

*Chinese Mexicans: Transpacific Migration and the Search for a Homeland, 1910-1960*. Julia Maria Schiavone Camacho. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012. ISBN: 9780807835401

Pushed by necessity and drawn by opportunity, for centuries Chinese people have migrated into nearby Asian regions and eventually beyond Asia in search of work or commercial opportunities. The majority went as temporary sojourners, hoping to return wealthy but many became permanent settlers in their new homes. By the end of the twentieth century over 30 million people of Chinese descent lived outside their ancestral homeland. Since then several million more have settled or work abroad as a side effect of China's recent economic expansion. In addition to Southeast Asia, home to perhaps 25 million ethnic Chinese today, the emigrants also eventually established substantial communities in the Americas, Pacific and Indian Ocean islands, Japan, Europe, and parts of Africa. The emigration of Chinese and other Asians into distant lands constituted an important social and economic development in modern world history. Chinese people adapted to life in foreign countries in many diverse ways, confounding easy generalizations about the ways Chinese maintained, reinterpreted, or abandoned their identity, culture, and social patterns in the diaspora they had created.

While the literature on the Chinese migration and diaspora in Southeast Asia and North America is voluminous, studies on Latin America's Chinese are much less numerous even though some of the earliest Chinese settlers boarded Spanish galleons carrying Asian commodities from Manila to Spanish America in the 1600s. More Chinese arrived over the next few centuries. Between 1849 and 1930 some 1.5 million Chinese sailed to the Americas, especially the United States,

Canada, Mexico, Peru, Cuba, Panama, the Guianas, and the British West Indies. Mexico provides a valuable case study of a troubled immigration experience.

Several historians have explored the Mexican experience from the later 19<sup>th</sup> to the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, including Grace Delgado (*Making the Chinese Mexican: Global Migration, Localism, and Exclusion in the U.S.-Mexico Borderlands*, Stanford University Press, 2012) and Robert Chao Romero (*The Chinese in Mexico: 1882-1940*, University of Arizona Press, 2012), not to mention the many essays by Evelyn Hu-DeHart. Delgado is particularly interested in the border zone connecting northern Mexico and the U.S. southwest. Romero's broad study examines Mexico generally as well as the larger transnational commercial network connecting Chinese in Mexico, Latin America, North America, the Caribbean, and China.

Julia Maria Schiavone Camacho's interesting and well written transnational history adds another dimension to our understanding of the Chinese Mexicans. She explores the unique Chinese community that developed in northwest Mexico in the later 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries and their experiences of socioeconomic adaptation, repression, expulsion to China, and finally return to Mexico. Skillfully constructing oral histories from 27 interviews with descendants of early 20<sup>th</sup> century Chinese Mexicans in Mexico, Macao, China, and Hong Kong Chinese Mexicans, combined with U.S., Mexican, and Chinese archival records and newspapers, Schiavone Camacho's sociocultural approach provides rich thumbnail sketches and human interest stories of various men and women. Hence she begins her narrative with a telling remark by Alfonso Wong Campoy, whose father Wong Fang immigrated to Sonora state from China around 1900,

settling in Navajoa: “Mexico delights me, Navajoa delights me” (p. 1). Campoy’s life reflected the hardship and tragedy of many Chinese Mexicans. He and his family were forced out of Mexico in 1933, when he was four years old, and he was only allowed to return to Mexico, and Navajoa, three decades later.

Tracing the Chinese and their Mexican families across national borders, Camacho organized her analysis into 4 Parts (divided into 8 chapters) emphasizing the main events and challenges shaping Chinese Mexican life from 1900-1960. These include: the creation of family bonds and a distinct Chinese Mexican identity in northwest Mexico; expulsion from the region and then from the nation in the 1930s by the forces unleashed by the Mexican Revolution and the Great Depression; resettlement of the expelled Chinese Mexicans in China, Macao, Hong Kong; and finally the return of many of them, including Alfonso Wong Campoy, to Mexico in the decades after World War II.

Schiavone Camacho’s account in Part One begins in the later nineteenth century when many thousands of Chinese sailed across the Pacific in quest of the goldfields and other economic opportunities on the west coast of the United States, but some of the migrants headed to Canada or Mexico. Most of the them were Cantonese-speaking men, the great majority from the Toishan district on the Pearl River delta near Guangzhou (Canton). They sought work as shopkeepers, artisans, and unskilled laborers. Following the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 in the United States, Mexico became an attractive alternative to prospective Chinese immigrants. The Chinese population in Mexico grew from 3,000 in 1910 to 24,000 in 1927.

In Sonora and neighboring Sinaloa, immigrant Chinese men settled and many established small businesses in cities, towns, and villages. By 1930 nearly 6000 of Mexico's 17,000 Chinese lived in these two states. In the U.S. Chinese men could neither become citizens or even legally marry but Mexico's more fluid social and commercial options made it possible for Chinese men to more easily integrate into local society. With few Chinese women available, most immigrants married or cohabitated with Mexicans and fathered mixed descent children, in the process fostering a new hybrid cultural identity, the Chinese Mexican. While maintaining Chinese language and some of their culture but also embracing many Mexican customs, the Chinese men became important components of the local society and economy. Some Chinese maintained close relations and even intermarried with marginalized indigenous groups such as the Yaqui.

Particularly interested in gender issues, Schiavone Camacho devotes considerable attention to the Mexican spouses and daughters. These women, who generally married Chinese men for a more secure life but also in many cases love, experienced the restrictions placed on them by both Mexican and Chinese patriarchy. Mexican wives adopted or adapted to some of their Chinese husband's ways and raised their children with a mixed culture. Some Chinese men sent their sons back to China for a few years to live with relatives and learn Chinese. Schiavone Camacho believes that "in distinct ways Chinese men, Mexican women, and Chinese Mexican children became diasporic citizens. By creating multiple connections between their homeland and places of residence [in Mexico], Chinese men were already diasporic...Their families in Mexico often became part of larger transpacific familial and other migrant networks" (p. 9).

But by the early twentieth century this diverse and accommodating society faced new challenges. During the early years of the Mexican Revolution, which broke out in 1910, leaders and thinkers emphasized unity rather than diversity, with nationalist rhetoric dominated by ideas of race and *mestizaje* (the ideology of Mexico's racial and cultural Spanish-Indian mixture). This ideology became even stronger in the 1920s. Even though many had adopted some Mexican customs and spoke fluent Spanish, Chinese did not fit into this Mestizo identity, particularly in Sonora, a stronghold of revolutionary fervor and the home state of many influential post-revolutionary leaders. Worried by Chinese enterprise, some working class Sonorans began organizing against the perceived Chinese threat. They propagandized against Chinese who legally married or lived with local women, openly insulting the women for defying *mestizaje* by marrying foreigners and embracing some Chinese culture, and ostracizing the children. Anti-Chinese feelings and agitation increased when the Great Depression generated widespread economic stress, prompting the United States to force many Mexican workers to return to Mexico. Mob violence increased with hundreds of Chinese murdered.

Part Two examines the expulsion in 1930-1931 of the Chinese from Sonora and Sinaloa, where they had monopolized commerce. Schiavone Camacho shows how Mexican women challenged the stripping of their citizenship by the state because they married Chinese men. The removal order deprived most Chinese Mexicans of their property and forced families to go into hiding or flee to neighboring states. Whether moved by force, threat, or choice, many left for Baja California or Chihuahua while others crossed the border illegally into the U.S. and were detained by U.S. immigration officials, who considered the Chinese men, their Mexican women (married

or unmarried), and Chinese Mexican children as “Chinese refugees from Mexico”. The refugees protested that they did not want to leave Mexico but were fleeing persecution. As an example, one refugee cited by Schiavone Camacho, Cho Lai, testified that he had lived in Mexico 33 years, “Longer than I have in China”. The refugee crisis caused tensions between the U.S. and Mexico, but eventually the refugees from Sonora and Sinaloa, some 5000 in all, were shipped off to China.

Schiavone Camacho analyzes in Part Three how the Chinese Mexicans, both men and women, adapted to new, often difficult, lives in China but also developed a reinforced sense of Mexican identity. Most of the families settled initially in or near the Chinese husband’s home villages in Guangdong Province, especially Toishan district. The Chinese men received the support of their families in China and enjoyed a privileged social position and influence. But their Mexican wives often discovered that their husbands already had wives in China and, furthermore, that they and their Mexico-born children enjoyed no legal status. Many women spoke little or no Chinese and found adaptation to China difficult and lonely. Camacho offers many personal stories of women’s struggles that convey well the social and political reality they faced.

Hence, the reinvention of Chinese Mexican communities and a revitalized Mexican nationalism resulted in part from the rupture of the family unit. Camacho suggests that: “In spite of a history of refusal and contestation, Chinese Mexicans embraced the Mexican homeland. They became Mexican in China. In so doing, they broadened and complicated what it means to, be Mexican” (p. 173). Eventually some of the women and their children, unable to return to Mexico, relocated

to Macao (a Portuguese colony) or British-ruled Hong Kong, where they received support from the Catholic Church and sometimes Mexican diplomats. In East Asia Mexican women, yearning for Mexico, also became diasporic citizens.

Schiavone Camacho traces the migration of some of the Chinese Mexicans back to Mexico in Part 4. Although neither Mexico nor China saw them as citizens, repatriation attempts began under reformist President Lazaro Cardenas in the late 1930s on a limited scale (Chinese husbands were not included), a result of political changes within both China and Mexico. By 1940 some 5000 Chinese lived in Mexico but only around 250 resided in Sonora and Sinaloa, where they often faced hostility and economic problems. Efforts to promote a broader repatriation continued through the war years and the Communist victory in China in 1949, reaching fruition in 1960, when the regime of President Adolfo Lopez Mateos sponsored an official program to allow the rest who sought repatriation to come home, with some 250-350 returning to Sonora and Sinaloa. Whatever their regional origins and identities in Mexico, the Chinese Mexicans now saw themselves as Mexicans first.

In the book's moving conclusion Schiavone Camacho relates how her own family's connection to Sonora, and the Chinese Mexicans that they knew there, spurred her interest in the subject. She also provides brief accounts of her research experiences in Mexico and Asia. Finally she offers some thoughts on the Chinese in northwest Mexico today, including the large and thriving Chinatown in Mexicali. Her summary is apt: "Chinese Mexican's place in Mexico is an intervention in the nation's dominant exclusionary discourse. Their history urges us to give a

more nuanced account of the Mexican past that widens rather than delimits what it means to be Mexican....The story of Chinese Mexicans is most deeply a tale of perseverance in the face of odds and the persistent drive to belong”.

The author did miss an opportunity to make some comparisons with cases similar to the Mexican Chinese, such as Peru, where Chinese faced sporadic hostility and wives of Chinese men encountered some of the same challenges as their Mexican counterparts, or Vietnam, which forced out many long-settled Chinese at the end of the Vietnam War. The South Asians in Uganda, a large community who were expelled by Idi Amin in 1972, provide another similar situation; while many relocated permanently to Europe, North America, or India, some later returned to Uganda. Schiavone Camacho uses but does not deeply engage with the contested concept of diaspora. Nonetheless, this well-written, impressively sourced, and readable book may interest scholars of modern Latin American and Mexican history, the Chinese and other Asian diasporas, transpacific migration and movements, racial mixing and hybridization, borderlands, race relations, gender studies, women’s history, nationalism, immigration studies, and modern world history. With the wealth of personal stories it could be used in undergraduate or graduate courses on oral history, transpacific relations, Mexican society, minority groups, or ethnic studies.

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