Chinese Mexicans: Mexico's Forgotten and Overlooked Mestizos

Rocío Gomez

CSUSB

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.lib.csusb.edu/history-in-the-making

Part of the Latin American History Commons

Recommended Citation
Available at: https://scholarworks.lib.csusb.edu/history-in-the-making/vol10/iss1/4

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the History at CSUSB ScholarWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in History in the Making by an authorized editor of CSUSB ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact scholarworks@csusb.edu.
Chinese Mexicans: Mexico’s Forgotten and Overlooked Mestizos

By Rocio Gomez

Abstract: This paper examines the Chinese community’s significant cultural and economic contributions in early twentieth-century Mexico and its impact on the ever-evolving term “mestizo.” After years of growing financial success in northern Mexico, Mexicans grew resentful of the Chinese community not only for harnessing wealth in their country, but for intermarrying with Mexicans and raising children, Chinese Mexicans, who were seen as illegitimate. The Chinese community later became the target of an oppressive anti-Chinese campaign that resulted in their expulsion from the country. At the crux of the campaign was the general disapproval of the matrimonial unions between Chinese men and Mexican women, which stems from the resentment at the financial success within the Chinese community, which was perceived by Mexicans as subhuman, much like the indigenous population. In the aftermath of the expulsion from Mexico, and later, repatriation, Chinese Mexicans were left to grapple with the pressure to embrace one side of their identity and erase the other to appease their families and society, never being regarded as “mestizos.” Providing daunting accounts of violence against the Chinese community and fascinating testimonials from Chinese Mexicans, this paper attempts to bring awareness to this community’s struggles and triumphs in early modern Mexico and acknowledges that the Chinese Mexicans’ claim to the notion “mestizo” is a legitimate and merited one.

The term mestizo embodies a very rich and complex history in Mexico. Mestizaje, or best translated using the historically loaded English word, miscegenation, resulted from years of ethnic mixing.
between the indigenous people of pre-colonial Mexico, Spanish immigrants, and African slaves. Once considered a racial slur in colonial Mexico, the term *mestizo* currently represents a celebration of fusing cultures and a banner of inclusion under which Mexico acknowledges its citizens with a diverse heritage. This recognition extends to a growing variety of foreign cultures in Mexico, but Chinese Mexicans find themselves unperceived as such despite their significant economic and cultural influence. Chinese-Mexicans, predominantly the offspring of Chinese fathers and Mexican mothers, fall into the category of *mestizaje*, but Mexico’s modern cultural climate fails to widely acknowledge them as *mestizos*. The Chinese-Mexican experience in China and Mexico is one of struggle, racial prejudice, and remarkable economic success. In the early twentieth century, the Mexican government perceived their prosperity as a threat and actively campaigned against them using Sinophobia and citing financial corruption as reasons to expel Chinese-Mexicans from the country. Chinese influence in Mexico is significant, but a severe lack of awareness of their history and presence in the country diminishes both their claim as *mestizos* and a merited role in Mexico’s proud notion of *mestizaje*.

**Chinese Immigration**

Chinese immigration to Mexico, which began in the seventeenth century in small numbers, increased significantly when the United States denied them entry after enacting the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1882. After helping complete the transcontinental railroad, the Chinese, who provided a steady and fairly cheap source of labor during construction, continued immigrating to America’s western coast at a high rate. The Exclusion Act may have prohibited Chinese immigrants from directly entering the country, but they sought ways to make their entry into the United States through its southern neighbor; Mexico. As a result, smuggling Chinese into the United States attracted many Americans looking to make a profit, and the city of Ensenada, Mexico, was a prime destination for Chinese immigrants seeking passage up north.

---

Nationwide coverage in the United States concerning this smuggling practice demonstrates just how profitable it was. Chicago’s short-lived publication, The Day Book, provided a detailed account of the nature of smuggling Chinese immigrants. The article reports that many Chinese immigrants, or “Chinks,” as they were commonly referred to even in ostensibly reputable publications, were, “willing to pay as high as $500 each to get into this country.”\(^2\) A heavy concentration of Chinese immigrants arrived in Baja California, enabling a lucrative business in organized smuggling and an accompanying hierarchical factor.\(^3\) Alternatively known as “Queen of the Smugglers,” a woman named Ethel Hall was arrested in Los Angeles for illegally transporting Chinese immigrants from Mexico into the U.S in 1912. The same article contends that one could earn $15,000 for smuggling thirty Chinese immigrants in a boat from Mexico to the U.S. and claimed that business continued to flourish, as Mexico had no standing law prohibiting Chinese immigration. \(^4\)

Without the Mexican government mandating an official order to object Chinese immigration, the finance minister, Matías Romero, advocated for Chinese laborers to replace indigenous workers even several years prior to the Exclusion Act in the U.S. Author Grace Delgado states that in 1875, Romero, then senator of the Mexican state of Chiapas, vehemently expressed his ideas for bringing in Chinese laborers to work in Mexico’s tropical landscapes, or \textit{tierra caliente}, which rested along the border with Guatemala and Belize. The plan was to grow coffee beans in these territories and later export them to the United States.\(^5\) In his essays, Romero expressed his belief that the most qualified laborers to work in these regions were, “...Asians, primarily from climates similar to ours, primarily China...” and emphasized their skills as agriculturalists to support his argument.\(^6\) Romero’s advocacy for Chinese labor was finally welcomed twenty-four years after his essays were published in 1875.

\(^3\) Ibid.
\(^4\) Ibid.
(rulers of China from 1644-1911) signed “The Treaty of Amity, Commerce, and Navigation” in 1899, allowing Chinese immigrants to travel to Mexico under official protection. The treaty was nurtured by an amicable correspondence and the exchange of goods between Romero and Qing Dynasty officials.\(^7\)

This economic move satisfied Mexican capitalists who oversaw business in the tierra caliente. They could now look forward to an influx of people who provided fairly cheap labor and not worry about increasing wages for their Mexican workers. Historian Robert Chao Romero claims that Matías Romero’s stance on Chinese emigration was particularly appealing to large capitalists, saying they believed, “Chinese laborers were perceived to be skillful and persevering,” while arguing that the, “high cost of subsistence and rising worker salaries threatened to stymie Mexican national economic development.”\(^8\) Within the same year of the treaty in 1899, publications in Mexico resonated Romero’s enthusiasm and rhetoric regarding Chinese laborers. El Tráfico, a prominent newspaper from the state of Sonora, remarked on the Chinese immigrants’ ability of conditional adjustment, claiming that they displayed, “marvelous qualities of strength, resilience and adaptability” (author’s translation).\(^9\)

These publications aimed to validate the Mexican government’s exploitation of Chinese laborers, but the pseudoscientific reasoning used to make their case was later arranged to express unfavorable sentiment towards them. El Tráfico published a piece reflecting a highly antagonistic opinion on the Chinese presence in Mexico, collectively referring to them as “Mongol”. It further explained that, despite their inferior race, Chinese certainly had the potential to be true world players if only they adjusted to the likes of Western civilization:

The Mongol is the ant of the human family; it does not know idleness, it eats frugally and has the cumulative power of the insect aforementioned. For

---

\(^7\) Delgado, *Making the Chinese Mexican*, 15.
the Chinese people idleness is a crime and wastefulness an offense...The commercial talent of the children of the celestial empire is superior to that of the Jews, for where Israelites succumb in the struggle for existence, the Mongol flourishes and becomes enriched. If the Chinese were more sociable, and if the Chinese, instead of adapting to climate, assimilate to Western ways, wear a frock and remove their queue, they would be a financial power in Europe and America today (author’s translation).10

The article reiterates that the Chinese presence is a necessary evil and an indispensable source of productive labor that enhances Mexico’s development, stating that without them, “the mining operations would be suspended in critical periods, [and] without [the Chinese] the State’s horticultural and agricultural products would be relatively insignificant” (author’s translation).11 The arrival of Chinese immigration concentrated in northern Mexico, and by 1923 their numbers reached over 3000 in the state of Sonora. Mexicali, situated in northern Baja California, drew in many Chinese laborers, especially after the introduction of cotton in 1902.12 Historian Phillip A. Dennis states that in the same year, a group of fifty Chinese laborers set out for the city of Mexicali after finding little to no work in the city of Mazatlán. They arrived in San Felipe, which lies on the eastern coast of Baja California, and aimed to reach Mexicali after crossing the desert just beyond the city. Alas, most of the men met an ill fate, and Dennis affirms that due to, “an incompetent Mexican guide and their own ignorance of the country, all but seven died on the trip.”13 Thereafter, the desert situated between the city of San Felipe and Mexicali became known as “Desierto de los Chinos” (The Desert of the Chinese).14 Despite such unfortunate circumstances, the Chinese in Mexico continued to seek fruitful opportunities in

10 El Tráfico, Guaymas, October 8, 1899, 2, quoted in Gonzalez, Chinos y Antichinos en Mexico, 37.
11 Ibid.
14 Ibid.
Mexico, eventually hosting more than 5,000 Chinese immigrants in just a few years’ time.

A growing economy in northern Mexico motivated Chinese migrants to settle in the region and encouraged entrepreneurship. They began establishing their own shops, restaurants and other businesses, but growing success in their endeavors were soon met with resentment from the Mexican population that they were joining. Economic prosperity in the Chinese community presented competition for Mexican businessmen, and it seemed that this was the catalyst for several years of official campaigning against Chinese immigrants and their families.

Anti-Chinese Sentiment

The city of Torreón, in the state of Coahuila, was home to a population of 35,000 and a thriving Chinese community in 1911, and its financial success had been influenced in part by a visit in 1906 from Kang Youwei, a scholar and leader of a reform movement in China that was intended to help restore the Guangxu Emperor to the throne. After he was exiled from China, Kang visited Chinese communities around the world seeking funds for the China Reform Association. He personally invested in a plot of land in Torreón and sold it back to the, “Chinese and other foreigners for a substantial profit.” The Chinese were indeed influential and prosperous, but Mexican citizens grew bitter toward their economic success. A man by the name of Jesús C. Flores was one of Torreón’s most vocal opponents on the Chinese presence. On May 5, 1911, he gave a speech condemning the Chinese, blaming them for any “economic troubles.” As this occurred during the Mexican Revolution, a circular, published on May 12th by the Chinese Merchants and Laborers’ Society of Torreón, warned the community of an “impending attack and the probability of mob violence,” after “Maderista revolutionary forces in the cities of Gómez Palacio and Ciudad Lerdo prepared for an attack upon Torreón.” What followed on May 13th was a three-day battle that resulted in hundreds of deaths.

16 Chao Romero, The Chinese in Mexico, 150.
17 Ibid., 151.
The Torreón massacre, as the event was subsequently known, proved to be an unforgettable incident of unfathomable cruelty and violence towards the Chinese immigrant community in Mexico. Chao Romero deems it the, “worst act of violence committed against any Chinese diasporic community of the Americas during the twentieth century.”\(^\text{18}\) 4,000 rebels, led by Francisco I. Madero, arrived in Torreón on May 15th after General Lojero’s federal army of 670 retreated and unleashed a brutal, racially motivated attack on the Chinese community. Chao Romero cites a witness account in the aftermath of the murder of over 300 Chinese immigrants, including men, women and children:

The town was searched for Chinese and all who could be found were murdered in the most brutal and horrifying manner. In one instance the head of a Chinaman was severed from his body and thrown from the window into the street. In another instance a soldier took a little boy by the heels and battered his brains out against a lamp post...In another instance a Chinaman was pulled to pieces in the street by horses hitched to his arms and legs...No language can adequately depict the revolting scenes which attended this carnival of human slaughter...The mind recoils in horror from the contemplation of such an atrocity.\(^\text{19}\)

Sources recounting the massacre suggest a general lack of knowledge of the event in Mexico. Scholars like Javier Treviño Ragel and Pablo Hammeken state that, “up until recently, few academics have addressed the issue of the murder of the Chinese in Mexico: and when it has, it has been done in a rather tangential manner” (author’s translation).\(^\text{20}\) Ragel and Hammeken claim that the reason as to why the massacre is not closely studied lies in the belief that any, “antipathy towards the Chinese communities was a ‘natural’ consequence of normal economic problems brought on by

\(^{18}\) Chao Romero, *The Chinese in Mexico*, 149.
The actions of people who spoke out against the Chinese community in Torreón, such as Jesús C. Flores, (who also lost his life during the massacre), supports the argument. However, a near genocidal massacre of this magnitude seems to have stemmed from something much more complex.

In the regions of northern Mexico, the Chinese community flourished with remarkable economic success in the first three decades of the twentieth century. In cities like Torreón, Chinese immigrants made up only two percent of the population. The Mexican residents of these regions (chiefly Sonora, Coahuila and Baja California) grew spiteful of their prosperity. It clashed with their concept of power, which was deeply rooted in a model of success that hierarchically places indigenous Mexicans and other non-European immigrants at the bottom. Ragel and Hammeken say it is worth considering how, “race has conditioned the behavior of the State and society and how it helped construct the idea of nation” (author’s translation).

Mexico’s notion of success throughout its early development as a nation was fundamentally based on European superiority and racial hierarchy, taking precedence over the argument that economic competition with foreigners was the catalyst for antipathy towards minorities:

The elite of independent Mexico did not always aspire to establish or create a postcolonial identity, but chose to imitate a European model. In reality, the ruling class has made a considerable effort importing institutions, rules, and power mechanisms that originated in Europe...the state controlled and designed the terms of racial expressions, as well as the racist marginalization and exclusion: that is, it came to be, in determined moments, a racist State” (author’s translation).

Sinophobia and Chinese communities in Mexico have yet to be examined thoroughly, and, “they remain visibly ignored issues because their analysis remains partially or tangentially

---

21 Ragel and Hammeken, “Racismo y Nación,” 672.
22 Ibid., 674.
23 Ibid., 681.
24 Ibid., 691.
developed.”

Given the nature of the attack, and the high number of casualties, it is no surprise that discourse over what occurred in Torreón has been intentionally desensitized. Nonetheless, what transpired that day stands as a testament to the fierce animosity Mexicans felt towards the prosperity of the Chinese community. In Sonora, however, we find the most extreme case and execution of anti-Chinese sentiments.

In 1895, the state of Sonora was home to over 1,000 Chinese immigrants, and by the mid-1920s it hosted more than 24,000. The population grew concurrently with the Mexican government’s concern of keeping Chinese men away from Mexican women. Their unions, along with economic competition, were at the center of anti-Chinese campaigns. They put in motion legislations throughout the 1920s attempting to suppress the Chinese community in a variety of ways. The year 1916 marks the first official stance Mexican businessmen took against the Chinese merchants of Sonora.

In February of 1916, a small group of Sonoran businessmen convened in the city of Magdalena and, according to Chao Romero, “evaluated the impact of the Chinese mercantile presence in Sonora and established a Mexican business organization called the Junta Comercial y de Hombres de Negocios (Council of Commerce and Businessmen).” A written declaration resulted from this and the council members expressed their concerns over the Chinese. They stated their goal to promote “the interest of the Mexican businessman through all possible means,” and, unsurprisingly, to utilize “all measures allowed by law to bring about the extinction of the Asian merchant.” This rhetoric, as Chao Romero explains, latched onto the coattails of the “nationalist fervor sparked by the Mexican Revolution, [and] they couched their complaints against the Chinese within a framework of patriotic nationalism.” The Chinese decided it was not in their best interest to stand idly by and sought help from the government to ensure their protection.

---

28 Ibid.
29 Ibid., 158.
A month after the council’s manifesto, the Chinese community in the city of Cocorit wrote to the Mayor and Governor of Sonora. The earnest nature of their concerns reflects the extent to which the government disregarded the well-being of their community. Their letter states:

We, perhaps more so than other foreigners, have suffered the consequences of the fratricidal war that has bloodstained the country...We have patiently suffered these unfortunate events, without complaint or protest. As good friends to the Mexicans, we regret everything [that happened], and all we have left is the latent spirit to work...We, as foreigners within the country, believe that we comply with all the laws; we work honestly and pay our contributions in a timely manner; we don’t bring harm to anyone, yet we have been innocent victims of war; for such a reason and without intention to claim compensation, we believe that we have the right to be considered with justice to the same degree as everyone else (author’s translation).³⁰

Through a series of letters and telegrams to the government, members of the Mexican community advocated for the removal of Chinese immigrants from Sonora, and members of the Chinese community appealed for recognition as law-abiding citizens. The ongoing conflict between the two was genuinely palpable, and the persistence with which the Chinese immigrants lay claim to their citizenship offers a telling insight into the government’s negligence.

In 1922, members of the Chinese community in Cananea, Sonora, sent a telegram to the president, Alvaro Obregón, stating that they reserve the right to respectfully oppose and protest the state’s decision to expel Chinese immigrants for deeming them, “pernicious foreigners.”³¹ Law 31, an anti-miscegenation law, was passed in 1923, prohibiting the marriage between Mexican women and individuals of the Chinese race, even if they had become

³⁰ Archivo General de la Nación, fondo Gonzáles Ramirez, caja 8, volumen, 100., as cited in CYA, 60.
³¹ Archivo General de la Nación, fondo Obregón-Calles, 104-ch-1., as cited in CYA, 78.
naturalized Mexican citizens. Couples chose to marry despite this law, and several had to pay a fine of $100 to $500 for doing so. Failure to pay the fine resulted in incarceration.

Mexican women and Chinese men who wished to be united in matrimony would challenge the law seeking *amparo*, or judicial relief, against its enforcement and petitioned to “resist the discrimination that the State of Sonora legally sanctioned.” Chinese-Mexican families were not legally recognized by the state, and since the civil codes instituted in 1870 only recognized civil marriages, those in free unions had to register their children as illegitimate. Despite extensive assimilation efforts on the Chinese men’s part, families like that of Gim Pon and his wife Julia Delgado, who claimed “Mexican nationality, Spanish literacy, and property ownership – [they] lacked formal recognition.” Records state that free union couples, like Gim Pon and Julia Delgado, continued to bring “*amparo* cases against discrimination in Sonora between 1924 – shortly after the passage of Law 31 – and the end of 1932, when Chinese were violently expelled from the state.” Before their expulsion, however, the question of mestizaje, or miscegenation, dominated much of the anti-Chinese propaganda in Sonora.

**Chinese Mexican Unions**

Chao Romero asserts that many believed that the only reasonable explanation for such unions was that, “wealthy Chinese merchants lured native Mexican women into marriage by promising them lives of material comfort and prosperity.” The driving force that fueled this discrimination with great effectiveness was José Angel Espinoza’s 1932 book *El Ejemplo de Sonora, or The Example of Sonora.*

---

33 Ibid., 421.
34 Ibid., 425.
Espinoza’s illustrations demonized Chinese men and criticized the Mexican women who had chosen a Chinese man as their mate. His works also accused Mexican women of betraying their nation and race by marrying a Chinese man. The illustration above reads, “The wedding night… and five years later,” and depicts a Mexican woman on the left, beaming with happiness and radiant with health, perhaps at the prospect of all the luxuries in life her Chinese husband promised her. On the right we see the same woman five years later, now emaciated and fragile, forced to care for three strange ape-like creatures who seem to be her children. Her Chinese husband, who now dons a new suit, seems to be walking away, abandoning his family. Espinoza’s illustration clearly aims to suggest that Mexican women would come to regret their decision to marry a Chinese man, as they only entice them with material luxuries and will leave them soon after. It articulates, quite blatantly, the unsuitability of Chinese men as marital partners.

36 Quoted in *The Chinese in Mexico*, 88.
José Angel Espinoza, El ejemplo de Sonora (Mexico, D.F.: n.p., 1932), 36.

The illustration above takes anti-Chinese sentimentality one step further. The caption reads, “Oh wretched woman! . . . You thought you would enjoy an easy life by giving yourself to a Chinese man, and instead you are a slave and the fruit of your mistake is a freak of nature.”37 The nature of these paintings suggest that women were willing to overlook the flaws of their Chinese husbands for the sake of material wealth and financial stability. However, it must also be noted that not all relationships formed between Mexican women and Chinese men were frowned upon. In fact, evidence suggests that the unions were, at times, encouraged. Historian Julia Marfa Schiavone Camacho claims that, “Mexican and indigenous fathers who worked for Chinese landowners sometimes encouraged their daughters to marry their Chinese bosses for economic stability.”38 Despite this, there were still efforts in condemning the union between Mexican women and Chinese men, and race came into play as the key factor.

37 Quoted in The Chinese in Mexico, 79.
During the time of steady economic growth in northern Mexico, when Matías Romero promoted Chinese immigration, *El Tráfico*’s publications alluded to an ethnic preference for what was deemed proper miscegenation. It promoted the immigration of “the French, the Saxon and the British,” as Europeans were considered racially superior, to come and work in northern Mexico for this very reason (author’s translation). According to a publication in 1899, this had to be done to prevent the gradual degeneration of the Mexican race from evolving into, “a nation of dwarves, as are the natives of Tibet and how the Chinese will become” (author’s translation).³⁹ However, European immigrants found Mexico’s hot northern climate intolerable, and many did not stay despite the growing number of jobs. After the Treaty of Amity granted Chinese immigrants safe passage to Mexico, and once they started populating the north, *El Tráfico* adopted a new perspective regarding the ethnic mixing occurring there. It stated:

The idea that the indigenous race will degenerate when crossed with the Chinese should not concern us, because the time has come to confess, without shame, that since the death of Friar Bartolomé de las Casas, there are very few Mexicans, both within the government and outside of it, who care about the future of the aborigines (author’s translation).⁴⁰

The idea of *mestizaje* became much more complex in Mexico, and apart from facing constant discrimination, the Chinese also found themselves excluded from that idea “even in a country defined by a *mestizo* ideal where interracial relationships were commonplace,” as historian Kif Agustine-Adams states.⁴¹ *El Tráfico* was careful not to include the Chinese in their definition of *mestizaje* by making certain that the term, “focused heavily on mixing among indigenous peoples, Spanish, and, nominally, blacks to the virtual exclusion of Chinese and other Asian.”⁴² It is also apparent that Espinoza’s illustrative attacks did not spare Chinese-Mexican children.

---

³⁹ “Raza e Inmigración,” *El Tráfico*, June 1, 1899, in *Chinos y Antichinos en México*, 2.
⁴⁰ Ibid.
⁴² Ibid.
“La Mestización” (Race Mixing), Jose Angel Espinosa, *El Ejemplo de Sonora* (Mexico, D.F.; n.p. 1932), 56.43

The image above expresses what Espinoza, and other Mexicans, considers an ideal *mestizo*. It compares two children who are the product of at least one Mexican parent. The caption for the child on the left reads, “12 year-old Indo-Latino mestizo,” while the caption beneath the child on the right reads, “14 year-old product of a Chinese-Mexican mixing.”44 It is clear that the prevailing standard for *mestizos* in Mexico did not include the Chinese. The term *mestizo* became almost exclusively associated to the fusing of indigenous peoples and Spaniards. By the 1930s, the “rhetoric of *mestizaje* in Mexico idealized Spanish/indigenous miscegenation, acknowledged black, and ignored Chinese.”45 They could not be officially recognized by the Mexican government as

43 As cited in “Marriage and Mestizaje,” 430.
44 Ibid.
mestizos, but they certainly made a great impression with their financial success.

Economic competition fueled tensions between the Chinese and Mexicans in Sonora and maintained its reign as the underlying factor in the campaigns against the Chinese. It was estimated that by 1923, Sonora boasted “twenty large industries, thirty tailor shops, fifty bakeries, seventy-two restaurants, thirty-six hotels, eighty laundries, fifty meat markets, fourteen sweet shops, and thirteen cantinas run by the Chinese.”46 In 1929, after the Great Depression hit, many Mexican workers who were trying their luck in the United States returned home, and the sight of economically prosperous Chinese did not sit well with them.

Dennis affirms that upon arriving, these Mexican sojourners “found Chinese everywhere, prosperous and controlling jobs and wealth they themselves wanted.”47 As a result, the anti-Chinese campaigns escalated and began implementing laws that required all businesses and establishments in Sonora to have eighty percent of their workforce consist of Mexican employees.48 This attempt at regulating the expansion of the Chinese community in Sonora exhibits a fear that sought to justify their prosperity and contributions to Mexico as a genuine threat. Sequentially, these laws implemented to suppress Chinese commercial expansion, and marriages between Chinese men and Mexican women, proved too difficult for many Chinese to endure. At its zenith in the summer of 1931, the anti-Chinese campaign in northern Mexico was successful, and many Chinese Mexican families were left with no choice but to leave Mexico. While some Chinese emigrated to different parts of Mexico, most returned to China with their families, which in turn lead to another significant development in the Chinese-Mexican identity.

The Chinese-Mexican Identity

A significant portion of the Chinese community returned to southern China, to the Guangdong province, during the time of repatriation, and the prejudice Chinese-Mexican families experienced in Mexico for challenging the fixed notion of

47 Ibid., 69.
48 Chao Romero, The Chinese in Mexico, 166.
mestizaje followed them. Many Chinese-Mexican families landed in southern China before relocating to a more permanent residence in the former Portuguese colony, Macau, situated just west of Hong Kong. It is estimated that some 500 families from Mexico reached Macau during the time of repatriation, which in total was estimated to be about 2,000 people. One of the immediate problems these families encountered upon their arrival was the realization that some of the men already had wives there in China. This was problematic because not only did the husbands not tell their Mexican wives, but some expected them to accept the arrangement.

In the case of Rosa Murillo de Chan, she was told by her husband, Felipe Chan, that he was never married, but recognized otherwise when her family reached Guangdong province in 1930. Refusing to live next door to her husband’s first wife, Rosa made an appeal to Mexican officials asking to return to Mexico, but she was not permitted to come back because she had given up her Mexican citizenship upon marrying Felipe Chan. Other Mexican women encountered the same fate as Rosa Murillo de Chan upon arriving in China with their husbands and children. They were either expected to accept their husbands’ Chinese wives’ children or leave with their own children, but they would have to relocate to another part in China since their Mexican citizenships were revoked. While Mexican women, along with their Chinese husbands, had difficulty adjusting to life in China, their children, who were products of the new mestizaje, had trouble seeking channels through which to express their identity as children of two cultures. Despite their efforts to appease both sides of their family, these Chinese Mexicans chose to associate with one cultural identity over the other, which at times was largely affected by their location.

Macau, a city on the southern coast of China, was a Portuguese territory with Catholic foundations and Iberian influences that made it possible for Mexican women and their children to get a sense of belonging. Many languages, such as Portuguese, Cantonese and Spanish, were spoken there and as result, and Chinese Mexican children grew up learning several languages. The exposure to their cultural Iberian roots enabled many Chinese Mexicans to channel strong feelings about their

49 Camacho, “Crossing Boundaries,” 558.
50 Ibid.
Chinese Mexicans

pride as Mexicans, which in turn made them the driving force in the efforts to repatriate back to Mexico.

Ramón Lay Mazo, who arrived in Macau from the Mexican state of Sinaloa with his family when he was four, worked as a scribe for Macau’s Ecclesiastical Chamber. He led the repatriation movement in Macau, and in his letter to Mexican president López Mateos in 1959 he stated that the Mexican community in Macau, despite residing in China for an extended period of time, did not understand the “exotic practices and customs of these people whose mentality is so opposite ours.”

It became apparent that Ramón, along with others like Alfonso Wong Campoy, wholly associated with their Mexican identities. This may have been the result of hearing Mexico being referred to as their true homeland by family members, especially the mothers, who were Mexican. Julia María Schiavone Camacho closely examined the manifestation of the Mexican identity in China and explained the way Chinese Mexicans might have been nurtured into associating with their Mexican identity. Here she uses Alfonso Wong Campoy as an example of such an upbringing:

Mexican women and some Chinese men were at the center of Macau’s Chinese Mexican community. They taught their children the Spanish language, passed on Mexican cultural traditions, and kept alive memories of community life in Mexico, which many of the children had left when they were very young. These parents taught their children that there was more to Mexico than the anti-Chinese campaigns that orchestrated their expulsion. Wong Campoy recalled that both his mother and father taught him to love Mexico and that [his father], like other Chinese Mexicans, believed that the Mexican government rather than the Mexican people had expelled the family.

Camacho explains that a “romanticized notion” of Mexico is what people like Wong Campoy and Lay Mazo most strongly

51 Camacho, “Crossing Boundaries,” 565.
identified with, growing up with the sense that their family belonged in Mexico.\textsuperscript{53} What strengthened that identity was the opposition Chinese Mexicans faced from the Chinese community because of their Mexican heritage. Ramon Lay Mazo dissociated himself from China, as he knew that many of the ideas in the west formed an unfavorable opinion concerning the People’s Republic of China. He used the fear of communism in an attempt to sway Mexican officials to help rescue Chinese Mexican families in China. An interesting case in which Lay Mazo’s anti-communist rhetoric rings true is that his nephew, Antonio León Sosa Mazo, a reputable classical Chinese dancer in Guangdong province, was rejected from a university where he planned to study medicine for being of mixed-race. His mother was referred to as “Mexican devil.”\textsuperscript{54} Shortly after his rejection, he wrote \textit{El invierno de otoño} (The winter in fall) a book which “described a student’s experience of the sudden changes in government as well as private and public life and how texts, materials, professors, and discipline at the university had been transformed.”\textsuperscript{55} The book was published during the time when the Communist party was censoring books, but he was later persecuted for it because it contained material that promoted capitalist ideologies. After a failed attempt in obtaining permission to return to Mexico in 1959, communist authorities found him in Macau and executed him.

Chinese Mexicans in Macau and Hong Kong continued to voice their feelings of oppression, and from this came the expression “being like a Mexican” which was associated with “being poor and stateless.”\textsuperscript{56} In part due to Lay Mazo’s incessant pleas to the Mexican government for repatriation to Mexico in the late 1950s, efforts began in bringing back Chinese Mexicans to Mexico. An organization known as the Lion’s Club took on the task of initiating a national campaign for this, beginning with the chapter in Tampico, Tamaulipas, by applying three strategies. The first was in appealing Mexican patriotism in their supplication to President López Mateos on behalf of Mexican families abroad in China by using clauses in the Mexican constitution from 1917 claiming that Mexican women and their children had to be protected by their government while on foreign lands. Secondly,

\begin{footnotes}
\footnote{Camacho, \textit{Chinese Mexicans}, 136.}
\footnote{Ibid., 143.}
\footnote{Ibid.}
\footnote{Ibid.}
\end{footnotes}
and perhaps the most contradictory claim, was the issue of protecting “abandoned Mexican women who live in China alone.” This was the very demographic the anti-Chinese campaign spared no expense in slandering for marrying Chinese men. The third tactic used was to shed light on the poor conditions Mexicans might face in China as well as the fear of communism spreading into their community.

The efforts of the Lions Club in Mexico and diplomatic communication proved successful, and Mexico would begin to repatriate its citizens in China by May 1960. Sonora, however, which maintained its anti-Chinese sentiment, responded to the repatriation process by opposing the idea. In the end, the fear of communism, which was underscored as the most alarming offense to Mexicans abroad, won out the anti-Chinese rhetoric. As a result, many families were reunited in Mexico, but they face challenges reintegrating themselves, as it became very difficult for some to find employment. Alfonso Wong Campoy’s mother, Dolores Campoy Wong Fang, told President López Mateos that her sons were having a hard time finding a stable job, even after the officials said they would help in this regard. The process of assimilation for Chinese Mexicans was another complex layer added to their identity.

The strategies used to bring Chinese Mexicans back into Mexico were controversial in the sense that they were the very reasons also used to exclude them from the notion of mestizaje and from Mexico itself. The Lions Club members intended to bring back Chinese Mexicans for possessing qualities many of them clearly possessed before a mass expulsion was prompted in the early 1930s. In their supplication to the government, members of Chinese communities in Mexico expressed their allegiance to the country in which they resided, worked, and formed families. Mexico was reclaiming Chinese Mexican children that it previously had not thought twice to regard as illegitimate. Could it be that their partial, or whole-hearted, claim to their Mexican identity as adults made a difference? If so, Ramon Lay Mazo’s case certainly points to that. What about the Mexican women who were vilified by Espinoza’s illustrative attacks? They were praised for their commitment to their families while in China, but scorned for the exact same reason while in Mexico. It is true that time tends

---

57 Camacho, *Chinese Mexicans*, 143.
to foster progressive ideas, and perhaps this was the case for bringing Chinese Mexicans back. However, there seemed to be no acknowledgement of the legislations that were implemented to constrain the Chinese community in Mexico prior to the expulsions. This aspect is interesting to look at when considering the community in present-day Mexico. Today, much of what defines the dynamic between Mexico and China is their economic relationship.

One study suggests that much of what has been written about China in Mexico and Latin America in social media reflects a lack of awareness of Chinese history in their countries. The comments surrounding China as an economic power are based on the quality of products imported into their countries. Many commentaries associated China with low quality consumer goods and suggested that this was true for the majority of Chinese products.58 There also seems to be fundamental misunderstanding of Chinese culture in Latin America and most of the negative comments are directed at their cultural differences. Meanwhile, most of the positive comments on social media regard the social activities within the Chinese communities, such as the New Year celebrations.59 One such celebration of Chinese culture was recently orchestrated in Mexico City. The three-day event called “Chinese Cultural Week: A meeting with the Silk Road,” where the Chinese ambassador to Mexico Qiu Xiaoqi spoke of the importance of their economic relationship, was programmed to highlight very important aspects of the Chinese culture. He stated that, “The number of Chinese companies in Mexico is very small, compared to the full potential China can find here. We must seek to formalize a commercial agreement to help our economies advance.”60 It is clear that this commercial advancement is the underlying factor for China and Mexico’s relationship, but it disregards the very complex history of their economic relationship from the early twentieth century.

Mónica Cinco reflected on her experiences growing up as a Chinese Mexican and what her identity means to her now. As an

59 Ibid., 138.
adult, she expresses her sentiments regarding her dual identity and the experiences of her father (who left with his family to China during the repatriation period in the 1930s) and his influence on her:

Being Mexican moves me and excites me, but my father has passed onto me the nostalgia he feels for China. Today, I do not feel completely Chinese and perhaps I will never feel that way. I often experience the rejection of the Chinese, like my cousins, who have come to Mexico in recent years. They reject me because I am not from China and because my mother is Mexican. These relatives, who are my age, do not see me and my father as completely Chinese.\(^{61}\)

Monica’s father, who endured one unfortunate circumstance after another as a child of a Chinese father and Mexican mother, shares a similar sentiment to that of Mónica’s. He expressed his dual identity by embracing both Chinese and Mexican cultures. Of a particular note, is the way he defines himself as mestizo:

I’ve worked in many things, but I’m a restaurant owner now. I love China very much. I was educated there. I spent most of my lifetime in that country. But I would not like to return to live in [Gunagzhou]. I’ve spent the other half of my life here, in Mexico. My wife is Mexican and I have Mexican children. I have no reason to return to China.

I enjoy talking with the Mexicans more than I do with the Chinese. Many of the Chinese here are envious of each other and don’t like to live amongst Mexicans. We speak the same language, but they seldom talk with me because I am mestizo. I have more Mexican friends than I have Chinese friends and we get along very well. People see me as Chinese and I like to be seen as that. But I am Mexican.\(^{62}\)

---


\(^{62}\) Cinco, “China en Mexico,” 70.
Chinese Mexicans like Mónica Cinco’s father and Ramón Lay Mazo acknowledged their dual identity and did not think it necessary to defend one part of it more so than the other. It is unfortunate that such an experience as that of Chinese Mexicans has gone virtually neglected in Mexico, and as the relationship between Mexico and China continues to be rooted in economics, it would be a careless act to continue ignoring the historical economic impact of the Chinese community in Mexico. And although Chinese Mexicans today no longer face the same vitriol and government oppression their families did in in the early twentieth century, they still encounter prejudice and are generally associated with harmful, residual stereotypes from the anti-Chinese campaigns. Mónica’s father self-identified as mestizo, but this claim may seem illegitimate to Mexicans who know little to nothing about the history of the Chinese presence in Mexico because it is not widely taught. If the history of the Chinese in Mexico was more widely lectured and Chinese efforts in Mexico’s early economic growth were acknowledged, there would be no question as to whether or not Chinese Mexicans are mestizos.
Bibliography


“Smuggling Chinks a Risky Business but Profitable Game,” *The Day Book,* October 29, 1908.

Author Bio

Rocio Gomez graduated from California State University San Bernardino in June 2016. She earned her Bachelor’s degree in History with a concentration in Chinese History. She developed an interest in the Chinese experience in Mexico after noticing similarities between her own experience as a Chicana and that of Chinese Mexicans. She is currently working as a Paraeducator in Lake Elsinore, but she hopes to someday work for the National Park Service and plans on returning to school to get a Master’s in Journalism.