

CHINESE IMMIGRANTS IN PERU

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Historically, most Latin American countries have benefited from large-scale immigration since the time of the conquest. Latin America as a whole was an region receiving immigrants from Europe and Africa during the colonial period and, to a lesser extent, from Asia after Independence. During recent decades, however, immigration to the continent has been greatly reduced. This general pattern is also found in Peru. After Brazil, Peru is the second among Latin American countries with the largest concentration of Chinese immigrants.¹ In recent years, Chinese immigration has been repeatedly studied, although much work remains to be done.

The purpose of this paper is to compensate for this deficiency. The present study is organized in six parts. Part I examines the dynamics of the migration process. Part II discusses the reasons why the Chinese migrated to Peru including pull and push factors. Part III analyzes why and how these people migrated into cities. Part IV illustrates the economic situation of Chinese in Peru. Part V addresses the political participation of the Chinese immigrants. And part VI examines the effects of this migration on the Peruvian society.

This study is based on a variety of published sources in English, and Spanish as well as in Chinese. Yet more importantly, this article derives from a series of interviews carried out in Lima during the summer of 1989.

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I. A BRIEF HISTORY OF IMMIGRATION

During its 400 year history, the Chinese immigration to Peru has passed through three distinct phases such as following.

A. Early Immigration and Settlement (1570–1849)

Permanent Chinese communities are known to have existed in Peru as early as the early colonial period. Throughout much of the late colonial era despite protests from Seville, there existed a rich trade between the two countries by way of the Philippines. The Manila galleons crossed the Pacific, flooding Peru with silk, brocades, linen, tea and spices from China and other oriental lands. Many Chinese sailors and merchants served with the crews of the Manila galleons and some of them must have remained in the New World.² In Spanish the Chinese were called 'sangleys,' which came from the Macao word 'sengli', meaning 'trade'. However, large movement of Chinese to this part of the Western Hemisphere did not begin until the mid-nineteenth century, partly because before then there was no demand for coolies on a large scale, and because China had long had implemented restrictions against emigration abroad. In addition, the animism inherent in ancestor worshipping and religious Confucianism militated against emigration.

B. Coolie Trade (1849–1879)

During these twenty-five years (1849–1874) about 100,000 Chinese arrived in Peru. All of them were males under forty years of age, who 'contracted' to work for eight years at a total remuneration of about 75 pound sterling plus food and housing, on coastal plantations, guano islands, in mines, and in railroad construction, or as servants. It is estimated that 90 percent of these coolies worked on plantations, or on *haciendas* on the coast and in the *sierra*, such as Tarna, Arequipa, and Moquegua. Although the Chinese died by the thousands, they became the largest foreign group in Lima, accounting for 37 percent of the city's total foreign population in 1876.³

C. From 1881 to the present

Chinese contract migration, though theoretically free, was in fact a limited kind of slavery, differing in the higher probability of ultimate freedom. The coolie ships were commonly called 'floating hells'. With intentions to correcting human abuse, China and Peru drew up the Treaty of 1874. This treaty was in effect, at least nominally, for twenty years until it was declared null by Peru. In 1909 the provisions of the treaty were redeclared

Table 1
Arrivals of Chinese in Callao (1850-1874)

Years	Sailed from China	Death on passage	Arrived
1850 to 1860	15,000	2,000	13,000
1860	2,007	594	1,413
1861	1,860	420	1,440
1862	1,726	718	1,008
1863	2,301	673	1,628
1864	7,010	600	6,410
1865	4,794	254	4,540
1866	6,543	614	5,929
1867	2,400	216	2,184
1868	4,732	466	4,266
1869	3,066	75	2,991
1870	7,917	373	7,544
1871	12,526	741	11,812
1872	14,505	1,114	13,391
1873	7,303	732	6,571
1874	3,939	114	3,825
25 years	97,629	9,677	87,953

Source: Martinet, J. B., *La Agricultura en el Perú*, Centro Peruano de Historia Económica, Lima, 1977.

with substantial revisions as stated in the so-called Wu Ting-fang Protocol. The main amendment stated that Chinese laborers could no longer enter Peru, and that only non-laborers (e.g., businessmen, professionals, students) were welcome. In short, since the early twentieth century, there have been few new Chinese immigrants in Peru due to restricted immigration laws. Furthermore, there is no evidence to indicate that such kind of policy will change dramatically in the years ahead. It should be noted that an immediate cause of this restriction was the series of riots in which Peruvian workmen demonstrated against both Chinese and Japanese competitors for their jobs. *Haciendas* and other employers, fearing foreign action would cut off the supply of cheap hands, were glad to search for other and more desirable sources of manpower.

Although the mass migration has stopped, the Chinese community continues to grow. For instance, in 1988, Peruvian Immigration authorities approved 736 mainland Chinese families' application to Peruvian passports, while in 1985 the number was only 94.⁴ Clearly, the current immigration is substantially different from what it was in the late nineteenth century.

First, most newcomers are relatives of *tusang* (the Chinese word for 'Chinese born in Peru') rather than coolies sold to plantations and *haciendas*.

Secondly, in contrast to earlier generations of poor, unskilled coolies, many recent immigrants are well educated professionals. Although incomplete data do not permit one to examine migrant selectivity, the available information suggests that migrants tend to be selected positively on the basis of education and occupation.

Thirdly, there is a tendency that the key origin of migration will gradually be replaced by those from rural areas of mainland China to Hong Kong, Taiwan, Macao and other major cities in China. Finally, in spite of increasing number of immigrants in recent years, the economic deterioration of the Peruvian economy may reverse this trend soon.

D. Present Demographic Situation

The official 1944 census of Peru gave the numbers of Chinese as 10,915. Among them only 500 were women. The Chinese Embassy (Nationalist) however gave a lower figure, 8,765, of whom 7,184 or 80 percent lived in Lima.⁵ According to the Chinese Embassy in Lima, today there are some 100,000 Chinese in Peru, with most residing in Lima. Few of them live outside of Lima. For instance, in Trujillo, the third largest city of Peru where many coolies lived a century ago, there are only 60 Chinese and about 200 *tusangs*. Likewise, in Piura, another major city, there are only about 40 Chinese and *tusangs*.⁶ That is to say that the majority of Chinese are concentrated in Lima alone. While the city's size has grown subsequently, the number of Chinese has remained constant.

According to official census of Peru, the country experienced a decline in the Chinese-born population. The census (1981) counted 2,714 Chinese, including 1,237 male and 477 female.⁷ The number of Chinese in 1972 was 4,057.⁸ However, according to the Chinese Embassy (Nationalist), overseas Chinese in Peru increased significantly in recent years (see Table 2). The difference in the data published by Taiwan —Table 2— and the census data of Peru is a result of different definitions and/or measures. In Taiwan's data, overseas Chinese refer to Chinese residing abroad, naturalized citizen of Chinese descents and the descendants of Chinese parents

Table 2
Overseas Chinese in Peru
 (Based on Taiwan Statistics)

1955	1959		1971		1979	
total	total	citizen of China	total	citizen of China	total	citizen of China
15,530	30,000	8,000	30,000	15,000	52,000	13,000

Source: Mei-yu, Yu, *Patterns of Distribution and Fertility of the Overseas Chinese*, p.43.

living abroad. Whereas, the official census of Peru refers explicitly to Chinese-born migrants to Peru.

Table 2 demonstrates that many overseas Chinese still retain their citizenship, Chinese citizens accounted for 27 percent of all overseas Chinese in 1959, 50 percent in 1971, and 25 percent in 1982.

An article in *People's Daily*⁹ states that there are more than 8,000 Chinese in Peru with PRC passports.¹⁰ It also estimates that more than one million Peruvians (about 5 percent of the population) have Chinese blood. It is clear that from the legal definition of Chinese, the number of Chinese today is much smaller than in the nineteenth century, as most of the Chinese in Peru today are of Peruvian nationality. Although it has been impossible to obtain exact information on the children of these Chinese since they are considered Peruvians by nationality and therefore submersed in the census, it is believed that the number of overseas Chinese in Peru is about 80,000 to 100,000.

II. REASONS FOR IMMIGRATION

As mentioned earlier, during the coolie trade period, Chinese immigration into Peru reached its zenith until it was stopped by Peruvian legislation. The causes of this migration include push and pull factors and shall be examined briefly.

1. Pull Factors

The demand for laborers in Peru arose in several sectors of the economy. By 1840 the many *guano* (bird manure) beds of the coastal headland and

offshore islands were being worked profitably, enabling the foreign market to grow steadily while the fertilizer's value to the nation became increasingly evident.

About 1850, Peruvian economists and capitalists began lobbying for infrastructural improvements — canals for irrigation, telegraphs, harbors, and, especially, railroads. All of these activities demanded labor and more labor. Eventually, it became evident that Peru's own labor supply was inadequate for supplying the nation's needs because of such factors as the drastic reduction in the male population resulting from civil wars, the impassivity of the Indians as well as the disorganization of the black labor force resulting from manumission. In fact, although slavery was not abolished in Peru until 1855, planters began complaining about a serious shortage of labor prior to the middle of the century. Regarding construction, there are a number of logical reasons why the Chinese were used in railway building. Thousands of Chinese had arrived in the United States to carry the Central Pacific Railway eastward across the Rockies. They proved to be reliable and inexpensive laborers. Now that the Central Pacific was completed, a large number of them were available for employment elsewhere. In short, during the mid to late 1800s, immigration was seen as a mechanism for obtaining cheap labor to develop Peru's economy.

2. Push Factors

There was a rapid population increase in China since the eighteenth century. Thus land, the ultimate desire of all peasants, became scarcer and more expensive due to population explosion.

Added to the food and land shortage, the earlier movement of Chinese is probably related to the unstable political conditions prevailing in China during and after the Opium War (1839–1842) and the Taiping Rebellion (1850–64). The Opium War and Treaty of Nanking of 1842 contributed tremendously to increasing the misery of the common Chinese people.

As a result of these harsh economic and political conditions, the people of southern China found themselves in abject misery and willing to try their fortune anywhere, even in the remote countries in Latin America.

III. CITYWARD MIGRATION

By 1879 probably well over half of the Chinese living in Peru had fulfilled the terms of their labor contracts and were free. Once the Chinese had fulfilled their forced labor contracts, a few stayed on as small farmers and

merchants near the plantations they had worked originally, while others emigrated to the *sierra*. The majority, however, moved to the large urban centers, especially Lima, where after 1850 they established the *Colonia China*.¹¹

Apparently, cityward migration was a result of a combination of several factors. Primarily, it was due to employment opportunities in the urban centers. According to Mei-yu, a Chinese scholar, merchants have traditionally been the backbone of the society of overseas Chinese.¹² In the large cities it is much easier for these former coolies to set up their own small business. In the larger towns such as agricultural regions of Pacasmayo and Trujillo, small businesses were established, and there were opportunities to some degree for domestic service.¹³ Domestic service gave employment to many in the form of cooks, launderers, butlers. Many became proprietors of small shops, particularly of food shops, including street stands. Others established rooming houses for their fellows. Still others became operators of small restaurants, called *chinganas* and *fondas*. Some even became *curanderos* (curers and herbalists). It is well known that city's wages are believed to be substantially higher than those of the *sierra*. Obviously, Lima offers a clear economic advantage over the rural areas. Many former coolies came to Lima after the termination of their labor contract.

The second reason for rural-urban migration is the location of early coolie settlements. Peru is divided into three geographical regions: the coastal, the highlands, and the jungle. Most coolies were scattered throughout the coastal region. Though there was a significant number in the mountain region, the further inland one goes, the fewer Chinese one finds. It was much easier for these Chinese to move into the cities nearby when their contracts were terminated.

Finally, when abroad, Chinese have a tendency, especially when their number are small, to form encapsulated communities in large cities. New immigrants usually followed the same occupations of their friends and relatives who had preceded. Today there is a network of mutual aid and assistance for recent migrants to the city. Of course, the presence of a Chinatown is an added encouragement and protection for the preservation of Chinese customs and institutions.

IV. ECONOMIC POSITION

At present, there are more than 1,000 Chinese-owned enterprises in Peru. They are concentrated in the following sectors:

A. Tertiary Industry

In this paper, tertiary industry refers to the service and commerce sector. The Chinese in Peru have a strong presence in this sector. They own 670 enterprises with 60 percent of those known as *chifas* (the Chinese word for 'having dinner'). For instance, Lung Fung Restaurant is one of the largest restaurants in Lima which employs 400 persons, and has a capital of US\$4 million. Less than 35 percent of Chinese-owned business are grocery and supermarket with a total capital of US\$70 million, of which 20 percent account for local capital. For instance, Wong S.A. is one the biggest supermarket chains in Peru, employing about 450 persons in 1986.¹⁴ The remaining Chinese businesses include 22 stores in service and entertainment.¹⁵

B. Industry

In the early 1970s, Chinese owned about 20 small holdings with a total capital of US\$1.1 million. Their products included garments, wine, soap, candles, lumber, rice, fish, etc.¹⁶ However, in the late 1980s, their economy has become more diversified, and quite successful. For instance, Nicoline is the biggest fodder factory in Peru, controlling one-third of production in the country; Juan Chang owns the second largest plastic toy factory in Peru; and Peruvian Chinese control 70 percent of the wholesale plastic products in the country. There are also several successful Chinese owned shoe-making factories in Lima, one of them has the capacity of producing 1,000 pairs of shoes per day.

C. Agriculture

There are about 30 Chinese owned farms in Peru. The biggest one, Yongan Farm, with more than 100 acres of arable land and 9,000 employees, was expropriated by the military government in 1972. The remaining Chinese farms are all very small, producing vegetable, food and cotton.¹⁷ According to the Chinese Embassy, few Chinese remained in the agricultural sector after the land reform of the 1970s.

As for the economic status of these Chinese, in his comprehensive study of Chinese immigrants, Fernández writes that Chinese are engaged in various types of commercial enterprises. In Lima, their business include restaurants, hotels, furniture stores, barber shops, pastry shops, travel agencies, insurance companies, grocery stores, etc.¹⁸ If this statement, which expresses the opinion of most writers on Peru, is accurate, it would be a simple task to describe the position of Chinese in the Peruvian economy: One could simply say that they constitute the urban middle class that carried on a small amount of trade necessary to meet local needs.

Generally speaking, Chinese make no social display of possessions, so it is difficult to judge the true extent of their assets. Yet, some Chinese are very wealthy. The sons of Chinese men and Peruvian women, known as *injertos* (born in small towns), found no obstacles to social advancement if they were well off or had a formal education. In some instances, they even became members of the highest social class, such as an adviser to the minister of labor, army generals, and even the director of the National Bureau of Migration and Naturalization. An increasing number of second and third generation Chinese immigrants have become professors, medical doctors, and bankers. However, as mentioned previously, most Chinese have occupied intermediate economic and social positions, between the European and the Indian or black masses, with only few of them very rich.

V. POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

Although a few Chinese immigrants have become members of the Senate (one *tusang*) and House (two *tusangs*) and some of them hold some important positions in the government, it is commonly recognized that average Chinese immigrant's involvement in Peruvian domestic politics remains quite inactive. There is no coherent organization which encompasses all Chinese and they do not vote as a bloc. Moreover, there is little chance that this will develop in the foreseeable future. In other words, the emergence of 'Chinese Power' even in a mild form seems to be out of the question and not likely ever to occur. At present, the Peruvian Chinese as a group are very conservative in their approach to political participation or getting out into the limelight of politics. When Chinese participate in Peru's political system, they act as individuals and avoid acting as a group.

There are several reasons for this political isolation. First, the political interests of Chinese immigrants continue to be China-oriented. Most Chinese associations and schools assume either a pro-Beijing (Peking) or Pro-Taiwan stance. For instance, currently there are two Chinese language newspapers in Lima, one is pro-mainland China (*La Voz de la Colonia China*), and the other is pro-Taiwan (*Man Shing Bo*).

Another factor is the attachments of the Chinese to their homeland. Fried observed that the original migrants generally believed that their stay in the foreign land was temporary. They entered under a contract basis and intended to work until they had amassed enough capital to return home and set up some lucrative enterprise, or simply to enjoy the fruits of a well earned retirement. Few Chinese leaves his home not intending to

ever return. His hope is always to come back rich, to die and be buried where his ancestors are buried. But this dream is rarely realized. Many Chinese settled permanently in the new countries, entered fully sanctioned or common-law marriages, and raised families locally. Since the Chinese intended to stay for a limited period only, hence, as far as possible, many of them avoided any adaptation to the culture of the host country. Under changing conditions, the Chinese remain Chinese. Although many overseas Chinese have been naturalized, the society of overseas Chinese has not disappeared, and is not likely that they will do so in the near future. In developing their own social institution, they have, for the most part, kept aloof from Peruvian politics. Crissman points out that the social organization of the urban overseas Chinese did not originate abroad, but rather it was derived from patterns indigenous to China itself.¹⁹ Clearly, the attitude of sojourner raised barriers for their political participation of local politics.

The third factor is religious differences. Peruvian Chinese do not seem to take Catholicism seriously. Those who practice the Catholic religion do so only superficially — taking on Christian names, burning candles in the church, etc., though some of the second generation Chinese are devout believers. There is much syncretism and overlapping of Catholic and Chinese beliefs and practices. It does not seem inconsistent for Peruvian Chinese to cross themselves before an image in their Family Association nor to offer incense as a candle is offered in church.²⁰ Therefore, it is difficult for them to be elected as public officials in a country that is almost entirely Christian. Needless to say, coolies' low social and economic status also barred them from entering the indigenous or colonial élite. Nevertheless, with the improvement of their economic position in recent decades, this barrier has been diminished significantly.

VI. CONSEQUENCES OF THE MIGRATION

There are at least three ways in which the impact of Chinese immigration can be assessed. The first is the economic consequences of the transfer of human resources from China to Peru. The second consists of the direct demographic effect of immigration or the effect on population growth and age/sex structure. The third level focuses on the social and cultural consequences of immigration.

The human resources impact of immigration is significant. One of the principal causes of immigration was a labor shortage. Since the mid-1840s,

Peru exported millions of tons of *guano*, valuable natural fertilizer. For more than a quarter of a century, measured by its place in the nation's foreign trade, it was the greatest single source of Peruvian wealth. Chinese of both the first and the second immigration were put to shoveling and sacking this bird manure. In the 1860s, thousands were imported for this work. Although the form of contract stipulated that the coolie should not be put to labor in the guano beds, nevertheless, through this particular period of migration, the bulk of the work in this industry was performed by the Chinese.²¹ During a quarter of a century Peru received approximately 100,000 Chinese laborers. Of this number, several thousand were employed in the offshore guano islands; between 5,000 and 10,000 helped build railroads into the Andes; while close to 80,000 or between 70 and 75 percent were assigned to the sugar and cotton plantation along the coast. Stewart noted that without the coolies, agriculture would have languished, the guano beds would not have yielded their wealth, and the railroad building and industry would have been gravely hampered.²² Gonzales concludes that the Chinese were crucial to the economic recovery and expansion of the sugar industry during the mid-nineteenth century.²³

Kwong makes the interesting observation that today in Lima, with European and North American competition, the Chinese businessman has been relegated to second place on practically every corner in Lima and throughout Peru — now concentrating in *chifas* and *bodegas*. It would not be an exaggeration to say that 90 percent of this business is in the hands of the Chinese.²⁴ It is obvious that local commerce would be in a sorry state without the Chinese.

Immigrants also have important demographic effects on Peru. The composition of the immigrants, consisting of economically active young males, clearly has a significant demographic impact on the society. Positively, the age and sex structure of the Peruvian population was influenced significantly by the arrival of 100,000 Chinese during the latter half of the nineteenth century. During this period there was a drastic reduction in the male population resulting from the civil war among war-lords with the population dropping to slightly over two million.

It can be argued that in the ultimate analysis Peru benefited culturally from the influx of the Chinese. Luis Alberto Sánchez states that as the coolie was poor and mixed only with the poor *mestizo* class of Peru, his influence on the general culture was not felt for a considerable time. But this brilliant Peruvian adds, "with the passage of time, nevertheless, this 'inert one' began to acquire social and cultural prestige. Today he has it, undoubtedly, in our universities and in professional life."²⁵ It is said that

in today's Peruvian universities, 2.2 percent of faculties are Chinese or descendants of Chinese immigrants in the country. Sánchez believes that the Chinese have exerted an influence on the language of Peru, even greater than that of Italian.²⁶

In sum, since their arrival in Peru, Chinese immigrants have played an important role in the economic development and social progress. However, it should be stressed that they have eschewed political participation, and it is highly unlikely that this trend will change in the near future.

Notes

- 1 *People's Daily* (Overseas Edition) March 11, 1989.
- 2 Chang Rodríguez, Eugenio, "Chinese Labor Migration into Latin America in the Nineteenth Century," *Revista de Historia de América* No. 46, 1958 pp. 337; and Millones Santagadea, Luis, *Minorías étnicas en el Perú*, Pontificia Universidad Católica de Perú, Lima, 1973, pp. 64-68.
- 3 Vásquez, Mario, "Immigration and Mestizaje in Nineteenth-Century Peru," in *Race and Class in Latin America*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1970, pp. 83.
- 4 Interview with Chinese Embassy on August 16, 1989.
- 5 Kwong, Alkice Jo, "The Chinese in Peru," in Fried, Monton H., *Colloquium on Overseas*, Chinese Institute of Pacific Relations, 1958, pp. 42-47.
- 6 Interview with Chinese Embassy in Lima on August 16, 1989.
- 7 Perú, 1981, *Censos Nacionales, VIII de Población, III de Vivienda, 12 de Junio de 1981, Resultados Definitivos a Nivel Nacional*, Lima, August 1981. Table 9.
- 8 Perú, 1972, *Censos Nacionales, VII de Población, II de Vivienda, 4 de Junio de 1972, Resultados Definitivos a Nivel Nacional*, Lima, August 1974. Table 8.
- 9 *People's Daily*, Overseas Edition, September 30, 1986
- 10 There are some other Chinese with Taiwan passports, some with British passports (those from Hong Kong), and some with Portuguese passports (those from Macao).
- 11 Vásquez, Mario "Immigration and Mestizaje in Nineteenth-Century Peru," p. 89.
- 12 Mei-yu, Yu, *Patterns of Distribution and Fertility of the Overseas Chinese*, unpublished dissertation, 1986, p. 205.
- 13 Stewart, Watt, *Chinese Bondage in Peru. A History of the Chinese Coolie in Peru 1849-1974*, Greenwood Press Publishers, Westport, Connecticut, 1951, p. 125.
- 14 *Perú Económico*, "Wong: De Tienda de la Esquina a Cadena de Supermercados," September 1986.
- 15 Committee of Overseas Chinese Economy in Ten Years, *Overseas Chinese Economy in Ten Years 1972-1981*, Taipci, 1983, p. 224.
- 16 *Ibid.* p. 224.
- 17 *Ibid.*

- 18 Fernandes Montagne, Ernesto, *Apuntes Socio-Económicos de la Inmigración China en el Perú (1848-1874)*, Centro de Investigación, Universidad de Pacífico, Lima, 1977, p. 83.
- 19 Crissman, Lawrence, "The Sedimentary Structure of Urban Overseas Chinese," in *Man*, Vol. 2, No.2 p. 185.
- 20 Kwong, Alkice Jo, "The Chinese in Peru," p. 45.
- 21 Stewart, Watt, *Chinese Bondage in Peru. A History of the Chinese Coolie in Peru 1849-1974*, pp. 95-96.
- 22 Ibid. p. 230.
- 23 Gonzales, Michael, "The Chinese Workers, 1875-1900," in Gonzales, Michael, *Plantation Agriculture and Social Control in Northern Peru, 1875-1933*, University of Texas Press, Austin, 1985, p. 85.
- 24 Kwong, Alkice Jo, "The Chinese in Peru," p. 52.
- 25 Stewart, Watt, *Chinese Bondage in Peru. A History of the Chinese Coolie in Peru 1849-1974*, p. 231.
- 26 Ibid.

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