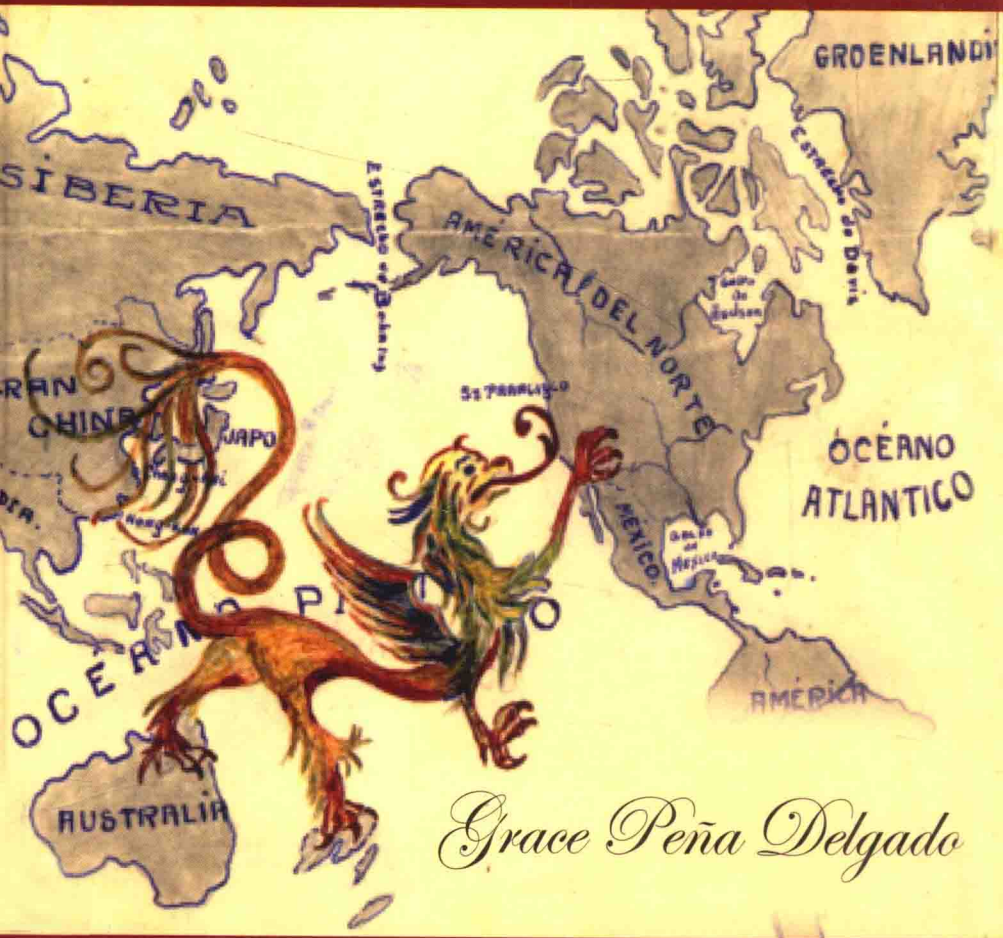
Making the Chinese Mexican

Global Migration, Localism, and Exclusion in the U.S.-Mexico Borderlands



Grace Peña Delgado

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MAKING THE CHINESE MEXICAN

For my mother,
Sandy Delgado

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In 2006 I threw caution to the wind and moved from southern California to central Pennsylvania to join the History Department at the Pennsylvania State University. I was hopeful that there a community of lively scholars, institutional resources, and some time away from teaching would help catapult my book to completion. And they did! What was most gratifying—and completely unanticipated—was the manner in which my ideas grew, deepened, and in the end, came together. Matthew Restall read multiple drafts of the introduction and provided perceptive comment and encouragement—and at a critical moment, opened doors for me at Stanford University Press when I was overwhelmed with tenure pressures. I am incredibly fortunate to have Matthew as my colleague. Philip Baldi, Cary Fraser, A. Gregg Roeber, Sally McMurry, Nan Woodruff, Tobias Brinkmann, Mrinalini Sinha, and Lori Ginzburg read parts of the manuscript at various stages of its development. I am thankful for their comments and their insights. With their usual enthusiasm, Amy Greenberg and Ronnie Po-chia Hsia read the entire manuscript. For their generous expenditure of time and their keen observations I am deeply grateful. Hongyan Chiang and Xinmin Lin checked and rechecked my Chinese translations and helped me navigate the murky waters of the Qing Dynasty and Republican-era calendars. Colleagues at other institutions have been equally gracious. Evelyn Hu-Dehart, Samuel Truett, K. Scott Wong, Erika Lee, Alexandra Minna Stern, and Alexis McCrossen read early parts of

the manuscript and pushed me, however kindly, to clarify and develop my ideas. I am especially indebted to Katherine Benton-Cohen for her expeditious and painstaking (literally line-by-line) critique of the manuscript. Thank you, Katie, for a yeowoman's work.

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Late in the process I had the pleasure of meeting two energetic members of the Tucson Chinese Cultural Center (TCCC): Robin Blackwood, chair of the History Program; and Patsy Lee, president of the Tucson Chinese Association. Both Robin and Patsy embraced me and the book project with immediate enthusiasm and warmth. I was honored to be among a small group of academics and community scholars whom Robin and Patsy invited to speak at the TCCC's First Annual Chinese American Immigrant History Program in September 2010. My experience at the TCCC reminded me that writing history must never be a project of mere intellectual curiosity or indulgence. Wherever possible, social histories must be shared with communities of origin and, if plausible, coproduced in a meaningful and exacting manner. Along these same lines I want to acknowledge the generosity of Esther Don Tang. Known throughout Tucson for her long-standing record of social activism and intrepid spirit, Esther graciously allowed the use of a family photograph in this book. The stories about Esther and the Don Wah family are among several personal

accounts that grant us a better understanding of how southern Arizona Chinese indelibly shaped the history of the U.S.-Mexico borderlands.

As this book neared its final stages, it benefited especially from the help of two friends, Barry Kernfeld and Mary McClanahan. Barry's talent as an editor and as a widely read scholar in many fields helped me clarify arguments and pay close attention to word choice. I always looked forward to receiving his penciled edits on paper recycled from his many books on jazz. I also treasure the friendship and editorial prowess of Mary McClanahan. During the dog days of completing this book, her wit and warmth inspired me to continue writing even when it meant returning to my office on cold winter nights. She kept me company, kept me fed, kept me laughing, and encouraged my sports-watching habit. With Mary I knew it was all possible.

As I hope I have made clear, I have been immensely blessed throughout this process. I must reserve my deepest gratitude, however, to Norris Pope, director of scholarly publishing at Stanford University Press. Norris understood the urgency of getting this book to press and extended both the graciousness and expertise to advocate on its behalf. He brought all of his resources and energy to bear on bringing this book to completion. There simply are no words that can adequately convey my appreciation. In addition, Sarah Crane Newman and Alice Rowan skillfully commanded the editorial process, gently drawing my attention to the smallest detail, and Mariana Raykov adroitly shepherded this book to publication.

This book is dedicated to my mom, Sandy Delgado. I can only aspire to achieve her strength and wisdom.

A Note on Language Use

This book was written from sources in English, Spanish, and Chinese. Drawing on three languages brought to bear a myriad of decisions that warrant explanation. In keeping with scholarly convention, all Romanized and Cantonese Chinese names were converted to pinyin, the official spelling system adopted by the People's Republic of China in 1958. One exception to this was Zhou Ren (Chapter 5). I used his name in Cantonese, Zhenran, to offset other similar-sounding names and for easier readability. When Chinese names appeared in British, Spanish, U.S., and Mexican legal documents, I retained the original spelling and name order used in these official records. For the most part, Mexican Chinese wrote in Spanish, although on occasion they wrote in Chinese and in pidgin Spanish-Chinese. In the former case, I translated the Chinese to Spanish and then into English, and in the latter case, I translated the pidgin into Spanish and then into English-Spanish-Chinese pidgin (Chapter 4).

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Introduction

NATIONS, BORDERS, AND HISTORY

By 1993, Cheng Chui Ping could claim she helped hundreds of Chinese immigrants achieve the American Dream. Cheng, most commonly known as "Sister Ping," proved to be a reliable conduit to jobs and housing in New York City, Los Angeles, and San Francisco for would-be immigrants. Sister Ping's generosity was without comparison and her resourcefulness was unsurpassed. When destitute immigrants were unable to afford the transportation cost from China to the United States, Ping financed the journey and arranged work for those who could not immediately repay the loan. For her deeds, the Fujianese native earned a reputation as a modern-day Robin Hood and was once described as "a living Buddha."[1] Ping's benevolence seemed befitting of one called "Sister." She promised hope and prosperity to those who believed that hard work and dependability would secure jobs and relieve debts.

Ping, though, was not a "sister" of goodwill. Rather, she was a kingpin, often dubbed the "Mother of All Snakeheads," who organized and financed the most notorious human-smuggling network in the history of the United States. Her scheme, which included packing hundreds of Chinese into the sweltering holds of cargo ships, netted millions of dollars for the immigrant financier and members of the Fuk Ching, a New York City-based gang with whom Ping worked closely for more than fifteen years.[2] "Customers" paid as much as $40,000 for a circuitous, often treacherous trip from Hong Kong through Thailand and across the Pacific Ocean to Guatemala and Belize. From Central America, immigrants either continued by sea to the port of New York City or trekked overland and across the Mexican border to the United States. Once they landed in the United States, they were either harbored or housed, depending on the travel debt owed to Sister Ping. After years of immigrant smuggling, Ping's enterprise finally met its end when the off-loading of would-be border crossers went

awry a mile from the Mexican coast and fourteen immigrants drowned trying to swim ashore.[3]

When one thinks of the history of unauthorized immigration through the U.S.-Mexico borderlands, the story of Sister Ping is hardly the first to come to mind.[4] Instead, our common image of border crossers is of weary Mexicans who slog through blistering deserts and scale walls partitioning one nation from another. A mental picture emerges of migrants so desperate to reach the United States that they enlist the services of "coyotes," that is, human smugglers of varying scruples who promise safe passage—but for a steep price.

Despite the familiarity of these images, our common views of immigration through the U.S.-Mexico borderlands are curious mostly for what they reveal about the writing and silencing of history. That we summon pictures of stark national division and treacherous border crossings when we think of immigrants originating from Mexico indicates that history has effaced many stories from the record. This book seeks to tell these stories. Until 1924, when the National Origins Act placed stringent new restrictions and means of exclusion on would-be immigrants, Mexicans were subject to some scrutiny from American immigration officials but, for the most part, entered the United States almost unfettered. Chinese border crossers, however, faced a different reality. After the passage in 1882 of the Chinese Exclusion Act, which barred Chinese laborers from entering the United States, virtually all Chinese were subject to intense inspection and surveillance by an immigration bureaucracy designed to exclude and deport. But immigration officials at the Mexico border discovered early on that exclusion laws were often too general for effective enforcement at the southern U.S. boundary. U.S. lawmakers had not anticipated the manner in which the myriad legal and social complexities presented by Chinese immigrants continuously prompted the reconfiguration of enforcement strategies at the Mexico border. Networks of migration comprising Chinese family and business relationships that reached deeply into the trans-Pacific world mutated in constant adaptation to immigration restrictions, serving to offer ever-changing means of undocumented entry into the United States. These means of migration persist to the present day.

Sister Ping's story, an example of the illegal immigration that occurs at the southern U.S. boundary, reminds us that the images that constitute the common borderlands narrative rarely if ever capture the entire history of any given group. Over the last thirty years, scholars have worked attentively to retrieve the histories of native peoples, women, and working-class *fronterizos* (borderlanders) from the oblivion of official narratives. We now take as a given the larger webs of race, gender, class, and nation that have ultimately defined who becomes American and Mexican and who

does not.[5] But as much as this body of scholarship has helped us better understand the intricacies of border life and the discreet adjustments made by *fronterizos* in times of momentous social change, the history of Chinese borderlanders has yet to be adequately told.

There were noteworthy entries in the early scholarship of Chinese in Mexico.[6] Evelyn Hu-Dehart's pioneering research, for example, invited scholars to look through a revisionist lens focused on Chinese living in Mexico's northern states. Advancing the work of Leo Michel Jacques Dambourges and Charles Cumberland, Hu-Dehart made visible the rhetoric of Sinophobia (the unfounded fear and intense dislike of Chinese persons) and economic competition as justifications for the official expulsion of Sonoran Chinese in 1931.[7] At the same time, Hu-DeHart posited that Mexico's revolutionary period was a crucial historiographical watershed, a time of national and racial consolidation that worked alongside anti-Chinese crusades. Since then, new studies about Chinese Mexicans have emerged, generating rich social and cultural histories.[8] But as Chinese borderlanders became more visible in scholarly literature, they did so almost exclusively within the context of nation-centered histories, Asian American studies, and Latin American studies. Their full significance for U.S.-Mexico borderlands history is still inadequately understood.[9]

I initiated writing this book because the omission of Chinese *fronterizos* from borderlands history did not square with my knowledge of the region, which resided in the everyday, in anecdotes, and in places where individuals and communities created identity. For a time, I relied on my own neighborhood experiences, the transmission of family stories, and the pursuit of hunches, which proved to be as effective in reconstructing this story as did a small collection of historians' essays. A patchwork of memories distilled from my childhood through my early adulthood guided my initial investigation. Growing up in southern California some two hundred miles from the U.S.-Mexico divide I experienced the border initially through a series of short visits from my grandmother, a native of Magdalena, Sonora, Mexico, a border town just south of Nogales, Arizona. I was perplexed that each visit culminated in a formal meal of Chinese food and not my favorite rice and beans. The meal, shared only among the adults, who would dress up for the occasion, seemed to transport my grandmother to places in her past as only a particular cuisine and ambience could. When rice and beans gave way to Chinese food, I invariably turned to a more reliable source to satisfy my palate—the corner grocery store. Here a family of Chinese, all of whom spoke Spanish, supplied me with far too many sodas and candies. While I dedicated myself to getting my fill of junk food, they proved equally dedicated to pestering me to improve my awkward Spanish. The irony was not lost on me.

Years later, as a college freshman, I ran into this story again. On a whim, I ventured into Mexicali, Baja California, Mexico, expecting to find a smaller and calmer version of Tijuana, but instead I chanced upon three square blocks of Chinese-owned restaurants, groceries, *carnicerías* (meat markets), and dry-goods stores. The dusty red facades of *la chinesca* (the Chinese neighborhood) lingered in my memory. Some years after that, teaching sixth, seventh, and eighth-grade immigrant students from Mexico, Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia taught me that no matter how much emphasis was placed on the distinct histories, cultures, and languages of Southeast Asia and China, some Mexican students still believed that all Asians were Chinese, and that all Chinese deserved ridicule and humiliation.

When I stopped teaching middle school, I began to search for this story as a graduate student and then as an American historian, but I encountered nothing more than fragments lodged between Mexican and U.S. national histories. As I mined archives on both sides of the border, a deeper, interlocking, and fascinating history appeared, one that seemed to account for some of my earlier experiences and observations. Telling this story has raised new questions, and to answer them has required looking beyond and between the Mexican and U.S. national narratives that had obscured it.

What follows is a history of Chinese *fronterizos* that offers a way to understand how the current images of the border came to be, and why our constructs of the U.S.-Mexico border do not include the Chinese. The answer is both complicated and simple. Clearly one can point to the enforcement of the Chinese Exclusion Act, or one may conclude that the violence of the Mexican Revolution (1910–1917) permanently drove out the Chinese. Restrictionist laws and civil war, however, were social realities that occurred almost everywhere Chinese settled; they alone cannot adequately explain the absence of Chinese from our border imagery. Some scholars have diminished the presence of Chinese *fronterizos* in their histories because of the modest size of the Chinese communities along the U.S.-Mexico border. When compared to the larger populations in San Francisco, Cuba, and Peru, the Chinese story of transborder communities seems like a marginal tale and one that historians can justify as numerically inconsequential.

I propose instead a more complicated explanation, one that has to do with writing history and recalling the past, which Michel-Rolph Trouillot and Prasenjit Duara suggest is mutually constitutive. In *Silencing the Past*, Trouillot argues that the production of historical knowledge involves power and that this power often determines what history includes and what history neglects. The basis of underrepresented, unconventional, or unpopular stories, contends Trouillot, is a lack of equal access to history telling, from the assembling and retrieval of facts to the selection of certain themes over others.[10] Trouillot's insights about the "silences and