

Misha and His Brigada:

A Tale of Betrayal, Racketeers and Informal Practices among Uzbek Labour Migrants in Russia

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Research Questions

- How do Central Asian labour migrants integrate into socio-legal environment in Russia?
- How does the exploitation of labour migrants occur in Russian migrant labour market?
- What strategies and tactics migrants produce in order to seek redress for their grievances?
- What implications do these strategies have for global debates on human trafficking and exploitation of migrant workers?



Policies of Migration Control in Russia

- Tightening laws and developing border control infrastructure (December 2012)
- Federal Law on "90-day stay" and the onset of "entry ban" regime in Russian migration governance (January 2014)
- Widening the grounds for issuing entry bans (2014)
- Draconian "Entry Ban" Regime (2015)
- Tougher work permit requirements and high work permit fees (2015)



Policy Outcomes and Unintended Consequences

- FMS statistics, September 23, 2014: "Nearly one million foreigners were banned from re-entry to Russia in 2014"
- FMS 2015 Statistics: "Nearly 3 million foreign nationals who are now in Russia have already violated the legal terms of stay"
- Most of those foreigners are the citizens of Uzbekistan (40 %), Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan (20 %)
- Around 5 million undocumented labour migrants in Russia

Methodology and Data Collection

- Ethnographic fieldwork in Moscow, Russia and Ferghana Uzbekistan, between January 2014 - July 2016
- Informal interviews, observations, focus group interviews and semi-structured interviews
- Weekly contact with migrants and their 'left-behind' families/community (*Whatsapp, Viber, Odnoklassniki, Facebook*)

Fieldwork strategy

- Pre-understanding: Russia is not a 'rule of law' society, so Western-centric theories do not fit the local context;
- Going to fieldsite 'blank', without any pre-designed fieldwork strategy or theoretical understanding. Strive for spontaneity and discoveries;
- Treating migrants as 'legal experts' and learning the 'law in migrants heads';
- My village background and Uzbek ethnicity provided unique access to fieldsites. I was treated like a typical migrant worker

Methodological nationalism

- Tendency to confine the study of labour exploitation to social processes that take place within the boundaries of a single nation-state;
- Increased transnational links due to migratory processes and the growing use of social media and smartphones;
- Migrant workers are part of everyday life and socio-economic processes both in their home and host societies;
- Daily flows of ideas, social practices and value systems between migrant sending and receiving societies via internet and smartphones



January 2014 Fieldwork in Moscow

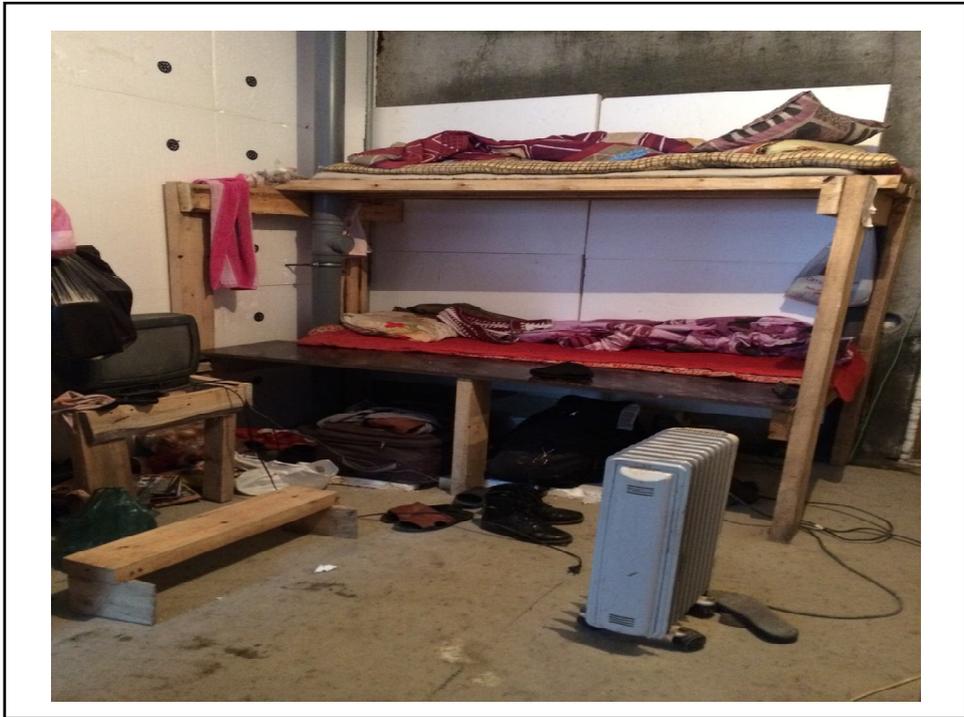
- Po rukam (handshake) contract between Uzbek middleman (brigadir) and migrant workers. Kinship-based work relations
- Middleman's po rukam obligations: securing salary, fixing work permits, and securing the basic needs of his employees
- Migrant workers po rukam obligations: obey middleman, work hard, even 15 hours per day, and give 15-20 percent of their salary to middleman

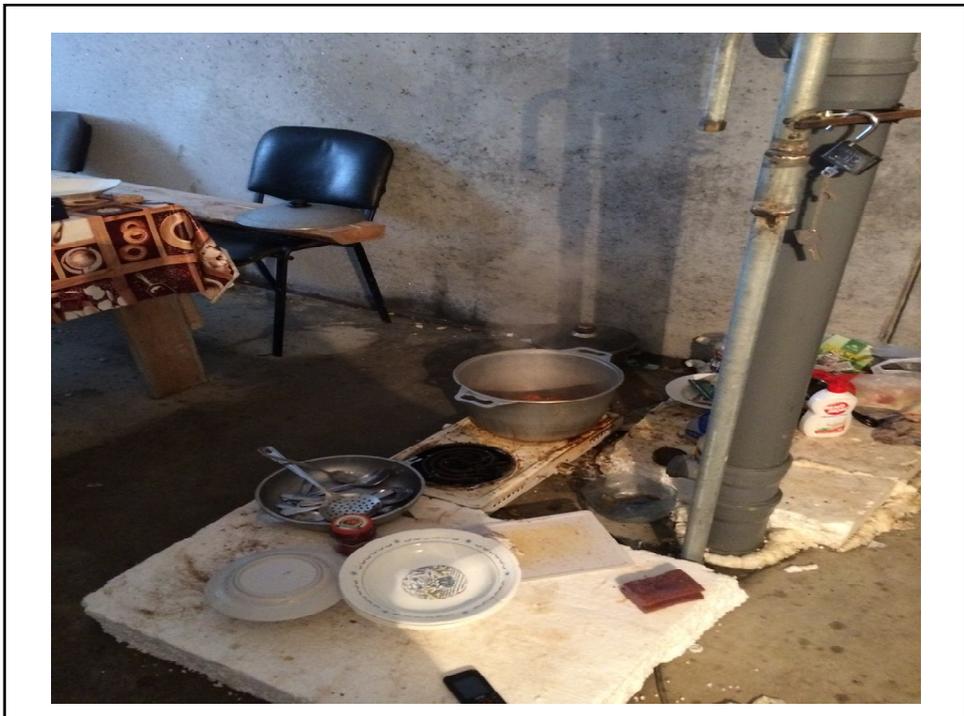
Po-Rukam Style Migrant Work











February 2014 Fieldwork in Fergana

- Establishing closer relations with middleman's and migrant workers families and mahalla;
- Observing everyday life and social relations in mahalla
- Focusing on mahalla talk about migrants and remittances sent from Russia;
- Trying to find out how often and in what way migrant workers and their families stay in touch;

April 2014 Fieldwork in Moscow

- Uzbek middleman was not able to get money from Russian middleman/construction company;
- Dispute between migrant workers and middleman;
- My dual controversial identity as 'researcher' and 'village guy', pressure to side with one of the parties
- The dispute remained unsolved and hostile relations between the two parties

“Of course, I understand that middleman has been cheated on by Russian middleman. But this doesn’t absolve him from responsibilities. From our side we properly finished the construction work and fulfilled our duties. He takes 20 percent of our salary, so his job is to make sure that we receive salary on time. If he cannot get money from company, this is his problem, not ours. We shook hands (made a deal) with him, not with Russian middleman. We don’t care whether he pays our salary from his own pocket or gets it from Russian company. He is constantly blaming Russian middleman and company, but we don’t want to hear anything about his private deals with Russians. The only thing we know and care about is our ‘po-rukam’ contract. “

Nodir, one of the migrants workers from middleman’s brigada

May 2014 Fieldwork in Ferghana

- The dispute between middleman and migrants in Moscow has now moved to Ferghana;
- My visit to migrant workers families;
- Migrant workers’ families are not happy and they demanded money from middleman’s parents;
- But they are not rushing to spread gossip about middleman or to contact police and authorities, hoping that middleman will change his mind

July-August 2014 Fieldwork in Moscow

- Middleman and migrant workers are in real conflict;
- Middleman does not have any employees. He is working alone, together with his couple of relatives;
- Migrant workers used Chechen rackets against middleman, but middleman had stronger connections (Russian police/OMON);
- Middleman refusing to pay salary and referring to 'street rules'
- Migrant workers are constantly calling their families and asking them to put pressure on middleman's family;
- Middleman still looks psychologically strong and is not willing to pay.

August 2014 Ferghana Fieldwork

- Gossip is spreading in the village;
- Migrants family members contacted mahalla oqosoqol (leader) and imam, complaining about middleman;
- Middleman's parents are no longer able to attend mahalla weddings due to widespread gossip and hate in mahalla;
- Migrants' families are threatening to contact local police and KGB, accusing middleman of 'human trafficking';
- Middleman's parents asked me to convince their son to pay migrants salary



September 2014 Moscow Fieldwork

- My meeting with middleman
- Middleman realizes the damage he has done to his parents;
- He finally decides to pay salary to migrants even though he still did not get the money from Russian middleman;
- Middleman meets each migrant worker privately and resolves the money dispute;



Concluding Remarks

- The enforcement of the po rukam contract in the informal construction work in Moscow is done via transnational interactions and pressure;
- Migrants are not just passive helpless victims but they do have agency and they can invent various strategies to address their grievances;
- The role of internet and smartphones in reducing the importance of distance between Moscow and Ferghana
- We need to be consider the social process in both sending and receiving societies if we want to better understand the power relations between migrants, middlemen and employers

Thank you for your attention!

Questions?