

# The Mexican and Chinese Diasporas in the United States Converging Political Challenges?

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“The movement that makes worlds go around is made up of the game of differences and how they attract and repel each other.”

OCTAVIO PAZ

The importance that migration has taken on globally allows us to predict that the twenty-first century will be marked by human mobility. According to the International Organization for Migration (IOM), recently incorporated into the United Nations System, by 2015, an estimated 244 million international migrants existed worldwide. This was a record: 41 percent more than the number registered in the year 2000, without even counting the migrants inside countries, estimated at 740 million. Of these, China heads the list with 150 million people going from rural to urban areas.<sup>1</sup>

In this context, one of the ways Mexico and China converge is that they are two of the three countries with the greatest number of immigrants in the United States today.

According to the Migration Policy Institute, the size of the Mexican immigrant community came to 11.7 million in 2014, or 28 percent of the entire population born outside the United States.<sup>2</sup> In 2013, the number of Chinese immigrants came to 2.01 million—the Census Bureau includes people from Hong Kong in this total.<sup>3</sup> It is particularly significant to point out that precisely beginning in 2013, China’s new immigrants and those from India began to displace the number of new entries by Mexicans; this trend has continued due to the deportations and voluntary return of Mexicans from the U.S.

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Robert Galbraith/Reuters

In the case of Chinese immigrants, the recent increase is due to young students being attracted: about 300 000. A considerable number of them arrive expecting to settle permanently in the United States, thus breaking with the traditional pattern of providing cheap labor or requesting political asylum.

So, by 2013, 47 percent of Chinese immigrants 25 or older had undergraduate or graduate studies, contrasting with only 28 percent of all immigrants and 30 percent of U.S. Americans.<sup>4</sup> The difference in this regard with Mexican immigrants is dramatic: only 6 percent of the latter had this level of schooling in 2014.

On the other hand, we should underline that the United States is no exception on the global migratory stage, which seems to be framed with restrictive, exclusionary policies, aimed at combatting uncertainty caused not only by economic cycles, but also by political-electoral periods. The current U.S. presidential campaigns are the best example: they have been enormously controversial due to Republican candidate Donald Trump’s positions on irregular migration.

For this reason, a decisive step for countering these kinds of negative trends has been to speed up immigrants' naturalization as U.S. citizens. To illustrate this in figures, I should mention that of the 11.7 Mexican immigrants in the United States, only 27 percent became citizens in 2014. This figure is very low if we compare it with the 47 percent of all of those born abroad living there who became citizens in 2014.<sup>5</sup> By contrast, the Chinese are much more likely to apply for citizenship; they surpassed both of the other groups even a year before: 54 percent of them, more than two million, became citizens.<sup>6</sup>

In absolute terms, only 3.16 million Mexicans become U.S. citizens in 2014, partly because of the weight of undocumented immigrants who could not fulfill the eligibility requirements.

The transition to permanent residency in the U.S. for both Mexicans and Chinese does converge,<sup>7</sup> however, in the fact that the majority of both groups obtain this status through family members who are already citizens (63 percent in the case of the Mexicans, and 33 percent in the case of the Chinese).

Due to the importance of minorities settled in the United States because of their demographic curve and the rapid aging of the general population, it is interesting to point out that Mexican immigrants are younger than the rest of those born abroad: on average, they are 41,<sup>8</sup> compared to 44 for all immigrants and 45 for Chinese immigrants.<sup>9</sup>

According to the Migration Policy Institute, the Mexican Diaspora in the U.S. comes to a total of 23.2 million, including Mexicans born in Mexico and their children. The Chinese Diaspora comes to about 4.4 million. I should underline the organizational dimension of these two communities, given that both groups need to build spaces for political empowerment to safeguard their interests.

Mexicans have established numerous well-funded, coordinated organizations and clubs throughout the country, including mutual aid societies, migrants' rights defense groups, political action committees, institutions to promote Mexican culture, and professional networks. They have all been strategic in the 2016 electoral process for defending their communities in the face of the critical scenario of xenophobia and racism promoted by the Republican candidate; to do this, they have appealed, among other things, to the imperious need that a greater number of their members move toward citizenship, register to vote, and actually go out and vote. Through the Institute for Mexicans Abroad (IME) and its extensive consular network, the Mexican government has made an un-

precedented effort to close ranks to support the community. According to the Pew Research Center, today we can predict that the Hispanic vote will favor Democrat Hillary Clinton by 66 percent, thanks to the high concentration of Mexicans who consider her their political option.

Down through the years, the Chinese Diaspora has organized based on an ethnic economy and preserving Chinese education and its language. However, it is important to note that the new generations of young Chinese studying in the United States have a much more cosmopolitan point of view, strengthening new, markedly transnational organizations.

To come back to the U.S. electoral scenario, China, like Mexico, has been the subject of severe criticism by both parties' candidates, particularly for being considered an unfair competitor.

It would not be right to speculate about Chinese-Americans' political preferences in this context, but we should remember that Mrs. Clinton has a record of criticizing China for its growing investments in Africa and its Internet-use policy, among other issues.

However, one of the most delicate matters in this regard was a comment against her was made in Peng Pai News, emphasizing that in China a woman over 55 should stay home and take care of her grandchildren.

So, the question is posed: Can the Mexican and Chinese Diasporas in the United States establish channels for dialogue that would allow them to act in solidarity to fight the prejudices and stereotypes about their origins, at a time of great social, cultural, and economic change that is pushing their host nation to a place where inevitably, in the medium term, there will be no racial majority at all?<sup>10</sup> ■■■

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#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> IOM, *Global Migration Trends 2015*, [http://publications.iom.int/system/files/global\\_migration\\_trends\\_2015\\_factsheet.pdf](http://publications.iom.int/system/files/global_migration_trends_2015_factsheet.pdf).

<sup>2</sup> Migration Policy Institute, *Mexican Immigrants in the United States*, <http://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/mexican-immigrants-united-states>.

<sup>3</sup> Migration Policy Institute, *Chinese Immigrants in the United States*, <http://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/chinese-immigrants-united-states>.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> Migration Policy Institute, *Mexican Immigrants in the United States*, *op. cit.*

<sup>6</sup> Migration Policy Institute, *Chinese Immigrants in the United States*, *op. cit.*

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, accessed October 11, 2016.

<sup>8</sup> Migration Policy Institute, *Mexican Immigrants in the United States*, *op. cit.*

<sup>9</sup> Migration Policy Institute, *Chinese Immigrants in the United States*, *op. cit.*

<sup>10</sup> See William H. Frey, *Diversity Explosion. How New Racial Demographics Are Remaking America* (Washington, D. C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2014).