They take good care of their own persons, but their houses, children, cats and dogs are filthy in the extreme. The stench about their dwellings is almost unendurable to a European, and the cesspools and slimy ditches in their backyards would breed the cholera in the most salubrious climate in the world. While the Chinaman is cleansing the house of his employer and removing every particle of dirt with scrupulous care, his family at home are living in the most slovenly quarters, where vermin of a hundred species revel in luxurious nastiness. How they can go from neat stores or fine drawing-rooms where they are employed, to eat and sleep in these foul quarters is a mystery which I have yet to hear explained.1

The alleged dichotomy of cleanliness and filth of the Chinese in Singapore fascinated not only the American Baptist minister and writer Russell H. Conwell, who published this observation in his 1871 book on the question Why the Chinese Emigrate. Despite his damning verdict on their hygiene, he did not deem all Chinese characteristics negative. In comparison to the native Malayans, Conwell considered the Chinese valuable and indispensable parts of the colonial population in the Straits Settlements. Conwell, the first president of Temple University in Philadelphia, had made his observations of the Chinese during a tour to Asia and the American West Coast in the late 1860s.

Conwell’s words were echoed in other publications. Fifteen years later, in 1885, Willard B. Farwell quoted this very passage in a polemical report arguing that Conwell’s comment on the Chinese in Singapore “might with equal force and equal truth apply to the habits of the Chinese in San Francisco.”2 Farwell, himself a Massachusetts transplant who came to San Francisco during the Gold Rush at the age of twenty, was Chairman of the Board of Supervisors of San Francisco and was running for mayor. In his The Chinese at Home and Abroad, he described the filth, crowding and disease of the Chinese quarter in exaggerated terms. The report was published at a time when, fueled by political and economic motivations, attacks on the Chinese were at a

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2 Willard B. Farwell, The Chinese at Home and Abroad: Together with the Report of the Special Committee of the Board of Supervisors of San Francisco on the Condition of the Chinese Quarter of that City (San Francisco, 1885), 53-54.
height in California. Xenophobic pamphlets, essays, and other ostensibly factual but most often fictional accounts portrayed Chinese as inferior, diseased, morally degenerate and a peril to the purity of the white race.

The fear of Chinese people living within what many white inhabitants of San Francisco considered a “European” city was a phenomenon not unique to San Francisco and Singapore. St. Petersburg writer and publicist Mikhail G. Grebenshchikov, who served as secretary of the resettlement administration in Vladivostok in the mid-1880s, described the character of the Chinese residents in the Russian city on the Pacific in similar terms:

What is true is that the Chinese are not terribly clean. In the attic where the search was conducted, I found such dirt, compared to which even the slums of the Sennaia Square [in St. Petersburg] are samples of neatness. Bed linen is unfamiliar to the Chinese worker, he sleeps on the bare floor, on one or several animal skins or mats. Whole clouds of dust rose when the police ransacked their unpretentious lodge — quite obvious that the beds are never shaken out. … It is quite surprising that until now the Chinese dwellings have not become yet a source of contagion in Vladivostok. In the summer they infect with their foul smell the whole of Chinatown, which in hot weather you can only walk through by holding your nose.3

During the decades that followed, the negative perception of the Chinese did not change. For Vladimir V. Grave, Commissioner of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs in charge of the Amur expedition, the Chinese habits and lifestyle made coexistence of Europeans and Chinese in the Russian Far East impossible:

From early childhood, the habit of living in the mud, in terribly unsanitary conditions, in small, often extremely overcrowded dwellings, makes the Chinese indifferent to his environment. He neither understands the need to observe elementary sanitary rules, nor does he develop a feeling of disgust at all, like the fear of getting sick. The premises of the Chinese, especially at night, when they all return to their lodgings, consist of large boxes with shelves on which the yellow people sleep shoulder to shoulder. The dirt and smell in these rooms is unbearable.4

3 Mikhail G. Grebenshchikov, Putevye zapiski i vospominanii po Dal’nomu Vostoku (St. Petersburg, 1887), 113-114.
4 V. V. Grave, Kitaitsy, koreirty i iapontsy v Priamur’i: Trudy Amurskoi ekspeditsii, vol. 11 (St. Peters burg, 1912), 117.
In many cities on the Pacific Ocean, Chinese residents were perceived to be more culturally and socially threatening than other immigrant groups from Asia and beyond. When contemporary observers described the habits and living conditions of Chinese in the three Pacific port cities of Singapore, San Francisco and Vladivostok, they regularly relied on stereotypes of dirty and disease-breeding slums. Time and again Sinophobic demagogues depicted Chinese residents as inherently corrupted by their race and further soiled by an environment of filth. In the eyes of these authors, the Chinese clearly represented a threat to the moral and physical safety and security of the European inhabitants.

This article examines anti-Chinese attitudes in these three Pacific port cities from the late nineteenth to the early twentieth century. My translocal approach aims to identify similarities and differences in discrimination strategies against the Chinese diaspora. Focusing on housing conditions, hygiene and diseases, which were some of the most prevalent issues stirring Sinophobic sentiments in urban contexts, I will analyze anti-Chinese debates across the different localities on the Pacific coast. I shall argue that, despite striking similarities, forms of stigmatization were also heterogeneous.

I. A xenophobic discourse and its impact

Anti-Asian discourses and the concept of “yellow peril” are the subjects of numerous monographs. The vast majority of scholarship, however, remains narrowly grounded in one specific period and location — overwhelmingly in the United States at the turn of the twentieth century. Whereas the concept of the “yellow peril” is usually understood as having emerged at a particular historical and social juncture, my study of the localities under review here demonstrates that this concept is best understood not as a product of a specific locality but as part of an eminently elusive and fluid discourse that shaped understandings of identity and difference. A comparison of different localities allows for a more comprehensive insight into the processes underlying this discourse and its consequences for the coexistence of Chinese and European subjects.

5 This was, of course, not a purely Chinese phenomenon. Other immigrant groups were also perceived negatively by the mainstream societies. For negative perceptions of Italians and Mexicans in urban immigration centers of the United States, see Thomas A. Guglielmo, White on Arrival: Italians, Race, Color, and Power in Chicago, 1890-1945 (New York, 2003); Natalia Molina, Fit to be citizens? Public health and race in Los Angeles, 1879-1939 (Berkeley, 2006).

Obviously, the “yellow peril” is a concept tied to race and embedded in racial classifications originating in the West. The attribution of the color yellow to Asian populations emerged from the taxonomical attempts of eighteenth-century physicians, later reinforced by anthropologists. Though recent, this discourse did not emerge in a cultural vacuum but built on pre-existing imaginings of Asia as a mysterious, dangerous, and inherently alien continent. Associated with violent invaders or deadly diseases, Asia has long served as Europe’s cultural Other. At times, this sense of unbridgeable otherness also made Asia an object of fetishistic fascination for Westerners: a world of sophistication and exoticism, reflected in certain objects and architectural styles inspired by Chinese forms, such as the “chinoiserie” that became fashionable during the Enlightenment.

The “yellow peril” emerged as a global discourse in the late nineteenth century. In the United States the concept was initially deployed to express hostility to Chinese immigration; then, particularly after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in December 1941, the concept shifted and was primarily used to target Japanese immigrants and their American-born children. The softening of (some) negative stereotypes can be seen in the way Chinese residents of San Francisco were perceived during World War II, along with a change in attitude towards Asian Americans in the United States in recent decades. Throughout the Cold War, American anti-Asian sentiments nevertheless surfaced in the form of political fears of China, North Korea and Vietnam. Later on, in the 1980s, “yellow peril” discourses referred to a prosperous Japan. In the days of China’s rapidly growing economy and increasing military power, the “yellow peril” has re-emerged as the “China threat.”

This history of the concept of the “yellow peril” followed a different pattern in Russia. There the “yellow peril” first took shape as fear of a tide of Chinese immigrants inundating Siberia and the Russian Far East at the end of the nineteenth century. Russian fears over military confrontations further fueled such anxieties during the war with Japan in 1904/05. When Japan occupied China’s Northeast...
in 1931, alarm about the possibility of military invasion prevailed, as it did when China, previously a communist ally, was reborn as an enemy of the Soviet Union in the 1960s. With the USSR’s collapse in 1991, the meaning of the “yellow peril” in Russia changed once again. As it had a century earlier, the concept reflected demographic and economic fears of Chinese flooding into Russia’s eastern periphery.15

In Southeast Asia the anti-Chinese discourse followed yet another course. The region has a long history of Sinophobic sentiments closely related to colonialism and a long history of Chinese immigration. Beginning in the eighteenth century, Spanish, Dutch, and other colonial powers introduced anti-Chinese laws and subjected some Chinese to massacres and expulsions. In subsequent periods, cohabitation was complicated by increased inequalities in distribution of wealth, majority-minority conflicts and the birth of national identities during the process of decolonization.16

Previous studies have interpreted anti-Asian sentiments mainly through the contents of debates on the “yellow peril” in newspapers, journals, and novels.17 With few exceptions,18 this scholarship has closely analyzed the production of such propaganda. Yet little has been done so far to investigate its actual impact on the everyday lives of Asian migrants overseas. In my research, therefore, the development of anti-Asian stereotypes serves as point of departure for investigating how xenophobic fears shaped areas of conflict between Asian immigrants and white majorities, and how such fears determined how the Asian diaspora fought back against racial stigmatization.

Hitherto neglected dynamics between anti-Asian discourses, actual conflicts in the public sphere and responses to xenophobic sentiments by members of the diaspora are best explored through a comparative analysis of cities with a high concentration of Asian migrants overseas. In my research, therefore, the development of anti-Asian stereotypes serves as point of departure for investigating how xenophobic fears shaped areas of conflict between Asian immigrants and white majorities, and how such fears determined how the Asian diaspora fought back against racial stigmatization.


16 Gungwu Wang, China and the Chinese overseas (Singapore, 1991); Sunil S. Amrith, Migration and diaspora in modern Asia (Cambridge, 2011), 38-46.


18 Mary Ting Yi Lui, Chinatown trunk mystery: Murder, miscegenation, and other dangerous encounters in turn-of-the-century New York City (Princeton, 2005).
Historically, hygiene, miscegenation and crime have been among the most salient issues raised by Sinophobic discourses. A comparative historical study can identify common causes and advocates of the “yellow peril” syndrome across the different localities on the Pacific coast. It can distinguish the variations of Sinophobic sentiments in Singapore, Vladivostok and San Francisco as well as trajectories of decline in perceptions of Chinese as a “yellow peril.” Such translocal comparisons can illustrate how multilayered and palimpsestic the negative narratives have been.

Chinese began to migrate in great numbers to Southeast Asia in the early nineteenth century, to the American West Coast in the mid-nineteenth century and to the Russian Far East in the latter half of the nineteenth century. Unlike in the capital cities of Russia, the United States and the British Empire, in these Pacific regions the “yellow peril” did not represent an abstract phenomenon of the media but a discourse that affected people’s everyday lives. The Chinese emigrations to Southeast Asia, the American West and the Russian Far East bear striking similarities, particularly regarding the timing and patterns of migration, the role that the Chinese played in certain labor-intensive areas of employment and the organization of ethnic community life and family structures. Vladivostok, San Francisco and Singapore are particularly suitable cases for a comparative study of the “yellow peril” because all three Chinatowns were densely populated urban areas, highly influential in the history and culture of ethnic Chinese immigrants, and predominantly inhabited by males who worked as shopkeepers, restaurant owners, small traders, and hired workers.

These common qualities had consequences for the perceptions of their inhabitants. The racial branding of Chinatowns as locations of the “yellow peril” was closely related to the spatial concentration and segregation of the Chinese population. Within the Chinatowns, Chinese residents maintained aspects of their native culture that were crucial for the construction of racial difference. Formal and informal efforts to marginalize the residents of these quarters produced Chinatowns that quickly came to be seen as physical evidence of immutable racial characteristics: contagion, disease, pollution and, due to the high male population, moral vice.

Yet despite such striking similarities, anxieties were also heterogeneous. Thus, the emergence of the “yellow peril” discourse across various regional and national contexts cannot be assumed to be

19 Philip A. Kuhn, Chinese Among Others: Emigration in Modern Times (Lanham, 2008); Larin, Migranty, 19-69 passim.
consistent with regard to the fears expressed or the stereotypes conveyed. The discourse was inherently diverse, multi-layered and contradictory. Owing to these circumstances, Chinese immigrants addressed and challenged stigmatization and stereotyping in different ways.

II. Ethnic ghettos

Singapore, San Francisco, and Vladivostok, all of which quickly became centers of the Chinese diaspora, shared certain settlement patterns. The British colony of Singapore is an example of an organized variant of an ethnic Chinese ghetto. Modern Singapore, an island at the southern tip of the Malay Peninsula, was founded in 1819 as a trading post of the British East India Company. Colonial administrators assigned certain areas in town to different ethnic groups. Chinese were evenly divided according to different provinces of origin, nourishing parallel societies within the city already in the original settlement pattern dictated by the statesman and founder of Singapore and British Malaya, Thomas Stamford Raffles, in 1822.20

In 1826 Singapore became part of the Straits Settlements and quickly developed into an important transit hub between China and Europe with a population of about 225,000 people in 1900. Travelers often noted the stark differences between Singapore’s English, Chinese, Malay, and Indian quarters: “The English district is laid out in squares, decorated with trees: the Chinese town is a busy part; the streets are wide, and the houses all uniform, covered with a yellow wash, giving them the appearance of stucco: arcades supported by pillars are in front, which offer good protection from the rain and sun. The internal appearance of each house is not so flattering as the outside might lead one to expect. I caught frequent glimpses, en passant, of the crowded, filthy rooms, peculiar to the natives.”21 Until well into the twentieth century, Chinese would settle in these central quarters adjacent to both banks of the Singapore River.

In 1846 the United States annexed California from Mexico. Yerba Buena, a small settlement near the northeastern end of the peninsula, was renamed San Francisco a year later. The city’s population mushroomed during the Gold Rush, and San Francisco continued to grow even after the boom had ended, particularly once the transcontinental railroad was completed in 1869. By the end of the nineteenth century more than 300,000 people lived in the city. In San Francisco, as in other cities across the United States, a Chinatown had sprung up since the 1850s in what was by and large

21 Julius Berncastle, A Voyage to China: Including a Visit to the Bombay Presidency; The Mahratta Country; The Cave Temples of Western India, Singapore, the Straits of Malacca and Sunda, and the Cape of Good Hope, (London, 1850), 18-19.
a spontaneous process. The first Chinese took up residence, rented or built houses for accommodation and opened shops and restaurants. As time progressed, newly arriving migrants from the Middle Kingdom gradually occupied nearby streets. In the late 1870s, municipal administrators succeeded in assigning the Chinese a specific area, in which they had previously congregated. The blocks adjacent to Grant Avenue and Stockton Street became the one geographical region in the city, deeded by the city government and private property owners, that allowed Chinese people to inherit and inhabit dwellings. This area would remain the key place of settlement for Chinese residents until the first decades of the twentieth century.\footnote{Charlotte Brooks, Alien Neighbors, Foreign Friends: Asian Americans, Housing, and the Transformation of Urban California (Chicago, 2009), 21-24; Chalsa M. Loo, Chinatown: Most Time, Hard Time (New York, 1991), 39-45.}

In Vladivostok and other cities in the Russian Far East, by contrast, attempts by municipal officials to regulate Chinese settlement were doomed from the beginning.\footnote{Tat’iana N. Sorokina, “Kitaiskie kvartaly dal’nevostochnykh gorodov (kon. XIX-nach. XX vv.),” Diaspery 2-3 (2001): 55-75; Tat’iana Z. Pozniak, Inostrannye poddanyye poddanyye v gorodakh Dal’nego Vostoka Rossii vtoraya polovina XIX-nachalo XX v. (Vladivostok, 2004), 59-63.} Vladivostok, the youngest of the three cities, was founded in 1860, after China ceded its Amur and Maritime provinces to Russia. Unlike San Francisco and Singapore, the Russian city remained economically relatively insignificant. Only after the completion of the Trans-Siberian railroad at the turn of the century did the development of the city of about 50,000 inhabitants gain momentum. In the early years, Chinese people lived scattered across the city, but soon they began to congregate in certain areas. The first Chinese market, called Manzovskii Bazaar, was already established by the late 1860s. Conveniently located at the Golden Horn Bay, it had a berth for Chinese boats and barges. Within several years’ time, the area became a place of dense Chinese population. Municipal authorities were concerned from very early on, since houses and stalls did not abide by the rules of security and hygiene, and became potential breeding ground for epidemics.\footnote{Nikolai P. Matveev, Kratkii istoricheskii ocherk g. Vladivostoka (Vladivostok, 2012 [1910]), 148-149.} The bazaar was finally shut down in the first years of the 1900s. By the time of its closing, a new market, known as Semenovskii Bazaar, had already been opened at the Amur Bay. At the turn of the century, Chinese began to occupy the area to the east where — inspired by its high demographic density — they built what would soon become the unofficial Chinatown.\footnote{A.V. Petruk, “Kitaiskii kvartal kak ekonomicheskoe iavlennie i chast’ kul’turnoi sredy g. Vladivostoka,” Izvestiiia Vostochnogo Instituta 2 (2011): 113-24, here 115-119.} Thus, most of the Chinese dwelled in a neighborhood called in the vernacular “Millionka,” after the main bazaar (see Figure 1) had been relocated from the Golden Horn to the Amur Bay. Construction of residential buildings had begun east of the bazaar at the turn of the century. Soon the Chinese occupied a neighborhood bordering the shores of the Amur Bay in the West, the American (Svetlanskai) Street in the South, the Aleutskai Street in the East, and the city’s slaughterhouse in the North.
Between the late 1890s and early 1920s, between one third and one half of Vladivostok’s residents were of Asian origin. The Chinese were the largest Asian group in the city. Unlike the relatively gender-balanced Russians, the Chinese (and, to a much lesser degree, the Korean and Japanese) had an uneven gender ratio with males outnumbering females up to 40:1. There are striking similarities to the Chinese population of San Francisco and Singapore: the Chinese were the largest Asian immigrant group in the Russian, American, and British colonial settings, and also the one with the highest gender disparity.

Despite varying local circumstances, in all three cities the Chinese quarters were centrally located and the most densely populated areas of the towns. In all three cases there was a tendency towards territorial concentration by race, which was facilitated by the original settlement plans (Singapore), a later designation of ethnic ghettos (San Francisco) or uncontrolled movement (Vladivostok). This ethnic homogenization and segregation was reinforced by the migrants’ inclination to settle in districts where institutional support structures or particular economic niches had already been established.

All three Chinatowns were crucial places in the history and culture of ethnic Chinese immigrants. In these densely populated urban areas, predominantly male Chinese lived and worked as shopkeepers, restaurant owners, small traders, and hired workers. The racial branding of Chinatowns as locations of the “yellow peril” was closely related to the spatial concentration and segregation of the Chinese population. Within these quarters, Chinese residents maintained and practiced aspects of their native culture, from which outsiders constructed notions of racial difference. To a significant extent, the claim that the Chinese were unassimilable and therefore dangerous was based on the fact that they lived in overcrowded and segregated Chinatowns, which were the result of urban planning rather than Chinese preferences. White city dwellers’ antagonism toward the Chinese also resulted from their perception that the Chinese conceived of themselves as temporary, largely male visitors rather than permanent residents.
III. Overcrowded housing

One key problem in the negative perception of the Chinese were the miserable housing conditions in which many Chinese lived. In Singapore, Chinese preferred to build horizontally rather than vertically: instead of adding another story to a building, residents added structures separated by a courtyard. Over the years, houses would merge through horizontal fusion and through vertical additions to tenement buildings, which ran through an entire block. A four-storied tenement house which ran through from Sago Street to Sago Lane in Singapore’s main Chinese quarter south of Singapore River may illustrate this densification:

Originally it consisted of two separate houses placed back to back .... One of the houses faced Sago Street and was known as 20-3 Sago Street, and the other faced Sago Lane and was known as 18 Sago Lane. Now there is an entrance to the lower [level] from Sago Lane, but the second, third and fourth stories can only be entered from Sago Street.

Such a construction style impeded the supply of sunlight and fresh air and the efficient ventilation and drainage of the houses, and was therefore condemned as a health hazard.27

The houses in which the Chinese lived in San Francisco and Vladivostok were designed by European architects and thus differed from those in Singapore. Yet a three-or four-story fireproof building was no guarantee of decent living conditions. In San Francisco, a contemporary observer lamented that, although “many of the buildings in Chinatown are of brick and all are of American architecture,” they

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still would be impossible to live in. “Wherever the Chinese get into a building, they commence to remodel it and change the appearance of the front .... In a few months after they attack it, so to speak, it looks though it were a hundred years old. The walls become blackened up, filthy, dirty and discolored.”

In From Sea to Sea, a collection of articles about his 1889 travels to Asia and the United States, the English journalist, poet, and novelist Rudyard Kipling complained that each building in San Francisco’s Chinatown was packed “with hundreds of souls, all living in filth and squalor not to be appreciated save by you in India.”

In San Francisco there was yet another feature of concern to contemporary observers, as Kipling noted:

I struck a house about four stories high full of celestial abominations, and began to burrow down; having heard that these tenements were constructed on the lines of icebergs two-thirds below sight level. ... On the second underground floor a man asked for cumshaw and took me downstairs to yet another cellar, where the air was as thick as butter, and the lamps burned little holes in it not more than an inch square. ... It was good to see the shop-fronts and electric lights again.

No matter in which direction Chinese buildings expanded, be it vertically under the surface in San Francisco or horizontally in Singapore, the defective design of the houses was further aggravated by subdivisions of each floor into a large number of windowless cubicle rooms that received neither natural light nor air directly from the outside (see Figure 2).

Journalist and author Thomas W. Knox recalled how a police officer showed him one of several Chinese lodging houses on San Francisco’s Jackson Street in the early 1870s:

We went with him to a large four-story building, which appeared to be divided into apartments of the smallest dimensions, in which the Chinese swarmed like bees in a hive. He said that there were over six hundred persons, all of the poorer class, sleeping in this single building every night. In front of the building was a narrow opening in the sidewalk, with a stairway just sufficiently wide to allow one person at a time to descend into the subterranean regions

Figure 2. The Globe Hotel, a Chinese lodging house on Jackson Street in San Francisco’s Chinatown. The cartoon, published in the illustrated San Francisco weekly Thistleton’s Illustrated Jolly Giant, depicts bunk rooms, a “small pox hospital,” an “underground Chinese cemetery,” and other elements often associated with Chinese houses in the city. Source: Thistleton’s Illustrated Jolly Giant 1/3 (8 June 1873): 5.
below. Down this he dived like a rat into his hole, calling out to us to follow and look sharp for our heads. The caution was not unnecessary, as I soon found to my cost. At the bottom of the stairs he lighted his candle again, and passing through a low opening in the wall, showed us the way under the street.

Here, congregated in total darkness, were some twenty of the poorest class of Chinese stowed away for the night. ... The atmosphere was that of a charnel house, thick with noisome exhalations from the foul and rotting rags, and the fouler persons, of the denizens of this worse than Black Hole of Calcutta. Water dripped from the roof constantly, and the walls were covered with mould and great patches of thick, oozy slime. What a place for a human being to sleep in and die in! In the five minutes we were there our clothes became clammy from the foul moisture.30

Many observers, such as English novelist and travel writer Mary Anne Hardy (Lady Duffus Hardy), were struck by the economy of space of the Chinese lodging houses, with chambers just long enough to lie down in and broad enough for a narrow door to open between two bunk beds. Worse than the claustrophobic confinement of those quarters were only the horrible odor and accumulation of filth: “There is no ventilation, and not a breath of air enters, except from the cellar through which we entered, and even that comes filtered through the barber’s and pawnbroker’s shops before alluded to.”31

San Francisco officials responded to unsafe tenement conditions by introducing a series of ordinances. One of them was the cubic air ordinance, passed in 1870. It required all lodging houses to have 500 cubic feet of air for each resident and made tenants and landlords equally culpable for violations. Yet the very nature of this regulation was discriminatory as police enforced the ordinance only in Chinatown and Chinese residents called it “the most inexcusable of all Acts of the Legislature of California.”32

In Singapore and Vladivostok overcrowding, poor ventilation and low levels of hygiene were of similar concern to the municipal authorities. Vladivostok’s health officer repeatedly condemned the appalling situation in the city center. After examining premises in 1910 he concluded that all of the overcrowded buildings in downtown

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30 Thomas W. Knox, Underground or Life Below the Surface (Hartford, 1874), 259-260.
32 How the U. S. Treaty with China is Observed in California: For the Consideration of the American People and Government, by the Friends of International Right and Justice (San Francisco, 1877), 4-7, quotation on 4.
Vladivostok were occupied exclusively by Chinese subjects. Along with police and sanitary inspectors, the health officer found houses to be overpopulated on Koreiskaia Street 46, Fontannaia Street 12 and 16, and on Pekinskaia Street 11. But the majority were located on Semenovskaia Street. House no. 5, for instance, had 59 apartments with 300 to 350 tenants. Many Chinese tenants lived in small windowless cubicles in the attic with a ceiling height of barely one and a half meters. Further down the street, in house no. 12, the situation was even worse. The house register of these “dirty and cramped premises” listed about 500 names for the 94 apartments. The number of actual occupants was at least twice as high. Apartment no. 2, with a size of less than ten cubic meters, slept eight people. The outdoor latrines were leaking and the backyard was occupied by all kinds of small shops, bakeries, taverns, workshops, hairdressers, brothels and opium dens, the majority operating without a license.33

In Singapore, San Francisco, and Vladivostok municipal sanitary reformers called for the elimination of overcrowding, darkness, stale air, filth, and clutter from Chinese tenements. In the European explanatory scheme, all these traits were attributed to the fundamental nature of the Chinese and their intrinsic racial peculiarities rather than to the inequalities and contradictions inherent in society itself. Even though one might argue that the municipal and government officials were responsible for the unsanitary conditions of the Chinese quarters in the three Pacific port cities, they laid blame primarily on the Chinese residents, who in public discourse were portrayed as filthy in their habits. Dirt and diseases were thus presented as natural consequences of racial characteristics and separated from the social and political context of immigration. By focusing attention on Chinese cultural traits as the cause for diseases and high mortality rates, municipal health authorities eschewed arguments that related mortality and disease to poverty and economic deprivation or that questioned the socio-economic structure of the urban immigrant settings. While complaints about filth and pestilence among the Chinese remained the horror of the press and the thunder of the politicians for many years, few observers scrutinized the key reasons.

Compared to other districts of the three cities, the Chinese quarters were neglected by the authorities despite their central locations. Nevertheless the streets were not less clean due to proactive sweeping of the streets and removal of garbage by the Chinese residents. When questioned by a Joint Special Committee of Congress in 1876,
Dr. Arthur B. Stout, a physician and member of San Francisco’s Board of Health, spoke on behalf of the Chinese, saying that the authorities neglected to take care of sanitary precautions in the Chinese quarter:

The squalor of the Chinese quarter is not much greater than that which exists in other parts of the city from other people. Of course their quarter is disagreeable, because it is perhaps more densely populated, but there is less care taken of it. If ample care were taken by the city authorities toward the drainage and the cleaning, I do not think they would be much inferior to the squalor, for instance, such as I saw nearly at the summit of Telegraph Hill a day or two ago. ... There has been a great exaggeration in all those charges against the Chinese. At the same time I do not pretend to say that that quarter might not be cleaner. They would be clean if they were forced to be so, and if the city authorities did their duty.34

Another key reason for the unsanitary living conditions of the Chinese was a matter of profit for the white landlord. In San Francisco, for instance,

Chinatown property ... was let with the stipulation that the tenant must make all repairs. The primary tenants were transient men; the lessees were Chinese lodging-house keepers who like other landlords wished to make their stake and go home; the white agents charged all the lessee would bear; and the white owner discreetly avoided the premises. ... With every change of Health Officers the new appointees made the motions of cleaning up Chinatown, which consisted in a squad of men arriving in the quarter to whitewash and fumigate. But the Chinese soon learned that ‘only those were cleaned up who didn’t pay up,’ in other words they paid the police to be let alone. In all the years during which these spasms occurred the white landlords were never compelled to put them in order, as landlords were obliged to do in other parts of the city.

Up until the outbreak of the bubonic plague in San Francisco in 1900, the municipal authorities never efficiently compelled the landlords to take care of their property. Only then were buildings not only cleaned but sewered for the first time.35


35 Mary Roberts Coolidge, Chinese Immigration (New York, 1909), 413-414, quotation on 413; John Philip Young, San Francisco: A History of the Pacific Coast Metropolis, vol. 2 (Chicago, 1912), 783.
IV. “Chinese” diseases

As port cities, Singapore, Vladivostok, and San Francisco were particularly vulnerable to infectious diseases. In the summer of 1911, Mayor Vasilii P. Margaritov emphasized Vladivostok’s exceptional position among the other Russian cities: “The city of Vladivostok, as a fortress, a military port and a commercial port, has contact with numerous countries of the East and the West. From sea and land it is surrounded by uncivilized people, who suffer annually some form of epidemic, or plague, or cholera, typhoid, scarlet fever, diphtheria and the like.”

The average death rates varied dramatically among different races in all three cities. Infectious diseases like cholera were associated with the Asian population, particularly the Chinese. This impression was further strengthened by spatial statistics, as districts which tended to be most consistently and severely affected by cholera and other filth diseases were traditionally Chinese-dominated areas.

During the third plague pandemic between 1900 and 1904, 118 people died in San Francisco. The vast majority of victims were Chinese. Many of San Francisco’s white residents saw the Chinese as a threat to the economic, social and cultural well-being of the larger community. Influenced by the prevailing mood that stigmatized the Chinese as unwanted foreigners in the United States, physicians and health officials in the second half of the nineteenth century backed these beliefs with the aura of academic truth. In studies, they identified ethnicity as a key factor in the detection, treatment and control of pandemics and disease.

In the course of the year 1900, Chinatown was repeatedly quarantined. In addition to undisguised racism, the quarantine measures also brought economic disadvantages for the Chinese people. Long after the quarantine was lifted, the Chinese residents of San Francisco remained stigmatized as medical scapegoats. Sinophobic reports discrediting the residents of Chinatown regularly appeared in the press. In December 1902, the San Francisco Chronicle wrote that their habits and traditions nullified all attempts at plague control: “They live together like pigs, and the result is that their quarters as a rule resemble sties rather than human habitations.” Stigmatizing the Chinese and framing them as disease transmitters in public debate, doctors, politicians, and other members of the urban elite demanded the elimination of Chinatown or its transfer from downtown areas to the outskirts of the city.

36 RGIA DV, f. 28, op. 1, d. 679, ll. 91-95, quotation on l. 91. From 1886 onward, cholera spread to coastal areas annually from Japan and Korea. In 1889 there was a severe outbreak of the disease in Vladivostok. In 1895, Chinese workers once again introduced cholera, but thanks to precautions the spread within the city was limited. Municipal police forces isolated infected houses. Chinese residents, however, refused to report outbreaks to the Russian authorities because they distrusted the Russian doctors.


40 Nayan Shah, Contagious Divides: Epidemics and Race in San Francisco’s Chinatown (Berkeley, 2001), 17-76.


In Vladivostok Russian authorities had discussed the eviction of the Chinese since the mid-1880s. After the cholera outbreak in 1890, a special commission inspected the Chinese dwellings, once again “confirming the extreme overcrowding and the impossible sanitary situation in the urban apartments of Chinese.” At this point, no measures were taken to evict them from the city.\footnote{RGIA DV, f. 28, op.1, d. 234, ll. 125-126.} In the summer of 1913, “taking into account the unsanitary conditions in which the Chinese live and the danger of their medical conditions that threaten the entire city population in the event of an outbreak of infectious disease;” the Military Governor of the Maritime Region demanded that the city administration should be guided by the interests of the entire city and not by those of individual homeowners.\footnote{RGIA DV, f. 702, op.1, d. 334, ll. 246-247.} Grave, the Commissioner of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Amur expedition, called for a speedy solution of the situation since “the Chinese live in the very center ... in the streets parallel to Svetlanskaia — the main artery of the city and near the main bazaars .... By personally inspecting these streets and going inside the backyards into shops, bathhouses and even into attics and cellars ... I was surprised by what I saw. The dirt, horrible smell, crowds of people, reminded me of the worst quarters of Beijing ...”\footnote{Grave, \textit{Kitaitsy}, 125.}

Although such extreme voices in the press subsided after the disease had disappeared, the cultural peculiarities of the Chinese continued to be a popular subject in public discourse in all three cities. In the eyes of many of their residents of European cultural background, the Chinese quarters of San Francisco, Vladivostok and Singapore remained a foreign body. From the perspective of the majority society, the plague pandemic and other diseases further consolidated their negative symbolic ethnicity.\footnote{E.g. cases of leprosy among the Chinese in San Francisco. John Philip Young, \textit{San Francisco: A History of the Pacific Coast Metropolis}, vol. 2 (Chicago, 1912), 779.}

In Vladivostok the local press repeatedly warned Russians of the presence of Chinese and their danger to public health: “[T]he thousands of exhausted, dirty, poorly-dressed sons of China have flooded Vladivostok ... and seized all the trade and occupations ... The cleanliness of your premises and luxury of your clothes will not save you from cholera. You will be infected by this terrible guest through back passages, through kitchen lice, through the cheap cooks, nannies, and lackeys.”\footnote{“Aziatskie Gosti,” in \textit{Dalekaya Okraina} (19.8.1907): 3-4, quotation on 4.}

**Conclusion**

In Pacific port cities, where European residents lived in constant interaction with their Chinese neighbors, politically charged debates
on health, hygiene and housing conditions erupted over suspicions that the Chinese communities harbored large numbers of people suffering from undetected infectious diseases. Politicians manipulated widespread fears of vulnerability for their own ends. White European inhabitants often equated improving public health with banishing the Chinese from the central locations in San Francisco, Vladivostok and Singapore. Until well into the twentieth century, politicians, journalists and demagogues along the Asian and American Pacific shores published pamphlets, essays, and newspaper articles that repeated old arguments painting the Chinese as the most vicious residents. Overcrowding or careless and filthy habits, such as universal spitting or scant use of water and soap, were seen as inherent traits of the Chinese. Many Europeans completely overlooked a number of factors that were major causes for the misery. The impression that the Chinese quarters in San Francisco, Vladivostok and Singapore gave a picture of filth and squalor, something akin to a slum, had mainly structural reasons: Chinese residents were forced to live in certain districts that, compared with other parts of the cities, were often neglected by the municipal authorities and the European landlords, who owned the houses the Chinese had to live in.

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