

English-language book documents history of Chinese in Mexico for the first time

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Robert Chao Romero

The little known history of the Chinese in Mexico — one that is marked by a bloody massacre and a successful effort to shut down Chinese-owned businesses in one Mexican state — is documented for the first time in an English-language book authored by a UCLA professor.

“There’s this rich history of the Chinese in [Mexico](#) that’s been forgotten for the most part,” said Robert Chao Romero, assistant professor of Chicana and Chicano studies. “It’s been forgotten because it’s a dark chapter in Mexican history, unfortunately.”

The book, titled “The Chinese in Mexico, 1882-1940” (University of Arizona Press, 2010) notes that Chinese migration to Mexico dates back to the 1600s when Spanish trading ships sailed between Mexico and the Philippines. Small numbers of Chinese immigrants entered colonial Mexico as personal servants of Spanish merchants.

Some Chinese stayed in Mexico to earn their living as tradesmen, barbers and shopkeepers, and often resided in segregated quarters in the periphery of large cities, Romero said.

Wide-scale migration to “Big Lusong,” as the Chinese referred to Mexico, did not occur until much later, according to Romero. About 60,000 Chinese entered Mexico during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, many of them with the intent of trying to gain illegal entry into the U.S., which had barred Chinese immigrants in 1882.

(At the time U.S. authorities did not arrest Mexican workers trying to cross the border for higher wages because there were no laws in existence that barred or even limited Mexican immigration to the United States, Romero noted.)

In 1899, the Mexican government also signed a treaty with China to recruit Chinese to work in agriculture in the northern border areas, Romero said. By the 1920s, Chinese immigrants who had settled in Mexico were the second largest immigrant group in the nation — after Spanish immigrants — with a population of 26,000, Romero said. They resided in every Mexican state except for Tlaxcala.

The Chinese community in Mexico was comprised of two distinct socioeconomic tiers, Romero wrote. Merchants and skilled artisans such as tailors represented the privileged, wealthier and, often times, more assimilated social class of the Chinese immigrant community. Agricultural laborers and urban unskilled workers formed the poor, illiterate and socially unconnected underclass of the Chinese community.

Many Chinese owned neighborhood grocery or dried good stores, particularly in northern Mexican states such as Sonora and Chihuahua. The store owners were usually able to offer cheaper prices than their Mexican competitors in large part because they were single when they arrived in Mexico and didn't have families to support.

Small Chinese communities prospered in such cities as Torreón, Coahuila, in northern Mexico. In Torreón, a small Chinese neighborhood sprung up of about 600 residents and boasted its own bank and hotel.

But a nationalist fervor swept Mexico in 1910, the year in which the Mexican Revolution started. Revolutionaries largely viewed foreigners in Mexico as a detriment to the nation's economy, blaming them for becoming rich at the expense of humble Mexicans.

In Torreón, sympathizers of revolutionary leader Francisco Madero started to make inflammatory speeches against the Chinese, and residents organized demonstrations against them.

Maderista forces entered Torreón on May 13, 1911, and two days later, they defeated the Mexican army. On May 15, Madero's forces and civilian mobs targeted Chinese homes and businesses.

Many Chinese residents were killed and robbed. Their private residences and business were ransacked and destroyed. About 300 Chinese lost

their lives. Romero said that this was the worst act of violence committed against any Chinese diaspora of the Americas during the 20th century.

But despite the profound loss of life that occurred on May 15, many lives were also saved that day by the intervention of Mexicans and foreigners.

“Such Good Samaritans protected the lives of Chinese residents of Torreón by hiding them in their private homes and by misleading Maderista soldiers as to their whereabouts,” Romero wrote.

Another hotspot of anti-Chinese sentiment was Sonora, a northern Mexican state.

In Sonora, the Chinese developed a monopoly on neighborhood grocery stores, which engendered much jealousy within aspiring lower middle class Mexican merchants.

In 1916 in Magdalena, Sonora, a group of Mexican businessmen created a pact to force out Chinese merchants by any legal means possible, Romero wrote. Their propaganda was further embraced by members of the working class of northern Mexico, who viewed Chinese merchants and workers as detrimental to their own prosperity.

“All these anti-Chinese clubs and anti-Chinese newspapers popped up,” Romero said. “They even tried to segregate the Chinese into their own barrio.”

Anti-Chinese comedy, cartoons, poetry and corridos (country songs) also blamed the Chinese for many of society's ills, including drug use and threats to public health.

“Chinese for the most part were able to deflect those shots taken against them because they would hire the best Mexican attorneys to represent them in court and also bribed officials,” Romero said.

Many Mexicans also frowned upon marriages between Chinese men and Mexican women; Sonora passed a law banning such marriages but it was loosely enforced.

To demonstrate the disdain for interracial marriages, Romero included text from “El Chino” (“The Chinese”). In the comedic skit, a Chinese man tells a Mexican woman that Mexican men are lazy but he is rich and can buy her whatever she wants in exchange for marriage; the woman ultimately rejects his overtures.

The skit, which is included in UCLA’s Strachwitz Frontera Collection of Mexican and Mexican-American Recordings, can be found at frontera.library.ucla.edu/find.do?keyword=El+Chino .

Starting in the 1930s when the Great Depression in the United States began to impact Mexico, government officials could not ignore the groundswell of protest against the Chinese, Romero said.

The Sonoran government implemented what were known as “80 percent labor laws.” Because many Chinese-owned businesses hired Chinese workers, the government dictated that at least 80 percent of their hires had to be Mexican.

Chinese store owners retaliated by hoarding food, Romero said, and the government responded by shutting down their businesses.

“Most Chinese returned to China and some went to more hospitable areas in Mexico, such as Mexicali in Baja California,” he added.

By 1940, anti-Chinese violence and propaganda had severely deterred Chinese natives from remaining in Mexico. Their numbers dwindled to 6,000 and have never increased since then.

But in Mexican cities such as Mexicali and Mexico City, some “café chinos,” or Chinese cafes, are to this day still owned by longtime Chinese-Mexican residents, Romero said.

“Despite the violence perpetuated against Chinese immigrants, they continued to persevere and have contributed to Mexico’s diversity,” Romero said. “It is a great testament to their courage and will to survive in spite of great adversity and prejudice against them.”

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