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THE CHINESE IN UKRAINE (1900’s–1938): MIGRATION, INSTITUTIONALIZATION, REPRESENTATION

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The paper for the first time presents an outline of the history of the Chinese in Ukrainian lands from the Russo-Japanese War of 1905 to Stalin’s repressions of 1938, focusing first on the formation and disruption of the Chinese diaspora’s formation, and second on the erasure of the Chinese from Ukraine’s ethnic fabric. Based on the analysis of existing studies, the paper advances a methodological approach to the proper terminology for describing the Chinese in Ukraine across different historical periods and to the establishment of chronological frameworks for distinct waves of migration. For the first time, evidence of the Chinese presence in Ukraine prior to 1915 has been brought to light and analyzed, including cases of soldiers returning from Manchuria with Chinese servants or adoptees, as well as the subsequent adaptation of these individuals within local society. The recruitment of Chinese coolies by Russian industrialists during World War I is examined, with the argument that they formed the foundation of the Chinese diaspora in Soviet Ukraine. The emergence of institutionalized communities in Kharkiv, Kyiv, and Poltava is analyzed, and the main centers of Chinese settlement are identified. Drawing on archival materials, the paper for the first time reconstructs a profile of a Chinese immigrant in Soviet Ukraine during the 1920s–1930s, highlighting their socio-economic status and interactions with the local population. Based on available archival sources from 1922–24 and 1937–1938 a basic demographic data on Chinese migrants in Ukraine was collected and analyzed which allowed to draw an image of a Chinese migrant in soviet Ukraine, specifically, their age cohort, origin and trade.

Keywords: Chinese-Ukrainian relationships; Chinese in Europe; World War I; Chinese diaspora; USSR; Stalin’s repressions

Introduction

Political unrest and civil uprisings within the Qing Empire, combined with the growing demand for cheap labor in the neighboring colonial powers, triggered a mass migration from China in the mid-19th century. Although the reasons for leaving the country were ranging from political prosecutions to personal affairs, the majority of migrants constituted male contract laborers, commonly referred to as “coolies”. Scholars generally frame this period of Chinese emigration between the mid-19th and mid-20th centuries. From the 1370s until 1893, emigration from China was formally prohibited, and those who left the country without official permission could face severe punishment. Nevertheless, this did not stop many, particularly natives of the southern provinces, from seeking

opportunities in Southeast Asia and Americas [Gungwu 2000, 43–44]. Given that for centuries the Chinese were perceived in the own tradition as non-migratory people [Skeldon 1996, 435], even the very term for emigrant in Mandarin is *huaqiao*, which literally stands for “Chinese sojourners” since most of the people who left intended eventually to return to their homeland. In English, this category of migrants is commonly referred to as “Overseas Chinese”, a neutral term that is widely accepted today. Starting from the 1960s, “Overseas Chinese Studies” emerged as a distinct multidisciplinary field within the social sciences, whereas previously research on the topic had essentially been within the framework of either local, national or world history [Miles 2020, 3–8].

Certain debates have been going on as to conceptualizing and naming the Chinese migrants communities across the world. Many researchers have expressed dissatisfaction with the use of the term “diaspora” as for Chinese migrants. One of the main objections is that the term over a long period was associated primarily with Jewish history, where it denoted a community expelled or forced to leave its homeland without possibility to return, which is different from migration patterns of Chinese sojourners. As Stephen Miles argues, the concept of diaspora

does not adequately convey the great diversity of experiences of people who are clumped together under this label. More specifically, it obscures the fact that the spread of Chinese people throughout many parts of the world resulted from specific trajectories of migration from specific places in China to specific destinations during specific periods in history [Miles 2020, 5].

Wang Gungwu, a pioneering scholar of Overseas Chinese Studies, opposed for long the use of the term “diaspora” and instead preferred to describe these communities as “sojourners” or simply as “Overseas Chinese” [Gungwu 2000, 135]. Another key researcher, Andrew McKeown, refuses the nation-based framework of migration studies and instead highlights the transnational nature of Chinese mobility. He interprets Chinese migration as a process shaped by networks and personal links across multiple localities. In his book *Chinese Migrant Networks and Cultural Change* from 2001, McKeown examines Chinese communities in Peru, Chicago, and Hawaii, noting that although they shared common regional origins in China, their trajectories reveal the diversity of global processes. His work demonstrates the need for a global perspective, where Chinese migration is understood as part of a transregional field rather than confined within national boundaries [Tung 2005, 31–32]. Nonetheless, the term “diaspora” still remains acceptable in reference to Chinese communities abroad in a meaning of an ethnic group united by language and tradition, sharing a common homeland, and maintaining ties with it. At the same time, we consider the term “Overseas Chinese” inapplicable to the case of migrants in Ukraine. Although the migration waves to the Americas, Southeast Asia, and Ukraine were driven by similar socioeconomic factors and occurred within the same chronological framework, the label “Overseas Chinese” is primarily associated with emigrants from the southern provinces of Guangdong and Fujian who settled in Southeast Asia and the New World. The very word “overseas” suggests a maritime mode of migration, whereas the Chinese who settled in Ukraine originated from Northeast China and arrived by land. Throughout this study, we identify similar patterns among Chinese migrants in Ukraine under Tsarist and Soviet rules, as described by Wungwu, who proposes the term “sojourners”, and McKeown, who emphasizes the “links and networks” methodology. We describe the Chinese in Ukraine before 1921 as “sojourners”, since many of the former coolie laborers were repatriated following the end of the Soviet-Ukrainian (1917–1921), also known as The Ukrainian War for Independence, or The Ukrainian Revolution. After 1921, however, we apply the term “diaspora”, as it more accurately reflects the higher degree of self-organization and recognition at the state level, in contrast to the more individual or community-based dimensions implied by sojourning or network-based frameworks.

The history of the Chinese in Soviet Ukraine remains an understudied subject that still poses numerous unresolved questions. While the involvement of Chinese volunteers in the Soviet-Ukrainian War and the Russian Civil War has been relatively well examined, far less attention has been paid to the social, political, and economic status of those immigrants who, after demobilization, decided to remain in Soviet Ukraine and build new lives there. The study of Chinese participation in the Bolshevik ranks within Ukrainian historiography was first initiated by historian Andrii Yaroshenko, coinciding with the publication of the first memoirs of Chinese veterans on the 40th anniversary of the October Revolution [Yaroshenko 1957]. A more comprehensive contribution was the seminal monograph by Mykola (Nikolai) Karpenko, *Kitaiskii Legion* (The Chinese Legion) [Karpenko 2007], which became the first fundamental study in the field. Although Karpenko's primary focus was the participation of the Chinese in the Soviet-Ukrainian War, he also examined the broader context of Chinese labor migration to Ukraine during World War I, the conditions that led to their involvement in military operations, and – importantly – for the first time addressed their fate after demobilization and their everyday life in Soviet Ukraine during the 1920s–1930s. After Karpenko, various aspects of the history of the Chinese diaspora in Ukraine of the first half of the 20th century were studied by H. Savchenko and L. Chorna [Savchenko, Chorna 2009], L. Syniavska [Syniavska 2013], O. Prydybailo [Prydybailo 2014], O. Belikov [Belikov 2017], L. Rasputina [Rasputina 2017], O. Shevchenko [Shevchenko 2018], I. Matyash [Matyash 2020], O. Haidamachuk [Haidamachuk et al. 2023], and others. Among foreign scholars, the topic was briefly addressed by G. Benton and A. Larin, although their studies remained chronologically focused on the Russian Civil War [Benton 2007; Larin 2009]. N. Pal, in his monograph *Chinese in Eastern Europe and Russia*, briefly addresses the Chinese presence in the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union, mentioning Ukraine only in passing and within the broader framework of Russian history [Pal 2007]. The historical section of the book relies heavily on the works of Larin, while the primary focus of the study is on Chinese diasporas after 1989 [Pal 2007, 1–41].

Based on archival materials that provide biographical information, and employing statistical methods of analysis, this study seeks to establish the chronological framework and trace the migration of Chinese to Ukraine between the 1900s and the late 1930s. It further aims to explore the stages of transformation from “sojourners” to an institutionalized diaspora, to examine how this community functioned within the realities of sovietization, and to attempt a reconstruction of the typical Chinese immigrant of that period across different waves of migration. The transliteration of Chinese names in this study poses certain difficulties. Numerous names were originally transcribed from Chinese into Russian or Ukrainian, and only subsequently into their current Romanized forms. The lack of a consistent transliteration standard in the early 20th century resulted in often arbitrary and corrupted spellings. Unless the original Chinese characters are provided, the task of verifying the correct forms of these names remains largely speculative.

Early Chinese Presence in Ukraine (1905–1917)

According to Liudmyla Rasputina, the earliest account of the existence of a Chinese diaspora in Kyiv dates to as early as 1880. A report addressed to the governor of Kyiv stated that there were “1000 infidels” residing in the city, a quarter of whom were the Chinese [Rasputina 2017, 152]. Besides this report, nothing is known about this community to date.

Some refugees from Northern China came to Ukraine during the Russo-Japanese War of 1904–1905. In October 1906, an undocumented Chinese national from Gongzhuling named Lifa Liyo applied for a residence permit in Kyiv. Lifa Liyo was brought to Ukraine in 1905 by a *praporshchik* (sergeant major) of the 5th Engineer Battalion, Ivan Mitrofanov,

as his servant. After some time, Mitrofanov no longer required Lifa's services and left him homeless without financial means. Lifa's petition was resolved in his favor – in 1907 he received a five-year residence permit, and in 1912 he was eventually granted Russian citizenship [DAKO, F. 1, Inv. 55, D. 4].

In 1911, a veterinarian from Kaniv, a court councilor Andrei Kosiura, petitioned the governor of Kyiv on behalf of a 14-year-old boy named Sergey Manzhurenko, requesting the residency for him. According to Andrei's testimony, his brother, Mikhail Kosiura, a staff captain in the 174th Regiment of Romny, had brought the boy from Manchuria on returning home from the war (hence the boy's last name). The Chinese boy secretly climbed into the train car with Russian soldiers; he was an orphan and knew only that he had an older brother living no one knew where. Since he could not remember his name, he was given a Ukrainian one and adopted by Andrei Kosiura. Sergey learned the language, converted to Orthodoxy, and became a smith's apprentice in the estate of landowner Rudolf Abel from Zolotonosha povit. His residence permit was granted in 3 months [DAKO, F. 1, Inv. 59, D. 234].

In early 1910's, the Ukrainian newspaper "Rada" reported on a group of wandering Chinese healers traveling through villages in the Kyiv and Poltava governorates. They offered treatments for various ailments of animals and humans, such as the application of herbal plaster (Gou Pi Gao) for hunchbacks and the removal of "tooth worms" using special sticks. However, their methods did not lead to recovery and often caused deterioration in the health of locals, as well as the deaths of livestock [Kitaitsi 1911; Kitaitsi-likari 1913]. The notorious fame of the Chinese healers spread rapidly throughout the region, ultimately leading to their arrest and deportation from the Russian Empire [Rasputina 2017, 154]. The renowned Ukrainian orientalist Andrii Kovalivskyi also mentioned a small Chinese diaspora in Kharkiv, which existed before 1917 and consisted of itinerant merchants of textiles and haberdashery [Kovalivskyi 1961, 9].

Chinese coolies began arriving en masse in Ukraine after the outbreak of the World War I. The mobilization of men led to a labor shortage, prompting the Russian government to seek cheap and reliable workers from abroad. The deficit of workforce was particularly acute in regions of Ukraine such as Donbass, where coal mining and military industries, both crucial to the wartime economy, were concentrated. As a result of negotiations between the Chinese and Russian governments and industrial syndicates, in 1915 the industrialists launched a large-scale recruiting campaign of laborers from villages of Northeast China, and by 1916 the entire process of importing labor was well streamlined.

The exact number of the sojourners who entered Ukraine between 1915 and 1917 remains unknown. M. Karpenko estimated that approximately 300,000 Chinese workers arrived in the Russian Empire, both legally and illegally. At least 20,000 made their way to Ukraine, with around 6,000 employed in the construction of military fortifications along the western front in Bukovyna and Volhynia [Karpenko 2007, 34–42].

The simultaneous collapse of Tsarist authority and the continuation of battlefield defeats in 1917 disrupted the country's economy, placing Chinese workers in an increasingly vulnerable position. The outbreak of the civil war led to the bankruptcy of many coal mining industrialists – one the primary employers of the coolies. In September 1917 alone, over 200 mines in the Donbas were shut down, leaving around 100,000 people without work [Karpenko 2007, 62–63]. Despite the efforts of both young republic governments in Kyiv and Petrograd to repatriate huaqiao home at its own expense, these attempts failed following the Bolshevik coup and the subsequent collapse of transportation logistics across the former empire. Tens of thousands of Chinese workers, destituted and displaced, faced an increasingly dire situation, were pushed to the margins of society [Larin 2009, 69]. Some of them became involved in organized crime. At the end of 1917, the Kyiv-based newspaper "Kievlianin" reported on an armed gang of "honghuzi" who were terrorizing local population by raiding and robbing villages in the counties of Podillya and Volhynia [Haidamachuk et al. 2023, 864].

The majority of those Chinese who chose to join the military in Ukraine enlisted in the ranks of the Red Army, where they were promised to receive payment, shelter, and access to supplies. Lenin's former bodyguard, Li Futsin, recalled that in 1917, when the Chinese community in Ukraine faced severe hardship, a Russian named Ivanov urged them to form a squad and raid tsarist troops, telling them: "There is bread and clothing in their warehouses" [Larin 2009, 86]. According to Karpenko's estimates, between 21,000 and 24,000 Chinese soldiers served in Bolshevik internationalist brigades in Ukraine – approximately one-third of all Chinese volunteers in the Red Army [Karpenko 2007, 319].

Due to the widespread involvement of Chinese workers in Bolshevik units fighting against the nascent Ukrainian state, their unions and movements faced persecution by the Ukrainian People's Republic and The Hetmanate [Ukraine – Kytai... 2018, 184–185]. In a 1918 letter from a member of Russia's Union of Chinese citizens (Soyuz kitayskikh grazhdan) Chzhan Yunkuy from Ukraine to Chzhu Shaoyan from St. Petersburg, he reported on the arrests of Chinese nationals that took place in Kyiv in September 1918. These arrests, initiated by the government of The Ukrainian State, were driven by suspicions of collaboration with the communists [Larin 2009, 75–76].

Not all Chinese in Ukraine fought under Bolshevik banners – in fact, more than fifty Chinese soldiers served in the army of the Ukrainian People's Republic and took part in the Winter Campaigns of 1919 and 1921 [Tynchenko 2017, 417–493]. Nevertheless, in the public imagination they came to be strongly associated with the image of the enemy invader, a perception reinforced both by Ukrainian political leaders and certain oppositional groups. One leaflet, printed in Ukrainian in the name of the Red Cossacks from the Kyiv region, urged locals to support the independence of the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic from Moscow:

BROTHER WORKERS AND PEASANTS OF UKRAINE!

[...]

Our country has again become a colony, that is, a country from which only all that is valuable is taken, and which is deceived all the time. This happened because power in Ukraine was seized by the communist-Bolsheviks, who came from Muscovy with their army – Chinese and Latvians – and who do not want to work together with our peasants and workers.

The Russian Bolshevik-communists promised us the power of the Soviets of Workers' and Peasants' Deputies, but in life they carry out only the dictatorship of their Russian party.

[...]

[Reabilitovani istoriieiu... 2011, 173].

The leaflet was likely either authored or inspired by Volodymyr Vynnychenko, then Chairman of the UPR's Directory, who often emphasized in his public speeches that the Bolsheviks had invaded and plundered Ukraine with Chinese and Latvian mercenaries [Karpenko 2007, 220–221]. After Kyiv was occupied by Red Army troops led by Vladimir Antonov-Ovsienko in January 1919, the capital of the Ukrainian People's Republic was relocated to Kamianets-Podilskyi. In an interview with the *New York Tribune* on April 5, 1919, the supreme leader of the UPR, Chairman Symon Petliura, alongside promises to soon recapture Kyiv, listed among the reasons Ukrainians were fighting the Bolsheviks the fact that they marched with Chinese troops:

"If anybody wants to know what Bolshevism means, let him go to Kiev", said General Petlura. The Bolsheviks undermined the national government there by bribing my soldiers, by trading with my political enemies and also by unfair promises to bring about peace. As a consequence they got a certain amount of domestic support. However, they now have lost this support and also have the Ukrainians in arms against them because they marched into the city with Chinese troops, who may be said to be the best type of Bolsheviks [Ukraine Wants To Join Allies... 1919].

The "oriental" units of the Red Army were notorious for their brutality toward civilians and prisoners of war, particularly in Ukraine. Many Chinese laborers fought in

Bessarabia under the command of Red Army leader Iona Yakir. His Chinese squads, which later became part of the 45th Volhynian Infantry Brigade, were described as “wild”, and their soldiers as “savages”. [Tynchenko 2025].

We suggest that there were two waves of Chinese migration to Ukraine prior to 1917. The first, in 1905, was made up by refugees from Manchuria along with those brought back by Ukrainian soldiers as servants or adoptees. The second wave occurred in 1915–1916, when thousands of Chinese were recruited by Russian agents to work in plants, mines, and fortification projects; it was much larger, more organized and consisted exclusively of males.

Due to the absence of reliable sources on the presence of Chinese in 19th-century Ukraine, including territories that then belonged to the Austro-Hungarian monarchy, it is not possible to speak of a genuine migration wave during this period in the meantime. Instead, the available evidence suggests the existence of small, scattered groups of itinerant traders or vagabonds, who may have reached the region from Russia’s Far East after its annexation from the Qing Empire in 1860.

The Chinese Population after the War

It is difficult to determine the exact number of the Chinese residing in Ukraine at that time. In July 1922, a representative of the Chinese embassy, Li, visited the Permanent Establishment of the Ukrainian SSR in Moscow. He proposed to the head of Soviet Ukraine, Hristian Rakovskyi, the opening of a Chinese diplomatic mission in Kharkiv, justifying the initiative by citing “the presence on the territory of Ukraine of up to 4,000 Chinese workers, whose interests had to be defended”, as well as the desire of the Chinese Republic to maintain friendly relations with the Ukrainian SSR. Rakovskyi, however, suggested instead extending the authority of the Chinese embassy in Moscow to represent interests of China in Ukraine, while granting the Russian ambassador in China the right to represent Ukraine in turn [TsDAVO, F. 4, Inv. 1, D. 588, Sh. 1].

At the same time, according to the Department of Ethnic Minorities of the People’s Commissariat of Internal Affairs (NKVD), there were approximately 21,000 Chinese living in Ukraine in 1922, and about 350 in Kharkiv registered with the Union of Chinese Workers in Ukraine (Soyuz kytaisykykh pratsivnykiv Ukrayiny, abbreviated in Soviet documents as SKRU). Of these, 3 % were serving as Red Army soldiers, while the remaining 97 % belonged to working class [TsDAVO, F. 5, Inv. 2, D. 1836, Sh. 3]. Moreover, in a draft paper submitted to the newspaper *Diktatura Truda* (Dictatorship of Labour), signed by the head of SKRU, Liu Van-san, the number of the Chinese living in Yuzovka Oblast was estimated at 700 [TsDAVO, F. 5, Inv. 1, D. 2243, Sh. 20]. According to the 1926 All-Union Population Census, there were only 878 Chinese residing in Soviet Ukraine, of whom 803 were men and 75 were women. Among them, 680 reported Chinese as their native language, 96 indicated Russian, and 17 Ukrainian [Vsesoiuznyi perepys... 1929, 10]. In addition, the census recorded 313 citizens of the Republic of China living in Ukraine, including 290 men and 23 women [Vsesoiuznyi perepys... 1929, 24]. Such a significant discrepancy between the figures may be explained by the repatriation of Chinese nationals to their homeland throughout 1917–1923, as well as by their high degree of mobility within the country, which made them difficult to account for. As for the 1930s, official statistics are virtually nonexistent, and the number of Chinese living in Ukraine during this period can be approximated based on criminal case files and records of repressed citizens.

Institutionalization of the Chinese Diaspora (1921–1925)

In the 1920s, Kharkiv emerged as the principal center of political life for the Chinese community in Ukraine. NKVD and provincial governorates increasingly struggled to manage a growing number of Chinese residents in the cities, many of whom did not

speak local languages at all. The situation of Chinese immigrants in the early 1920s is best illustrated by a letter from the Department of Ethnic Minorities of the NKVD to the executive committee of the Kharkiv governorate:

Many Koreans and Chinese are dispersing across all the cities of Ukraine in search of work. Most of them have arrived in Kharkiv. Their lack of knowledge of the Russian language creates a very desperate situation for them. They are well acquainted with agriculture and could work in one of the sovkhozes (state farms. – A. K.).

The Department of National Minorities requests that sovkhozes of the Kharkiv province be placed under their administration. In this way, it would be possible to carry out cultural and administrative work among them.

In view of the hopelessness of their situation, we urgently request that this issue be resolved and that the Department be informed of the location of the sovkhoz [TsDAVO, F. 5, Inv. 2, D. 1836, Sh. 8a].

The circumstances created the need for a dedicated body to serve as an intermediary between the diaspora and the Soviet authorities, addressing practical issues such as employment, humanitarian aid, repatriation, legal defense, and political education. With this mission, *the Union of Chinese Workers in Ukraine* (SKRU) was established in June 1921 with the support of the Union of Chinese Citizens (UCC) in Moscow. Initially called *the Chinese Working Revolutionary Union*, the founding assembly was attended by 87 participants, including a representative of UCC [TsDAVO, F. 5, Inv. 1, D. 666, Sh. 5].

The SKRU was an autonomous, quasi-governmental organization that relied primarily on membership fees and often suffered financially without state support. It combined the functions of both a trade union and a controlling body. The SKRU registered arrivals and departures of Chinese to and from Ukraine, issued identity documents in lieu of Chinese passports and even carried out police functions by investigating crimes and apprehending offenders of Chinese origin [Prydybailo 2014, 106–107].

The headquarters of the SKRU was located at Rybna ploshcha 4 (also known as Rybnyi bazar) in Kharkiv. Unfortunately, the building did not survive the Second World War. It is hard to trace its history and understand why it became the office for the Union. However, archival records indicate that as early as the summer of 1921 the site housed a dormitory for 23 former Red Army soldiers of Chinese origin, and served as a temporary stopover for those repatriating to China as well [TsDAVO, F. 5, Inv. 1, D. 659, Sh. 23].

The Union of Chinese Workers in Ukraine had its branches in Poltava, Yuzovka (Stalino) and other smaller towns in Donbass. It was officially dissolved in January 1925. According to Iryna Matiash, the termination of the Union was linked to activity of criminal secret societies which existed within the organization [Matiash 2020, 162], while Oleksandr Prydybailo likewise emphasized the involvement of certain members in illegal practices [Prydybailo 2014, 106]. After its dissolution, its functions were partially transferred to the Central Commission on National Minorities of the All-Ukrainian Central Executive Committee (VUTsVK) and to the All-Ukrainian Trade Union Federation of the Ukrainian SSR [Matiash 2020, 161].

As we have showed in previous research, the Kharkiv Union of Chinese Workers in fact served as an umbrella for a criminal group within the small yet close-knit Chinese community. Their activities included assassinations, drug trafficking, extortion, and illicit currency operations. Members of the group were bound by a blood oath of brotherhood, following an old Chinese tradition of forming secret societies known as *hui*. In September 1924, the chairman of the Union, Siu-Shen, was arrested by the GPU and charged with murder and extortion of money from members of the Chinese community in Ukraine. These accusations were made by his former comrade and the Union's secretary, Kon-Chan-Chun, who reported him to the authorities. After several months in detention, however, Siu-Shen was released, and shortly thereafter the SKRU was dissolved. Nonetheless, the dormitory at Rybna ploshcha 4 remained the principal center of the Chinese

diaspora in Kharkiv. In 1925, it hosted the “Chinese Red Corner”, a subdivision of the Department of People’s Education of the Kharkiv City Council, which was responsible for political education and propaganda inside the community. Beginning in 1929, the premises also housed the laundry cooperative “Cantonese Commune”, founded by Siu-Shen, which provided employment opportunities for compatriots [Kistol 2025, 11–16].

Between 1918 and 1922, an office of the Russian Union of Chinese Citizens operated in Kyiv, functioning de facto as a diplomatic mission of the Republic of China in Ukraine. Unlike the Worker’s Union in Kharkiv, its primary responsibility was the coordination of repatriation for Chinese citizens, working in cooperation with the Consulate General in Moscow, the People’s Commissariat of Foreign Affairs (NKID), and local provincial authorities [Matyash 2020, 72–78].

In April 1925, the Kyiv City Council established *the House of Peoples of the East* (Budynok Narodiv Skhodu, BNS) which served as the primary hub for the Chinese community and other minority groups in Kyiv. Officially, 73 Chinese were registered there. The BNS offered a wide range of social services, including schooling, literacy courses, social and sports clubs, employment assistance, and food support for ethnic minorities. The Soviet authorities used the BNS to consolidate disparate minority groups into a single, manageable cultural and educational center for better control. It grouped together diverse ethnic communities – Armenians, Georgians, Assyrians, Turkic-Tatars, and Chinese. They were organized into separate ethnic sections, sometimes with little regard to their distinct cultural identities and historical tensions. This forced integration created friction; for instance, Koreans petitioned to be separated from the Chinese section due to historical hostility, but their request was denied. Similarly, the Chinese community’s attempts to form an independent organization were unsuccessful. By 1931, the Chinese section of the BNS established own theater and a kindergarten [Savchenko, Chorna 2009].

It is noteworthy that in the 1920s–1930s the Chinese community of Kyiv was not fully consolidated around a single institution. Instead, a certain competition emerged between the state-run internationalist BNS and informal but more traditional and customary Chinese brotherhoods. One such secret society was *siun-de-ton-min-khun* (most likely a corrupted transliteration of the Tóngménghuì) also known as khe-tu (i.e., ke-tou). It was founded in 1926 by Chinese officers who had come to study at the Kamenev School of Red Army Commanders in Kyiv, together with members of the local diaspora. In 1935, Li Do-Yan, a worker in a Chinese laundry, was arrested on charges of belonging to a counter-revolutionary organization. During interrogation, he testified that the secret society “drew the majority of Kyiv’s Chinese away from Soviet communist influence by involving them in speculation, gambling, and drug consumption”. According to his account, of the 90 members of the Chinese section of the BNS, only 37 remained, while the rest “were in the khe-tu” [Kistol 2025, 14–15].

The Chinese community of Poltava was relatively small but visible in daily life. In a note to Siu-Shen from March 16, 1924, an instructor of SKRU Li-Sin-Dzhou reported that 65 Chinese workers-members of the Union lived in Poltava region: 40 in Poltava, 12 in Lubny and 13 in Bakhmach. The staff of the Poltava branch of SKRU consisted of 5 representatives, 1 executive and 1 secretary [TsDAVO, F. 5, Inv. 1, D. 2244, Sh. 19]. After the dissolution of SKRU in 1925, the local diaspora remained active in small business sector, establishing ethnic Chinese artels, much like in other Ukrainian cities. One of such cooperatives, *Chervonyi shliakh* (“Red Way”), specialized in basketwork and rope-making and was located at Novyi Bazar 6, directly opposite the central market in Poltava. The site remains popularly known as the “Chinese Garden” (*Kytaivskyyi dvoryk*) because of the relatively high concentration of Chinese families who once lived there [Kistol 2024, 42].

Despite the war, material hardships, and difficulties in communication, the Chinese community in Ukraine not only preserved its national identity during the 1920s but also

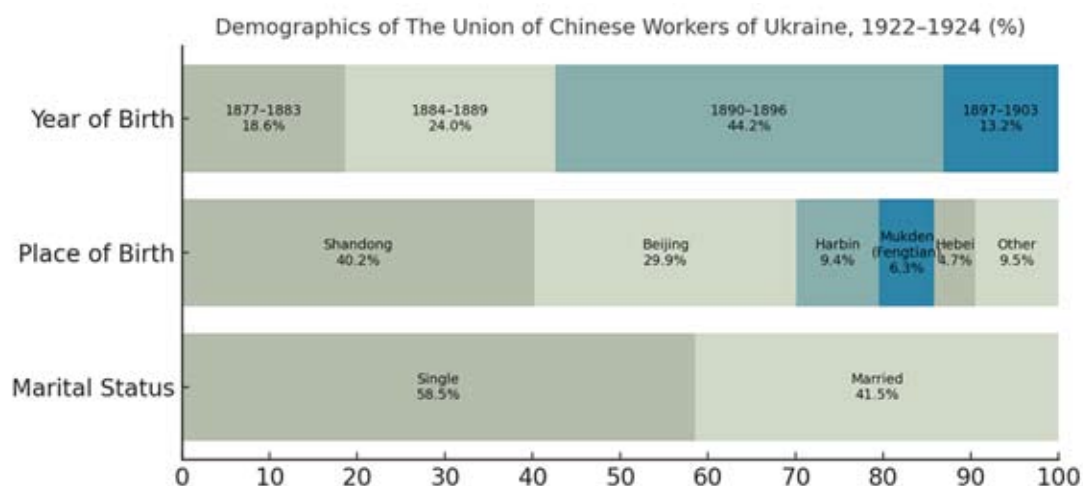
succeeded in creating its own institutions. Taking advantage of the opportunities provided by korenizatsiia, they were able to govern themselves with relatively little interference from the state. A characteristic example was the establishment of Chinese laundries in several Ukrainian cities – a phenomenon typical of Chinese emigrant communities worldwide [e.g. Siu 1987; Hoe 2003]. Similarly, the organization of the Chinese into brotherhoods can be viewed as another form of cultural preservation, allowing the diaspora to maintain a sense of solidarity and continuity in a foreign environment.

A Profile of a Chinese Emigrant in Soviet Ukraine

Reconstructing a portrait of the Chinese in Soviet Ukraine during the 1920s–1930s is a challenging task. Although archival sources are relatively abundant (SKRU files, personal dossiers, criminal case records, etc.), first-hand narrative sources are very rare. Mykola Karpenko made a significant contribution by analyzing the accounts of Red Army commanders (Antonov-Ovsiienko, Yakir, Zatonsky, Lokatosh) as well as politicians of the Ukrainian People's Republic (Isaak Mazepa, Dmytro Doroshenko, Volodymyr Vynnychenko). However, he also pointed out their shortcomings: the memoirs of the Bolsheviks were subjected to Soviet censorship, which in the 1930s sought to diminish the role of non-Russian ethnic groups in the Civil War, while the accounts from the Ukrainian side were often fragmentary and biased, portraying the Chinese primarily through the lens of the “yellow peril”. Memoirs of Chinese veterans were first published on the occasion of the 40th anniversary of the October Revolution – initially in Beijing in 1957, and in 1959 in the Soviet Union under the editorship of Li Yun-nan, also a former “red partisan” and candidate of historical sciences [Karpenko 2007, 20–23, 218]. These testimonies written in line with communist propaganda, besides the history of Bolshevik internationalist brigades, shed light on the Chinese immigration to Russian Empire and their vulnerable social position. They are interesting in the context of the Civil War in Russia, however, tell nothing about the Chinese in Ukraine specifically, and about those veterans who decided to stay in the Union and their lives in 1920–30's. Mykola Karpenko partially investigated the fate of the Chinese who remained in Donbas after demobilization in 1921–1922, drawing on personal files preserved in the state archives of Donetsk and Luhansk. Today, these materials are inaccessible to researchers from Ukraine and other countries due to the ongoing Russian occupation of these regions, which makes Karpenko's work an invaluable source.

The Union of Chinese Workers of Ukraine was issuing identification documents certifying that their holders were Chinese nationals. These documents included a photograph, a brief biographical description, an official seal, and the holder's signature. Interestingly, a single document could be issued to an entire family, with the photograph depicting the holder alongside his local wife and children. According to the legislation in force at the time, a wife automatically assumed her husband's citizenship. In practice, however, citizenship was of little significance: Article 30 of Chapter 3 of the 1919 Constitution of the Ukrainian Socialist Soviet Republic, inspired by the spirit of proletarian solidarity and internationalism, granted equal political and civil rights to all foreigners, provided they belonged to the working class or peasantry and did not exploit the labor of others [Konstytutsiia... 1919]. The Central State Archive of Supreme Bodies of Power and Government of Ukraine stores 139 such documents in two dossiers [TsDAVO, F. 5, Inv. 1, D. 1837; F. 5, Inv. 1, D. 2245] issued in Kharkiv between 1922 and 1924. 130 documents were analyzed, 8 were duplicates and 1 was issued to a wife of a Chinese of local descent. Given that contemporary estimates of the Chinese community in Kharkiv for this period range from 87 to 350, the corpus provides near-complete coverage at the lower bound and roughly one third of the upper bound estimate; we therefore regard the resulting statistics as reasonably representative for Kharkiv, which was home for the biggest Chinese urban community in Ukraine:

Figure 1
Demographics of The Union of Chinese Workers of Ukraine, 1922–1924 (%)



The Year of Birth data shows that the diaspora in the early 1920s in the total age range between 21 and 46 was dominated by men aged 26–32, most of whom had arrived in Ukraine around 1916 at the age of 20–26. The documents typically listed only the province of origin (e.g., Beijing, Shandong), though some noted counties or specific cities. Among the latter were Shanghai, Tianjin, Zhili, Changchun (Jilin), Tangshan (Hebei), Kalgan (Zhangjiakou, Hebei), and Chefoo (Yantai, Shandong). Several place names could not be established due to corrupted transliteration. This data gives the possibility to tentatively delineate the regions of Northeast China from which immigrants moved to Ukraine.

Figure 2
Regions of origin of Chinese immigrants in Ukraine
(within present-day provincial boundaries of PRC)



Absolute majority of these men were unskilled workers or miners, with a few exceptions including merchants (2), interpreters (2), a circus artist (1), and a cook (1).

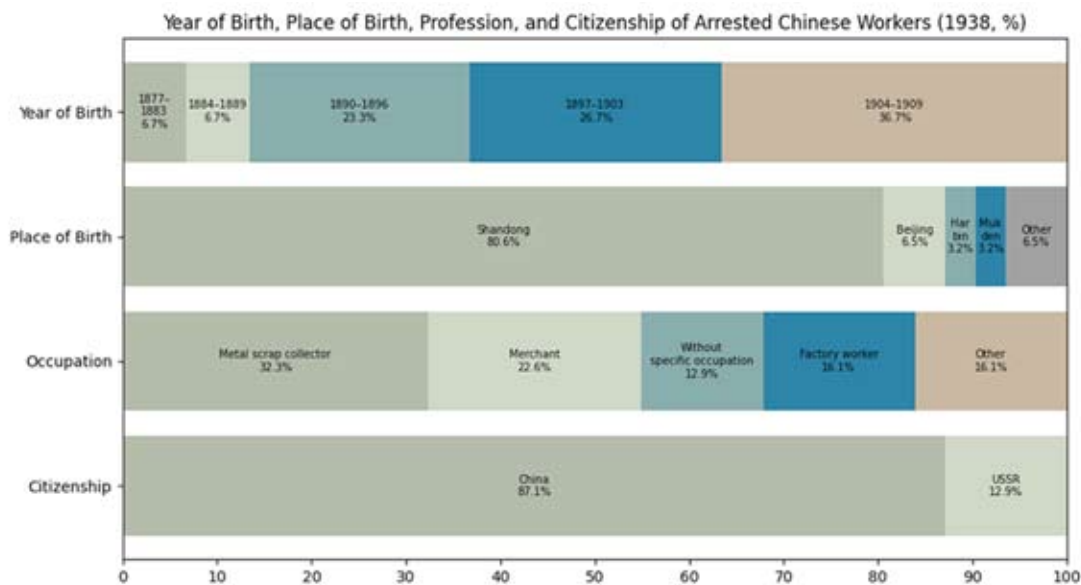
The documents reveal a notable age gap between Chinese workers and their local spouses, averaging 10 years. The largest gap is 18 years, between Van-Va-Yu (43, signed as 王文有, Wang Wenyu) and his wife Elena (25). This was likely an effect of the high mortality of the male population due to wars and subsequent famine of 1921–1922.

Criminal case files of repressed Chinese in the 1930s contain considerably more detailed information, including place of birth, residence, occupation, social and marital status, and personal connections. After the Civil War, not all Chinese remained manual laborers; depending on their skills – for example, knowledge of Russian – they could obtain positions related to public sector. As Mykola Karpenko notes, it was not uncommon for demobilized Chinese soldiers to continue their service in the People’s Militsiya (Police), despite their foreign citizenship [Karpenko 2007, 323, 334].

In February 1938, four Chinese nationals were arrested in the village of Chubarivka of Dnipropetrovsk oblast (now Polohy, Zaporizhzhia oblast) on fabricated charges of espionage for Japan: Van-Yun-Tsi (b. 1898), Van-Yun-Nen (b. 1877), Van-Tin-San (b. 1890), and Gao-Si-Yuan (b. 1889), all natives of Shandong province and Chinese nationals except for Van-Tin-San, who naturalized. Three of them were employed as metal scrap collectors at the state company “Utilsyrie”, while one was officially unemployed. Three were married and had young children. Notably, Van-Yun-Nen immigrated to the Soviet Union in 1930 and was a relative of Van-Yun-Tsi, who had arrived earlier in 1917. Gao-Si-Yuan had come to Russia in 1914, later moving to Ukraine from Vladivostok in search of work. In addition to collecting scrap metal, the men also worked as itinerant merchants, selling fabrics and sewing supplies from a carriage. Interestingly, local residents gave Van-Yun-Tsi and Van-Yun-Nen Russian names – Misha and Volodia [DAZO, F. R-5747, Inv. 3, D. 3910].

At the same time, 270 kilometers from Chubarivka, three Chinese nationals were arrested in the village of Kosiorove (now Apostolove, Dnipropetrovska oblast). They were Tsin-Tsen-Chan (b. 1906, signed as 金增东 Jīn Zēngdōng), Dzhao-Fa (b. 1906), and Sun-De-Zhun (b. 1907), all natives to Shandong. They had arrived in the USSR in 1931, 1930, and 1920 respectively. Tsin-Tsen-Chan admitted that he had crossed the Soviet border illegally. All three had previously lived in the Russian Far East before moving to Ukraine, a decision they explained as motivated by the search for work. By the 1930s, they had met in Kryvyi Rih and chose to settle together in Kosiorove, about 45 kilometres away. According to witness testimonies, they engaged in itinerant trade. Vekla Ilyina recalled that, in addition to selling fabrics and sewing goods, the men also collected scrap metal in the village from the locals and exchanged it for other goods. Another witness, Bulhakov, stated that they worked with “Utilsyrie”, were “sociable, enjoyed their life in the Soviet Union”, and “never caused any trouble” [DADO, F. R-6478, Inv. 2, D. 6439].

Figure 3
Demographics of the Chinese arrested in Dnipropetrovsk oblast, 1935–1940 (%)



According to the martyrologies *Rehabilitated by History* (Reabilitovani istoriieiu) for Zaporizhzhia [Reabilitovani istoriieiu... 2006] and Dnipropetrovsk [Reabilitovani istoriieiu... 2008] oblasts, 31 Chinese individuals fell victim of Stalin's repressions between 1935 and 1940. Their brief biographies, reconstructed from criminal case files, provide the following data:

From the 1930s onward, we see a noticeable increase in the number of Chinese born after 1900. This generation, which immigrated to Soviet Ukraine after the war, settled mainly between the late 1920s and the mid-1930s. The overwhelming majority of these post-revolutionary immigrants were engaged in itinerant trade or low-skilled labor. In contrast, those who had arrived before 1917 were more likely to find employment in the governmental sector, artels, factories, or even the militsiya. It also appears that some Chinese workers used their employment with the state company "Utilsyrrie" as a convenient cover, organizing itinerant trade under the guise of public service. It is also interesting, that some immigrants were arriving illegally in the Soviet Union, which was not a big concern for the authorities. An illustrative example is Gao-Ho-San (b. 1908), a market merchant from Kryvyi Rih, who used his employment at the state meat factory as a cover for his private business activities. In 1930, he managed to cross the land border near Khabarovsk without any documents, later obtaining a passport from the nearest Chinese consulate, which allowed him to remain in the Soviet Union legally thereafter [DADO, F. R-6478, Inv. 2, D. 10120, Sh. 10–12]. Boris Yan-Fa-Sha, a factory worker who was arrested in Dniprodzerzhynsk in September 1937, later testified during his rehabilitation in 1970 that he had entered the Soviet Union via Ussuriysk without visa. According to his statement, he paid 2 rubles to Soviet border guards to have his passport stamped. He then spent eight years working at a canning factory in Vladivostok before eventually moving to Ukraine [DADO, F. R-6478, Inv. 2, D. 6691, Sh. 22–24].

We observe a clear differentiation in social status between the 1916 "coolie" wave and the post-revolutionary Chinese immigrants. Remarkably, even the later generations continued to arrive from China's northeastern provinces, such as Shandong. For many of these migrants, the journey took years from the moment they first entered Russia until they finally reached Ukraine.

It is noteworthy that Gungwu identified patterns of migratory practices among the huaqiao that closely resemble those observed in Ukraine. The initial stage is characterized by an all-male community; this progresses into the second stage where men marry local wives, leading to the formation of family communities. The final stage involves the arrival of new Chinese men who, often by intermarrying with the established group, introduce fresh Chinese perspectives and revitalize the original sojourning norms within the community [Gungwu 2000, 56–57]. Similarly, the connections among migrants, such as shared village origins, common employment, and trade suggest that McKeown's "links and networks" theory provides a useful framework for explaining the basis of formation of Chinese communities in Chubarivka, Kryvyi Rih, Kosiorove, and other cities. Although the exact reasons that compelled these migrants to travel such long distances remain uncertain, their settlement patterns point to the high mobility of Chinese in Ukraine and indicate possible ties with relatives or close acquaintances who had arrived during World War I and subsequently established themselves there.

Conclusions

The history of the Chinese in Ukraine can be traced back to the late 19th century, but the first notable wave of refugees from Manchuria arrived during the Russo-Japanese War of 1904–1905. A significant influx of Chinese coolies between 1915 and 1917 further influenced the balance of forces during the Russian Civil War and the Soviet-Ukrainian War. While some Chinese fought in the army of the Ukrainian People's Republic, the majority of former "coolies" joined the ranks of the Red Army. This association gave

them the image of the “enemy,” and to this day, the Chinese are heavily linked in historical memory with the brutalities committed by internationalist brigades.

Following demobilization from the Red Army in 1921–1922, a number of the Chinese chose to remain in Ukraine, thus transforming from sojourners to permanent residents. Many created families and enjoyed relatively privileged status, largely due to the leniency of early Soviet immigration legislation and the favorable attitude of the Soviet government. While some Chinese managed to secure employment in the governmental sector, others remained unskilled workers or engaged in trade. The peak of the diaspora's development coincided with the Soviet policy of *korenizatsiia*, during which the Chinese community became well institutionalized and organized throughout the 1920s, until the first wave of repressions began in 1935. Although some “fresh blood” migrants from China could be observed in Ukraine between the 1920s and 1930s, the diaspora could not advance to the third stage of formation as per Gungwu. Its development was interrupted by Stalin's repressions. The main reason for the arrests of Chinese in Ukraine was the allegation of espionage on behalf of Japan, often disregarding the merits of former “red partisans” to the Soviet state. Such accusations were likely rooted in the fact that many of them originated from Northeast China, a region under Japanese occupation at the time.

Criminal case records from Dnipropetrovsk oblast reveal that many of the Chinese survived by engaging in itinerant trade, despite possessing little to no knowledge of Russian or Ukrainian. Ultimately, the community that had been steadily forming since 1915 was destroyed during Stalin's repressions of 1937–1938, when many Chinese were either deported to prison camps in Kazakhstan or executed.

A comparative analysis of statistical data from the SKRU documents and criminal case records reveals notable similarities in the regional origins of Chinese migrants. A closer examination of their biographies shows that many combined manual labor with small-scale trade, indicating that physical work did not exclude participation in commercial activity. Given the small size and relative homogeneity of this migrant group, the demographic data derived from these biographies may be cautiously extrapolated to represent the broader Chinese diaspora in Soviet Ukraine. Such data could also serve as a basis for comparison with Chinese communities in other Soviet republics during the interwar period, contributing to the formation of a more comprehensive collective portrait, though further and more detailed research remains necessary.

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**Китайці в Україні (1900-ті–1938 рр.):
міграція, інституціоналізація, репрезентація**

У статті вперше подано узагальнений нарис історії китайців на українських землях від Російсько-японської війни 1905 р. до сталінських репресій 1938 р. Дослідження зосереджується на двох ключових аспектах: по-перше, на процесах формування та подальшого переривання становлення китайської діаспори, а по-друге, на витісненні китайців з етнічної мапи України внаслідок політичних репресій та асиміляційних практик радянської влади. На підставі аналізу наявних студій у роботі запропоновано методологічний підхід до належного термінологічного окреслення присутності китайців в Україні в різні історичні періоди та встановлення чітких хронологічних рамок окремих хвиль міграції. Вперше введено до наукового обігу й проаналізовано свідчення про присутність китайців в Україні до 1915 р., зокрема випадки, коли солдати поверталися з Маньчжурії з китайськими слугами чи усиновленими дітьми, а також простежено особливості їхньої адаптації в місцевому середовищі. Окрему увагу приділено вербуванню китайських кулі російськими промисловцями під час Першої світової війни та обґрунтовано тезу про те, що саме вони стали підґрунтям для подальшого формування китайської діаспори в радянській Україні. У статті розглянуто виникнення інституціоналізованих громад у Харкові, Києві та Полтаві, а також окреслено основні центри поселення китайців. На основі архівних матеріалів уперше здійснено реконструкцію узагальненого профілю китайського емігранта в Україні 1920–1930-х рр., зокрема висвітлено соціально-економічний статус, професійну зайнятість та характер взаємодії з місцевим населенням. Залучення архівних джерел 1922–1924 та 1937–1938 рр. дало змогу зібрати й проаналізувати базові демографічні дані про китайських мігрантів, завдяки чому відтворено їхній колективний образ: вікову структуру, соціальне походження та напрями професійної діяльності. Отже, дослідження не лише заповнює істотну прогалину в українській та світовій історіографії, а й формує підґрунтя для подальших студій у царині історії китайської діаспори у Східній Європі.

Ключові слова: китайська діаспора; китайсько-українські відносини; китайці в Європі; Перша світова війна; СРСР; сталінські репресії

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