

Albert Manke

Coping with Discrimination and Exclusion

Experiences of Free Chinese Migrants in the Americas
in a Transregional and Diachronic Perspective

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When we were first favored with the
invitations of your ship-captains to
emigrate to California [...], we could
hardly have calculated that we would
now be the objects of your excessive
hatred [...].

Every nation under heaven mocks at
you. Hence it is not alone we Chinese
that suffer, but blessings are lost
thereby to your own land.
—*Pun Chi in Speer (1870, 596, 602)*

Introduction¹

Xenophobia and racism are currently relevant and worrying, not only in the United States of America and Europe. This often manifests itself in hatred toward ‘undesirable’ immigrants. The public discourse of populists tends to justify this aversion by claiming that the migrants themselves are to be held responsible for this very aversion and not those who are aggressive toward and reject them. Prejudices based on supposed differences or cultural, ethnic or religious inferiority are the breeding ground for dynamics of discrimination and exclusion that not only infringe upon the human rights of immigrants, they are also harmful for the receiving societies and their economies. Repressive policies of ‘zero tolerance’ or a ‘heavy hand’ toward immigrants result in the criminalization of immigrants that by itself keeps fomenting the increase of xenophobia and racism.

1 This study is based on previously published literature and sources and shall provide a preliminary framework for my larger research project about Chinese migrant networks in the Americas during the Exclusion Era. Currently conducted at the University of California, Berkeley, this project will include new archival research on Chinese migration and the multiple ways of thinking the Americas otherwise through informal networks like Chinese secret societies.

During the Cold War there was a decrease in racist and xenophobic policies and practices in developed countries, both within societies as well as in the design of migration regimes. However, since the 1990s there has been a new rise of racist and xenophobic attitudes that are now coupled with populist policies of the right and far-right. These tendencies have a direct impact on the formulation of exclusive migration policies and the renovation and deepening of the pre-existing structures of xenophobic discrimination.

Attitudes like these have been fostered by the heyday of neo-liberalism, growing inequality and economic crises, have led people to experience the contact with new generations of immigrants fleeing from unlivable conditions as culture shock, increasing estrangement between people.

Nowadays, more attention is being paid to the rise of xenophobia, racism, and populism while the cycle of discrimination of migrants is interwoven with the social question and the decline of living conditions in the countries of origins in the globalized world (Faist 2018; McLeman, Schade, and Faist 2016).² A number of ideas have emerged in order to counteract this disturbing situation and stop the cycle of xenophobic hatred, such as a global network to create an operative framework that helps formulate policies against xenophobia when developing migration policies (Achiume 2018).

While there are now international organizations such as the United Nations that have the power to raise awareness about these problems and exert a certain amount of pressure on government that do not follow through with their promises in this regard, these types of mechanisms had not yet been established in the nineteenth century. The mistreatment of immigrants posed more of a bilateral problem between two nation-states and only gained attention when incidents greatly affected international relations, especially commercial

2 Furthermore, there are three key aspects that contribute to the decline in living conditions and foment an aversion toward immigrants: economic inequality (in the societies of both the country of origin as well as the receiving country), climate change and armed conflict (or higher levels of violence).