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The Quest for the Oracle Birds: Researching the Chinese Community in Colonial Mexico (1565-1641)

The Asian Diaspora in the Americas in the 16th and 17th has been neglected by scholars for a long time. This fact is baffling, not only for the great interest of this topic in of itself, but also because it could provide new knowledge of colonial Mexico, especially in terms of the interaction among the many groups that populated the colony. This early movement of people and ideas across the largest extension of water in the planet is characteristic of what has been called the “archaic globalization,” and thus research on these matters could contribute to the history of globalization.

The Asians arrived in Mexico through the trade route established in 1573 between Acapulco and Manila. Traditionally, the Manila Galleon, the link between Manila and Acapulco, between Asia and the Americas, has been considered in terms of its impact on global economics,[[1]](#footnote-2) but little attention has been paid to its relevance to the transformation of global demographics in the 16th and 17th centuries. While it is quite obvious that it had nowhere near as profound an impact as that of other trading routes--the Atlantic slave trade being the paramount example--the transpacific trade route did in fact entailed some notorious social and cultural transformations in colonial Mexico and all the areas in and around this sea lane. These are historical phenomena that have been sorely neglected by scholarly research.

In this presentation, I seek to further elaborate on the themes outlined by Edward Slack in *The Chinos in New Spain: A Corrective Lens for a Distorted Image*, an article published in 2009 in the Journal of World History.[[2]](#footnote-3) Firstly, I would like to bring forth some evidence that indicates that Asian religious practices were present in Mexico in the 1600s. Furthermore, I will argue that the traces of these practices are still visible today, in the form of a popular fortune-telling tradition. Secondly, I intend to provide some information about the arrival, settlement and distribution of the Asian Diaspora. I will focus on their distribution within Mexico City. Thirdly, I will elaborate on their occupations, social status and daily life, as well as in the patterns in marriages and relations with other groups. And lastly, I will show how the guild of barbers served as an Asian immigrant reception network.

In a work published in 1609,[[3]](#footnote-4) Antonio de Morga, a high-ranking colonial official in the Philippines, provided a long and detailed description of the products imported from China. Among many varieties of textile products and luxurious pieces of furniture, Morga noted that Chinese traders also brought “domestic buffaloes; geese that resemble swans; horses, some mules and asses; even caged birds, some of which talk, while others sing, and they make them play innumerable tricks”. When I first came across this information, the last item on the list immediately made me think of the fortune-telling birds which are a common sight in the plazas of many towns and cities of my native Mexico. Typically, a service is provided where, upon receiving a tip, a man carrying a portable multi-colored wooden cage, will open it and let a little canary pick a folded card from a drawer. After rewarding his pet, the man then hands the card to his customer. Written on it is a fortune or prophecy, not unlike the ones found inside fortune cookies served in Chinese-American restaurants.

I then wondered if this tradition could have arrived in Mexico, along with an Asian Diaspora, on the Manila Galleon. After some research, I found examples of fortune-telling birds in several other places—Singapore, Hong Kong, Japan, India, Korea, Brazil and Guatemala—. The fact that there are more Asian countries in this list can be taken as evidence of an Eastern origin for this practice. A stronger case can be made if one considers the lack of any indication of a pre-Hispanic or Spanish avian divination tradition. The legend of how Tezcatlipoca, a central deity in Aztec religion, tricked Quetzalcoalt, patron god of learning and knowledge using a mirror, has been related to scrying, that is the prediction of future events through the use of reflecting objects, such as, for example, a crystal ball. Scrying seems to have been the most widespread divinatory practice in Mesoamerica. Being Christians, the Spanish had the express Biblical prohibition of performing any kind of divinatory practices, which is present in verses like Deuteronomy 18:10-12 or Leviticus 19:26. It would not be too risky to imagine that some practices, like palm-reading, tarot, and such, may have been widespread in Spain, especially among the Romani people, who are recorded as having arrived in the Iberian Peninsula from North Africa as early as the 15th century.

These two traditions, the Native-Mexican on the one hand and the Spanish on the other, could have been present—although most likely persecuted—in New Spain in the early 17th century. Neither, however, makes use of the written word to deliver its omens. In China, by contrast, the Book of Changes or Yi Jing易经 is among the world’s most ancient divination systems. Moreover, at some Shinto shrines and Buddhist temples in Japan one can find *omikuji* 御御籤, that is, random fortunes written on strips of paper. It is a Japanese custom to use yamagara birds to draw these fortunes from a box. Both the Mexican and Japanese birds sometimes ring a bell as part of their performance. Europeans in the Early Modern period were impressed by the degree of sophistication of Chinese bird keeping. Gaspar Da Cruz reported that he owned two birds “which sang in December as though it were April” during his stay in Macau.[[4]](#footnote-5) With all this facts at hand, one could safely argue that something very similar to the picking of *omikuji* could have been among the “innumerable tricks” Morga said the Chinese made their birds perform.

The Mexican fortune-telling birds are very likely the remnant of popular religious practices taken by Asian sojourners to New Spain at least since the early 17th century. They could also suggest that these immigrants may have kept on practicing their native religions, or, perhaps more likely, fused elements of it to their newly acquired Catholic faith. These birds are the fossils left by an Asian Diaspora in colonial Mexico.

These Asian immigrants are all referred to in the Mexican sources as *chino*, the Spanish word for Chinese.[[5]](#footnote-6) The term, however, is used indistinctively to describe people hailing from various locations—China, Philippines, Japan, Burma, etc.—. Furthermore, the term is also applied to several of the categories or *castas* of New Spain’s racial social stratification system. Furthermore, the word *chino* itself might derive, not from the name of the Asian country, but from the Peruvian *quechua* word *čína* used to describe a person with almond-shaped eyes.[[6]](#footnote-7) It is, therefore, very difficult to determine the size and the process of settlement of the Asian Diaspora of New Spain. One of the goals I will pursue in my future work will be to set aside each of the many subgroups that formed the Asian community.

But leaving these terminology problems aside, the first *chinos* arrived shortly after the establishment of the Manila Galleon in 1573. In the 16th and 17th centuries, Asians settled mostly along the Pacific coast, in the towns and villages along the road that linked Acapulco with Mexico City, in the vice royal capital itself, and in the city of Puebla. In the 18th century a few settled outside these areas as well. One of the earliest accounts of this movement of people is that of Friar Juan Gonzalez de Mendoza, who wrote in his *History of the Great Kingdom of China*, that in 1579 “greed brought to Mexico eighty-five Chinese merchants with very curious wares.”[[7]](#footnote-8) If this information is accurate, these “greedy” Chinese probably laid down the foundations for a trading network spanning the Pacific from Fujian, to Manila, and from there on to Acapulco and beyond. *Chino* merchants proliferated in New Spain, selling goods from China, Castile and New Spain. Their licenses are preserved in the Mexican archives. *Chinos* with other occupations like, shipbuilders, militiamen, muleteers, goldsmiths, and, of course, slaves, among many others, also left a trail of documentation. As Slack pointed out, Thomas Gage recognized that chinos dominated the goldsmith industry in Mexico City in the 17th century.[[8]](#footnote-9)

*Chinos* were considered legally equal to the *indios*, or Native Mexicans by the Spaniards. They even had some important privileges over them, such as the right to bear swords. However this was not always reflected in practice. Several complaints are preserved where *chinos*, mostly of Filipino origin, and some with a background in the wars of the Hapsburg monarchy against the sultanate of Mindanao, demanded their right to bear arms. Some of them argue this was something they needed to do as they were traders to some remote areas in Northern New Spain, and therefore, needed their swords for protection against the chichimeca indians.[[9]](#footnote-10) This, of course was a privilege enjoyed only by men.

The history of *chino* women is much more difficult to outline than that of men. *Chinas* were mentioned mainly in marriage licenses, either as brides or witnesses. However, if one takes into account Lourdes Villafuerte’s interpretation of marriage patterns at the time,[[10]](#footnote-11) it seems almost certain that the women contained in these sources are not Asians but rather *castas* that is of Native Mexican Indian and African descent. All these women were marrying black or mulato men and Villafuerte showed strong evidence that suggests that the various ethnic groups tended to marry within their own group. Following this reasoning, the wife of Juan Perez, a *chino*, must have been *china* herself. The couple had a domestic fight in 1634, after which she left her husband and moved in with another man called Agustín. Eventually, the Inquisition forced her to return to her spouse.[[11]](#footnote-12) It is worth mentioning that her lover was also a *chino*, and that he was a baber.

Many *chinos* acquired licenses to become barbers. At the time, barbers in New Spain and elsewhere, were no mere groomers, but provided important healthcare services to the community, for example, rotten teeth removal and bloodletting. Several barber licenses were issued in the 1620s, 30s, and 40s to *chinos*. There must have been a considerable number of them and they must have occupied some strongly coveted workplaces, because in 1635, a group of Spanish barbers solicited the Mexico City Town Council or *cabildo*, to enforce the removal of the *chinos*. The Spaniards succeeded and the *chino* barbers were expelled to the outskirts of the city. They were also prohibited from taking in *chino* apprentices, and their maximum number was limited to twelve. The Asians seem to have clustered around the San Juan and San Jacinto parishes on what was then the Western edge of the city. [[12]](#footnote-13)

Slack noted this presence and speculated that these areas may have constituted the Chinese “ghetto” of Mexico City.[[13]](#footnote-14) But more interestingly, today San Juan is home to Mexico City’s Chinatown, which raises the question of whether this fact is a sign of continuity. With this information at hand, it could be suggested that Mexico City’s is the oldest and longest lived Chinatown in the Western Hemisphere. Despite the Spanish barbers’ efforts, many *chinos* continued to work as barbers after the 1635 dispute. *Chinos* trying to get a license argued that they did not performed bloodletting, and that they did their services for free to the poor.[[14]](#footnote-15) The accusation that *chinos* were greedy used by Mendoza in the late 16th century was obviously still uttered some fifty years later.

A social network, which could be referred to as the *chino* barbers guild, may have functioned as an Asian network, easing the arrival of *chinos* to the viceroyalty. A 1688 marriage license serves to support such an argument. The witnesses testified that Antonio de Siles, of Filipino origin, arrived in Mexico sometime in the 1680s. He made his way to Mexico City, where he became an apprentice to a barber, and later became one himself. He finally settled in the town of Taxco and married a local Indian girl.[[15]](#footnote-16) The guild may have served as a fictive family to the *chinos*. Some guilds would set up confraternities. As Edward Slack pointed out, the traveler Gemelli Carerri documented a brawl that occurred in Easter 1697 between the confraternity of the Holy Trinity and the “procession of the Chinese.”[[16]](#footnote-17) This aggression was probably provoked by the perception of this confraternity as a threat. The recipients of it surely stood by one another to better resist these attacks. These phenomena might have triggered a sense of belonging among the Asian community to ensure their own survival, thus forming groups such as the barbers guild. Within such groups they could have preserved some part of their Asian heritage. Could it be that a number of them still practiced their original native faith? What is certain is that at least one such ritual is still present in modern day Mexico, or so, a little bird told me.

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1. D. O Flynn y A. Giráldez, "Born with a 'silver spoon': The origin of world trade in 1571", *Journal of World History* 6, no. 2 (1995): 201–221. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. Edward R. Slack Jr., "The Chinos in New Spain: A Corrective Lens for a Distorted Image", *Journal of World History* 20, no. 1 (2009): 35-67. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. Antonio De Morga, *Sucesos de las Islas Filipinas*, 1a ed. (Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2007), 527. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. Gaspar da Cruz, *Tratado das coisas da China: (Evora, 1569-1570) (Serie Ultramarina)* (Comissao Nacional para as Comemoracoes dos Descobrimentos Portugueses, 1997). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. All the archival material cited in this paper comes from the Archivo General de la Nación (AGN) in Mexico City. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. Real Academia Española, *Diccionario de la Lengua Española de la Real Academia*, 21 ed. (Real Academia Española, 2002). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. Juan Gonzalez De Mendoza, *Historia de las cosas mas notables, ritos y costumbres del gran reino de la China. Edición, prólogo y notas por el P. Félix García*, (ed. Félix GARCÍA, 1944). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
8. Edward R. Slack Jr., "The *Chinos* in New Spain"; Thomas Gage, *Viajes Por La Nueva España Y Guatemala*, 1ª ed. (Madrid: Historia 16, 1987). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
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10. Lourdes Villafuerte, "El matrimonio como punto de partida para la formación de la familia. Ciudad de México, siglo XVII", en *Vida cotidiana y cultura en el México virreinal. Antología* (México: Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, 2000), 181-187. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
11. AGN Instituciones Coloniales/ Indiferente Virreinal/ Caja 2430/ Expediente 029/ Fecha: 31 de mayo de 1634 [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
12. Homer Dubs y Robert Smith, "Chinese in Mexico City in 1635", *The Far Eastern Quarterly* 1, no. 4 (1942): 387-389. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
13. Edward R. Slack Jr., "The *Chinos* in New Spain". Slack offers the first academic discussion about the *chino* barber’s guild in Mexico City. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
14. AGN Instituciones Coloniales/ Indiferente Virreinal/ Caja 3303/ Expediente 008 (Real Audiencia Caja 3303/ Fecha 1625 [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
15. AGN Instituciones Coloniales/ Inquisición/ Inquisición (61)/ Volumen 673/ Expediente 37 Fecha: 1688 [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
16. Ibid.; Giovanni Francesco Gemelli Careri, *Viaje a la Nueva España* (UNAM, 2002). [↑](#footnote-ref-17)