

Chinese Migration to America:
Changes in Policy, Diaspora and in Returns

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The past century and a half has been witness to two large scale waves of migration of Chinese to America. Migration policy in the United States and in China has played an important role in shaping migratory flows between the two nations. However, these two waves have significantly different migrant profiles and have provided different returns to China. The purpose of this poster is to highlight major migration policies from both nations and the key differences in the type of work that the migrants engaged in and to argue that new forms of migration have emerged which are providing superior returns to China.

In the mid 1800s, labor in America was in high demand and Chinese immigrants played a significant role in America's westward expansion. Large numbers of Chinese aided in the construction of the Transcontinental Railroad, worked in mines and provided laundry services. However, the end of the gold rush and the American Civil War resulted in fewer job opportunities. Anti-Chinese sentiment grew as Americans increasingly found themselves in direct competition for jobs with Chinese immigrants. The struggle came to a head in 1882 when the Chinese Exclusion Act was passed effectively eliminating Chinese immigration to America.

Almost one century later, a second wave of Chinese began migrating to America. However, this wave of migrants engaged in a wider array of jobs, with many also seeking

educational opportunities. Differences between the waves of migrants can largely be explained by policy changes in each country as well as changes in the countries' relative economic positioning. Consequently, today's Chinese migrant is engaging in a new type of migration and is able to provide different returns to China.

The theoretical focus of this poster will be on new forms of migration and capital development. Specifically the concept of *virtual migration*, or the ability of workers to contribute to production without moving in physical space, will be introduced to explain how today's Chinese migrants are able to contribute deeper and broader forms of capital (Aneesh, 2006). For example, in the past, the most prevalent type of returns came in the form of financial capital or remittances. The transfer of human capital, if expanded at all, was often not realized until the migrant returned home. Today, human capital is as mobile as financial capital and neither requires physical migration. This new transnational flow of all forms of capital is offering China greater returns from its diaspora.

Data for this poster is based on census data drawn from the Integrated Public Use Microdata Series (IPUMS) USA database and on existing secondary data regarding migrant returns to their native country. IPUMS-USA is a publicly accessible database of nationally representative samples of America's decennial census. In general, the variables from each wave of the census have been harmonized, making data comparable across time. The variables of specific interest in this study include sex, age, state of residence, level of education and occupation. Various scholars have documented the contribution of the Chinese diaspora at a given point in time; however, few have looked comparatively across time periods or studied the implications of virtual migration.

It is expected that the findings from this research will show first, that the profile of the migrants in the two time periods were different and second, that the mechanism of virtual migration is playing a significant role in changing how China's migrants are contributing to that society without physically returning to China. As an example of how the two waves differed, the earlier wave consisted almost entirely of males (96%) living predominantly in western states (with 70% living in just California, today's Hawaii, Oregon and Montana). Today, males account for a more balanced 47% of the population and the states listed above contain only 35% of the diaspora. With regards to the change in returns to China, many immigrants have established businesses in America that are engaging directly in trade and economic development with China. On the academic side, many Chinese in American are collaborating with colleagues back in China. These activities facilitate the transfer of human capital as new methods and processes are being shared between partners.

In summary, migration from China to America has changed significantly over the past century and a half. Bolstered by various policies, the type of individual migrating is different as are their patterns of migration. These differences are resulting in new returns to China.

References

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