WeChat and the Chinese Diaspora

Digital Transnationalism in the Era of China's Rise

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Chapter 2

WeChat as migration infrastructure: The case of Chinese-Russian precarious labour markets

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The case of Chinese-Russian precarious labour markets

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In May 2017, Roskomnadzor (the official committee regulating the communication, information technology, and media in the Russian Federation) banned the use of WeChat (Reuters 2017). The disconnection happened gradually and in an order that was unpredictable for users. Access to some accounts was lost, then restored, while other accounts continued to work without being disabled. There was a wave of questions among users as they tried to find out which of their number could still use their account and which could not. The Russian segment of WeChat seemed to be full of messages: "Are you in touch?" or "Answer, did you get a message from me?" Deprivation—or the mere possibility of being deprived—of access to WeChat caused migrants to feel in danger of being excluded from the familiar digital world; from the world of social ties through which they are connected to home, to support groups in the host country, to employers or commercial partners. The case described above shows how WeChat is vital for Chinese migrants in Russia. It might seem surprising that since leaving China, where the Internet is highly regulated, the Chinese have not switched to other "free" platforms. What should surprise us more is that WeChat is by no means less crucial for Russians who live in China. When going to study, work or do business in China, most of them install this platform on their smartphones, and those of their friends and family members.

Digital migration studies, which began to develop relatively recently, have already revealed the crucial role that information and communication technologies (ICTs) play in intensifying transnational practices. For instance, Georgiou explores the role of social media in the diasporic identity of Greek-Cypriots and reveals how consumption of media keeps migrants in social and spatial domestic, public, urban and transnational connections (Georgiou 2006). Madianou and Miller focus on prolonged separation between Filipino mothers in England and their children living in the Philippines; in so doing, the authors emphasise digital mediation in establishing transnational migration identity (Madianou & Miller 2011). Studies of digital diasporas have shown that ICTs can facilitate migrants' lives, freeing them from the many limitations imposed by the usual redistribution of

power (Candidatu, Leurs & Ponzanesi 2019). New regimes resulting from using ICTs allow migrants to take more control of their lives (Diminescu 2008; Leurs & Madhuri 2018).

Perhaps due to the lesser availability of field data, the role of ICTs in the lives of precarious, more vulnerable migrants has remained under-studied until recently (Ennaji & Bignami 2019; Leurs & Smets 2018; Nedelcu & Soysüren 2020). The topic requires attention because, on the one hand, states are increasingly using various digital technologies for top-down control of migrants; on the other hand, migrants, especially precarious ones, often use digital platforms to facilitate mobility and adjust in the host country (Zapata-Barrero & Yalaz 2018). Migration infrastructure—systematic inter-linkage between technologies, institutions and actors (Xiang & Lindquist 2014)—may empower or restrict precarious migrants and controlling agencies. Focusing on this infrastructure can bring migration studies to a new level of conceptual discussion if one pays attention to technologies and other material (nonhuman) actors.

This brings us to a recent trend in migration studies, namely, a material turn inspired by Actor-Network Theory (ANT) (Burrell 2008; Vrăbiescu 2020; Walters 2015). To evoke Latour's metaphor of the American pilot who cannot fly anywhere without all those human and nonhuman beings and networks that make his flight possible (Latour 1999), a Chinese cook cannot migrate anywhere without all those actors and networks, humans and non-humans, including digital platforms, that make his move and work in a new country possible. The strength of ANT includes a rejection of conventional hierarchical constructs and the necessity of thinking of all relations, including human and nonhuman, as equal. This is so in the sense that any actor, regardless of their position, removed from the network or added to it, affects the functioning of the entire network (Doolin & Lowe 2002).

In this chapter, we focus on the uses of WeChat in the context of *precarious labour markets* and the *precarious positions* (Ferguson & McNally 2015; Fudge 2012) of both Chinese employees in Russia and Russian employees in China. We study the everyday practices entrenched in the complex inter-section of social and digital realms. Among other things, we are trying to understand if people can do without WeChat, and if this is difficult, why. We also seek to uncover whether the platform *per se* plays any role in the practices of emancipation and subjugation of people who have lower economic and cultural capital or suffer from vulnerable migration status. Scrutinising the use of the digital platform WeChat by Chinese and Russian migrants and employing the methodological framework of ANT, we examine the role of ICTs as a part of the infrastructure which facilitates, assists, directs, controls, limits and restricts the lives of mobile people. In contrast to other papers (Nedelcu & Soysüren 2020) in which authors reveal the emancipating possibilities of such Internet platforms as Facebook or WhatsApp, and conversely the subjugating potential of governmental systems such as biometric border control, we focus on the ability of the same platform to strengthen or

weaken structural constraints depending on the configuration of migration infrastructure.

Like Zhang's study of the Chinese students in Vancouver, our contribution to this volume also takes an ethnographic approach to place-making, but we focus on a distinct WeChat-using migrant group—Chinese and Russian labour migrants who traverse the transnational labour market space. Our study relies on primary data gained from long-term field research in Russia and China. One of the authors regularly returned to the migration processes in Amur oblast and Krasnoyarskii Kray during 2008–2014, while the other conducted fieldwork research in Irkutskaya oblast in 2017–2019 as well as in Heilongjiang, Hubei and Yunnan provinces in 2011–2013. In addition to the participant observations and interviews obtained earlier, we conducted a series of informal interviews in 2019–2020: with Russian young people 20–32 years old working in different positions in China (23 in number) and Chinese 23–45 years old, working in different positions in Russia (19 in number). In addition to biographical interviews, we collected thematic interviews with intermediaries working in both the sending and the host countries; the total number of such interviews was nine. We also conducted a qualitative content analysis of groups formed: in Irkutsk (Russia) on WeChat for Chinese migrants; in Shanghai (China) on WeChat for migrants from Primorye (Russia); also via the Telegram channel for Russians working abroad (mainly in China or Korea). The content analysis was accompanied by interviews with those connected to these groups or who responded to requests sent in private messages.

Based on this research, the remainder of this chapter introduces migration between Russia and China and presents four ethnographic cases. They reveal how WeChat (un)replaces traditional social ties for Chinese and Russian migrants. We also explain how "Chinese" and "non-Chinese" digital practices are intermingled, and in so doing, we aim to unpack how the digital platform both weakens and strengthens the structural constraints of precarious migrants.

Chinese versus Russian migration infrastructures

Migration from China to Russia

In contrast to many other countries, Chinese migration to Russia is a new phenomenon, beginning hardly more than 30 years ago. Its newness stems from a total prohibition of migration inflow from China to Russia that occurred twice in the 20th century. In the late 1920s, the USSR established border zones and ridded them of ethnic groups identical to those living on the other side of the border. As a result, Chinese nationals living in settlements on the Russian east were exiled home. Some were shot, and others had to hide their identities, stating "Russian" in the ethnicity column in their passports. In the 1950s, as part of the strong friendship between

China and Russia during the socialist era, Chinese students, engineers and intellectuals came to the USSR. The period of "eternal" friendship lasted only until the 1960s when, after the border conflict on Damansky Island, a Russo-Chinese "cold war" began. Moscow and Beijing stopped all cultural, economic and even technical exchanges. In this context, the few ethnic Chinese citizens of the USSR and their descendants had to downplay or even conceal their cultural and ethnic identity (Larin 2000).

The situation changed in the 1990s. Russia's transition to a market economy resulted in a flood of Chinese self-employed and low-skilled workers pouring into Vladivostok, Novosibirsk, Irkutsk, Blagoveschensk and many other cities in the Russian east, as well as into Moscow and St. Petersburg (Dyatlov 2000, 2005; Larin 2000; Portykov 2004). Today, it is often the case that the presence of these people in the territory of the Russian Federation is not fully documented. Many serve without a work visa (having just a business or tourist visa), work permits, patents, or the required documentation of their entrepreneurial activity. It is common for Chinese migrants not to be registered at the place of their residence—which is mandatory in the Russian Federation—and many do not buy medical insurance. These problems with documentation are both a cause and a consequence of the fact that most Chinese migrants have fixed-term, seasonal, or temporary jobs in agriculture, logging, construction, or the services industry, or work as self-employed in bazaars. Most temporary workers commute between work in Russia and families in China. Many self-employed people in Chinese bazaars came to Russia intending to stay for one or two seasons but stayed for a decade.

Official Russian statistics suggest that logging and trade have been the main types of employment for Chinese labour migrants in Russia in recent years (Ryzhova 2013, pp. 214–219). Small-scale Chinese trade in Russia has come a long way—from a sudden growth in uncontrolled shuttle trade in the 1990s to the blossoming of various intermediary schemes designed to evade tax, customs and other payments and then again to merchants registering at bazaars as employees of trade centres in order to legalise their status. Actually, "Chinese bazaars" have never been entirely legal, and Chinese merchants are undoubtedly the most visible representatives of the precarious market. The logging industry in Russia attracts both relatively large Chinese entrepreneurs and workers in logging, sawmills and wood processing (Ryzhova 2009). Chinese entrepreneurs, who often have businesses on both the Russian and Chinese sides of the border, prefer to hire Chinese workers, but only a few of those who work in Russia have high qualifications or official contracts. The biographies we describe below are typical for our study, and the people who shared their experiences with us indeed have irregular migration status and/or low qualifications.

The regulation of the Russian segment of the Internet is still changing, and experts assume new restrictions are coming (Kuznets 2020). What is important for our discussion is that, despite all attempts made so far, the

Russian digital sphere is less controlled than the Chinese one. Restrictions complicate the everyday lives of migrants in both Russia and China, but in a different manner. The experience of China is well known: in the early 2000s, it introduced the so-called "Great Firewall of China" (Tsui 2007). This resulted in denied access to most online foreign resources and required Russians (as well as other foreigners in China) to use WeChat or other Chinese platforms. Meanwhile, Chinese migrants in Russia can still use familiar platforms to stay in touch with friends and relatives.

The digital visibility of Chinese flows to Russia is lower than in the other direction, primarily because of the Chinese "techno-nationalist" approach to digital platforms (Plantin & de Seta 2019): the user cannot find a group facilitating migration from China to Russia using standard English-language search engines. However, as we discuss in this chapter, the digital environment also facilitates this cross-border flow. Not only international movement but also the everyday life of migrants is embedded in the digital world. If one walks into a "Chinese" bazaar in any Russian regional city, she can easily observe that most of the bazaar's merchants are immersed in their smartphones. If she asks which platforms they use the most, the answer would be unambiguous: WeChat. Using this platform, Chinese merchants order commodities from China and pay for them. In the WeChat groups, migrants solve current financial issues, respond to changes in legislation, and are alerted about immigration inspections. Merchants and Chinese restaurant chefs, agrarian workers and builders use WeChat to communicate with family members or friends living in China, send wishes to their beloved on holidays, and discuss rumours and news. Sometimes, WeChat-ers "share" lunch, staying in their respective places. In groups made up of their fellow compatriots, migrants exchange news, find rent advertisements or deal with health issues. Wang is one such migrant.

A second-generation "temporary" merchant

Wang is a merchant from the "Chinese" bazaars in Irkutsk; he was born and raised in China in Harbin's suburbs. He came to Russia two years ago. He is the "second generation" of precarious workers in his family because his mother, Wulan, has been trading in Irkutsk since the 1990s. Thirty years ago, when she was 25 years old, Wulan came to Russia, thinking that it was for a temporary job and she would return to China very soon. She started as a street vendor (the goods were laid out right on the ground), then rented a space in an old, poorly developed "Shanghaiika" (open bazaar). Now the family has a small shoe shop, not more than 15 square metres in size, rented in the new "*Kitay-Gorod*" (Chinatown) shopping centre, where most of the renters are Chinese.

Both Wulan and Wang are in Russia on business visas arranged for them by an intermediary agency registered in Irkutsk. The official owner of the

agency is a Russian citizen, but he never appears in the office, bank, or other formal places; the effective owner is Chinese. Thus, despite being a businessman, this Chinese intermediary has not registered a company in either the host or home country. Instead, he uses agency representatives who draw up the necessary documents in Russia and China, contacts the authorities and communicate with migrants. While the use of an agency to obtain a visa is technically optional, none of Wang's family has tried to draw up the documents themselves. Chinese labour migration legislation does not regulate the departure of merchants from China. From 2008, when Russia outlawed foreigners trading at bazaars, the informal entry schemes involved registering Chinese entering Russia as hired labour for the shopping centres. The centres paid taxes, and the migrants had to pay extra for this "service." Nowadays, Chinese merchants mostly come on a business visa, applying for a certificate of entrepreneurial activity to do so. Wulan has such a certificate; Wang does not, as it involves an additional cost. Guided by the agency, Wulan prepared the business invitation for Wang, which was the basis for issuing the business visa.

The ban on trading for foreigners means that neither Wang nor Wulan can sell their goods themselves, and hence, they have to hire a salesperson. Ayana, a migrant from Kyrgyzstan, works in Wang's shoe shop. Russian legislation for Kyrgyz nationals is much more relaxed than for people from other post-Soviet countries, not to mention the Chinese. However, Wang attributes the hiring of Ayana not only to formal rules but also to her competence in trading ("the Russians do not know how to trade at all"). Wang's family hired Ayana through Chinese social ties. Unlike the vast majority of other labour positions, Chinese shops seldom advertise their positions through WeChat. As Wang explains, Ayana has access to both goods and money, and all activity is entirely undocumented; if something goes missing, Wulan and Wang have no legal recourse for recouping the loss. Therefore, finding an employee through personal social ties (rather than WeChat) increased the family's confidence in Ayana.

WeChat is, however, actively used in other areas of Wang and Wulan's daily and work life. The shop is tiny, and the family can display only a limited range of shoe sizes. When there are many customers, Wang stays in the warehouse and Wulan in the sales area. Wang brings shoes from the warehouse to the store when Wulan messages via WeChat. If a size is out of stock, Wang sends a request to the "shoe" WeChat group "Kitay-Gorod" (meaning "Chinatown"). Other merchants then bring in their products and give them to the Wang family. This kind of help pays off—next time, Wang will return the favour to his "competitors." Replenishment is usually quick, as goods are also bought in Irkutsk from wholesalers owned by larger Chinese entrepreneurs. Procurement and payment by small merchants from large Chinese wholesalers in Irkutsk also take place via WeChat. Sometimes Wang and Wulan order shoes directly from China. They select products on WeChat, pay via WeChat and order a delivery through traditional informal

channels (see, for example, Ryzhova 2018). The delivery payment is made upon the arrival of the goods at the warehouse, again via WeChat Wallet.

The "dynasty" of logging workers that never eventuated

Li, a 23-year-old man from Qiqihar, had dreamed about going to Russia to work under the same scheme as his uncle Zhang since he was 15 years old. However, while Li was growing up, the Ring timber company where Zhang was working closed its subsidiary in Russia. As a result, Li could not entirely replicate Zhang's migration strategy.

His uncle's example encouraged Li mainly because Zhang could afford to buy a two-bedroom flat and save money for his children's education after just a few years of work in Russia. Zhang was lucky because his employer decided to open his production facility in Russia in 2011. The plan was to make billets (pieces of wood) on the Russian side and produce chopsticks, toothpicks and kebab sticks on the Chinese side. To implement the plan, the Ring factory owner, like most other Chinese entrepreneurs, decided to register the business with a Russian front (fake) company. The launching of Ring required bringing Chinese forepersons into the production process in Russia. Staying in Russia for one year (and a year in China), forepersons had to ensure the quality of semi-finished products and the smooth running of expensive equipment. The paperwork for the relocation of the labour force began a year before the workers' entry, with the factory making an application to the Russian Federal Migration Service for a migration quota for foreign labour. Based on the quotas received, Ring company issued personal invitations, and the Russian Embassy issued work visas. Zhang was unaware of the details of this paperwork and did not consider himself a labour migrant since his work in Russia was a long business trip with the same company. He was not even listed as a migrant worker in Chinese statistics; nor did the "base"[1] or intermediaries in the Chinese labour export market know anything about him. Not only did this detail not overshadow Zhang's life in any way, but it was also unknown to him.

Zhang willingly shared information with his relatives about his living, working and security conditions and his wages, thus inspiring Li to hope that his uncle would help him find a similar job. It did not work out—in 2014, the business environment changed, and production in Siberia became unprofitable for Chinese companies. Ring and many other Chinese companies engaged in the wood industry turned from processing to harvesting and shipping raw materials to China. Zhang returned to China, while less qualified Chinese came to Russia to work in logging and sawmills. Despite these changes, Li still decided to go. The uncle helped him to get into a WeChat group advertising job positions in Russia. After a series of unsuccessful attempts (employers preferred those already in Russia and who had their documents ready), Li found a firm willing to accept him without a work visa. Zhang, who was somewhat familiar with the problems the Chinese

faced in Russia, assumed this option was not safe: a tourist visa would not entitle Li to work and he would thus be vulnerable to the threat of deportation, and Zhang also felt that he could not entirely trust people found through a digital platform. Zhang, who also communicated with twenty other migrants living in the flat he had once rented, knew that the WeChat search option was not ideal for employers. People hired without references and background checks were often unqualified or had personal qualities that were not suitable for living away from their home country and family.

As it turned out, Li was not satisfied with the job: it was hard work, not so well paid, and came with the aforementioned risks. Furthermore, he could not access WeChat since the sawmill did not have reliable access to the Internet, and so Li, like Zhang, was disconnected from his usual social ties.

Infrastructure for migration from Russia to China

Migration from Russia to China began even later than the Chinese migration to Russia. Before 2008, when the Russian economy weakened significantly, Russian migration to China was rare: representatives of creative professions, financial and IT professionals—but not precarious migrants—went to China. In the last ten years, outgoing migration has gained momentum (Ryazantcev et al. 2018). Increasingly, young university graduates or even people without education and proper documentation are rushing to China. However, the phenomenon remains poorly understood, partly due to a lack of knowledge resulting from the "hidden" character of the flow, and hence, the impossibility of gathering statistical data. Qualitative field research also remains sporadic (but for rare examples, see Barabantseva & Grillot 2019; Zuenko 2014). On the other hand, a search on popular Russian digital platforms—such as Instagram, VK, or Telegram—allows one to quickly identify advertisements seeking groups of Russian dancers or English language teachers to go to China.

Statistics for migration from Russia to China are scant, but existing research confirms that it is rising (Ryazantcev et al. 2018; Zuenko 2014) and notes that at least a quarter of all Russians in China (Zuenko, 2014) are employed in the entertainment industry (from artists, dancers and DJs to karaoke workers, hostesses and prostitutes). While we did not come across any publications about Russians migrating to China to work as English language teachers, an analysis of Russian-language digital platforms with job vacancies in China confirms that both teachers and artists are the most sought-after positions. (The most popular groups in VK (based on the number of subscribers) include https://vk.com/china_show_time; https://vk.com/chinaoffers; and https://vk.com/public61806079.) Interestingly, in both cases, this demand is explained on the grounds of Russians' European appearance rather than any unique competency. English language schools, now very trendy in China (kknews.cc 2018; Zhihu.com n.d.), hire Russian teachers as native speakers (representing them as "exotic" Canadians and

Australians rather than "proper" British and Americans). Clubs are happy to have Russian dancers (or hostesses) because of their "exotic" appearance for the local market. As we will show later, even if such employees have contracts, their work is temporary and undocumented, and they thus live very vulnerable lives.

"Canadian" teacher of Russian origin

Vera, 22 years old, was born in a small Russian town and educated in Vladivostok. She undertook an internship in Canada and subsequently worked as an English teacher in Shanghai. When the COVID-19 pandemic started, she left China and would like to return but could not due to border closures.

Vera saw on Facebook that a former classmate was teaching English in Shanghai. Since Vera could not find a job in her hometown ("with rent, clothes, and food, I could only work at a loss—that is, without my mother's help I could not cover my expenses"), she decided to go to China. Vera asked an official Chinese agency to help her find a position. She gained the agency's contact via a WeChat group that advertises vacancies for native speakers of English, and she was added to the group by a former classmate for a small fee. After a successful online interview, the company sent the invitation and promised to start the process of issuing a work visa; as it turned out later, they did not in fact do this. Vera entered China on a business visa, hoping to get a work visa from the school. At the interview, they told her that she would be considered Canadian since she had taken an internship in Canada. The salary offered was 17,000 *yuan* per month, which, as she found out later, was three to four times higher than that of a Chinese teacher in the same position, but half that of real native speakers (a real Canadian, whom she met later, was paid 42,000 *yuan*).

Vera did not contact a Russian employment agency abroad because "all Russian agencies are middlemen of middlemen of middlemen" (this was the opinion expressed by all our respondents). She requested that a Russian travel agency issue a business visa because it is relatively fast, allows one to stay in China for up to 6 months, and costs about 15,000 rubles in border cities (in Moscow, it goes up to 25,000 rubles). The "travel agencies" have long-term relations with firms in China that issue business invitations and provide all the documents required by the Chinese consulate. When she went to China, Vera had only a passport with a business visa on it (no licenses or business invitations; she did not even know the name of the sponsoring firm). It is strictly forbidden to work in China on a business visa—everyone is aware of that—but it is the primary way of gaining entry to the country for teachers, dancers, models, prostitutes and bartenders.

Quick and easy entry into China turned out to be just one of Vera's problems. Two weeks later, Vera lost her job, officially due to "bad pronunciation," and was required to vacate the flat provided by the school. The

contract she had signed online was instantly voided. Nobody even remembered the work visa.

Once back in Russia, Vera wrote to intermediaries. One of the agents wrote to her immediately after her contract was terminated, asking: "are you looking for a job?" As a result, Vera agreed to pay for professional job-hunting assistance and received three new leads on the same day. Over the next two days, Vera passed three job interviews, and two schools offered her jobs. The intermediary demanded 40% of her salary, and she was further cheated because her full-time position came with payment for holidays and weekends, but Vera never saw this money. Subsequently, Vera changed intermediaries several times, usually finding them through WeChat groups. Despite the aforementioned deception, she was lucky overall: she found an almost "white" intermediary straight away. "White" means that an intermediary rarely cheats and always pays salaries. Vera learned about "blackness" and "whiteness" from special WeChat groups in which foreigners to China discussed their agents.

Vera started working and soon found that she earned barely enough money to rent a flat and eat. She had to forget about the work visa. To obtain it, Vera would have had to have her diplomas verified, a clear police background check, and proof of medical insurance. All of these documents would have to be translated into Chinese and officially certified. Later, Vera discovered that not only could a migrant be undocumented, but also an employee. The second school where Vera worked did not have a license to employ foreign workers. She decided to leave it after two months and gave two months' notice. She never received her salary for the second month, but there was no point in going to the police: her undocumented status made the contract null and void. When an undocumented migrant is detected, the police fine the employee around 10,000 *yuan*. If it happens a second time, they deport the migrant and forbid them to return for five years. In some cases, the police can even arrest undocumented workers.

In her first six months in China, Vera worked in three schools, a training centre, and a kindergarten. Several times she worked as a model and acted as an extra in movies. Migrants generally do not like to work for one company because they need to be clandestine, hiding from the police and random people who can hand them into the police. Precarious migrants try to change their appearance by wearing caps, hoods and dyeing their hair so that people working or living around them do not notice that the same person regularly goes to the same jobs. Those who are already under suspicion have much more pressure. For example, the police demanded that a girl with whom Vera rented a flat upload her real-time WeChat location, and hence WeChat became a tool for additional control and regulation by the authorities. This lady had to stop her classes and run to make a real-time check-in at an Ikea located nearby. Neither Vera nor her friend had ever walked with schoolchildren—if they had, the police would have recognised them as teachers and suspected them immediately. Among the techniques

Vera's friend used to evade the police were hiding in the kitchen cupboard at home, in the pantry at school, and jumping over a hedge when she saw the police outside the house.

Six months after she arrived in China, Vera returned to Russia to obtain a business visa again. This time she did not go to a travel agency; she applied by herself using an invitation issued by the director of her last school. The invitation was not for teaching but a managerial position in a firm owned by the school director. This same director offered to work with Vera directly, without intermediaries, which doubled Vera's income.

Nowadays, WeChat accompanies Vera in all her daily matters: apart from looking for a job for English-speaking people, she has joined Russian-speaking job search groups; agent search groups; groups to check agents; groups offering flat rentals or manicure services; groups for compatriots (from the same region of Russia where Vera is from). Every school grade that Vera has taught also runs a WeChat group. Her students post their homework there, and the teacher can check it and comment on it. She also uses WeChat to check lesson timetables. Groups for compatriots are similarly very effective: one can receive help with moving, finding a flat, a job, currency exchange, and access to a WeChat Wallet; the migrant themselves, as a rule, does not have a Chinese bank card because of lack of a work visa. Despite the importance of WeChat, every migrant must remove and reinstall the App regularly. The regularity with which they do so varies. Vera deleted the App only before crossing the border because Chinese border control officers often check smartphones, including all WeChat contacts and groups. If they reveal any evidence that the migrant has worked and received a salary (school groups, intermediaries, job search groups), entry into China can be refused. Vera's friend, being under police suspicion, had to delete and reinstall the App every day because she was afraid of being checked on the street.

Russian "exotic" dancer

Dina, 23 years old, is from Blagoveshchensk, a regional centre of Amurskaya oblast and the only city situated exactly on the Russia-China border. She studied English and dance from childhood and started learning Chinese in China. Her areas of work are club dancing, Go-Go dancing and modelling. She has been working in Beijing lately but has also worked in other Chinese cities. She stayed in China during the pandemic and enjoyed a huge number of available job positions.

Dina first travelled to China in 2014, as a schoolgirl on tour with her dance studio to Guangzhou for three summer months. The tour organisers paid for food, accommodation and entertainment; they also gave the children a small stipend for "pocket money." The Chinese city life became appealing to young Dina. A couple of years later, an older cousin who was also a dancer who had returned from China provided Dina with the contact

details of some intermediaries. Dina obtained a four-month business visa and went working in Harbin. She found this experience much less pleasant: the city was boring, and although her salary was more than the first "pocket money," it remained modest compared to what her sister earned and even more so to what Dina earns now. Dina's main concern was the lack of a work visa, because she was underage—younger than 18 at the time.

A year later, when Dina turned 18, she gave up on intermediary services, obtained a work visa and started looking for employment herself. In addition to her main job in a nightclub, Dina worked as a model, an actress in commercials and a hostess. "You have a contact, … you get in touch with a manager. You send him your profile, your name, and negotiate the price." As the boss who issued the visa and provided the main place of work allows his employees to have extra jobs, he usually demands a part of their earnings; in some cases, out of 10,000 *yuan*, 8,000 went to "the boss." Therefore Dina decided to break her contract and go freelancing. Despite her precarity, she always comes to China with a work visa. As long as she worked under a contract, when it ended, she informally paid her boss for the documents necessary to re-issue the visa. It was technically a contract for similar work, but informally they agreed that no one would perform the work. When Dina switched to freelance work, she had to pay much more for the documents to apply for the visa. Now she is in an unregistered marriage, and her husband has taken care of the paperwork.

Dina obtained information about all sorts of jobs (full- or part-time; formal or informal) via WeChat: "You need to ask about WeChat contacts always. If they add you, you will be shocked at how many jobs there are, and you know nothing about it." The talent of being added to groups is one of the most useful skills of a freelance actor: "At any part-time job, at any contact in a club, in a film studio, you have to try to do it. There are WeChat groups where access is closed once it reaches the limit of 500 members, but everyone wants to get in. As soon as a spot becomes available, they will add you." Dina assumes that these contacts can be monetised or capitalised on if she decides to return to Russia. Having at least 150 theme groups of "artists" now, Dina can become an intermediary who sends girls to China. However, Dina has no desire to return to Russia at all.

Analysing our ethnographic data, we were initially surprised that WeChat proved to be a less crucial resource for the survival of Chinese migrants in the precarious labour market than for the Russian ones. Although WeChat is included in social ties and assemblages in all four cases, the role played by WeChat is not crucial when compared with other factors in Chinese migration infrastructure. To be sure, not having access to this social platform makes people's lives more difficult, but Chinese migrants seem to be able to adjust to challenges. In contrast, for Russian migrants, although it is not easy for them to access WeChat, and using it may sometimes bring potential risks, it is nevertheless instrumental in shaping their sociality. Some actors in the Russian networks (agents, "bosses," intermediaries, documents,

smartphones) regularly drop out, "unplug," stop working, disconnect. To keep working in the precarious Chinese market, moving back and forth between the two countries, the Russian migrant has to assemble and reassemble infrastructure for herself. In this process, WeChat becomes one of the main actors.

Nevertheless, it would be misleading to claim that WeChat only empowers migrants. Depending on the configuration of the network at the particular moment, WeChat can empower the authorities instead. Vera's teacher friend was not thrown out of the precarious labour market and remained in it only because her network was promptly assembled, disintegrated and reassembled thanks to WeChat again. However, the need to rebuild the network and the risk of being deported comes from a digital connection via WeChat that the authorities can check, trace or even force the use of.

Contamination of "Chinese" digital practices

So far in our analysis, the Chinese and Russian migrant worlds have not mixed. It could appear that migration infrastructure exists in unconnected, completely separate, non-contaminated social (networking and fluid) spaces. As we will show later, this is not entirely true; mixing or contamination does happen. The precarious positions encourage people to look for new networks, new intermediaries, new actors and connect all new actors to solve their problems. An exploratory focus on the "contaminated" network will allow us to shed more light on how and why empowerment and subjugation occur.

We therefore turn to the content analysis of "Platform M" (a WeChat group; one among others created in the Irkutsk region). All these groups— for tour guides, workers in Chinese bazaars and students, to list a few— might be divided into two types. The first one is a more open chat, with up to 500 users. Of course, openness does not mean that you can find it through a search engine: as usual, it requires an invitation to join. However, once joined, the user can not only read all the messages but also write them herself. She also has access to the contact list of all the users included in the chat room. The second type of group is built around an individual user (users call them Creators). You can become a member of such a group only after receiving an invitation from the Creator. Even if someone one knows shares the contact, the joining itself happens only if the Creator responds to one's request. If this happens, the user can correspond with the Creator or monitor moments (personal news) of the Creator. In other words, it is only possible to send announcements to a wide range of users in the Creator groups through a request to the Creator himself. Thus, this network is built around and tied to one intermediary with a wide circle of friends.

We scrutinised all "Platform M" posts—a total of 3125—published from May 1 2019 to November 7 2019. Most of the posts were advertisements of some kind: purchase and sale of agricultural machinery and equipment,

land, buildings, cars, used items, medicinal herbs, cosmetics and other goods. Some posts asked for or offered to rent premises (offices, retail space, land); a few promoted new Chinese restaurants and shops while several offered cooperation in business ventures. More than 400 of the 3,000-odd posts were directly related to the labour market: advertisements about looking for a job; announcements of positions vacant; and offers of paperwork for migrants. In 215 posts (7% of the total number), users were notified about job postings for Chinese citizens in Russia. In 174 cases (5.6%), users were looking for a job. The same users (actors with the same WeChat number) sometimes appeared several times as they were searching for various employees to work in different regions.

This means that intermediaries use the "Platform M," while this WeChat group itself is also an intermediary and hence part of the migration infrastructure of the precarious labour market. The structure of the job posting on "Platform M" was as follows. Most posts (almost 62%) were seeking unskilled workers (loggers and woodworkers, construction workers, agricultural workers, shop assistants, painters, cleaners, night guards) who rarely had formal contracts. The most popular activity was seasonal labour in logging and wood processing (about 40% of posts). We also identified offers for skilled workers: car mechanics, crane operators, welders, tractor drivers, cooks, bricklayers, electricians, carpenters, maintenance specialists and excavator drivers. Their share of posts was less than 5%. Some of the positions came with employment contracts, and some offered work visas. The number of inquiries for "white collar" positions reached 33%, with five to six vacancies each for economists, financiers, managers and accountants. Among vacancies for highly educated people, we should mention tour guides (6%) and interpreters (22%). Despite requiring high levels of formal education, these positions tend to be even more precarious than those for workers. The latter are hired for a pre-determined season, while the former are often one-off engagements. These figures clearly indicate that precarious positions prevail on "Platform M."

Although most posts aimed to hire workers from China, "Platform M" serves as migration infrastructure to send Russians to China or to attract citizens of post-Soviet states to Russia. Thus, it is a manifestation of the "contamination" of precarious markets. Importantly, in these mixed digital practices, migrants themselves remain governed and dependent, while Chinese intermediaries govern and hold the power in the precarious labour market. Accordingly, we viewed advertisements looking for a group of Russian female models for a Chinese photo studio in Hainan; we assume these posts were directed to Chinese-speaking intermediaries who could hire girls. Girls being sent to China via this intermediary will most likely suffer from a complete lack of rights. Their passports will be taken already in Russia; they will not be able to change employers, no matter how unacceptable their working or living conditions are; they will not be in a position to challenge the duration or even type of work.

The dominance of Chinese intermediaries was most evident in posts about Chinese employers looking for *"blacks"* to work in Russia. They used the slang expression *heimao* (literally *black hair*) to refer to people from Central Asian republics. The pejorative term reflects their most subordinate position. Recruitment of such vulnerable foreigners (usually to the lowest-skilled positions in agriculture) began in the mid-2010s when Russian authorities began introducing zero migrant quotas for agricultural workers. Chinese farmers who worked in the semi-legal environment faced an imperative to hire Russians or close their business. Only the most marginalised (often alcohol-addicted) Russians were ready to work for Chinese farmers. Therefore, farmers began to bring in migrants from Central Asia, who, as foreigners in the Russian environment, could not protect their rights, especially considering that the employer did not work according to Russian norms either.

If, as we have shown, WeChat operates as a significant part of the migration infrastructure, the platform's design and the government regulation associated with it also enable the accumulation of market power on the part of some individuals. This is evidenced in the *modus operandi* of a WeChat group creator and a colleague who helped us navigate the myriad platform functions. We discovered "Platform M" thanks to a Chinese colleague. This colleague advised us to change the personal data (photo and name) on the platform in such a way as to "Sinicize" the identity. As she explained, this is not crucial for groups registered in Russia, but it matters for groups used in China. We did not change the name but set a bright, Chinese-style picture as our avatar. Knowing that users of "Platform M" actively utilise it to advertise, promote services, or search for them and to probe how it works, we placed an ad to find a translator. The service was for a fee, but the price was not explicitly announced (the Creator offered to pay "whatever it takes"). The colleague explained that a reasonable amount would be about 50 *yuan*. To make a transfer, you need to have a virtual wallet and a Chinese bank card, for which we again had to contact the colleague. Access to a Chinese bank card opens up many opportunities to transfer money securely across borders and receive the services needed, but those deprived of this privilege find themselves in a subordinate position in this digital world. In this case, both the group creator and the colleague who operated as an intermediary stood to gain market power by taking advantage of the technological affordance that comes with WeChat.

Conclusion

This discussion makes it clear that WeChat is an essential part of the migration infrastructure, and as such, it simultaneously works as a means of inclusion and exclusion when it is used by individuals, labour agents as well as state authorities. Through the use of WeChat, migrants generate economic and social capital, and negotiate the space between the legitimate and illegitimate, and for this reason, it can be said that WeChat has become

a means of accruing power. Yet our survey also supports the claim that WeChat forces migration infrastructure and the non-Chinese people connected to it to have a presence in the Chinese digital world. WeChat impels Russian labour migrants to live in the world "the Chinese way," and as a result, their social ties to their homeland are weakened. Of course, this does not happen instantly, and it takes a long time to "tear" precarious Russian migrants from their attachment to home; we only want to emphasise the role that the migration infrastructure and specifically WeChat plays in this process. By comparison, Facebook or Instagram—which we as foreigners in the Czech Republic use—do not help us become more integrated into the Czech realm. Rather, they play the same role as they did in our home country. This serves to highlight the unique role of WeChat in the stories of migrants around the world.

Indeed, our discussion also shows that WeChat contributes to maintaining social and emotional ties with the homeland for Chinese migrants in Russia, but fulfils this role to a much lesser extent for Russian migrants to China. For the Chinese, WeChat is part of the migration infrastructure, but the infrastructure itself is based on people or human intermediaries to a greater extent than it is on platforms. The WeChat platform's design and the government regulations associated with it nevertheless allow Chinese users to benefit from the opportunity to acquire capital in addition to maintaining a presence in the Chinese world. In contrast, for Russians, WeChat itself is the migration infrastructure to which humans and nonhumans are connected. WeChat, as a significant part of the migration infrastructure, allows the accumulation of market power in the precarious labour market.

Finally, we should note that the eagerness of Chinese users to stay connected via WeChat and the readiness of Russian users to abandon familiar platforms in favour of WeChat does not really speak to the quality of the platforms themselves, but to the Internet restrictions or institutional regimes in Russia and China. The Russian WeChat ban mentioned at the beginning of this chapter was not related to any concern of the government about this platform specifically; rather, the new requirements were imposed simultaneously against all platforms not of Russian origin. Those which fulfilled the government's requirements in time quickly returned to the original mode of operation. If companies did not obey new restrictive rules, then Roskomnadzor tried (though not every company and not simultaneously) to ban them—this happened to Telegram in 2018 and Twitter in 2021 (Levchenko 2021). In this context, it was not only migrant WeChat users who experienced precarity but the platform itself.

Acknowledgement

Note

1 According to Xiang (2017, p. 175), "a base is a tight cluster of public and private institutions … designated by the government as an important player in the recruitment of migrant workers. The base manages migration by conditioning the activities that lead to migration, such as how people choose destinations, make payments, and deal with uncertainties in preparing for migration."

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