chinese	Name of Website in English	URL of the Website
中俄口岸中俄文名称对照	Heihe city government website	<www.heihe.gov.cn>
对俄信息导航	Jiamusi government website	<www.jms.gov.cn>
走进俄罗斯年	Suifenhe government website	<www.suifenhe.gov.cn>
俄罗斯注意事项	Hulunbuir city government website	<www.hulunbeier.gov.cn>

Source: Author's compilation.

An example is the story of Yu Lianwei, “a successful migrant”, whose narrative was published on one of the government websites.¹ As is described in the story, Yu Lianwei is a retired military officer who returned to his native village to take up the position of party secretary. In subsequent years, as a member of the village administration, he was in charge of poverty alleviation work and village income issues. Later, he organized and led a group of villagers to Russia.

In March of 2003 as a part of the official delegation I [Yu Lianwei] visited Guangming Township to examine the residents’ experiences in the organization of labour service export. During the visit, the members of the delegations were shown a film recounting the success stories of the township people abroad. Soon after returning to my village I organized a cadre meeting to discuss the possibility of sending people abroad. To assist people in gathering necessary information on the possible working conditions, I decided to explore the real opportunities and travelled to Dalian, Shenyang, Anshan, Harbin and other places to speak with people engaged in labor export. [...] After that I also travelled at my own expense to Russian cities including Moscow, Ussuriysk, Nakhodka, Khabarovsk and Vladivostok and visited construction sites in these cities. During the trip, I noticed that the Russians were very friendly towards the Chinese people; besides, the labour intensity was not very great, and the living and working environment and social security seemed almost ideal. At that time, I felt that Russia should become the place where people from my village go to earn money (Department of Human Resources and Social Protection 2008).

As we can see from Yu Lianwei’s story, the migrant’s decision to go abroad can be presented as a necessary way to get out of poverty or to solve the unemployment problem for the prospective migrant. The importance of the decision is further accentuated by the sense of responsibility the prospective migrant has for his family or community. Apart from explaining the rationale for the decision to go abroad, online narratives may also dwell on the specific life experiences and lifestyles of Chinese people abroad.

The analysis of migrants’ narratives published on the state-affiliated websites showed that a considerable number of them can present the individual life course of a Chinese person as a specific life project which

1 If not otherwise specified, quotations from Chinese sources have been translated by the author.

is often described in detail in the online stories about Russia, and in this capacity the narratives can probably be used by other migrants as a sort of blueprint for devising their own behaviour strategies in the host country. To illustrate this, let us examine the story of Sun Xiaohong – a young woman from Dongning County in Heilongjiang Province – which was published on the website of the Chinese–Russian Information Centre of the province.

This 21-year-old girl had comfortable living conditions at home and had an office job in her town before she decided to go to Russia. When she was asked to explain her decision, Sun Xiaohong gave the following explanation:

In my reveries, I used to search for my dream and finally understood that this dream should have a realistic basis. For this reason, I decided to find a job in Russia so as to enrich my life experience and learn valuable life lessons (Chinese–Russian Information Centre 2007).

As is described further, today Sun Xiaohong works at a shoe factory opened by a Chinese person in the Russian city of Ussuriysk. Her everyday life is very monotonous. Every day after work she returns to her dormitory to take Russian language lessons from her companions. It is especially hard for Sun when she has to work extra hours. But she never complains, and keeps saying that at this factory she not only learned about the technology of shoe production but also made some Russian friends. Just one year after her arrival, Sun Xiaohong managed to become a remarkable specialist, a leading technician with a dozen apprentices. Sun Xiaohong says that when her oldest apprentice, who is 40 years old, calls her “mistress”, she feels very uncomfortable. But the staff respect her and this makes her work even more enthusiastically. When speaking about her future plans, Sun Xiaohong says that today she is studying technology, but in the future she will probably open her own shoe-manufacturing workshop in China. And the shoes that she will produce on her own will be exported to Russia, thus making her dream come true (Chinese–Russian Information Centre 2007).

In my view, the political rapprochement between China and Russia and the obvious profitability of economic cooperation between the neighbouring countries today are the major structural forces that influence the publishing of the stories of successful migrants on the Chinese Internet. The social and economic context of labour migration determines the immediate pragmatics and impacts the way the migration experience is presented through the internal structure of the narratives on

the government websites. Following the logic of the new migrant discourse in the PRC, working in Russia is presented as a way to both realize one's personal ambitions and plans and become a full-fledged member of society. The theme of an individual effort toward a final reward for working hard is essential; along with the civilized manners and need for self-improvement, these make a Chinese person abroad competitive in the destination country and attractive for the local community.

Of course, in the framework of the Internet-based research, it would be next to impossible to identify how influential the stories are for the prospective migrants who use the Internet. I agree that due to the existing digital gap in rural China, their impact may not be particularly pervasive and far-reaching. Despite that, based on the high occurrence rate of such stories in this segment of the Chinese digital space, it can be argued that online narratives represent a specific product of the state-constructed imagination of labour migration to Russia.

News Agency Portals and Migration to Russia

Under the auspices of the PRC government, mass media in China started to establish their own websites as both a new approach to publicity and a link between officials and citizens. In the middle of the first decade of the 2000s, the Chinese government decided to invest 1 billion CNY to set up five new Internet-based information agencies, which would have their own websites, including the news portals www.peopledaily.com (*People's Daily*), www.xinhua.com (*Xinhua News Agency*), www.cctv.com (China Central Television), www.chinadaily.com.cn (*China Daily*) and www.cnnic.cn (China Internet Network Information Centre) (Zhang 2002). Thus, a three-level structure of media networks has been established in China. On the national level there are the five aforementioned leading networks. The second level is made up of the websites of other nationally circulated newspapers and provincial papers, and the third level comprises the websites of professional newspapers and journals (Xiong 2010: 56).

The growing influence of web media on Chinese society as well as the increasing degree of its commercialization and flexibility in its relations with the Chinese Communist Party seem to be the new and powerful factors shaping the distribution of information flows in the Chinese cyberspace (Hong 2010: 83). The attempt of the state-run mass media in the PRC to make themselves more popular has led them to change or

revise the content they provide from the more ideologically biased portrayal of grand-scale events to the coverage of seemingly more trivial, but more diversified and society-oriented matters. This has also caused the Internet-based state-run mass media to pay more attention to the design of the web portals, adding links to more practical information and entertainment content.

Another social tendency that has been captured by the Chinese mass media is the rising interest of the Chinese people in global developments and foreign affairs (Xiong 2010). In this sense, the web-based mass media outlets have provided Internet users with an opportunity to receive information about foreign countries and about overseas Chinese in a more comprehensive and dynamic manner. The changing political landscape – in particular, the state-to-state relations between China and its international partners – forms a background against which the Internet stories describing the experiences of Chinese abroad have been presented by the mass media of the PRC. The signing of the Sino-Russian Treaty of Friendship in 2001 was followed by the hosting of the successive Year of Russia in China (2006) and the Year of China in Russia (2007). During the Year of Russia in China, mass media campaigns with a Russian focus were organized in the PRC, including the so-called China–Russia Friendship Tour in August 2006. During the Friendship Tour, a delegation of CCTV journalists travelled overland from Beijing to Moscow and reported on their Russian encounters, which were directly broadcast on TV or published on the Internet (CCTV 2006).

The story of Wang Sijie, an ethnic Chinese and a long-term resident of Russia, became known in China thanks to an interview conducted by CCTV journalists in the course of the China–Russia Friendship Tour. His life story was also published in the *Xinhua Agency* online in the section devoted to the Chinese people abroad.

Wang Sijie was born in 1933 in Harbin. At the onset of the Cultural Revolution, Wang married a Russian woman and fled to the Soviet Union. Having settled in the Soviet Union, in the year 1976 Wang moved to Moscow, where together with his Chinese colleagues he set up the first overseas Chinese association in this country. In 1994, as a highly-qualified specialist, Wang Sijie went to the Siberian city of Ulan-Ude, where he also founded a local Chinese association. Today, in his seventies, Wang Sijie says that there are increasingly more Chinese people residing in Russia now. The local market is very good, there are many opportunities. He also adds that the local women pre-

fer to choose Chinese men as most of them do not like alcohol and work hard (*Xinhua* 2006).

The story of Wang Sijie was later re-published by a number of other online web media. Interestingly, the re-publishing of Wang's story on the Internet occurred under different headlines, for example: "The Chinese leader of the Russian Buryat Republic: 'I dream of returning home'" (<<http://big5.xinhuanet.com>>, 14 March 2012), "The old leader of the Russian Chinese: 'I live like a Russian, but my heart is in China'" (<world.people.com.cn>, 20 February 2012), or "The leaders of the Russian Far East: 'The impact of the Chinese people is positive'" (<<http://news.hebei.com.cn>>, 15 December 2011) or "The leaders of the Russian Far East praise the Chinese people for hard work" (<<http://gb.cri.cn>>, 2 March 2012). Analysing the circulation of the story under different headlines and the context in which the story is presented by the mass media, a supposition can be made that the publishing of migrants' narratives by the Chinese mass media is responsive to the political and economic issues of Chinese labour migration and is aligned to reflect the position of Chinese people in Russia.

The web-based mass media in the PRC have been increasingly responsive to rights violations and unfair treatment of Chinese migrants in Russia. The fact that the Chinese labour migrants in Russia are subject to poor working and living conditions, labour abuses, including extra working hours, delays in or non-payment of salaries under different pretexts and, above all, physical insecurity, has been the focus of a considerable number of media stories in the last few years. In this sense, the Chinese mass media have probably made an important contribution to the renegotiation of the understanding of Russia as a place suitable for labour migration. As an example, I refer to an incident that happened to a group of Chinese workers in January 2011 in the city of Irkutsk, covered by a number of Chinese mass media outlets. The reports describe that at the beginning of 2011, 20 residents of Henan Province relied on the intermediacy of a local migration broker and soon thereafter left for Russia to work as labourers. Having completed working in Irkutsk, the workers received their salaries only for a three-month period. However, the most troubling thing was that the workers were frequently beaten by the boss. When the workers' families in China learned about the unhappy experiences of their relatives in Russia, they applied to the local Bureau of Commerce for help. However, any actual assistance was provided only after the Chinese Embassy became involved, after which the salaries

were paid and the workers could finally return home (China Radio International 2011).

The problem of the legal vulnerability of Chinese migrants in Russia is further complicated by the rise of anti-migrant sentiments among the local population, a feeling which has revealed itself in the legalization practices of the Russian migration service and the procedure of granting Russian citizenship to the Chinese subjects. Since 2005, the Russian migration service has been organizing campaigns to legalize illegal migrants in Russia. However, the legalization practice has covered mainly labour migrants from the former Soviet space, somewhat neglecting the Chinese labour migrants (Zayonchkovskaya and Korobkov 2004). The changing migration policy of the Russian state is another important factor that has influenced Chinese labour migration and its representation in the Chinese mass media.

Apart from the legal vulnerability of Chinese labour workers ensuing from the deficiencies of the migrant protection system in Russia, the problem of economic vulnerability and the potentially high business risk have also been a focus of Chinese media stories in the last few years. When the city government of Moscow shut down Cherkizovski Market on 29 June 2009, a considerable number of Chinese entrepreneurs went bankrupt and entered into a state of uncertainty; what ensued was covered by the Chinese mass media and provoked further discussions of the legal rights issues of the migrant workers abroad.

Cherkizovski Market, the largest wholesale market in Europe, was shut down on the grounds of numerous violations of regulations and illegal activities, including grey customs clearing. The number of Chinese workers employed at the market at that time was estimated to be 60,000 (*China Daily* 2009). On 7–8 July 2009 Russian authorities took some Chinese citizens working at the market into custody and confiscated their goods. Among those who probably suffered the heaviest losses with the closure of the market were the entrepreneurs from Wenzhou. According to estimates made by the Wenzhou Shoe Leather Chamber of Commerce, the confiscated goods destroyed by the Russian authorities caused about 100 household enterprises to go bankrupt and approximately 100,000 workers to become unemployed in Wenzhou alone.

Reflecting on the underlying causes for closing down the market, the Chinese mass media outlets have referred to the internal contradictions inside the Russian government and the high level of corruption of Russian officials, both of which were conducive to the spread of illegal

practices in the market (*Dongfang Zaobao* 2009). In the aftermath of the market closure, a Chinese government delegation headed by Vice Minister of Commerce Gao Hucheng visited Moscow to negotiate the future of the Chinese entrepreneurs. As a result of the negotiations with the Russian authorities, the decision was made to construct a new shopping centre in Moscow that would be used by the Chinese traders.

The plausibility of the stories about what I would conventionally call “the unhappy experience” of Chinese migrants is normally not in question, considering that most of the incidents involving Chinese citizens abroad can be cross-referenced with news reports by the Russian mass media. Of more importance is, probably, that the circulation of the media stories about the unhappy experiences of Chinese migrants in Russia is due to the increasing public attention in the PRC to the social and legal vulnerability of labour migrants.

Indeed, the social protection rights of migrant workers is one of the most hotly debated issues in China today. In recent years, the promotion of the social security system for migrant workers has become one of the top priorities in the country, consistent with the central government’s objectives of establishing a “harmonious society” and integrating rural and urban populations. In a move that aimed to better protect the interests of Chinese labourers abroad, China in 2010 announced a ban on the outsourcing of its labourers working overseas that have been hired by third-party labour agencies (*Beijing Review* 2007). According to the official news reports, more efforts will be made by the PRC government to crack down on illegal labour-outsourcing, preventing Chinese workers from working overseas without a contract or from being duped by false contracts (*Global Times* 2010). As labour conflicts involving Chinese in Russia increase, authorities in the Chinese border regions have organized a series of inspections to supervise the situation of Chinese citizens employed in Russia. For example, in October of 2007, a delegation from the Labour and Social Welfare Department of Manzhouli, Inner Mongolia, visited a number of Russian border cities to supervise the working conditions of the Chinese labourers employed in Russian enterprises.

The rise of electronic mass media in the PRC was undoubtedly conducive to the dissemination of the stories about the experiences of Chinese migrants in Russia. The competitive and dynamic character of electronic mass media has probably facilitated the regular coverage of a broad range of themes related to migration to Russia – including the issue of the legal and economic vulnerability of Chinese migrants – and

thus contributed to a more nuanced and critical representation of the Russian Federation as a destination country for the Chinese migrants than the migrants' stories on the government websites have provided. The growing importance of migrants' issues inside China itself may have added to the popularity of the topic in the mass media and pre-determined the focus of the news coverage. In this sense, the pragmatics of the mass media stories can explain their wide distribution in the Chinese cyberspace and probably have a wider reach than the migrants' narratives on the more specialized government websites.

Bulletin Board Systems and Migration to Russia

The bulletin board system has evolved into one of the most important channels through which information about labour migration to Russia is disseminated among Chinese Internet users today. Unlike PRC government websites and news reports by the official news agencies, BBS has the major advantage of being an electronic service that provides a platform for virtual communication on an asynchronic and, less typically, on a synchronic basis. The interactive and public character of BBS enables their participants not only to passively consume the information presented but also to act as initiators and further discussants of different topics, including migration. In the Chinese context, BBSs have won their huge popularity primarily due to their capacity to facilitate promoting personal relationships and enable the Internet users to express personal opinions (Giese 2005). Probably as a result of their immense popularity in the PRC, BBSs are provided in a great number of forms, intended for diverse social groups in the country and used for expressing different attitudes and perceptions.

In the course of the research, I dealt with a number of BBSs that contained a thematic section devoted to Russia. I was particularly interested in occurrences of selected stories evoking threads of responses by other participants and serving as grounds for further discussion. Thus, unlike the other online resources I analysed (government websites, news reports), BBSs provided me with the occasional opportunity to at least somewhat identify the impact the narratives might produce on the Internet audience by affecting the individual perception of the participants of the BBSs.

The capability of BBSs to facilitate communication by including in the digital space potentially an innumerable number of participants along

with the non-official character of communication on the BBSs have arguably made them a viable and alternative source of information about migration for the more computer-savvy audience in China. Furthermore, the non-official, semi-anonymous character of some of the BBSs in the PRC has allowed their participants to make enquiries about or engage in the discussions of such aspects of migration that would never be covered or described in detail by official sources such as government websites. For example, my observation work on the Chinese Internet showed that any potential user of a Chinese BBS devoted to labour migration may ask other participants how to go about emigrating and then get from others practical information, including on how to circumvent the laws of the destination country. The discussions on the issue of circumventing the Russian migration law have become a phenomenon on the Chinese forums, sometimes containing stories of people's individual experiences and expressing individual perceptions of the destination country. Another practical side of using BBSs in the PRC involves publishing recruitment advertisements that normally contain a job offer, the promised wages, requirements for the vacant position in Russia and the contact details of the job dealer.

The number of themes concerning migration to Russia on the Chinese BBSs is rather large, ranging from studying in the Russian Federation <www.ixru.com/forum.php> to the new trade and customs regulations there <www.cn-ru.cn/>. I argue that the stories on Chinese migration published on the BBSs have the potential to stimulate self-reflexive discussions concerning the role of Chinese people abroad. In this case, the story about how the village of Sihe became "the village of Russian brides" is exemplary, demonstrating how a rather typical life situation involving labour migration of Chinese people from the same village to Russia, followed by marriage migration of their Russian brides to China, can lead to the republishing of the narrative, arousing active discussions about the role of Chinese people abroad in the Chinese cyberspace. Originally, the story was published by the electronic journal *Da Gong* (2008). The central character of the story is a young man named Li Dongping. Because of the poor living conditions, he, like other young men in the village, could not find a wife. At the beginning of 2000, Li Dongping heard that by working in Russia one could earn good money, so he made up his mind to go abroad. Although Li Dongping could speak enough Russian to interact with the local people, it was clear to him that his enterprise could further develop only if he could be profi-

cient enough in Russian. So he decided to allocate a little time every day to learning Russian and started to visit a library, where he eventually met a Russian girl, Yulia. Unlike Russian guys who drink, smoke and do not like reading books, Li Dongping was eager to study, which appealed to Yulia, so when the young man asked her out on a date, she readily agreed. In 2003, they got married in an Orthodox church and soon after that, Li Dongping returned home with his wife. The arrival of Li Dongping with the young Russian lady caused other single men in the village to make the same decision to go to Russia. Afterwards, each of the male villagers who had left for Russia came back to the village with a Russian wife.

The story of Sihe, which came to be known as “the village of Russian brides” in northeast China, curious as it is in its demonstration of human nature, is rather typical in its presentation of the outcomes of labour migration for the local community. As the Russian women settled in the village, the local authorities set up entertainment facilities and decided to build a church to better the women’s lives there. People who went abroad from Sihe continued to invest in the community and helped to improve the conditions in the village. The news about Sihe spread across northeast China and the village attracted a lot of people who needed advice about going abroad.

The truth of the story can be confirmed by referring to the website of the Shulan city government, which provides an official profile of the village, enumerating the achievements of its population as a result of working in Russia and the actual improvement of the people’s living conditions over the last few years <www.shulan.gov.cn/>. Today, the story can be found on a great number of websites devoted to migration, lifestyle, love stories, etc., and it has caused participants of BBSs to engage in discussions on these topics. It is evident that the stories of successful labour migration abroad can be manipulated by some BBS participants for different practical purposes, even by those who may not have engaged in the process of migration. For example, the narrative about the village of Russian brides was as well published as a post on one of the BBSs that was created as a place for people from Jilin in Beijing to communicate. I argue that the publishing of the story could be a calculated move to garner social capital by claiming the same place of origin as the dwellers of the successful village or an attempt to try to consolidate fellow people from Jilin in Beijing by providing a theme for the discussion.

Conclusion

To return to the research questions put forward in the introduction (What is the role of Chinese migrants' narratives circulated via different electronic resources on the Internet on the reproduction of the state-regulated imagination of Russia? To what extent have different types of electronic resources (government websites, news agencies websites, BBSs) been used to renegotiate this imagination?), I would like to further elaborate here on the nature of the transnational imagination. First, as far as this concept is concerned, we can probably see some dialectics at work: On one hand, the similar representations of the labour migrants' experience in the Chinese mass media are suggestive of certain forged or shaped understandings of the destination country standing behind them and reproduced on different types of online resources. On the other hand, as the electronic mass media and the Internet, in particular, are capable of providing new bits of information about the destination country immediately, the transnational imagination is also a dynamic and processual phenomenon, a part of the changing mediascape comprised of socially shared symbols. This quality of transnational imagination may have important ramifications for the process of decision-making relating to migration, as a more nuanced or completely changed "imagination" of the destination country can lead to changes in the migration tendencies of an individual or a group.

Second, as we can see, transnational imagination as a social construct is a multifaceted and compartmentalized phenomenon in that some of its aspects are embraced by the state authorities and thus presented on the government websites, while other, non-official aspects can reveal themselves through the media outlets, which are subject to less state control and have more leverage to provide information. In this respect, we can probably speak about the state-regulated imagination, a product of the official policies of the PRC government. The present-day Sino-Russian political rapprochement and the importance of economic cooperation and human exchange between the two countries have formed the social context in which this type of imagination has been spread through the government-affiliated mass media.

The Internet has been no exception in this sense, as it has provided a platform for state authorities to elaborate the successful experiences of former labour migrants on government websites. In my view, the transnational imagination of Russia as the place where Chinese people can go to make their own fortune and even contribute to the development of

their home community – as it is framed on the government websites of the PRC – is based on the current Sino-Russian political rapprochement and the economic profitability of border trade and labour migration for the PRC. Concerning the role of Chinese migrants' narratives circulated via the state-affiliated websites, my analysis has shown that a considerable number of them can present the individual life course of a Chinese person as a specific life project which is often described in detail in the online stories about Russia and in this capacity can probably be used by other migrants as a certain blueprint for devising their own behavioural strategies in the host country.

At the same time, I would like to emphasize here the conflicting character of the social processes involving migration inside Chinese and Russian societies nowadays. Having survived the ban on out-migration under Maoism, Chinese society has seen a return to the historically habitual practice of international migration. The rise of the new migrant discourse legitimized the mobility of people and underpinned the decision-making among the prospective migrants. The Russian Federation, as a migrant-receiving country, has found itself confronted with the influx of labour migrants, including those from the PRC. The spread of anti-migrant sentiments and xenophobia, fuelled by populist rhetoric, has directly affected the migrants' living and working conditions in Russia and has turned the issue of maintaining Russian cultural identity into an important argument for restricting foreign labour migration, including Chinese labour migration.

The rise of electronic mass media in the PRC was undoubtedly conducive to the dissemination of the stories about the experience of Chinese migrants in Russia. The competitive and dynamic character of electronic mass media has probably facilitated the regular coverage of a broader range of themes related to migration to Russia, including the issue of the legal and economic vulnerability of Chinese labour migrants. Analysing the circulation of media stories under different headlines and the context in which the stories are presented by the mass media, a supposition was made that the publishing of migrants' narratives by the Chinese mass media is responsive to the political and economic issues of Chinese labour migration and is aligned to reflect the actual position of the Chinese people in Russia. Thus, in a sense the stories of unsuccessful or cheated migrants published by the electronic mass media of the PRC contest the state-led understanding of Russia as the destination country,

providing more negative criticism to the otherwise rather consolidated imagination of the country at the official level.

In recent years, however, apart from the electronic mass media, some of the government websites of the PRC, including those specifically devoted to the development of Russian–Chinese relations, have started to publish more diversified and, in a sense, more objective information about Russia as the destination country, which in some cases could possibly discourage potential migrants from making the journey. As a striking example, illustrating what I designate as the re-negotiation of the state-regulated imagination, I will refer here once again to the situation with Cherkizovski Market in Moscow. In fact, the coverage of this event by the Chinese mass media was followed by the re-publishing of the information on some of the government-affiliated websites of the northeast provinces. The fact that some of the government websites, responsible for promoting political and economic cooperation with Russia, have been capable of presenting analytical and even explicitly critical information regarding the closing of the market demonstrates how with the rise of the Internet and other mass media the more consolidated representation of social reality is being increasingly contested, yielding to the more fragmented and somewhat contradictory totalities of representations in the public domain.

With regard to the theory of cumulative causation, each act of migration changes the social context within which subsequent migration decisions are made, so additional acts of migration are more likely to occur (Myrdal 1957; Massey 1990). However, as we can see, various discourses about labour migration are not unanimously positive, and potential migrants might not be only passive receivers of these messages. Rather, in this sense the Internet enables its consumers by means of interaction services to influence the social context of migration – for example, by engaging in public communication on the BBSs and providing new information that could influence the migration decision of others.

The use of the bulletin board system has provided Internet users with an alternative platform to access non-official information and to engage in digital discussions about the migration experience. The capability of BBSs to facilitate communication through including a potentially innumerable number of participants, along with the non-official character of communication, has made them a viable and alternative source of information about migration for the more computer-savvy audience in China. Furthermore, the non-official, semi-anonymous character of

some of the BBSs in the PRC has allowed their participants to make enquiries about or engage in the discussions of such aspects of migration that would never be covered or described in detail by the official sources, like government websites. My analysis of the Chinese cyberspace has revealed that the BBS postings devoted to Russia tend to focus on the seemingly more trivial matters, such as personal security, rather than the official or grand-scale events, and that Internet users prefer to discuss the more pragmatic issues that are not always sufficiently covered or are indeed sometimes entirely avoided by the official web resources, such as information about how to circumvent Russian legislation.

It might be also relevant to reflect on the possible motivations of different social actors for publishing or re-publishing migration stories online. As Goldhaber (1997) reminds us, the Internet has evolved into the domain of the specific attention economy, wherein attention is seen as the scarce resource for which diverse social actors have to struggle. From this viewpoint, as the contents of the government websites and the state-affiliated news portals of the PRC are to a large extent determined by the structural influences of the political discourse and economic conjuncture, the current issue at stake is to what the extent the official web resources can effectively reach out to the Internet audience and affect their decisions. Presumably, with the spread of alternative, non-state mass media in the PRC, the state-run media outlets would have to further diversify their content, responding more dynamically to the changes in the social context of migration both at home and abroad. Under these circumstances, the ability of migration narratives and media stories to impact the decisions of potential migrants might increasingly depend on the current popularity of these electronic resources and the degree of credibility associated with them as sources of information for the potential migrants.

As far as the BBSs are concerned, the publishing of migrants' stories and narratives on this electronic resource has probably been determined to a greater extent by human agency and individual decisions of Internet users. In terms of the economy of attention, posting and re-posting migration stories in the cyberspace can be considered an effective way to provoke and maintain digital discussions and gain additional social capital by entering the netizen networks. In this sense, the posting of more unusual and extraordinary stories on the BBSs has probably been used to this end, as such stories are more likely to capture the attention of a

greater number of people, facilitate self-reflexive discussions online and impact the decisions of prospective migrants.

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