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The “Yellow Peril” Syndrome in Contemporary Russia

In the last two decades, the term “Yellow Peril” has been appearing almost at all levels of the Russian debate on the influx of immigrants from the PRC. In various situations it has been permeating into public statements of politicians, social activists and representatives of scientific circles. It has also often appeared in the press. The origins of this term, as well as the social phobia which it defines, should be sought in times of the nineteenth-century Western colonialism. Due to the long break with tsarist tradition in Soviet times, post-socialist return of the “Yellow Peril” syndrome as a part of a mosaic of various collective phobias that affect the worldview of modern Russians is puzzling. Given the strong convergence of pre-revolutionary and the current perception of threat that inevitably was to come from the East, the problem of relationship between historical and contemporary “Yellow Peril” in Russia is interesting. In this context, there is a question to what extent we can talk about the possible continuation of the nineteenth-century mindset, and to what extent we can discuss its reconstruction after dismantling the Soviet Union. Due to the fact that this typical for the 19th century concept, steeped in the civilizational and racial rhetoric, cannot function today without any changes. What is more, one should also consider the new components of the contemporary “Yellow Peril” syndrome. They derive partly from the Soviet past and the consequences of the radical departure from the socialist categories of understanding the reality, and partly from completely new and extremely different from the nineteenth-century organization of the international life and changes in global balance of power. Finally, considering the vitality of the “Yellow Peril” syndrome, persisting for more than two decades in Russia, one should note its implications for the internal political situation in the country.

The “Yellow Peril” in the 19th Century

The „Yellow Peril” syndrome generally can be defined as a complex of fears and prejudices associated with the sense of variously understood threat from the expansion and domination of representatives of the yellow race, felt and expressed by the white people indentifying themselves with the Western civilization. Distinctive for this phenomenon, civilizational and racial rhetoric, based on Europocentric colonial approach to culturally and religiously different non-Western nations, permeated the political and publicist discourse and became widespread among the “white societies” at the end of the 19th century. Dangerous “yellow race” was identified mainly with the Japanese, due to their expansionism at the turn of the 20th century, and Chinese, which were politically and militarily weak “humiliated nation” on the one hand, but on the other they presented a huge demographic potential and never went under the “full” colonial domination of the West.

The term “Yellow Peril” as such was popularized by Kaiser Wilhelm II who used it in 1895 in the context of Japan’s victory in the war with China.¹ The idea, which was hidden under this phrase, was the racist element of geopolitical thinking in the 19th century on the one hand, and the response to the intensification of Chinese and Japanese migrations to the countries of the “civilized West” on the other. Placed in the context of the reflections on the global balance of power, it was characterized by emphasizing the significance of racial differences rather than national or interpersonal divisions, it was derived not from fear of “... any one country or people in particular, but from a vague and ominous sense of the vast, faceless, nameless yellow horde, the rising tide, indeed, of color.”² To some extent, in European and American perceptions such as sense of threat from “alien other” racialized their own colonial expansion—dividing and weakening of Asia was associated with a conviction that if it was militarily strong, it would pose a great threat. In this situation, imperialism and colonization were seen as a specific form of prevention.³ Perception of “organized yellow force” had also an impact on the growth of resentment against Asian immigrants in Western countries. In the United States fears of a competitive labour force from China and taking control over the national agricultural areas by “strangers” resulted in enactment of The Chinese Exclusion Act in 1882, which limited the number

¹ D.A. Metraux, *Jack London and The Yellow Peril*, “Education About Asia,” 2009, Vol. 1(14), p. 29.

² J. Dower, *War without Mercy: Race and Power in the Pacific War*, New York 1986, p. 156, In: D. Scott, *China and the International System, 1840–1949: Power, Presence, and Perceptions in a Century of Humiliation*, New York 2008, p. 6.

³ D. Scott, *op. cit.*, p. 7.

of Chinese immigrants in the country.⁴ Anti-immigrant resentment and fears in the U.S. were soon “transferred” to the Japanese, arriving to California in the last decade of the 19th and at the beginning of the 20th century, filling a demand gap that emerged in the labour market in the agricultural sector.⁵ The Japanese were seen as a potential “fifth column,” Hostility and suspiciousness toward them undoubtedly increased when Japan had defeated Russia in the military conflict in 1905. It was the first time in the modern era when the representatives of the alien race had triumphed over the white Europeans.⁶

The “Yellow Peril” syndrome functioning in the 19th century in the Russian Empire was not a unique phenomenon, it was a part of the outlined above, typical of European and American colonizers system of civilizational and racial prejudices and fears toward the “yellow masses,” Firstly, it was related to the Japanese expansionism strongly affecting the perception of external threats in Russia due to geographic location of the country and close proximity of newly colonized Far Eastern lands to the aggressor. Secondly, it developed because of the intensive contact between the Russian Far Eastern settlers and Asian immigrants, including Chinese, which was taking place since the second half of 19th century to the 30s of 20th century. It is worth mentioning that the defeat in the war with Japan in 1905 significantly contributed to the deterioration of Russian approach to the Chinese immigrant population, which was manifested, inter alia, in strengthening of formal restrictions on immigrants and transferred the discussion about the “yellow peril” to the political level. In the early 20th century this problem was openly discussed during the sessions of the Duma.⁷

On the eastern borderland of the Russian Empire, the Chinese functioned mainly as a cheap labour force that enabled the implementation of construction projects and exploitation of local natural resources, suppliers of cheap goods and services, small traders and entrepreneurs.⁸ They were

⁴ K. Lee, *Asian and African-American Co-operation and Competition in Nineteenth Century USA*, “Graduate Journal of Asia-Pacific Studies,” 2006, Vol. 4:1, p. 82.

⁵ K. Aoki, *The Yellow Pacific: Transnational Identities, Diasporic Racialization and Myth(s) of The “Asian Century”*, “University of California Davis Law Review,” 2011, Vol. 3(44), pp. 913-914.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 920.

⁷ Т.Н. Сорокина, *К вопросу о выработке иммиграционного законодательства для дальневосточных областей России в конце XIX–начале XX в.*, „Вестник Томского государственного университета,” 2004, Vol. 281, p. 67.

⁸ V. Karlusov, *Chinese Presence in the Russian Far East: An Economist’s Perspective*, paper presented at the international seminar “Human Flows across National Borders in Northeast Asia,” Monterey Institute of International Studies, November 2–3 2001, <http://gsti.miiis.edu/CEAS-PUB/200104Karlusov.pdf> [accessed on: 25.10.2011], pp. 45-46; А. Ларин, *Китайские мигранты в России. История и современность*, Moscow 2009, pp. 27-37.

seen by the Russian settlers as a highly competitive market participants, hardworking and having low financial requirements. It released great concerns—Russians feared that such situation would discourage potential migrants from the western part of the country from moving to the Far East and, therefore, difficulties with the progress of colonization of the region would increase. The growth of the sense of insecurity was also undoubtedly influenced by the fact that without the participation of immigrants in the economic life of the Russian Far East, the development of the region would be impossible.⁹ On the Far Eastern lands, newly incorporated into the Russian Empire and still sparsely populated by European settlers, the idea of potentially dangerous “masses,” “Oriental horde of many millions,” being a part of the “Yellow Peril” syndrome, gained extraordinary impact on the imagination of local society as the multi-million China was “right next to” them and demographic imbalances on both sides of the border were huge. The concept of a “sleeping” Chinese giant combined with the fear of his awakening and releasing vast amounts of hidden strength,¹⁰ typical of the “Yellow Peril” rhetoric, had also quite intense influence on the Russians, especially on the borderland. Along with the concerns about the demographic disparities, this fear caused a sharp increase in anti-Chinese moods in the Far East and the tragically ended outbreak of panic in Blagoveshchensk that took place during the Boxer Rebellion in China.¹¹

The Threat from Asia—Reconstruction of the Idea

Between 1937, when Stalin decided to deport immigrants of Chinese and Korean origins from the eastern part of the USSR, and 1988, when the Sino-Soviet border control regime was liberalized, the “Yellow Peril” syndrome vanished, along with the change in political ideology and the disappearance of migrants, which were the key factor stimulating this phobia in the society. In the 90s of the 20th century, when for the second time in the history of bilateral relations the mass influx of Chinese to the eastern part of Russia occurred, the discussed syndrome has been restored.

⁹ В. Дятлов, Е. Дятлова, *Китаец в дореволюционной и современной России: ре-инкарнация образа?*, Восточные регионы России: стратегии и практики освоения, Novosibirsk 2006, pp. 96-98.

¹⁰ D. Scott, *op. cit.*, p. 3.

¹¹ Я.С. Гузей, *Боксерское восстание и синдром „желтой опасности“: антикитайские настроения на российском Дальнем Востоке (1898–1902 гг.)*, „Известия АГУ,” 2011, Vol. 4-2(72), pp. 82-86.

THE “YELLOW PERIL” SYNDROME IN CONTEMPORARY RUSSIA

I deliberately use the term “reconstruction” as we cannot talk about undisturbed historical continuity between the nineteenth-century and contemporary idea of the “Yellow Peril.” Moreover, the “original” name of this phenomenon is used today without changes, and in contemporary Russian debate about the “Yellow Peril” premises of alleged threats from alien “masses” of immigrants are often identical to those perceived, or rather imagined in the 19th century. It does not mean, however, that the entire western colonizers’ civilizational and racial debate about the threat from “Oriental horde” has been taken unreservedly and without reflections. However, the differences between the historical and contemporary, reconstructed version of the discussed syndrome are based primarily on the delegitimization of the racial and cultural segregation manifestations in the public debate, changes in China’s position on the global stage and the related consequences in the perception of this country and its citizens by contemporary Russians.

In the context of several decades interval between the two intense waves of Chinese immigration to Russia, the question is: on what basis the historical “Yellow Peril” rhetoric was reconstructed in the 90s of the 20th century? The generation that could remember well this pre-revolutionary syndrome was already dead, and every next generation grew in Soviet propaganda which broke with the earlier tradition. However, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, despite of the revolutionary transformations that took place in almost every sphere of social life, some trends have remained unchanged. One of them was undoubtedly the high rate of readership. At that very time, post-socialist transformation in the field of journalism resulted in numerous references to the literature of the 19th and the early 20th century—reprinted editions of works by various Russian writers from before the revolution, including those creating on emigration and unpublished in the Soviet times, have appeared. Among them were works of Vladimir Soloviev and Dimitri Merezhkovsky, undertaking the problem of the “Oriental civilization” and, with typical of the 19th century manner, accentuating variously understood threat from the East, including the Middle Kingdom and its inhabitants. The return of the “forbidden” writers fell on the years 1989–1992, and the “Yellow Peril” problem described by them intertwined and harmonized with the hostility towards China as the last giant communist experiment that was expressed by the elites from the new liberal circles after the collapse of the USSR.¹² Articles written in the early 20th century by Russians analyzing the threat from China and suggesting various remedies for the unfavorable, from their point of view, influx of immigrants from the East, were reprinted in the press in almost unchanged form. Many of them included the phrase “yellow

¹² Information received during conversations with Ph.D. I. Peshkov (March 20, 2012).

peril” in the title and attracted quite a lot of interest among readers.¹³ At the beginning of the 90s Russians gained wide access to this kind of publications which due to the context of the renewed Chinese immigration, very intense in comparison with the Soviet times, led to the reconstruction of specific, typical of the turn of the 20th century, conceptual apparatus connected to the sense of threat from the culturally alien Chinese. However, it should be noted that the popularization of such expressed concept did not come immediate after the abolition of the closed border regime,¹⁴ and the instrumentalization of the “Yellow Peril” syndrome by some Russian political elites played a catalytic role in this process, as it will be discussed further.

Renewed Edition of the Pre-revolutionary Phobia—Selected Analogies Between the Past and Present Perception of Threat from the East

The ongoing Russian public debate about demographic and economic implications of Chinese immigration illustrates well the analogies between the nineteenth-century and contemporary “Yellow Peril” syndrome. At the beginning of the 21st century, these two issues were discussed most often in the alarmist approaches to the renewed influx of Chinese.¹⁵

There is no doubt that in Russia, especially in its eastern part, the negative demographic and economic trends persist. After the collapse of the USSR the massive exodus of Russian population from the Far East to the west of the country has begun, and this direction of movements remains to be current in internal migration processes to this day.¹⁶ Therefore, the issue of progressive depopulation of the region and the associated deficits on the local labour markets is undoubtedly important, but presented in the context of the alleged “quiet expansion” of Chinese in Russia, it grows into the threat to the territorial cohesion of the state. It is worth to notice that the large

¹³ I. Saveliev, *Chinese Migration to Russia in Space and Time*, In: P. Nyiri, I. Saveliev, *Globalizing Chinese Migration: Trends in Europe and Asia*, Aldershot 2002, p. 62.

¹⁴ At the turn of the 90s of the 20th century, when it came to the actual resumption of contact between the Soviet citizens and the immigrants from the PRC, the influx of Chinese was taken with enthusiasm, because the concomitant economic cooperation helped to alleviate the consequences of the crisis in USSR in the period of pierestroika. See: А.В. Лукин, *Медведь наблюдает за Драконом. Образ Китая в России в XVII–XX веках*, Moscow 2006, pp. 291-292.

¹⁵ See: V. Gelbras, *Chinese migration to the Russian Far East: a view from Moscow*, <http://gsti.miiis.edu/CEAS-PUB/200208Gelbras.pdf>, p. 144 [accessed on: 19.04.2012].

¹⁶ С.В. Голунов (ред.), *Региональное измерение трансграничной миграции в Россию*, Moscow 2008, p. 13.

part of immigrants heads towards the Central Federal District,¹⁷ where their presence does not cause, though, any special controversies. In the southern part of the Russian Siberia as well as in the Far East, the situation is different due to, inter alia, constantly raised issue of demographic imbalance on both sides of the border, which is to prejudice the high probability of “colonization” of eastern Russia by the Chinese, only because such disparity exists. In the extremely alarmist opinions about the “Chinese expansion,” the fact that in many cases migrations are short-term and focused primarily on achieving economic profit¹⁸ is completely neglected. Such way of interpretation of potential threat is definitely not a new trend, it is a manifestation of the nineteenth-century thinking in terms of demographic determinism. The same fear of expansion through migrations influenced the approach of the inhabitants of the Russian Empire to the Chinese at the turn of the 20th century. Moreover, the fear of losing control over the national territories due to their possible “sinicization” was not specifically Russian phenomenon—in the 19th century the similar premises became the basis for the mentioned earlier, anti-Chinese legislation in the United States, although in the context of a completely different geographical location of this country one could not talk about the sense of being “surrounded” by the racially and culturally alien Asians.

Today, as in the 19th century, tendency to holding migrants responsible for the growth of informal economy and for the complex economic and development problems of eastern borderland, permeates the rhetoric of the “Yellow Peril,” Corruption, transborder smuggling, tax offences, avoidance of customs duties and the unfavorable, from the viewpoint of the Russian state, exchange of natural resources for cheap goods and services provided by migrants, are undoubtedly significant problems for the economy. However, immigrants and their activity in the host country are not the causative factor in this case. The consolidation of undesirable norms of economic life in Russia is a result of transformation processes,¹⁹ while the Chinese workers and entrepreneurs adapted to the functioning in this complex reality rather than brought the qualitatively new, negative trends

¹⁷ А. Г. Ларин, *op. cit.*, p. 151.

¹⁸ М. Alexeev, *Chinese Migration into Primorskii Krai: Economic Effects and Interethnic Hostility*, http://src-h.slav.hokudai.ac.jp/coe21/publish/no2_ses/5-1_Alexeev.pdf, pp. 333-335 [accessed on: 11.03.2011].

¹⁹ More about the institutional problems in the period of the transformation: В.М. Полтерович, *Институциональные ловушки и экономические реформы*, „Экономика и математические методы”, 1999, Vol. 35/2. About the regularities in the process of the post-socialist market transformation and its effect on the economies of the former Soviet republics: Е.Г. Ясин, *Российская экономика: Истоки и панорама рыночных реформ*, Moscow 2003, pp. 170-190.

into it. However, emotionally marked, xenophobic opinions do not include such multifactorial interpretation of situation existing on the borderland. Identical views, blaming immigrants for everything that is bad, including the smuggling, “stealing” jobs from Russians, ruthless plunder of the Siberian and Far Eastern natural resources, and the broadly defined „demoralization” of Russian society, formed part of the pre-revolutionary rhetoric of the “Yellow Peril.”²⁰ Indisputable is the fact that the current economic activity of Chinese immigrants on the eastern borderland takes place, at least partially, within the informal economy and, therefore, causes the increasing number of semi-legal, illegal or unregulated by the legislation of the host country transactions and activities. Nevertheless, the Russian counterparts of immigrants as well as the local and regional authorities share responsibility for the growth of the informal sector. The problem of gray area on the borderland followed a similar pattern at the turn of the 20th century—any attempts to enact the law which were to restrict the economically detrimental activities of immigrants, proved to be ineffective due to existing legal loopholes, weakness of the regulatory bodies and high adaptability of both Russians and Chinese to frequent changes in legal regulations.²¹ These issues, obvious at first glance, although noticed by the scientific community, have rarely appeared in the alarmist press, both then and today, and thus had a limited impact on the “Yellow Peril” syndrome in the Russian society.

In the context of variously defined “illegality” of stay or activity of the Chinese in Russia, one more important issue intensifying the “Yellow Peril” syndrome should be discussed. The contemporary political science and sociological research shows that the size of migration is directly, although not always explicitly, associated with the sense of “realistic threat,”²² Meanwhile, illegal immigrants cannot be formally counted. Due to the nature of population movements on the Sino-Russian borderland (large share of shuttle migrations), and the degree of legalization of foreigners’ economic activity, recording the actual number of migrants is difficult, there is only the possibility of its estimation. The lack of clear data creates the fertile ground

²⁰ В. Дятлов, *Миграция китайцев и дискуссия о «желтой опасности» в дореволюционной России*, http://otechestvo.ucoz.ru/publ/professor_vi_dyatlov/migraciya_kitaycev_i_diskussiya_o_zheltoy_opasnosti_v_dorevoljucionnoj_rossii/1_vstuplenie_migracija_kitajcev_i_diskussija_o_zheltoj_opasnosti_v_dorevoljucionnoj_rossii/82-1-0-324 [accessed on: 1.05.2012].

²¹ Е. Ли, Е. Скрипник, *Борьба с „желтой угрозой” на Дальнем Востоке на рубежах XIX–XX и XX–XXI вв.: конфликт формальных правил и неформальных практик*, „Известия АГУ,” 2011, Vol. 4-1(72), pp. 137-141.

²² The “realistic threat” might be understand as a threat to social or/and economic status of majority group. See: M. Alexeev, *Immigration Phobia and the Security Dilemma. Russia, Europe and the United States*, Cambridge University Press 2006, pp. 8-9.

for various speculations and conjecture concerning the real number of the Chinese in Russia. In this situation not their total amount, but uncertainty and manipulation of information about it fuels a sense of threat, becoming a part of the “Yellow Peril” syndrome and perpetuating it. And again, the historical analogy can be observed—in the 19th century, the famous Russian publicist, Far Eastern entrepreneur and social activist S. Merkulov, publicly proclaimed an opinion that the official data on the number of Chinese in the region are significantly underestimated, and the economic engagement of migrants has become a serious obstacle on the way to the colonization of eastern territories by the Russian Empire.²³

The mass media played a key role in the process of dissemination and perpetuation of the most alarmist opinions about the influx of the Chinese migrants, both in the 19th century and after the dismantling of the USSR. All the information presented were marked by rather simple, cause-and-effect perception of complex phenomena: if there are demographic disparities on both sides of the Sino-Russian border, the future colonization of the sparsely populated eastern Russia is inevitable; the pathologization of economic life and criminal manifestations of transborder contacts are primarily “fault” of immigrants who participate in the informal economy. Such tendency to simplified interpreting of the complex socio-economic reality is not surprising, it is typical of the xenophobic reactions and the process of stereotyping of “alien” being the natural consequence of sudden ethnic and cultural clash. While comparing the nineteenth-century and contemporary Russian debate on the “Yellow Peril,” one can conclude that this simplification took place twice and in each case it resulted in the stigmatization of immigrant population, based on similar, mostly irrational assumptions.

New Components of the Reconstructed Syndrome. The “Yellow Peril” and the “Chinese Threat”

Despite the existence of the numerous parallels between the nineteenth-century and contemporary “Yellow Peril” syndrome in Russia, logically resulting from the reconstruction of the pre-revolutionary system of fears and prejudices after the collapse of the USSR, there are also some new elements in such perceived sense of threat. These include the departure from the openly expressed manifestations of racial and civilizational segregation, global change in the role of migration processes, and the rise of the PRC taking place simultaneously with the transformation crisis in Russia and

²³ В. Дятлов, *op. cit.*

the depreciation of the Soviet Union's successor international position after 1991.

As it was mentioned before, emphasis on the racial differences and division into the “white, civilized West” and the dangerous but highly primitive “yellow hordes,” was crucial for the nineteenth-century “Yellow Peril.” Modern political correctness and delegitimization of racial and cultural segregation led to exclusion from the common usage the term “yellow” referring to Asian people. It has preserved virtually only in the phrase “yellow peril,” due to literal restoration of the nineteenth-century term, without reference to racial differences between Russians and Asians. It does not mean, however, that components of racism have been completely excluded from Sino-Russian relations—one should rather assume that they affect the perception of foreigners in the latent manner.²⁴ It is also worth to mention that in the past two decades there have been changes in fundamentals of distinguishing the “enemy aliens” among the Russians. We can observe an evolution from a “foreigner” or “ethnically alien” (инородец), to a stranger—“immigrant” or “immigrant worker” (гастарбайтер).²⁵ Today, all collective fears which were previously racially or ethnically motivated, including the “Yellow Peril” syndrome, are becoming the part of more general phenomenon of anti-immigrant phobia in Russia.²⁶

The contemporary role of migrations in global economy, far different from the nineteenth-century, is also a very important issue. Effective integration into the global market is currently the goal of most countries, and Russia is no exception in this regard. In the pre-revolutionary period, in the debate on Chinese immigration to the Far East, beside the option of the efficient use of the migrant labour, the possibility of deportation of the Chinese was taken into account.²⁷ Today, the second of these alternatives is impossible to meet because of the internal economic and demographic problems in Russia, and the country's need to participate in regional and global economic cooperation. Moreover, the effective expulsion of Asians from the territory of today's Russia took place only once, in the late 30s of the 20th century, with the use of methods typical of the totalitarian regime. Dismantling of this regime meant the loss of the state's ability to act radically in the field of external migrations control. Therefore, the contemporary “Yellow Peril” syndrome is

²⁴ В. Дятлов, Е. Дятлова, *op. cit.*, p. 112.

²⁵ В. Дятлов, *Динамика формирования стереотипов*, <http://www.baromig.ru/experts/stati-o-migratsii/grazhdane-blizhnego-zarubezhya-i-drugie-viktor-dyatlov.php> [accessed on: 12.04.2012].

²⁶ From the lecture of Professor V. Dyatlov, *Mythologization of the Chinese migration in contemporary Russia*, Institute of Eastern Studies, AMU Poznan, November 4, 2011.

²⁷ В. Дятлов, *Динамика формирования стереотипов*.

strengthened by the sense of inevitability of influx of immigrants and their economic activity in the host country.

The new geopolitical context, strengthening the international position and impact of the PRC, introduces new significant components to the contemporary, reconstructed “Yellow Peril” syndrome. While in the 19th century China was seen as a huge space and “sleeping” power, and the prospect of its possible “awakening” was the main source of fear, today this “awakening” has become a fact. Meanwhile, Russia has not inherited a superpower status from its legal predecessor—USSR, and the dissolution of the socialist giant has started the transformation crisis in the former Soviet republics, which continues to this day. In this context, the PRC is perceived as an organized power, focused on the development and expansion. Such perception pervades the contemporary rhetoric of the “Yellow Peril” and significantly differentiates it from its historical equivalent. In Russia there is a popular theory about the China’s “plan” of domination, implemented through migrations of its citizens. In this context, the Chinese are seen as a mass, absolutely loyal to their homeland and consistently realizing its strategy of demographic, economic and territorial expansion.²⁸ The phobia which concerned all representatives of the yellow race in 19th century, today is focused on the PRC and its “tools”—Chinese migrants. Therefore, in the Russian public debate the term “Chinese threat” has appeared, which expresses more or less the same set of fears and prejudices as the phrase “yellow peril” used today. In the alarmist press releases, describing the threats coming from the Chinese presence in the eastern Russia, these two terms are often used interchangeably. Their close meaning is the manifestation of the earlier mentioned departure from the racial discourse and focusing of the phobia on citizens of the particular country—immigrants of Chinese nationality, and not the representatives of any particular race are in the center of attention. This concerns not only the official rhetoric. The phenomenon of racism, which has not disappear but exists in a latent form, has also been “politicized” in this manner.

The Role of the Soviet Era and the Post-socialist Transformation

One of the factors of social popularity of the reconstructed “Yellow Peril” syndrome is the mental legacy of the Soviet Union. In the USSR, xenophobia was treated as a political tool to control and mobilize the society. Categories of

²⁸ А. В. Лукин, *op. cit.*, pp. 294-295; В. Дятлов, *Трансграничные мигранты в современной России: динамика формирования стереотипов*, „Международные исследования. Общество. Политика. Экономика,” 2009, Vol. 1, pp. 146-148.

“internal” and “external” enemy were then in common use, therefore various divisions for “us” and “them” have been rooted in the mentality of Soviet citizens.²⁹ The various lines of this divisions permeated all spheres of the country’s internal life, accentuated the ethnic and social differences between its citizens and conditioned the general approach to the foreigners. Given the high social acceptance of the influx of Chinese migrants observed shortly after the opening of the borders, it can be assumed that not the continuity of impact of the Soviet propaganda promoting fear of the PRC since the 60s of the 20th century, but rather the fixed habit of categorizing people as “ours” and “aliens”, along with the tendency to stigmatize “aliens,” contributed to the strengthening of the “Yellow Peril” syndrome in the past two decades.

One should also notice that the mentality of inhabitants of the Sino-Russian borderland is still largely conditioned by the experiences of semi-war regime, binding in this region in the Soviet era. The concept of “besieged fortress” with the eastern border as its bastion, reduced to the role of barrier protecting the society from the ideological enemy and isolating citizens from any undesirable “external” influences, is still functioning in the consciousness of the contemporary Russians. It affects, however, the social relations on the borderland in a latent manner. Negation of the Chinese model of modernization and recognizing the continuity between the USSR and the Russian Federation with all its consequences, implies uncertainty and distance between Russians and anyone who is “not them,” especially the Chinese immigrants.³⁰ During the gradual transformation of the border from barrier to intensive contact zone, the society, unable to cope with the post-socialist realities, returned to the old way of thinking in terms of “external enemy.” The local Russian press has contributed to increased tensions, regularly presenting the sensational reports about the criminogenic activity of Chinese migrants and the harmfulness of goods which they are selling. As a result, the view that “... in the ‘good old days’ of closed border life was much more peaceful and less dangerous”³¹ became more and more widespread.

The consequences of the way and pace of carrying out the deep systemic reforms also has an impact on the strengthening of influence of the “Yellow Peril” idea on the society. Although the transformation takes place on the both sides of the Sino-Russian border, it variously affects the societies involved in the transborder cooperation. The PRC has decided on a gradual

²⁹ В. Дятлов, *Трансграничные мигранты*.

³⁰ И. Пешков, *Граница на замке постсоветской памяти. Мифологизация фронтальных сообществ на примере русских из Трехречья*, In: В. Дятлов, *Миграции и диаспоры в социокультурном, политическом и экономическом пространстве Сибири. Рубежи XIX–XX и XX–XXI веков*, Irkutsk 2010, pp. 601-616.

³¹ А.В. Лукин, *op. cit.*, p. 293.

transformation, controlled by the authorities as far as possible, involving only the sphere of economy. Ideological and constitutional foundations of the state remained intact and therefore, according to the intentions of the reformers, it was possible to avoid chaos comparable to that which occurred during the Cultural Revolution.³² Russia, in turn, has chosen the path of total, rapid and even revolutionary transformation. If we recognize the validity of the assumption that the accelerated transformation of values is the primary source of social phobias,³³ we can conclude that the Russian society became very susceptible to the development and strengthening of various collective fears. The collapse of the USSR meant not only the rapid economic and political changes, but also the delegitimization of socialist ideological and moral system. However, such delegitimization might have been carried out quickly only at the political level—at the social level the Soviet mentality has been largely preserved, but in a latent form. The new, post-socialist system of values was only formed then, and some components of the Western way of thinking, “affixed” to the post-Soviet reality during the neoliberal systemic changes, were simply rejected often without reflections.

In this context, the lack of acceptance for the Chinese traders, a kind of disapproval for their activity, and the relative ease of their stigmatization are understandable. It results from associating their activity with the violation of not only legal, but also social norms. In one of her works, C. Humphrey highlights the fact that some concepts such as market, trade, democracy etc., regarded explicitly in the West, gained different connotations when transferred to the new context. Trade, in the consciousness of post-socialist societies, provokes ambivalent reactions as something necessary from the economic point of view, but morally wrong, leading to enrichment without work. Therefore, commercial activity is often linked with criminal activities.³⁴ In Russia, which unlike the PRC has not experienced any experiments with the “socialist market economy” after the departure from the Lenin’s NEP, a there is a suspicious and full of hidden disapproval approach to the typical market relations and its participants including migrants, and it is quite common and deeply rooted in the social mentality.

The Russia’s post-socialist turn towards nationalism was also a problematic issue. It caused a huge internal social upheaval. Citizens of the multi-ethnic state which was the USSR, after years of silencing the

³² K. Seitz, *Chiny. Powrót Olbrzyma*, Warsaw 2008, pp. 242-244.

³³ А.Г. Янков *Синофобия—Русофобия: реальность и иллюзии*, „Социологические исследования,” 2010, Vol. 3, p. 71.

³⁴ C. Humphrey, *The Unmaking of Soviet Life: Everyday Economies after Socialism*, Ithaca 2002; see: M. Buyandelgeriyn, *Post-Post Transition Theories: Walking on Multiple Paths*, “Annual Review of Anthropology,” 2008, Vol. 37, pp. 238-239.

national discourse replaced with the idea of unity of the proletariat, faced the task of transition from Soviet to Russian identity. The typical reaction to this situation was the categorization of people, which along with the lack of overall agreement on what “the nation” is³⁵, resulted in many different “us” versus “them” judgments. The identification of the “external enemy” is the simplest, and to Russians also well-known from the Soviet era, way of community consolidation.

Effects of Instrumentalization of Phobias—the “Yellow Peril” As a Component of the Trap Mechanism of “Delegalization” of Migrants in Russia

The instrumentalization of the „Yellow Peril” syndrome that took place in Russia in the 90s of the 20th century, brought significant consequences for the internal situation in the country, which were felt long after the end of hostility campaigns. The concept of “external enemy,” identified with the Chinese, became a tool in the hands of some members of the political elite, which was particularly exploited in Primorskii Krai and Khabarovsk Krai. The press played an important role in the process of consolidation of the society in the face of new, mostly imagined threats—at first at the local and then at the countrywide level.³⁶ Due to the involvement of the mass media, the anti-Chinese and anti-immigrant, xenophobic attitudes spread within the society. The politicization of the “Yellow Peril” syndrome brought many new components to it, particularly a long list of potential threats and negative elements in the image of a Chinese immigrant, and it strongly perpetuated it. Some public statements of the Russian politicians show the persistence of this phobia. For example, in 2000 the President of the Russian Federation, V. Putin, said in Blagoveshchensk: “... if you do not take practical steps to advance the Far East soon, after a few decades, the Russian population will be speaking Japanese, Chinese and Korean” In 2003, the governor of Khabarovsk Krai, V. Ishaev, once again warned the President of ongoing “Chinese expansion into the Russian Far East.”³⁷

After 2000, the deliberate development and use of the “Yellow Peril” syndrome as a tool for achieving political goals, has virtually ceased. However,

³⁵ A. Sevortian, *Xenophobia in Post-Soviet Russia*, “The Equal Rights Review,” 2009, Vol. 2, p. 21.

³⁶ See e.g.: В.Л. Ларин, *В тени проснувшегося дракона. Российско-китайские отношения на рубеже XX–XXI веков*, Vladivostok 2006, pp. 257-264; F.K. Chang. *The Unraveling of Russia's Far Eastern Power*, “Orbis,” 2001, Vol. 2, pp. 257-264.

³⁷ Quoted from: M. Alexeev, *Immigration Phobia and the Security Dilemma*, pp. 95 and 101.

the consequences of such instrumentalization became important factors which, along with the other manifestations of xenophobia, triggered the mechanism of the legal-political trap, which Russia is still struggling with today. In order to protect national interests, not only against the real, but also against many imagined threats associated with transborder mobility of the population, Moscow decides to tighten the border control regime and the migration policy. However, this leads to the development of phenomena, which are detrimental from the perspective of the national economy and the state as a whole, and consequently—to further restrictions.

Knowing that one of the most important factors of formation and implementation of the migration policy in Russia is public opinion,³⁸ it is hard to underestimate the impact of various manifestations of collective phobias, including the “Yellow Peril” syndrome, on political decisions. Legal regulations are the implementation tool of state decisions concerning management of influx and the adaptation of immigrants. The strong sense of threat among Russian inhabitants of the eastern borderland, resulted from the intense influx of the Chinese, along with the huge number of press releases about extralegal and illegal activities of immigrants, led to tightening of border control and legal conditions of foreigners’ activity in the Russian Federation. Such restrictions are part of the growing on the global scale trend towards “delegalization” of migrations. In conditions of globalization, it is a specific reaction to the states perception of the loss of control over political initiatives in other areas of their functioning. In other words, in conditions of the contemporary erosion of borders, migration law is being increasingly understood as the last bastion of sovereignty.³⁹ This trend goes well with the observed in Russia, since the year 2000, progressive striving for centralization of power and reversing the excessive autonomization of individual regions, which developed in the 90s of the 20th century. In order to control effectively all the sections of the state border, Moscow uses the unified regulatory system, often without taking into account the differences between regions to eliminate unfavorable phenomena associated with migrations. The problem lies in the fact that such measures lead to totally unexpected results.

One of these results is the feedback between the tightening of migration policy, including border control regime, and the increase of collective phobias associated with the influx of foreigners. Increased legal restrictions mean growth in the number of illegal migrants, which results from, inter alia, a

³⁸ В. Мукомель, *Миграционная политика России. Постсоветские контексты*, Moscow 2005, p. 76.

³⁹ C. Dauvergne, *Making People Illegal. What Globalization Means for Migration and Law*, New York 2008, p. 2.

need to meet additional formal requirements in order to fulfill the criteria of “legality” of arrival and residence in the host country. Such situation, as it was mentioned earlier, intensifies the sense of threat among the host society, due to inability to estimate the number of “illegals” explicitly as well as the alarming press releases about the real, although more often imagined, harmful effects of immigrants’ activity. Moreover, the “delegalization” of migration creates an additional line of divisions into “us” and “them,” and “they” are most often stigmatized as a group which violates “our” law. The symbolic border is formed in order to protect the citizens against “aliens”, while the physical boundaries can no longer fulfill this role. In this context, we can talk about the growing anti-immigrant sentiments and, consequently, about the increase of the social demand for enactment of more restrictive law, even if such tightening of legal regulations will not eliminate the undesirable effects in practice.

An additional problem is the ineffectiveness of the existing formal restrictions on business carried on by immigrants in the host country, but it is worth to notice that not all Russians see this ineffectiveness as something negative. Basing on the example of the analysis of extralegal exploitation of Far Eastern natural resources, N. Ryzhova has shown that regulations designed to limit this practices does not bring the desired results. The Russians, cooperating with the Chinese migrants, are involved in this kind of activity. The law, tailored to the interests of big business and politics in Russia, cannot withstand a confrontation with the specificity of transborder cooperation and economic needs of the region, where emphasis is placed mainly on the activity of small and medium businesses.⁴⁰ Moreover, the increasing competition between the regional Far Eastern political and business circles, and the Russian federal authorities for the Chinese migrants and their activity, seen as an economic “resource,” has been observed in recent years. In this context, border regions are interested in the proliferation of the informal economy since the extralegal forms of economic activity exclude the Moscow’s share in the benefits coming from them.⁴¹ Paradoxically, although the decision on tightening migration regulations stems from the concern to strengthening the national security, federal measures toward progressive “delegalization” of immigrants are contrary to the economic interests of the state as a whole. However, they bring significant benefits for the border regions. In this

⁴⁰ Н. Рыжова, *Природные ресурсы российского Дальнего Востока: институциональные изменения и экстралегальные практики*, In: В. Дятлов, *Миграции и диаспоры в социокультурном, политическом и экономическом пространстве Сибири. Рубежи XIX–XX и XX–XXI веков*, Irkutsk 2010, pp. 282-312.

⁴¹ Л. Бляхер, Н. Пенин, *Представления населения Дальнего Востока о Китайских мигрантах (на рубеже XX–XXI вв.)*, „Диаспоры,” 2011, Vol. 1, pp. 166-171.

situation, one should remember that the issue of “harmfulness” of informal economy, including illegal and semi-legal economic practices of foreigners which appears at all levels of the Russian debate on migration problems, is highly relative.

Concluding Remarks

Due to the long Soviet interval in contacts between the Russians and the Chinese, we cannot talk about the continuation of nineteenth-century “Yellow Peril” syndrome in contemporary Russia. However, the analysis of pre-revolutionary and post-socialist phobias, increasing along with the intensified influx of the Chinese immigrants, allows to point out a large number of similarities between them. A debate on the allegedly growing “yellow peril”, initiated after the collapse of the USSR, is in many respects the carbon copy of the pre-revolutionary considerations about the threat from the “yellow hordes.” The model of interpretation of reality, based on simplifications and stigmatization of “aliens” and typical of the historical equivalent of discussed phobia, has been repeated, although today the focus is on the national, not racial likeness. Also the contemporary arguments for the alleged Chinese efforts to dominate Russia demographically and economically are almost identical to those from the past, although now the Chinese are seen as implementers of organized, multifaceted expansion of the “awakened” and strong state, while in the 19th century they were viewed as a “yellow mass,” flowing from the “sleeping”, and at least partially enslaved by the West power. Therefore, it can be assumed that the historical “Yellow Peril” syndrome was reconstructed after the collapse of the USSR, however the reconstruction was not full.

Social experiences gained from the Soviet era have also undoubtedly had an impact on the discussed phobia in its contemporary version. Mental shock, caused by sudden delegitimization of the ideology and system of values existing for decades, along with the resistance against the Western way of thinking, resulted in the return to the old Soviet tendency to “us” and “them” judgments as well as in the growth in demand for isolation from the enemy and from largely incomprehensible outside world. Simplified interpretation of the post-socialist realities and looking for the “guilty” of growing sense of uncertainty and internal problems in the country, were the response of the society to the information chaos and crisis of values and identity. Therefore, migrants have been made scapegoats, especially the Chinese, because as an “aliens” they perfectly fit to the general image of “enemies.” They soon became the main characters of the sensational and emotionally marked press

releases, alarming about threats, caused by erosion of previously strictly controlled borders. The mass media were co-creating and perpetuating the negative stereotypes of foreigners, and therefore they contributed to the intensification of various ethnic and anti-immigrant phobias. All of the aforementioned problems, along with the instrumentalization of the “Yellow Peril” concept by some representatives of the Far Eastern regional authorities, led to the politicization of the discussed syndrome and its spreading among the whole Russian society. As a result, the discussed phenomenon has played its role in creating the trap of “delegalization” of migrants. Struggles with the consequences of this trap can be considered as a long-term and still actual effect of spreading of the rhetoric of anti-immigrant phobias to the Russian political debate on the regulation of migration processes in the modern era of “eroding” borders.

Aleksandra Łopińska

The „Yellow Peril” Syndrome in Contemporary Russia

A b s t r a c t

The „Yellow Peril” syndrome, defined as a complex of fears from the expansion and domination of representatives of the yellow race, felt and expressed by the white people indentifying themselves with the Western civilization, has been a widespread phenomenon in the pre-revolutionary Russia. Today, the syndrome has returned and became a part of a mosaic of various collective phobias that affect the worldview of modern Russians. This paper examines the relationship between historical and contemporary “Yellow Peril.” It is important to analyze, which components of the contemporary syndrome has been restored, and which are completely new. Moreover, one should consider the origin of this new components. The impact of the “Yellow Peril” syndrome on the contemporary political life in Russia is also an interesting issue, especially in the context of the ongoing era of “eroding” borders.

K e y w o r d s : „Yellow Peril” Syndrome, collective phobias, Russia.