

# Anti-Chinese Legacies in Latin America: The Past, Present, and Future of Transpacific Developments

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On May 17, 2021, Mexican president Andrés Manuel López Obrador issued a public apology for the 1911 massacre of Mexico's Chinese community in Torreón, Coahuila. The massacre was the culmination of growing xenophobic and racist mobilization that resulted in the death of 303 Chinese residents. In commemorating the tragedy, López Obrador pledged, "The Mexican state will not allow, ever again, racism, discrimination, and xenophobia." His apology was received by Chinese ambassador Zhu Qingqiao, who used the occasion to affirm China's shipment of COVID-19 vaccines and medical equipment to Mexico to support pandemic relief. The event brings together both the history of anti-Chinese violence in the Americas and the region's increasing reliance on China for development today.

The Torreón massacre was far from an isolated incident; it represents just one instance of the widespread anti-Chinese violence that was formative of the Americas during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.<sup>1</sup> While private firms and individuals across the region actively recruited Chinese labor to build essential infrastructure or perform agricultural work, local politicians and citizens decried these same Chinese actors as threats to local economies and national identity. Their allegations echoed nineteenth-century "yellow threat" discourses from the United States, which positioned Chinese immigrants as contaminating foreigners who would undermine the region's health and progress, measured not just in economic growth but also racial whitening. The historian Erika Lee (2005,

238) describes these "racialized understandings of the Chinese as economic, social, and cultural threats" as a "hemispheric Orientalism" that has circulated throughout the Americas. Following the United States' 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act, which imposed a wholesale ban on Chinese immigration, many Latin American nations imposed their own exclusionary, anti-Asian immigration laws that restricted entry, required registration processes, or outright expelled existing communities. López Obrador's apology thus makes visible a history that is often obscured when focusing on nationalist narratives of mestizaje or US imperialism. It draws attention to a fundamental dimension of contemporary politics in the region, and one with hemispheric implications.

López Obrador's gesture is emblematic of a moment of racial reckoning that has forced states and citizens across the Americas to reevaluate historic inequities and violence toward Indigenous, Black, and Asian communities; however, that reckoning is happening amid a new wave of anti-Chinese sentiment. The combination of looming US-China trade wars and pandemic politics has resurrected narratives of Chinese threat that make the anti-Chinese violence enacted in Torreón feel chillingly familiar. As the COVID-19 virus crossed borders, halted mobility, and wreaked havoc on public health systems, local economies, and individual lives, leaders and citizens alike blamed the Chinese government for the pandemic's emergence and marked Asian bodies as carriers of the disease. Racist monikers like the "Chinese flu" directly linked the Chinese state to the virus,

<sup>1</sup> For more on the history of anti-Chinese mobilization in Mexico, see Chang 2017, González 2017, Romero 2011, and Schiavone Camacho 2012. For the history of anti-Chinese sentiment in the Americas and its impact on national identity and immigration policies more generally, see Hu-DeHart 1989, 2010 and Young 2014.

subjecting Asians of all types—often referred to collectively in Latin America as *chinos*—to threat of bodily harm. The current wave of anti-Asian violence unfolding across the Americas reiterates, rather than rejects, the historical racism and xenophobia that López Obrador decried.

Orientalist representations of *los chinos* as foreign threats to the economic, political, and racial integrity of the nation sit in tension with Beijing's growing role as development sponsor and partner in Latin America. In this uneasy balance, how do nineteenth-century racist formulations of China and Chineseness influence this new era of China-Latin American relations? To answer these questions, we need to look beyond Beijing and toward a longer history of transpacific exchanges that have produced multiple Chinas in the region (DeHart 2021). This transpacific framework places before us Cantonese-speaking laborers from the southeast China as well as Mandarin-speaking factory owners from Taiwan; the descendants of nineteenth-century migrants as well as recent arrivals; pro-democracy supporters and Communist Party members, private sector entrepreneurs, state-owned company managers, and unskilled workers. These actors' diverse histories and connections helped to forge national identities and regional development in the past, and they continue to shape local expectations of what Chinese development might mean for the future. Their condensation into a single, essential idea of *los chinos* relies on and reproduces the negative stereotypes of China and Chineseness that have motivated past and present violence across the Americas.

### Proliferating Chinas

To illustrate my point, let me turn to the case of Central America where the presence and stakes of multiple Chinas is especially clear. Central America's development experience exemplifies many patterns of nineteenth- and twentieth-century nation-building across the region. There, state officials collaborated with entrepreneurs to recruit migrants from China, the Caribbean, and Europe to construct regional railroads and other vital infrastructure that would serve as foundations for the nation. The Chinese railroad

workers, largely Cantonese-speaking immigrants from Guangdong and Fujian Provinces, were valued for their perceived industriousness but increasingly maligned for their supposed lack of hygiene and association with vices like gambling and opium. As infrastructure projects were completed, many Chinese immigrants set up small-scale commercial enterprises in local settler communities and then larger cities, both reflecting and fueling local economic growth. Nonetheless, their alleged physical and moral degeneracy, coupled with the economic threat posed by their commercial success, marked them as threats to the aspiring white or mestizo modern nations under construction.

The Cold War multiplied forms of Chineseness in the region as Central American governments demonstrated their anticommunist commitments by establishing diplomatic relations with Taiwan. They built on that ideological affiliation to cultivate a strong development partnership inspired by Taiwan's success in agricultural innovation, manufacturing, and export-led growth. Even today, four out of seven Central American nations continue to recognize Taiwan, rather than the People's Republic of China, as their official diplomatic partner. These political relations were augmented in the 1980s by the arrival of private Taiwanese factory owners and entrepreneurs who triangulated production of their US-bound commodities between Taiwan, Mainland China, and Central America, thus instituting new forms of transpacific flows.

More recently, migrants, visitors, and temporary laborers from Mainland China, especially Beijing, have further diversified the Chinese community in Central America. These subjects include representatives of Chinese embassies, state banks, and enterprises, the migrant workers brought over to build Chinese-sponsored infrastructure projects, private tourists, and entrepreneurs. The growing pervasiveness of Chinese state initiatives in the region have, nonetheless, often led these multiply positioned actors to be collectively perceived as synonymous with Chinese state interests. After all, China's state banks have become the largest lenders to Latin America, outspending traditional international financial institutions.

China has become the region's second largest trade partner, designating ten Latin American countries as "strategic partners" and signing free trade agreements with three of them.<sup>2</sup> Chinese state firms have become a primary source of energy and transport infrastructure initiatives in the region, a situation likely to increase as Latin American nations continue to sign on to Beijing's Belt and Road Initiative. The pandemic context has also made the Chinese state an important supplier of health equipment and vaccines.<sup>3</sup> The Chinese state's growing presence as a development partner thus contributes to regional conceptions of Chinese people, commodities, and culture, conflating them with the Chinese state regardless of their origins, citizenship, or ideology.

### Grounding Chineseness in Contemporary Development Politics

Take, for example, the case of Costa Rica, which in 2007 became the first Central American nation to change its diplomatic affiliation from Taiwan to Beijing. Following the switch, a flurry of bilateral activity promised the beginning of a fruitful relationship, consummated by the construction of a new stadium, the proposed renovation of an oil refinery, and the signing of a free trade agreement. Building on this momentum, in 2011 San José's mayor launched an initiative to transform a historic section of the downtown into a Chinatown honoring earlier Chinese immigrants' contributions to the Costa Rican nation. In doing so, he was refurbishing that past as the foundation for the city's future, hoping the Chinatown would link San José more directly to China's global status and bring with it new cosmopolitan opportunities (DeHart 2015).

Non-Chinese Costa Ricans that I engaged in my research generally expressed admiration for the local Chinese community and its "hardworking" citizens; furthermore, many appreciated the "efficient" labor provided by the imported Chinese laborers who constructed the national stadium. Nonetheless, they often offered this praise through

narratives that repeated well-worn racist tropes that described Chinese migrant labor as "ants moving back and forth across the structure night and day" or characterized the conditions of Chinese labor camps at construction sites as *muy raros* (very odd). These narratives complemented ongoing jokes about local Chinese restaurants using rats or dogs in their dishes. Upon news of the Chinatown project, protests soon broke out by local students who argued Chinatown doesn't exist but was a "Chinese myth," because the Chinese establishments in the area did not constitute the kind of condensed, iconic ethnic zone found in other global cities. To drive home the point, a group of historical preservationists and neighborhood residents marched to the Legislative Assembly building carrying banners reading, "History yes, Chinatown no!" For them, Chinatown would displace Costa Rican history rather than honor it.

Members of San José's Chinese ethnic community were, themselves, mixed about the project, with some more recent immigrants hopeful about the economic opportunities it might offer their businesses, while more settled Chinese worried about how it might reinscribe them within a "ghetto" that reaffirmed essentialist stereotypes. One Chinese immigrant from the latest wave of arrivals in the 1980s argued that the mayor's proposed "traditional" Chinatown was a patronizing reflection of the past rather than an accurate representation of the growing, global power of China today. Apparently agreeing with this sentiment, when Xi Jinping visited Costa Rica in 2013, he did not make any appearances in the Chinatown district.

The Costa Rican case captures the ambiguities and tensions of engaging multiple Chinas and forms of Chineseness. The Chinatown's referents included Taiwan, Beijing, and a historic Chinese diaspora made up of multiple generations, ethnicities, ideological persuasions, and class positions. The initiative sought to project exotic, millenary Chinese culture, Costa Rican multiculturalism, ethnic consumption possibilities for tourists, and claims

<sup>2</sup> The Chinese state has designated Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Costa Rica, Ecuador, Mexico, Peru, Uruguay, and Venezuela as "strategic partners." It has established free trade agreements with Chile, Costa Rica, and Peru.

<sup>3</sup> For an overview of the scope these contemporary China-Latin America relations, see Dussel Peters 2019; Gallagher and Myers 2021; and Wise 2020. For an analysis of medical diplomacy to the region, see Sanborn 2020.

on a powerful global China. Non-Chinese residents worried that instead, the space would erase local history and lay the groundwork for further “invasion” of Chinese culture and commodities. Whereas for Chinatown promoters, past and future came together to promise opportunity, for detractors this same conflation embodied threats to the local economy and national identity that smacked of Orientalism.

This tension between multiple Chinas is not limited to local urban initiatives but also framed major infrastructure projects and public politics. My ethnographic work in Guatemala and Nicaragua illuminates how decades of collaboration with Taiwan had cultivated a local appreciation not only for Taiwan’s democratic identity but also for its strategy of tailoring development assistance to local conditions, including local communities, and promoting skills transfer. Among Chinese diasporic communities across Central America, it also created the expectation that Chinese embassies play an active role in the local community and advocate on the Chinese community’s behalf (see also Siu 2005). These norms established by Taiwan shaped locals’ perceptions of development initiatives from Beijing, for example, a new stadium or major highway renovation. While these projects were seen as valuable feats of modern engineering and “First World technology,” they were also seen as an ambivalent foundation for local development futures. Indeed, the same kinds of Orientalist stereotypes mobilized by anti-Chinese protestors in the nineteenth century—which defined the Chinese as wily, monopolizing, and essentially untrustworthy—led many Central Americans to imagine these current Chinese development gifts from Beijing as Trojan horses that might come back to haunt them.

## Conclusions

The twenty-first-century context has heightened our awareness of the permeability of our borders and the vulnerability of our communities, institutions, and economies to forces beyond our control. It has also forced a reckoning with

the racist foundations of many of those same borders, communities, institutions, and economies. Therefore, while the correlation between China and the COVID-19 virus has been a global phenomenon, in the Americas that association has translated into familiar forms. Brazilian education minister Abraham Weintraub’s tweets ridicule Chinese accents and accuse the Chinese state of plans for world domination. The Mexican politician Carmen Salinas claims that the virus is what happens to “los chinitos por andarse comiendo a los perritos y a los gatitos.” Average citizens carry out violent public assaults on Chinatown residents and Asian Americans across the United States, often invoking insults such as “You are the virus.”<sup>4</sup> All of these incidents speak to the ongoing legacy of hemispheric Orientalisms and their entanglement with a global China that is perceived to be a unique source of threat and possibility.

Analyzing the multiple forms of China and Chineseness in Central America gives us a unique purchase on contemporary relations in the region. Instead of perceiving them as a new relationship between distant and essentially different actors, we begin to see how a history of transpacific encounters and exchanges have contributed to regional development and national identity. Nineteenth-century Chinese immigrants helped build essential infrastructure and provided the foil against which a white, modern citizenry could be defined. Taiwanese development partnerships reaffirmed the region’s democratic identity and established central ideas about the values and practices that should guide Chinese development collaborations. This history reveals Chineseness to be constitutive of regional development and national identity, rather than foreign to it. It also demonstrates why residents assess the nature and stakes of contemporary Chinese state development partnerships in relationship to long-standing assumptions about who China is and what Chineseness means for Latin American sovereignty, national identity, and development. Therefore, as we confront this newest wave of anti-Chinese sentiment in the Americas, we must appreciate the legacy of anti-Chinese violence that accompanies

<sup>4</sup> See Biller 2020; *El Universal* 2020; Patrick 2020; and Cai, Burch, and Patel 2021 for more on these instances. See Chan and Montt Strabucchi 2021 for an analysis of dynamics in Chile and their relationship to Orientalist representations.

the promise of new development opportunities through Beijing, as both continue to shape the future prospects and limits of transpacific developments.

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