The Work they Did: Chinese in Latin America from 1847-1919

From Coolie to free workers in the age on mass labor migration

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There were no large numbers of Chinese in Latin America until the middle of the 19th Century. But the labor crisis that came with the end of slavery caused budding capitalists in agricultural, transportation and mining in Latin America to look to Asian for their labor needs. By 1847 recruitment and signing of indentured coolie workers directly from regions of South China had began. By the end of the century, however, Chinese were making their way to Latin America on their own. Some under work contracts but others followed earlier Chinese in “chain migration” patterns similar to other groups who were part of the mass labor movements of the period. Those who came later often found their place in their new communities as small shop keepers and wholesale distributors, much to the consternation of local business leaders who objected to their presence.

By the early 19th century, Western powers, especially Great Britain, were making large profits from the sale of opium to China in return for highly demanded tea, silk, porcelain. Many had high regard for the work ethic of Chinese who worked their warehouses or “go-downs,” and even as the use of opium increased to crisis proportion, that view served as a favorable edge for recruitment in the new south China treaty ports after the Opium War of 1839-42. When Hong Kong

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1Earlier movements of Chinese to Latin America in the colonial period resulted in only small pockets of Asians. Except for a handful of failed attempts to use Chinese from Southeast Asia to cultivate tea and Chinese spices in Rio de Janeiro Brazil, or use them to replace native workers in woolen textile production in Peru or promote the visions of using Chinese labor in Trinidad to help anchor Port of Spain as a depot for dispersing Asian goods to South America, very few Chinese were present before the middle of the 19th century. Arnold J. Meagher, *The Coolie Trade-The Traffic in Chinese Labor to Latin America 1847-1874.* (Xlibris: USA) 2008, cf.194-97.
became a permanent base for the British, they became the de facto controller of official dealings with local Chinese governors and magistrates. Macao, long a bastion of Portuguese control, served as another venue for the movement of humans. Technically, it was against Chinese law for any Chinese to leave the country. But this rule had long been ignored as many Chinese had migrated to various ports within the South China Sea, serving as intermediaries for trade with China, working in fishing, agriculture and as sailors. Many became wealthy and they and their families circulated back and forth between ports in SE Asia and home.

Securing Chinese coolie labor for indenture contracting was a corrupt and inhumane process that deserves its own focused investigation. The transport of those coolies to ports in Latin America was also so inhumane that death rates were very high and mutinies, most of which came soon after they left China, were not uncommon and deserve separate attention. Very few women were among the coolies and most of them had service as domestic workers.

Over time, it became more common for agricultural indenture contracts to be longer at 8 years, than those requiring the coolie to do mining or construction work, at 4 to 6 years. The intermediary, often unscrupulous agents, who worked at the behest of a company, a group of planters or, in some cases, governments, skimmed off advanced monies, shorting both the coolies and the ship’s companies they
arranged to transport this human cargo. Most of the coolies were illiterate and depended on the word of “crimps” or Chinese in the service of the recruiters before “signing” [often with an X] the contracts.

**Agricultural Coolies & their Contracts**

Contracts were signed while in China and generally were in two parts: first, a section that listed the required labor expected by the Coolie for the company and a second part that a list of what was expected of the company was expected to do in return for the coolie. The first 571 coolies to arrive in Cuba in 1847 were placed in a barracoon or holding pen used to house runaway slaves. Planters who had subscribed were then allowed to from various lots of 10 coolies. A railroad company took 2 lots and the governor of the island, Leopold O’Donnell took 2 Chinese likely for domestic service. The majority were to be workers on plantations, replacing the loss of African labor. This first group was bought at the rate of 170 pesos for each 8 year contract. A contract holder could sale the contract to another buyer at a rate they agreed on without the consent of the coolie. It was legal practices such as these that made the objections to the coolie trade as just another form of slavery credible.
Contracts arranged by agents Messrs Vargas & Co in 1860 sounds reasonable.\(^2\) In part One, the Coolie contracts for eight years of service, his passage paid to Havana, he must agrees to be “transferred” to others doing work that is “customary there.” Work was to begin 8 days after arrival if the coolie was in good health or 8 days after leaving hospital if he arrives ill. Hours of work was at the discretion of the master, Sunday work was to be only what was deemed necessary for the task engaged and if ill and unable to work for more than a week, wages were suspended until a return to work. [Some other contracts allowed 3 days a year for the coolie to observe his own religious rituals – presumably at the Chinese New Year] The coolie was subject to the discipline of the establishment in which he worked and under no circumstance could he refuse services.

Part two, what the contractor promised to the coolie, looks reasonable for an indenture contract. In addition to paying the passage to Havana and maintenance aboard ship and an advance of 8 dollars in gold or silver, coolies were to earn four dollars a month from the first day the 8 year contract, daily rations of salt meat, yams and other “wholesome and nutritious” foods, a infirmary provided if ill with

\(^2\) Accounts of the House of Commons, https://books.google.com/books?id=zK1bAAAQAAJ&pg=RA1-PA67&lpg=RA1-PA67&dq=Messrs+Vargas+and+Company&source=bl&ots=x-rz4mU2lg&sig=Zsi9mAqibZxATl1aKno0vc7a6I&hl=en&sa=X#v=onepage&q=Messrs%20Vargas%20and%20Company&f=false
medicines and treatments for illnesses as long as necessary, 2 changes of clothes and a woolen blanket each year. Also upfront, coolies were to be supplied with 3 changes of clothes a hat and other necessities amounting to 4 dollars. Combined with the other 8 dollars in front money the total of 12 dollars was to be repaid to the agent company by a one dollar reduction in pay each month by whoever held the coolie’s contract. Renewal of the contract was also part of many agreements. Similar contracts for agriculture workers were enforced in the British West Indies, Costa Rico, Nicaragua, Peru, and even for the brief experiment of Chinese coolies who went to Louisiana to work in the sugar cane fields there.³

Reality was too often very different. Harsh treatment and reaction to it during the passage from China often meant that the coolies arrived with a bad attitude that was met with a similar distain from the prospective planters. In the Caribbean region, agricultural indentured workers were initially treated more like their slave companions when working in the sugar cane fields. Many were unfamiliar with the kind of industrial cultivation on the plantations. This meant that the “seasoning” process often put them at a disadvantage with slave laborers who were familiar with the cycle. The whip was often used in the fields and when sugar pressing time was underway, working around the clock took a heavy toll on their health. Also, the lack of immunity to tropical diseases posed additional health

hazards. In Cuba, which had more Chinese coolies than other Caribbean islands, [British West Indies holding had more Indian coolies than Chinese] the death rate hovered at 50% before the end of the 8 year contracts. Pay docked for illness soon put many permanently in debt and unable to a save the funds needed to return home assuming they lived that long. Furthermore, in Cuba, if they owed debt, they could be forced to renew their contract under less generous terms and if they tried to object or run away they were imprisoned and forced to work off their debt as part of work gangs overseen by the government agents. These conditions fooled no one as being different from slavery even when the Cuban tried to call the Chinese “colonialists” when it became clear they were unable to return to their country. But even this deceit did not work either. The cultural gap of food, language and religion made it clear that these “colonialists” would not assimilate. The shortage of Chinese women, even though more women came to Cuba than to other parts of the Caribbean in this period, the inability of Chinese to form family units militated against inclusion into the local scene. As we’ll see below, many Chinese in the BWI eventually started up fruit and vegetable truck gardens supplying green grocery distributors in the main port cities. But they also had some very hard times in the early period.

Beyond the Caribbean, Chinese indentured workers in the agricultural sector also went to Peru and Brazil. Most attention has been given to coolies who went to Peru to work in the guano mines discussed below. But significant numbers worked in sugar and cotton plantations in valley regions along the coast from Lambayeque in the north to Arequipa in the south. Initially, the contracts were only 5 years at a 4$ per month wage and the employer paying for food, clothing and medical care. The contracts were later extended to 8 years more in line with those of Cuba. Free unskilled labor was scarce in Peru and more expensive at .60$ a day, making coolies worth the overall cost. They were also more reliable and there when they were needed.\(^5\) One observer noted that a large estate of 10,000 acres had more than 1,500 Chinese workers and other large plantations had about 1,000 workers on them.\(^6\) However, not having family units gave them few local ties. Planters tried to employ a number of freed slaves, indigenous people and mestizos, “who, because of their racial prejudices and animosity to the Chinese, could be counted on to side with the owners in case of a disturbance or an insurrection.”\(^7\) Most plantations had their own jails and, for the most part, Chinese treatment on the plantations was similar to that administered to freed African slaves.\(^8\) Their similar

\(^6\) Thomas J. Hutchinson, *Two Years in Peru.* (S. Low, Marston, Low and Searle: London). 1873. 137.
\(^7\) Meagher, 232.
conditions, however, did not result in the two groups making common cause against their oppression. When War of the Pacific [1879-84] broke out between Chile and Peru, a massacre of the Chinese community took place in the Canete Valley on Ash Wednesday in 1881.⁹

In Peru, the most effective way to keep the coolies beyond their contract years was the reported sale of opium by the plantation store. Heavy opium use was also common among coolies in the guano mines. An outspoken critique of Chinese coolies’ despicable conditions on Peru’s isolated plantations where the planter was free to do as he pleased conveyed his sense of their plight in:

…Condemned to ceaseless …toil, without a ray of hope. They do not live, rather they vegetate and at last die as brutes beneath the scourge of their

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⁹ Although the historiography of this event is in flux concerning the reasons behind the violence and the later uses of the events to stir support for patriotic claims on both the Peruvian and Chilean sides of the War, the massacre of hundreds of Chinese on a single day (Ash Wednesday, 1881) and hundreds more in the following months is not in dispute. Vincent C. Peloso’s article describes the slaughter as originating from a conflict between Chinese and Peruvian holiday revelers in the town of Cerro Azul that moved to nearby plantations. “Overwhelmed by the Afro-Peruvians and cholos [indigenous coastal inhabitants for centuries], the Chinese fled to nearby partially abandoned structures, including plantation houses, they probably knew well. Plantations became killing fields. The African-Peruvians attacked them with stones, knives and farm tools.”⁹ Invading Chilean forces founded the Chinese in abysmal conditions and offered some aid. Self-serving national histories have cast those Chinese who joined Chilean forces as traitors to the Peruvian cause.
driver…. We only remember the Chinese when, weary of being weary,…he arms himself with the dagger of desperation. Wounds the air with a cry of rebellion and covers our fields with desolation and blood.\textsuperscript{10}

This rebellious spirit was also present among Chinese in Cuba who aided rebels there in the fight against colonial Spanish rule. They were later honored for their contribution to Cuban independence.

Several faltering attempts were made to bring contract Chinese workers to Brazil starting in the 1850s. Abolition of slavery came late to Brazil (1888) but the looming need for replacement labor on the sugar plantations was evident decades earlier. Rio de Janeiro merchant, Manoel de Almeida Cardosa was at the forefront of the effort to boost the labor supply. In 1855 he brought 303 Chinese from Singapore, a British enclave, on a US ship to Brazil [shows how international the whole process was] on 2 year contracts with promise of free return passage. Because they were British subjects, their contracts were closely scrutinized and thus not welcomed by planters. Later that year, the Brazilian Government arranged with a Boston company, Messrs Simpson & Tappan to bring 2,000 Chinese from the Canton region to Brazil at a price of 20£ each. But only 368

\textsuperscript{10} Quoted in Alexander James Duffield, \textit{Peru in the Guano Age: Being a short Account of a Recent Visit to the Guano Deposits 1877}. (Richard Bentley & Sons:London). 1877, 46. [Duffield has translated and quoted this passage from C.C. Zagarra, \textit{La Condicion Juridica de losEstranjerosen Peru}. 1872.]
were delivered 1856 on 5 year contracts when the US Commissioner in China, Peter Parker, pressed Brazil to vacate the contract.

Insubordination on the part of the Chinese in response to poor food and shorted wages set a pattern of miscommunications and intolerance on both sides. In 1866, Cardosa tried again to bring 312 Chinese from Singapore, this time on 5 year contracts but could find no takers and finally foisted them off on a public works contractor. The Ministry of Agriculture tried repeatedly to present the Chinese labor immigrants as a solution to the looming labor crisis, decreeing in 1870 permission for a group of Rio merchants to import Chinese workers. Strict rules were spelled out limiting the role Chinese could have on Brazilian society. On completion of their contracts they were to either re-indenture themselves or leave Brazil in 2 months at their own expense. They were excluded from ever becoming citizens and were basically like the slaves working at the behest of the planter who held their contract. Fears of “mongolization” were imagined if they intermarried. Language, food, cultural and religious differences helped make clear that these workers could never be considered colonialists, although they used that term to avoid the taint of near slavery associated with indentured workers. Some planters voiced support for Chinese workers saying they were essential for large proprietors’ survival. Abolitionists opposed government plans for bringing more

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11 Meagher, 265-266.
Chinese, saying that they stirred up racial conflict, didn’t solve the labor problem and were morally a problem because they had many vices such as opium and their presence would only preserve the institution of slavery by another name.\textsuperscript{12} The Anglo-Brazilian press went so far as to argue that if the large planters couldn’t survive without Chinese workers, then they should fail. But a Brazilian government, made up mostly of planters, didn’t listen to words about the “yellow peril.” It was hoped that by using the foundation of the 1874 Treaty between China and Peru [which also had an impact on the several other Latin American policies, especially Cuba and Mexico] that Brazil could build direct relations with China to further the movement of labor. The 1881 Treaty of Friendship, Commerce and Navigation, however, made no mention of bringing Chinese labor to Brazil, but did provide for nationals of both countries to freely travel, reside and conduct business in the other’s country.\textsuperscript{13}

An attempt to bring in 21,000 Chinese to Brazil in 1883 failed when the managing director of the China Merchants’ Steam Navigation Company was first warned by the British of the prospects of near slave conditions for such workers. Then, after an inspection of his own in Brazil, he learned that the funds for the deal were coming from the planters and not the government. When he asked the planters how they expected to recover the $100,000 subsidy paid to his company

\textsuperscript{12} Meagher, 267
\textsuperscript{13} Meagher, 269
they replied “out of the labor of the coolies,” the deal was abruptly called off. It was clear that servility was to be the status of Chinese in Brazil.

**Non-Agriculture work for Coolies and Chinese migrants**

The most notorious non-agricultural work that Chinese sis in Latin America was in the guano pits of Peru. “Paradoxically,” says Robert Marks in his *Origins of the Modern World*, “both the size of the global human population and its ability to conduct modern warfare depended on and were limited by…naturally occurring deposits of nitrates, mostly in the form of bat and bird guano.”\(^\text{14}\) Large deposits of guano on the islands off the coast of Peru became very valuable on the global market and demand for increased production led to the use of Chinese indentured labors. Before the growth of mid-19\(^{\text{th}}\) century demand for guano, slave and native labor had been used in the guano mines, but that was no longer sufficient.

Estimates put Peru’s population at this time around 2.5 million with probably 70% either pure or mix blooded Indian. These people tended to live mainly in the highlands and avoided labor in mines and agriculture as much as

possible; still their labor was regularly exploited by Creole\textsuperscript{15} mine and plantation owners. At the time slavery was abolished in 1854, there were an estimated 17,000 African slaves, mostly working in the plantations in the coastal regions, a practice that had been common during the colonial period. The 30 year lapse between independence and emancipation likely reflects a shortage of plantation labor. As in other parts of Latin America, the attitudes left over from Spanish rule seemed to make many natives and former slaves indisposed to work. Writing in the \textit{Callao and Lima Gazette} in Nov. of 1871 one critique of this situation opines that “It cannot have escaped the notice of observant men, native and foreign, much less of those who form the hiring class among us, what a vast number of the population idle away their time.”\textsuperscript{16}

The shortage of labor characterized the conditions into which the first Chinese indentured laborers arrived in Peru in 1849. Preparations began in 1847 with a bill in the Chamber of Deputies to encourage immigration. The bill authorized the executive to make 10 year contracts with capitalists and landowners who wanted to import foreign labor. Those using foreigner workers were to be given 4 tons of guano for each worker brought in. These workers would be free of taxes and, after the contracts were completed, granted 25 acres of land. This was

\textsuperscript{15} The term “Creole” in Latin America generally referred to people of European, predominately Spanish, ancestry who were born in the Americas.

\textsuperscript{16} Quoted in Stewart, 10.
viewed by the elite as too generous; the bill failed. However, a survey was conducted to determine the labor needs and what might constitute acceptable contract terms. Pushed by Domingo Elias, a prominent business leader in Lima, a general immigration law was passed in November 1849. Its main purpose was to promote the importation of Chinese labors and quickly became known by supporters and opponents alike as the “Chinese Law.”17 From then until 1874, nearly 100,000 Chinese coolies were transported to Peru.

Actually, the first group of 75 so-called “colonists” from China arrived in October 1849, a month before the official passage of the “Chinese Law.” In the first decade of the indenture trade to Peru, it is estimated that around 13,000 coolies embarked from the southeastern Chinese port of Amoy alone. Two ships that left Macao for Callao in 1850 started with 750 coolies; by the time they landed there were only 304 still living, a loss of nearly 60%. These harsh conditions did meet with resistance. More than once Chinese heading to Latin America mutinied against cruel captains. In the case of Peru, only the loss of profit to capitalists from reduced numbers of foreign workers resulted in improved conditions for the voyages by the mid-1850s.

17 Stewart, 12-13.
Early indenture contracts were for 5 years (this later became 8 years) from the date the contract was signed, and any time off for illness was added to the length. Chinese laborers were to do any work their patron or master asked of them and could not move without permission. The advance given to the worker, who generally gave it to his family in China, was to be paid back at the rate of 1 paso a month out of a 4 paso earnings from which the worker was to provide his own clothes. The patron was obliged to feed and give medical care so long as the illness or injury did not result from the worker’s bad conduct.18

For Chinese mining the guano beds, conditions were especially bad. A British observer wrote that “no hell has ever been conceived by the Hebrew, the Irish, the Italians, or even the Scotchs mind for appeasing the anger and satisfying the vengeance of their awful gods, that can be equaled in the fierceness of its heat, the horror of its stench, and the damnation of those compelled to labor there, to a deposit of Peruvian guano when being shoveled into ships.”19 Another British witness of the period tells of the rations fed to the workers in late morning after 6 hours of work and that each man was “compelled to clear from four to five tons of guano a day.”20 These conditions took a serious toll on the health of the coolies.

18 Stewart, 19.
19 Duffield, 23.
Many worked even though ill and at any given time as many a one-third might be in hospital.\textsuperscript{21}

Most Chinese working in the guano mines never returned to China, dying of diseases related to their work, malnutrition and generally being overworked. While most of the Chinese indentured workers who went to Peru worked on plantations, their work in the guano pits brought the loudest international outcry against the conditions just described. As the guano deposits dwindled in the late 1870s, some Chinese workers moved to the sugar and cotton plantations where the work was still harsh but some also worked as household servants and artisans. Others worked building the Peru’s Andean Railroad.

Nothing marked modern development in the 19\textsuperscript{th} century more than railroads. Peru, flush with money and, more importantly, with credit from the guano trade, launched an effort to build rail connections into its interior. The man retained to carry out this symbol of modernization was Mr. Henry Meiggs, [of Fisherman’s Warf fame] sometimes dubbed in Latin American history the “Yankee Pizarro.” Meiggs came to Peru in 1868 after spending the previous decade building nearly 200 miles of railways along the Coastal Range in Chile. But Meiggs’ reputation was far from spotless. Bribery was one of his tools and fast talking helped him get the government to further hock the earnings from the guano trade for international

\textsuperscript{21} Stewart, 97.
loans to build the rails. Workers for his railroad construction projects in Peru [like his nephews in Central America decades later] were Chinese indentured coolies.

At its peak, their numbers reached around 5,000 workers. Reports indicate that he wasn’t the worst when it came to caring for his Chinese workers. Conditions in the high mountains were harsh and the weather cold. Meiggs provided good food rations with meat and vegetables and provided warm clothes as they fulfilled their 7 year contracts. When guano profits declined along with its volume, so did the money. When political difficulties in Peru combined with an international economic downturn, Meiggs had built only 700 miles of railways. Attempts to extract additional nitrates from the Atacama Desert regions soon led to notorious war with Chile. The hope to use the railroad to extract and deliver mineral riches from the mountains of Peru ended with Peru having more debt than any other country in Latin America and control of the railroads in the hands of the British consortium that had fronted most of the money for their construction. Henry Meiggs died in Lima in September, 1877.

International objections to the indenture system and a Chinese inquiry board sent to examine the conditions of their countrymen in Latin America led to an official end to the old-style recruitment and contracting of Chinese indentures in

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1874. Contract workers, however, did continue to arrive in Latin America but they worked and exercised more independence than their forebears. This new dispensation had an impact on both agricultural and skilled workers. Treaties of Friendship signed by several counties with China after 1874, however, didn’t change many local attitudes or improve conditions for new contracted workers.

Among those Chinese who lived to finished their contracts and stayed in Peru, some pursued commercial operations in urban areas such as Lima. Since Chinese women were not part of the contract system for the guano mining, (although some did come to work on plantations), most of the men who stayed married into the local native populations. Official estimates of Chinese populations in coastal regions in 1887 included 8,503 ex-contact coolies working for wages. Another 1,182 were re-contracted workers and 838 were listed as part of Chinese-run labor gangs. There were a handful of shopkeepers, sharecroppers, and innkeepers and even one ex-coolie turned planter, with 80-90 free Chinese working for him.²⁵

In the case of Central America, Chinese workers initially came on indenture contracts to work on major infrastructural projects such as railroads and canal building. But these coolies soon left that very difficult work, becoming small shopkeepers and agricultural workers. Those who came in the last quarter of the

²⁵ Pan, 255.
19th C and the early 20th C often came from other parts of the Americas or the Caribbean, as sugar production gave way to other agricultural cash crops and ports on both the Pacific and Atlantic/Caribbean coasts of Central America grew to accommodate the new export economy.

In 1848 the first contract to build a railroad through the isthmus was signed between newly formed Panama Railroad, organized by Messrs Aspinwall, Stephens and Chauncy of New York, and the Panama provincial government. [This region was part of Grand Columbia until it declared its independence in 1903, but Columbia did not officially recognize it until nearly a decade later]. Construction planning began in 1849, just as the gold rush in California increased the demand for faster passage between the East and West coasts of the USA. Chinese workers also preferred to try their hand at panning gold in California [known as “Gold Mountain” to the Chinese] than to build railroads. Even with outside capital, the region still lacked access to the needed labor and other necessary materials such as lumber and iron.

The use of indentured Chinese workers on Cuban plantations starting in 1847 and in guano pits of Peru in 1849 inspired the Board of Directors of the Panama Railroad to secure 2,000 coolies through Canton labor contractors. Payments were made to the contractors at an agreed amount of $25.00 a month. Contractors of course, made their own financial arrangements with the individual
coolies, who usually received much smaller wages, since the contractor kept
money to pay for the passage and for food. In 1851, agents of that company
reached Hong Kong and Guangzhou to recruit workers. The next year, 300 coolies
set out for the isthmus of Panama; 72 died during the crossing. Only 228 arrived in
Panama, a mortality of 24%. In 1853, another ship carried 425 Chinese to the
isthmus, of whom 96 perished in the crossing, i.e., 22.5% of them.  

The labor conditions in Panama were no better and perhaps worse than
other regions of Latin America. Many workers died of tropical diseases such as
malaria and yellow fever. Others simply abandoned their labor camps, fleeing to
local villages or making their way to the ports of Panama City and Colon. There
they became small shop-keepers or migrated to other parts of Central America or
the British Caribbean for agricultural work.

The *Daily Panama Star and Herald* reported in September of 1854 that a
Chinese gentleman arrived from Jamaica hoping to “exchange” Jamaican workers,
who were more suited for work in the isthmus, for Chinese workers who were not
well adjusted to the climate. It seems that of the 195 Chinese who went to Jamaica

26 There is much discrepancy over the numbers of Chinese workers who came to Panama during the indenture era.
Diego Chou cites a Chinese source that has over 20,000 being brought to Panama between 1852 and 1856. A Qing
dynasty official, Zhi Gang [Chih Kang] reported that “the land and water were terrible and the climate very hot. In
that place, where 20,000 Cantonese were serving, they had to eat and drink and live in the open air. Forced to work
hard, they became ill and almost everyone died. How shameful!”

http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0014-1801%28197123%3A4%3C309%3ATOCR%3E2.0.CO%3B2=G
in November 1854, most were in very poor health and ended up dying in hospital or begging in the streets of Kingston.\textsuperscript{28}

Those who stayed behind did not fare better. Most were opium addicts who were promised the drug as part of their contract but now had no access to the drug. Neither the Railroad Company nor the community was prepared to prevent the coolies from leaving their camps or to care for these destitute men. Many committed suicide.\textsuperscript{29} A second large group of about 800 Chinese coolies arrived in early 1855, just about the time the Panama Railroad connected the Atlantic to the Pacific. It is estimated that 5,000 to 10,000 workers [not all Chinese, of course] died over the 5 year process of constructing the 47 miles of narrow gauge track.\textsuperscript{30}

Early attempts to introduce indentured Chinese workers to Costa Rica were even less successful. It is not known how well these early Chinese were received. Some clue that the Chinese were not welcomed came in the 1862 Costa Rican law that specified that Chinese and Africans were not to be allowed into the country “except as necessary in limited numbers.”\textsuperscript{31} Such laws were often bent or ignored.

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\textsuperscript{28} Cohen, 312.
\textsuperscript{29} Lucy Cohen. “Continuity and Change in Intercultural Relations among Chinese in the Americas: Understanding the Present through Selected Experiences of the 19th Century,” \textit{The Macau Ricci Institute – MRI Forum 05} (June 08, 2004). 2

\textsuperscript{30} Lucy Cohen. 1971. 317.

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Costa Rica’s leaders also harbored the dream of an ocean-to-ocean rail link, but early efforts failed due to shortages of capital, labor and other resources. In 1869, Fredrick Alberding, a trader who had brought a few coolies from China to Nicaragua, got permission to bring Chinese workers into Costa Rica. He argued that if the Costa Rican railroad were built, Chinese workers would help prevent the dislocation of local scarce labor resources. Their numbers increased when work began on the Atlantic Railroad in 1871, a link from the highlands of Costa Rica to the Caribbean port of Lemon.

Although Chinese were one of the “prohibited ethnic groups” mentioned in the 1862 law, they made important contributions. Of the more than 650 Chinese who arrived in Puntarentas in 1873, 400 were assigned to work on the railroad. Two-hundred and fifty were sold to landowners to work as domestics or in agriculture, mostly producing coffee, tending livestock and even working in gold mines. The price of their labor depended on their physical condition and work history. A year later, only 236 of the original 650 were left. These began to ask for better working conditions. The army’s response was to shoot them in their sleep, killing five of them in what some have called Costa Rica’s first labor uprising.  

32 An 1874 report from the Superintendent de Chinos “indicated that of

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the 300 people in the camps established by Alberding to hold labourers until they were employed, 145 had been sold, eight had been injured, and eight had died. Of the eight that had died, at least five had been shot.”33 Some slipped into commercial niches in the new communities that popped up along the new rail line. Lack of capital and labor continued to be great limitations.

The next efforts to bring in Chinese workers to both Panama and Costa Rica were done in the era of so called voluntary immigration. But similar to other areas of Latin America, conditions in Central America were not much improved. The previously mentioned end of the near slave indenture coolie trade in 1874 did not end the arrival and especially the movement of Chinese already in the Americas. As Central American states began to nurture large scale agricultural businesses and as the visions of an inter-oceanic canal and more railroad construction across the isthmus geared up, the need for labor increased.

In Panama’s first phase (1880-1889) of canal construction under a French company, Chinese were again recruited as voluntary labor immigrants. Because of mounting pressure from the USA against Chinese labor [in 1882 the Chinese Exclusion Act was passed] records indicate that initially only 671 Chinese workers came directly from China. By 1889-90, another 4,000 to 5,000 Chinese laborers came to Panama. Some came from China, but most were sojourners from the

33 Harpelle. 12.
British West Indies, especially from Trinidad and Guyana. When the French company that had hired then went bankrupt, most were suddenly out of work. A short-lived successor company employed many and even was able to bring others between 1894 and 1895. Some scholars believe that the anti-Chinese sentiments in the US caused some Chinese to move from the West Coast of the USA to Central America, especially the Panama region and Columbia proper, but most of those who left the USA or who were forced to leave, went to the borderlands of Mexico in the hope of re-entering the USA or at least establishing ties with other Chinese just across that border.

In 1902, when the US Congress approved the Panama Canal Act [a.k.a. the Spooner Act] and founded a company to recruit workers, they sent agents to Cuba, Jamaica, Guyana, Hong Kong and the Philippines in search of Chinese workers. While Chinese were refused entry into the USA, US contractors in Panama were eager to have their labor. In 1905, the US formally requested the Chinese government to authorize them to hire and keep workers in Panama. That request was declined. Nevertheless, some 2,800 workers of Chinese origins were engaged, some from Fujian, an area of China from which many workers had come and others from parts of Southeast Asia where they had earlier migrated for work.

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These were transported on US shipping first to New York, and later taken to Panama. In 1906, the same US Canal company offered to hire Chinese to work ten hours a day for two years, after which they would be returned to China once the contracts were fulfilled. Many died others became suppliers of goods used by other Chinese workers, few returned.

Trading in so-called voluntary Chinese labor was very profitable, but attitudes toward the Chinese were still discriminatory. To aid their protection in the absence of full diplomatic relations between China and Colombia, Chinese immigrants had earlier urged the Chinese government to make efforts to get the American consuls in Panama City and Colon to represent their interests. The imperial Chinese government's request was granted by the government Colombia on August 30, 1885.

Around the same time, the first Panamanian Chinese society was founded. This *Forward Way Society* started in 1892 and was reorganized in 1904 as the *Chinese Benevolent Society*. In 1896, a second association, the *Tong Dong Society*, formed to promote healthy Confucian practices. Before the separation of Panama from Columbia in 1903, Chinese were able to freely leave and return to Panama, but after independence, restrictions were placed on them. Chinese called on the government of China to recognize the new state and it became the fourth country to do so, just behind the USA & France.
Panama’s government was much influenced by US Chinese Exclusion policy. The Chinese Minister in Washington requested that his government establish full diplomatic relations with Panama, to directly negotiate the terms for labor migrants as a new wave of Chinese immigration began with the renewed construction of the Canal by the Americans. Reaction against this new wave was swift. In March 1904, Panama’s National Convention issued Law No. 6, prohibiting, for the first time, “the immigration of Chinese, Turkish and Syrians to the territory of the Republic.” That law allowed the Chinese to remain who possessed real estate, agricultural land, had financial means, a commercial or industrial establishment or lawful occupation, but they were required to be registered. Further immigration of Mongolian and Semitic races was forbidden because ”they were detrimental from an economic and public health point of view,” according to the 1906 report of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. In spite of Law No. 6, Chinese kept arriving in Panama, and finally in 1907, Panama took the first steps to establishing full diplomatic relations with China by sending a Consul General to China, setting up offices in Hong Kong. But without a Chinese Consul in Panama, the Chinese Legation in Washington continued to intervene regarding the many complaints of maltreatment of Chinese in Panama. Requests for help were so numerous that the Chinese Foreign Ministry urged his government to set

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35 Chou. 29.
36 Chou. 30.
up a consulate in Panama before the local government, much influenced by the USA after 1903, took the path of exclusion that the USA had.

In 1909, the Chinese minister to the US, Wu Tingfan, traveled to Lima, Peru via Panama. In a report to his government, he recorded that there were more than 3,000 merchants and very few Chinese workers in Panama. Most of these resided in the port cities of Colon and Panama City and their business activities supposedly exceeded ten million dollars. Wu commented that Chinese shops along the Canal were as numerous as "stars in the sky." He added that even with a Consul present, abuses still occurred.

According to the first national census of 1911, there were 2,003 Chinese, but the Census Bulletin commented that the figure was likely closer to 3,000.37 [Chou: 2002, 30]

Discrimination against the Chinese continued. Between 1912 and 1916, a series of actions were taken, such as the bill introduced by Rep. Justiniani in 1912 that called for the expulsion of all Chinese. US intervention kept that from happening. In 1913 a regulation passed to forbid the establishment of new Chinese associations and clubs; old ones had already been shut down the previous year. These actions coincided with revolutionary activity in China; perhaps these groups were seen as possible allies of the Columbian authorities as leaders in Panama.

37 Chou. 30.
were still trying to secure legal independence. Other actions included the registration of all Chinese; a census of ethnic Chinese individuals and their conditions of stay; the legalization of their stay; the renewal of their old identity cards and even the expulsion of Chinese who would not abide by these provisions. Chinese who left Panama were now not allowed reentry.  

What happened in 1913 deserves more explanation. On March 13 of that year, the Chinese legation in Washington filed a petition to the State Department, requesting that US diplomatic agents make use of their good offices with the Panamanian government, as they once before, to act in favor of overseas Chinese in Panama. The Panamanian Legislative Assembly had approved on first reading a draft law consisting of 38 articles against the Chinese, most of which were harsh. The key points of the new legislation were:

1) That all Chinese would have to register. Those without proof of having been previously registered were to pay a fine of US $210; and those who had duly registered must also pay $25. Failure to do so could result in the possible punishment of deportation;

2) Registration papers must be submitted to the authorities for review every six months under the punishment of a fine of $10;

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Chou. 31
3) All Chinese companies or clubs must pay a monthly tax of one thousand dollars, and this tax had to be paid three months in advance.39

The Chinese Legation requested that swift action be taken against enforcement of these new laws and appealed to the good offices of the US Legation in Panama. The US Legation realized that most of the measures against the Chinese would be counter-productive [note: these new laws were also against the Turks, Syrians and North Africans]. The Chinese entry into the country, however, had been authorized under a legal employment contract. Though some of Panama’s officials acknowledged that the measures were likely unconstitutional, they discouraged the Chinese Consul General from seeking legal remedies to resolve the issues. J. E. Lefevre, Panama’s Charge d’Affaires, claimed not to be in favor of the law, but the Legislature was vehemently anti-Chinese.

The Chinese consul protested that many of the small Chinese traders could not pay $250 (now $250 instead of $210), because doing so would bankrupt them. Meanwhile, wholesalers and medium-to lower-class Panamanians, who worked closely with Chinese traders, expressed their concern about the situation. If the Chinese closed their businesses or were expelled, it would be a disaster for both groups of Panamanians. Moreover, US investment banks also were alarmed, because they had given considerable credit to Chinese traders. Enforcement of the

39 Chou.32
law was postponed for at least six months, during which time the US and Chinese Consuls had two rounds of meetings that modified the harshest stipulations of the proposed new laws. The $250 fee was reduced to $3 and the requirement of re-registration of Chinese domiciled in Panama before 1906 was eliminated. Religious and benevolent societies, written into most work contracts, were to be allowed and exempt from the tax, as was the Chinese Chamber of Commerce.40

The US government’s good offices for the Chinese were also in the best interest of the US, since construction on the canal was nearly finished by 1913. The maintenance of both Chinese labor and its support network was essential. Anti-Chinese laws were not in the US’s best interest. Earlier bouts of anti-Chinese measures had already started the growth of Chinos barrios or Chinatowns. Anti-Chinese attitudes made them grow larger as the numbers of Chinese continued to arrive.

In Costa Rica, the government’s bans on excluded groups were harder to break. Attempts were made by development figures such as brothers Henry and Minor C. Keith, who took over construction of the failing Atlantic Railroad from their uncle Henry Meiggs. Henry Keith died in 1871, leaving his younger brother Minor in near full control. Uncle Henry had used Chinese labor for railroad

construction in Peru; so Minor pressed to use them on the Atlantic Railroad. But an 1887 attempt to use Chinese in Costa Rica was thwarted on moral grounds when he requested permission to bring in 1,000 workers. Other labor sources were at least as morally questionable and they, too, failed. There are some reports that 1,600 inmates from New Orleans prisons and a similar number of Italians had been brought in. But of the “thieves and murders” from New Orleans it is said that fewer than 25 survived.\textsuperscript{41}

When the French canal-building efforts in Panama failed, Keith turned there to hire labor, including Caribbean blacks and Italians as well as Chinese. This was cheaper than bringing them all the way from China. But the government allowed the Chinese in on the condition that they only be allowed residency for 2 years and be restricted to residential compounds.\textsuperscript{42} Other Chinese came in illegally, embedding themselves mostly in the port city of Lemon. There is some indication that a few Chinese migrated to Costa Rica from the United States or were redirected there after being excluded from entry into the US after 1882. There were few Chinese women immigrants, so family life was very limited. Preserving a sense of Chinese identity was difficult. Restrictions on allowing Chinese to set up businesses that could supply familiar foods or medicines or being allowed to

\textsuperscript{41} Harpelle. 13.
\textsuperscript{42} Robinson. 107.
practice their religions added additional hardships. But Chinese numbers were few compared to the other excluded group of Caribbean blacks, mostly from Jamaica.

When Railroad work stalled, Minor Keith began experimenting with growing bananas for export, using the railroad segments that were complete on the Atlantic lowlands to bring his crop to port. Profits from this endeavor made him the only contractor able to complete the railroad to the highlands. In 1883 the so-called Soto-Keith contract proved to be a thorn in the side of the government, because in return for renegotiating a bad railroad loan from the British, Keith was given a 99 year lease on 800,000 acres tax-free and ownership of the railroad when it was completed. In 1880, Costa Rica exported 360 bunches of bananas; the year the railroad was completed, Keith’s Tropical Trading and Transport Company exported over one million stems of bananas at a value of $410,000. Keith used the profits to finance other projects in Latin America, many not as successful, forcing him to merge with Boston Fruit Company in 1899 to form the infamous United Fruit Company.

Panama and Costa Rica accounted for the largest numbers of Chinese immigrants in Central America but they were present in other Central American states and had to deal with similar difficult times before becoming assimilated into the local communities. By the 1920s and ‘30s, additional legal pressures caused

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43 Harpelle. 15.
more intermarriage with local women in some places. The small Chinese presence in El Salvador, for example, became the focus of a campaign in 1897 against “pernicious foreigners.” They were accused at the same time of being both “separatists” for having their own “barrios” and for too easily assimilating and interbreeding with locals. But, because of their importance to the economies of the local communities, such laws [what laws? If not enforced, how did they produce integration?] were not well enforced. By the second and third decades of the 20th century, the Chinese in Panama and Costa Rica were beginning to knit into the fabric of local societies, but not without additional problems.

In the most northern area of Latin America along the border between Mexico and the United States, Chinese migration took on additional issues not present in other parts of Central and South America. Finding it difficult to secure land claims in US gold mining, many Chinese turned to jobs supporting railroad development. By the 1870s, however, fears about their increasing numbers as laborers and their success as small shopkeepers in the new Pacific coast states brought out racist cries of “Yellow Peril” that fueled the passage of the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882. The Exclusion Act was the first legislation to restrict migration of any kind into the USA and severely reduced the numbers and kinds of Chinese immigrants to the West Coast of the United States. But it did not stop the
flow of Chinese migrants to North America, especially to the neighboring states of Mexico and Canada.

The end of slavery in Mexico did not create a crisis of labor shortage because it had a history of being a mixed bag of first indigenous and then African peoples, the latter only amounting to about 2% of the population when slavery officially ended in 1829. As a result, coolie labor was less a part of Mexico’s labor history with Chinese migration. But the northern border regions was less populated, had mineral wealth and proximity to the westward expansion of the USA. This made it attractive to Chinese who had been shut out of those opportunities by US laws, but made them clear targets of local borderland elites with whom they competed for supplying this growing region. Here, and in parts of the Caribbean where Chinese found themselves competing with both freed Indian coolies and slaves, Chinese merchants became viewed as a threat.

Although Mexico did not have regular diplomatic relations with China until later, passage in 1883 of Mexico’s Colonization Law and the 1886 Law of Alienage and Naturalization resulted in the migration of 4,100 Chinese workers in that decade. These laws, supported by Mexico’s President Porfirio Diaz, were an attempt to attract foreigners to help modernize Mexico, much as immigrants had brought new energy and even capital into the USA around the same time. Incentives provided under these laws placed no limits on the numbers who could
come or where in Mexico they could settle. [The only exception was on islands
held by Mexico, where new settlers could not exceed 50% of the population.]
Under Diaz’s administration, foreigners who remained in Mexico for 6 months
were considered immigrants, and if they remained for 2 additional years, they were
eligible for naturalization.

The reality, however, was much less rosy. Chinese in areas of Mexico with a
history of plantation labor found it hard to escape the coolie system. Some
Chinese who thought they were headed from Hong Kong or Macao to Victoria,
British Columbia found themselves instead working for the National Railroad of
Tehuantepec on the transcontinental San Luis Potosi – Tampico line. Such
deception was often done with the cooperation of Chinese labor brokers.

By the turn of the 20th century, Mexico had formalized relations with China,
including most favored nation status and free, voluntary movement of their
respective citizens. This new status encouraged new Chinese immigrants to
establish residence in the Sonoran borderlands. By 1900, this area had one of the
largest concentrations of Chinese in Mexico, with over 850 settlers. These
immigrant Chinos, however, came not as laborers but as shopkeepers and many
had hidden hopes to cross into the United States. As Grace Pena Delgado puts it,
“In theory, the U.S. southern boundary may have been closed to Chinese
immigration, but in actuality, the Chinese, occupying a range of positions between
Mexican citizen, national, sojourner, and merchant-laborer, were uniquely poised to cross into the United States almost unfettered.” In the early stages, Chinese settlers in the borderlands moved easily across the unguarded national frontier to do business and establish connections with Chinese on the U.S. side of the border. Ironically, it is likely that the first illegal people to cross from Mexico into U.S. Territory were Chinese.

By 1904, US immigration officials confirmed the widely held view that most of the Chinese who entered Mexico planned to move across the border into the USA. This helped make the exclusion of Chinese a permanent law rather than one renewed every decade.

The supply of Chinese labor to Mexico now increased, as a result of a price war between 2 Chinese shipping companies. Their numbers doubled between 1903 and 1904 from 1,900 to 3,800 respectively. The increased numbers arriving in Mexico resulted in a significant increase in illegal trafficking. “Coyotes” used sophisticated ways to transport their clients across the border regions on coaches, in boxcars, mule trains, etc. Along with greater covert activity came greater attention and scrutiny at border crossings, as well as the growth in the professional development of the US Border Patrol over the next two decades. As border

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crossing tightened, more Chinese set up residency on the Mexican side, and Sonora became home to a growing community of settlers from the Celestial Kingdom.

Their growing numbers began to raise complaints from elements within the Mexican government, especially in the borderlands. They insisted that the new Chinese immigrants needed to be more closely scrutinized for the state of their health. Mexico’s Health Council began to require the main steamship company transporting Chinese immigrants, the China Commercial Steamship Company, to disinfect their luggage and set up quarantine barracks and observation zones in the port of Manzanillo, the only place permitted for Chinese to enter after 1903.

This slowed but did not stop Chinese immigration, and began to raise a public profile of Chinese as unsavory. An ad hoc Mexican governmental committee conducted two surveys of every state in 1903 to capture demographic information and to discern levels of criminal activity, number of beggars and the mentally insane. While the Immigration Commission concluded from the surveys’ results that Chinese were no threat to Mexico’s body politic, proponents of eugenics used the surveys to conclude that Chinese criminal activity, poverty and unsanitary dwellings were proof that they would never assimilate into Mexican society. One of the ad hoc committee members, Jose Cavarrubais, wrote that the Chinese who came were the “dregs” who brought no capital or skills and were suitable only for menial labor.
Nevertheless, most Chinese who stayed in Mexico became naturalized citizens, supporting themselves as merchants, shopkeepers and truck farmers. Because of the shortage of Chinese women among the immigrants, Chinese men married local women, who were helpful in steering customers to their shops. Such integration into communities delayed the growth of the Chinatown phenomenon so common in the USA. Sons of these unions were often sent to China to secure ties with family in the old country, to study the language and build new business connections. Likely because they were not immune to local prejudice, Chinese established friendly relations with marginalized peoples such as the Mayo and Yaquis in the Sonoran region. These indigenous peoples liked to shop in the Chinese stores because of the friendly treatment they received. Shopkeepers often spoke to them in their own language and gave them, as well as other customers, a little something extra in their purchase or small candies for the children. Chinese merchants knew how to cultivate loyalty and mastered both Spanish and native languages to better serve and please their customers.

In the chaos after revolutionary activities erupted in 1910, what had been more or less subtle discrimination became more overt. The city of Torreon south of Sonora was the site of a massacre of 303 Chinese. Torreon was a center of industrial growth fostered by foreign investments in mining and railroad

construction that linked the region to El Paso, Texas and Piedras Negras on the Arizona border. It was just the kind of urban area that attracted Chinese immigrants of the period as well as other foreign entrepreneurs – Germans, British, Spanish, Italians, even Arabs and Turks. In this ripe economic climate, Chinese had gone beyond opening the usual shops and restaurants, joining with other foreign investors to establish banks and purchase urban real estate and large tracts of land for truck farming to sell in local markets. By the time the revolution broke out, “Chinese wholesalers and retailers were in control of production and distribution and sale of daily foodstuff to the local population.”46

To complicate matters further, many of the prominent Chinese businessmen were also caught up in China’s own revolutionary struggle of the period, lending their financial support to such notable Chinese opponents of the Qing dynasty as Kang Youwei. Kang visited Torreon in 1906 and 1907 and supplied substantial help to Chinese businesses there. This situation led some to question the loyalty of Chinese business leaders. Although there was little open anti-Chinese criticism in Torreon prior to the spring of 1911, in May a rousing speech by a bricklayer, one Jesus Flores, in a neighboring town aroused sentiment against the Chinese, accused of taking jobs away from Mexican workers. Leaders of the Chinese community in Torreon got wind of these views and issued a circular warning local Chinese to

stay in their shops and homes, not to go into the streets or even to resist if their businesses were entered. Rebel followers of Francisco Madero, led by his brother, occupied Torreon in mid-May 1911, and a civilian mob joined by a few of his troops quickly carried out a massacre of 303 Chinese, nearly half the city’s Chinese population. Men, women and children were savagely murdered in what can only be called acts of racial hatred. The commander restored order; Madero’s government later apologized and offered indemnities to China, but after his assassination they went unpaid.⁴⁷

Instead of moral outrage at the massacre in Torreon, these events ignited anti-Chinese violence in other parts of Mexico. In Sonora, a hot bed of revolutionary chaos, it is no surprise that violence erupted, encouraged and sustained by the anti-Chinese rhetoric of Jose Maria Arana, a schoolteacher from Magdalena. His writings not only supported anti-Chinese behavior but also took aim at campaigns that favored women’s political equality. Sonoran Chinese flocked to the border towns near Arizona, fearful of another massacre. Local Arizonian newspapers carried headlines such as “Chinamen in Sonora Feel Effect of Race Hatred; in Fear for Their Lives.”⁴⁸

⁴⁷ Jacques, ibid., 233-246.
⁴⁸ Delgado, 104.
Antichinistas became more organized in Magdalena in 1916 with the formation of the Commercial and Businessmen’s Junta [first headed by Francisco C. Lopez]. Hoping to be a model for other places in Sonora, the goal of this junta was to promote Mexican merchants over their Chinese competitors, to ruin their businesses. They complained that the success of the Chinese caused the exodus of young Mexican men into the USA, because they could not secure jobs at home. Encouraging their members to use lawful means to achieve their goals, they proceeded to create new ordinances to harass Chinese shopkeepers, such as new or higher taxes, prohibitions on selling foodstuffs and doing laundry, leasing land for growing vegetables or even traveling to visit one another. Demands were made by the Cananea chapter, who called themselves the Fraternal Union of Salaried Workers [showing a bond between business and working classes], that more Mexican workers be hired by Chinese. Other chapters adopted names that boasted their nationalist political agenda, publishing organs such as En Defensa de la Raza (In Defense of the Race) and Arana’s tabloid Pro-Patria (For the Fatherland). On the whole, the measures were mostly a business annoyance, but they displayed rising antichinista sentiment in the area.

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49 Evelyn Hu-DeHart, “Indispensable Enemy or Convenient Scapegoat? A Critical Examination of Sinophobia in Latin America and the Caribbean, 1870 to 1930,” in The Chinese in Latin America and the Caribbean, Walton Look Lai and Tan Chee-beng, eds. (Leiden:Brill, 2010), 92-93
Chinese merchants and shopkeepers appealed to local, regional and federal politicians for help in rescinding these harassing ordinances, while bribing local politicians to not enforce them. Chinese businesses’ lock on retail sales, their ability to bribe local officials and pay lawyers to appeal unjust laws and ordinances protected them in the first bouts of revolutionary chaos.

Other appeals used to separate and stigmatize Chinese communities involved social issues, especially those relating to marriage and family. Taking her cue from Arana’s campaign, a university-educated Magdalena schoolteacher, Maria de Jesus Valdez, held public lectures on the evils of Chinese influence, holding them solely responsible for Mexico’s moral degeneration and for stifling its prosperity. She advocated physical separation of the Chinese from Mexicans. Chinese merchants should be forbidden from joking with customers, especially women or girls who could be sullied by such contact. She chided that those Mexican women who gave their bodies to diseased Chinese men effectively became whores, and any resulting children of a Mexican—Chinese union would be racially contaminated. Mexican law granted immediate naturalization to foreign women who married Mexican men, but a Mexican woman who chose to marry a Chinese lost her citizenship rights, even if her husband had become a naturalized citizen of Mexico.
Governor Plutarco Elias Calles, who despised Chinese, supported Arana’s efforts on additional taxes. In 1917 he denied reentry permits for those who traveled from Mexico to China and wanted to reenter by way of Nogales, Sonora. The interim governor in 1917-18, Cesareo G. Soriano, promoted a boycott of Chinese merchants. The 2 largest Chinese merchants in Guaymas, Juan Lung Tian and Fon Qiu [?], protested the new taxes and other measures as discriminatory. Juan Lung Tian wrote to the governor that the antichinista campaigns were nothing short of incitement to violence, filled with lies that played into the hands of the ignorant. Tian’s appeals were also publicized locally, as he pointed out that federal and state constitutions, treaty agreements with China and penal codes all protected Chinese rights and that no local official could override these. At the same time, less measured words were addressed to officials by some unsavory members of the Chinese community. A faction calling themselves “Fu Fon Culong” wrote mocking notes to Arana, assuming the persona of family members of a love-struck Chinese-Mexican girl and threatening to castrate him if any harm came to her.50 Yet official and community attacks continued to spread in 1917, such that even Governor Soriano reluctantly ordered municipal authorities to offer protection to all foreigners, which in most cases meant Chinese.

50 Delgado, 115.
The rapidly changing revolutionary climate beyond the region prompted some Sonoran officials with national ambitions to criticize *antichinismo* activities. However, local pressures dictated new or more strictly enforced local laws that increased Chinese taxes, pressed for the removal of Chinese into barrios and, most damaging, produced the passage of Article 106, more widely known as the 80% law, in 1919. This state-wide Sonoran article provided that 80% of workers in foreign owned establishments had to be Mexicans. Some places in Sonora were more eager to enforce this law than others. In some towns, Chinese tried to evade the restriction by forming mutual aid societies, claiming group ownership and no employees. The president of the Chinese Fraternal Union in Nogales, Benjamin Ungson, spoke out against the new law, saying it violated individual rights in Article 1 and the rights of employers in Article 4 of the Federal Constitution. Article 106, he argued, also made no business sense and promoted a view of Mexico as primitive in the eyes of civilized nations.\(^\text{51}\)

The language of his rebuttal was carefully chosen to fit into the rising tide of nationalism that incorporated ideals of racial pride, captured in the notion of *mestazaje*, or a synthesized racial mixture focused on European *criollos* and Europeanized *mestizo*. There was no place in this mix for Chinese. While trying to promote an international view of Mexico as modern and progressive, many

\(^{51}\) Ungson quoted in Delgado, 119.
Northern Mexican politicians such as Carranza, Callas and Obregon tried to downplay their personal dislike of Chinese. They could ill afford to completely alienate the Chinese community. For example, Carranza allowed over 500 Chinese to join in General Pershing’s pursuit of “Pancho” Villa, crisscrossing the US/Mexican border. But Carranza, who was from a wealthy industrial family in the state of Chihuahua, failed to reward the Pershing Chinese who helped secure his shaky government. As a result, many of them were allowed to settle in the Tucson area at the behest of General Pershing and his staff, ultimately supported by a special act of the US Congress. Callas, a bastard child raised by a wealthy uncle, rose to governorship of his home state of Sonora and, as we have seen, took aim at Chinese by restricting their reentry after traveling to China. He also hitched his political wagon to the rising star of another Sonoran son, Alveno Obregon, who became President after launching a revolt against his political patron, Carranza, in the spring of 1920 and winning an election in the fall of that year to replace the interim rule of de la Huerta, another Sonoran. With their now more secure hold on national politics, these strong supporters of a mestazaje- based revolutionary nationalism took a hands-off approach when cultural and economic attacks against Chinese ramped up in the next decade.

When attacks on Chinese businesses failed to ruin them, race and gender issues took on the most critical roles in the assault on Chinese in the 1920s.
Campaigns attacking the degenerate nature of Chinese that had started in the revolutionary period continued to gain traction. Sharp attacks focused on how Chinese filth endangered public health and how their traffic in drugs, prostitution and gambling poisoned communities. Portraying Chinese men as brutal and debauched, Mexican women were urged to avoid contact with them, lest they become physically and sexually abused and abandoned with children and no support.\textsuperscript{52}

Some of this rhetoric was validated by Chinese inter-communal violence, prompted by various alliances supporting revolutionary events unfolding in China in the 1920s and struggles between rival gangs or \textit{tongs} for control of the drug trafficking and gambling operations in which Chinese were in fact engaged. The so called Tong Wars in Nogales saw the unexpected arrest of 250 Chinese in 1922, just as a truce among the factions was taking hold. A sweep of Chinese, most of whom were not involved in the violence, sent these men to prison. Labor union leaders and town councilmen called for their immediate expulsion. The Sonoran governor, Elias, received support from President Obregon for these actions, while wealthy Chinese such as Juan Lung Tian, Lin Mo Poing and Alfonso Hoy, along with other Chinese representatives from the State of Sinaloa, pressed Obregon for a more moderate solution. This struggle went on for nearly a year and, in the end,

\textsuperscript{52} Camacho, 49.
most of the Chinese were released, because it had become clear they had nothing to do with the violence. The only order that Obregon could legally issue was the deportation of 43 tong members. Once again, Chinese claims to their political rights and economic power to manage local commerce and bribe local officials prevailed.

However, allowing local governments to enact laws without central government interference did allow harsher moves against Chinese and other foreigners. With the “Sonoran dynasty” in control of the Federal government, in December of 1923 the Sonoran State legislature passed, for the second time, laws restricting Chinese to barrios. Also, enforcement of Article 106, requiring that 80% of employees be Mexican, could no longer be evaded, and Mexican-owned businesses cried foul over the monopoly Chinese held on certain kinds of businesses.

How valid were these latter claims? In the Sonoran capital of Hermosillo around 1920, Chinese were keen competitors, especially when it came to grocery, dry goods, shoes, daily household items and tobacco, owning 116 stores compared to 27 owned by Mexicans. In the whole of Sonora by the mid-1920s, Chinese held about 40% of manufacturing operations and small-scale dry goods shops and also
held 65% of all grocery stores in Sonora. Chinese control of similar businesses in the rest of northwest Mexico gave the antichinista attacks a ring of truth.

Under pressure from local leaders, Sonora also passed state-wide legislation prohibiting marriages between Mexicans and Chinese, even naturalized Chinese citizens. Most crippling by the mid-1920s were actions taken under the cloak of Article 27 of the national constitution, that held that all property rights were to be subordinate to the needs of the society. This article later led to the confiscation of large haciendas and any subsoil mineral deposits, but at this time it played into the moves to eliminate property rights of foreigners. Also, Article 33 prohibited foreigners from taking part in political life and allowed the expulsion of aliens who failed to obey the law or those who were clearly undesirable.

The language of “clearly undesirable” reflected antichinista rhetoric and by 1925, relations between antichinistas and the Chinese community were spiraling into further violence. In Fronteras, five Chinese merchants were killed when they refused to buy permits to transport their goods. In July, the districts of Nogales, Arizpe and Navojoa erupted, with Chinese-owned shops looted and burned. Three more Chinese were killed, and others escaped after paying extortion demands.

55 Jacques, ibid., 207.
Juan Calderon, noted *antichinista* orator, rallied a group of listeners to action in the mining town of Nacozari, where leaders had failed to enforce the new laws against Chinese. Calderon and his followers looted Chinese stores, burned some, took several Chinese hostages, and murdered others. In spite of the violence and the convocation of a National Anti-Chinese Convention in Sonora’s capital in October of 1925, few Chinese moved their stores or changed their occupations, hopeful that methods used in the past would again prevail.

Rhetoric against degenerate Chinese as unhygienic heroine users who out-bid local men for the hands of local women in marriage ramped up a familiar stream of hate speech. Offspring of these unions were called weaklings who polluted the Mexican race. These images, projecting a dire state of social and racial hazard, “pathologized” Chinese and echoed the pseudo-scientific eugenics movement of the day.\(^5^6\) Local Law 31, that banned Mexican-Chinese marriages, was not easily enforced when first passed in 1923. But in the second half of the decade, there was greater national support and public sentiment for enforcing Law 31 and extending its powers to the dissolution of all Mexican-Chinese marriages.

By 1930, new voices joined the anti-Chinese cacophony, with Mexican men recently expelled or voluntarily returning from the USA as the grips of the Great Depression set in. These mostly single men blamed the limited number of eligible

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\(^5^6\) Delgado, 180.
women for marriage on the number of women who married Chinese. The Chinese community could no longer appeal anti-miscegenation laws in court, bribe officials into non-enforcement, or counter negative views with good civic behavior.

On August 25, 1931, Governor Elias ordered Chinese to liquidate the stock in their stores and leave the state by September 5th. Some closed their shops and sold their goods in order to take their wealth with them, but this, too, was soon seen as a problem. Some banks were permanently closed once Chinese deposits were withdrawn. Some towns refused to allow them to wholesale their goods, and in other places many refused to buy their businesses. Special trains of cattle cars swept throughout the state collecting those departing, carrying them to Nogales on the Arizona border or the port city of Mazatlan in neighboring state of Sinaloa. An insult added to the injury of expulsion was the charge of a 50$ (peso) exit fee, on top of which border officials often confiscated their best clothing and valuables. Most of those expelled were bound for China.

If crossing into the USA, those who could pay their own passage to China crossed legally under bond.57 All others came under the jurisdiction of the local border patrols or sheriffs, who then turned them over to immigration authorities for appearance before an immigration commissioner. Passage to China for those less fortunate was often paid by the Six Companies Group, based in San Francisco.

57 Jacques, 213.
Chinese-Mexican losses in property and assets are hard to assess but have been estimated between $8,000,000 and $10,000,000.

A few Chinese went underground and stayed in Sonora, protected and hidden by Mexican friends and family. Sonoran state revenues collapsed in the immediate wake of the Chinese expulsion, and only slowly recovered over the next three years with special help from the central government. The repatriation of Chinese-Mexicans to China, many with their wives and children, started a new chapter in the story of the Chinese of Mexico, as many struggled to maintain their Mexican identity in a country far away from their Sonoran homeland.

In the context of the Caribbean, Chinese merchants also found themselves in keen competition with others for control of key economic resources.

[the last section will deal with the merchant Chinese in the Br. West Indies, especially Jamaica showing how they came to dominate the food wholesale and retail operations …. Then a summary and conclusion]