

The Chinese in Baja California

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Translated by Héctor Antonio Corporán

Las incursiones iniciales de la población china a Baja California se suscitaron entre 1860 y 1880, cuando los chinos de California inauguraron la Bahía de San Diego con la industria de la pesca del abulón. Posteriormente los chinos arribaron en mayor número con la apertura de las tierras a la agricultura en el Valle de Mexicali en los primeros años de este siglo. Luego de haberse iniciado la expropiación de las tierras y las dotaciones ejidales a fines de la década de los treinta, los chinos quedaron excluidos del proceso de colonización y explotación de la tierra. Con ello los chinos empezaron a concentrarse en las actividades comerciales y de servicios hasta ese momento poco desarrolladas, al tiempo que sus asentamientos se empezaron a ubicar en la ciudad.

The Chinese played an important role in the 19th century development of the California and Baja California coast and border region. They created the first abalone fishing industry along the coast and were a major part of the work force that transformed the border region into the productive Imperial Valley on the California side and the Mexicali Valley on the Baja California side. Chinese have always lived in separate communities, but their presence has greatly contributed to defining the culture of the region, particularly that of Mexicali.

Chinese were attracted to California in the middle of the 19th century by the discovery of gold and the territorial expansion of the United States, which offered job opportunities, high salaries, and possibilities of acquiring farm land. The majority of the migrants were poor farmers

from the province of Canton, who were fleeing poverty and war.

Chinese first came to Baja California between 1860 and 1880. They extended the San Diego Bay abalone industry along the Baja California coast down to Bahía de Tortugas. Chinese migration from the U.S. to the northern border states of Mexico was accelerated by a series of anti-Chinese movements in the United States, culminating in the first Chinese exclusion law in 1882. Chinese settled primarily in Baja California, Sonora, Sinaloa, and Tamaulipas.

Chinese later arrived in greater numbers, drawn by the land and employment promotions of various foreign companies during the last decades of the 19th century, which were aimed at attracting tenant farmers to this scarcely populated region. At the turn of the century, the Colorado River Land Company built irrigation works and opened the Mexicali Valley for agricultural development.

Chinese contractors from California provided the company with the necessary labor to work the virgin lands of the Mexicali Valley at a low cost. The Colorado River Land Company leased the land to independent Chinese contractors, who in turn sub-leased it to Chinese farmers. In this way, the company indirectly controlled the different phases of farming production, making the Chinese intermediaries for United States businessmen in the exploitation of Mexican resources.

The relationship between United States investors, Chinese contractors, and Chinese workers substantially changed after the Mexican government stopped Chinese immigration in 1921. Other factors contributing to the change were the government's 1936 expropriation of land owned by foreign companies in Baja California and the growth of the Mexican population in the peninsula. Chinese and other foreign groups — Japanese and East Indians — were

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excluded from the subsequent redistribution of these lands. As a result, they began to concentrate on commercial and service activities mainly in Mexicali, leaving their earlier, rural agricultural pattern of settlement.

Another important movement of Chinese to the region occurred during the 1930s anti-Chinese movement in Mexico. After the Mexican government cancelled Chinese immigration in 1921, various state congresses approved discriminatory legislation prohibiting marriages between Chinese and Mexicans, creating special zones to isolate the Chinese, and deporting illegal Chinese immigrants.

Part of the life history of an elder Chinese man from Mexicali illuminates those years of conflict:

We left Mexico when I was 12 or 13 years old, more or less in 1931 or 1932. We left Mexico City due to the anti-Chinese campaign. In those days almost all the Chinese were discriminated against and insulted by Mexicans. I remember that when we went to school other kids threw stones and called us *chales*.

Although there were many people who tried to prevent those kids from bothering us, there were always others ready to insult us. So that when some didn't offend us, others were devoted to doing so. They would insult us without reason, only because we looked Chinese. Almost daily we were attacked with stones, and unfortunately, we lived in that situation for more than two years.

The government at that time clearly sought to get the Chinese out of the country, one way or another. As a result, many mixed families were broken. A husband would not be allowed to take his wife with him, much less his children who were born in Mexico. These things took place in various states of the Republic. One could not live in that constant harassment. The government of that time did not want the Chinese in Mexico.

It seems that at that time a group of people with very strong interests had come together, and were devoted to harassing the Chinese. That group, if I remember correctly, was named the Anti-Chinese Party or something like that — I don't remember the name exactly. And in spite of the government's knowing of their activities, it did nothing to stop their cruelties, like those that are said to have happened in the state of Coahuila, where dozens of Chinese lost their lives in confrontations with Mexicans. And in Ensenada we know that some Chinese committed suicide because of that.

Today the Mexican Chinese community supports itself through small- and medium-sized commercial activities like restaurants, real estate brokerages, money exchange centers, hotels, and a variety of retail stores. Recently arrived Chinese usually come with six month residence permits to work in these establishments. Chinese in this western border region have lived for a long time in a contradictory situation of economic integration and sociocultural segregation, a condition which continues today, as exchanges between Chinese and Mexican populations in the region remain predominantly economic.

Further Readings

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