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# CHINESE MIGRANTS IN THE CZECH REPUBLIC

*Perfect Strangers*

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Markéta Moore and Czeslaw Tubilewicz

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The post-cold war period marked the end of ideological affection between the People's Republic of China (PRC) and East Central Europe (ECE). While the latter chose parliamentary democracy and market economy, the former reemphasized its Marxist foundations while seeking to reinvent its economy. The economic reforms in China fostered strong economic growth, revived entrepreneurial spirit, and generated domestic migration of peasants and urbanites searching for jobs or new business opportunities. Some of these migrants, either unsatisfied with the business environment in the PRC or wealthy enough to venture beyond China, sought opportunities abroad. The ECE economies— which included Albania, Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, East Germany, Hungary, Poland, Romania, and Yugoslavia— were hungry for investment and so granted entry to Chinese prospective investors and business individuals. Ironically, 1989 marked the end of the camaraderie between the PRC and ECE and the beginning of the fraternity between the peoples of China and East Central Europe.

Ten years after the Chinese began their ECE odyssey, the topic of Chinese migration to the former communist countries remains largely under-researched. Only the Chinese community in Hungary has received sufficient academic attention.<sup>1</sup> The scarcity of research on Chinese migration to ECE is

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Markéta Moore is a Ph.D. Candidate in the Department of Sociology, Hong Kong University. Czeslaw Tubilewicz is Assistant Professor in the School of Arts and Social Sciences, Open University of Hong Kong.

*Asian Survey*, 41:4, pp. 611–628. ISSN: 0004–4687

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1. Pál Nyí ri, *New Chinese Migrants in Europe: The Case of the Chinese Community in Hungary* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1999); idem., “New Migrants, New Community: The Chinese in Hungary, 1989–1995” in *The Chinese in Europe*, eds. Gregor Benton and Frank Pieke (London:

rather surprising given the novelty of the issue and its implications for the broader pattern of Chinese migration strategies and inter-ethnic relationships in ECE societies. This article is meant to contribute to the broader understanding of the changing patterns of Chinese migration in the 1990s and their specific characteristics in ECE. Specifically, it will examine Chinese migration to Czechoslovakia and later the Czech Republic. It aims to accomplish four tasks: (1) to establish the general features of Chinese migration to ECE; (2) to understand migrants' motivations and their business strategies; (3) to scrutinize the nature and identity of the Chinese community in the Czech Republic; and (4) to identify the dynamics of social interaction between the Chinese newcomers and the receiving Czech society, and its economic and political consequences. As used in this essay, the term "community" is conceived in its symbolic, "imagined" sense, providing a frame of Chinese social and cultural space in the Czech Republic.

We will argue that recent Chinese migration to the Czech Republic is an evolving phenomenon. Its complex nature is conditioned by two factors, namely, absence of an active migration policy in the Czech Republic, which discourages foreigners from settling on a permanent basis, and Chinese migrants' perception of the Czech Republic as merely a gateway to the European Union (EU). While waiting for an opportunity to enter the EU or for the EU to embrace the Czech Republic, the Chinese make little effort to forge a formal community or integrate themselves into society. Prevented by Czech law from settling down, and at the same time eyeing opportunities elsewhere, Chinese were predetermined to remain outsiders or— to borrow Georg Simmel's concept<sup>2</sup>— "strangers," whose physical presence in the Czech Republic, coupled with their "strange" origins and culture, results in a combination of proximity and apartness, closeness and distance vis-à-vis the majority society. While waiting for their turn to leave the Czech Republic, the Chinese remain unattached to the land and— in a metaphorical sense— out of place. They are not recognized as individuals but as strangers of a certain type belonging to the cluster of many other strangers, read through the prism of stereotyped images, defined as unknown, unreachable, even undesirable, yet still next-door neighbors.

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McMillan Press, 1998), pp. 350–79; and idem., "Chinese Organizations in Hungary 1989–1996: A Case Study in PRC-Oriented Community Politics Overseas" in *Internal and International Migration: Chinese Perspectives*, eds. Frank N. Pieke and Hein Mallee (Surrey: Curzon Press, 1999), pp. 251–79.

2. Georg Simmel, "The Stranger" in *The Sociology of Georg Simmel*, ed. K. Wolff (New York: Free Press, 1950), pp. 402–08.

## Hungarian Fever

When the first Chinese migrants reached Europe in the late 19th century, few of them ventured into ECE. Post-1949 official camaraderie notwithstanding, no ECE regime seriously contemplated importing labor from the PRC nor relaxing visa regulations for PRC nationals. Thus “ordinary Chinese” (*laobaixin*) had little first hand experience of ECE, as people-to-people contacts between the Soviet allies and China were restricted to official exchanges of party and governmental delegations. Following the Sino-Soviet split in the early 1960s, even these limited contacts were further curtailed in respect to most ECE states.

A gradual thaw in Sino-ECE relations, which began in the early 1980s, resurrected an exchange of official delegations but had no impact on the tightly shut doors protecting ECE from any potential migration from the PRC. This changed, however, with a stroke in the form of the Hungarian signature on a new bilateral visa agreement in October 1988. Hungary, trying to win Chinese friendship in advance of the Sino-Hungarian summit meeting scheduled for 1989, allowed all PRC nationals visa-free entry to Hungary, a privilege previously reserved only for the service passport holders. While the summit meeting did not materialize, the visa agreement had far-reaching results. Between January 1989 and March 1991, some estimated 45,000 Chinese citizens crossed the Hungarian border, many of whom stayed.<sup>3</sup> In a short time, the Chinese had become a sizeable ethnic group in Budapest.

Infected by “Hungarian fever” (*Xiongyali re*), the Chinese began perceiving Hungary in more permanent terms, which was reflected by an organizational maturing of their community. In 1992, they established their first (and, until recently, their major) organization, the Hungarian Chinese Association. Budapest saw the publication of the first Chinese newspaper in East Central Europe. By the mid-1990s, the number of Chinese organizations in Hungary increased to 20, while the number of Chinese language periodicals grew to five.<sup>4</sup>

In October 1991, Hungarian authorities launched their “immigration control project,” which targeted all foreigners (including Chinese) who engaged in illegal trade or lacked valid residence permits, and aimed at expelling them from the country. Worried about fast emerging ethnic minorities, Budapest also embarked on the task of closing Hungarian doors to Chinese migrants. In April 1992, it secured Beijing's agreement to revoke the free visa agree-

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3. Mao Chun, *Zhongguo ren zai Dong Ou: 90 niandai xinrenchao chuguo taojin jishi* [Chinese in Eastern Europe: An account of the new wave of seeking a fortune overseas in the 1990s] (Beijing: Zhongguo luyou chubanshe, 1992), p. 54.

4. Nyíri, “Chinese Organizations in Hungary,” pp. 251–68.

ment of 1988. The reversal of this liberal immigration policy, coupled with the introduction of more restrictive visa regulations, contributed to a substantial shrinking of the Chinese community in Hungary from a height of 45,000 in the spring of 1991 to around 16,000 at the end of 1992. An estimated two-thirds of the Chinese population had left Hungary either to go back to China or to go on to other countries in Western Europe or ECE, particularly Czechoslovakia, Romania, and Poland.<sup>5</sup>

### The Czech Odyssey

Czechoslovakia's underdeveloped catering services and ailing textile industries lured Chinese who sought business opportunities in ECE. A year before Budapest restricted its immigration policy, Czechoslovakia experienced its first influx of Chinese arriving from Zhejiang, Fujian, Hebei, Jilin, Guangdong, and Shandong Provinces, as well as Chinese migrants from Hungary and such Western European countries as Austria, Italy, and Spain. Urban dwellers from major Chinese cities—Beijing, Shanghai, Tianjin, and Hong Kong—also joined the flow. Most Chinese clearly favored Prague as their chosen place of residence.<sup>6</sup> Initially, Chinese migrants did not intend to stay for long. However, many remained in the Czech Republic because of the perceived, promising business opportunities there.

The absence of an active migration policy in the Czech Republic meant that the Chinese could only adopt an unofficial migration strategy. These unofficial migrants arrived in Prague with valid service (rather than private) passports, which—thanks to the Sino-Czech visa agreement of 1956—gave them visa-free entry. Since administrative restrictions made obtaining a work permit in the Czech Republic difficult, the most convenient way to legalize their stay was to set up a company. Most Chinese, from street vendors to company owners, became “business associates,” with the formal status of “Chinese business persons.” Also Chinese employees in ethnic businesses, who started to move to the Czech Republic in the mid-1990s, often appeared as paper businessmen and businesswomen rather than imported labor. This practice inevitably led to an increasing number of Chinese phantom companies that never functioned as business units but acted solely as administrative devices for obtaining residence permits.

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5. Pál Nyíri, “New Migrants, New Community,” p. 357. For a discussion of the Chinese migrants to other ECE countries, see *Zycie Warszawy* (Warsaw), July 30, 1997; Peter S. Green, “Chinese Find Romania No Land of Gold,” *International Herald Tribune (IHT)*, December 26, 1998; and IOM, “Chinese Immigrants in Central and Eastern Europe: The Cases of the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Romania” in *The Chinese in Europe*, pp. 320–48.

6. This preference has been changing gradually in the subsequent years as 90.5% of all Chinese in the Czech Republic lived in Prague in 1993, 78.2% in 1997, and 58.6% in March 2000. Internal document of the Czech Ministry of Interior, received July 2000.

Most newly arrived Chinese applied for a temporary residence permit on the basis of their newly formed companies and subsequently tried to replace their service passports with private ones. This replacement of their passport signaled an important shift of status, transforming a Chinese “official” into a migrant and private entrepreneur. On the conditions that their business licenses were approved, they possessed sufficient funds, and had no criminal record, the Chinese could extend their residency year by year. At this stage, they could also invite their immediate family members who, in turn, could apply for a residence permit based on family reunion. As a result, family chains of migrants were created, consisting of the nuclear and extended family members joining the primary movers. This chain migration strategy was reflected in the growth in the number of Chinese with residence permits between 1990 and 1996 (see Figure 1).

Prague also became an important transit point for illegal migrants, who used newly set up land routes going through Moscow or air routes through Bangkok, where human traffickers organized the flow of Chinese peasants to Western Europe. While this was not a massive movement in the early 1990s, by late in the decade the volume of irregular migration had increased. Although increasing, the number of irregular Chinese migrants, who attempted to cross the Czech borders illegally, has been consistently lower than those recorded for other nationalities. However, the picture is different when we look at trafficking networks. Statistics show that about 40% of the Chinese caught at the border have utilized guides organized by traffickers to take them across; this rate is the highest proportion among all nationalities.<sup>7</sup>

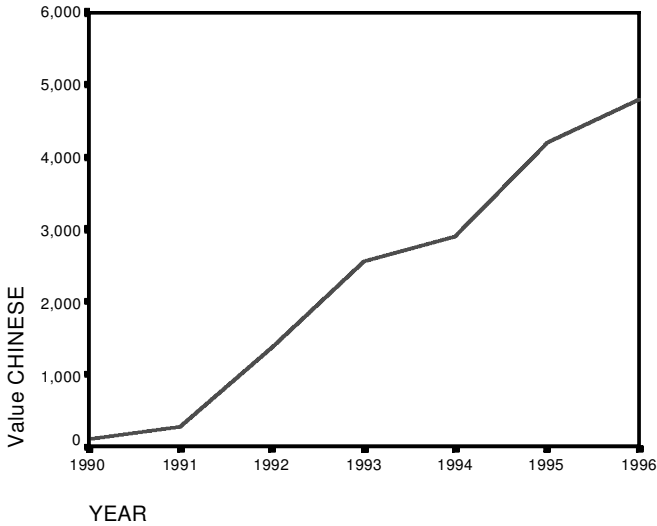
In the early 1990s, the Czech popular media suggested that some 20,000 legal and illegal Chinese migrants resided in the Czech Republic.<sup>8</sup> The Czech quality press altered this speculation with an estimation that about 4,500 Chinese had taken up residence in the Czech Republic by 1998, which represented less than 2% of all long-term foreign residents, including Slovaks (see Table 1). The Czech Ministry of the Interior came up with an unofficial figure of 9,000 legal and illegal Chinese residents. However, because of the high turnover of Chinese, all attempts to determine their numbers accurately are probably doomed to failure. The confusion is further compounded by the fact that not all Chinese with residence permits actually live in the Czech Republic. Some have their permits renewed by their friends or specialized Chinese agents. Others (especially those working illegally in Western Europe) bought their permits without ever visiting the Czech Republic as a sort

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7. *Information on Migration on the Czech Republic Territory in 1998* (Prague: Czech Ministry of Interior, 1998).

8. Milos Ěermák and Stanislav Motl, “Znamení draka” [Sign of the dragon], *Reflex* 4:29 (July 19, 1993), pp. 24–26.; “Ěí na v Praze” [China in Prague], *Mladý Svět* [The young world], 35:30 (July 26, 1993), p. 19.

FIGURE 1 *Number of Chinese in the Czech Republic with Residence Permits, 1990–96*



SOURCE: Government of the Czech Republic, Directorate of Aliens and Border Police, Prague 3, Department for Analysis and Information, internal documents, PPR-504/RCP-A-2000, received September 13, 2000.

TABLE 1 *Number of Chinese with Residence Permits in the Czech Republic, 1990–2000*

Year	Number of Chinese with Permits	% of all Foreign Residents
1988	39	–
1989	54	–
1990	94	–
1991	261	–
1992	1,388	2.77
1993	2,567	3.30
1994	2,907	2.78
1995	4,210	2.64
1996	4,774	2.41
1997	4,501	2.1
1998	4,191	1.9
1999	4,328	1.9
2000	3,907	1.9

SOURCE: Ivana Bakašová, “Cinský svět v. českých zemích 1” [Chinese world in Czech lands 1], *Nový Orient* [New Orient], November 1996, pp. 273–76.

NOTE: The year 2000 figure was current as of June 30, 2000.

of insurance policy. They did so in order to be sent back to Prague, rather than the PRC, in case local immigration police identified them as illegal workers.

## Motivations

It is tempting to simplify the motivations behind Chinese migrants' decision to go to the Czech Republic as economic. The reality is complex, as the Chinese have gone for a variety of reasons: personal, economic, social, self-development, and, extremely rarely, political ones.

A significant group of Chinese prime movers in ECE, usually former employees of Chinese state-owned enterprises (SOE), were motivated by potential opportunities for starting their own businesses, often with direct or indirect support of the SOEs. They had little to lose by exploring possibilities in the Czech Republic. Had they failed to prosper, they could still return and likely get promoted in their old work units (*danwei*). Had they succeeded, the economical and social capital accumulated in ECE would not only gain them respect among their colleagues and friends in China, but their newly achieved status of private entrepreneur abroad would help them improve their connections (*guanxi*) with local officials and further expand their businesses, whether abroad or in China. PRC-based wealthy entrepreneurs, on the other hand, sought ECE residence in order to protect themselves against a possible reversal of market reforms or questioning of the source of their wealth in China. They kept and cultivated their business contacts in China at the same time and traveled to the PRC periodically. When in China, they were no longer suspected of having earned their fortunes illegally and their money was secure in European banks.

For some young Chinese from big cities, dissatisfied with dead-end jobs in China that offered limited social mobility, the chance to gain foreign experience offered a form of adventure or a chance to broaden personal horizons. Their foreign experience often helped them to improve their social status upon their return to the PRC and their savings enabled them to start their own businesses. Other Chinese found emigration from the PRC to be a temporary solution to their marital problems. They viewed it as a culturally acceptable substitute for separation, usually a prelude to divorce.

Finally, although the Chinese appreciated the personal freedom the Czech Republic offered, only a handful of them landed in Prague because of political persecution in China. Political motivations played an insignificant role in the decision to stay in or leave the Czech Republic. Up until the mid-1990s, only six Chinese had formally applied for political asylum. In 1990, Prague granted asylum to one Chinese applicant and two years later to another. Unexpectedly, in the late 1990s, this situation changed. In 1998 alone, there were 10 asylum-seekers in the Czech Republic. A year later, their numbers

increased to 202 (2.8% of all applicants). Within a few months, however, 195 of the Chinese asylum-seekers in 1999 had left the asylum camps without prior notice, thereby losing their chance for successful application. As a result, the Chinese dropout rate became the highest among all asylum-seekers in the republic. A closer examination of Chinese applicants for political asylum, alleged political refugees, reveals that the majority made an application after having been caught crossing the Czech borders illegally. This strategy prevented the Czech authorities from immediately sending them back to the PRC. Once in the asylum camps, however, the Chinese would often try again to leave to Germany or Austria. In January 2000 alone, out of 33 illegal Chinese migrants caught when crossing the German border in western Bohemia, 11 applied for political asylum. This indicates the growing trend among Chinese to seek asylum for practical rather than political reasons.

### Business Strategies

The first sector to attract Chinese investors arriving with a lot of cash and supported by their families or sponsored by the Chinese SOEs was the restaurant and catering business. The number of Chinese restaurants in Prague increased significantly— from one in 1988 to almost 40 in 1994. In a country lacking a tradition of eating out and caught in the middle of economic recession, expensive Chinese restaurants managed to attract Czech business and the cultural and political elite (including President Vaclav Havel), as well as Western tourists, but were not affordable for the vast majority of local people.

Textile imports and retail became another business niche appropriated by the Chinese. While the Chinese involved in catering could barely make a living for their families, going into the textile trade in the early 1990s meant success. Huge demand for textile products, such as children wares, T-shirts and winter jackets, enabled Chinese traders to sell almost everything they imported. Thus, many Chinese ventured into the textile business, including those who already operated restaurants, attracted by the uncomplicated business operation, relaxed legal and tax system, little competition, and the assistance of Chinese SOEs, which were trying to capture ECE markets and get rid of goods that did not meet Western standards.

Close relations between ailing Chinese SOEs and Chinese migrants played a key role in the success of Chinese import businesses. Although only a handful of Chinese arrived in the Czech Republic as official representatives of SOEs, most Chinese traders enjoyed informal close links with the township-level SOEs, which supported their business ventures by providing initial working capital. This provision took various forms, such as goods on credit, goods at subsidized prices, and financial loans with favorable repayment terms. In return, Chinese traders issued invitations to SOE managers, facili-

tated immigration of other SOE employees' to ECE, or helped them in China by utilizing their newly achieved status of Chinese traders from Europe. Connections with the SOEs helped Chinese migrants maximize their profits and minimize their risks, as they often invested the SOEs' resources rather than their own. While SOEs hoped to use the Chinese migrants to expand their export markets, in some cases they became victims of fraud when their "representatives" neither paid the loans back nor paid for the goods received. By the mid-1990s, Beijing banned low interest loans for Chinese traders abroad and requested SOEs to collect deposits for any goods ordered.

Starting in the mid-1990s, as a response to the saturation of restaurant and textile markets, Chinese migrants began diversifying their business strategies by identifying new market niches. The popularity of alternative medicine among Czechs, for example, facilitated the establishment of centers of traditional Chinese medicine, affiliated with Czech medical clinics. In 1997, the founder of the Czech-Chinese Association of Wushu opened Chinese martial arts schools in Prague, Brno, and Plzen. The Chinese have also taken up farming, invested in manufacturing and food production, provided services aimed at the Chinese community, and started exporting Czech products and raw materials to China.

Chinese traders' involvement in the import of textile and other light industrial products from the PRC seriously affected Sino-Czech trade. Until 1989, Prague exported "traditional" Czech products to China, e.g., production equipment and complete industrial units. In return, it imported light industrial products and foodstuffs. Sino-Czechoslovak trade was conducted on a barter basis and, at least in theory, was balanced. In the 1990s, however, Czech exports of industrial products to the PRC declined due to the introduction of cash trade and numerous non-market forces governing China's economy. At the same time, Chinese imports boomed, in no small measure because of the dynamic business activities conducted by Chinese traders in the Czech Republic. The first Czech trade deficit with China emerged in 1994 and became a constant feature of Sino-Czech economic relations.<sup>9</sup> The Czech case was not exceptional, as all ECE countries experienced trade deficits with the PRC. In response, Budapest introduced trade tariffs for Chinese textiles in the mid-1990s, while Warsaw exercised the right to do so in the 1993 most-favored nation agreement with the PRC. Whether Prague will follow suit depends largely on China's entry into the World Trade Organization and the scale of the trade deficit in coming years.

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9. In 1999, the Czech Ministry of Trade and Industry recorded a US\$506 million trade deficit with the PRC. Klára Smolová, "Thorny Passage to the Far East," *Prague Tribune*, March 21, 2000.

## Human Trade

An estimated 100,000 Chinese are being smuggled abroad every year, earning traffickers more than US\$3 billion annually.<sup>10</sup> Relatively cheaper smuggling fees and a comparatively higher success rate has recently made Europe a more popular destination for irregular migration than the U.S. Because of its geographical position in the center of Europe, the Czech Republic became an important transit point for trafficking routes to Western Europe.<sup>11</sup>

Members of groups that first got involved in human trade in the Czech Republic originated from Qingtian County in Zhejiang Province. Given the migration culture of Qingtian County dating back to the early 20th century and their well-established trafficking networks across Europe, the Qingtianese were well-positioned to become “snakeheads” and smuggle their fellow villagers (*laoxiang*) to the Czech Republic and, via Prague, the Schengen group of West European countries. Their presence in Prague affected the Chinese business environment, as they became an important source of Chinese investment. Most of them invested trafficking money into legitimate businesses, such as Chinese restaurants or the wholesale of textiles. With an image of well-respected business people, they formed a distinguished group of Chinese “investors” in the Czech Republic. Chinese who have lived in the republic could identify the restaurants and companies that were involved in organizing human smuggling (*toudu*). While *laoxiang* look up to them as successful, affluent business individuals with economic power and social capital, the Chinese from other localities prefer to keep a polite distance from them.

Starting in 1997, the influence of networks from Fujian Province began growing. Subsequently, the Fujianese took a sizeable share of the human smuggling market in the Czech Republic, hitherto controlled by groups from Qingtian and Wenzhou. Chinese from Fujian's rural areas paid as much as US\$12,000 a head to be smuggled to the country. Usually, they did not have this kind of money and borrowed it from loan sharks at high interest rates. People, who came as “smuggled guests” (*touke*) inevitably, ended up at the bottom of the Chinese status hierarchy. As underprivileged people lacking social and cultural capital, they were used as “cheap labor” for washing dishes in Chinese restaurants or doing manual work in warehouses. Once in the Czech Republic, they soon learned that their wages would pay only the interest on their loans for their smuggling fees. One possible solution to their

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10. Tom Buerkle, “A Deadly Traffic in Humans: Chinese Gang Is Suspected in Smuggling into Dover,” *IHT*, June 21, 2000.

11. International Organization for Migration (IOM), *Chinese Migrants in Central and Eastern Europe: The Cases of the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Romania* (Budapest: IOM, September 1995), p. 23.

problem was to migrate to Germany, where the wages were higher, but this required yet another large smuggling fee.<sup>12</sup>

## Negotiating Chinese Identity

Although the Czechs usually perceive Chinese as a homogenous group of people from the same country, or as strangers of a certain type belonging to the cluster of many other strangers, nothing could be further from the truth. Chinese in the Czech Republic not only came from different places in China and thus differed in their linguistic and sub-ethnic identities, but they also presented differences in their educational and professional backgrounds as well as their social status in the PRC. Diversification of economic status since 1993–94 further reinforced the divisions within Chinese social space, leading to the emergence of the Chinese *nouveau riche*.

The largest group of Chinese in the Czech Republic came from southern and northern Zhejiang Province, namely, Qingtian County, Wenzhou, and the city of Hangzhou. Although originating from the same province, they spoke three related but distinct dialects, which defined their sense of belonging to a locality within the province rather than to the whole of Zhejiang or China. When in the Czech Republic, despite facing similar problems and sharing a similar culture, they continued to define themselves narrowly as belonging to specific localities in China. Local dialects often replaced *putonghua* (a common medium of communication) in communication among fellow villagers (*tongxiang tongbao*). They felt the same sense of belonging to their village and the local culture shared before their departure for Europe, when it was more significant than their national, Chinese identity. Villagers from Qingtian, for example, rarely travel to or talk about Hangzhou, let alone Beijing. However, due to the migration culture of Qingtian, they had more news about and contacts with their *tongxiang tongbao* in far-away European countries.<sup>13</sup>

As ethnic identification requires a sense of others against whom a group can be defined, the ethnic identity of the Chinese, who came from different regions and represented distinctive local cultures, became an expression of the relationships and self-perception constructed in opposition to the majority society. Objective elements of shared Chinese culture and the formation of a “we-image” in interaction with the Czechs affected the process of constructing a distinct Chinese identity. Hence, in relation to others, i.e., Czechs (“foreigners,” *laowai*), the Chinese in the Czech Republic identified themselves as Chinese (*Zhongguoren*) sharing *putonghua*.

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12. From a Chinese businessman who employed young men from Fujian as dishwashers in his restaurant, personal communication, Prague, January 2000.

13. A group of people from Qingtian under study in Prague in 1993 had links not only to their Qingtian *tongxiang tongbao* back home but also in Spain (at the Chinese embassy in Madrid) and in Hungary (catering businesses in Budapest).

Membership in exclusive informal networks based on the place of origin fostered the establishment of various cliques, e.g., the Qingtian clique (*bang*) or the Wenzhou *bang*, which were linked to parallel well-established native-place associations (*tongxianghui*) in other European countries. Several Chinese informants contacted in the Czech Republic maintained that Qingtianese in the Czech Republic had also formally established their own association. A perception of other Chinese belonging to different informal networks as being competitors for the limited resources in the small Czech market fueled common distrust. In extreme cases, Chinese viewed with suspicion those *tongxiang tongbao* who willingly socialized with various informal groups; they could even be expelled from their own clique. The emergent heterogeneity, the complexity of informal networks with its exclusive membership based on strong local identities, and the complicated web of inter-group relations could partly be seen as a rationale behind the low level of ethnic solidarity among Chinese in the Czech Republic, which finally resulted in the disjointed nature of Chinese community.

### Chinese Imagined Community

The emerging Chinese identity failed to bring unity, or the semblance of unity, among the Chinese in the Czech Republic. Unlike their counterparts in Hungary who organized themselves through numerous associations, Chinese in the Czech Republic lacked interest in establishing ethnic organizations. The strict regulations against selling property to foreigners prevented them from conglomerating in one residential area. Nonetheless, with the support of their families, cross-border informal networks of friends, and *guangxi* in the PRC, they did not find an absence of Chinese associations too distressing.

A number of attempts to organize a Chinese community in the Czech Republic, such as the Chinese embassy's efforts to support establishment of a Chinese association with the underlying intentions of influencing the actions of Chinese migrants, have all failed. Although the majority of influential Chinese business people in the Czech Republic preferred to focus on their own businesses rather than getting involved in the Chinese community, a wealthy patron from Shanghai established the Central Association of Chinese Businessmen in the Czech Republic (Jieke Huaqiao Zongshanghui) in 1995.<sup>14</sup> Word-of-mouth within the Chinese community had it that this individual was more motivated by his personal ambitions and business interests in the PRC rather than by a concern for the welfare of his compatriots. His

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14. Tomáš Nemeček, "Ějčáné v Praze! No a?" [Chinese in Prague! So what?], *Mladý Svet* 36:44, November 15, 1994, pp. 28–30; and Miroslav Nožina, ed., *Mezinárodní organizovaný zločin v ČR* [International organized crime in the Czech Republic], (Prague: Ústav mezinárodní ch vztahů, 1997), p. 67.

fellow countrymen, therefore, avoided the association, which they viewed either as a front for organized crime or a vehicle for the businessman's personal aggrandizement.<sup>15</sup>

In 1996, Tang Yunling, a Chinese woman residing in Czechoslovakia since the 1950s, established the Association of Chinese in the Czech Republic (Lu-Jie Huaren Lianyihui, or Hualianhui). Tang Yunling's association was different from the earlier establishment in that it was seen to serve the Chinese community rather than her self-interest. Furthermore, unlike the male-dominated Chinese associations common around the world, Hualianhui welcomed female members. The association's stated goal is to protect the legal rights of Chinese living in the Czech Republic and help them deal with the Czech authorities. The association's activities include providing assistance in acquiring Czech visas for relatives of Hualianhui members, representing Chinese citizens in Czech court, and helping people who face serious problems. Its monthly publication, *JieHua Tongxun* (The Czech-Chinese newsletter), which first appeared in February 1999 and is circulated among 500 to 700 readers, attempts to familiarize the Chinese with the Czech Republic.<sup>16</sup> It carries a section on current Czech news and practical advice on how to cope with everyday life in the country.

Hualianhui struggled with three major predicaments: a limited membership, a lack of financial resources, and a dubious relationship with the PRC embassy (due to Tang's well-known political convictions). However, Tang's personal connections with former Czech political dissidents—now dignitaries—has earned her respect among Chinese and constitutes a trump card for her association. It is difficult to ascertain to what extent Hualianhui genuinely represents the interests of the Chinese community, if not the community itself. There is little doubt, however, that the organization attempts to present itself in such a way. In January and October 1999, respectively, Hualianhui acted as a representative body of the Chinese in the Czech Republic during official meetings with Andrej Sulitka, the Czech governmental official responsible for national minorities, and, rather surprisingly, Chen Wusu, the vice-chairman of the Chinese Association of Friendship with Foreign Countries (Zhongguo Renmin Duiwai Youhao Xiehui).<sup>17</sup>

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15. Tang Yunling, personal communication, Prague, January 2000.

16. Lubica Obuchová, "Ějđđđđ v ĚR: Ěj nskđ komunita u nđs" [Chinese in the Czech Republic: Chinese community in our country], *Informađđđ Zpravodaj Ěsko-đđ nskđ spoleđnosti* [Newsletter of the Czech-Chinese association], 5:2/3 (December 1999), pp. 8–9.

17. "Jieke minzu shiwu bangongshi fuzeren huijian hualianhui huizhang ji fuhuizhang" [Representative of the Committee of National Minorities in the Czech Republic received chairperson and vice-chairperson of the Association of Chinese in the Czech Republic], *JieHua Tongxun* [Czech-Chinese newsletter], 1:1 (February 15, 1999), p. 1; and *ibid.*, 1:11 (December 25, 1999), p. 6.

Despite its limited influence within the Chinese community in the Czech Republic at the time of writing, Hualianhui seems to have the potential to gain a wider recognition among Chinese and be a thriving agent in constructing Chinese community spirit. An invitation to Tang Yunling for a meeting with the new Chinese ambassador in the Czech Republic in April 2000 and increasing interest in Hualianhui's gazette seem to be first signals.

## Images of Chinese

The Chinese, as a visible minority of "strangers," rendered silent by the language barrier, became an easy target of racist media attacks. The tabloid press and commercial television station NOVA in particular elaborated on the evils the Chinese brought to the Czech Republic. The media usually picked up only on cases where the Chinese committed crimes, resided in the Czech Republic illegally, or engaged in illegitimate businesses. They generalized such phenomena and further contributed to the strengthening of the Czechs' negative attitude toward foreigners in general<sup>18</sup> and Chinese in particular. The Czech public was presented with terrifying images of the aggressive, violent, and well-organized triads moving from Hong Kong to Prague. These images of alleged Chinese criminality also included vague accusations of breaking the law, robberies, intimidation, tax evasion, racketeering, passport forgery, and trafficking of Chinese to Western Europe.<sup>19</sup> Apart from tax evasion, all of these criminal activities were directed solely at the Chinese community.

Public surveys make it clear that the Czech majority did not seriously question the negative stereotype of the Chinese as presented in the sensationalist media. In 1996, for example, 73% of Czech respondents preferred to keep a social distance from Chinese and Vietnamese<sup>20</sup> (whom the Czechs rarely distinguished from each other). This statistical data, translated, for example, into the Czech nationals' avoidance of social contacts with Chinese and the Czech landlords' fear of renting them flats. On rarer occasions, extremist groups (e.g., skinheads) intimidated the Chinese.

However, the quality and on some occasions popular media countered the negative image by presenting the Chinese in a positive light: as successful business people, excellent artists, or conscientious students. *Mladý Svět* for example, portrayed them as modest, inconspicuous, polite, peaceful, quiet, and enigmatic, people who neither gathered in public nor published their own

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18. Ministry of the Interior of the Czech Republic, Department for Refugees and the Integration of Foreigners, *National Roundtable on Community Relations: Set of Documents* (Prague: Ministry of Interior, February 19, 1998), pp. 83–84.

19. "Ějí na v Praze," p. 19., no. 30, 1993.

20. "Veřejné mínění: Nejvíce vadí Romové, Vietnamci a ějóáné" [Public opinion: The most disliked are Romanies, Vietnamese, and Chinese], *Právo* (Prague), December 13, 1996.

newspapers and were trying to be invisible. Successful Chinese entrepreneurs were also described as stylish, wealthy, and English-speaking. Chinese farmers growing rice in the Czech Republic were praised as extremely hard working. The Czech press also made favorable comments on the centers of Chinese traditional medicine as capable of “curing everything” from back pain to breast cancer.<sup>21</sup>

The image of the Chinese benefited from the presentation of China as a rising superpower with great potential, a long history, and a unique culture. The Chinese were often described as a nation of philosophers, poets, and masters of martial arts. Chinese food gradually gained popularity among the Czech public, who tried to prepare “*čína*” (“china,” common Czech colloquialism for Chinese food) at home as they could not afford eating out in Chinese restaurants. In addition, a positive image of the Chinese was aided by comments made by Czech celebrities who paid visits to China.<sup>22</sup>

The Czech police also, rather unexpectedly, countered the negative image of Chinese in the media. In mid-1990, the director of Alien Police in Prague, Vaclav Kuthan, reiterated that the Chinese belonged to the most “well-behaved” foreigners in the Republic. Among 1,300 foreigners expelled between January and August 1996, there were only 17 Chinese. Prague’s criminal police lent support to his views by adding that Chinese crime was usually committed within the Chinese community and did not cause problems for the country as a whole.<sup>23</sup>

Although signs of Czech xenophobia called for active attempts on the part of Chinese migrants to interact with their receiving society and learn its language, the Chinese appeared rather passive in this regard. Few made an effort to learn the Czech language, discouraged mainly by uncertainty of their long-term future in the country and the perceived immensity of the investment in time and effort needed to learn the language. Those who decided to improve their language skills opted for English, German, or French, because they saw these as more useful for their future careers. As far as Czech language is concerned, most Chinese preferred to rely on Czech interpreters as their major agents of communication and social integration.

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21. Ěermák and Motl, “Znamení draka,” pp. 24–26; Němeček, “Ějčáné v Praze! No a?” pp. 28–30; Judita Bednářová, “Ějčány to nebolí” [The Chinese do not feel the pain], *Mladý svět* 42:2 (January 13, 2000), pp. 28–29.; Ivo Bártík, “Ej pod Buchlovem ry\_a zraje” [Hey, rice is growing below Buchlov], *Kvety* [Flowers], no. 27 (July 15, 2000), pp. 22–23; and Czech TV Channel 1, Evening News, May 16, 2000.

22. For example, see the interview of Czech popular singer Karel Gott by Jiří Tluhoš, “Ějčáné jsou velmi přátelstí, ale vy\_adu\_j disciplínu jako øemen” [Chinese are very friendly, but they demand strict discipline], *Právo* (Prague), November 6, 1999.

23. “Letos bylo vyhosteno jen 17 Ějčánù” [Only 17 Chinese were expelled this year], *Slovo* (Prague), August 21, 1996; and “Cizinci v Praze” [Foreigners in Prague], *Metro* (Prague), December 14, 1998.

## Political Response

The post-1948 communist regime in Czechoslovakia suppressed ethnic animosities among various nationalities still residing in the country but did little to resolve them. Added to this, Czechs and Slovaks rarely traveled beyond the Iron Curtain, which resulted in giving them their rather vague ideas of the outside world while shaping an ethnocentric approach toward peoples of different cultures. A forced ethnic homogenization and international isolation of the Czechoslovak society generated a low degree of tolerance by the general public (as well as the authorities) toward minorities and ethnic diversity.<sup>24</sup> Neither the Velvet Revolution of 1989, with the institutionalization of democratic values and practices that it produced, nor the peaceful “divorce” with the Slovaks in 1993 altered the long-standing Czech prejudice against “aliens,” often seen as a potential threat to public safety.

In the context of rising xenophobia, it is not surprising that the Czechs sought to close their gates to potential migrants from China. A specialist on China at Charles University, Martin Hala, openly called for a revision of the 1956 Sino-Czechoslovak visa agreement, arguing that the service passports could be easily obtained in the PRC through some “back door” arrangements.<sup>25</sup> In 1997, the Czech Ministry of the Interior classified migration as a major risk to political stability.<sup>26</sup> Three years later, an amended law on foreigners, which, in particular, affected nationals from the so-called “problematic countries” (to which China was classified) came to life. This amendment made it much more difficult for migrants to renew their residence permits.<sup>27</sup> Minister of Interior Vaclav Grulich justified the amendment as necessary in order to curtail the flow of foreigners to the Czech Republic in general and illegal labor migration in particular.<sup>28</sup> Given that the Czech Republic has the lowest number of foreigners of all the central and western European countries,<sup>29</sup> the officially stated purpose of the amendment remains questionable.

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24. Stanislav Bouček, “Imigrace jako životní zkušenost . . . nejen pro přistěhovalce” [Immigration as a life experience . . . not only for immigrants], *Respekt*, February 22, 1999, special supplement, p. 2. *Právo*, February 1, 2000.

25. Martin Hála “Reálné problémy a kouřové clony” [Real problems and smoke screen], *Respekt*, May 17, 1999, p. 3.

26. Jaroslav Spurný, “Jak je u nás (ne)bezpečno: Vláda schválila Rumlovu výroční zprávu” [How (un)safe it is in our country: Government approved Ruml's annual report], *ibid.*, May 26, 1997, p. 4.

27. Adam Drda, “Do nového tisíciletí bez obtížných cizáků” [To new millennium without annoying strangers], *Lidové noviny* (Prague), January 14, 2000; and Georg Pacurar, “Jak má sto harmonie vypukl chaos” [How chaos erupted instead of harmony], *Právo* (Prague), January 27, 2000, February 18 and January 21, 2000.

28. Linda Kholová, “Alou domů” [Off you go home], *Respekt*, April 10, 2000, p. 6.

29. Jan Kubita, “Ěchům vadí lidé přicházející z Prahy” [Czechs do not like people who are coming after work], *Lidové Noviny* (Prague), June 10, 2000.

The Czech anti-immigration policies and media comments were not mitigated by any consideration of the migrants' contribution to the cultural diversity and economic well-being of the country. The Vietnamese and Chinese, through their retail and cheap light industrial products, for example, catered to the poor, who could not afford glossy but expensive department stores and boutiques. Chinese markets for many Czechs became the only shopping outlets for daily necessities, such as clothes, shoes, electronics, and toys. Where there were no Chinese and Vietnamese traders, many Czechs would have found it much harder to lead normal lives. Similarly, little attention was paid to the jobs created by Chinese businesses for Czech nationals. Numerous interpreters, clerical staff, accountants, lawyers, shop assistants, and warehouse workers would be affected if the Chinese were forced to close down their firms.

Czech politicians ignored the problem of xenophobia and racism against ethnic groups until 1995, when racially motivated violence (particularly against the Romanies) increased dramatically. Only after vocal condemnation by the international community did the Czech authorities begin to tackle the issue of racial violence. In 1996, Minister for Minorities Bratinka emphasized the importance of taking a firm action against racism and drew attention to the difficulties the government would face given the racism of the Czech police.<sup>30</sup>

In the late 1990s, the European Council initiated roundtables—debates at a regional level with representatives of government, nongovernmental organizations, regional authorities, and individual communities—that sought to foster nation-wide dialogue on such questions as migration, integration of foreigners, and community relations in the Czech Republic.<sup>31</sup> The Council's document, *Community and Ethnic Relations in Europe* (1991), became a guideline for Prague's policy on the integration of foreigners. Most recently, in February 2000, the Czech government launched a countrywide Tolerance Project that aims to expose the irrationality of racial prejudice. The Project is a conscious first step toward increasing the Czechs' understanding and acceptance of those who differ from them. Its goal is to initiate a positive, long-term process of altering stereotyped views toward foreigners in Czech society.

## Conclusion

The Chinese in the Czech Republic fall under the category of new migrants. On the whole, their decision to leave China was motivated by neither poverty nor political persecution. Instead, it was conditioned by a desire to find new opportunities, whether it was a liberal business environment, self-develop-

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30. Spurný, "Jak je u nás (ne)bezpečno," p. 4., May 22–26, 1997.

31. *National Roundtable On Community Relations*, pp. 8–16.

ment, more personal freedom, or social advancement. The new Chinese migration to ECE can be termed as being "experimental migration" in that the Chinese first tested new territories and evaluated the benefits and drawbacks of each location before deciding whether to stay, go somewhere else, or return home. Those Chinese who went to the Czech Republic did not take up lowly paid local jobs but rather became entrepreneurs, employing local people and their less fortunate countrymen and women who arrived later, i.e., in mid-1990s. As such, the prime movers created a small business elite and joined the ranks of the emerging Czech moneyed class, an impressive feat given the short span of time, limited working capital and entrepreneurial experience, and their ignorance of the receiving society.

Chinese contributions to Czech society were restricted mostly to the economic and cultural sphere and were seen by the Czech public as mixed at best. The positive inputs in the form of creating new jobs, introducing Chinese cuisine to the local market, and making consumer products available to the poor were countered by the negative perception of the Chinese as tax evaders, smugglers in human cargo, and mafia-style gangsters. The negative stereotypes, when applied to the image of the entire Chinese community, became a justification for discriminatory behavior at personal as well as official levels. Although anti-Chinese attitudes could be seen as a part of the racist upheaval in modern European societies, rather than as a consequence of historical or social development, its persistence emphasized the Czechs' reluctance to accept Chinese migrants as fully fledged members of society. As a result, the Chinese remain "strangers," outsiders, and an enigma, fascinating yet threatening.

So far, the Chinese have done little, if anything, to counter the negative stereotyping. Their effort in this regard is inhibited not only by their inability to communicate in Czech but also by the disjointed character of their community—a result of strong sub-ethnic identities of the Chinese in the Czech Republic. While economically self-reliant, the Chinese wrapped themselves into closely knit networks of nuclear and extended families, as well as *lao-xiang* and friends, perceiving other Chinese as competitors or potential threats. Inter-community rivalry and mistrust are to blame for the absence of an effective Chinese association, which could truly represent and advance the interests of all Chinese migrants. Lacking organization and distrusting each other while facing increasingly more hostile attitudes of the receiving society, the Chinese find themselves in a precarious situation. Alienated from the majority society and each other, they wage an uphill battle for social recognition and financial security. Given the mobile nature of Chinese migration to the Czech Republic, it is not entirely certain whether they will continue to struggle or will give up and move to another country with seemingly brighter business opportunities and a more welcoming society.