The Globalization of the Nineteenth Century:

Borders and the Reimagining of the World

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In my recent book, *The Chinese Question*, I wrote that the Chinese exclusion laws, enacted across the Anglo-American world in the late nineteenth century, were not extraneous to the period's globalization of capitalism but integral to it. These laws (passed between 1875 and 1910 in the United States, Australia, Canada, New Zealand, and South Africa) were a radical correction to existing norms of free trade and free migration. (Those norms were themselves established with the demise of mercantilism, the slave trade, and assisted migration in the early-mid nineteenth century.) Free trade and free migration were necessary for the great demands of capitalism, specifically, international trade, finance, and labor mobility to the core industrializing regions of the world.

Anti-Chinese sentiment originated in the settler colonies of empires—the British empire and the United States, which was a continental empire before it acquired overseas possessions. The discoveries of gold on the frontiers of empires were enormously consequential in myriad ways: at the international scale, for the power of Britain and the U.S. as creditor nations; and at the local level of gold-rush societies, for accelerated economic development and rapid immigration and settlement, more or less completing the dispossession of indigenous peoples. From the perspective of the globalization of the late nineteenth century, settler colonialism congealed the frontiers of empires.[1]

The process of congealment augured the rise of a politics of racial nationalism and nation-state formations of white men's countries—so-called openly throughout the British settler colonies and more obliquely but no less true in the United States. Chinese exclusion was neither inevitable or

[1] I take this concept from Jürgen Osterhammel, *The Transformation of the World: A Global History of the Nineteenth Century* (2014), chapter 7.

achieved without contestation: British imperial prerogatives in diplomacy and trade with China resisted settler colonial demands and the legacies of the slave emancipation and reconstruction in the U.S. deterred sectional politics from the Pacific coast. But the exclusionists ultimately prevailed. Their achievements constituted the leading edge of a trend of nation-state formations based on a new border imaginary that severed the connection between free trade and free migration. In its stead they established national laws and policies that continued to uphold free trade while regulating or restricting immigration and emigration. The trend would continue, reaching its apogee in the First World War and with the erection of crustaceous immigration and citizenship laws in the United States and Europe in the 1920s.[2] There was a long history of trading and labor emigration from the southern coastal regions of China to Southeast Asia, predating the incursions of European colonialism. But in the nineteenth century Chinese ventured much farther from home, compelled by both need and opportunity, as indentured workers to New World plantation colonies (notably Cuba) and as voluntary emigrants to the Anglo-American settler colonies, attracted first by the gold rushes. Their emigrations were influenced by the intrusions of European colonialism into China in the aftermath of the Opium Wars (1838-42 and 1856-60) but not entirely controlled by it, as China was never formally colonized by another power.[3] Chinese labor emigration thus differed from indentured labor from India, which the British recruited, directed, and regulated as part of a global strategy that used labor from one part of the empire to satisfy needs in another. (The British also used that strategy in the early 19th century to underwrite emigration from Ireland and England to Australia to provide labor after the decline of convict transportation.) In the 1870s and 1880s in both the United States and Australia, proponents of Chinese exclusion argued that unchecked

[2] On U.S. see Mae Ngai, *Impossible Subjects* (2004); in Europe, John Torpey, *The Invention of the Passport* (2018) and of course Hannah Arendt, *Origins of Totalitarianism* (1958).

[3] It should be noted that China unilaterally ended the coolie trade to Cuba and Peru in the 1880s on account of the cruel treatment of Chinese indentured workers there, something that it could do because of its status as an independent nation.

Chinese immigration threatened to overrun them with "coolies," a racial shorthand that associated Chinese with slavery and indenture. In fact, Chinese emigrants were not indentured or otherwise unfree; Chinese emigration to the settler colonies disturbed Euro-Americans precisely because it was not contracted or indentured (and hence regulated and potentially restricted) but free and voluntary (and hence potentially without limit). Coolieism was a myth that served racial-nationalist politics by positioning Chinese as racially unassimilable and unfit for democratic citizenship.

Chinese exclusion's aim to keep the yellow race out of white men's countries was part of larger imaginary that required the containment of China. Having forcibly gained access to Chinese port cities, favored-nation trading and extraterritorial rights after the Opium Wars, the western powers held a typical colonial attitude towards China: that is, they desired China as a market for foreign trade, investment, and Christian conversion but regarded Chinese people as undesirable as immigrants and potential citizens in the West. The Opium Wars had rudely introduced China into an international world order based on principles of Westphalian sovereignty and free trade, but as an unequal and marginal player. Still, China was not a formal colony and could not be contained by the usual methods, with its economy, monetary system, and the mobility of its people controlled by the colonizer, as in India or Indochina. In this context, Chinese emigrants to the West posed an imagined threat that China might overtake the rest of the world by virtue of its large population and its racial competitive advantage, not just as laborers but as capitalists, as well. A British writer from South Africa wrote in 1906 that Chinese were the "hardest-headed businessmen in the world, older by several centuries than the Indians; their industry is proverbial, their plodding patience with small profits inimitable— all very good qualities in themselves but dangerous to introduce into a land occupied already by two different races, of which one is too uncivilized, and the other too impatient, to exercise them."[4] That perspective was part of a white supremacist trend that warned about the

[4] I. Dobbie, "Chinese Labour," *Macmillan's* (August 1906): 787-800.

"passing of the great race," "the Asiatic danger in the colonies," and "the rising tide of color."[5] Chinese exclusion laws in the late nineteenth century were of a piece with a general reorganization of global migration patterns. Chinese emigrant energies, excluded from the West, redirected to regions closer to home, to Southeast Asia and north Asia, responding to labor and trading opportunities emanating from colonial economic development (British and French rubber plantations in Southeast Asia; Japanese and Russian mining and railroad construction in Manchuria). Smaller numbers of Chinese emigrated to Latin America after the United States closed to them, but racial nationalism turned against them there, as well, with race riots and legislation that sought nation-building immigration from Europe, not Asia.[6]

The British purposefully directed emigration away from the United States (which had been the premier destination) to the settler colonies (Canada, Australia, etc. now called dominions to signal their autonomy over local affairs, including immigration restriction of Chinese and other Asiatics) as part of a grand recalibration of their importance to the empire. The United States and Argentina recruited labor for industrialization and urbanization from new regions in southern and eastern Europe. The age of mass labor migration (150 million between 1850-1940 if one includes 20th century intra-Asian regional migrations[7]) was a conglomeration of various chain migrations directed and sustained by border mechanisms that were positive and negative, formal and informal. They involved legal restrictions as well as the relentless efforts by labor recruiters and employers, steamship and railroad companies, and the families of former immigrants themselves. Chinese

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[5] Madison Grant, *The Passing of the Great Race* (1916); Lawrence Neame, *The Asiatic Danger in the Colonies* (1907): Lothrop Stoddard, *The Rising Tide of Color Against White World Supremacy (*1920).

[6] Eveyln Hu-Dehart, "Indispensable Enemy or Convenient Scapegoat? A Critical Examination of Sinophobia in Latin America and the Caribbean, 1870s-1920s," in *The Chinese in Latin America and the Caribbean*, ed. Walton Look Lai and Chee-Beng Tong (2010); Nancy Ng Tam, "A Transpacific Caribbean" (unpub. PhD diss., Columbia Univ. 2021); André K. Deckrow, "Friendship Across the Antipodes: Japanese in Brazil" (unpub. PhD diss, Columbia Univ. 2019)

[7] Adam McKeown, "Global Migration," *Journal of World History* (June 2004): 155-89.

exclusion did not directly produce these myriad chains of migration but neither were they merely coincidental. They were all part of a new way of imagining, organizing, and governing the world.