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The Chinese Population of Transbaikalia under the Conditions of the Stalinist System in the 1930s

Vladimir G. Datsyshen 

Institute for Demographic Research – Branch of the Federal Center
of Theoretical and Applied Sociology of the Russian Academy of Sciences, Moscow, Russia
Siberian Federal University, Krasnoyarsk, Russia
KSPU named after V.P. Astafiev, Krasnoyarsk, Russia
✉ generalhistory2005@yandex.ru

Abstract: The article is devoted to the history of the Chinese population in the East Siberian border region with China, Transbaikal, in the 1930s. The particular position of this border region determined the specific formation of this Chinese population. The transfer of the Transbaikal region from the Far Eastern region back to the administrative unit of Siberia in the 1930s strengthened the Siberian regional features of the development of the Chinese community, and meant that the Far Eastern nationality policy was not applied to this community. The development of this community was influenced by the fact that in the 1930s, the state border with Manchuria was completely closed. The Manchukuo state, along with the Republic of China, had its official representatives in Chita. In the early 1930s the size of the Chinese population in Transbaikal reached a maximum, and in the Chita region its share in relation to the total population was equal to that in the Far Eastern regions. In the 1930s the working and living conditions of the majority of Chinese workers were difficult: they faced discrimination and were poorly adapted to the socio-political realities of Stalin's system. Initially the Bolsheviks carried out an active policy towards the Chinese that was aimed at their ideological and political re-education and the improving of their living and working conditions. In the second half of the 1930s, however, this policy changed, and political education and the development of a “Soviet Chinese” culture were no longer prominent. The Chinese began to be perceived as a national community disloyal to the Soviet regime, as real or potential agents of Japan and Kuomintang China. In 1936 began the “exposure” of Chinese spies, and in 1937–1939 the Soviet Chinese were fully subjected to the tyranny of the Soviet secret services and punitive agencies, and suffered greatly from political repression. By the late 1930s the number of Chinese in Transbaikal had decreased by almost a third; however, the situation was different from that in the border regions of the Far East in so far as there was no mass eviction of Chinese from the Transbaikal area.

Keywords: Transbaikal, Russian-Chinese border regions, Soviet Chinese, 1930s, Bolshevik policy towards Chinese, political repressions

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Китайское население Забайкалья в условиях сталинской системы в 1930-е гг.

Владимир Григорьевич Дацышен 

Институт демографических исследований

Федерального научно-исследовательского социологического центра РАН, Москва, Россия

Сибирский федеральный университет, Красноярск, Россия

Красноярский государственный педагогический университет имени В.П. Астафьева,
Красноярск, Россия

✉ generalhistory2005@yandex.ru

Аннотация: Статья посвящена проблемам истории китайского населения в приграничном с Китаем регионе Восточной Сибири в 30-х гг. XX в. Приграничный регион обусловил специфику формирования китайского населения, а возвращение в 1930-е гг. Забайкалья из Дальнего Востока в Сибирь усилило особенности развития китайской общины в регионе, нераспространение на нее «дальневосточной национальной политики». Особенности развития китайской общины в Забайкалье в 1930-х гг. были обусловлены полным закрытием государственной границы с Маньчжурией и появлением государственного образования Маньчжоу-Го, имевшего наряду с Китайской Республикой своих официальных представителей в Чите. В начале 1930-х гг. численность китайского населения в Забайкалье достигла максимума, и в Читинской области его доля по отношению к общему числу населения сравнялась с дальневосточными регионами. В 1930-х гг. условия труда и жизни большинства китайских рабочих были тяжелыми, они сталкивались с дискриминацией, слабо были адаптированы в социально-политические реалии «сталинской системы». Советские реалии 1930-х гг. обусловили активную политику большевиков в отношении китайцев, направленную на их идейно-политическое перевоспитание и улучшение условий жизни и работы. Во второй половине 1930-х гг. политика в отношении китайского населения изменилась, вопросы политико-просветительной работы и развития «советской китайской» культуры потеряли актуальность. Китайцы стали восприниматься как нелояльная советской власти национальная община, реальные или потенциальные агенты Японии и гоминьдановского Китая. С 1936 г. начались «разоблачения» китайских шпионов, а в 1937–1939 гг. советские китайцы, как одна из наименее защищенных от произвола советских спецслужб и карательных органов национальная община, сильно пострадали от политических репрессий. В конце 1930-х гг. численность китайцев в Забайкалье сократилась почти на треть, но здесь, в отличие от приграничных районов Дальнего Востока, их массового выселения не произошло.

Ключевые слова: Забайкалье, русско-китайское приграничье, советские китайцы, политика большевиков в отношении китайцев, политические репрессии

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Introduction

The oldest section of the state border of the Russian Federation is located in Transbaikalia¹. It was established by an interstate Russian-Chinese treaty back in the 17th century, and to this day Transbaikalia remains a region bordering on China. The eastern part of the contemporary Transbaikal *krai* directly adjoins China. Geographically, Trans-

¹ Over the past two hundred years, Transbaikalia has been transferred several times to the Far East, then returned to Siberia: the Amur Governorate General – the Irkutsk Governor General. Far from the non-Eastern Territory – East Siberian Territory. In our time, Transbaikalia was part of the Siberian Federal District, now – in the Far East. Everything depended on the policy of the center, which they wanted to strengthen. Historically, culturally, mentally, this is Siberia, but it is also the gateway to the Far East, the border with China, a resource base for the development of the Far East.

baikalia traditionally includes a large part of modern Buryatia, bordering on Khalkha-Mongolia. The border position of Transbaikalia contributed not only to the arrival there of immigrants from China, but also to the active participation of the Chinese population in the political, economic and cultural life of the region.

A distinctive period in the history of Chinese migration to Russia was the 1930s. The period between the crisis of 1929 (“The Great Breakthrough”) and the outbreak of World War II became a time of social experiment, the search for new models of economic development, and political repression. In 1930, Soviet-Chinese relations, which had been severed in the late 1920s, began to be restored. In 1931, the regions of China adjacent to Transbaikalia were occupied by Japanese troops; and in 1932 the state of Manchukuo, a Japanese dependency, was proclaimed. In 1930, the Republic of China restored its consulate in Chita, soon to be joined (in 1933) by a consulate of Manchukuo.

In the summer of 1930, all of Transbaikalia became part of the newly formed East Siberian *krai*. In addition to the Buryat-Mongolian Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic, this territory also included the Chita and Sretensky districts transferred from the Far Eastern Territory. The East Siberian *krai* was liquidated, to be replaced by the Chita *oblast* in 1937. The entry of Transbaikalia into Eastern Siberia predetermined the specifics of the Bolsheviks’ policy and measures toward the Chinese in this region.

In recent years, several works on Chinese migration to the Soviet Union have appeared in Russian historiography, but the emphasis has traditionally been placed on Chinese migration to the Far East. A few researchers, for example O.V. Zalesskaya, have studied Chinese migration in the Russian east, including the border regions of Transbaikalia, in the 1930s.² Historians have devoted considerable attention to political repression against the Chinese.³ Extrapolation from the history of the Chinese population in the Primorye and Amur regions to Transbaikalia, especially with respect to the 1930s, leads to distortion of the historical picture. As a rule, works on the history of the Chinese in Siberia fail to take into account the specifics of Transbaikalia. This has begun to change as historians from Transbaikal *krai* have themselves begun to pay more attention to the history of the Chinese in the region.⁴ Even so, especially as regards the 1930s, the history of the Chinese in the regions of Eastern Siberia bordering on China remains insufficiently studied.

The aim of the work is to restore the historical picture of the Chinese community’s existence in Transbaikalia in the 1930s by identifying and analyzing the its adaptation. The article examines both the perspective of the Chinese population and that of the local authorities in relation to the Chinese community. Consideration of this issue will help create a more holistic picture of the demographic history of the border regions in the Russian east.

To reconstruct Chinese community life in Transbaikalia, I utilized documents from regional archives. The study is based on “Minutes of the Meeting of the Secretariat of the East Siberian Regional Committee of the All-Union Communist Party of Bolsheviks” and “Special messages of the NKVD on the East Siberian Territory” stored in the “East

² O.V. Zalesskaya, *Kitaiskie migranty na Dal'nem Vostoke Rossii (1917–1938 gg.)* (Vladivostok: Dal'nauka Publ., 2009).

³ V.I. Vasilevskii, *Tragicheskaiia stranitsa zabaikal'skoi istorii*, 2 ed. (Ulan-Ude: Domino Publ., 2012); D.B. Fartusov, “Political repression in relation to citizens of Mongolia and China in the territory of BM ASSR,” *BSU bulletin. Human research of Inner Asia*, no. 1 (2015): 72–77; N.A. Potapova, *‘Kharbinskaia’ operatsiia NKVD SSSR 1937–1938 gg.: mekhanizmy, tselevye gruppy i masshtaby repressii* (St. Petersburg: Aleteiya Publ., 2020).

⁴ Yu.N. Lantsova, “Otnoshenie Sovetskoii vlasti k kitaitсам i koreitsам v Chitinskoi oblasti v dovoennyi period i vo vremya Velikoi Otechestvennoi voiny,” in Part 1 of *Vtoraya mirovaya voina: predistoriya, sobytiya, uroki: materialy mezhdunar. nauch. konf. posvyashch. 70-letiiu Velikoi Pobedy nad nemetskim fashizmom i yaponskim militarizmom. 11–12 sentiabria 2015 g.* (Chita: ZabGU, 2015), 67–71.

Siberian Regional Committee of the VKP(b) [All-Union Communist Party (Bolsheviks)]” archival fund, as well as materials from the funds of various district committees of the VKP(b), stored in the State Archives of the Transbaikalian krai, State archive of the latest history of the Irkutsk region and State archive of the Amur region. Among published sources, census materials and the multi-volume *Commemorative Book for Victims of Political Repression* were of particular importance.

Number and Composition of the Chinese Population of Transbaikalia in the 1930s

Chinese migration to Transbaikalia began with the opening of the Russian-Chinese border in 1860. First, Chinese traders from Mongolia began to come to the border districts of the region, then artisans and farmers arrived. At the beginning of the 20th century, Chinese migration occurred on a mass scale. It was stimulated by railroad construction and the development of gold mining in the region. By the end of the first decade of the 20th century, the population census recorded more than two thousand Chinese, mostly Han Chinese, in the Transbaikalian region.⁵ During that period, a small permanent Chinese population formed, and mixed Sino-Russian families began to appear. The First World War gave an additional stimulus to Chinese labor migration, though the situation of the Chinese community was complicated during the civil war and foreign intervention in Russia.

In the 1920s the Chinese community in Transbaikalia not only survived, but continued its development. In 1923, 2,996 Chinese were recorded as living in the Transbaikalian *guberniia*.⁶ The number of Chinese in the capital of Transbaikalia was only half that of Khabarovsk or Blagoveshchensk, and several times less than in Moscow and Vladivostok. As of January 1, 1927, 2,334 Chinese were recorded in Chita, including 67 women and 77 children. Of these, 182 men and 9 women had Soviet citizenship.⁷ At that time, 213 Chinese people, 28 of whom were Soviet citizens, lived in rural areas of the Chita region.⁸ Several thousand Chinese people lived at the mines of Transbaikalia. According to the “Information of the Permanent Mission of the Unified State Political Administration for the Far Eastern Territory,” in 1929 most Chinese people worked at the Kozlov mine of the Borzinsky district administration “Tsvetmetzoloto” – 470 people; and in total in the seven places of the region indicated in the document, there were recorded two thousand Chinese laborers.⁹

During the 1930s, when the border with Manchuria was closed and free migration within Russia was limited, several thousand Chinese people were permanent residents of Transbaikalia. Most of them lived in Chita and the Chita region, as well as at the mines. The “Memorandum on work among the Eastern workers in the Chita region” dated March 16, 1933 read: “In the Chita region there are 969 Easterners, including 805 Chinese people.”¹⁰ In 1933, in the Mogochinsky district bordering on the Amur Region, there were recorded 567 “eastern workers,” most of them Chinese.¹¹ The “Memorandum on the state of work among eastern workers” stated that at the mines of the Ust-Kariysky district there were 385 eastern workers, in Kozlovo 87, and in Bogomolovo

⁵ I.S. “Zemledel'cheskaya Sibir'. K voprosu o chislennosti sel'skokhozyaystvennogo naseleniya Sibiri,” in vol. 41 of *Izvestiya VSO IRGO*, 1910 (Irkutsk: [S.n.], 1911), 155.

⁶ *Tablitsa naseleniia po natsional'nostyam, polu, vozrastu i gramotnosti* (Irkutsk: [N.s.], 1923), 88.

⁷ State archive of the latest history of the Irkutsk region (henceforth GANIIO), f. 123, op. 2, d. 360, l. 29.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ State archive of the Transbaikalian territory (GAZK), f. II-71, op. 1, d. 468, l. 283.

¹⁰ GANIIO. Ф. 123. Оп. 4. Д. 86. Л. 14–17.

¹¹ State Archive of the Amur Region (GAAO), f. P-114, op. 2, d. 6, l. 8.

105 eastern workers.”¹² The documents noted that “the absolute majority of the Easterners” came from China.

In the second half of the 1930s, the Soviet Union carried out two censuses, which give an idea of the number of Chinese people in Russia’s regions. The 1937 USSR census recorded almost 59 thousand Chinese people, including foreign citizens.¹³ The census enumerated 8,127 Soviet Chinese citizens in the Chita region,¹⁴ and 2,172 Soviet Chinese citizens in the Buryat-Mongol Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic.¹⁵ In addition, 1,065 Chinese foreign citizens lived in the Chita region, and 478 Chinese foreigners in Buryatia.¹⁶ The percentage of Chinese people who adopted Soviet citizenship was higher in Transbaikalia than in the Far East and in Russia as a whole. In the Chita region, the percentage of Chinese people in the total population of the region was slightly less than in the Far Eastern Territory. This comparison looks different, though, if we take into account the fact that in the Far East the Chinese population was concentrated in Vladivostok and that the wider Transbaikal region, including Buryatia and the adjacent Bodaibo district of Irkutsk *oblast’*, included approximately thirteen thousand Chinese. In broad regional terms the Chinese presence in Transbaikalia was not less noticeable than in the Far East.

By the end of 1939, there remained just two regions in the Soviet Union, where Chinese people made up a significant proportion of the population – about 0.5%.¹⁷ The largest community was now in the Chita region, where the 1939 census recorded 6,017 Chinese,¹⁸ which was slightly more than in the Khabarovsk Territory, including the Amur Region. In the Buryat-Mongolian ASSR, the 1939 census recorded 1,498 Soviet Chinese people.¹⁹

Demographically, Chinese people in Transbaikalia shared several characteristics. Most came from the northern China. Party committee records from the the Ust-Kariysk *raion* of the Eastern Siberian *krai* noted in 1933:

The vast majority of Easterners came from the provinces of Shandong, Zhili and three eastern provinces (Manchuria).²⁰

Additionally, the overwhelming majority of the Chinese population, both Soviet citizens and foreigners, were men. For example, in the early 1930s at the Baleysky plant there were several hundred Chinese men and only one Chinese woman. Of 1,065 Chinese foreigners in the Chita region in 1937, there were 1,019 men;²¹ in Buryatia, out of 478 Chinese people there were recorded 422 men.²² The available documents give an idea of the age groups of Chinese people in Transbaikalia. According to a survey of Chinese workers at the Baleysky plant, 92 people were over 55 years old, 115 workers were at the age of 25–45, and only 7 Chinese people were under the age of 25.²³

¹² GANIIO, f. 123, op. 4, d. 53, l. 58.

¹³ B.B. Zhiromskaya, and Yu.A. Polyakov, eds. *Vsesoiuznaia perepis' naseleniia 1937 goda: Obshchie itogi. Sbornik dokumentov i materialov* (Moscow: Rossiiskaia politicheskaiia entsiklopediia Publ., 2007), 87.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 104.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 91.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 424.

¹⁷ Yu.A. Polyakov, ed. *Vsesoiuznaia perepis' naseleniia 1939 goda: Osnovnye itogi* (Moscow: Nauka Publ., 1992), 57.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 65.

¹⁹ N.A. Potapova, *‘Kharbinskaia’ operatsiia NKVD SSSR*, 92.

²⁰ GANIIO, f. 123, op. 4, d. 53, l. 58.

²¹ V.P. Motrevich, “Inostrannye grazhdane-kitaitsy v Sovetskom Soyuze po dannym Vsesoyuznoi perepisi naseleniia SSSR 1937 g.” In *Kitai: istoriia i sovremennost': materialy VIII mezhdunarodnoi nauchno-prakticheskoi konferentsii. Ekaterinburg, 7–8 oktiabria 2014 g.* (Yekaterinburg: Uralskogo un-ta Publ., 2015), 181.

²² *Ibid.*, 180.

²³ GANIIO, f. 123, op. 2, d. 278, l. 11.

Some Chinese men in Transbaikalia were married to Russian women. The “Memorandum on the state of work among Eastern workers” stated: “About 30% are married to Russians; Easterners have a lot of children.”²⁴ Data on the number of children in mixed Sino-Russian families can be found in the volumes of the *Commemorative Book for Victims of Political Repression in Eastern Transbaikalia*. For example, Yan Delin, a resident of the village of Olovyanny, who was sentenced to 3 years in prison in 1938, had a Russian wife and 5 children.²⁵ The arrested Chinese men Tong Xiang and Pan Chushin each had four children from Russian wives.²⁶ Among the repressed were Chinese people who had three, two and one children. But not all Chinese people had children; the March 1933 “Memorandum on work among Eastern workers in the Chita region” noted: “In the Chita region there are 805 Chinese people. There are 60–100 Chinese children in total, but their mothers are all Russian.”²⁷

Chinese people were employed in various spheres and sectors of the national economy in the 1930s. The documents indicate that most of the Chinese people worked in the mines of Transbaikalia. A significant number of Chinese people worked in agriculture and were also artisans. In the East Siberian Territory in the early 1930s, 5,326 Chinese people were members of the “Tsvetmetzoloto” trade union, 112 people were members of the coal miners’ trade union, 123 Chinese people were in the trade union of the forest industries, 109 – in artisanal cooperatives (*Promkooperatsia*), 47 – in the trade union of tanners. Eleven people were livestock breeders, six people were worked on state farms and two Chinese people were listed as members of the mechanical engineering trade union.²⁸

A collective farm called “Red China” was formed near Chita and existed until the end of the 1930s.²⁹ In Chita itself there were three Chinese gardeners’ artels, uniting 85 people, in 1933.³⁰ In 1930, nineteen Chinese collective farmers were officially registered in the Mogochinsky district.³¹ The data on repressed Transbaikalia residents indicate a significant number of Chinese people employed in agriculture and handicrafts. The documents of the regional Communist Party organization make mention of Chinese people of various professions and spheres of activity, including, among others, a head of a mining workshop, a director of a district store, a controller of a gold-extracting shop, a superintendent of a mine administration, a head of a warehouse.³²

The Situation of Chinese Workers

Most Chinese people in the 1930s lived in difficult socio-economic conditions:

The living conditions are poor. They live in fanza-barracks, which are small, dark, damp, dirty.³³

Chinese people who lived in Transbaikalia in the 1930s remained alien to the existing political regime; they did not support the ideological and political attitudes of the Bolsheviks, but remained adherents of traditional Chinese values. In their reports on

²⁴ GANIIO, f. 123, op. 4, d. 53, l. 58.

²⁵ *Kniga pamiati zhertv politicheskikh repressii v Vostochnom Zabaykal’e*, vol. 6 (Chita: Poisk Publ., 2008), 386.

²⁶ *Kniga pamiati zhertv politicheskikh repressii v Vostochnom Zabaykal’e*, vol. 5 (Chita: Poisk Publ., 2007), 16.

²⁷ GANIIO, f. 123, op. 4, d. 86, l. 14–17.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, op. 2, d. 279, l. 4.

²⁹ A.P. Tarasov, *Zabaikal’e i Kitai: opyt analiza mezhdunarodnykh svyazei* (Chita: ZabGPU Publ., 2003), 153.

³⁰ GANIIO, f. 123, op. 4, d. 86, l. 16.

³¹ GAAO, f. P-114, op. 2, d. 6, l. 8.

³² GAZK, f. II-3, op. 1, d. 700, l. 1–32.

³³ *Ibid.*, f. II-71, op. 1, d. 468, l. 301.

the results of a survey of Chinese workers at the mines of Transbaikalia in 1930, Soviet commissioners wrote:

They are not politically conscious, they have no idea what the Communist Party, trade union, Soviet power are, they don't know about the events in China, etc. Most of them smoke opium, and some of them are engaged in gambling games, they firmly believe in religion.³⁴

Further:

They are not politically conscious [...] In their minds there are nationalism and utopian dreams: "to become rich," dreams of the Manchu dynasty: The emperor will return, and in China there will be the kingdom of peace and unification.³⁵

Meanwhile, anti-Chinese attitudes were prevalent among the Russian population. In the 1930s these sentiments were manifested in discrimination, domestic violence, and various forms of crime. In 1931, the regional newspaper *Vostochno-Sibirskaya Pravda* reported:

Many cases of beating and humiliating Chinese workers are not brought to trial.³⁶

The newspaper also noted:

There are facts of rude attitude toward the Chinese workers on the part of the administration.³⁷

It was alleged that Russian workers in Ust-Kariysk *raion* had been issued fur coats and mittens, while Chinese workers got nothing. The document noted:

Chinese noodles were brought, but the Chinese workers were not given the noodles. For the October holidays, the Russian workers were given meat, but the Chinese workers were told that it was not their holiday³⁸

The Chinese workers complained to their representatives in Chita:

Comrade Lyufuchen, you manage the Eastern workers at all the mines, you should improve our lives. Our life is very bad, there is no bathhouse; besides, the workers are paid very little. In the store, Russian workers buy goods out of turn; a lot of Eastern workers do not understand Russian. We wait for 2 or 3 hours for goods, but can't buy anything.³⁹

At the same time, the Chinese workers fulfilled and exceeded plans. In the early 1930s, the documents of the East Siberian regional organization of the All-Union Communist Party of Bolsheviks stated:

Ust-Kara. Thanks to the extensive mass work, the main groups of the Easterners declared themselves shock workers and fulfill the norms of up to 130% ... In Baley, the brigade of the Easterners turned out to be the best brigade of miners, which received the challenge banner.⁴⁰

The party bodies constantly pointed to evidence of discrimination against Chinese workers:

The awarding of prizes to Easterners is not satisfactory... Instances when they are promoted to management can be counted on one hand, and they are totally absent from party and trade union work.⁴¹

³⁴ GAZK, f. П-71, op. 1, d. 468, l. 301.

³⁵ Ibid., l. 334.

³⁶ *Vostochno-Sibirskaya pravda*, March 2, 1931.

³⁷ Ibid., March 4, 1931.

³⁸ GANIIO, f. 123, op. 4, d. 86, l. 19.

³⁹ GAZK, f. П-71, op. 1, d. 468, l. 332.

⁴⁰ GANIIO, f. 123, op. 2, d. 279, l. 8.

⁴¹ Ibid.

The party bodies of the East Siberian *krai* circulated the following episodes:

The mine manager arrests eastern comrade Ti-Hsiang, a candidate member of the VKP(b), for no good reason. He kept him under arrest for six hours ... The Russian workers get drunk and beat up the Easterners... Worker Gusev mocks the Chinese worker – the party candidate... Member of the bureau of the party cell Zhukov (Head of town works) always referred to the Easterners as “Dzhan-Zo-Lin” threatening them, “I’ll send you to Manchuria tomorrow”... the cell reprimanded him not for chauvinism, but for drunkenness.⁴²

The documents on Transbaikalia stated:

In the first place the obstacle to the implementation of our tasks was nationalism which is expressed in the fact that Russian people disdain Chinese people. Thus, for example, when communicating they use such words “chink,” “pheasant.”⁴³

The leadership of the East Siberian *krai* also pointed out the racist views in the region. A draft of the “Closed Letter to all the district committees and party cells of the East Siberian Territory” stated:

The investigative materials of work among Chinese workers, produced by the Chita Control Commission and Workers’-Peasants’ Inspectorate (*Rabkrin*), cite a number of instances of outrageous attitudes toward eastern workers; in addition, [...] there is another “theory,” directed against “cross-breeding with the Chinese”: “Since there is no inflow of Chinese women to Transbaikalia, there is no natural increase in the Chinese population. Cross-breeding with the Chinese is insignificant, and such cross-breeding produces offspring with weakened vitality and high mortality. Great-power theories and minor theories of this kind are by no means rare phenomena.”⁴⁴

Chinese people were not protected from the arbitrariness of the special services. A report from the Ust-Kariysk region may serve as illustration:

In 1931 the OGPU carried out an operation; they imprisoned all the Eastern workers, began to torture them in every possible way. They were beaten, poured with cold water, their fingers were tied over their heads, they were pulled to the ceiling, etc. to demand gold from them [...] more than a hundred people fled to China. At the beginning of 1932, the OGPU again carried out an operation...⁴⁵

Starting in the early 1930s, opportunities for in-migration of Chinese into the border regions of Transbaikalia practically disappeared. With the closure of the Russian-Chinese border, free migration ceased; and after the creation of the neighboring state of Manchukuo under the complete control of Japan, the Chinese arriving across the border (deserters, interned soldiers, etc.) no longer remained in Transbaikalia. On the other hand, Chinese people living in the region, especially those employed in the mining industry, were looking for opportunities to leave their enterprises, as described in this message from the Eastern Siberian Party committee:

The situation described above caused the outflow of Eastern workers from the territory of the region; up to 1,500 people left the gold industry. Over the past year, the influx of new Eastern workers to the territory of the region completely stopped.⁴⁶

The documents of the Chita party organization also noted that the Eastern workers felt like leaving the Kozlovo mine.⁴⁷

⁴² GANIIO, f. 123, op. 2, d. 24, l. 105–106.

⁴³ GAZK, f. II-71, op. 1, d. 468, l. 301 ob.

⁴⁴ GANIIO, f. 123, op. 2, d. 24, l. 40.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, op. 4, d. 86. l. 20 ob.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, op. 2, d. 24, l. 109.

⁴⁷ GAZK, f. II-71, op. 1, d. 468, l. 301.

Soviet Policy toward Chinese People

The shortage of workers that arose in the late 1920s in the USSR made the task of attracting or retaining Chinese workers especially urgent; the country needed gold from the Siberian mines. In addition, in the early 1930s the Bolsheviks tried to make life in the Soviet Union attractive to the peoples of Asia. All this predetermined an active Soviet policy toward the Chinese population of Transbaikalia. In the first half of the 1930s the policy was aimed at improving the living and working conditions of the Soviet Chinese, as well as their ideological and political acculturation.

Development and implementation of measures to protect the interests of Chinese people and propaganda among them were handled by the local and regional Party organizations. The first regional party conference on work with Asian workers took place in Chita on December 20, 1930.⁴⁸ The draft “Resolution on the report on work among the Eastern workers” presented a contradictory picture. The document began with words about the “great successes in the implementation of the Leninist national policy,” but ended as follows:

In most areas of the region, and especially in the gold industry, this work is completely unsatisfactory.⁴⁹

Vostochno-Sibirskaya Pravda devoted almost an entire page to the struggle against chauvinism in a March 1931 issue. The newspaper noted:

The Chita Workers’-Peasants’ Inspectorate (*Rabkrin*), which has investigated the state of work among Eastern workers and their cultural and living conditions, reports: “In some cases, the court and the prosecutor’s office do not pay enough attention to protecting the rights of Eastern workers.”⁵⁰

The party leadership of the East Siberian *krai* tried to organize a struggle against Great-Russian chauvinism through the newspaper:

After listening to Comrade Nikolaev’s report about episodes of great-power chauvinism and local nationalism ... construction workers for Tsvetmetzoloto drew the conclusion that these are the acts of the class enemy, a manifestation of deviations from the general line of the party...⁵¹

The most important tool for engaging Chinese people in socialist construction was the trade union movement. According to statistics, by May 1, 1931, 6,323 Chinese were in the trade unions on the territory of the East Siberian *krai*.⁵² The “Memorandum on the state of work among Eastern workers” indicated that “60% of Eastern workers are trade union members.”⁵³

In 1931, the regional committee of the All-Union Communist Party of Bolsheviks made a decision “to enhance the satisfaction of social and domestic needs and demands of eastern workers.” The decision stated:

...The Tsvetmetsnab together with Krajsnab are to allocate the necessary fund for the production of food based on the calculation of servicing 5000 people [...] In 1932 the *Krai* Consumer Union is to ensure the development of truck farming in the mining areas...⁵⁴

The vigorous activity of the Soviet authorities to protect the interests of Chinese workers in the early 1930s brought some success. A 1933 “Survey of the state of cultural work and living conditions among Eastern workers in Mogochinsky *raion*” stated:

⁴⁸ GANIIO, f. 123, op. 2, d. 278, l. 32.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, l. 1.

⁵⁰ *Vostochno-Sibirskaya pravda*, March 2, 1931.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, March 4, 1931.

⁵² GANIIO, f. 123, op. 7, d. 19, l. 77.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, op. 4, d. 53, l. 61.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, op. 2, d. 278, l. 2.

a) the hostels for the Easterners are satisfactory, b) supply for the Easterners – at economic work, they receive a ration and everything based on workers' supply...⁵⁵

The party and Soviet bodies tried to organize cultural and socio-political work among the masses through clubs and circles. However, this work did not receive adequate material and organizational support. The “Memorandum on the state of work among the Eastern workers” alleged:

In general, Party, trade union, and economic organizations undervalue work among the Eastern workers. Nothing is done systematically. Work is carried out only in a campaign manner.⁵⁶

A March 16, 1933, report by the instructor of the Chita Party committee (*gorkom*) “On work among the eastern workers in the Chita region,” observed: “the financial situation of the international club is poor.”⁵⁷ Similarly, “On the survey of cultural work and living conditions among the Eastern workers in the Mogochinsky district” noted with respect to Red Corners servicing Eastern workers:

c) this work was weak, there is not a single Red Corner for the Eastern workers...⁵⁸

In the summer of 1932, the East Siberian Party committee (*kraikom*) made the decision to publish an insert in Chinese in the Khabarovsk newspaper *Rabochii put'*

to meet the cultural and domestic needs of the Chinese workers of East Siberian *krai*.⁵⁹

The print run of the insert was set at two thousand copies, and editorial space was provided in Irkutsk. That fall, under the title *Udarnik*, the Chinese language newspaper for Chinese workers in Eastern Siberia began to be published in Irkutsk.

An important area of work among Chinese workers were Soviet campaigns to eradicate illiteracy and to Romanize the Chinese script. In the early 1930s the authorities maintained:

The 1931 target figures for the liquidation of illiteracy among Eastern workers were fulfilled only by 55%... the main difficulty was that there were not enough liquidators.⁶⁰

Courses for “Easterner liquidators” were accordingly set up in 1931. The documents stated:

From the second half of 1932, after the first cohort of liquidators graduated, work began on the liquidation of illiteracy, using the Latinized alphabet of the Chinese script.⁶¹

Documents of the East Siberian *kraikom* commented:

In the second five-year plan, the Party and governments set the task of transforming every worker into a conscious participant in the socialist construction. In fulfilling this task among the Chinese workers, the Romanization of the Chinese script plays an enormous role as the decisive lever of the cultural revolution.⁶²

In 1933, the party organizations of the East Siberian *krai* tried to intensify their work to “liquidate illiteracy among Chinese workers on the basis of the new Latinized

⁵⁵ GAAO, f. P-114, op. 2, d. 6, l. 8.

⁵⁶ GANIIO, f. 123, op. 4, d. 53, l. 61.

⁵⁷ Ibid. d. 86, l. 16.

⁵⁸ GAAO, f. P-114, op. 2, d. 6, l. 8.

⁵⁹ GANIIO, f. 123, op. 1, d. 315, l. 110.

⁶⁰ Ibid., op. 2, d. 278, l. 56.

⁶¹ GANIIO, f. 123, op. 4, d. 53, l. 60.

⁶² Ibid., l. 154.

alphabet.” The resolution of the Regional Committee of the All-Union Communist Party of Bolsheviks noted:

to organize three-month liquidator courses for thirty people in Irkutsk, two-month courses for twenty people at the Nerchinsk plant, two-month courses for twenty people in Chita.⁶³

The educational work with the Chinese workers was not limited to the “liquidation of illiteracy” program. The *kraikom* resolution on the report on work among Eastern workers, adopted in 1931, specified that the regional economic council (*kraevoi sovmarkhoz*) and sectors of the regional Council of Trade Unions should

outline practical measures for organizing training courses for Eastern workers through the worker faculty (*rabfak*) of the Medical Institut, the Institute for Soviet Construction and Law, and the Mining Institute within twenty days’ time. It is necessary to expand the departments for the Eastern workers at the regional school of education (up to twenty people) and at the Chita medical school (up to thirty people).⁶⁴

Chinese workers were also sent to Irkutsk to train as engineers, technicians and managers.

To attract Chinese people into the ranks of the Communist Party and improve work among the Chinese Communists in Transbaikalia, a system of party training was also established for the Easterners. A Chinese branch of the Chita Soviet Party School was organized in 1931. An initial cohort of 75 Chinese was admitted to this department, most of them workers from the gold mines. In 1933, 63 Chinese people studied at the school.⁶⁵ For the purposes of retention, scholarships for the Chinese students were increased, as were the teachers’ salaries.

The Party also inaugurated short courses, held in Chita, to accelerate the training of Chinese activists. Documents from 1932 indicate that eight Chinese workers completed two-month courses for party activists and propagandists, and sixteen completed one-month activist courses. In 1933, Party organs resolved to

confirm the plan of party training among Eastern workers and collective farmers with a target figure of 450 people and specified that such training should reach 100% of members and candidate members of the VKP(b).⁶⁶

In 1932, the Eastern Siberian *kraikom* announced the decision to admit a group of 15-20 “Easterners” into the six-month course for party activists.⁶⁷

An important avenue for work with Chinese people was their admission into the ranks of the Communist Party. Most of the Chinese Communists lived in Chita and the Nerchinsk-Zavodskoy District, each of which had more than 50 Chinese Party members. In 1933 in the Mogochinsky district, out of 567 mostly Chinese “Eastern workers,” 31 were members of the Communist Party and two were in the Komsomol.⁶⁸

Although Eastern workers were involved in all political measures and campaigns, Chinese residents did not believe in Soviet propaganda. This can be inferred from the “Memorandum on the state of work among the Eastern workers”:

The Eastern workers exceeded the loan plan of the first year of the second five-year plan... by 10–30%, they also participate in all kinds of public fundraising ... The bonds of the loan are never issued, and

⁶³ GANIIO, f. 123, op. 4, d. 53, l. 145.

⁶⁴ Ibid., op. 2, d. 278, l. 2–3.

⁶⁵ Ibid., op. 4, d. 86, l. 14.

⁶⁶ GAZK, f. II-75, op. 1, d. 853, l. 39.

⁶⁷ GANIIO, f. 123, op. 1, d. 315, l. 150.

⁶⁸ GAAO, f. P-114, op. 2, d. 6, l. 8.

if Eastern workers receive them, they throw them away. Their attitude is: “we subscribed to the bond, which means, we won’t get any more money.” This shows poor work among the masses.⁶⁹

Even joining the ranks of the ruling party of the USSR for most Chinese was only a means of socio-political adaptation in Soviet society. It is no coincidence that among the Chinese Communists there was a high percentage of people not involved in hard physical labor, though there were also ordinary workers.⁷⁰ Indeed, in the early 1930s the number of Chinese Communists in Transbaikalia increased by several times and reached roughly 300 people. However, the quality of the Chinese Party members is suggested by the following document:

We have studied the Chinese citizens who are in the ranks of the VKP(b): 1. FANG-SHO-SE [...] He does not engage in productive labor, he serves as a liaison between the business office of Soyuzzoloto and worker artels. For this, he receives rations for five people in summer, and in winter rations for two or three. He organizes gambling games, resells opium... 2. LI-SI-ZUN [...] He heads two artels [...] He does not engage in productive labor, but exploits a worker force... 3. LEE-HO [...] He is uneducated and has poor class-consciousness, but is much better than Fang-Sho-Se and Li-Si-Zun.⁷¹

Repression

A turning point in the history of Chinese people in the USSR, as well as of many other Soviet nations, was Stalinist political repression. The geopolitical realities of the late 1930s impelled a new wave of mass repression precisely in the areas bordering on Manchuria. There were some regional differences between how the repression was carried out in Transbaikalia as against the Far East. Historically and geopolitically, Transbaikalia remained a part of Siberia, which predetermined some distinctive aspects of regional policy toward “disloyal” groups of the population.

The border position of Transbaikalia caused the Soviet special services to take heightened interest in the region’s Chinese. An NKVD “special report” about East Siberia, dated October 2, 1936, noted:

As a result of our measures toward Easterners, we once again identified and liquidated a large espionage organization in September that encompassed all the main economic facilities and the military airfield network in Transbaikalia [...] twenty people were arrested, including seventeen Chinese people (three Nanjing subjects) and three Russians.⁷²

The special services described it as follows:

Masked by the “Baikal” fishing artel, on instructions of the Nanking Consulate, a group of Chinese agents of the Consulate opened a number of restaurants, canteens and repair shops, and launched espionage activities.⁷³

The Soviet special services named former employee of the Chinese Consulate in Ulan-Ude Kon-Chun-I as the head of the Chinese espionage group. Upon the conclusion of the case on July 28, 1936, three Chinese people and one Russian were brought to justice.

This case was fabricated by the Soviet special services; there was no evidence in the case, except for the personal confessions of the accused. There was no Chinese Consulate in the capital of Buryatia, and Chinese spies, according to their confessions, for some reason worked simultaneously on the instructions of the consulates of two mutually hostile states. The falsification of the case is also indicated by the fact that the Soviet spe-

⁶⁹ GANIIO, f. 123, op. 4, d. 53, l. 61.

⁷⁰ GAZK, f. II-3, op.1, d. 700, l. 1–32.

⁷¹ Ibid., f. II-71, op. 1, d. 468, l. 335.

⁷² GANIIO, f. 123, op. 15, d. 57, l. 38.

⁷³ Ibid.

cial services connected this case with the murder of Kirov and with the Trotskyists. But in 1936, the repression had not yet become a mass phenomenon; as a result, only four out of twenty arrested people were convicted.

Mass repression against Chinese people began in 1937. Chinese people were not evicted from Eastern Siberia, in contrast to Primorye and the Amur region, but those Chinese deported from the Far East were prohibited from living in the Chita region. Among the first Chinese to be repressed in Transbaikalia were Chinese employees of the Soviet special services. In July 1937, P.V. Grigorovsky, a Chinese employee of the Chita sector of the East Siberian NKVD, was arrested on charges of “treason” and then shot (he was rehabilitated in 1959). Lieutenant of State Security S.M. Lenitsev (Hou Mingqi) was arrested as a “Japanese spy” in Chita in 1938, though a year later he was released and reinstated in his job. Chinese communists were also among the first to be repressed. In 1938, several workers of the Kozlovo mine in the Nerchinsk-Zavodskoy region, as well as other enterprises, were expelled from the party and arrested. The documents identified the fact that they were “enemies of the people” as the “main reason for expulsion.”⁷⁴

Repression against Chinese people was carried out throughout the USSR. The “Harbin operation” alone led to the repression of more than ten thousand Chinese. Yet by the end of the winter of 1938, only 152 Chinese people had been arrested in Chita *oblast'*, fewer than in Novosibirsk *oblast'* or Krasnoyarsk *krai*.⁷⁵ However, in 1938-1939, thousands of Chinese people in Transbaikalia fell under political repression, and many of them perished. The repression touched all strata of the Chinese community in Transbaikalia. People shot in the fall of 1938 included Pan Kuichin, a worker from Chita; Pan Tyatzi, a gardener from the Nerchinsk region; and Pan Chukho, a photographer, among others.⁷⁶ A Chita historian writes:

A total of 1,500 Chinese residents of Chita were arrested. The true evil demon for the Chinese was the head of the 3rd department of the NKVD, senior state security lieutenant Yakov Stepanovich Kamenev, who led the campaign to exterminate Chinese people.⁷⁷

A historian from Novosibirsk gives the following examples:

In April 1938, in Sretensk [...] a group of Chinese deserters, which included 120 people, was allegedly liquidated. ...In February 1938, in Rukhlov, the Chita Oblast NKVD fabricated a case of a sabotage and insurgent organization of Chinese smugglers, in which 144 people were arrested.⁷⁸

O.V. Zalesskaya notes:

In the Baley district, out of 426 arrested Chinese people, they were able to prove guilt of only 78 people. During the interrogations and investigation, in Baley alone every fourth Chinese died (117 out of 426), in Chita – every third (568 out of 1500).⁷⁹

More than 300 Chinese people were arrested in Buryatia, 196 of them were sentenced to be shot.⁸⁰

As a result of mass political repression, the total number of Chinese people in Transbaikalia decreased. Researchers show that from 1937 to 1939 the Chinese population declined from 8,127 to 6,016 in Chita *oblast'* and from 2,172 to 1,498 in the

⁷⁴ GAZK, f. П-3, op. 1, d. 239, l. 34.

⁷⁵ N.A. Potapova, *'Kharbinskaia' operatsiia NKVD SSSR*, 80.

⁷⁶ *Kniga pamiati zhertv politicheskikh repressii v Vostochnom Zabaykal'e*, vol. 5, 16.

⁷⁷ V.I. Vasilevskii, *Tragicheskaia stranitsa zabaikal'skoi istorii*, 113–114.

⁷⁸ N.A. Potapova, *'Kharbinskaia' operatsiia NKVD SSSR*, 91.

⁷⁹ O.V. Zalesskaya, *Kitaiskie migranty na Dal'nem Vostoke Rossii*, 287.

⁸⁰ D.B. Fartusov, “Political repression,” 74.

Buryat-Mongolian ASSR.⁸¹ The reduced number of Chinese in the region and a change in Soviet policy made the problem of Chinese people in Transbaikalia less urgent. With the emergence of an unlimited pool of forced prisoner labor in the second half of the 1930s, the Soviet state had less need for Chinese workers. Moreover, under the conditions of the world war, the ideas of “proletarian internationalism” lost their relevance: the country’s global competitiveness now depended on the army, rather than on the “attractiveness of socialism” for the peoples of other countries. After 1939, the Chinese community in Transbaikalia survived and played a significant role in the economic life of the region, but Chinese people were subject to legal restrictions imposed on representatives of many nationalities. In the eyes of the Soviet authorities and the Russian public, Chinese migrants continued to be perceived as representatives both of the USSR’s ally, China, and of its enemy, Japan.

Thus, the 1930s was an important period in the history of the Chinese community in Transbaikalia. During that period, the Chinese community in eastern Transbaikalia was one of the largest in the Soviet Union in both relative and absolute terms. The percentage of Chinese people who adopted Soviet citizenship was also higher in Transbaikalia than in the country as a whole. Chinese migrants were important both for the Soviet economy and for the realization of the ideological and political aspirations of the USSR’s ruling party. In the first half of the 1930s a great deal of work was done to improve the living and working conditions of Chinese workers and to involve them in various political, propaganda, cultural and educational campaigns. Despite the purposeful policy of the ruling party in the USSR and the authorities of the region to acculturate Chinese people and to create a comfortable living and working environment for them, most Chinese people retained the views and way of life that Chinese labor migrants in Russia had traditionally held. In the second half of the 1930s, repressive methods and principles began to prevail in Soviet policy toward the Chinese diaspora, as a result of which the Chinese population of Transbaikalia noticeably declined. The special status of Transbaikalia, as a border region distinct from the Far Eastern *krai*, gave a regional coloration to the situation of Chinese inhabitants, including the preservation of the Chinese population in the border areas during the period of political repression in the second half of the 1930s.

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⁸¹ N.A. Potapova, ‘Kharbinskaia’ operatsiia NKVD SSSR, 92.

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Информация об авторе / Information about the author

В.Г. Дацышен, д-р ист. наук, главный научный сотрудник Института демографических исследований Федерального научно-исследовательского социологического центра РАН, 119333, Россия, г. Москва, улица Фотиевой, д. 6, корп. 1; профессор кафедры истории России, мировых и региональных цивилизаций Сибирского федерального университета, 660041, Россия, г. Красноярск, пр. Свободный, 82А; профессор кафедры всеобщей истории Красноярского государственного педагогического университета имени В.П. Астафьева, 660049, Россия, г. Красноярск, ул. Ады Лебедевой, дом 89; generalhistory2005@yandex.ru; <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6471-8327>

V.G. Datsyshen, Dr. Habil. Hist., Chief Researcher of the Institute of Demographic Research, Federal Research Sociological Center of Russian Academy of Sciences; 6, korpus 1, Fotievoy Str., Moscow, 119333, Russia; Professor of the Department of History of Russia, World and Regional Civilizations, Siberian Federal University, 2 A, Svobodny Av., Krasnoyarsk, 660041, Russia; Professor of the Department of World History, KSPU named after V.P. Astafiev, 89, Ady Lebedevoy Str., Krasnoyarsk, 660049, Russia; generalhistory2005@yandex.ru; <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6471-8327>