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EDITED BY
WALTON LOOK LAI
AND
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# The Chinese in Latin America and the Caribbean

Edited by
Walton Look Lai and Tan Chee-Beng





BRILL

LEIDEN • BOSTON 2010 This book is printed on acid-free paper.

All chapters of *The Chinese in Latin America and the Caribbean* originally appeared as articles in *Journal of Chinese Overseas* 5.1 (2009).

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

The Chinese in Latin America and the Caribbean / edited by Walton Look Lai and Tan Chee-Beng.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-90-04-18213-4 (hbk.: alk. paper) 1. Chinese—Latin America.

2. Chinese—Caribbean Area. 3. China—Emigration and immigration. 4. Latin America—Emigration and immigration. 5. Caribbean Area—Emigration and immigration. I. Tan, Chee-Beng. II. Look Lai, Walton.

F1419.A84C55 2010 980'.004951—dc22

2009049043



ISBN 978 90 04 18213 4

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Fees are subject to change.

Printed and bound in Great Britain by

CPI Antony Rowe, Chippenham and Eastbourne

The Chinese in Latin America and the Caribbean

The Chinese in Latin America and the Caribbean

#### PREFACE

This publication is a reprint of articles published in volume 5 number 1 of the Journal of Chinese Overseas, 2009. The issue is in fact the first issue published by Brill for the Chinese Heritage Centre under the auspices of the International Society for the Study of Chinese Overseas (ISSCO). This is also the first time a JCO issue is reprinted as a book volume. The issue is devoted to the special theme on the Chinese in Latin America and the Caribbean. Dr. Walton Look Lai was invited as guest editor to help solicit papers for review and for publication, and it represents a very successful collaboration between a guest editor and the JCO editor. Dr Kwan Siu Hing did the copyediting and we wish to register our thanks.

We are grateful to the contributors and the external reviewers who remain anonymous. The research articles not only enhance our knowledge of the Chinese in Latin America, they also contribute greatly to the study of the transnational links between Asia and Latin America since the early colonial days. Also fascinating are the discussions on acculturation and assimilation, ethnic relations and relations between the localized Chinese and the new migrants. We also thank Professor Wang Gungwu, chairman of the JCO editorial committee, for his advice.

Tan Chee-Beng

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Walton LOOK LAI (Ph.D. in History, New York University 1990) taught at Rutgers University, the City University of New York and the University of the West Indies until retirement in 2006. He has published four books on Asian migrations to the Caribbean.

Kathleen López (Ph.D. in History, University of Michigan, 2005) is Assistant Professor at Rutgers University. She has published several articles and is working on a book manuscript on the transnational history of the Chinese in Cuba.

St. John Robinson (Ph.D. in Spanish, Louisiana State University, 1982) is Professor of Spanish at Montana State University, Billings. He is the author of *Peopling Belize: Chapters in Migration* (Belize City, 2006).

Edward R. SLACK, Jr. (Ph.D. in history, University of Hawaii, 1997) is Associate Professor at Eastern Washington University. He has published works on opium in Republican China and on Asian migration to the Americas during the Spanish colonial era.

TAN Chee-Beng (Ph.D. in anthropology, Cornell University, 1979) is Professor of Anthropology, Chinese University of Hong Kong. He has published on Chinese overseas and on emigrant communities in southern Fujian, covering ethnicity, food, religion and transnational networks. Paul B. TJON SIE FAT (Ph.D. in anthropology, University of Amsterdam, 2009) has studied the Chinese of Suriname and Surinamese ethnopolitics, and has published a number of articles on these issues.

Lisa Yun (Ph.D. in Literary Studies, University of Texas, 1998) is Associate Professor of English and Asian American Studies at Binghamton University. She is the author of *The Coolie Speaks: Chinese Indenture and African Slavery in Cuba* (Temple University Press, 2008).

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#### INTRODUCTION

#### THE CHINESE IN LATIN AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN

#### Walton Look Lai

This collection of papers is devoted to the Chinese diaspora in the Latin America/Caribbean region. It is part of a growing effort toward filling the knowledge gaps on overseas Chinese communities in this part of the world. To date, there are three excellent bibliographical resources, namely, Jane Cho, Asians in Latin America: A Partially Annotated Bibliography of Select Countries and People (Stanford, 2000); Lamgen Leon, Asians in Latin America and the Caribbean: A Bibliography (Queen's College, City University of New York, 1990), and the paper (in Chinese) by Li Anshan, "A Historiographical Survey of the Study of Chinese Immigrants in Latin America and the Caribbean," in Collected Writings of Asia-Pacific Studies, vol. 1. Institute of Asian-Pacific Studies of Peking University, ed. (Peking University Press, 2004). Li's paper which contains a particularly valuable survey of the past and current academic research in this field by Chinese scholars and their publications has been translated into English and published in Essays on the Chinese Diaspora in the Caribbean, edited by Walton Look Lai (Trinidad: History Department, UWI, 2006). A number of recent journals have also highlighted this theme and its larger implications, they include: the Pacific Historical Review (November 2007) and the special issue of Afro-Hispanic Review (Spring 2008), edited by Kathleen López and Evelyn Hu-DeHart.

The Chinese relationship with the Latin America/Caribbean region falls into three distinct historical time periods: the early colonial period (pre-19th century); the classic migration period (19th to early 20th centuries); and the renewed immigration of the late 20th century to the present.

### The 16th and 17th Centuries

The relationship here is defined by the three-century Manila-Acapulco connection during a period when late Ming and early Qing China was a major regional (and world) power, and the Mexican connection via the

Philippines represented China's main contact with the rising Atlantic economies. Research on, and knowledge of, this period is still very much in its infancy. This applies not just to the early migration of Chinese and other Asians to Spanish Mexico and Peru, as a byproduct of the Manila-Acapulco trade connection, but also to the little known cultural influence of China on early Mexican colonial society, again as a byproduct of this trade. Edward Slack's original paper is a pioneering essay in this field, and contributes not just to the deepening of the Chinese diaspora project, but also to the continuing historical revaluation of the links between China, the New World and the rising Atlantic economies in the pre-industrial centuries, a topic explored best so far by Andre Gunder Frank in his ground breaking study, *Reorient: Global Economy in the Asian Age* (Berkeley, 1998).

## The 19th Century

This period is the best studied by far, and represents what most students of Chinese diaspora studies understand by the term *coolie trade*. Some clarifications are necessary regarding the use of this term. It tends to refer to the Chinese indentured-worker migrations to the plantations of slave and ex-slave America, especially to Cuba and Peru, and sometimes to the smaller flows to the British, French, and Dutch West Indies in the 19th century. Others apply the term *coolie migration* to the entire global movement of Chinese unskilled manual labor (*huagong*) in this period, to distinguish it from the centuries-old movement of traders (*huashang*), artisans, and skilled workers who migrated mainly to Southeast Asia. <sup>1</sup>

This latter usage is historically more accurate. It is worth remembering that the central factors stimulating the growth of all sectors of the Chinese diaspora in the 19th century were basically the same: the explosive growth of the global economy (powered by two industrial revolutions, the British and the American) and the consequential widespread demand for labor generated in a variety of labor-scarce local economies all over the globe (most of which became food and raw-material pro-

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> Wang Gungwu, *China and the Chinese Overseas*. Singapore: Times Academic Press, 1991.

ducers for the industrial and industrializing world). Not all the migrations of indentured coolies were to countries with a history of slavery — Hawaii, the Malay Peninsula, Transvaal in South Africa (at least officially), and Queensland in Australia being the most obvious examples to the contrary. More than seven million of South China's poor sought opportunities overseas owing to a variety of local push factors — among them famine, civil war, and regional ethnic strife — as well as in response to systematic recruiting in the South China region carried out by a multitude of private and government-sponsored agencies, both Chinese and Western. Within this broad coolie migration, some country-recruitment practices and some destinations ultimately proved more calamitous than beneficial for those who went there, and this is what came to distinguish what was called the coolie trade from the more general coolie migration. The Latin American indentured migrations (Cuba and Peru), being the most calamitous of these migrations, thus gave a negative connotation to the term coolie trade.

The international background to the Asian labor migrations of this century is discussed in my own article in this volume. Other articles devote themselves to the 19th-century labor experience. Evelyn Hu-DeHart discusses the issue of anti-Chinese racism in Latin America, mainly in Mexico and Jamaica; St. John Robinson explores an underresearched dimension to this immigration, the Chinese migrations to Central America, and Lisa Yun interviews a Eurasian novelist, Ruthanne Lum Mccunn, on her use of the coolie trade theme in a recent novel, *God of Luck*.

## The 20th Century

Our three final articles discuss the late-20th-century Chinese communities. Isabelle Lausent-Herrera analyzes the issues of identity and assimilation among the new Chinese of Peru, as contrasted with their earlier counterparts. Paul Tjon Sie Fat explores the same theme as it applies to the Dutch-speaking country of Suriname, and in addition discusses a new phenomenon, the rise of anti-Chinese sentiment arising from the new migration, with its connections to globalization, as understood by the local society. Finally, Kathleen López provides valuable insights on a topic still largely unexplored by scholars: the fate of Chinese Cuba after the 1959 Cuban Revolution.

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## PART I

## THE EARLY COLONIAL PERIOD

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#### CHAPTER ONE

## SINIFYING NEW SPAIN: CATHAY'S INFLUENCE ON COLONIAL MEXICO VIA THE NAO DE CHINA

Edward R. Slack, Jr.\*

Scholarship on the Asian diaspora in Latin America has been plagued by one incontrovertible weakness: an appalling lack of research on the "first-wave" (pre-Opium War) of migration. Speaking in terms of the past 5,000 years (and arguably longer), there is no reliable archaeological or humanly chronicled evidence of Asians ever having sailed to the Americas prior to 1565 aboard Friar Andrés de Urdanata's trailblazing galleon the San Pedro (Lorenzo 1996: 99-105). A few years later, Miguel López de Legazpi's conquest of Manila in 1571 ushered in a new era of regular maritime commerce across the Pacific Ocean. The Manila galleons transported Asian products and peoples to Acapulco and other Mexican ports until 1815 (Schurz 1939: 1, 60, 261). For almost two and one-half centuries travelers from Cathay, Cipango (Japan), the Philippines, various kingdoms in Southeast Asia and India were known collectively in New Spain as *chinos* (Chinese) or *indios chinos* (Chinese Indians), as the word *chino/a* became synonymous with the Orient.

It is an indisputable fact that Chinese sojourners or colonists, depending on one's point of view, quickly established themselves in Manila following Spain's conquest of that "insigne y siempre leal" (Illustrious and Forever Loyal) city. The population of Chinese, or *Sangleys* as they were called by the Castilians, reached upwards of 30,000 by the early 17th century (Blair and Robertson 1905: Vol. 9, pp. 319-320; Vol. 12, p. 147; Vol. 16, p. 42, fn. 15). Friar Pedro Chirino related in 1602 that "there have come tradesmen of every calling — all clever, skilful, and cheap, from physicians and barbers to carriers and porters. The Chinese are the tailors, the shoemakers, the blacksmiths, the silversmiths, sculptors, locksmiths, painters, masons and weavers; in short, they represent all

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the trades of the community" (Blair and Robertson 1905: Vol. 12, p. 192). A marketplace called the Parián, the first "Chinatown" of the modern age, was the economic engine driving Spain's imperial ambitions in the Orient. Since all but a handful of *Sangleys* arriving in the Philippines were male, they married or cohabitated with native Filipino women, resulting in a large population of Chinese *mestizos* that numbered 120,621 by 1810 (Wickberg 2001: 13). Chinese converts and *mestizos* crossed the Pacific on the so-called *naos de China* (China ships — actually Spanish galleons and other vessels) in the late 1500s, bringing valuable skills and DNA that contributed to the cultural dynamism of the Viceroyalty of New Spain in kaleidoscopic fashion.

This exploratory article exposes the process of sinification that impacted colonial Mexico on many levels, focusing on Chinese and *mestizo* immigrants as well as the lucrative trade relations that bound New Spain and China together. One of the issues to be addressed is how and when the Chinese actually set foot in Latin America, and how they adapted to the socio-cultural reality of New Spain. Another issue examined is the impact of Chinese exports on the daily lives and economic activity of colonial Mexico's inhabitants over the 250 years of transpacific exchange through the "frontier funnel" of Manila. Thirdly, a genealogical analysis of the term *chino/a* will illuminate the internal dynamics of New Spain's society that would all but obscure its Asian heritage by the early 18th century.

## Los Chinos in New Spain: Demographics and Occupations

Spanish galleons transported Oriental goods and travelers from Manila to colonial Mexico primarily through the port of Acapulco. During the long span of contact between the Philippines and New Spain a minimum of 40,000 to 60,000 Asian immigrants would set foot in the "City of Kings" (Acapulco), while a figure double that amount (100,000) would be within the bounds of probability (Benítez 1992: 38; Mercene 2000: 2-6; Israel 1975: 75-76.)¹ From Acapulco they would gradually disperse

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> There are varied estimates for Asian immigration to Mexico during the colonial era. Guillermo Tovar calculated that during the 17th and 18th centuries 40,000-50,000 *chinos* arrived in New Spain. Floro Mercene claims that 60,000 Filipinos alone made the journey to Acapulco, while Jonathan Israel contends that 6,000 Asian slaves were arriving each decade in the early-to-mid-1600s.