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Possibility or Barrier? The Influence of Digitalization on the Adaptation of Student-Migrants (The Case of Siberia)

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Abstract

In this study, we report on how the consumption of digital technologies has impacted the process of settling-in of two groups of student-migrants to the Irkutsk region in Siberia: trans-local Russians and transnational Chinese. The article demonstrates that the consumption of digital technologies and participation in diverse digital communities modulate the spatial practices of educational migrants and, consequently, the perception of space itself, which plays a crucial role in the adaptation process.

Participation in social media groups by the Chinese is vital. Social media mark up the urban space (city, dormitory, institute, shopping places, leisure places, etc.) into (not)necessary for consumption, which "completes" a set of perceived places. For Russians, social media serves only as an addition to offline practices. They play a "servicing" role, often allowing them not to contact once again offline. At the same time, the potential opportunities for Russian students to build networks and visit new places in everyday life remain wider and do not have "Chinese" restrictions - places or chat rooms.

Additionally, the investigation proves that being physically every day at the same time and in the same places, local and international students perceive them differently, and a large part of this difference derives from the digital resources they communicate and obtain information. As a result, despite the mutual interest and physical presence of both Chinese students and learners of Chinese, contact between these groups throughout the educational track remains low.

Keywords: student-migrants, adaptation, digitalization.

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1. Introduction

The issue of migrants' adaptation is one of the general topics of contemporary social research. The phenomenon of educational migration and problems of students' adaptation deserve special attention. On the one hand, - student-migrants are initially included in institutional relations, where the educational organizations solve several issues, such as various bureaucratic procedures, accommodation, and organization of (extra)curricular activities. On the other hand, factors related to newcomers' cognitive, psychological, and socio-cultural attitudes influence adaptation processes, and the solution to such problems is usually left to the students themselves. Problems and mechanisms of educational migrants' adaptation are also studied in Russian cases (Masalimova et al., 2020; Makeeva et al., 2021). Such investigations address psychophysical, linguistic, and socio-cultural difficulties faced by international students, while the research focus is mainly limited to the framework of educational processes (Shmeleva, 2021; Kolova & Belkina, 2023). The everyday life of student-migrants in non-educational spaces, such as the urban environment or digital platforms, which to no lesser extent determine the (un)success and the intensity of adaptation processes, remains outside the scope of research interests.

A student-migrant is usually a young person who has recently graduated from school and reached adulthood. In moving, an educational migrant finds him/herself in an unfamiliar urban environment - they change from their native country or city to a new one or move from a small settlement to a larger one, finding themself in an unfamiliar context. The migrant's continued presence in the new space somehow shapes different techniques of consuming it (Urry, 1995; Goodman et al., 2010), which conditions adaptation processes (Brøgger, 2019). In addition, moving is accompanied by acquiring or improving a new set of life skills, deprivation of contacts with the established circle of socialization in the previous life, and building a network of relationships in a new place. An essential factor in building new life trajectories is the use of digital tools, which are integrated into the everyday life of a modern person. For the migrant, they play a role as a tool for maintaining communication with the place of origin (Peng, 2016; Masud, 2020) and as a potential "entry point" into the new place (Haynes & Wang, 2019; Dekker & Engbersen, 2013).

In the most general way, educational migrants are divided into two types - transnational students and trans-local ones, i.e., those from other cities or regions. On the one hand, both encounter similar adaptation problems in the new place and, no less importantly, far away from their parents. On the other hand, hypothetically, adaptation for internal migrants should be more accessible, as they do not experience cultural and linguistic difficulties. This

understanding of the adaptation processes of internal migrants is widespread in Russia, where even in academic discourse, internal migrants are often described as carriers of all-Russian "meta-cultural values" (Mukomel, 2015) a priori located within the Russian "imagined communities" (Anderson, 2006). At the same time, international students are presented as a polar example of educational migrants regarding starting positions for adaptation.

The subject of the study is the role that digital means play in the mechanics of perception of space - groups in social media, chat rooms, publicity groups, etc. Through a comparative analysis of everyday practices, including digital ones, this paper aims to identify how the involvement in digital social interaction shapes trans-local and transnational migrant-students' perception of urban space and how this affects their adaptation. Additionally, we demonstrate that despite the mutual interest and physical presence of Chinese students and learners of Chinese, we observe low contact between these two groups. It is also essential that the lack of regular contact between them continue throughout their educational track. Examples of friendship between representatives do occur, but these are instead exceptions that confirm the rule. By problematizing their common sphere of communication (the social and educational aspect) and field of interaction (the familiar places in which they spend most of their time), we have attempted to understand by highlighting the physical presence of migrants and analyzing their digital practices, to what extent the factor of physical location and characteristics of perception of space do or do not shape the conditions for the construction of communicative perspectives.

2. Theoretical framework

At the problem formulation stage, we realized that we would primarily deal with two types of spaces[1]. As the main theoretical framework of the study, we chose Actor-Network Theory (ANT) (Callon, 2002; Latour, 2007), which allowed us to combine the perspectives of "Euclidean space" and "Network space" proposed by J.Law (2002). "Euclidean space" is a collection of physical bodies located in an orthogonal coordinate system or an apparent form of spatiality from the perspective of European-American common sense. In "Euclidean space," objects can be located close to each other but may not have any connection. In addition, ANT considers "network space," where objects are embedded in a stable network of relationships with other elements, regardless of distance and location. Consequently, things and "places" exist

[1] We understand space as "the organization of the observed into a consistent set distinguished based on given parameters of observation" (Filippov 2008: 122).

simultaneously in "Euclidean space" and in "network space," resulting in "multiple forms of spatiality" (Law, 2002), which, in turn, have different effects on the objects included in them.

Considering the "network space" of a migrant-student's life activity per se, analyzing the used fragments of the city from the "network space's" point of view, we see that some localities become more significant, others less so. Others can be ignored, falling out of the stable, closed network of relations. The very continuous fabric of the city is torn, and only some part of it is formed into a network within which the migrant organizes everyday life. Some urban spaces have become more critical to migrants than others, with digital technologies significantly impacting this distinction. Thus, our object is "the effect of some stable sets or networks of relations" (Law, 2002). The urban "space itself is neither object nor a priori, but a frame of reference for action" (Werlen, 1993), in our case a physical framework framed by the social practices of migrant-students, framed by the digital context and socio-cultural background. In other words, the area of the city frequented by migrant-students, defined by networks and relationships and thus shaping their perception of it, represents a type of "network space." This space is homeomorphic, meaning it geometrically corresponds to urban areas in "Euclidean space" that migrants focus on. However, it exists independently within the network of relationships that govern migrants' daily lives.

3. Methodology and methods

This paper explores how Russian trans-local students learning Chinese and Chinese student-migrants studying Russian in Irkutsk utilize various spaces and places. Our primary methodological approach is "digital ethnography" (Murthy, 2008; Miller, 2018; Dawson, 2019; Miller & Horst, 2020). Given its broad interpretive possibilities, we opted for a methodology involving online observation in digital settings and semi-structured interviews to discuss digital platforms and their significance in students' daily routines. Research on the impact of social media and digitalization on the acculturation and adaptation processes of transnational student-migrants often employ quantitative methods like surveys and questionnaires, collection and analysis of social media data (see, e.g., Yang, 2018), as well as by combining qualitative and quantitative methods (see, e.g., Martin & Rizvi, 2014; Sinanan & Gomes, 2020). However, a gap exists in understanding what transnational and trans-local students express about their consumption habits and their effects on everyday life. Online observation enabled us to identify critical practices, interaction forms, and the level of engagement in the digital realm. Meanwhile, semi-structured interviews

provided a deeper understanding of how digital interactions influence the everyday consumption patterns of students in their living spaces.

An important "place" of "Irkutsk Chinese" communication is the corresponding groups in Chinese social media, particularly WeChat. One of the authors of this article has been observing the everyday digital practices of Chinese migrants in the research region, as well as closed WeChat groups, for several years (Koreshkova, 2018; Ryzhova & Koreshkova, 2022). The information gathered from these observations was utilized as empirical material to build our findings in this study. Having their own physical and virtual infrastructure greatly simplifies the adaptation processes of Chinese students because, firstly, it allows them to be in a familiar environment. Secondly, it forms a significant information resource that reduces the costs of staying in a new city for them. Also, we made similar observations on the student pages of Russian students on the social media "Vkontakte." Some digital spaces, particularly the chats of dormitories and study groups, were inaccessible for the investigation, as there was a high probability of our de-anonymization as university faculty members. However, we could observe the open groups of the union organization, the institute, and the dormitory. The data obtained were also utilized to verify our hypotheses.

The central part of our methodological framework was collecting and analyzing interviews on posed issues. The main line of conversation was built around the organization of student' everyday lives, intertwined with the use of digital means and their significance in the everyday processes and practices. One of the crucial elements of this methodology was the careful sampling of respondents.

Regarding transnational student-migrants, in this study, we deliberately narrowed down the focus to students from the PRC. The choice was based on several conditions. Firstly, Chinese students for the 2022-2023 study year constitute most international students at ISU[2]. Secondly, the geographical proximity of China to the region in question, the relatively high economic potential of the Irkutsk region and Irkutsk city, and their role in the logistics system are significant factors attracting the Chinese and their capitals. Irkutsk and its suburbs are literally "intertwined" with "Chinese" infrastructure, in particular ethnically marked markets (Grigorichev & Dyatlov, 2017; Bryazgina, 2020), agricultural enterprises (Grigorichev, 2017), "Chinese" catering (Dyatlova, 2017). In other words, we can speak of a peculiarly dispersed "Chinese" economic and spatial component built into the city, accumulating

[2] Statistical data on the International Department of the ISU foreign contingent for 2022-23.

ethnically marked goods and services demanded by locals while acting as part of the industry used by the Chinese staying in the city.

Forming our selection, we identified additional attributes of the studied internal Russian student-migrants. First, we decided to focus on first-year students – a first year in a new city is the most stressful period (Lee et al., 2012), determining terms of crystallizing the perception of space, developing logistical algorithms, and constructing everyday life. Secondly, we have chosen those first-year Russian students who study at ISU and live in the same dormitories as the Chinese students. Thus, the immediate localities of Chinese and Russian life activities coincide, just as, supposedly, many practices should coincide. Thirdly, we decided to choose Russians learning Chinese language. Hypothetically, Chinese and Russian students have a mutual interest in each other's cultures, which is an additional incentive for communication.

Finally, the third objective of our sample was to select pairs of students united by a relationship of friendship and a common household. "Pair interviews" (Bjørnholt & Farstad, 2012), as a qualitative research method, are usually conducted with married couples or people in romantic relationships. However, essential criteria for determining this method's validity are a common household, financial practices, regular leisure time together, and the "density" of interpersonal interaction. Considering these circumstances, this method gives excellent results in the study of households (Valentine, 1999). This methodology was quite suitable for our purposes. We took as conditional households the neighboring in dormitories - a room or a section whose inhabitants lead an everyday life together; pairs of informants were selected strictly on the principle of friendly relations. Since we were partly working with phenomenological constructs, trying to identify collective experiences and practices, we agree with some authors that collecting interviews from carefully selected couples allows us to deepen and fund research interpretations of the material (Mavhandu-Mudzusi, 2018).

We conducted 16 in-depth interviews with Chinese (8) and Russian (8) students and 4 expert interviews with university staff. The interviews with students were conducted in pairs (two Chinese students/two Russian students) to verify the data. During the paired interviews, students periodically discussed some questions with each other before answering. The interviews with Russian students were conducted in Russian language and with Chinese students in Chinese language. We carried out expert interviews with university employees who have long experience (at least 5 years) of direct involvement in issues of adaptation of both international and trans-local migrant-students. Among other things, when analyzing the materials within the framework of the above

research optics, we involved the data of a multi-year (2016-2023) included observation in the university environment in the role of teachers, as well as in the role of organizers of joint ventures and general communication environment for Russian and Chinese students.

4. Network spaces of trans-local student-migrants (Russians)

There is a certain homogeneity among Russians at the level of cultural and regional differences that (not)impede adaptation in Irkutsk. For the most part, respondents are comfortable communicating in their new place. Fluency in the Russian language and having the status of a Russian citizen regardless of ethnicity removes questions about legal costs. It helps resolve everyday issues independently in most life situations. An interesting observation in this regard came when comparing two Buryat female respondents. One was from Ulan-Ude, the other from Alarsk District, Irkutsk Province. When asked, "How often is your origin actualized in Irkutsk? Exactly where do you come from?" received polar answers:

> Well, I often joke about being Buryat. Like, recently, yesterday, a classmate sang the song 'I'm Russian'. I said I don't agree <sighs> Quite often. Well, I like to mark that I'm a Buryat. I feel it's unique in a way. (Female student, 18 years old, Ulan-Ude)

> If one comes across someone from the Alar District and the subject comes up, then yes. Well, and we're Buryats, but that's a bit different. (Female student, 19 years old, Alarsky District, Irkutsk Region)

Trans-local students choose to study in Irkutsk due to various factors. Firstly, its remote location allows for easy travel back home without significant financial or time burdens. Secondly, the increasing popularity of learning Chinese in the region motivates some students, spurred by alarmist sentiments from academic and media sources, to learn the language of a "dangerous" and "unpredictable" neighbor. Thirdly, having relatives and acquaintances in the city facilitates integration into local networks, providing a sense of supervision for young people living independently. Additionally, prior positive experiences of visiting Irkutsk during school years contribute to the decision to study there.

Moreover, there is a certain tendency to mythologize the image of the city at the stage of the formation of migration perspectives. These mythologies act as cautionary mechanisms in students' discourse. Many internal migrants were familiar with stereotypical perceptions of locals about particular areas, which

they had learned about in past arrivals, from local relatives and friends, or in place of origin.

> - Some of my relatives used to say that Irkutsk was a city of bandits.
> - So what? Have you seen any bandits?
> - Well, only "mine" in the dormitory <smiles>
>
> (Male student, 18 years old, Svobodny)

At the same time, the interaction with the city space of out-of-town first-year students can hardly be called unconstrained. The main reason may be the narrowing of mental maps and specific mechanization of routes. They orient themselves quite well around their dormitory or institute but only go up to 1-2 blocks. Sometimes, they practice walking from the dormitory to the institute but sacrifice time as they walk along the main streets. The fact that they repeat the most popular public transport routes along this route is also essential. All places mentioned for walking line up around the main route they use to move "from dormitory to university." In this way, they use this limited space not only for moving between places of living and studying but also for leisure activities.

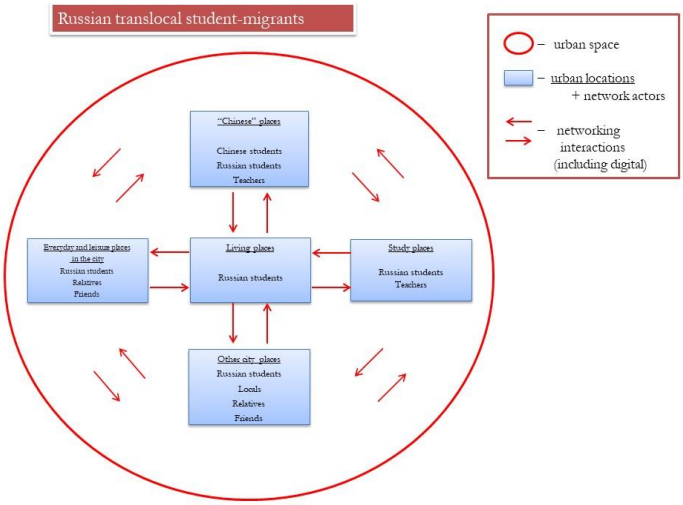
The network space in which the student is included plays a vital role in narrowing and expanding the mental "map of the city." When students move to a new place, they virtually and physically maintain contact with the place of origin, primarily with family and relatives. These connections and contacts partly form the locations visited: some they visited with family, and others relatives advised to visit. In addition, some students have family or friends' connections in the city of study, which allow them to expand the number of places they visit, join new local networks, and change their perception of the city. At the same time, new student networks formed - classmates, student activists, dorm neighbors - with whom they discover and visit new places (see Fig.1).

Limited finances restrict Russian students' engagement with the city and hinder forming new social connections. This affects their choice of shops, often favoring low-cost options. The presence of affordable options within the dormitory area helps, but some students remain unaware of nearby markets offering quality goods at low prices. Additionally, spatial practices involve online clothing purchases by parents, minimizing students' need to visit physical stores.

Financial constraints also influence that students spend a significant portion of their time in the dormitory, organizing themselves for get-togethers and hangouts. At the same time, the degrading materiality of the dormitory building acts as a factor of solidarity and building small social structures. All

respondents note negative first impressions of the living conditions, widespread areas - corridors, kitchens.

Figure 1. The main places of visit of the Russian trans-local student-migrants in the urban space.



At the same time, students note the low quality of the material condition of the dormitory stimulates attachment to one's room or section. In this aspect, two trajectories of social life manifested each of them we can label as containerization, although different in scale and number of members included in the interaction. Most sit in their rooms and, at best, have contact with their roommates. They do not use the kitchen, prefer a multi-cooker machine, and cook in their rooms. They try to solve rare domestic issues through available chats on social networks. Another trajectory we found is turning one of their kitchens into a social hub. According to the respondents themselves, who are part of the company interacting in this kitchen, other units lack initiative. Offline communication stimulates the formation of small social groups whose communication becomes prolonged and periodic. However, being in a common Euclidean space with Chinese and other international students, they prefer to remain in the Russian-speaking community. Students argue that the Chinese behave as if "they do not notice us." As it turned out during the interviews, both groups feel awkward and afraid to show initiative in communication and interaction, cannot overcome the language barrier, and live "in parallel worlds."

4.1. The digitalization aspect of network space (Russians)

In many ways, the need to leave the dormitory for necessities and financial shortages is mitigated by using digital platforms. The central platform used by students is the social media Vkontakte. The digital infrastructure of the dormitory is quite differentiated and includes general chats, floor chats, section chats, and a general public used more for informing about recreational activities and posting photo reports from them. However, the public chat does not affect the intensity of residents' contact and the building of long-lasting horizontal relationships. Generally, the chat room is used to find cigarettes, salt, sunflower oil, or transportation change. This somewhat diminishes the potential for communication and relationship building by minimizing the need to leave the room and interact face-to-face. An everyday unifying activity in general dorm chat is the exchange of jokes and memes, but this is engaged by a very narrow circle of people who can be classified as an asset, with the rare reactions to jokes in chat also coming only from asset representatives.

> You can see right away from the chat that there is a circle of five people in the dormitory
> - So this "nucleus" is active?
> - Yes, local jokes, all selves.
> (Female student, 18 years old, Irkutsk region)

Going beyond the functional space of digital platforms allows students to come closer together. However, the potential of this mechanism also proves to be limited. Information about activities does not get into the general dorm chat rooms, as there is a separate chat room for members "active" in the offline sections of the dormitories. The activist of this company notes that initially, during the folding phase of the company, all interactions take place offline and only then are formalized in the digital space, which has become more of an auxiliary tool. On the other hand, the segregated group on Vkontakte essentially draws a line between those involved in the group and the rest.

Some residents attempt another practice when general chat becomes in demand to voice their dissatisfaction (mostly domestic issues) to other residents living next door by posting their grievances. More often than not, it suggests that even if there are some issues with those living literally across the wall, be it noise, hair in the shower, or uncleanliness, students find it easier to write about it in a general chat room than to leave the room and talk in person, the chat room acts as a mechanism to eliminate face-to-face contact. Of particular note is that negativity, be it gossip or voicing dissatisfaction, does not leave the general chat room for the section or floor chats. This is justified because what

is said this way will likely go offline. Also, a common topic of concern can initiate a joint discussion - an earthquake, a blackout, or Internet problems. Naturally, these events are also discussed only for the duration of the issue. They generally instrumentalize the chat room as a platform for background information - when the internet is restored, the electricity will be given, etc.

> They write actively from time to time, I think. They start texting back and forth about what's going on. An earthquake. I mean, some kind of newsworthy event.
>
> (Female student, 18 years old, Irkutsk region)

We were also interested to discover how digital platforms are "embedded" in a student's everyday life outside the dormitory, how information online affects students' current practices, how it shapes their leisure time, and their choice of places and events to visit. Since the main occupation of the observed students is education, it is worth starting with study chat rooms. Expectedly, they mainly serve as reference resources, where study materials, information about grades, and alerts their classmates about the reasons for absence are mostly exchanged. That is, general study chats have a purely functional meaning and rarely act as a mechanism for assembling offline leisure activities. Chinese students learn a great deal, especially in the early stages of language and theoretical subjects related to culture, about which they tend to have a very abstract understanding. Coupled with the complexity of the Chinese language, the amount of learning is significant, and this fact is noted as one of the reasons why interaction with classmates online is mainly limited to academic matters. The complexity of the learning process and the competition for future budgetary places also force nonresident students to spend most of their time in their rooms rather than organizing leisure activities together.

Most of the answers were the same when asked what digital resources first-year students use to stay in contact with the student environment and the university. In their first weeks at the new place, succumbing to the advertising on the part of the ISU, every first-year student subscribes to their social media resources. However, behind the beautiful and relatively rich content-politics of the union's official pages, there is more of an "imitation of activity". Respondents mostly say that the professional union organizes events for themselves; at least, it looks that way. As a digital mechanism that hypothetically should attract a student audience to actual offline activity, something other than social media is needed. Moreover, even if someone outside the trade union committee comes to their events, it turns out that the main contingent there are the organizers themselves. If students attend some events, they learn about them personally from teachers or classmates of the trade union activists. At the

same time, internal migrant-students, unlike Chinese students, can and do use local (news) digital platforms from which they learn about and attend city-wide events.

5. Network spaces of transnational student-migrants (Chinese)

Kim (2001) states that transnational migrants are divided into short-term and long-term categories. International students are short-term stay representatives wishing initially to return to their country of origin. This section focuses on Chinese students, who represent the second category, distinguishing them from the studied group of trans-local Russian students and, consequently, influencing their potential for practices and strategies of building communication and contacts in the host country.

When you ask Chinese students: "Why did you choose Irkutsk and ISU, to study?" The first thing they all, without exception, start talking about is a craving to learn Russian language and culture. Through terms such as language and culture we find an implicitly embedded spatial dimension. Learning a foreign language and culture becomes a motive for educational mobility - studying in another country. After choosing a specialization, the next step raises the question - how to choose a place to study in Russia? The spatial factor becomes key, as the characteristics of the place determine the choice: the attractiveness of the place, the potential practices in it. In the case of Chinese students studying in Irkutsk, we singled out the following: remoteness from the place of origin, tourist and economic attractiveness, possibility to establish contacts for future prospects, already existing contacts, and the use of the city as a transit zone for further promotion to the European part of the country.

> I chose Irkutsk because I wanted to see something outside of China. My Russian language is not very good. To go to Moscow you need a higher level of Russian. Then I will go to Moscow. Irkutsk also as not a very expensive city. (Male student, 19 years old, Zhejiang)

> A friend who studied in Irkutsk said, "Why should you look for a job in China? Come to Irkutsk, you can study here! A change of scenery, see something new." I was interested to see Baikal. It is a very famous place, very beautiful. (Male student, 20 years old, Heilongjiang)

The motivation with which students arrive in the city of study forms the framework of their perception and vectors of movement in it. The focus, in a way, even before the arrival, introduces limitations to the perception and

"containers" it. In the case of Chinese students in Irkutsk, Lake Baikal and "Chinese" locations become the priority places to visit besides the university. In contrast to the pre-arrival mythologization of the city found in trans-local Russian students, here we observe more of a tourist gaze directed toward specific places of attraction. Consequently, among Chinese respondents, we observed a higher awareness of and interest in the city's tourist and historical attractions than among Russian students (see Fig.2).

Moreover, the city as a social construct is also created and perceived by migrants living there. The Chinese presence in Irkutsk is palpable, which is reflected in the city's appearance. Large Chinese markets and numerous Chinese restaurants become places of attraction and assembly points for PRC students. As a rule, they learn about such places within the Chinese network. They may be disoriented in the city space, but they know exactly where the Chinese market is. The fact is that they tend to navigate along those routes from place to place that has been presented to them by senior students.

> - Do you often walk in the city center?
> - Is Shanghai City[3] the city center? I usually go there.
> (Female student, 19 years old, Heilongjiang)

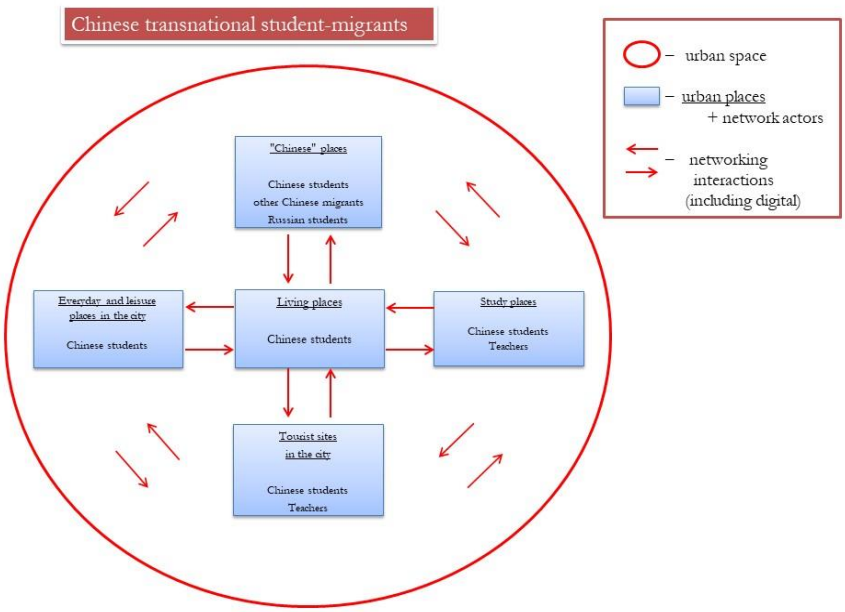
Some disorientation is also observed concerning the surrounding living area:

> Lots of stops near the dormitory, but I don't remember the names.
> (Male student, 18 years old, Guangdong)

Future students select their study destination based not only on academic interests but also on the potential for social connections. Chinese students, unlike Russian peers, typically reside within the educational zone, fostering their involvement in Chinese social networks. Thus, staying at the place of study, Chinese students become hostages of their socio-cultural background, part of the homeomorphic Chinese network space. Chinese students, while remaining included in the Chinese network of interactions, being within it, put together their own "city map," which consists of a limited number of places. All respondents mentioned a set of the same places they visited. In addition to the university and the dormitory where they spend most of their time, such a "city map" covers the well-known supermarket chains in the city, famous shopping centers, the Angara River embankment, the Baikal Lake coast, and of course those mentioned above "Chinese" locations.

[3] Chinese ethnic market, located in the center of Irkutsk.

Figure 2. The main places of stay of the Chinese transnational student-migrants in the urban space.



At the same time, knowing the location of Chinese restaurants, for example, does not make them accessible to transnational or trans-local students. The versatility of student life is evident in the limited financial options. The financial security of the few Chinese students allows them to focus on restaurants and entertainment.

> A lot of Chinese restaurants. So, I spoke almost no Russian for the first six months. (Male student, 21 years old, Heilongjiang)

However, all of them prefer to spend time in familiar "Chinese" locations, which contributes to maintaining a networked space.

Students' socio-cultural backgrounds significantly shape their perceptions of the host environment, with Chinese students often emphasizing differences between their homeland and their host city, while trans-local migrant-students tend to focus on domestic comparisons. This creates a sense of "otherness" in their places of residence, imbuing them with new meanings through reproduced differences. On the other hand, both Chinese and Russian students follow similar daily routines, engaging in activities like attending classes, using public

transport, and buying groceries. However, Chinese students tend to stick together in small groups due to financial, legal, and safety concerns. This preference for companionship stems from the shared experience of economic constraints, legal uncertainties, and feelings of insecurity, especially during evenings. Their dormitory serves as a safe space where they predominantly interact within their Chinese circle, united not by their province or city of origin but by a common language.

> There's no problem between us, we all speak Chinese after all. (Male student, 20 years old, Heilongjiang)

Joint activities are based on everyday life, study, and leisure activities. Here one can observe the division of groups according to their interests. Some people play computer games in a group of three or four. A particular room is equipped with a powerful computer and several monitors. The game is often played online together with other players in China. Some engage in sporting activities. Some alcoholic drinkers organize evenings in their rooms.

We are witnessing a simultaneous contraction and expansion of interaction spaces. A limited set of places in Chinese environment provokes the expansion of the Chinese network space. The more closed and compact the group, the stronger the bonds that form and grow within them. The example of the sports ground near the dormitory can illustrate the reverse situation. Unlike the kitchen in the Chinese block or the room with game consoles, the playground is an open space. Some Chinese students started playing basketball there; other Chinese and Russian students gradually became interested in the game. However, this case is the exception that proves the rule rather than the standard practice. The above demonstrates that the closed nature of networked spaces hinders their adaptation and inclusion in collaborative practices with host community members. The use of open spaces to build new connections with non-Chinese actors, adapt, and acculturate in the local environment is more of a deviation, as confirmed by expert interviews.

5.1. The digitalization aspect of network space (Chinese)

Technology consumption and digitalization have become so commonplace that users themselves need to give them more importance. Assume we see students in a minibus or the cafeteria and corridors of the institute. In that case, we will find that their attention is partially absorbed by what is happening on their phones. They live between two worlds, and in our case, as the study showed, their digital world is Chinese.

First, it should be emphasized that our primary respondents were first-year students. Studies describe that at the initial stage of adaptation, students experience the most significant stress when communicating in person with representatives of the host country (Ye, 2006). The need to keep in touch with relatives and close associates in the country of exodus is much higher during this period. Maintaining contact with family through social media allows them to lower their stress levels by staying in the "here" and "there" spaces simultaneously since they do not have the opportunity to maintain these connections physically with the same frequency as Russian students. In addition, the high-stress level in the first months of stay increases the likelihood that Chinese students unfamiliar with the situation will seek help and shelter among their compatriots (Hurh & Kim, 1990). At the same time, as soon as students get into this comfortable zone of their Chinese circle, they are less willing and eager to maintain relations with Russian citizens. In other words, containerization processes are launched at the initial stage of their residence, and social media plays a significant role in them, representing part of "the comfort zone" and "cultural babble" of Chinese students where WeChat plays a significant role in these processes.

Chinese students are included in WeChat student groups – study chats, dorm chats (for whole building, localized on one floor), for buying/selling goods, etc., and in groups used by other categories of Chinese migrants in Irkutsk. In digital spaces, Chinese students solve similar issues as Russian student-migrants; however, the strategies and the impact of which are different. First, it is a way to overcome financial constraints. In the case of Chinese students, by purchasing used goods from undergraduates or graduate students, as well as from Chinese migrants who have been living in Irkutsk for a long time.

> First day here. My roommate helped me. Then we went to Chinatown (Kytai-gorod) to buy the rest of our things. He also gave away some things he didn't need anymore. Chinese students leave things for other Chinese students. It's a cycle of things. Selling things to each other - via WeChat. (Male student, 23 years old, Liaoning)

Chats are both digital trading platforms and a source of information about suitable shopping locations in the city. A significant difference is that we see the offline expansion of the network of Chinese contacts as an effect of virtual communication. Chinese students try to keep Chinese connections and contacts for potential interactions in the future.

In matters of mutual assistance, the strategies of Chinese students are similar to Russians. In the general WeChat group, which includes more than 60

users, they mostly turn to each other with requests - to open the door at night; to advise purchasing something; to express dissatisfaction about the intense noise; to ask to borrow some product, etc.

> In the group on WeChat we usually call friends to play basketball, ask some questions about ordinary life. We can re-buy some goods, borrow something. We joke around. (Male student, 21 years old, Heilongjiang)

At the same time, separate closed groups are created offline for a certain circle of people with common interests – for basketball players and computer gamers, for lovers of gatherings in the kitchen. We find similar mechanisms used by Russian students, where the organization of small groups in the virtual space is built offline, thereby limiting entry possibilities.

WeChat groups play a crucial role as a source of information for Chinese students, from where they learn about what is happening not only in the dormitory but also at the university in the city. The limited circle of communication does not allow us to get this kind of information first-hand, for example, from trade union organizations like Russian students. Moreover, it is possible to observe the processes of inclusion of local teachers in the Chinese digital space. A striking example is the pandemic period, when "teachers began to create groups in WeChat in order not to lose students, not to lose contact with them." In order to create an educational environment at the University, groups were created in the messenger. The first goal is to keep everyone up to date. Many Russian teachers had to master a new platform that they did not use in their daily lives. The second goal was to create a community so that individuals felt connected with others; these were both groups of students from one and different courses. Before that, there was no general University group of Chinese students. At first, they created a small group, and then they began to invite classmates, those with whom they live together, to a dormitory, so the group gradually filled up. Then, in part, these groups began to disband for those directly in Russia and those who remained distant in China since different information was provided to them. The system established during the crisis period helped to preserve the community. Study groups in WeChat remained a priority for use, both for educational purposes and for organizing (extra)curricular activities.

China's policy of restricting the use of "non-Chinese" social networks also affects the daily practices of students abroad. When they come to study in Russia, Chinese students become users of the Russian Vkontakte. However, even with the initial superficial viewing of the pages of our respondents on this social media, we found that only some have photos uploaded or use pictures instead of photos. In most cases, the names are written in Chinese (hieroglyphs

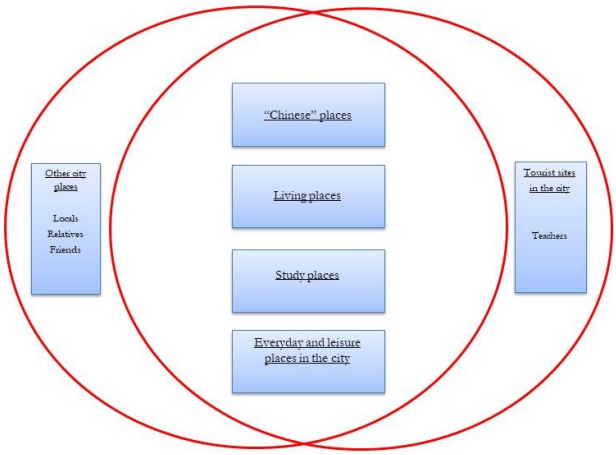
or pinyin transcription). The number of friends each varies from 3 to 9, no more. Friends are Russian students studying Chinese; teachers. This social media is one of many for communication. This was indirectly confirmed when we arranged an interview with the respondents. They answered with long breaks, referring to the fact that they did not have notification notifications configured in this social media, and willingly switched to a conversation in WeChat. Also, in their responses, they noted that they prefer to stay in their circle, and "if it were not for WeChat, they would have been forced to step out of their comfort zone." In addition, a qualitative analysis of messages in WeChat groups confirmed that many everyday issues could be solved without going beyond the Chinese circle.

6. Conclusion

Utilizing transnational and trans-local migrants-students' cases, we demonstrated that perceived cultural distance (Galchenko & Van De Vijver, 2007) is a crucial variable in adaptation. Our results are consistent with the study of Asian and Anglo-Australian students in Australia by Bailey and Dua (1999), who found that Asian students used collectivist coping strategies more frequently than Anglo-Australian students. In our study, a comparison of two cases revealed. First, stereotypical ideas and preconceived images of the city are gradually de-actualized in the case of trans-local migrants. In the case of Chinese students, the city's image is "confirmed" by the set of sights visited and "Chinese" locations. Secondly, the everyday life of first-year students is similar in many aspects; they spend most of their time studying or in the dormitory. Both groups have limited finances, which modulates the places and practices in which they purchase food or necessary goods and items. Consequently, interaction with the urban environment could be more vital and selective for both groups. However, it is potentially broader for Russians since it is not rigidly tied to social media and sociocultural backgrounds (see Fig. 1,2).

Participation in social media groups by the Chinese is vital. Social media mark up the urban space (city, dormitory, institute, shopping places, leisure places, etc.) into (not)necessary for consumption, which "completes" a set of perceived places. For Russians, social media serves only as an addition to offline practices. They play a "servicing" role, often allowing them not to contact once again offline. At the same time, the potential opportunities for Russian students to build networks and visit new places in everyday life remain wider (Fig.3) and do not have "Chinese" restrictions - places or chat rooms. Therefore, being physically in the same places daily, local and international students see them differently, including under the influence of digital resources.

Figure 3. The potential [4] places of interaction between Chinese and Russian student-migrants



In contrast to Yan's study (2018), which found that Facebook (the host social media) and WeChat (the ethnic social media) usage both have positive effects on the Chinese international students' successful adaptation in the US, we found that the situation in Irkutsk (Russia) is different. Indeed, WeChat (as ethnic, social media) and other Chinese applications (DouYin, XiaoHongShu) have a positive effect when adapting among Chinese compatriots. However, they have opposite effects on acculturation and adaptation processes among the host country's citizens. Using Vkontakte as the host social media platform has a different effect than Facebook. It only becomes an active tool for expanding social contacts with representatives of the host country. Our outcomes coincide with the study of Ju et al. (2021), which was carried out with the application of mixed methods – questionnaires and focus groups among Chinese migrants in Canada. In our case, Chinese social media does not contribute to the adaptation of Chinese students. Moreover, it makes social groups even more closed, allowing Chinese students to remain in their "comfort zone" and "cultural bubbles."

We detected two areas - educational and social adaptation of student-migrants. Digitalization can have a positive effect in both areas. Moreover, online communities can contribute to the development of weak ties (Granovetter, 1973), as discussions in online communities often focus on the most important topics relevant to the user's needs. Therefore, digitalization

[4] Remain potential due to the discontinuity in "network space", including digital actors. As a consequence, living in parallel worlds.

opens up many possibilities for international university departments and student organizations interested in successfully adapting international students and their active engagement with local students.

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