

Constructing the Image of Asian Immigrants in the Czech Media

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We will examine some of the processes and mechanisms that influence the shaping of the media image of minorities and migrants in general and also look at specific examples of journalist practices used in reporting about Chinese migrants in the Czech Republic.

It is a fact well described in literature that the work of journalists is the result of routine and institutionalized working procedures as well as institutionalized professional imperatives. The sociologist Stuart Hall (Hall 1978) aptly calls such creative processes the 'social production of news'. He believes that what we consider to be 'news' is the end product of a complex process which starts with systematic selection of events and topics based on a predetermined set of socially constructed categories. The selection process is governed by 'professional ideology,' which infallibly leads a journalist's hand when selecting newsworthy events.

The main criterion of a truly newsworthy event is that it must be unusual, i.e. the event must be unexpected and beyond the everyday experience of most people (e.g. earthquake or Moon landing). After that, there are events concerning the elites and superpowers, i.e. events that are dramatic. Prized are especially those events that can be personalized and have a certain emotional dimension (humor, sentimentality, sadness). Finally, a trained journalist cannot let pass any event that has negative consequences, and especially an event with a certain amount of future potential, i.e. an event that brings out a topic that may be further developed in subsequent reporting. The more of the above newsworthiness criteria an event fulfils, the bigger its media potential and the probability of our reading it in the newspaper. Following the imperative of the above criteria, journalists produce pieces of news about disasters and dramas, extraordinary happenings and sentimental providence.

Analysis of some journalist practices reveals that a media report, or 'socially constructed reality,' may be different from reality (Croteau, Hoynes 2000, Shoemaker, Reese 1996, Kellner 2003, Sparks, Tulloch 2000). It is clear that journalists, under the flag of their 'professional ideology,' are motivated to emphasize unusual and dramatic elements in their work.

In order to better understand the mechanisms of news construction, it is important to pause and consider the 'production process' itself. If media presented raw events as they had been collected and recorded, it would offer to consumers only a peculiar mixture of chaotic and unconnected fragments (we have witnessed a similar situation recently with American journalists reporting from the Iraqi battlefield). The

media offer people help with orienting themselves in the bewildering world of events. Not only the media identify events, they also sort them in a comprehensible social context. This process of identification and contextualization aims at attaching some sense to fragments of everyday events.

We will now take a closer look at how is the 'professional ideology' of journalists reflected in real life, specifically in reporting about Chinese migrants in the Czech Republic between 1992 and 2002. Unlike in most countries of Western Europe, where the first wave of immigrants from China had been largely ignored and earned the stereotypical label of the 'invisible minority,' their recent arrival in Central and Eastern Europe stirred considerable attention in the local media. In the Czech press, first articles about Asian immigrants appeared as early as the beginning of the 1990s. Apart from the better known Vietnamese, who had been coming to the former Czechoslovakia since the 1970s based on international agreements, the media bestowed a great deal of attention on new immigrants from China.

A semiotic analysis of the media image of Chinese migrants shows that journalists almost always follow the above indicated professional principles. As foreigners, the Chinese are interesting for the media only when they fulfill the criteria of unconventionality, surprise, drama and right timing. As the Media Tenor' justly observed, successful foreigners are not really newsworthy for most of media outlets. Their success must be therefore made more dramatic and unconventional for Czech readers to be interested.

First articles about the Chinese in the Czech Republic contained sensational elements and at the same time attempted to instigate apprehension in the Czech public. There were speculations about the rapidly growing number of new arrivals from China, the possibility of a Chinatown being created in Prague, the impenetrability of the Chinese community or the burgeoning crime rate.² Although for the most part, characterizations of Chinese migrants had been based only on superficial notions and unfounded assumptions motivated by efforts to boost the value of 'news,' some of these artificially construed characterizations relatively quickly became a fixture on the Czech majority's collective consciousness. Many schemes created and popularized by the Czech media were remarkably similar to cultural stereotypes concerning Chinese immigrants that had been spreading at the beginning of the 20th century in the United States and later also in Western Europe.

Aside from resurrecting stale old stereotypes, the Czech society begun to create and nourish its own stereotypes about the individual migrant groups. For example, successful Chinese businessmen were presented by the Czech media as suspicious characters who made money through illegal activities. Efforts to strengthen media attractiveness led to accusations that the Chinese are engaged in money laundering (so far, no journalist has revealed or proved anything in this respect), people traf-

² *China in Prague*. Mladý svět, 1993, No. 30. Němeček, T.: *The Chinese are in Prague! So what?* Mladý svět, 1994, No 44. Vondra, V.: *Chinatown in Prague? Týden*, 1994, No. 4.

ficking, bribery and tax evasion.³ In their search for sensation, the so called investigative journalists did not hesitate to make up stories about the Chinese mafia and organized crime.⁴ Not only were pieces of information distorted and statements made by Chinese immigrants manipulated – reporting about the topic was often the product of pure imagination. Some excessively creative journalists decided to let their imagination fly so much as to totally lose touch with reality.

As evidenced by an installment of the TV series *Na vlastní oči* (“With our own eyes”) about the “Chinese mafia in the Czech Republic,” the fact that the reporter saw nothing with his own eyes did not hold him back from making up the whole story. Hollow space, the result of a lack of decent footage, was filled by the reporter with comic figures of “Chinese criminals.” The monstrosity of the “Chinese mafia” was demonstrated by a recording of an oblivious martial arts master who had been told that a film about his fighting style and life in Prague was being filmed. After finding out that the footage had been exploited in a TV show about the Chinese mafia, the martial arts master asked the reporter to apologize. After a week, the reporter uttered a few evasive words on air, which, however, sounded more like another insult than an apology.⁵

³ The Chinese in Prague, *Respekt*, 27 February 1995. Scams used to import tons of poor-quality textiles, *Právo*, 4 January 1999. In focus tax evasion and market vendors, *Slovo*, 14 January 2000. Dangerous snakeheads, *Reflex*, 29 June 2000. The Chinese in our country, *Magazín Práva*, 4 July 2002. China, China, China, *Týden*, 10 June 2002. The Vietnamese community is in a similar position, often being accused of tax evasion or of causing social and cultural problems. For example, this was the case in an installment of the TV series *AKTA* aired on 22 October 1996 by TV Premiéra or in the article *Czech-Vietnamese coexistence is full of quarrels*, *Lidové noviny*, 19 October 2002.

⁴ *China in Prague*, *Mladý svět*, No. 30, 1993. Reports that the Hong Kong triads were moving to Prague had been officially confirmed by the Ministry of Interior’s spokesman during the evening news on TV NOVA aired on 21 August 1996. Misleading stereotypes about the Chinese triads in the Czech Republic also found their way into Miroslav Nožina’s *Chinese Triads* published by Inforservis on 11 December 2002 (www.infoservis.net). It is necessary to note that some so called experts and government officials have been also known for similar flights of imagination.

⁵ In the apology, the reporter said that just like the comic figures, the Chinese martial arts master was not really a member of the Chinese mafia. Considering the fact that the comic figures hardly requested an apology for their appearance and their reputation and future engagement in comics in the Czech Republic was not jeopardized, we must ask the question what is the relationship between these figures and a real person whose name had been slandered in public. By its approach, TV NOVA demonstrated that the comic figures and the person in question are on the same level, repeating xenophobic attacks of the American press of more than one hundred years ago. Regardless of the fact that no Chinese mafia had been operating in the Czech Republic, the N station managed to create an alternative reality and air a show about this reality. *Chinese mafia in the Czech Republic*. *Na vlastní oči*, TV NOVA, June 2000.

Chinese restaurants have also fell victims of the Czech press. Unlike in Western Europe, where Chinese restaurants and fast food outlets were criticized in the past for alleged shortcomings in the area of hygiene, Chinese restaurants in the Czech Republic were instantaneously criminalized by the printed media. Again, this criticism was based on unfounded assumptions. Chinese restaurants had been repeatedly accused of money laundering without anyone ever presenting evidence, which was enough for the Czech public to embrace this stereotype so that nowadays, almost no one wonders about it or doubts its factualness.

The newsworthiness of crime is high. Murder, certainly the most attractive crime, gets an air of mystery when connected with Chinese immigrants, nourishing old Oriental fantasies and climbing one more step on the newsworthiness chart.⁶ News about the mafia, crime and secret conspiracies evoke threat, but also reaffirm the moral consensus of society. In his well-known study about mugging in 1970s England, Stuart Hall illustrated how the media constructed a ‘critical situation,’ feeding on it for two years. The main role was given to immigrants from the Caribbean – ‘socially inadapted’ and ‘dangerous’ individuals (Hall 1978). A media affair like that can give rise to moral panic in society and mobilize social action against evil represented by transgressors of common decency.⁷ The role of a scapegoat usually goes to a group of people who live outside of the society’s power structures and are different from the majority – immigrants, minorities or foreigners. Such media affairs often have nationalistic subtext, calling for an end to the inflow of immigrants and restoration of law and order in society.

It is not surprising in the light of this information that the media succeeded in making Czechs really fear immigration;⁸ to this fear, the Czech government responds by regularly toughening the rules for residency of foreigners. Immigration and related issues are also a great opportunity for populist politicians who hope that simple and swift solutions of the ‘crisis’ at hand will win them political points in the next election.

The comparison between media coverage of foreigners and reality is not very flattering for the media. As regards the Caribbean ‘criminals’ in the United Kingdom,

⁶ Massacre in Hostivař. *Večerník Praha*, 29 April 1996. Police looks for Chinese murderer. *Slovo Police*, 25 May 1996. Chinaman charged with murder MF Dnes, 1 February 1996. Chinese likely to have been strangled by a countryman and two prostitutes, *Plzeňský deník*, 16 September 1998. Three Chinese restaurant owners murdered, *Mladá fronta Dnes*, 11 October 1999. Businessman wanted to kill son’s friend, *Mladá fronta Dnes*, 23 June 1999. Prague: police arrests a Chinese murder suspect, *Mladá fronta Dnes*, 15 July 2002.

⁷ *Revealed: How UK media fuelled race prejudice*, Chronicle World, chronicleworld.org

⁸ In a 1996 national identity poll, 90 percent of Czechs said that the government should toughen measures against the inflow of illegal immigrants into the country. The arguments most often cited by those interviewed were fear of growing crime rate and high unemployment. Nedomová, Alena, Kostecký, Tomáš: National identity. *Sociologické texty*, No. 9, Institute of Sociology of the Czech Academy of Sciences, Prague 1996.

the affair started to live its own life independently of police statistics (the time of the most intensive media coverage of muggings was not the time of the highest number of muggings according to police statistics). Statistical data show that the number of crimes committed by foreigners in the Czech Republic is very low compared to the notoriety of foreigners in the media. The Chinese have not even made it to most of the police statistics because of their statistically negligible presence. However, regular coverage of 'Chinese crime' has made a big impression on the Czech public as evidenced by the continually deteriorating attitude towards Chinese immigrants. In public opinion polls, the Chinese together with the Vietnamese regularly rank at the bottom of the popularity chart.⁹

Since the mid-1990s and especially by the end of that decade, the Czech media have started to publish 'personal stories' that describe everyday life of Chinese immigrants. The image of a 'Chinese criminal' is complemented by the image of an industrious Chinese businessman, a hard-working Chinese student who speaks fluent Czech, and Chinese doctors who can cure diseases incurable by European medicine. Chinese businessmen were presented as "rich, well-educated and cultivated" people who speak fluent English and can be good neighbors to Czechs. People from China who were given the opportunity to speak in the Czech media characterized themselves as "gentle", "smart", "honest, strong, hard-working and understanding."¹⁰

The media could not let pass the opportunity to report on the efforts of Chinese farmers who tried to grow rice in Southern Moravia.¹¹ This story had accumulated a fairly big media potential thanks to its peculiarity, moment of surprise (the Chinese and rice in the Moravian country) and also due to the fact that it offered the opportunity to follow up on the whole matter (would they succeed?). Lately, the Czech media have been partially trying to develop positive stereotypes of immigrants from China and Vietnam in a way that is similar to the 1960s American discourse, which attached to all immigrants from Asia the problematic label of a 'model minority.' In spite of these tendencies, however, Asians were designated as undesired

⁹ According to a research conducted by the Institute of International Relations, the unacceptability of the Chinese and Vietnamese among Czech respondents grew between 1994 and 1996 by 4 percent, which is a higher growth of intolerance than for any other ethnic group. *Public opinion. The most disliked include the Roma, Chinese and Vietnamese*, Právo, 13 December 1996.

¹⁰ Chinese therapy, Právo, 5 March 1998. Chinese don't mind, Mladý svět, 13 January 1999. In Hluboká, Chinese start to treat patients, Mladá fronta Dnes, 29 January 2001. Mr Li has a problem, Lidové noviny, 19 October 2001. Czech Chinese and Chinese Czechs, Hospodářské noviny, 14 – 16 April 2000. Chinese in Prague! So what?, Mladý svět, No. 44, 1994. The sign of the dragon, Reflex, No. 29, 1993. Name like a sang, Magazín Lidových novin, 23 August 2002.

¹¹ *Chinese try to grow rice in Moravia*, ČTK, 5 June 2000. *Chinese are growing rice in Slovácko*, Právo, 9 June 2000. Apart from a number of articles in the press, the Chinese rice farmers made it to the evening news on the Czech Television (16 May 2000).

immigrants in the recent debate about a pilot migration project developed by the Ministry of Labor.¹²

Led by 'professional ideology,' the Czech media selected, identified and contextualized fragmented news and events in order to produce an interesting image of the Chinese and Vietnamese designed for public consumption. Majority of the Czech society accepted stereotypes that are based on juggling with numbers and dramatized versions of events without any questions or critical evaluation. The media have succeeded in rousing the Czech public from quiet lethargy by emphasizing potential dangers, exaggerating the real number of Asian immigrants and ignoring official statistics. Journalists – limited by institutionalized practices and routine working procedures and pressured to produce media-friendly, attractive stories – have constructed a skewed image of foreigners, which may sell well but often has no relation to reality. The media have let pass the opportunity to develop a sound platform for intercultural communication. According to the social identity theory, accurate stereotypes that are close to reality can help harmonize the relationship between different groups of people (Taylor 1994). On the contrary, stereotypes of foreigners that are based on formal inaccuracies, generalization, simplification and illusory connotations (such as Chinese-crime) become an obstacle for successful communication between people from different cultures. However, not all is lost: stereotypes are not everlasting and their distortion can be corrected. It will take many years.

¹² A prototypical unsuccessful/undesired immigrant was described as a single Asian male with no children who did not complete secondary school and cannot speak Czech. Zavadilová, T.: *Government wants to attract educated foreigners*. Lidové noviny, 11 January 2002. Kučera, P., Zavadilová, T. *Špidla defines ideal foreign worker*. Lidové noviny, 11 January 2002. Fisher, P.: *Immigration laboratory*. Lidové noviny, 11 January 2002.

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