

Article Summary

for full version, see: Sören Urbansky: „A Chinese Plague. Sinophobic Discourses in Vladivostok, San Francisco, and Singapore“, in: *Bulletin of the German Historical Institute* no. 64 (2019), pp. 75–92

The article examines the relationship between Sinophobia, urban segregation, public health, and representations of disease in three Pacific port cities, Singapore, San Francisco, and Vladivostok, from the late nineteenth to the early twentieth century. It focuses on the widespread portrayal of Chinese migrants as inherently unhygienic, overcrowded, morally degenerate, and particularly susceptible to or responsible for infectious diseases. Such representations formed part of the broader transnational discourse of the “yellow peril,” which associated Chinese migration with racial, social, economic, and demographic threats.

A comparative analysis of the three cities demonstrates that these perceptions emerged in different political and colonial contexts but shared striking similarities. In all three cases, Chinese migrants became concentrated in densely populated urban districts that were increasingly identified as Chinatowns. Overcrowding and unsanitary housing conditions provided material grounds for public-health concerns, yet these conditions were commonly interpreted as expressions of supposedly inherent Chinese characteristics. Municipal neglect, discriminatory regulation, poverty, and exploitative housing arrangements were consequently obscured in favor of racial explanations.

Disease outbreaks further reinforced these associations. Cholera, plague, and other infectious diseases became closely linked in public discourse to Chinese neighborhoods, while quarantines, sanitary inspections, and proposed expulsions disproportionately targeted Chinese residents. In San Francisco, the plague outbreak of 1900 turned Chinatown into a major object of medical and political scrutiny. In Vladivostok, concerns about Chinese migration and disease intensified during the cholera epidemics of the 1890s and the Manchurian plague of 1911. Similar concerns appeared in Singapore, where the spatial organization and density of Chinese settlements generated recurring debates about public health.

The comparison highlights both the transnational circulation and the local variability of Sinophobic ideas. Rather than treating the “yellow peril” as a fixed ideology originating in a single national context, the article approaches it as a fluid discourse whose meanings were shaped by particular urban, political, and demographic circumstances. It argues that the association of Chinese communities with disease cannot be understood separately from processes of segregation and unequal urban governance. The perceived “Chinese plague” was therefore less a reflection of epidemiological realities than a racialized interpretation of structural inequalities in the three Pacific port cities.