Chinese Migration to America: Changes in Policy, Diaspora and in Returns
Seth Werner
Minnesota Population Center, University of Minnesota

Abstract

The past century and a half has been witness to 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 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.

Timeline of Major Migration Policies and Events

Chinese Born People Living in the U.S.A.

Age Structure of Chinese Born in the U.S.A. 1850 and 2000

Chinese Exclusion Act abolished
Immigration Act

June Fourth and 9/11

June Fourth, 1989 was the culmination of a pro-democracy student movement that ended in bloodshed as the government sought to clear Tiananmen Square of the protestors. The American public's response was an Examination of its immigration policies. As a result of this response, the United States implemented an immigration policy in 1990 that provided for entry of up to 20,000 Chinese workers per year. This policy was subsequently reformed in the 1990s to allow entry of more than 100,000 Chinese workers per year.

New Patterns of Migration

As most migration theories were developed in an original context of migration (A), they fail to provide insight on the process of emigration (B): China's transformation over the past thirty years has been unprecedented. China today is qualitatively different than it was thirty, twenty or even ten years ago. A virtue would be understood about the Chinese that exists today if only relying on conceptions of the Chinese that they had held. But these conceptions are irrelevant. This reality is only augmented by new information from external sources (Friedland, Finder, media, etc.) and personal experiences through visits back to China.

Not only has the place changed but the process of migration itself has changed. Around 2000 did Chinese begin migrating to America and other countries with the virtualization of communication, a process which has allowed new forms of migration. As a result, migration to America is largely driven by young Chinese with strong personal and cultural ties to the United States. These migrants are likely to return to China, often multiple times, and may be the first in their families to return.

Conclusion

As China continues to transform, individual migrants are contributing in new and increasingly different ways. Contemporary Chinese migrants to the United States are older, constitute a wider range of occupations, and include a growing number of professionals. Furthermore, the number of Chinese living in the U.S. has increased significantly over the past decade, and the individuals returning to China are referred to as "seagulls" or "wobblers."