

PRC-Mexican Relations and Chinese Mexican History: Opportunities, Limitations and Challenges

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The following article will provide insight into archival and non-archival resources available for writing histories of Chinese-Mexican relations after 1949 as well as the histories of Chinese immigrants in the Latin American country during the twentieth century. Both subfields face a significant challenge in the lack of available sources, although for the latter community resources and memoirs as well as archival resources from several countries, including the United States and Taiwan, can help fill gaps in Mexican and Chinese archives. This helps explain why the study of Chinese migrants to Mexico is flourishing even as the study of PRC-Mexican relations has produced relatively little scholarly work. Even as these two subfields appear to be very distinct, through much of the twentieth century they were linked, particularly as the People's Republic of China sought closer ties to Latin American countries through their resident Chinese.

Despite the challenges to writing histories of PRC-Mexican relations as well as of Chinese immigrants to Mexico, these histories are still very much worth exploring. The study of the contemporary relationship has attracted many scholars, and these histories provide a window into how the PRC began to reach out to potential partners in Latin America as well as to the wider third world.

PRC-Mexican Relations

After the transfer of the government of the Republic of China to Taiwan in 1949, the Mexican government followed the lead of the United States in continuing to recognize that government as the legitimate government of China. It did so until 1971, when administration of Luis Echeverría Álvarez publicly broke with the ROC, proclaiming that “the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the Chinese nation are legally indivisible,” and voted to expel that government from the United Nations.¹ Three months later, the Mexican government would establish relations with the PRC. Although the break with the Republic of China seemed rather abrupt, from 1949 to 1971 the Mexican government had been interested in closer ties to the People's Republic of China.

The slow improvement in the relationship between Mexico and the PRC took place through economic investment and cultural missions, as well as through Mexico City's bureau of the New China News Agency (xinhua she 新華社). Two Mexican national-level archives are fundamental to understanding these strengthening ties: the General Archive of the Nation (AGN) and the Historical Diplomatic Archive of the Secretariat of Foreign Relations (SRE). For the AGN, the Fondo Presidentes (Presidential Papers) and the Investigaciones Políticas y Sociales (Social and Political Investigations) files will be most helpful. While the records of

the Archivo de la Embajada de Mexico en China (Archive of the Mexican Embassy in China) only run until 1949, the SRE contains other isolated files on Chinese-Mexican relations after that year. Documents at these archives are most often written in Spanish and occasionally in English, French, or Chinese. Unfortunately, neither archive has an online catalog, meaning that researchers will still rely on the dusty card catalogs and the help of the archivists. Making photocopies can be difficult, but at these two archives one can freely take pictures.

Still, scholars will find that archival resources on the relationship between Mexico and China during this crucial twenty-year period are rather limited, and what is available often consists of the protests of the ROC embassy against the “infiltration” of the People's Republic of China. Historians may have to rely on Chinese-language sources in the PRC and ROC's Ministries of Foreign Affairs for additional insight. Indeed, without ROC Ministry of Foreign Affairs sources, I probably would not have been able to pull together the various strands I found in the SRE and AGN – the Mexican sources on their own were not abundant enough. Despite the fact that the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Beijing is once again closed to researchers, the sources available at the MOFA in Taipei often records the PRC's visits to Mexico and analyses written by ROC government officials. Two good overviews, both published in Spanish, give an idea of the archival sources available in China and Mexico on this relationship. Mexican archival sources are well covered by the chapter, “Por si no nos volvemos a ver” by Haro, León, and Ramírez, while Jorge Octavio Fernández Montes' chapter “Encuentros y desencuentros,” using PRC sources, provides a comprehensive synopsis.²

To help overcome the lack of documents, in my own work I also utilized newspaper sources and individual narratives. *Renmin Ribao* provides information on the scientific, economic, artistic, and political delegations exchanged between Latin America and the People's Republic of China. For example, influential former presidents Lázaro Cárdenas and Emilio Portes Gil visited Beijing shortly after 1949, both meeting with Mao Zedong and Zhou Enlai. Additionally, the PRC staged a Mexican film festival in Beijing in 1959.³ These visits illustrate the incremental development of this relationship, and challenges the conventional narrative of Chinese Communist “infiltration” and “radicalization” of Latin America during the Cold War. Mexican newspapers such as *Excelsior* and *El Universal* can provide insight into the Mexican attitude towards Communist China. It should be noted that right-wing delegations often visited Taipei instead, including conservative journalists and

former president Miguel Alemán.

These sources can be complemented by diplomatic memoirs and intelligence records. At least two ROC diplomats in Mexico, Cheng Tien-ku (程天固) and Feng-shan Ho (何鳳山), and one PRC ambassador, Huang Shikang (黃士康), wrote memoirs about their time in the country, providing information not only about the status of the PRC and ROC in Latin America, but also on the local conditions of Chinese migrants and on how the embassy made contact with local Chinese to pursue its diplomatic objectives. During the Cold War, the Mexican government shared information on potential Chinese communists with US intelligence agencies including the FBI, and both monitored the PRC's initial contact with Chinese Mexicans, particularly through the Mexico City branch of the New China News Agency.⁴ Some information on the PRC's contact with Chinese Mexicans is similarly located in Foreign Broadcast Information Service (FBIS) files.

Chinese Immigrants in Mexico

As the extant sources for the Cold War period might suggest, much of China's historical contact with Latin America has taken place through Chinese immigrants. Beginning in the 1850s, Chinese left Guangdong and Fujian provinces for new settlements around the Americas, including Cuba, Peru, Panama, and Mexico. Ever since, the Republic of China and the People's Republic of China sought to organize "overseas Chinese" (*huaqiao* 華僑) throughout the hemisphere as a component of their foreign policy towards Latin America. Several scholars, such as Kathleen López, Ana María Candela, Diego Chou, and Evelyn Hu-DeHart, have also worked on issues relating to Chinese overseas as well as China's relationship with Mexico, Cuba, Chile, and Peru.⁵

Aside from the Manila Galleon, direct contact between China and Latin America began during the mid-nineteenth century as hundreds of thousands of Chinese took part in the coolie trade to Cuba and Peru. Chinese concern over the treatment of its emigrants led the Qing government to establish diplomatic channels with those two countries, eventually expanding to other parts of the region. Chinese migrants would not arrive in large numbers to Mexico until the turn of the twentieth century, after Mexico and China established diplomatic relations in 1899.

Rather than shed their old culture and assimilate wholeheartedly into Mexico, Chinese Mexicans founded associations which maintained attachments to their sending regions. Clan and native-place associations took care of arriving migrants and sent remittances back home. Political associations were also a strong pillar of Chinese community life. Before the Xinhai geming, northern Mexico had a branch of the Tongmenghui, and Kang Youwei visited the Mexican city of Torreón. After the Revolution, Chinese Mexicans established branches of the Guomindang around the country. The Guomindang in Mexico was a hybrid of a political association and a mutual aid association, which is why some scholars of Latin America primarily consider it an immigrant association and why anti-Chinese writings regard the Guomindang as an opium- and prostitution-running mafia. Among immigrants, it had a deep cultural impact. One immigrant recalled that "The Kuo Min Tan [Guomindang] for

instance organized the best parties and dances for the paisanos. The dance of October the 10th was very famous and many locals joined in. Also when they held Chinese banquets, the food was the best."⁶ Often the pictures that Mexicans of Chinese descent have of their parents' social gatherings were taken during Guomindang meetings.

In addition to the archives mentioned above, two Mexican archives will be useful as resources on Chinese migration to Mexico: the Central Migratory Archive of the National Institute of Migration (ACM-INM) and the papers of influential former president Plutarco Elías Calles (FAPECFT). The ACM-INM contains individual immigration and naturalization records, providing scholars with information on when Chinese migrants arrived as well as where Chinese settled and conducted business activities. Similarly, a 1942 national registration of foreigners in the country (Registro Nacional de Extranjeros), accessible either at the ACM-INM, the AGN or on microfilm at El Colegio de México, provides biographical data on individual migrants. The papers of Plutarco Elías Calles include critical information on Mexico's anti-Chinese campaigns which rocked the country during the 1930s, but also include correspondence with Chinese associations during his presidency. Additionally, there are state and local archives around the country which also contain information on Chinese associations and individual migrants.

The US government observed and commented on the relationship between Mexico and China as well as on Chinese migrants, meaning that some sources are available at the National Archives in College Park, Maryland and Washington, DC. US consuls in cities like Mexicali, Mazatlán, and Tampico regularly wrote on the Chinese populations in those areas, especially since during times of trouble the Chinese often petitioned those consuls to keep them safe.⁷ Many such records have been collected into a microfilm roll entitled "Records of the Department of State Relating to the Chinese Question in Mexico, 1910-1929." Additionally, Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) files may be helpful, as many Chinese Mexicans tried to enter Mexico under the merchant exception of the Chinese Exclusion Act. The interviews that those merchants underwent contain important data on their lives south of the US-Mexico border.

There are also narratives and community histories written by the Chinese themselves. Of particular interest is Eduardo Auyón Gerardo's *Los chinos en Baja California ayer y hoy* (The Chinese in Baja California Yesterday and Today) and *Moguo xiajiasheng huaqiao yange shilüe* (墨國下加省華僑沿革史略, Brief History of the Overseas Chinese of Baja California, Mexico). Auyón Gerardo (歐陽民) provides a narrative of Chinese Mexican history in the region and examples of local celebrations. Three other directories include *The Chinese in North America: A Guide to Their Life and Progress*, *Meizhou huaqiao tongjian* (美洲華僑通鑑, The Chinese in the Americas) and *La Honorable colonia china en la república mexicana* (The Honorable Chinese Colony in the Mexican Republic), all of which provide brief histories of Chinese associations and prominent migrants. Because the naming practices of Chinese migrants in Spanish can vary widely, it can be difficult to match Chinese records on

individual migrants with Mexican ones, but directories like these can provide clues.

Mexico unfortunately did not have a tradition of Chinese-language newspapers, but copies of four periodicals have survived. *Qiaosheng Yuekan* (僑聲月刊), a newspaper founded during the Second World War to encourage Chinese Mexicans to donate to the war effort, has surviving issues in the National Libraries of China and Taiwan, while *Moguo Gongbao* (墨國公報), the organ of the Chee Kung Tong, a large fraternal organization that was the largest Chinese association in Mexico, survives in the National Library of China. Surviving issues of other newspapers are scattered. Two issues of Mexico’s *Xinghua Zazhi* (醒華雜誌) survive in the AHSRE, while two issues of Torreón’s *Qifa Zazhi* 啟發雜誌 may be found in the Guomintang archives in Taipei.

Sources from these archives which present the Chinese perspective are not always flattering. For example, newspaper clippings on a high-profile scandal involving Mexican General Agustín Mora, housed at FAPECFE, suggest that the Chee Kung Tong conspired to bribe high-level Mexican officials to deport the leadership of the Guomintang from the country, thus seeking a final solution to the longtime rivalry between the two organizations. This plot complicates the current scholarly understanding of the anti-Chinese movement in Mexico, mostly presented as unified Chinese resistance to Mexican popular xenophobia. It demonstrates that Chinese organizations themselves took advantage of anti-Chinese sentiment to settle scores, and that corrupt Mexican officials, motivated less by anti-Chinese sentiment than by the potential to pocket funds, sometimes took part in internecine conflicts in Chinese Mexican communities. Despite the potential to unearth unflattering stories, these archival resources can provide a better sense of the agency exercised by Chinese migrants themselves, as well as how they attempted to make the best of a hostile climate in Mexico.

Although the sources on Chinese-Mexican relations and Chinese migrants to Mexico are not always abundant, the stories that are unearthed can be rather surprising to scholars who view Mexican migration as well as foreign relations primarily involving the United States. It is perhaps because of the potential for an intellectual reward that several scholars have been working on these sources as well as China-Latin American relations more generally.

Were scholars to conduct research on China-related issues in Latin America, it’s worth noting that the Centro de Estudios China-Mexico (CECHIMEX) at the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM) is a regional leader in China-related research, spanning topics as varied as contemporary political and economic relations to overseas Chinese history to Chinese education. Each semester CECHIMEX holds a lecture series on these varied topics, and the conference Red Académica de América Latina y el Caribe sobre China (Red ALC-CHINA) draws scholars from around the region and beyond.

NOTES

¹ Henry Tanner, “Albania Says Peking Bars Any 2-China Plan at U.N.” *New York Times*, October 6, 1971, front page.

² Francisco Javier Haro, José Luis León y Juan José Ramírez, “Por si no nos volvemos a ver: proceso de ruptura con Taiwán e inicio de una nueva etapa diplomática,” [In Case We Don’t See Each Other Again: The Process of the Break with Taiwan and the Start of a New Diplomatic Phase] in *Historia de las relaciones internacionales de México, 1821-2010 volumen 6: Asia* (Mexico City: Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores, Dirección General del Acervo Histórico Diplomático, 2011): 219-241; Jorge Octavio Fernández Montes, “Encuentros y desencuentros. México y la República Popular China antes del establecimiento de relaciones diplomáticas (1949-1972)” [Encounters and Disagreements: Mexico and the People’s Republic of China before the Establishment of Diplomatic Relations (1949-1972)] in *40 años de la relación entre México y China: acuerdos, desencuentros y futuro*, ed. Enrique Dussel Peters & Yolanda Trápaga Delfin (México: UNAM, 2012): 387-400.

³ “Mao Zhuxi jiejian Moxige qian linshi zongtong” [Chairman Mao Receives Former Mexican Provisional President], *Renmin Ribao*, October 6, 1960, front page; “Moxige dianying daibiaotuan di Jing” [Mexican Film Delegation Arrives in Beijing], *Renmin Ribao*, August 13, 1959: 4.

⁴ See, for example, Fernando Gutiérrez Barrios, Captain of the DFS, “Actividades pro China Comunista en el estado de Baja California,” [Pro-Communist China Activities in the State of Baja California], AGN IPS 2958B; “Washington Post Article – Parade Uncovers A Chinese Spy Ring in Mexico”, Bureau of Inter-American Affairs, Entry #P2, Records Relating to Mexico, 1946-1975, Container #16, Record Group 59, US National Archives.

⁵ Kathleen López’s article on Cuban and Chinese archives of Chinese Cuban history will be especially helpful. See “Transnational Histories: A Dual-Sided Approach to Recovering Early Twentieth-Century Migration to Cuba,” in *Chinese Overseas: Migration, Research and Documentation*, ed. Chee-Beng Tan, Colin Storey, and Julia Zimmerman (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 2007): 167-198. For printed Chinese-language sources on the Chinese of North America, see Him Mark Lai et al., *A History Reclaimed: An Annotated Bibliography of Chinese Language Materials on the Chinese of America* (Los Angeles: Asian American Studies Center, University of California, 1986).

⁶ Subject 14, Lau “Memories of Origins / Origins of Memories: The Collective Memory of the Chinese Community in Tapachula, Chiapas, Mexico” (M.A. Thesis, University of British Columbia, 2003): 53.

⁷ Record Group 59 (Records of the Department of State) and Record Group 84 (Records of the Foreign Service Posts of the Department of State) will be most helpful.