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## Does the Social Group “Immigrants” exist in Khabarovsk Region? (Sketches on the Immigration Mythology)

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### Abstract

*This article analyzes two images of “immigrants” as a social group based on empirical material collected in Khabarovsk Region. The first arises from official statistics and influences the decisions and actions of regional authorities and manifests itself in the public discourse of the authorities. The second, originating from the discourse about the “yellow peril”, constructs the image of “immigrants” through a set of characteristics (having nothing to do with either citizenship or residence time in the region), the leading of which is appearance. In the second image, “immigrants” personify “strangers” who oppose and threaten the host community. This image is most commonly represented in the media and partly in everyday discourse. For all the intensity of the polemics unfolding in the media about immigrants, both discourses refer to a simulacrum, the denotation of which, even if it existed, is now disappearing. Less and less are the “New Far Easterners” constituting an internally organized community or social group, differing in terms of ethnicity or religion, place of origin, push factors, educational level, professional affiliation, social strategies, or cultural identity, etc. Not all of them are oriented towards communication within the ethnic community. The authors argue that the Far East was originally built as an immigrant region, where immigration has always been a more significant factor determining the demographic situation than natural increase. But immigration flows have gradually petered out, turning into traces that coexist in society. The immigration flow from Central Asia and,*

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to a lesser extent, Transcaucasia, is increasingly becoming traces, distributed on different levels of the social hierarchy, in different types of activities, and gradually dissolving into the regional community.

**Keywords:** immigration, Far East, flowing community, the image of immigrants, Khabarovsk Region, social myth, immigration flow, trace of immigration flow

## Introduction

Immigrants in Russia are recorded in official statistics. Federal and regional programs and legislation are aimed at them. There are numerous, at least formally, national-cultural organizations (e.g. the Khabarovsk Regional Assembly of Peoples)<sup>1</sup> that represent ethnic groups before the regional authorities and participate in events where immigrants are discussed. Immigrants are also the subject of academic research [Yarulin, Garnaga 2018; Mishchuk 2023]. A deputy of the regional Legislative Assembly fights immigrants<sup>2</sup>.

This group is differentiated by ethnicity and religion, time of arrival, qualifications and socio-demographic parameters. However, this does not prevent immigrants from being conceptualized as a certain integrity with common goal orientations, forms of group control, activity patterns, and certain group identity [Kachanov, Shmatko 1996].

The latter is not obvious in Khabarovsk Region. Following the tactic of “suspicion penetrating behind the veil of appearances” [Bourdieu 2019, p. 79] of naively recognizing immigrants as an integral group, we try to discover the social constructions that are created about immigrants by various actors and groups by “Khabarovsk Region residents”. We identify who constructs the idea of immigrants as a special, integral group with defined characteristics, what tools of construction are used, and why. An additional issue is the question concerning the different images of “immigrants” constructed by different parts of the host community. Thus, the constructivist approach serves as the theoretical framework in our research.

Constructivism, although common humanitarian research, has not been widely recognized in mass immigration studies. Immigration is more often considered in the context of demographic and economic phenomena [Mkrichan, Florinskaya 2018]. Constructivism is used for analyzing individuals and the most vulnerable groups among immigrants [Mole 2018]. However, the phenomenon itself is the object of study more among demographers and economists than sociologists. First, it seems surprising that immigrant studies in a significant number of publications exist relatively autonomously from race and ethnicity studies, in which the constructivist approach has gained recognition [Alleyne 2002; Chandra 2012].

The connection between immigration and the construction of ethnicity would seem to lie on the surface, but here we will see a clear preponderance of descriptive works

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<sup>1</sup> Khabarovsk Regional Assembly of Peoples. *Committee on Internal Policy of the Khabarovsk Territory Government*. <https://gupv.khabkrai.ru/Soveschatelnye-organy/HKOO-quot-Assambleya-narodov-Habarovskogo-kraya-quot-/> (in Russian).

<sup>2</sup> Pirogiova E. (2023) They Want to Ban Immigrants from Driving and Selling in Khabarovsk. *DWHAB.ru*, November 24, 2023. <https://www.dvnovosti.ru/khab/2023/11/24/162824/> (in Russian).

(for example, on how the media shape anti-immigrant sentiments in different countries worldwide) to the detriment of studies focused on theorizing and explanation. This niche is being filled by Irkutsk researchers [Dyatlov, Grigoriev 2014; Timoshkin 2022], a recently published monograph [Malakhov 2023], and Varshaver [2023]. In their research the immigrant issues are bound up with the descriptive languages producing ethnicity in the categories of “own–alien–other” and address the distinguishing attributes. The reflection of immigrants themselves regarding their association into a group is also important [Grigoriev, Koptseva 2020]. Our research continues this logic and shows how the proposed models work on regional material.

The second direction, notable for its constructivist intentions in relation to immigrants, is social psychology, where the constructivist approach is used to solve pragmatic problems of immigrant adaptation and which is used as a basis for developing methods of constructing new meanings that facilitate immigrants’ entry into the host community [Suslova 2016; Ulanovsky 2009]. We do not set ourselves the task to identify optimal models of social adaptation. We are more interested in the process of attributing the status “immigrant” or “stranger” to a social agent.

The empirical basis for our reflection is provided by several groups of data. First, are official statistics data posted on the website of Rosstat’s regional branch<sup>3</sup>. Second, an analysis of publications about immigrants in the media of Khabarovsk Region (the newspapers Tikhookeanskaya Zvezda, Khabarovsk Express, tabloids Vostok.today and DWHAB.ru) for the period from 2020 to 2023. Third, several series of interviews. In-depth biographical interviews with immigrants, natives of the post-Soviet states of Central Asia and Transcaucasia, who arrived in Khabarovsk Region at different periods and for different purposes (25 respondents). During the interviews, collected in 2021–2023, we elicited reasons and purposes and the form of arrival (under the quota, resettlement program, independently, long-term, short-term, etc.), the role played by the compatriot community at different stages of their stays, interaction with the authorities, and the host community, the direction of labor activity. This material was supplemented by interviews with leaders of official ethnic associations, immigration service workers, and federal and municipal officials (6 interviews). Here our task was to find out about the problems that, in the respondents’ opinion, are related to who immigrants are and the problems they face. The same questions were asked in expert interviews with representatives of the host community (5 interviews). We also used the results of observation in places where Khabarovsk residents believe there are “a lot of immigrants”. These data allowed us to identify several discursive fields involved in the formation of the image of a immigrant and describe them as constructs rather than “social groups” or “communities”.

The first construct is related to the data of official statistics. These give us an idea of the reality with which state and municipal structures interact and interviews with representatives supplement the statistical information. An immigrant is defined as a person who has the passport of a foreign country, has crossed the border, and has undergone registration at the place of arrival. This categorization does not include foreigners who, for various reasons, have not fulfilled these requirements. These are not necessarily illegal immigrants, but also, for example, those who obtained Russian citizenship in the recent past, but continue to maintain close ties with the place of origin. This means that not all those who are perceived by locals as immigrants are considered as such in official statistics.

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<sup>3</sup> Population (2024). *Federal State Statistics Service*. Available at: <https://27.rosstat.gov.ru/folder/25028>, accessed 21.04.2024 (in Russian).

The second construct is built on information obtained from media publications. It is intended to give an idea of the attributes that immigrants are endowed with in the public discourse. We proceed from the (perhaps not uncontroversial) thesis that the media broadcast and promote a certain type of “immigrantness” to the mass consciousness, which residents take as a basis and, checking with their everyday experience, construct a corresponding idea of who immigrants are. We supplement these two constructs with our empirical data obtained during the study of immigrants’ identity at the previous stage of the work. They allow us to penetrate the discourses formed in the first two pictures and create a description from within the group through immigrants’ self-representations and reflection of themselves.

We have not considered whether these constructs are complementary or competing, as we realize that it is difficult to draw clear boundaries between them. In the future, when expanding the empirical base, we will be able to accomplish this task, but at this stage we consider them more like a kind of kaleidoscope, in which a shift of the point of view or a turn of the whole structure allows us to see a different quality of a seemingly familiar element in the puzzle.

## Site-specificity

Since the subject of the research is immigrants in their interaction with the host community, when analyzing and interpreting the data, we are guided by the works written by the representatives of Chicago School [*Park, Burgess* 1921], who consider the entry of new ethnic groups into a territorial community, distinguishing the stages of competition, conflict, and the determination of position among other groups. However, in the classic works in immigration studies and their successors [*Cressey* 1938; *James, Taeuber* 1985], new ethnic groups of immigrants, as special social communities, were an unquestionable given. They arrived in a relatively short period of time, jointly began their ascent in the social structure, and had a sufficiently high level of identification as an ethnic group. Further immigration to ethnic groups that had already found a stable position in the community, if any, was simply not considered in this context.

While the situation in Chicago in the 1920s is similar to the situation in the Far Eastern territories of Russia a century later [*Blyakher, Leontyeva* 2023], there are also a number of specific features typical for the Far East and, above all, for the Khabarovsk Region, which led to our interest in the situation.

First, the territorial community of Khabarovsk Region itself does not represent any stable structure. It has been characterized for a long time by constant immigration [*Skripnik* 2010; *Motrich* 2019]. The establishment of Soviet power in the region, the Zeya uprising of peasants and its suppression [*Blyakher* 2017] led to a powerful outflow of population from the region. Thus, the population of Khabarovsk during this period decreased by almost two-thirds, as did the population of the entire Far Eastern Region [*Vostrikov, Vostokov* 1991]. During the entire Soviet period there was new development and settlement in the region. This process involved representatives of all Soviet republics. Add to this the resettlement of Koreans and the attempt to create a “Jewish country” in the Far East [*Gurevich* 2020], the picture becomes even more multi-ethnic. The resettlement of people in the region was organized by the state. This was

accompanied by a constant return movement of those who could not get accustomed to the new place. This outflow was compensated for by new flows of migrants. As a result, a specific type of territorial community is formed, which we have labeled a “flowing community”. This term is understood as a structure with significant inward and outward migration, which has a much more significant impact on the demographic situation than natural increase. It was the construction of large industrial enterprises in Khabarovsk Region in the 1960s–1980s and the resettlement of future employees at these enterprises to the region that caused the population to grow by more than 200% during that period [Morozov 1988]. The “regional nucleus” itself, which sets the internal norms for the territorial community in these conditions was unformed. This fact is recorded by local residents.

*There are no powerful people here, nope. Well, I mean, the kind that would take charge. Everyone is different and there are not a lot of them. That's why people here negotiate with you not as with a Russian, a Belarusian, a Jew, or an Azeri, but simply as with a human being. If you are a decent person, they will come to an agreement. If you are not – they will just ignore you (male, Komsomolsk-on-Amur resident, teacher, 47 years old).*

This demographic growth in the early post-Soviet years was the reason for the later sharp decline in population. Organized incoming flows disappeared and the population outflow persists. The population of the region is pulling from the “north”, from rural areas, from small towns to large cities, moving outside the region as part of the “western drift”. The population of the regional center (Khabarovsk city) continued to grow due to intra-regional immigration, while other settlements decreased quickly.

The decline in Khabarovsk Region’s population, which is recorded by statistics, is perceived as an acute problem at the level of regional and federal authorities. Against this background, foreign immigrants, whose number during the entire post-Soviet period did not exceed 2% of the region’s population, and for most of the period, according to Rosstat, did not reach 1%, were not particularly noticeable. Especially taking into account the fact that the region was once populated by natives of all Soviet republics; those from Transcaucasia and Central Asia arriving in the Soviet period were not considered strangers. Moreover, migrants from these regions (where the demographic transition had not yet been completed) were constantly arriving, turned towards their compatriots and were not seen as disturbing the locals. Such natural resettlement, judging by the interviews, was a constant process in the region. However, this process did not have a special impact on the overall situation. It increased slightly during military conflicts in former Soviet republics, but, in general, up to the end of the 2000s was not particularly significant.

The situation described in studies on migration from other regions [Deleva 2010] was different also as representatives of the host community and newcomers had recently been citizens of the same state and remembered it. Immigrants from the former Soviet republics were not perceived as “strangers” [Bliakher, Kovalevskii, Leont’eva 2023]. Most of the representatives of the host community themselves had personal or family experience of resettlement in the recent past. 67% of the region’s residents are settlers or descendants of settlers from the 1960s–1980s [Kovalevskii 2023].

Chinese immigrants were subject to immigrant-phobia for quite a long time [Mukomel 2014], which also took place in Khabarovsk Region. Soon after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Chinese traders appeared in the region, creating huge spontaneous markets in regional cities. Researchers in the 1990s reported “millions of Chinese”, who had already taken over the East of Russia [Gelbras 2011]. It was not accurate, of course, to speak about millions of “illegal immigrants” filling the territory. According to statistics, there were only several thousand immigrants (up to 20,000 at the turn of the century) in the region [Motrich 2019].

The problem here is not the number arriving from China. Judging by interviews with residents collected during this period [Blyakher 2004], the problem was the identity of the population of the Russian Far East. The region was perceived as a Soviet fortress, opposing the “yellow peril”—primarily the Chinese. The appearance of Chinese in the streets of Far Eastern cities was seen as a sign of the fall of the fortress, which nullified the self-identity among the locals. By the end of the 1990s, Chinese traders were joined by Chinese builders and workers. Chinese guest workers became one of the features of Far Eastern cities.

These people were not the only representative from China. Chinese cafes, restaurants, and casinos appeared in cities. “Chinese” shopping centers grew. Scientists, artists, and the political leadership from the northern provinces of China also visited the region. However, the embodiment of “the Chinese” is a poor, badly-dressed, not very clean, builder living in appalling conditions, who speaks almost no Russian and does “everything wrong”. He is “the other” for the people of the Far East, overshadowing all the “others”.

As noted by the respondents from Central Asian and Transcaucasian ethnic groups living in Khabarovsk Region, until 2010, they did not feel rejected at either the governmental or household level. These respondents clearly recognized the importance of the Chinese as a shield against xenophobia.

*Everyone in Birobidzhan knows us and our family. In Khabarovsk, too, there were no problems before. I dress properly. I speak Russian as well as you do. There were no problems. I guess in about the tenth year, problems appeared. Then the Chinese had gone, and they started moving a lot of Uzbeks into the construction sites. The Uzbeks were completely different. They didn't understand local life. It is clear that there were conflicts with the locals. For the locals, an Uzbek or an Azerbaijani is “black”. The fact that you've lived in the Far East since birth doesn't bother them either. Black is a stranger. Then it all began (male, entrepreneur, 32 years old, ethnic Azerbaijani).*

This quote reveals several points to consider. First, the realization of the connection between the disappearance of the Chinese and the spread of xenophobia against the natives from the former Soviet republics. Although anecdotal, it is logical to assume in community that is not fully formed and consists mostly of immigrants from different times with different socio-cultural back-grounds, locals would identify and oppose a certain group as “strangers”.

Even in the Soviet period, regional identity was of a fortress garrison resisting a hostile environment against “strangers” who were Chinese citizens, agents of China's

“creeping expansion”. However, after the 2008 crisis this disappeared. Since 2008, Chinese tourists and numerous students have begun to arrive in the region. Delegations of Chinese scientists and musicians have become common. Chinese entrepreneurs work in the region. In the neighboring Jewish Autonomous and Amur regions, amidst China’s strict ban on gambling, entire gambling complexes catering for Chinese citizens have emerged [*Simutina, Ryzhova* 2007]. Only Chinese “guest workers” disappeared—the ones who in local residents’ opinions symbolized the “other”.

Now comes the emergence of new “strangers”. It was during this period that government megaprojects began to be implemented in the region. First was the reconstruction of Vladivostok, one of the two largest cities in the Russian Far East. Due to an acute shortage of labor in the region, the mass import of contract workers from Central Asian republics began. It is not that millions of workers were brought to the construction sites of the APEC summit or to build the Power of Siberia pipeline. Judging by information in the media, the number does not exceed 20,000 people. Nevertheless, there are new, poor, badly-dressed people who barely speak Russian and do everything “wrong”. New “strangers” are appearing.

Second, the attribution as “strangers” ignores length of stay or citizenship, and focuses on phenotype, dress, and language skills. A few attributes are enough for an agent to be identified as an immigrant by locals and not just an immigrant, but a “stranger who does not belong here”. In an interview, a female public figure in Khabarovsk talked about her spouse. He is a native-born citizen of the Russian Far East, but his ethnicity and appearance stand out (his father is Chinese, his mother is Uzbek). This proved to be a sticking point.

*There were some funny cases when my husband was yelled at by a consultant in Leroy Merlin [hardware store] when he was buying building materials, then by a tenant of this house, when we moved in..... And we’re not poor in terms of this house, yeah. I mean, we own the whole floor. So they told him not to park his car here, but to park it outside the gate. “We’re the owners, we paid for parking, and you go over there.” My husband’s in the renovation and real estate business, so sometimes it happens like that. Somehow... well, “immigrant-like...” (woman, public figure, 56 years old, resident of Khabarovsk).*

Thirdly, this change in “the other” (“black”, not dressed or behaving like locals) maximizes the group of “immigrants”. Here we find people who were born in the Far East and speak Russian, but have a distinctive appearance.

In other words, there are two different images of immigrants in Khabarovsk Region and, more broadly, in the Far East. Both assume the existence of an immigrant group and similar images can be found in other regions of Russia [*Konstantinov, Osin* 2020]. These form the discourse about immigrants as a phenomenon although we limit our discussion to Khabarovsk Region.

The first is the image that is drawn by official statistics (federal, regional, and municipal), which are found in official documents. The second is the image of the other which is broadcast in the media, brandished by left-wing populists, and manifested at the everyday level. Before addressing these images of immigrants as a group, it is worth describing the images themselves in a little more detail.

## Two images of foreign immigrants

The first difference between the two images in Khabarovsk Region is the contrast in the immigrant population. In the image constructed by the authorities, the number of immigrants is determined by official statistics (arrival, registration, work permits, visas, etc.) and is small. In recent years in the region this number has barely exceeded 1% of the population. People who arrived as immigrants but obtained Russian citizenship are automatically excluded from this group. Immigrants arrive under quotas or state programs. As a rule, they are young men (20–40 years old) working mainly in building, repairs, road transportation, housing and utilities, and trade.

They mostly have low or medium qualifications [Mukomel 2017]. In other words, as the theory of Thomas Park [1921 (2009)] suggests, immigrants fill the lowest tiers of the social pyramid. It is assumed (according to their contracts) that most are short-term (up to a year).

From the point of view of a state and municipal employee, they have an undoubted set of common characteristics. They have a similar legal status. They are employed in certain economic sectors. They want to earn money to live in their country of origin. The goal of the state is also common in relation to immigrants: to provide labor for state projects and economic sectors recognized by the state as important. In other words, immigrants from the position of the state are simply workers [Ryazantsev 2010].

Immigrants also have a social function, which is relevant for the regional authorities given the dwindling local population in the Far East. Immigrants are intended to replace the retiring population. In this case, immigrants change from short-term workers whose arrival is not particularly desirable, although necessary, into those who should be persuaded to stay. State programs for the resettlement of immigrants, which appeared at the turn of the century, are aimed at this. At the beginning of the process, the emphasis was placed on Russian-speaking immigrants from the newly independent states, and the programs did not focus on the problems of Eastern Russia [Yudina 2008]. Initially, they were resettled in the Kaliningrad, Kaluga, and Lipetsk regions. Later, the conditions of the program were adjusted and the Krasnoyarsk and Amur regions became the most common destinations. The composition of the immigrant group also changed. At the first stage the majority were natives of Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Ukraine [Kirillova 2010], later natives of Uzbekistan and Tajikistan became the majority. However, the Far East did not remain a particularly attractive territory for resettlement. Out of more than 16,000 immigrants to Russia before 2010, only 291 people arrived in the region. As the program developed and citizenship in the Far East became easier and faster to obtain, the number of “new Far Easterners” grew. Nevertheless, numerically this group, and immigrants staying longer than a year, is small (*Figure 1*).

The peak is expected to occur in 2012, as this was the year the reconstruction of Vladivostok and preparations for the APEC summit were completed, and some builders decided to stay in the Far East of Russia. Some growth is registered in 2014 also, presumably, connected with the completion of several megaprojects in the region. A sharp decline occurred in 2020, when the most stringent quarantine restrictions were in effect. The takeoff in 2021 was the largest and was unexpected for us. It was twice the number of new Far East residents after the completion of



construction works for the APEC summit. In 2018–2019 only natives of Tajikistan showed growth, but in 2021 the leap is observed in all major ethnic groups. We tried to explain this circumstance in a previous article by the fact that the last of the former Soviets arrived. A more unexpected drop was in the net immigration in 2022 [Blyakher, Leontyeva 2023]. Two factors can be assumed here. First, in the previous period, all those who really wanted to do so resettled and obtained Russian citizenship. With the international pressure on Russia, the attractiveness of resettlement fell. Although the push factors (lack of land, high unemployment, etc.) continue to exist, they were not as strong as before. Second, the most important push factor for Central Asia was the incomplete demographic transition. As a result, most of the donor countries had experienced significant demographic growth, which has been gradually declining. Today Uzbekistan has reached a plateau in demographic terms, which indicates that the demographic transition has been completed [Mamadaliyeva 2022]. This circumstance, and the fact that part of the flow went to Kazakhstan [Dzhunusbaev, Savin 2015], has led to a decrease in the number of Uzbeks. Only in Tajikistan and, partially, Kyrgyzstan, is the transition characterized by a high natural birth-rate [Mirzoev 2012]. Accordingly, Uzbeks have been replaced by Tajiks. The issue now is not so much about ethnicities, but about people from certain countries serving as the main source of immigrants. It is still difficult to talk about the prospects of immigration from Central Asia to Far Eastern Russia, as the situation is changing too rapidly. However, it is possible to make some observations.

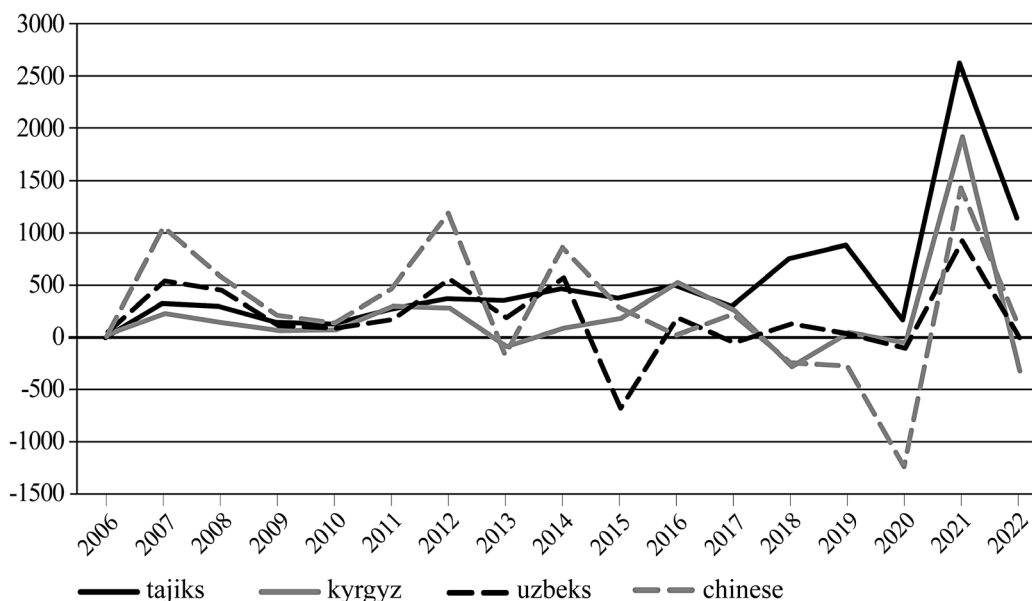


Figure 1. The most numerous ethnic flows of immigrants to Khabarovsk Region (net immigration, number of people)

Source: calculated by the authors according to the materials from <https://27.rosstat.gov.ru/folder/25028>

The continuing negative net migration and the negative natural increase leads to an acute shortage in most professions. The list of vacancies in the region is growing, but the prospect of filling them remains dim. The number of unemployed in the Khabarovsk Region, according to Rosstat, for the last years has decreased from 20,400 people in 2021 to 3,100 people in 2023. The number of advertised vacancies increased this year to 28,172<sup>4</sup>. Notwithstanding the fact that there is obviously hidden unemployment and shadow employment, these data show that there is a problem. Wage increases to attract workers is inevitable. The situation changed slightly during the pandemic and quarantine period (reduced production and vacancies, negative wage increases), but since 2022 the problem has intensified again.

This situation also affects the salaries of foreign immigrants. That is what the administrator of one of the largest supermarkets in the city said in the interview:

*We used to have a lot of these... well, Tajiks, working for us. Loaders, ancillary workers, they sat at the cash registers. We paid them peanuts. They'd go along with it. Where could they go? They say otherwise now. They ask for proper wages. They won't go for the old ones. And we're not interested in hiring them for that kind of money. Although, we have to hire someone anyway. We don't have enough of our own (woman, supermarket administrator, 34 years old).*

At any rate, the wages of immigrants are growing. The last is the most important factor in attracting immigrants. However, risks are also increasing. An unstable political situation, unclear economic prospects, and a number of other factors discussed below, hinder long-term stays. Net immigration shows that the number of immigrants oriented to long-term stay in the Khabarovsk Region has become negligible in recent years, although arrivals remain significant. It seems that immigrants prefer to minimize risks through short-term stays, to wait out the uncertainty. In other words, there is a certain stable image of foreign immigrants, primarily labor immigrants, whose presence compensate for labor shortages in mainly low-skilled jobs.

An equally important function of foreign immigrants, prescribed by the government, is to replace the natural population loss in Russia [Denisenko 2003], and for the Far East to compensate for the outflow of population. It is clear that in order to make immigrants “real Russians” it is necessary to adapt them. This is handled by government agencies and public organizations who introduce foreigners who have decided settle in Russia to its history and culture, improve their proficiency in Russian, and familiarize them with the legal norms regulating the life and activities of citizens. The incomprehensible and frightening Chinatowns and “Shanghais”, the appearance of which was expected back in the late 1990s [Mikhailenko 2010], are being replaced in the cities of Far Eastern Russia by ethnic NGOs that are loyal to and fully controlled by the authorities. Immigrants themselves not only work in low-prestige jobs that do not displace local workers, but also contribute to the intensification of the cultural life in the territory and enrich the local community [Burda 2017].

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<sup>4</sup> Information on the situation in the registered labor market of the Khabarovsk Territory as of 12.01.2024. <https://sz27.ru/Documents/Detail/ef972139-422a-4164-b06e-e8c01d35473a/>, accessed 21.04.2024 (in Russian).

In this depiction immigrants are a group in relation to which the state policy is built. Within the group, as within any large community, there is differentiation, nevertheless, there is a certain social integrity, which is significant economically and socially.

Even at the level of official discourse, the situation is not so favorable. Along with positive expectations, there is an increase in social tension due to the presence of immigrants such as an increase in crime, which is perceived to be associated with them. This is not so much a feature of the noted image as the influence of a competing image, which is closely connected with the previous discourse about the “yellow peril” and “creeping expansion” [Dyatlov, Dyatlova 2022].

The first striking difference between the “state” image and the “public” image is the number of foreign immigrants. In the public imagination, there are many more of them. The reason for this is that the public image is not based on the state statistics but on “what I can see for myself”. It is true that this view is peculiarly organized. On the one hand, “immigrants” have a stereotyped image: they are “black”, they wear dirty overalls, they do low-prestige, physical labor, and they have an accent—although these features do not necessarily exist together. A number of interviews spoke about their “guessing” (“I always recognize an immigrant, even if they are dressed as a prince and in a Mercedes”). With this rather vague and extremely broad view of an immigrant, which takes into account neither citizenship nor length of residence, immigrants include Russian citizens who have been living in the region for decades and their children, who were often born here. “Immigrants” include people who came to the Far East from the Transcaucasian republics in the Soviet era, and even people from the North Caucasus republics who are Russian by origin.

*They're all the same to me. They definitely are. I mean, Caucasians, Tajiks, and Uzbeks. They came to take bread from my compatriots, to destroy our culture and identity, to push us out of our own lands. This is what I am fighting against. And don't tell me that they are warm and fuzzy (male, public figure, 47 years old).*

Immigrants (according to those who regard them as a group) are characterized by the violation of social norms, a connection with crime, and, due to the unsanitary conditions prevailing in their community, are carriers of the most dangerous diseases. Immigrants are also characterized by aggression directed at the local population, especially women. But even if immigrants do not break the law directly, do not fight, do not spread disease, their presence is undesirable. If any “immigrant” managed to get any position with status, they are certainly going to start pushing their own into all the “bread-and-butter” positions, violating the interests of the local population.

We are not aiming to verify the truth (or otherwise) of these statements. What is important to us is that they exist, they are broadcast in the media, they are an ongoing element of the discourse on immigrants.

In Khabarovsk city, for example, a sticking point and the subject of public activists is the work as taxi drivers by immigrants, especially in the area of the bus station, where they also work as porters, loaders, etc. It is not clear why this enterprise, which has traditionally experienced a shortage of personnel, unlike the railway station and airport, suddenly turned out to be a “bread-and-butter place”. It is possible that

respondents-representatives of the local community (especially social activists) were simply stressed by the increased concentration of immigrants in a prominent place. Immigrant construction workers or loaders in large stores remain invisible to a certain extent. Nevertheless, the Khabarovsk bus station being “taken over by immigrants” was mentioned in three interviews and in most of the media publications of the last three years devoted to immigrants.

These images do not exist in isolation. They interact and overlap. Even the most zealous fighters against the “overpopulation of immigrants” do not deny their necessity in an empty region.

*You can't do without 'blacks' here, no matter how you look at it. People are leaving. Our authorities are proud that they have solved the unemployment problem. Of course they have. People have left, so there are no unemployed. And who's going to work? Especially for the money they pay. At the same time, there are a lot of problems with housing, and social services are weak. If you're not in Khabarovsk [city], you'll get neither education nor normal treatment. So, we have to wait for our 'saviors' and stick our necks out for them to get in more comfortably (male, public figure, 47 years old).*

Stricter regulation of their stay and employment and the introduction of tougher sanctions for violations are demanded. The fact that these sanctions would fall on a small number of those whom the carriers of this image-myth classify as immigrants does not really bother them. Russian passport holders themselves are perceived by these public figures as “having deceived Russia” and “having snuck into the number of citizens”.

It is clear that government, municipal, and law enforcement officials do not exist in a vacuum. They also live in Khabarovsk Region and consume the same discourse which is broadcast in the media and acts as a kind of “people’s voice” opposing “empty and thoughtless administration”. This leads to an increase in inspections and raids by law enforcement agencies, and the formation of a specific attitude towards immigrants on the part of officials.

*The fact that immigrants are necessary is not even discussed. Without them, both construction sites and transportation would become deadlocked. They must be monitored as strictly as possible. Otherwise, there will be trouble. They bring a lot of problems with them. They're kind of like rebellious teenagers. They can't do without their father's belt. It's okay, we will raise them (male, civil servant, 44 years old).*

There are 50,000 immigrants according to the number of members in ethnic organizations registered by the regional government. For a sparsely populated region, it is about 5% of the population and more than 12% of able-bodied residents. However, these associations includes ethnic associations of Tatars, Belarusians, Jews, Ukrainians, etc., representing many people who have lived in the territory of the region since the Soviet period. But even when it comes to ethnic groups that are considered “immigrants”, the situation is not clear. Each association and its leadership are interested in attracting

the maximum number of participants. This raises its status, making it, for example, “representative of all Tajiks in Khabarovsk Region”. It also gives material bonuses and preferences. Accordingly, the association attracts members of the ethnic group, who are already rooted in the local community and act as its representatives rather than as representatives of immigrants. Nevertheless, it is significant that this number is quoted by civil servants. It also appears in documents reflecting regional immigration policy.

In Khabarovsk Region, there are two images of immigrants, differing in number (in one case there is a shortage of them, in the other an excess) and the level of rejection (in one case they are a salvation, in the other a threat). They also differ in terms of where the image can be seen or heard. The first image is broadcast by official organizations focused on working with immigrants, and government and municipal officials. The second image is broadcast by left-wing public figures, the mass media, and government and municipal officials in a private capacity. However, in general, these images have significant overlap: a social group characterized by low or medium qualifications, poor personal hygiene, weak adaptation to the conditions of the host community, and, as a consequence, increased aggressiveness.

In the second case, “immigrants” are associated with crime and represent its breeding ground. Official statements by representatives of the MIA of the Region claiming a serious decrease in the number of offenses committed by immigrants (by 22% over the year) and that the overwhelming majority of offenses are related to violation of the regime of stay<sup>5</sup>, do not convince. As was said in one of the interviews: “*They just don’t get caught or they pay someone off*”.

If in the first case, immigrants fill the gap in the labor market of Khabarovsk Region, occupying, mostly, the lowest positions, in the second case, they displace local workers. The most frequently cited example is work as taxi drivers. Taxi drivers themselves describe the situation a bit differently.

*You know, earlier [Yandex-taxi] used to charge good prices, they didn’t take a big percentage. And then they started to change everything secretly and quietly. Today they also have lowered the prices. There is simply no profit in working for them. I have a dozen clients like you. They’re the ones who feed me. And let Tajiks work at Yandex (male, taxi driver, Khabarovsk resident, 51 years old).*

We are not talking about displacement. It is just that this type of work was unattractive for locals. This is the space that immigrants have filled. But the myth sees the situation differently, ignoring the inconsistencies. Immigrants poorly adapted to local life have made their way into a profitable type of activity (apparently, through bribery or other deceit), and dragged all their own. Now they simply do not let the locals in. The question of whether the locals, given the terrible shortage of taxi drivers, those working in supermarkets or vegetable markets, etc. would take such jobs is simply not raised.

Judging by interviews with residents of the region, given the myth about dangerous and formidable immigrants who are simultaneously the most low-status and socially vulnerable, there is a perception that any aggression against them

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<sup>5</sup> The Number of Crimes Committed by Immigrants Has Been Revealed in Khabarovsk Region (2024). *Fedpress.ru*, February 2, 2024. <https://fedpress.ru/news/27/society/3296403>, accessed 21.04.2024 (in Russian).

is justified and fair, since the locals are the bosses here. We have already mentioned the incident in a hardware store between a security guard and a person who looked like an immigrant. An immigrant taxi driver spoke about similar situations in an interview.

*How does it work here, dear sir? We, taxi drivers, fight for a good order. When the payment is good, the ride is not far, the road is nice. Everyone wants such an order. But if a Russian taxi driver intercepts a Russian, he just shakes his head. He'll say what to do, it's bad luck. And if I intercept, then I am a "churka", and a "bastard", and "go home". It is offensive (male, taxi driver, ethnic Tajik, 32 years old).*

Such reports are frequent and they extend far beyond the group possessing the entire set of the highlighted features to anyone with the look of a foreigner. However, it may turn out that the "immigrant" is the head of a successful enterprise and a native Far Easterner (as in the situation from the interview). The opposite situation is also possible. One of the interviews mentioned how a certain person, having found himself in a difficult situation "went to work for one entrepreneur at his dacha as a Tajik".

## Different "Immigrants"

The extreme expansion of the idea of who immigrants are essentially changes the meaning of the concept. As noted above, a Russian citizen who has nothing to do with "immigrant" ethnicities can be identified as an immigrant. This was very clearly seen in a project carried out in Khabarovsk by Dzhan-Sha, a well-known journalist and the organizer of an amateur film festival.<sup>6</sup> In her project well-known people in Khabarovsk and representatives of "immigrant" ethnic groups, were photographed twice. In the first case, in their "usual" working clothes, and in the second case "in immigrant clothes" in the corresponding context (market, construction site, etc). The audience unmistakably identified the "immigrant" by outward appearance and did not recognize well-known locals if they were made-up to look like an immigrant. The opposite is also true: an office and a suit completely supplanted the perception of the person as an immigrant.

An immigrant is not someone who belongs to a social group but someone with a certain social status. It not only in the Far East as a stigma [Blyakher, Kovalevskii, Leont'eva 2023], and can be imposed on a person. These "immigrants" are fought by social activists in the region, who demand immigration bans to protect the local population. These "immigrants" are supported by ethnic organizations and protected by human rights activists. Another issue is that the social myth about immigrants and the newcomers to Khabarovsk Region from the new states of Central Asia and Transcaucasia exist on almost non-overlapping planes.

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<sup>6</sup> Alla Dzhan-Sha (2023) Photo Project "That's the Way I See It. Two Views on the Other Person". *Khabarovsk TV Channel*, December 15, 2023. Available at: <https://khabarovsktv.ru/programms/fotoproekt-ya-tak-vizhu-dva-vzglyadana-drugogo-cheloveka-alla-dzhan-sha-0>, accessed 21.04.2024 (in Russian).

Immigrant workers make up for staff shortages in various sectors of the economy. However, they generally live separately, therefore minimally overlapping with the local population. This group is not particularly different in terms of social characteristics and behavior patterns from any other shift workers in the territory. Their presence is beneficial to employers and the authorities, as it does not require the organization of the social infrastructure necessary for local residents. Between them and the host community there is an intermediary in the form of an employer responsible for them representing them before the authorities. These people enter the public space in case of infrequent *forces majeure*. Judging by the articles in the media, this may be a conflict with residents of the nearest village or town (one article mentioned a fight at a dance in a village in the Jewish Autonomous District) or bad faith on the part of the employer violating the terms of the contract, which caused the conflict. Such references were encountered three times in the last three years. In other cases, this group, which most closely corresponds to the image of a “immigrant”, remains socially invisible for the local community. Some of the shift workers in previous years, especially after the completion of construction works for the APEC summit, remained in the region. However, in the last two years this group has numbered only in the hundreds.

Immigrants are work in a much wider range of sectors than previously. In other words, they are also present at the market, behind the counters of vegetable stands, driving taxis, working in urban development, and in ethnic cafes and restaurants.

Two features can be noted for this group, whose representatives were the most numerous among our respondents. First, these people are most often included in ethnic diaspora networks. The diaspora and legal ethnic associations, however, coincide to a minimum extent. The associations (Tajik, Uzbek, Armenian, etc.) are much broader in composition, including all members of a given ethos. Informal ethnic networks are built not so much along ethnic lines as on the basis of kinship or neighborhood ties. The functions are also different. The association carries out representation and organizes festivals. The diaspora introduces more adapted members of the the host community to those less adapted, providing mutual support. Through a legal ethnic association, the diaspora establishes contact with the authorities.

*Do you know how Azerbaijanis earn money? That's right, retail shops – fruits, vegetables, and all that. You know who holds the Ali market – Azerbaijanis. It's a big system. A web where people know and help each other (female, ethnic Azerbaijani, 20 years old).*

Second, these are the people who are most often criticized by those who fight against the “influx of immigrants”. The reason is clear: this group is most visible to the host community, and it is here, in the thick of social interactions, that conflicts most often arise. They do not necessarily have an ethnic character. But if one of the participants is a representative of a “immigrant” ethnic group, then, the respondents claim, the conflict is instantly transformed into a “clash of civilizations”. The immigrant’s stigma is used by the local participant in the conflict situation to provides them with an advantage.

The community performs the same function in relation to newcomers as the employer in relation to shift workers. They acts as an intermediary between the immigrant

and the host community. According to respondents, conflicts on transportation, which are reported in the media (2 conflicts in the last 3 years), are related to people who, for various reasons, are apart from the community.

Higher education is another sphere where ethnicity is fixed by representatives of the host community and where in the last decade there have been many foreign students arriving from the Central Asia states. The attitude of one university employee is typical.

*I do not perceive them as students. They are just sitting there. It feels like they have escaped from the market or a construction site. They came here by mistake. They only interfere with teaching normal people* (male, Khabarovsk resident, professor at the university, 49 years old).

However, there are almost no reports of conflicts in the student body. The only conflict that has recently hit the media is related to a fight in one of the dormitories of the Pacific National University in Khabarovsk city. This situation is typical of the transition of a domestic conflict into an ethnic conflict. In the media, the conflict was presented as a beating of two Russian citizens by three Tajik citizens, which resulted in a call to OMON (part of the Russian National Guard) and the detention of the foreigners. In reality, the situation developed quite trivially. Two young men argued about young woman and each called for “support”. However, the next day, the Russians, having a certificate of bodily injury without the need for hospitalization, went to the police. That is, the immigrant stigma was used by one of the participants in the conflict to resolve the situation in their favor.

In general, even in more visible spheres, despite the fact that almost every conflict was reported in the media, there were not many conflicts at all. An analysis of media publications over the last three years shows only six such conflicts in all social spheres. No major conflicts in the sphere of public catering were noted.

The range of employment of workers from Central Asian and Transcaucasian states, even relatively recent ones, are much wider than those traditionally prescribed to immigrants by the myths described above. Observations carried out by the authors in 2021–2023 in Khabarovsk Region allow us to speak at the level of expert estimates about the employment space of recent immigrants. In recent years there has been more skilled labor among immigrants and Russian citizens. The acute shortage of medical staff (including nurses) is partially compensated for by graduates of the Dushanbe medical school and medical institute, in Tajikistan. Transcaucasian nationals are often found among truck drivers, whose importance to the region cannot be overestimated. There are slightly more Transcaucasians than Central Asians among owners of manufacturing-related businesses (furniture, installation and maintenance of machinery, car repair shops, etc.). Transport, construction and agricultural enterprises were noted during the observation.

There are immigrants among artists and painters, and beauty salons and make-up centers started by immigrants are becoming increasingly popular in the city, and immigrant teachers are appearing in technical colleges and schools. There are almost no immigrants in the higher echelons of power or among law enforcement officials, but there are few local residents in these groups either. Today there are more and more ethnic Tajiks, Uzbeks,



and Kyrgyz, who represent the second generation of immigrants in the higher education institutions of the region. In the near future there will be immigrant-engineers, university professors, and scientists. Gradually, new Far Easterners are appearing on all levels of the social pyramid, although there are more of them on the lower levels. It is now difficult to speak of any employment spheres specific to them. It is indicative of the fact that the new Far Easterners adapted to the host community and are also starting to talk about the need to move—not to their country of origin, but as part of the “western drift”, which is typical for the region.

## Conclusion

The Far East of Russia is a region of settlers. Since the 1880s, this territory has been developed and settled by new people. This process was often interrupted and reversed, but it determined the demographic and economic situation in the region, because people often arrived for specific projects, on which the regional authorities reported [Remnev 2004]. After a project was completed, some of the newcomers left, while others remained and became Far Easterners. This outflow-inflow was lost in the immediate post-Soviet period but after a short pause in the 1990s, incoming immigration flows began to arrive. The first was from China, which since 2014 has been steadily decreasing to almost nothing, although traces of the flow, those who have taken root in Russia, remain. This was followed by the flow of immigrants from Central Asia and, partly, from Transcaucasia. It is they, as recent arrivals, who are treated as immigrants today. During the peak period of this incoming flow, this may have created some commonality, but today it is increasingly imaginary.

People who are referred to as “immigrants” or “settlers” as part of the first and second constructs came to the region in different ways. Some stayed after working under a contract, some came under resettlement programs, some came at the invitation of their compatriots or colleagues, and then formalized their stay. Some of them maintain strong contacts with their point of origin, acting as an intermediary for later immigrants. Others minimize these contacts. This group represent different ethnicities, cultures, religions (or lack thereof), occupy different social positions, and belong to different social networks, which are not always ethnically based.

In recent years, the weakening of this flow has become increasingly evident. Newly arriving immigrant workers are lost among those from the western regions of Russia. Builders and housing and public utility workers with stereotypical immigrant appearance are rarely met on the streets. Uzbek housing repair crews are increasingly being replaced by Russian (“elite repairs”) or “North Korean” (“cheap repairs”) crews. There remain traces of immigration flows, which are increasingly dissolving into the local community.

All the more interesting is that this has no effect on the *pro et contra* discourse on immigration. Activists, civil servants, law enforcement, and cultural activists continue to work with immigrants. Public organizations representing this group are multiplying. The fact that the group itself is becoming increasingly hard to define does not affect the activity of public debate. It is possible to assume that this discourse hides the interests of local social groups, to preserve and strengthen their positions. The latter is an area for future research.

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## Существует ли социальная группа «мигранты» в Хабаровском крае? (очерки мифологии миграции)

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### Аннотация

*В статье на эмпирическом материале, собранном в Хабаровском крае, анализируются два образа мигранта как определенной социальной группы. Первый из них возникает на основе данных официальной статистики, сказывается на решениях и действиях региональной власти, проявляется в публичном дискурсе властных лиц. Второй, берущий свое начало еще с дискурса о «желтой опасности», конструирует образ мигрантов на основе набора характеристик (не имеющих ничего общего ни с гражданством, ни с временем пребывания в края), ведущей из которых выступает внешность. Во втором образе мигранты олицетворяют «чужих», противостоящих принимающему сообществу, угрожающих ему. Этот образ более всего представлен в средствах массовой информации, отчасти, в повседневном дискурсе. Как показано в статье, при всей интенсификации полемики, разворачивающейся в СМИ, по поводу мигрантов оба дискурса имеют отношение к симулякру, денотат которого, даже если он существовал, к настоящему времени исчезает. «Новые дальневосточники» (мигранты) все менее составляют внутренне организованное сообщество или социальную группу, различаясь не только в отношении этничности или религии, но и в отношении места исхода, факторов выталкивания, уровня образования, профессиональной принадлежности, социальных стратегий, культурной идентичности и так далее. Далеко не все они ориентированы на коммуникацию в рамках этнического сообщества. Дальний Восток, по утверждению авторов, изначально выстраивался как регион мигрантов, где миграция всегда была более существенные фактором, детерминирующим демографическую ситуацию, нежели естественный прирост. Но миграционные потоки, достигнув пика, постепенно исчезали, превращаясь в «следы», сосуществующие и сегодня в территориальном социуме. Сегодня входящий миграционный поток выходцев из новых государств Средней Азии и, частично, Закавказья все более становится «следом», распределенным по различным этажам социальной иерархии, разным видам деятельности, постепенно растворяясь в региональном сообществе.*

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**Ключевые слова:** миграция, Дальний Восток, проточная общность, образ мигранта, Хабаровский край, социальный миф, миграционный поток, след миграционного потока

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