

# Asian Diasporas to Latin America and the Caribbean

by **Evelyn Hu-DeHart** | Brown University | [evelyn\\_hu-dehart@brown.edu](mailto:evelyn_hu-dehart@brown.edu)

Recent scholarly attention to the Spanish Empire in the Pacific is compelling the backdating of the arrival of the first Asians to the Americas, specifically to today's Mexico, to a much earlier date than the conventional historiography has maintained. The new beginning date is now the late sixteenth century, when Miguel de Legazpi sailed from Acapulco, New Spain, across the Pacific to Cebu Island in 1564 and colonized the archipelago for Spain, naming it Las Filipinas, after Emperor Felipe II, to be administered by the Viceroyalty of New Spain. The colonial capital of Manila on the big island of Luzón became the entrepôt for trade with China, exchanging American silver from Mexico and Potosí (then Peru, today Bolivia) for Chinese silk, porcelain, and other finely crafted beautiful objects. Many traders from East and Southeast Asia and the Indian Ocean world also came to trade, such as East Indians, Armenians, and Japanese.

The galleons that made yearly round trips between Acapulco and Manila for 250 years (1565 to 1815) carried people on board in both directions. It was in Spanish Manila that the first large, permanent Chinese community outside China arose, attracted to this Asian outpost of the Spanish Empire by global trade. Before the century's end, Manila's *barrio chino*, called Parián, located on the shores of the Pasig River just outside the Spanish walled city of Intramuros, numbered some 20,000, composed of merchants, artisans, and skilled craftsmen, shopkeepers, service providers, fishermen, horticulturalists, and common laborers of all kinds. As an extension of New Spain or Mexico, Manila's Parián can be said to represent the first American Chinatown. It can also be considered the beginning point of the long and vast global phenomenon called the Chinese diaspora, in both temporal and spatial senses. Soon, large Chinese communities, composed of people from the same origins in

southern Fujian Province, formed in Formosa (later Taiwan), which the Chinese themselves colonized; in Dutch Batavia (Indonesia today); in the British Straits Colonies (today Singapore and Malaysia); and throughout Southeast Asia.

For our interest in this essay, an estimated 20,000 to as high as 100,000 *indios chinos*, as they were labeled in the documents, disembarked in Acapulco in the late sixteenth through the eighteenth century, spreading out throughout New Spain and southward to Peru. Some six to seven thousand migrated as enslaved men and women, including the *beata* Catarina de San Juan, native of the Mughal Empire of today's India, transformed into the popular *la china poblana*. Less well known were the Japanese *daimyo* (feudal lord) Luis de Encio and his son-in-law Juan de Páez, converted Christians who escaped religious persecution at home via Manila to Guadalajara, Mexico, where they became successful business and family men, honored as city notables by the Catholic Church. Aside from this handful of identified Asian migrants, we do not know the precise Asian origins and ethnicities of this considerable population. The vast majority were probably Filipino natives familiar with Spanish language and culture through close interaction at home. In colonial Mexico and Peru, through intermarriage and new identity formations, they merged into local communities, unable or unwilling to maintain distinct Asian communities past the second generation. Migration from Asia effectively ended with the decline of the transpacific galleon trade when Mexico gained independence from Spain and became a republic in the early nineteenth century (Falck y Palacios 2009; Carrillo Martín 2015).

The next chapter of Asian migration to America began in the mid-nineteenth century, after the United States forced Mexico to give up half of her national territory in the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo of 1848, followed immediately by the discovery of gold in California on the new frontier of the looming American Empire. Slavery and the plantation economy came under serious challenges throughout the Americas, from the US South to Cuba of the Spanish Caribbean and Brazil. Latin American republics, such as Peru, and the British colonies of the Caribbean were the first to abolish slavery. By mid-century, every republic and every colony in America was looking for alternative sources of cheap labor; soon, all eyes converged on South China and British India. Three great Asian diasporas met in Latin America and the Caribbean, including the Japanese and the Chinese to Latin American (Spanish and Portuguese) and the Spanish Caribbean (summarized below). The East Indian diaspora of over half a million Hindi and Muslim contract laborers to the British Caribbean constituted the third great Asian migration to the Caribbean, but it is beyond the scope of this brief essay (Look Lai 1991).

Organized, large-scale Japanese migration overseas did not begin until after the Meiji Restoration ushered in modern Japan in 1868, opening up Japan to the world after centuries of self-imposed near isolation. At the turn of the century, a thousand Japanese immigrants arrived in Hawaii, mostly agricultural workers destined for sugar plantation labor under three-year contracts, and from there to California and the US West Coast north to Washington State. They were soon followed by Japanese state-sponsored migration to Brazil, Peru, Bolivia, Argentina, Colombia, Chile, and Paraguay in South America, as well as to Mexico and Cuba. These early agricultural migrants, which included many Okinawans (of the Ryuku Islands), who were subjects of the Japanese Empire, were vanguards of an imperial diaspora that fanned out throughout Asia (Taiwan, Korea, Manchuria), the Pacific, and America (Kikamura-Yano 2002).

When the US enacted very restrictive immigration laws against Asians in 1924 (the “Asiatic barred zone”), more of them turned to South America. A decade later, Latin American countries, notably

Brazil, enacted their own restrictive immigration laws targeting the Japanese, while anti-Japanese riots erupted in Peru and elsewhere. No anti-Japanese action in Latin America matched the extent and intensity of the US government’s mass incarceration of Japanese immigrants (*issei*) who had no access to citizenship for being nonwhite, and their American-born citizen children. Mexico and Peru sent some of their Japanese residents to US camps, or interned them internally. Among the so-called Japanese immigrants to Latin America during the early twentieth century were ethnic Koreans of the Japanese Empire, such as the several hundred families sent under contract in 1905 to work in henequen plantations of Mexico’s Yucatán; some remigrated to Cuba to cultivate henequen in 1921, giving rise to a small Korean community that survives to this day.

With the opening of the Pacific War in 1941, immigration to Latin America came to a standstill, but it would resume after the war through the fifties and into the early sixties, when it gradually petered out. In the twenty-first century, descendants of Japanese immigrants, commonly called *nikkei*, can be found in most Latin American countries, well integrated into their respective societies as middle-class professionals and businessmen as well as literary figures of renown and popularity, such as the poets Pedro Shimose of Bolivia and José Watanabe of Peru, not to leave out Ryoki Inoue of Brazil, author of over one thousand pulp fiction books of crime and romance and recognized as the “world’s most prolific writer” by Guinness World Records.

Unquestionably the most notorious and intriguing Japanese-Latin American is Alberto Fujimori, son of Japanese immigrants who was elected to the presidency of Peru in 1990 and served two terms. As president, he oversaw the capture of leader Abimael Guzmán of the Sendero Luminoso (Shining Path) guerrilla movement, which had terrorized the country for a decade. Controversies continue to swirl around him and his children; currently (June 2021) his daughter Keiko is a leading candidate for the presidency of Peru while her father sits in jail for corruption. The *nikkei* community in Brazil rivals that of the postwar, post-incarceration community in the

United States in size (approximately one million each) and prosperity as successful businessmen and professionals in many fields, as politicians and as writers and artists. Together, the nikkei of Peru and Brazil have made it impossible for the world to deny knowledge of Asian immigration and their prominent presence and social and political integration in Latin America.

By far the oldest, largest, and most widespread group of Asian immigrants in Latin America and the Caribbean are the Chinese, whose large presence in Spanish Manila was noted earlier in this essay. Since Manila, the Chinese diaspora has reached every corner of the world, an incomparable global phenomenon (Pan 2006). Among the very early migrants from Manila to New Spain, we know of only a handful who were clearly identified as *sangleys*, or ethnic Chinese. As with the Japanese, large-scale Chinese migration to the Americas did not take place until the middle of the nineteenth century, during a period which saw the decline of slavery throughout the hemisphere and the expansion and development of world markets for New World cash crops, minerals, and other raw materials, which in turn required major infrastructural improvements such as railroads and shipping. All these enterprises were labor and capital intensive, with labor supplied in large part by Asians, and capital by US and European industrialists.

Chinese migration to Latin America and the Spanish Caribbean in the modern era occurred in three movements. First, there was an impressive agricultural labor migration in the second half of the nineteenth century known as the coolie or yellow trade, *la trata amarilla*. Between 1847 and 1875, close to 250,000 working men landed in Cuba (still a Spanish colony) and Peru (a new republic) (Hu-DeHart 2002; López 2013). Their arrival in these two Spanish American locations heralded the migration during the same decades

of a comparable number of working men recruited to work in California and the US West, providing labor and services in gold mines, agriculture, and most impressively, building the massive transcontinental railroad from the East to the West Coast of the United States. Almost all these immigrants throughout the Americas hailed from the handful of counties of the Pearl River Delta of Guangdong Province, close to British Hong Kong and Portuguese Macao.

The second flow of Chinese migration to Latin America paralleled the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act of the United States, which restricted further entry of Chinese laborers. No longer under contracts, free Cantonese immigrants, mostly men, flocked to Central America, Peru, Cuba, and especially northern Mexico with its long border with the United States, from the Pacific to the Atlantic. On the borderlands, they found plentiful opportunities providing goods and services to a rapidly proletarianizing Mexican population in mining, commercial agriculture, and railroad towns, sometimes cooperating with US capitalists to operate company stores. Ubiquitous and visible in their relative prosperity, they readily formed families with local Mexican women. Not surprisingly, the Chinese also invited resentment and criticism for perceived unfair business practices, in particular among the emerging working class of the borderlands. Before, during, and after the Mexican Revolution (1910–1917), anti-Chinese violence frequently flared up on or near the border, but none so egregious as the massacre of 303 unarmed Chinese laborers and shopkeepers on May 13–15, 1911, in the prosperous northeastern town of Torreón, perpetrated by armed men of Francisco Madero's revolutionary army.<sup>1</sup> Mexico dealt another harsh blow against the Chinese in northern Mexico in 1929–1931 when it expelled most members of the well-established community in the state of Sonora

<sup>1</sup> The 1911 Torreón massacre counts as one of the most egregious incidents of anti-Chinese violence in the history of the Chinese diaspora anywhere in the world. On May 17, 2021, Mexican president Andrés Manuel López Obrador issued in Torreón an official apology to the Chinese community: "Petición de perdón por agravios a la comunidad china en México." Notably, the one incident of extreme anti-Asian violence noted in history occurred a long time ago, in Spanish Manila in 1603, when the Spanish colonial government literally cleared the city of Chinese presence by allegedly massacring all 20,000 of them, a figure repeated over and over again by historians without a serious critical analysis. The figure is clearly a gross exaggeration, although equally clearly something terrible happened. Within a year, large numbers of Chinese returned to Manila and quickly rebuilt the community. The "*pequeño genocidio*" of Torreón in 1911 has been poignantly and dramatically captured by Mexican writer Julián Herbert in his bestseller *La casa del dolor ajeno* (Mexico: Literature Random House, 2015).

bordering Arizona, many of them shopkeepers and, at around five thousand strong, Mexico's largest (Hu-DeHart 1985).

With very few exceptions, Chinese can be found in every Latin American and Caribbean country in the twentieth century, with Cuba, Peru, and Mexico historically hosting the largest Chinese populations, although politics, weak economies, a long pause in immigration after World War II, and continuous intermixing with local women (and some men) have severely reduced their numbers and weakened self-identification as Chinese. Notable Chinese-Latin Americans include the internationally renowned Afro-Chinese artist Wifredo Lam of Cuba; the award-winning short story writer Siu Kam Wen of Peru; the Mexican singer Ana Gabriel of the popular *música norteña*; and the Mexican politician Miguel Ángel Osorio Chong, one step from the presidency as secretary of Gobernación (Internal Affairs) in 2012–2018.

The Asian diasporas of South Asians to the Caribbean and Japanese to Brazil and Peru have essentially ended, as appeared to be the case of the Chinese, but this latter group has been enjoying a resurgence in the twentieth-first century, giving rise to a third wave of Chinese migration to Latin America and the Caribbean. Paralleling Chinese president Xi Jinping's Belt and Road Initiative to invest in infrastructure, telecommunication, and extractive industries (mining and commercial agriculture) around the world, especially in Africa and Latin American and Caribbean, and constituting a new era of globalization led by the Chinese state, Chinese peoples are once again on the move, this time in a way markedly different from the past. In this third wave of the Chinese diaspora to Latin America, they come from all over China, from the traditional coastal regions to interior provinces and the far north; they are families, with women and children prominently featured. Unlike the first wave in the nineteenth century, they are not agricultural laborers or construction workers. Rather, expanding on the role of the second wave of shopkeepers and service providers, the *xin yimin* (new immigrants) for the most part engage in large-scale retail trade importing cheap consumer goods of all sorts made in China, from electronics to clothing, to meet

demands of a growing class of wage earners in cities, towns, and even the countryside (the area of massive soybean cultivation in Brazil, for example). This time, globalization led by a powerful China with imperialist or neocolonial ambitions is driving a new era of the Chinese diaspora to Latin America and Caribbean.

By way of concluding this brief and cursory summary of Asian diasporas in Latin America and the Caribbean through four centuries, let me offer some observations on this long history that is not ending. First, while this essay focuses on Asians in Latin America and the Caribbean, their diasporas can best be understood in the larger hemispheric American context—North, Central and Caribbean, and South—because they are part of a global phenomenon (Kikamura-Yano 2002 is a good example).

Second, Asian migrations to America are inextricably bound to empires: European, US American, and Asian. The role of the Spanish Empire in launching the first stage of Chinese out-migration and settlement overseas, in the case of Spanish Manila in the late sixteenth century, has not been duly recognized by historians of Latin America or of the Chinese diaspora. The role of the Spanish Empire in attracting the first large contingent of Chinese labor migrants to America in the mid-nineteenth century, Cuba in this case, and in launching the vast Chinese diaspora to all the Americas, is equally under-recognized. The US Empire followed on the heels of the Spanish Empire in expanding the scope of the Chinese diaspora through its domain from Hawaii to the West Coast, up and down, with Canada following suit on its West Coast. It should be noted that an Asian empire, the Japanese, played a role in sending its people out as settlers throughout Asia and the Americas, from Hawaii and the US West Coast to Brazil. And today, China is infusing new energy into the Chinese diaspora as companion to its state-directed global reach.

Finally, reflecting on the experience of Asian immigrants and their descendants in Latin America and the Caribbean, a central paradox emerges: on the one hand, early miscegenation (race mixing) between Asian men and local women of difference

racas (white, black, indigenous, mestizo, mulatto) has led to integration and incorporation of Asians into the society at large. The distinguished careers of many Japanese and Chinese Latin Americans are testament to this simple fact. On the other hand, anti-Asian violence directed at the first generation was widespread and could be brutal: witness the Torreón massacre in 1911 and the mass expulsion from Sonora, Mexico, in 1929–1931, not to mention the 1603 massacre of a reported 20,000 Chinese in Spanish Manila. That these most violent actions occurred in New Spain/Mexico and were directed against the Chinese in particular over the course of three centuries begs some further examination and explanation, which is beyond the scope of this brief essay. The history of a persistent Chinese diaspora to Latin America and the Caribbean continues, the final chapter not yet in sight.

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