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global dis:connect

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What does a comparative look at the Pacific cities of San Francisco and Vladivostok reveal about the history of the Chinese diaspora?

The problem

By comparing San Francisco and Vladivostok, I ask how Chinese migrants experienced similar forms of exclusion and developed forms of self-organization on the peripheries of two very different states in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The comparison highlights the Pacific as a shared migration space while showing how distinct political, social, and urban contexts shaped the experiences and possibilities of Chinese migrants.

Core interest

The project examines how anti-Chinese stereotypes emerged, circulated, and sometimes disappeared over time. It traces how government authorities, the press, and urban communities constructed negative images of Chinese migrants, how these images influenced political decisions and urban policies, and how Chinese migrants responded to exclusion and sought to preserve their own agency.

global dis:connect

Ideas about the ‘criminal’, ‘immoral’, or ‘diseased’ Chinese migrant circulated across the Pacific and connected seemingly distant cities. Yet these global discourses acquired distinct meanings in San Francisco and Vladivostok. Local institutions and communities selectively appropriated and amplified them, embedding broader patterns of Sinophobia in specific political, social, and urban contexts. The project thus explores both the global circulation of anti-Chinese ideas and their local dis:connections.

Preliminary results

The sources show that anti-Chinese stereotypes circulated widely, but were deployed differently in different local contexts. Chinese archival sources also reveal that migrants were not simply passive victims of exclusion. They developed diverse strategies to protect their communities and preserve spaces of autonomy. Chinatowns were shaped both by exclusion and by migrants’ own efforts at self-organiszation, even as their spatial concentration could reinforce existing stigmas.

Vladivostok’s Chinese Quarter ‘Millionka‘, 1927
(State Archive of Primorskii Region, Vladivostok)